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Words by MICHAEL ODELL

Photograph by SASHA EISENMAN



## THE MAN MOST WANTED

*From bit parts on *The Bill* to Hollywood HERO, JAMES McAVOY ruminates on his impressive CV, his suit with removable arms, and his FATWA on mirrors*

It's a chilly Saturday afternoon in New York and a shivering James McAvoy is experiencing déjà vu. 'I feel like I've woken up back home in Scotland... except with taller buildings,' he gripes. Yesterday the 30-year-old Glaswegian was panting in the heat of Savannah, Georgia, where he's making the Robert Redford-directed *The Conspirator*, a film about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865. McAvoy plays Frederick Aiken, a young attorney who defends one of the alleged conspirators.

Today, though, he's here to chat about his role in *The Last Station*, a tragi-comic costume drama, starring Christopher Plummer and Helen Mirren, about the

final year of Leo Tolstoy's life. McAvoy plays Valentin Bulgakov, an idealistic young aide to Tolstoy. It's a challenging role, not least because McAvoy shares screen time with his wife Anne-Marie Duff (who plays Tolstoy's daughter Sasha) but falls in love and sleeps with another young Tolstoy follower, Masha, played by Kerry Condon.

Since rising to fame in Channel 4's *Shameless*, roles in *The Last King of Scotland*, *Atonement* (with Keira Knightley) and *Wanted* (alongside Angelina Jolie) have established McAvoy as both a serious actor and a big box-office draw. Yet he is a reticent Hollywood star, notoriously media-shy and living an unpretentious life in a north

London flat: 'Our little flat. Our little car. People think we are weird. I think it's pretty normal,' he grins.

*ELLE*: What did you like most about *The Last Station*?

*James McAvoy*: It's not a stuffy costume drama. One minute Tolstoy and his wife are jumping into bed together making hen noises, the next she's threatening to shoot him because he's planning to donate the rights to his literary work to the Russian people. The script made me laugh, which is always a good sign.

*ELLE*: Valentin begins as a clean-living idealist but he comes to see the need for love and sex. Do you see yourself in him?

# ELLE *interview*

*JM:* I think so, yes. I think everyone goes through stages in life where they drop their previous beliefs and see there's a new path.

*ELLE:* Your wife is also in the film. Was that a tough decision?

*JM:* I was approached about *The Last Station* four years ago, but the film never happened due to financing problems. Then a couple of years ago it was resurrected and the casting director put my wife up for audition. I don't think he knew we were together. I didn't know it was back on, then she came home and said, 'I've been offered a job on a film called *The Last Station*'. I was on the phone to my agent, like, 'Oi! My wife's been cast! What the f\*\*\* is happening?'

*ELLE:* In the film you have sex with another woman. Was that weird?

*JM:* No. My wife and I don't have too much to do with each other on-screen, that was the plan. It's not always great having crew and cameras around when you're kissing someone. It can be very business-like – you don't need that with people close to you.

*ELLE:* The Tolstoy commune – healthy living, hard work, no sex. How would James McAvoy have fared?

*JM:* I'm not really the type of person to get wound up in huge movements of lots of people thinking the same thing. I'd probably be a little bit s\*\*\* and get rebellious.

*ELLE:* Really? Weren't you once going to become a priest?

*JM:* I considered it. I felt I had to do something good and important. I wanted to be a doctor if I got good qualifications. Otherwise it was join the Navy or become a priest. Then I discovered I loved acting.

*ELLE:* What gives you most satisfaction from acting – a 'well done' from your wife, an award, the pay cheque...?

*JM:* Not so much the money because you could just go and do any old cheesy stuff for the big bucks. The best thing though is... I enjoy doing it. I enjoy collaborating and occasionally arguing with a director and seeing a film evolve.

*ELLE:* What do you think has been your best performance?

*JM:* *Starter For 10* [he plays a University Challenge contestant] because it has a great soundtrack and I really enjoyed playing that guy. I was gutted that only three people in the whole of Britain went to see it.

*ELLE:* Your character was Brian Jackson, an endearing geek. Do you think you are an unusual leading man?

*JM:* The image I see in the bathroom mirror is *not* that of a leading man. It's a pale Scottish guy who needs to go to the gym. But hopefully there's a bit more to it than that. I hope that I bring a little bit of the internal life of the hero alive, which makes up for the fact he's a pale weedy little git.

*ELLE:* Which role would you say has been your worst performance?

*JM:* I turned in a wonderfully ruddy cheeked performance for *The Bill* once, and I fear that I wasn't all that

good in the *Inspector Lynley Mysteries*.

*ELLE:* Do you still drive your 10-year-old Nissan Micra?

*JM:* I may do and I may not. I'm enjoying the mystery of what people make of that. They either think 'Tight-arse Scot' or 'Aha! Eco warriors' or 'I bet there's a Range Rover parked round the corner'. All I'll say is I live in London and cars don't really work there do they? I've got a Triumph motorbike and that serves me well.

*ELLE:* So what do you do with all that money you're earning?

*JM:* I don't earn millions and millions of dollars. Nothing like what people think I do. I'm self-employed and I might stop working tomorrow for all I know. I've got to be frugal and be a tight Scotsman.

*ELLE:* Is it true you had all the mirrors in your flat removed?

*JM:* Not all of them. But there are far better views to be had than in a mirror. It's a distraction. My self-esteem has gone up since I stopped checking whether my ginger beard looks scruffy or not.

*ELLE:* Do you work out?

*JM:* I did for *Wanted*, but then I stopped. I do what everyone else does: go to the gym for three months and then give up.

*ELLE:* What's the McAvoy look?

*JM:* When I had a few red-carpet events to go to, Clemens en August, a Dutch designer, fitted me for some suits. This was before I got freebies and I stuck with them. They

always have a futuristic element to them which makes me feel like a secret agent. The jackets are reversible. They have little cummerbund attachment that means if you leave it undone in the wind, it stays closed. And the sleeves are removable. I can't imagine the red-carpet situation where you'd need to remove the sleeves of your suit, but it's nice to know the option is there.

*ELLE:* British actresses who arrive in Hollywood are told to drop weight, get

*'The IMAGE I see in the mirror is not a leading man. It's a PALE Scottish guy who NEEDS to go to the GYM*

a nail technician and lose their body hair. What's the equivalent for a male actor?

*JM:* Your teeth need to be sorted out. It doesn't matter if you're playing a guy who's been living on a desert island eating coconuts for 20 years, your teeth need to be perfect. I'd hate to be a woman in this business. They're not allowed to be imperfect. If you see an actress weighing over eight stone being cast for anything, it's considered totally edgy and 'out there' experimental cinema, which is ridiculous.

*ELLE:* If Keira Knightley or Angelina Jolie came to live in Glasgow, what adjustments would they have to make?

*JM:* I don't know Angelina very well. We worked together and that was fun but there wasn't time to go out. Instinctively I'd say Keira would be OK because I count her as a friend. She'd be cool. Anyway it's not what they're like, it's how people react to you. I know an actor who met some lads on a night out in Glasgow and it got a bit boisterous – they kidnapped him and did all sorts of stuff to him.

*ELLE:* You turned 30 last April. Was that a major milestone?

*JM:* Yes and no. I've had a wonderful time since I started acting. But I try to look forward and make sure I'm pushing myself a bit. Trying new things. It can all go by so quickly. I feel there is a duty not to churn out the same old shit.

*The Last Station is out on 19 February*