Christopher 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 objeccts. "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 Maereth with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, a role requiring him, among other acts of extreme violence to, as Shakespeare puts it, "annoy" someone "from the nape to the top", then have Macbeth's wife and children killed. "It's the one I've always wanted to play", he says of the doomed Scottish king. "The biggest thing I've ever done."

We're having Sunday lunch at the Dairy, 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 handicap bargains: 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.'" New 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 parochial. 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").""'s, in 2013, 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, Hilsborough, 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 Ermey award winner Danny Brocklehurst, might just 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 Maire (Paula Malcolmson) 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 2008, he split from Michele, his wife of four years and mother of his son Albert, six, and daughter Rame, 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."

That 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 Maereth. "I had the kids up here the other week," he says. "I was brushing them around 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. Eme 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 Eme. I call her Hurricane Eme. She was very brave, genuinely brave.' Eccleston got to London 0
ON DANIEL CRAIG, A LENNON WIG AND "VALUABLE WORK"

NORTHERN STAR

The piece has got a revolution. No more English Heritage. It's got to finish.

Eccleston has recently claimed he was blacklisted 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 irremediably during the first block of filming and it never recovered. They lost trust in me, and I lost faith and trust in them."

"The last time I was in the country" series 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 was 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? It can only think of Davie Morrissey that was in that, and he wasn't the lead. So, what's going on there? And how many actors of colour were working in the drama? One. I think (Sophie Okonedo played Queen Margaret)."

But what about the RSC? "My tackles always rise when we move to the National Theatre and the RSC, because I just see a sea of white faces. And there are more black males in our company now than there are people of colour, or women. So, this place has got to have a revolution. No more English Heritage. It's got to finish."

ECCLESTON 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-brides 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, I'm supposed to be here. And I still ask the edges: well, I don't do that now."

He must mix with a lot of posh people in the acting business: "I know 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..."

ON DOCTOR WHO, THEY LOST TRUST IN ME, AND I LOST FAITH AND TRUST AND BELIEF IN THEM

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 was a crap actor? Probably not.

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REMEMBERING THE NORTHERN STAR

HILLSBOROUGH 1996

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

DOCTOR WHO 2005

"I lost my confidence after Doctor Who. This is how I got it back. I was at least four 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?

LENNON NAKED 2010

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Eccleston has been feeling a little at odds with his surroundings since he moved to London in 2003 to study at the Central School of Speech and Drama. And there are few to no songs at the RSC, that's my dictionary. That's what I pass on to them."

H E IS EXCITED ABOUT THE #METOO MOMENT THAT WE ARE LIVING THROUGH AND THE APPARENT CHANGE IN THE WAY WOMEN ARE TREATED."

"I just go to be able to 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 - everywhere."

"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 washed our hands 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 Feminine Emancipation. She is a very, very strong woman 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 the stage" to Andrea Harbin, director of Come Home, "I think there's a trigger in me about male authority figures," he says. "And particularly middle-class authority figures if they have a great look, or a great look, before having a good look at me."

I wonder how such a combative man deals with having children born into a different social class? "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? And Drama. It was only then that I realised I was working class. I started to meet young middle-class women who were embracing -"