

The man who left Doctor Who

A lack of confidence, midlife crisis, feminine ankles – is TV hardnut Christopher Eccleston going soft?

THE RT INTERVIEW BY ANDREW DUNCAN

WE BEGIN INAUSPICIOUSLY: he says he doesn't mind interviews "so long as I don't have to talk about myself".

How dull would that be, I mutter, while acknowledging that actors talking about themselves can be uninspiring. Luckily, it's not the case with the former nude model, National Theatre usher and now one of our most respected and versatile actors, who controversially left *Doctor Who* after one series in the eponymous role. He's straightforward, amusing and self-deprecating in spite of a reputation for being prickly. "Maybe it's a class thing," he says.

Spare me that, I plead, and he smiles. At 51, he's lean and fit, known best for left-wing, hard-man roles. "I'm one of those actors they set up for a class rant. I still feel insecure, like a lot of my working-class contemporaries. I had a sense acting wasn't for me because I'm not educated. I was a skinny, awkward-looking bugger with an accent, as I still am. British society has always been based on inequality, particularly culturally. I've lived with it, but it's much more pronounced now, and it would be difficult for someone like me to come through. You can't blame Eddie Redmayne [Eton], Benedict Cumberbatch [Harrow] and others taking their opportunities but it will lead to a milky, anodyne culture. To an extent that's already happened.

"I confess I don't watch much film or television drama but I'm aware of the predominance of white, male roles. It's not just about the working class. There's not enough writing for women or people of colour. It frustrates me when they insist on doing all-male Shakespearean productions – a wonderful intellectual exercise, maybe, but it's outrageous because it's putting a lot of women out of work."

The third son of working-class parents, he was



TIME LOVES
Billie Piper and Christopher
Eccleston in 2005

'I don't watch *Doctor Who* and am not keen to discuss it'

brought up in Salford. Even becoming head boy at school was no blessing. "It was a danger, and I was poor at it because I became associated with the teachers and couldn't separate myself from my mates. It was the same with my father who was a truck driver at Palmolive for 25 years and was then made foreman. It created a conflict in him because he joined middle management among a lot of young university students whereas my old fella had worked with blokes from Salford."

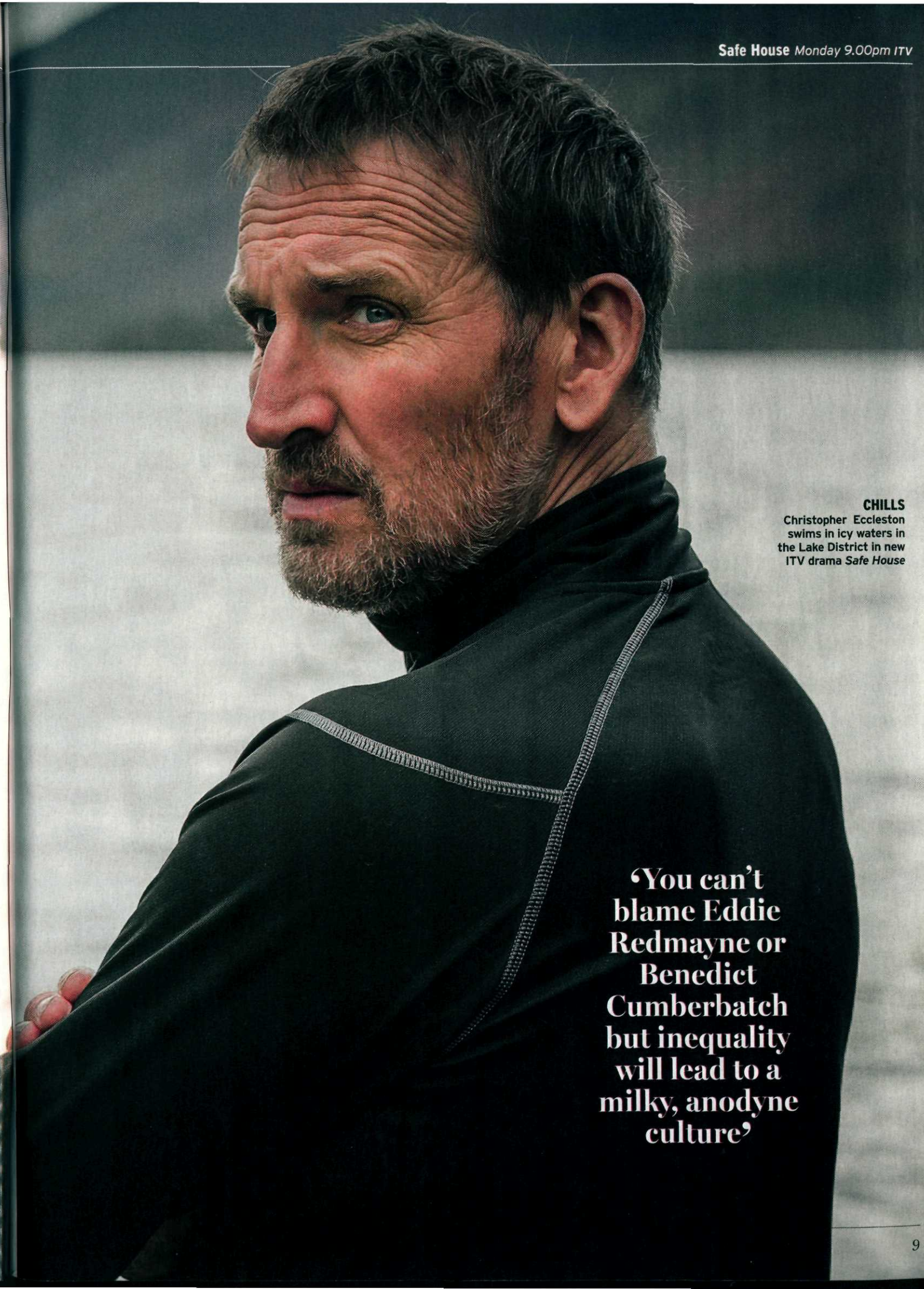
Eccleston's desire to become an actor, inspired by watching 1980s TV dramas like *Boys from the Blackstuff*, was welcomed by his family. "They never tried to stop me doing what I wanted. The

Billy Elliot cliché [a northern coal miner's son whose family discourage him from becoming a ballet dancer] is very offensive. There were lots of jokes about Albert Finney [also from Salford]. He's my hero. I saw him once at an event and a journalist asked if I'd like to meet him, and I said, 'Oh no.' I was too overawed. Then later that day, I was pretty drunk and got a tap on my shoulder. It was Albert Finney, who joked I was from the posh part of Salford [Langworthy] and was lovely to me. I'm a tough bird, but I'm so fortunate to have had the love of my parents. My dad said, 'Do your best and have some grit.' He was transported by me becoming an actor. I do it for him."

IT WASN'T EASY. He spent two years at London's Central School of Speech and Drama. "I'd had very good roles in my final year but agents looked the other way. I wasn't delivering, and knew it. In every profession you have to believe in yourself. I was an odd mix of dedication and lack of confidence. I sabotaged myself." He spent three years in north London in what he calls "my bedsit years, feeling like a tortured artist and listening to the Smiths."

"I was a model at the Slade School of Art – a lump of meat, naked in the middle of the room. It seemed like easy money but was structured and rigorous. You had to keep the same pose for 45 minutes before a 15-minute rest. If you broke the pose, you'd hear exasperated tuts and pencils thrown across the room because they were hardcore, serious artists."

"I think my irregular body was appreciated. I remember a teacher saying, 'He's an interesting mix of masculine and feminine – thin ankles and a big calf.' I was depressed: everyone in the room was being creative and I was ▷



CHILLS

Christopher Eccleston swims in icy waters in the Lake District in new ITV drama *Safe House*

'You can't blame Eddie Redmayne or Benedict Cumberbatch but inequality will lead to a milky, anodyne culture'

◁ failing. I'd take the money to the nearest pub, and drink it all."

His breakthrough came in 1991's *Let Him Have It* as Derek Bentley (who was hanged for murder in 1953, even though he was only an accomplice), followed by Danny Boyle's *Shallow Grave* in 1994 and Nicky in *Our Friends in the North* in 1996. He also played Trevor Hicks, who lost both his daughters, in Jimmy McGovern's *Hillsborough*: "I think that made a tiny contribution because it generated publicity and challenged accusations from the right-wing press. I was confrontational in myself and the parts I played. I wanted to change the world. All young people should."

PRESUMABLY, SUCCESS OVERCAME feelings of inadequacy? "No. The key to working in the arts is never to feel successful. It was conversations with key figures in my life who belonged to the intelligentsia like [the late translator and dramatist] Michael Meyer. I immersed myself in the biographies of Olivier, Gielgud and Richardson and then became aware of Ibsen and Strindberg. I'm obsessed with theatre. I became a film and TV actor by default, and the great sadness for me is I've got to 51 and apart from *Hamlet* [at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2002] and Creon in *Sophocles's Antigone* [at the National ten years later] I haven't done what I wanted to do.

"I'm not seen as a theatre actor, which is what I trained for, so don't get offered the parts. I'd never say that's unfair. I'm one of the luckiest actors you've ever met and still have a good 20 years where I can get on stage, which is what I want to do, particularly now I have a young family [son Albert, aged three and Esme, two, by the wife he married in 2010 and has never publicly named], although you can earn a better living from film and TV."

I wonder if he's doomed to be remembered as the man who left *Doctor Who* controversially after just one series as the ninth incarnation in 2005? "I didn't agree with the way things were being run, or like the culture that grew up around the series," he said in 2011, and now adds, "I wanted to move him away from RP [received pronunciation] for the first time because we shouldn't make a correlation between intellect and accent although that still needs addressing. I hope I'll be remembered as one of the Doctors. I have no ill feeling towards the character or the series. I don't watch it and am not keen to discuss it because I want this to be about *Safe House*. That's my mortgage."

In the four-part series, he plays Robert, a former detective who begins a new life running

AMONG FRIENDS
Eccleston (second left) in 1996 with *Our Friends in the North* co-stars Mark Strong, Gina McKee and Daniel Craig

a Lake District guesthouse after being injured when a witness he was protecting was shot dead; she was due to testify against her gangland husband. He's asked by his former boss to use it as a safe house.

"One of the huge attractions in acting for me is that grey area of motivation. I've always been aware of a duality in myself. Robert belonged to an alpha-male, chauvinistic world and by inadvertently causing the death of this woman and taking a bullet himself, he's had a spiritual awakening and become a much gentler person. It resonated with me to play a man who's fallen apart. The TV archetype of the capable, gun-wielding cop means nothing to me."

He did all the stunts himself, which meant swimming in icy Coniston and Derwentwater. "I dreaded it but found it exhilarating – all part of my midlife crisis," he jokes. "I completely understand that someone traumatised would use exercise as a release. I've done that myself when unemployed. I enjoyed the physical aspects of the role. It helps get rid of any angst. I've always been an anxious fellow but now I know how to handle it with physical exercise and work."

"I always worried about things – God, existence. I no longer believe in God – do you? As a child I was intrigued when someone died and where they went. I was told my Auntie Annie was in a star, so I pictured her there. I wish I hadn't been given such a flip

answer because when you're starting your intellectual journey, it's better to be told the truth: 'Some people believe this, and others have a different view.'"

The writer of *Safe House*, Michael Crompton, says everyone has a secret to hide. Has Eccleston? "We all have suspicions about our motives, but I've worked hard over the years not to have secrets. They're not useful."

This helped when his phone was hacked by the *Daily Mirror* and the Murdoch press. "It went on from 2005 to 2011 and I can't say I was surprised because, looking back, I'd see a photographer where I didn't expect them. But they got nothing because there was nothing to get. My conscience is clear."

IN 2007, HE appeared in the US series *Heroes* and later this year he'll be in Texas filming the second series of *The Leftovers* for HBO. He was also in Sky Atlantic's Nordic thriller, *Fortitude*. "I'd love to have a big career in America, as would any British actor worth his salt. If you're successful there, you can return to England and won't be entirely reliant on our comparatively small industry. I've been in a couple of 'popcorn' films that I wouldn't go to see myself – *Thor: the Dark World* [2013] and *Gone in Sixty Seconds* [2000]. I had a good

time – except for being in make-up for six hours a day on *Thor*. You can be creative within that genre. Sometimes they're over-reliant on bangs and crashes, and sometimes they aren't."

"I'd still like to change the world but I realise now you have to be more subtle. Speak softly and carry a big stick. You learn to smile when you're being confrontational." So has he changed anything? He grins. "No. But I have matured."

'I'd love to have a big career in America, as would any British actor worth his salt'



SIX HOURS IN MAKE-UP
Eccleston as Malekith in *Thor: the Dark World*