

Going on a Fassbender

HERE'S ONE BINGE THAT'S WORTH GOING ON. OH YES, MICHAEL FASSBENDER IS THE WHOLE PACKAGE, SAYS TIFFANY BAKKER

Michael Fassbender is drinking a green juice. Now, before you think he's gone all 'California' on us and turned his back on his stout Irish roots, it transpires that he's just giving his much overworked liver some respite. When we meet at a fancy downtown New York hotel, Fassbender has only just returned from the Toronto International Film Festival, where his hotly anticipated film, *12 Years a Slave*, premiered to a rapturous response, and where he says he spent most of his time "drinking, drinking and more drinking".

"You see people you haven't seen in a while, and all of a sudden the bottle of whisky comes out," he says. Fassbender clearly is a man's man, in the modern sense of the word. He may be cut from the same cloth as Humphrey Bogart, Spencer Tracy and Richard Burton, but he has a certain fragility that makes him a captivating presence on screen.

Unlike recent leading men such as Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt, who can often come across in their films simply as Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt playing a role, Fassbender is a character actor who happens to have movie-star good looks; a shapeshifter who glides seamlessly between roles. He might be too resolutely Irish and self-deprecating to admit it, but Michael Fassbender is having a moment.

After years of minor roles, he's currently enjoying a golden run, which started with his performance in 2008's *Hunger* as Irish hunger-striker Bobby Sands (his first feature film with now-frequent collaborator, director Steve McQueen) and continued with *Inglourious Basterds*, *Jane Eyre*, *A Dangerous Method*, *X-Men: First Class*, *Haywire*, *Shame* and *Prometheus*. In *Shame* (2011), his impressive private parts caused as much excitement as his impressive performance as a New Yorker contending with a raging sex addiction.

Now, along with a string of projects lined up, he has two big films ready for release, both of which are set to further consolidate his new standing as the industry's go-to leading man. First up, he takes centre stage in the Cormac McCarthy-penned *The Counselor*, playing a lawyer who gets caught up in a one-time drug deal that goes horribly wrong. The movie also stars Javier Bardem, Penélope Cruz, Brad Pitt and Cameron Diaz – hardly Hollywood lightweights, but they all play second fiddle to Fassbender.

In the McQueen-directed *12 Years a Slave*, he is mesmerising as sadistic slave-owner Edwin Epps, a broken, pathetic man tormented by his obsessive love for one of his slaves. His performance as Epps should surely nab him his first Academy Award nomination.

The 36-year-old seems genuinely surprised by the force with which his career has taken off – and this makes him even more likeable – given he was already 30 ("an old man in this game") when he was cast in *Hunger*.

Although Fassbender enjoys Hollywood, he also likes to leave it behind and get back to his London base: "The trimmings around it are fun if you dip a toe in every now and then, but not something I'd like to be embroiled in all the time."

The fact his success came relatively late in life has helped to keep Fassbender's head screwed on. "Thank the lord it happened later," he says. "The seductions of the business are immense." He feels for younger actors who achieve huge success early on.

"It's off-kilter. It can be a very unbalanced surrounding. I totally feel for young teens or kids in their early twenties. For me, I'm happy it went that way. I had to do different jobs and gathered a lot of experience of life. I wouldn't change that."

He's also becoming accustomed to people being curious about his personal life. In the past he's been linked to Zoë Kravitz, and he was seeing *Shame* co-star Nicole Beharie for most of last year, but he's recently been spotted with British Olympian Louise Hazel. Asked if he's single, he just flashes that megawatt smile and says, "Ah, I'm just having a good time." And you get the feeling he is.

Still, he reckons his new-found fame has been infinitely more exciting for his parents. "Oh, they love it. Because it's a frightening thing being a parent, and seeing your child grow up and hoping that they get a job, and that they're happy, and working and being able to provide for themselves," he says. "So when I went into acting, it was like, 'Oh lord, help us. Really? Don't you want to go to university first and then do that on the side?' So to see it turn out like this, it must be a great relief. And I think they're very proud, you know?"

While his own trips to Ireland are "less and less, unfortunately", Fassbender says his parents, who have recently retired and to whom he is very close, visit him often – wherever his work takes him. "They're an absolute treat. They are the easiest guests to ever have. I think a lot of the time people are like, 'Oh no, the parents are going to be here', but they're the easiest. They come, they potter around and do their own thing. They understand that I work 16-hour days."

His parents may understand his life, but he's had a few difficulties with friends. "They kind of get annoyed because I don't get to see ▶



| SUNDAYSTYLE.COM.AU

(cover_story)



them or speak to them that often. I think maybe they don't understand that it's not down to forgetting about anybody, it's just down to time," he says.

"For example, if somebody's getting married, I'll say 'I'll try to make it' and they're like, 'Oh right, he's just not committing to it.' But the fact of the matter is, I just don't know if I'm working, if they'll give me the time off and all this sort of stuff. So that, I guess, takes a bit of getting used to and understandably so." (To put his busy schedule in perspective, Fassbender reckons in the past year, he's spent six weeks at home in his East London flat.)

Fassbender was born in Germany to an Irish mother and a German father. The family moved to Killarney in Ireland when he was two (his older sister, Catherine, is a neuropsychologist who lives in California), but his surname left him open to schoolyard taunts.

"Well, you can imagine – in amongst the O'Sullivan and the Fitzgeralds – 'Fassbender' was wide open for attack," he says. "And all of the connotations that surname would evoke, with kids especially. There's a certain amount of displacement I felt. But I didn't really know anything about Germany, either, because I was so young when we left."

Fassbender found himself drawn to other kids who came from different backgrounds; one of his best friends was half Italian, half Canadian, another half Irish and half American. "It's an interesting thing, wondering where your roots come from, and just that tie-in to your personality," he says. "Of course, when I moved to London, I missed Ireland and I felt more Irish being away."

Given the nature of his childhood, Fassbender thinks he may have been drawn to acting because of the peripatetic nature of the business. "I like the gypsy lifestyle. Is that a residue from my childhood? Who knows?" he says. "But wherever I go is sort of my home for the time."

Acting wasn't Fassbender's first love. Early on, when his parents owned a restaurant, he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and become a chef. He also fancied himself as a bit of a musician (he plays the piano accordion), until he realised he wasn't any good. "I have an absolute lack of ability in anything else."

Acting first struck a chord when he was 17, after a local actor conducted a workshop at his high school. He liked it, and found he was good at it. When the actor started a theatre company in Fassbender's hometown, he was asked to join. The company travelled all over County Kerry, performing. "That was my most



▲ **FACES OF FASSBENDER** (clockwise from top left) Michael Fassbender and Javier Bardem in a scene from *The Counselor*; with former love Zoë Kravitz in 2011; as Lt. Archie Hicox in 2009's *Inglourious Basterds*.

valuable time as a student of acting where I got to learn that all you really need to do is be passionate and work hard," he says.

Ultimately, Fassbender went to London to attend drama school, but success eluded him. He thought he'd made a breakthrough when he landed a small role in *Band of Brothers*, the hugely successful television miniseries helmed by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg

(and which also kickstarted the career of *Homeland*'s Damian Lewis). But the role didn't lead to the parts he hoped it would. "After that, it was hard to get work. After the initial heat, people were like, 'Oh, you were in which episode?' It was another five years before I started really making a living out of acting, where I didn't have to work behind a bar or do odd jobs."

According to Fassbender, talent is not always enough to find lasting success. "There are plenty of talented people out there who we'll never see in this field, because there's so many things outside of that that are crucial – timing, other people giving you a break or mentioning your name to somebody giving you an opportunity. It's so many things outside of just the talent. In fact, talent, I would put – in a weird way – below all of those things."

Fassbender credits now three-time co-star Brad Pitt with helping him get a leg-up. "After *Inglourious Basterds*, he really spoke to a lot of people about me. He didn't have to do that."

It may have taken Hollywood a while to recognise his talent, but now Fassbender is in constant demand. He's about to pack his bags again for a three-month stint in New Zealand, where he's preparing to film *Macbeth* with Justin Kurzel, the Australian director behind 2011's chilling *Snowtown*. "That film, fl says Fassbender, "freaked me out.fl

He's also hoping he'll soon head our way. He visited Australia in 2008 "because the girl I was seeing [Maiko Spencer, Sam Neill's stepdaughter] was from Sydney", but the trip was a bit of a disaster.

"We tried to go to Cape Tribulation [in northern Queensland], but it was the rainy season, so we flew into Cairns, but we had to turn around and go back because everything was flooded. fiou'd have thought we would have looked into that before we went. This is why I went into acting – I don't have a lot of sense," he smiles.

And with that, Michael Fassbender takes his green juice and goes back to his brilliant career. 📍

The Counselor is in cinemas on Thursday.

🐦 FOLLOW TIFFANY ON TWITTER @TIFFANYBAKKER

SCAN THE PAGE TO WATCH THE TRAILER FOR *THE COUNSELOR*. SEE PAGE 6 FOR HOW TO USE BLIPPAR

PHOTOGRAPHY: © NINO MUÑOZ/OPS/INDICATION/HEADPRESS, KERRY BROWN, SNAPPER MEDIA, UNIVERSAL