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

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..."

The third son of working-class parents, he was 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 cliche [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."

Billed in an auspicious: 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, hardman 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
I’d love to have a big career in America, as would any British actor worth his salt