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**'Macbeth is very insecure about his masculinity. I am. Most men are'**  
**Christopher Eccleston opens up**

In rehearsal for *Macbeth* with Niamh Cusack, 2018



## 'Doctor Who almost finished my career'

As he takes on *Macbeth* - a role he hugely identifies with - Christopher Eccleston talks to Gareth McLean about his fallout with the BBC, his debt to his parents, and why he 'put self-hatred to bed'

Photography David Levene

**W**ithin minutes of meeting the man, it becomes clear that Christopher Eccleston is the sort of person who would be very good in a crisis. He has an air of soothing security about him - an ardent calm, if you will - that encourages other people to pause, take a breath, and become mellower. By other people, obviously, I mostly mean me. But he has a similar salving effect on the staff in the bar where we meet, and on the photographer, too. We are all seduced.

For Eccleston is quite the charmer. But as much as he is a great actor - from his debut as Derek Bentley in *Let Him Have It* through playing Steve Baxter, son of God, in Russell T Davies's *The Second Coming* to his role in HBO's acclaimed *The Leftovers* - his turn today is no performance. Overused a word it may be, but Eccleston seems authentic. When he says, "I think when you're working at your best you're constantly humble,"

you believe it. And you believe him when he says: "Because I grew up with not much, I've always been a rainy day person. I've always put money away. And I know that doesn't make me rock'n'roll, but I never imagined really that I'd get another job." It's different for him now, he admits. "I've got to the point where I believe I will work. But for the first 15, 20 years, I saved. I saved because I thought: 'This is all going to fall through. And when it falls through, I want something to show for it.'"

Eccleston's energy - of which there's lots - is invigorating. He gets animated - even angry - when discussing UK politics, or the moment in his career that he felt he might lose everything, or his regrets over taking roles primarily for financial reward.

"Working on something like *GI Joe* was horrendous," he says, emphasising that the responsibility was his and not anyone else's. "I just wanted to cut my throat every day. And *Thor*? Just a gun in your mouth. Gone in 60 Seconds was a good experience. Nic Cage is a gentleman

and fantastic actor. But *GI Joe* and *Thor* were ... I really paid for being a whore those times."

Eccleston may not be a total stranger to hyperbole, then. After all, he is an actor, so he likes an audience - and he commands a room when he tells a story. But overall, he seems deeply decent and thoroughly thoughtful. Honesty, along with integrity, dignity - and Manchester United - matter a lot

**'I gave them a hit show and left with dignity and then they put me on a blacklist'**

to Eccleston. His own, and other people's.

When he left *Doctor Who* after the first series of the revived show, his decision was greeted with speculation and ultimately hostility, much of it exacerbated, says Eccleston, by the BBC's mishandling of the situation.

"What happened around *Doctor Who* almost destroyed my career," he says. "I gave them a hit show





His first episode of *Doctor Who*, 2005; (right) commemorating the Peterloo Massacre with Maxine Peake, August 2017

and I left with dignity and then they put me on a blacklist. I was carrying my own insecurities as it was something I had never done before and then I was abandoned, vilified in the tabloid press and blacklisted. I was told by my agent at the time: 'The BBC regime is against you. You're going to have to get out of the country and wait for regime change.' So I went away to America and I kept on working because that's what my parents instilled in me. My dad always said to me: 'I don't care what you do - sweeping the floor or whatever you're doing - just do the best job you can.' I know it's cliched and northern and all that bollocks, but it applies."

Working clearly suits Eccleston. Through this process, he has also developed compassion for himself. He talks of putting self-hatred to bed "a good few years ago ... because it's a waste of everybody else's time, never mind my own. It's a form of arrogance in itself." And arrogance, like entitlement, does not pass the Eccleston Test.

"I've seen those people and been in those corridors of power, and they smell of fear and shit."

Peter Bowker, the writer of the BBC series *The A-Word* which stars Eccleston, has known him since he cast him in *The King and Us* in 2002. When Eccleston acts, he says: "It's almost as if you can see his soul ... saying

that probably makes me sound like a twat, but I don't care. With Chris, it's true. He was just mesmerising - in *Our Friends in the North*, *Cracker*, *Hillsborough* - I just knew that instinctively he would understand and land my rhythms. He talks with intelligence and insight, and what he never does is pull rank. There are actors who remain curious - and it makes them continually interesting to watch."

For his part, Eccleston seems at ease with himself - and life - now. You suspect he could deal adeptly with whatever slings and arrows are flung at him - from strangers' random rudeness and the challenges of fatherhood, to retiling a bathroom or wrestling a grizzly bear. His physicality helps - tall, broad and fit, he has hands like shovels - but it's more an emotional than a physical presence.

Like so much else in his life, Eccleston attributes his way of being to his upbringing and his quite-wonderful-sounding parents. He has pursued acting "largely in honour of my beloved mum and dad, who gave me everything, including a great love of literature, while they worked at Colgate Palmolive as a pallet packer and stacker truck driver, in the workplace at 14, the pair of them, working 40-hour weeks".



With Billie Piper in *Doctor Who*; (above) *Let Him Have It*, 1991



## 'With Macbeth there are things I can access, like being capable but overlooked'

His parents' values are crucial to who and where Eccleston is today. From the emphasis they placed on learning, reading and being curious about the world, to their work ethic and unerring support for his career choice, Eccleston owes them. "They were 100% behind me," he smiles. "Which may not have been the case if they had had any idea of the statistics of actors not working."

Eccleston's parents grew up in the 1930s, and he grew up on stories of "the terror of unemployment or not having enough money". But that never translated into timidity. "There was never a poverty of ambition in our house. That's why one of my brothers was very, very good at art, and the other was just this amazing raconteur. My parents never really said: 'You've got a gift.' The gift was your body, your concentration, your effort. It brings to mind my favourite Alex Ferguson quote, and I love Alex Ferguson: 'See hard work? It's a talent.'"

This brings us to *Macbeth*; the official reason for our meeting is that Eccleston is playing the King of Scotland at the RSC. It has been an ambition ever since he first encountered the play, taking on the role of Macduff and the Sargent to Ayub Khan-Din's thane. It was 1982, and Eccleston was 17 and a student at Salford college of technology.

"We began rehearsals on the day that the Falklands war was declared and we went on to tour around the north-west: Liverpool, Oldham, Farnworth, Buxton. We lived in digs and drank enormous amounts. I fell in love with two women, one playwright, and his greatest play and role."

Eccleston says that it was listening to a "breathtaking Ayub" night after night that cemented his decision to become an actor and formulated an ambition to play *Macbeth* at the RSC. "Very apt, considering the play and the fact that all the posh fuckers ruled the RSC and British theatre top to bottom," he notes, dryly.

Eccleston has given his *Hamlet* in 2002, at the West Yorkshire

Playhouse, "but I never felt like a *Hamlet*". He identifies much more with *Macbeth* "because he's a soldier, a traditionally proletarian job. There's no doubt that [director] Polly Findlay wanted me in this role because of what I bring, the things we're talking about. And without jemmying it in, there are definitely things I can access - about being very capable, but being overlooked. *Macbeth* is fantastic at his job. He lays his life on the line, and then he sees a chinless, milky blue-blood become King of Scotland. So of course I'm going to use that. But it's much more interesting to do that about the psychology of the character, rather than just wholly about my take on class politics in Britain. But it is definitely there."

But also there, says Eccleston, is so much more, not least an examination of masculinity ("He's very insecure about his masculinity: As I am. As most men, I hope, are") and a portrait of a relationship curdling from love into co-dependency.

"*Macbeth* has a very solitary journey into depravity, but it is definitely a play about relationships, and hence Niamh Cusack [who plays Lady *Macbeth*] and I are both on the poster - it's not just some image of me. Everything comes back to the marriage. That's fed my *Macbeth*, because I always felt there was a much more interesting dynamic than just him being chauvinistic and patriarchal. Though he is both those things."

By his own admission, Eccleston is primarily a television actor and doing *Macbeth* also feeds a need to take a break from "the constipation of screen acting", as well as addressing the voice in his head that says "rightly or wrongly, to be a really good actor you have to be able to do it on stage".

"I needed to stretch my legs and test myself a bit, and I am doing that. When I did *Hamlet*, I said to all the cast: 'I'm not going to read the reviews.' But, of course, I read them. Genuinely this time, though, in a very healthy way, I'm not going to read them because I understand now that it doesn't matter. Because, apparently, I'm reasonably secure in my career, and if this finishes me as a theatre actor ..."

An exit, then, perhaps pursued by a bear. Possibly waving a copy of the Stage. (I'm not a betting man, but my money's not on the bear).

*Macbeth* is at the RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon, from tomorrow.