

# 'I must be the chippiest actor in Britain'

As his explosive new drama about a marriage in crisis begins on BBC1, Christopher Eccleston has a lot to get off his chest...

THE RT INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL HODGES

**C**HRISTOPHER ECCLESTON HAS a battering ram for a nose and a gaze that could clear a public bar. It's a fighter's face. "No," he objects. "I can't fight my way out of a paper bag. I look like I can but I've got a black belt in cowardice. I hate violence." Good job he is such a fine actor then.

In the first episode of his almost unbearably tense new series about marital breakdown, *Come Home*, Eccleston is involved in the pub brawl from hell (shortly after going on the pub online date from hell). As we speak, he is about to take on *Macbeth* with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, a role requiring him, among other acts of extreme violence to, as Shakespeare puts it, "unseam" someone "from the nave to the chaps", then have Macduff's wife and children killed. "It's the one I've always wanted to play," he says of the demented Scottish king. "The biggest thing I've ever done."

We're having Sunday lunch at the Dirty Duck, the actors' pub beside the River Avon. Eccleston has ordered a giant rib of beef with all the trimmings - none of which will be left by the end of the interview. It's not-quite-hangover hunger; the night before, the young cast members had been out, "going nuts, tearing the place up", but Eccleston knows his limits. "At 2am I said, 'Listen, lads - I'm 54 and I'm playing Macbeth. I'm going home.'" Now he's drinking squash.

"I ran away to join the circus," he says of leaving Salford to become an actor 35 years ago. "And there's a lot of boozing in the circus. I love that, I love wine, women and song. But I love the work much more; nothing gets in the

way of the work. I'm quite puritanical. I always was. I still feel shocked to not be working in a factory. I'll never go on stage drunk or not turn up. My mum and dad would be ashamed of me."

Eccleston's parents feature a lot in our conversation. His mother Elsie lives in the North West; his father Ronnie, a forklift-truck driver who read to young Eccleston from a dictionary ("so I could share his passion for words"), died in 2012, but in some ways Eccleston, who has two older brothers, lost his father to dementia before that.

"My eldest brother drove him from Salford to Leeds to see me in *Hamlet* in 2002. He was going 70mph on the motorway, and my dad tried to get out of the car." Did Ronnie know what his son had achieved? "His dementia didn't start to manifest until 1998, so he'd seen a lot. I think he knew I was going to be all right. He knew I'd made it."

Eccleston's triumphs - *Our Friends in the North*, *Hillsborough*, the rebirth of *Doctor Who* in 2005 and, since 2016, *The A Word*, to name a few - have included some of the most important moments in British television over the past 30 years. *Come Home*, written by Emmy award winner Danny Brocklehurst, might join them. Eccleston brings all of his formidable intensity - and humour, we should note - to Greg, a Belfast mechanic's shop owner with three children whose wife Marie (Paula Malcomson) unaccountably leaves home to live in a terraced house only a few streets away.

Troubled families are at the heart of much of his work and Eccleston has had his own difficulties. In 2015, he split from Mischka, his wife of four years and mother of his son Albert, six, and

daughter Esme, four. "Yes, I'm divorced," he says. "Separated from my ex-wife. *Come Home* is about divorce. There's great humour in it, and there's great redemption. That was a reason that I wanted to do it, because we have a duty to offer hope, no matter how tough the vision. I want to be respectful of my children and their mum and my experience [of divorce] is redemptive. We parent our children together and separately, and she is a wonderful mother, and they're wonderful children, and my job to the end of my days is to protect them."

**T**HAT IS WHY, Eccleston says, he plays Greg as a straight-down-the-line Ulsterman. "I insisted on doing it in a Northern Ireland accent because I didn't want to sound like me. Because I had gone through it. I am not a method actor; my private life is very separate. I've been doing interviews for 20 to 30 years. I've never portioned out chunks of my personal life. I like to be judged by my work. I don't need to tell you who I'm sleeping with."

Eccleston wanted to involve his children in his preparation for *Macbeth*. "I had the kids up here the other week," he says. "I was chasing them round the grass there in front of the theatre, doing the invisible dagger speech." Then, after they went back to London, he got the call parents fear. Esme was ill with appendicitis and needed emergency surgery. "It was out of the blue," he says. "But I felt very calm, because I've got great trust in my children, particularly Esme. I call her Hurricane Esme. She was very brave, genuinely brave." Eccleston got to London >

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**FAMILY DRAMA**  
*Come Home*, exploring marital breakdown, co-stars Paula Malcomson



## ‘On Doctor Who, they lost trust in me, and I lost faith and trust and belief in them’

ground.” Is there still snobbery? “I think it exists. I think Gary Oldman is as fine an actor as Daniel Day-Lewis, but Gary is not double-barrelled. You might say Daniel has made better choices, but Gary Oldman’s Oscar was massive to people from my background.”

Eccleston gives an example of the prejudice he sees at work. “When the BBC did *The Hollow Crown* series it was a huge investment in Shakespeare on the television.

Now, without sounding arrogant, I’m a high-profile actor and I didn’t get a call. Didn’t get an audition. There’s an assumption being made there about my accent, and my background. Or did they think I’m a crap actor?” Probably not.

“Right. So, I’m asking you now: what was the social background of the people who got all the lead roles in that BBC Shakespeare? What schools did they go to and why didn’t somebody like myself get offered a lead? I can only think of Dave Morrissey that was in that, and he wasn’t the lead! So, what’s going on there? And how many actors of colour were the leads? One, I think [Sophie Okonedo played Queen Margaret].”

But what about the RSC? “My hackles always rise when I go to the National Theatre and the RSC, because I just see a sea of white faces. And there are far more white males in our company now than there are people of colour, or women. So,

yes, this place has got to have a revolution. No more English Heritage. It’s got to finish.”

Eccleston has recently claimed he was black-listed by the BBC after he was cast as Doctor Who when Russell T Davies brought the sci-fi show back to life in 2005 and then left after one series. Now he explains just how unpleasant making the series was. “My relationship with my three immediate superiors – the showrunner, the producer and co-producer – broke down irreparably during the first block of filming and it never recovered. They lost trust in me, and I lost faith and trust and belief in them.”

**T**HAT MUST HAVE BEEN stressful, working on a show where the key relationships were so damaged? “Very. Some of my anger about the situation came from my own insecurity. They employed somebody [as the Doctor] who was not a natural light comedian. I think if you’re setting up a huge series like that the director has to be impeccable in setting the tone. Billie [Piper], who we know was and is brilliant, was very, very nervous and very, very inexperienced. So, you had that, and then you had me. Very, very experienced, possibly the most experienced on it, but out of my comfort zone.”

Why speak about it now? “When I left, I gave my word to Russell T Davies that I wouldn’t do anything to damage the show. But they did things to damage me. I didn’t criticise anybody. I didn’t issue a statement.” Was Davies aware of the issues? “If you’re the showrunner, you know everything. That’s your job.” Can I presume he doesn’t have a relationship with Davies any more? “No. I never will have.”

Eccleston has been feeling a little at odds with his surroundings since he moved to London in 1983 to study at the Central School of Speech and Drama. “It was only then that I realised I was working class. I started to meet young, middle-class women who were embracing ▷

◁ in time to see Esme wheeled into surgery. “I looked at her, and then the doors closed and she went in there on her own. They told me she’d been talking about the dagger speech.”

It’s a point of honour for Eccleston that when he performs at the RSC, it will not be RP, but recognisably from the banks of the Irwell. “My mum’s a fiercely intelligent woman, and a very sensitive woman, but she carries that thing that a lot of the working class of that generation have of not wanting to upset people. She said, ‘Chris, you’re not going to be like a Salford lad are you, doing Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon?’ Ten years ago, I would have snapped at her because I was immature. But I said, ‘Well, I am actually, Mum. Because it sounds just as good in our accent as it does in anybody else’s.’”

So, he was horrified in rehearsal to find himself doing it the other way. “Our director Polly Findlay, who I trust with my life, said, ‘Chris, when you do the soliloquies, you’re talking posh. Do you know that?’ And I was totally ashamed. There it is. I must be the chippiest actor in Britain. When I was doing, ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me,’ part of me just went, ‘It’s got to be done posh.’ I felt like Judas.”

**E**CCELESTON OFTEN TALKS about class. “People say I’m obsessed with class,” he notes. “But the whole country is obsessed by class. It’s like, it exists, but you’re not supposed to mention it.” He says he still half-bridles when he hears a public-school voice. “There is a kind of twitch, yes. And also, a kind of begrudging respect because they take status, they walk into a room going, ‘I’m supposed to be here.’ And I skulk around the edges; well, I don’t do that now.”

He must mix with a lot of posh people in the acting business? “I brush up with them, yes. I have friends from that background, and I’m middle class myself now. But I’ll be honest with you, my friends tend to be more from a working-class background, and I’m sure their friends are more from a middle-class back-

**TIME TEAM**  
The 2005 reboot of *Doctor Who*, with the “brilliant” Billie Piper as Rose Tyler

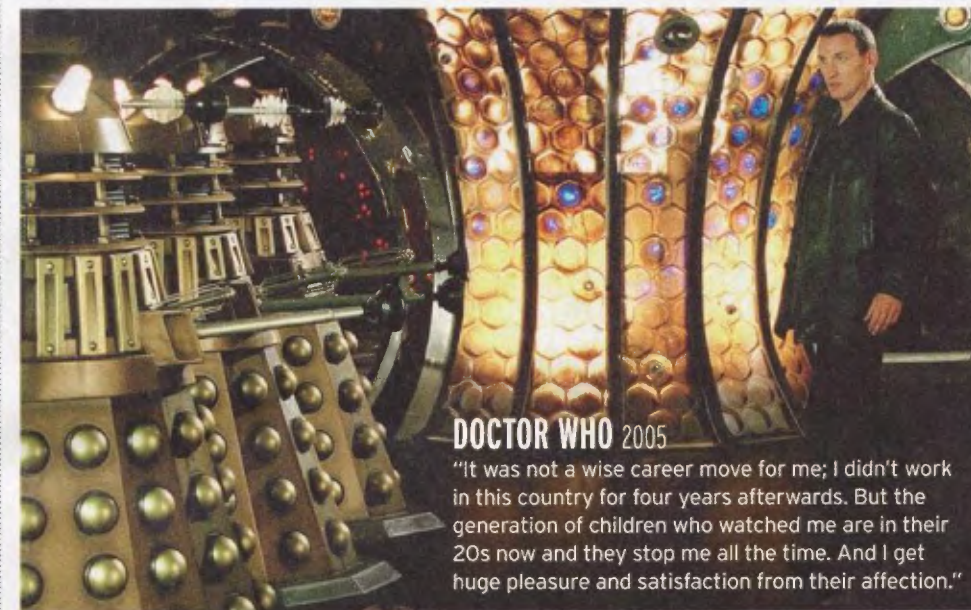


# NORTHERN STAR

On Daniel Craig, a Lennon wig and “valuable work”

## OUR FRIENDS IN THE NORTH 1996

“When I drive past the 007 set at Pinewood, I think of Daniel Craig. I can’t pretend he’s a mate of mine, but I think fondly of him. It was clear on *Our Friends in the North* that Dan had that kind of rock-star charisma, a sexiness. He became a massive star because of that.”



**DOCTOR WHO** 2005

“It was not a wise career move for me; I didn’t work in this country for four years afterwards. But the generation of children who watched me are in their 20s now and they stop me all the time. And I get huge pleasure and satisfaction from their affection.”

## LENNON NAKED 2010

“I lost my confidence after *Doctor Who*. This is how I got it back. I was at least ten years too old and there was no budget for the wig, so I paid a couple of grand myself. It was a great wig, but I didn’t get it at the end of the job. Where is it?”



## HILLSBOROUGH 1996

“When I did *Hillsborough*, I thought, ‘This is valuable work’ and I still do. In the end, I’d like to be remembered for *Hillsborough* more than anything.”



◁ feminism. My sexuality was emerging, and I felt because I was a big unit, northern, and very male, that my way of being was not acceptable. I remember wanting to be more like Morrissey or David Sylvian [androgynous lead singer with 80s group Japan]. You know, chiselled, angular and extremely sensitive. There was a great deal of confusion. Basically, I’m a big, hairy-arse fella, and at that time it just wasn’t acceptable. Of course, what you learn when you get older is that actually women like that kind of masculinity if it’s accompanied by – and I hate the label – femininity.”

**H**E IS EXCITED about the #Metoo moment that we are living through and the apparent change in the way women are treated.

“I’m just so glad to be alive now,” he says. “And I’m so glad my daughter and son are going to benefit from what’s happening.” Has it made him reassess his own past and behaviour? “Yes, I have to. I can honestly say my behaviour has been laddish. I’ve not had sleepless nights but certainly some discomfort.

“I was brought up in a chauvinistic, misogynistic, patriarchal environment. That was the culture – not just the working classes – every-

## ‘I’ve not had sleepless nights but my behaviour has been laddish’

where. My mum ran the house and she did the cooking and cleaning. She waited on us hand and foot, my dad and me and my two brothers. And in a sense, she didn’t even question it. But my mum is instinctively a feminist, though she doesn’t tweet Andrea Dworkin and she hasn’t read *The Female Eunuch*. She is a very, very strong mum and has always been my guide.”

He says he works better with women and goes out of his way to praise Polly Findlay, who has brought “a feminist agenda to *Macbeth*”, and Andrea Harkin, director of *Come Home*. “I think there’s a trigger in me about male authority figures,” he says, “and particularly male middle-class authority figures if they have not had a good look at themselves, before having a good look at me.”

I wonder how such a combative man deals with having children born into a different social class? “My children are very middle-class children,” he says, “but I can give them things, like my dad’s passion for language.” Will you be reading from the dictionary? “When I walk on to the stage at the RSC, that’s my dictionary. That’s what I pass on to them.”