



Sheffield steel

He's a bit of rough, a brooding pin-up, and so in demand as an actor, he never stops working. Christa D'Souza meets Sean Bean, the Yorkshire blade who's cutting a swathe through Hollywood. Photographed by Norman Jean Roy

Sean Bean tried his hand at the welding trade with a view to joining his father's steel business, before suddenly realising he wanted to act. Six months later he was at RADA with Kenneth Branagh and Joely Richardson. Grooming: Maitel Sabbon. Fashion editor: Katie Felstead

Smokers are always saying they are going to give up. Sean Bean is no exception. Today is the day he’s vowed never to put another cigarette in his mouth ever again. But not until after he’s finished this interview – heh, heh – which is why, on this unseasonably brisk, grey afternoon in LA, we are huddled outside, at a table overlooking the not-very-picturesque driveway of the Four Seasons Hotel. Bean has been in LA for the past five weeks making *National Treasure* (an action thriller with Nicolas Cage and Harvey Keitel) and promoting sword-and-sandal epic *Troy* (in which Brad Pitt stars as Achilles and Bean as Odysseus, the wily warrior who thought up the wooden-horse idea). The 44-year-old often likes to sit out here with a beer and a bite to eat, indulging in a spot of people-watching. Over there, being cantilevered out of his shiny Roller, is Larry Flynt, the notorious publisher of *Hustler* magazine who was paralysed from the waist down after beingshot in the stomach. “I’ve seen him here a few times,” says Bean, green eyes peering flintily over his coffee cup, fingers crooked securely round a Marlboro Light. “Can you see? He’s got a gold-plated wheelchair.” Then, over there, getting out of a chauffeured limo, is Bean’s co-star from *The Lord of the Rings*, Sir Ian McKellen, a friend and personal hero ever since Bean saw him play Macbeth opposite Judi Dench. “Yeah, that’s him, I can hear his voice,” he says in his famously pronounced Sheffield accent. “Has he got a cigarette in his hand? Can you see? I caught him out with one last night, I did!”

Everyone has a favourite Sean Bean character. For some people, it is the ill-fated Boromir. For others, it’s the dastardly Alec Trevelyan in the 1995 Bond film *Goldeneye*. At least a third of London theatre critics think his debut on the West End stage as Macbeth will be what’s he’s remembered for. Grannies, meanwhile, swooned over the dashing figure of Major Richard Sharpe in the mid-Nineties TV series *Sharpe*. Then there are all of us out there who will forever think of him as Oliver Mellors, the pumping-buttocked gamekeeper in Ken Russell’s *Lady Chatterley* – a role he played with such dazzling authenticity, it’s hard not to feel somewhat giggly and schoolgirlish in his presence.

A little shy and awkward in the flesh, and wearing a rather new-looking leather biker jacket (picked out himself, it transpires, on a recent shopping expedition to the nearby Beverly Center Mall), Bean is not quite the sex god one expects him to be. But with those vulpine cheekbones, that classic “period” jaw that looks like it’s hewn from granite, and that “wiry bugger” build, as his *Goldeneye*

co-star Pierce Brosnan once described it, he is still undeniably attractive. As Liz Hurley, who starred alongside him in a long-gone episode of *Sharpe*, commented, “I thought Sean was incredibly sexy but slightly odd. We were filming in Russia and he’d call his mum in Sheffield and listen to an entire football match over the phone. He did look gorgeous in his Sharpe costume, though.”

One can see, too, where that dangerous edginess he so exudes on screen comes from – that unpredictability that makes one feel,

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as the *Gosford Park* screenwriter and Bean’s fellow actor on *Sharpe*, Julian Fellowes, puts it, “that he’s going to jump right off the screen, *Purple Rose of Cairo*-style”. I bet, for example, he has a temper. I bet, too, he’s got his feminine side – a theory confirmed by his Lady Chatterley co-star Joely Richardson. “Oh, there’s a whole hinterland of stuff going on there that most people don’t know about,” enthuses Richardson later on, over the telephone. “Did you know, for example, what a great present-giver he was? After filming most people give you chocolates or a bottle of wine, but he gave me this really exquisite white embroidered Chinese print, something I’d be impressed with if given it by a really good girlfriend. It was one of those leftfield Sean Bean moments which really blew me away. I’m a terrific, terrific fan”. Or as *Troy* director Wolfgang Petersen, offers, “I guess it’s true what they say in German: *Stille Wasser sind tief* [still waters run deep].”

Bean has been living in hotels for a year now – because of a burst pipe in the kitchen of his Belsize Park mews house back home, he spent the three months before coming out here holed up in The Covent Garden Hotel – and frankly, he’s loving it. There is probably many a celeb who loathes the anonymity of hotels, loathes not being able to fry up an egg on his or her own stove, but not Bean. Although he misses his three daughters – Lorna and Molly by the actress Melanie Hill (Aveline in the TV series *Bread*) and Evie Natasha by the actress Abigail Cruttenden (with whom he fell in love on the set of *Sharpe*, and divorced four years ago), although he misses watching his beloved Sheffield United play and going down the

Belsize Tavern with his mates, he adores the idea of being so assiduously looked after: having his bed turned down every night, having the papers slipped under the door, having everyone say, “How are you this morning, Mr Bean?” He also, he admits, rather enjoys the freedom of being single after nearly 23 years of marriage, albeit to three different women. (He married his first wife, Debra, a hairdresser, at 21.) It’s nice, too, being away from the British tabloids, who gave him such a hard time after he once

let slip that he thought scoring a goal might be better than sex and that women with babies should stay at home rather than go out to work; those same tabloids who so went to town when he and Melanie went through their acrimonious split after 16 years together (according to the *News of the World*, she couldn’t stand his laddish behaviour any more) and then, extremely soon afterwards, he married Cruttenden, the privately educated daughter of a solicitor.

But more of all this later. First, since it’s lunchtime, what about some food? It’s a suggestion Bean welcomes, but not for himself. Having bumped into his great pal Billy Boyd (one of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*) in the hotel bar last night, he pulled a bit of a late one and has only just had his breakfast. But seeing as he doesn’t have to be anywhere for another four hours, he might switch from coffee to beer. “It’s all right, you sit there,” he says, leaping decorously to his feet. “I’ll go find us a waiter.” Then off he momentarily disappears, leaving a faint scent trail of leather and, unexpectedly, Givenchy Pour Homme, in his wake.

Born in Sheffield and brought up in a two-up, two-down council house by his steel-business-owning father and secretary mother, Shaun Bean (as his name used to be spelt) never had the slightest aspiration to be an actor (a profession “that fairies went into” where he came from). If anything, he had dreams of becoming a boxer or a footballer for Sheffield United (he has “100% Blades” tattooed on to a sinewy shoulder in their honour, and he now proudly sits on the team’s board of directors). He was also passionate about drawing, playing the piano

(which he used to practise at a neighbour’s house) and David Bowie, spending hours locked away in the bedroom he shared with his sister Lorraine, miming the words of his favourite album, *Diamond Dogs*, into a pretend microphone. Indeed, such a fan was he that at one stage he streaked his hair red and shaved off his eyebrows. He also insisted on wearing platforms. “We used to get them from Barnsley market – three pair for a pound, and then you’d have to sew your own stars on when you got home.”

Although mesmerised as a teen by the films of Richard Harris and Albert Finney, it wasn’t until he was a student at Rotherham College of Arts & Technology, halfheartedly learning how to become a welder in order to join his father’s business, that he decided he wanted to be an actor. The epiphany came when he peeped through the window of a drama class going on in the next room and suddenly realised he could get just as much of a rush acting as playing football or boxing or “cat creeping” (jumping over the hedges of people’s gardens), as he used to do with his mates – perhaps even more. Six months later he found himself accepted at RADA in a class of students that included Kenneth Branagh, Janet McTeer and Joely Richardson.

Bean’s first big break, arguably, was when the late Derek Jarman cast him in his cult 1986 film *Caravaggio* as Ranuccio, the artist’s bisexual lover. But it was *Stormy Monday*, a 1988 thriller set in Newcastle, in which he played Melanie Griffith’s lover, that brought him to the attention of Hollywood. The film’s director, Mike Figgis, remembers him walking in for the casting and being bowled over by “this total geezer who could also do Shakespeare”. “Of his peer group –

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Colin Firth, Richard E Grant, James Wilby and so on – he stood out because he was so obviously non-public school. As well as being beautiful he also had this immense coolness. I remember sending Melanie Griffith’s agent a photo of him because they had no idea who he was and soon after getting this slightly hysterical call from Melanie saying, ‘I wanna make a movie with this guy!’”

Since then, apparently, so has everyone else – from Sir Ian McKellen, who tells me

via e-mail how he wishes Boromir hadn’t been killed “so that I could have enjoyed his company right through the year’s shoot in New Zealand”, to the theatrical impresario Sonia Friedman (who produced Macbeth) “He’s the most generous-spirited, popular actor I’ve ever come across,” she tells me over the telephone, “and I don’t think I’ve ever seen a company rally round an actor like that before.” And Wolfgang Petersen, who directed *Das Boot* and *The Perfect Storm* as well as *Troy*: “Odysseus is an interesting role because he is forced to straddle enemy lines within his own camp. Sean pulls it off so effortlessly – it’s great to watch him find the edges of his character and nail him down... To work with a professional like this is just a beautiful thing for a director.” See? People just love making movies with this man.

“He’s a bit like Harrison Ford,” offers Figgis. “He can convey a whole raft of emotions with the flicker of an eyelid or the slight flaring of the nostrils, but it’s all totally instinctive as opposed to being intellectually – or as is so often the case, pseudo-intellectually – based. I don’t think I ever heard him once talk about Stanislavski or method or whatever.” But, then, Bean has always been slightly allergic to that whole what’s-my-motives tlick. Slightly defensive, too, about the assumption of some people in the business that because he is not a man of words, he might not quite get it if it’s not spelt out. “I can take things in quickly,” he shrugs, a small but perceptible flicker of annoyance about his slanty eyes, “I understand what a director is saying from the word go, and when they labour the point I just say, like, I do know what you mean, can we get on to the next thing, please?”

walking around with face-lifts (“Didn’t he say you can never recapture your youth, like with Dorian Gray and all that?”). There are flashes, too, of humour, when he tells, deadpan, of the “blue woolly socks” he had to talk to while filming *The Fellowship of the Ring*, or of the trainer he was given on the set of *Troy*, an ex-*Gladiators* champion called Eunice, who would chirp, “Y’all right, Sean?” (perfect Liverpoollian accent here) every time she entered his trailer for a session; or of the way he is flown everywhere first class now (“Yeah, what’s it like back there now? Do they play movies and all?”). There’s a very visceral anger simmering in there, too, especially when he dwells on the idea of strangers (ie tabloid journalists) making judgments on his private life.

“I just think, leave it. It’s a very sensitive subject. I know I’m all right. I know the kids are all right, and that’s all I’m worried about. I don’t hold myself up as a shining example; I just am who I am, like lots of fathers... Like there’s this Eminem song with this bit in the background where he’s talking about not being at home when the kids come home from school and you just think, oh, fucking hell. I mean, I’ve spent time away from my kids, I miss them, but they come and visit. We talk, we chat, it’s no big deal...” His voice trails away into the ether, an effective but rather maddening way of closing a subject he’s not comfortable discussing any further. But one senses with Bean that he is not being particularly evasive or pig-headed here, it’s more that he genuinely isn’t particularly adept at expressing exactly what he wants to say. If he’s got a script in his hand, no problem, but in a situation like this, as he himself rather helplessly admits during one point in the conversation, “I’m not a very good person to talk to, I suppose, am I?”

Predictably, Bean won’t be drawn on his current love life except to say that he is not actually in love. “No, no, I would tell you if there were someone special,” he protests weakly, “but there’s not. I mean I’m taking people out, but, erm, no, I’m just enjoying meself at the moment.” What he will say is that he is “no scally” when it comes to women or anything else and believes very strongly that what goes around comes around. “It’s like this little quotation alongside what the weather’s going to be like on a card the hotel always put on your bed before they turn it down for the night – I don’t know who said it, I think it’s Samuel Johnson – but it goes something like: ‘The true measure of a man is how he treats somebody who can do him absolutely no good.’ That were great, I thought.” ■