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Tom Hardy

12 Mar 2009

Guy Ritchie was being uncharacteristically conservative when he named the character who would eventually confess to a long held desire for Gerard Butler in *RocknRolla*. Calling Tom Hardy's gay gangster 'Handsome' Bob is a misleading moniker. 'Drop Dead Bloody Gorgeous' Bob would have been far more appropriate. Hardy isn't quite as sexy or DDBG in his new role as hardened criminal Charles Bronson. No. Not THAT Charles Bronson. The Charles Bronson who's become the most famous prisoner in the UK for spending 30 out of his 34 years in gaol banged up in solitary confinement.

Hardy is virtually unrecognisable. He's beefed up, bald and seriously moustachioed, not to mention a little manic. He embodies Bronson with every inch of his being – his ferocity, his rage, his bluster, his desire for fame and his vulnerability. Thanks to Hardy's performance and Nicolas Winding Refn's demented direction we are asked to consider the man behind the legendary violent outbursts.

Taking a second look at the seemingly obvious is Hardy's raison d'être. He believes things are rarely what they appear to be when it comes to the disassociated. It's this philosophy that inspired him to play Bronson and deliver a critically acclaimed performance of a homeless heroine addict with mental health problems in the BBC's *Stuart: A Life Backwards*.

It's hard to imagine how the 31-year old looker from a nice family in a posh part of West London is able to reveal such a sympathetic side to society's castoffs. Until he explains that he could have turned out to be one of the darker characters he's played in real life.

Hardy's tumultuous teenage years have been well documented. He used to punch people a lot and steal cars. He fooled around with guns and came inches away from a long stretch in prison before he pulled himself together enough to go to drama school. He was chucked out just before landing a role in Stephen Spielberg's *Band of Brothers*. But the converted don't become saints overnight and he exchanged joyriding for drinking and drug taking.

Now, after six years sober and straight thanks to lots of therapy and some serious self-realisation, the former bad boy is now the father of 11-month old Louis and happily ensconced with girlfriend Rachael Speed who he met on the set of *The Virgin Queen*.

He's won an Evening Standard Outstanding Newcomer Award for his performances in updated Oedipal myth *Blood* and *In Arabia, We'd All Be Kings* as the young drug dealer Skank, and he was the sexy, swaggering libertine in the National Theatre's contemporary take on George Etherege's *The Man of Mode*. He also starred as one of the put upon brothers in David Eldridge's excellent *Festen* and works closely with Philip Seymour Hoffman's Labyrinth Theater.

Where most celebs attempt to keep their murky past firmly locked away in the closet, Hardy is nothing but candid. When I meet him to discuss Bronson he's a powerhouse of excess energy, swiveling around in his chair, animating his answers with his hands and body and doing lots of impersonations. If he channels even an ounce of this vivacity into his roles it's easy to see why he's so good. He obviously has a soft spot for Bronson and I got the feeling he's had to justify that position on more than one occasion...

You manage to make Bronson quite a sympathetic character despite the things he's done, so how did you decide on the best way to play him?
(Hardy takes a long pause) Mmmm. To make him sympathetic...?

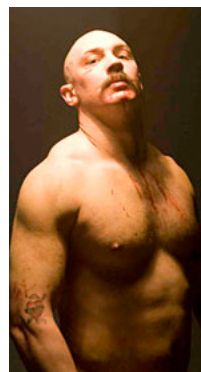
Yes. I thought the audience was rooting for him even though they know he's dangerous and violent. The film doesn't shirk away from that.
Yeah. Do you think they should, or shouldn't root for him?

I don't think they should, or they shouldn't.
Do you think they were rooting for him in the end or were you just rooting for him?

"My experience of Charlie was pleasant and amusing at times. Sometimes I was wary...I'm aware I'm in a maximum security prison on a segregated wing which houses...a mixture of multiple murderers."

I was sympathetic towards him the whole way through. I didn't know much about him before I saw the movie, but from what I did know I would expect him to be a very disagreeable, unlikable character because of what he's done.
Do you know what he's done?

I do now. And I know he didn't do very much on the outside to get locked up, but he is still incredibly terrifying. He hasn't killed anyone, but if you believe how he's portrayed in the movie then you come to the conclusion that you wouldn't really want to be his best mate. You had quite a good rapport with him though didn't you?
It's necessary that I do because he's my subject, so it helps to be able to get along with somebody otherwise I'm shut out of the situation.

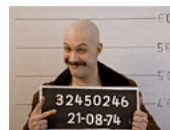


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Did you like him?

Yes. My experience of Charlie was pleasant and amusing at times. Sometimes I was wary because of the nature of the subject. I'm aware I'm in a maximum security prison on a segregated wing which houses seven of Wakefield's most violent offenders. A mixture of multiple murderers and most of the men have killed more than two people. They've mutilated or chopped their victims up and posted them through peoples' letterboxes or they've tried to eat their brains.

**Charlie is next door to a cannibal isn't he?**

Yes. From what I gather he (Robert Maudsley, also known as 'Hannibal the Cannibal') killed a cellmate and, when the guard came to remove him from the cell, he was spooning the brains out of his cellmate's skull. If I were to act that I would look at what that suggested. For me, it's about being elaborate. It seemed to be a protest designed entirely to shock and I have no idea how to get into that headspace at all.

So you think Charlie's in the wrong place?

Charlie's headspace was a lot more comfortable for me to have a look at. In an environment where I was very aware of other people's crimes, yet his somehow seemed to be...they've never manifested in the murder of anybody. Charlie would say, [*Hardy adopts a slightly high pitched excited voice and mimics Bronson*] "Did you see the cannibal? Come an' 'ave a look at Bob. E's thru' the window. Fuckin' 'orrible cunt".

"Forget about the crimes, look at that drive and the desire to be famous. He's a very camp, vaudevillian circus juggler. He's not gay but there're definite overtones...musclely, big bear..."

Were you allowed to be in the same room as him?

No.

So how did you communicate?

Through a dumb waiter between two cells. There's a hole that's got bars on it. He's in the part that was purpose built for the naughty, naughty boys. Food comes underneath the door and he gets an hour's exercise a day.

So how does he deal with having no physical contact with anybody?

Painting, writing, press-ups, he's written ten books and a lot of poems. He has a certain amount of numbers he's allowed to call and phone cards are like gold dust to him. He soaks up whatever he can from the outside world. He's a hive of activity.

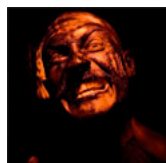
I can't imagine how you'd keep yourself sane when you don't have any interaction with other people.

He isn't allowed to hold his mum. He's not allowed in the same room as her and he's not going to take his mum hostage. You can shake his hand through the bars but he's not allowed physical contact with anyone. No hugs, nothing.

What's he like?

Very funny, very disarming when you first meet him, and charming. Self-deprecating and the self confessed worst armed robber in the world. Useless. Loves kids, wants to paint, wants to get out, knows what he did was wrong.

But then he gets the wrong end of the stick very quickly and he'll bollock you. He's got an anger issue, no doubt about it. But one wonders how much of that was compacted by fighting the system and the system fighting him back. I've heard stories from both sides of the fence, but there are members of the prison service who are bullies. There are members of the prison service who are in as long as the inmates. That's their life too. There are prison guards who I've heard say that it would be really good to go downstairs and rattle Charlie's cage because he's had a bad letter and he'll be pissed off.

**What was it like when you first met him?**

When I first met the people who approached me about it, I thought it was going to be like *The Football Factory* and I didn't want anything to do with it. Without a sideswipe at anybody's work it's just not my kind of thing. *RocknRolla* was fun because I got to play a gay guy, but generally, *Lock, Stock and Snatch* are not my kind of thing. I am a lad and if I could play football I would, but I wouldn't approach it with that kind of attitude.

Bronson is shot in a surreal, non-linear way. He dresses up as a nurse and a clown, talks to the audience... Did the theatricality of the script appeal to you?

The script went through many different changes and a lot of that stuff was arrived at on set because things weren't working and we were looking for new ways to show what was in Charlie's head. There was a very cool group of artists who wanted to tell the story in a unique way. At one point one of the crew threw a tantrum and said, [*Hardy adopts an outraged Cockney accent*] "Wot you doin'?! This is a fuckin' British gansta movie! He's a fuckin' legend, yeah."

We've seen that side of the genre so many times now; it needs to progress and Bronson breaks that mold.

It's a lot to do with having a Danish director. His sensibilities are much more sensitive, much more homoerotic, do you know what I mean? Bronson's a brand, as British as OXO with the big tash and the glasses. Forget about the crimes, look at that drive and the desire to be famous. He's a very camp, vaudevillian circus juggler. He's not gay but there're definite overtones...musclely, big bear...

I was fucking henched, bald head, big tash and people would think I was either gay or nuts and that's all I could see in people's eyes. On my day off, I'd go around town in Nike trainers, big white T-shirt and gold chain and I'm very smiley because I've got nothing to prove - I know I can handle myself. I'm with my girlfriend with my arm round her so I'm not gay, but I must be at least bi? There's a pregnant girl who's very attractive with a guy who's not very attractive and people are thinking what's going on there? It was really interesting to see.

"They keep saying I woke up next to a crack pipe on the streets of Soho, which is an embellishment and it gets worse every time I read it."

How did you get into shape for the role?

I put all the weight on for *Bronson* then it fell through and then I had to drop it all to play Stuart (*Stuart: A Life Backwards*). And then there was *RocknRolla* and then *Oliver Twist* and then back up with the weight for *Bronson*. Very stop, start. The thing with Bronson is that he's a brawler body. Ideally I had to get to 16 stone. That wasn't going to happen because I only weighed ten stone. We had five weeks and I got up to 12 stone 9lbs. I ate everything and pushed the floor. Not the best way, but it worked.

You were naked in quite a lot of the film and manhandled by other actors. Is that something you have to psych yourself up for or doesn't it bother you?

Nah. I did it with Stuart and in *Oedipus* at the Royal Court. Once you've crossed that bridge, it's crossed. It makes no difference to me and the choreographer who did *Eastern Promises* had already cornered the market for naked fighting, so that was the template for this one. Plus, that's what Charlie does. He'd cover himself in margarine so you couldn't hold on to him.

You've been very open about the trouble you got into when you were younger...

It's not going to get me a visa, though, is it?

What?

I'm having real trouble in America getting a visa because drugs and guns don't go down very well.

What happened to make you come out the other side and decide you just didn't want to be like that anymore?

Fear. I woke up. They keep saying I woke up next to a crack pipe on the streets of Soho, which is an embellishment and it gets worse every time I read it. You know, *[adopts a sensational tabloid headline voice]* "He woke up blood soaked with a crack pipe, on his knees, howling at the moon, with a gun." And I'm thinking, 'Oh, this is good'.

You could make your own movie.

Yeah. It's brilliant. Does my bad boy image no end of good. Basically I was a dick. There comes a point when you grow up. It's just not going to fit anymore and I would lose more than my behaviour's worth. The pleasure I get from that behaviour is minimal every day now.



A very close friend of mine hung himself only yesterday and that's where I could have been and I'm not. Maybe I saw that coming or that was coming for me. I'm very fortunate to be alive. I don't know how I got out of it but I'm blessed to get out of it because I could be dead.

Do you think you vent some of your frustrations through your characters?

Yeah. Absolutely. There's a place for all the silly things I've done and I don't think it's therapy, but it goes somewhere useful and hopefully you like the people I play because you don't judge them.

There's a story everywhere and it's a lot easier to go, "No. Hang him. No. Box that." And I go, "Wait a minute, wait a minute" and let's just look at this kid because it could be a microcosm of something that we've missed about our daily life and maybe he holds the key. You never know where the DNA strand is that's going to save a kid's life. I don't why I do what I do, but these are the characters that I'm working on. I work hard on them and I have a relationship with all of them.

But that doesn't mean I don't want to play spitfire pilots and do romantic comedies.

What's your next project *The Warrior* about?

It's kind of *Deerhunter* meets *Rocky*. More dysfunction, more pain and violence, but in a competitive environment. Mixed martial arts is a very big industry in America. It's cage fighting. It's not like WWF, it's very serious. Basically it's about athletes who fight.

I gather you have a bit of a shoe fetish. Is that right?

Yes. I luurve shoes. My mum was a pattern cutter and designer and I used to pin her into dresses when I was a kid. So I'm used to hearing my mum say, "Shall I wear those shoes with that?" So I'm used to shoes and they are something I find very sensual.

Apparently shoe fetishism is called retifism and it's named after an 18th century French author called Nicolas-Edme Rétif.

Wow. Thank you. *[Hardy makes a note of this in his mobile]*

So you're a retifist.

And what is it? A love of shoes?

Yes, a shoe fetish.

High heels, though?

Well, it usually is, isn't it? I don't know anyone who's got a real thing for flats.

[He laughs.]

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***Bronson* opens in UK cinemas on 13 March 2009.**

Author: Rachael Scott

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