A view to a killer

Matt Smith trades in his sonic screwdriver for a chainsaw
Look out: the man formerly known as the Doctor is now wielding a chainsaw in American Psycho, the musical. But it's giving him grey hairs, Matt Smith tells Louis Wise

There is something so yang about Matt Smith, so positive and affirmative, you can't help feeling a little bit yin. The outgoing Doctor, 31, counters the echoing chambers of his face — his creepy hollows, if you will — and a CV of off-kilter roles with the kind of media persona that would make Dolly Parton seem mean. It's an entirely agreeable experience, only it might not reflect well on you. At one point, we dwell on the process of ageing: Smith is at the age where the events of yesterday are now, clearly. The Past. "Do you remember England v Germany?" I assume he means 1990 — Gazza's tears. Of course not. "You know — when we won 5-1?"

Oh, to have a 2001 state of mind. This chipper attitude has stood Smith in good stead as he has weathered the hurricane Who. It's not been slogging down a mine, as he is the first to emphasise, but being the BBC's premier global ambassador takes up an actor's time: 10 months' solid filming a year, plus promotional duties, since 2009. Only 24 days to go now, then he codes the mantle tepid 2000 movie version, a long time ago, but he loves the novel now.

"It's quite an interesting thing to make dramatic, because it's an 'experience' in many ways — there isn't a huge narrative arc to it." And it's true, it is more of a wild spiral — but directed by the electric Rupert "Enron" Goold, it should be quite the ride. Goold, formerly of Headlong, has taken over the Almeida. It signals a new lease of life for the venue, and it seems right that Smith should add his star power, too. Not that he is just a celeb actor, by any means. Before Doctor Who took over his life, he was a real stage presence — most famously in Polly Stenham's zeitgeisty debut, That Face. But Bate­man should be a challenge: highly conscious yet utterly hollow. "There's a great existentialism to it, in a way, but not, because everything's about the surface," Smith ponders. A beat. "Why not add some songs to the story?"

Ah, yes — it's a musical, too. But don't panic: Ellis's vision might well be perfect for a larger-than-life, theatrical treatment. And serial killers do have form in the genre (see Sweeney Todd). The level of violence may still be unpalatable for some, but Smith won't get bogged down in all that. "Hopefully, people are entertained. I think that's what it should do, ultimately. I don't care if they're shocked, as long as they're entertained."

He finished Who on a Friday and jumped into rehearsal the following Monday. What's getting to him, giving him "more grey hairs than anything I've ever done", is the singing bit. He has never actually sung before in a professional capacity. "I'm not a West End tenor," he confirms glumly. Instead, he is hoping to, ahem, "inhabit the songs with some acting". There's also dancing, but he seems less alarmed by that.

It's very much in line with what he has done before, though it may not be immediately apparent. The Doctor may be good, and Bate­man, well, not, but there are parallels. "There's a weird alienness about them both, and they have an inability to connect with everyone else around them." Weirdos? No. "They're just weird. Which is alluring, somehow."

And, of course, both have style — a Marmite one, maybe, but it's there. This suits Smith right down to the ground. "I'm a sucker for a good costume, yeah," he chuckles. He has been noted for his clobber, on screen and off: someone even once made a Tumblr page called No Seriously Matt Smith, What Are You Wearing? Today he is wearing an ambitious costume, from the designer who worked on Drive, a "horseshoe that hung as a belt". The project also

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'It's a monk's life':

Matt Smith allowed him a liberating buzz cut, finally ditching that Doctor quiff. And phew, isn't he glad to be rid of that ruddy bow tie? He looks crestfallen. "No! Why? Do you not...?" Well, no, not really, but it's clearly time to backpedal. It's just nice to cut loose, right? "It was quite liberating to buzz the hair. Although I then had to wear a wig for the Christmas special, which wasn't liberating."

He denies recent rumours linking him to the new Star Wars movies. It's probably a "sci-fi crossover thing", he suggests - Whovians wanting to send him back into space. "But hey, look, I'm totally open to the idea." When the stage show is done, he says he wants a long, hot holiday, but then, still young and "unattached", he might move abroad, possibly to New York. Presumably, that monk's existence will cease, too?

"Do you think I go to a lot of things?" Well, I say, I see you in certain party pages a fair bit. "I go to things to support my friends..." he begins. Oh, that old chestnut. "I mean, if a glass of champagne is there, fine. But I don't just go to a random film premiere, I go if a friend is in it. Or, if it's a fashion show, I go if someone I know is in it. Or I go to a fashion dinner... if they're giving me a new suit." He bursts out laughing and retracts. Kind of. "That's where all the hot chicks are!"

It's possible, though, that he really doesn't go to that much - just that he's paparazzi every time. Is he OK with the press intrusion? "Ah, man, what's 'OK with it'?" He gives quite a graceful spiel on the matter, says some paparazzi are even quite nice, but recounts a situation only the previous week when he opened the door at 8.30am and found a photographer outside it. He had no idea what for. "What I find weird is people saying, 'Well, you did sign up for it.' Sign up for what? People outside my house in the morning? I didn't sign up for that."

He seems to prefer the grand flourish to forensic detail. "It's quite hard to talk about your job if you're an actor without sounding like a dick," he says, a little pained. The battery is dying; as he considers the roles he does, and why, he gets a little lost. "It's interesting, consciousness and all that. I don't know, it's all very interesting..." Then, suddenly, he picks up. "Dreams!" Oh, no. "I swear! I've worked with a lot of actors who are really into dreams." An actor's dreams. Oh, please, no. "No, I know," he says. "This is the thing. If you were going to open a magazine and see an interview with an actor saying, 'Oh, yeah, I consider my dreams', you'd be like, 'Oh my God — chill out, old boy.'" He gives up again. "Oh, whatever works, man, you know? Whatever gets you through life and makes you smile." And there he is, really, somewhere between a puppy you could tickle and a bubble you should prick. Yang, yang, yang. 🎈

American Psycho previews from Tuesday at the Almeida, London N1