

Heaven knows I'm not miserable now

As BBC1's Clocking On [sic] reveals, there's more to Christopher Eccleston [sic] than brooding looks

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CHRISTOPHER ECCLESTON could brood for Britain. He has manifested severe miserablist tendencies through several hours of Our Friends in the North, Elizabeth, Jude, Cracker, Hillsborough, Hearts and Minds and Shallow Grave - none of which could exactly be described as a barrel of laughs. Grim and gritty are the adjectives that have stalked his career.

What a shock, then, to encounter an actor not brooding but bubbling, a man - and here's the real surprise - with a highly developed sense of humour. When Eccleston met me at Manchester Piccadilly, I was fuming about the half-hour delay on my Virgin train from London. As we left the station, we passed a man dressed as a yeti. Quick as a flash, Eccleston said: "That's Richard Branson trying to hide from you."

He displays a similarly unwonted twinkle in Clocking Off, Paul Abbott's (Cracker, Touching Evil, Reckless) new series for BBC1. When I heard this was a drama set in a Manchester textile factory, I immediately imagined Eccleston would be playing an unreconstructedly militant shop steward - a sort of Scargill without the jokes.

But cast completely against type, he plays Jim, a light-hearted womaniser who becomes positively daffy when he falls for Sarah Lancashire's feisty production-line worker. After their first night together, Jim moons around at like a lovestruck fool, singing along to "Love's the Greatest Thing". He even - a screen-first for Eccleston? - gets to smile.

We are having a drink in the newly refurbished Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester where, many moons ago, Eccleston helped paint the scenery. He acknowledges that it was something of a relief to get away from roles intense enough to strip paint at 50 paces. "The movers and shakers of Soho have me pigeon-holed as a class-avenging lout," he sighs. "But that's not fair. I've reread Jude and looked in vain for opportunities to introduce custard-pies.

"That's why it was lovely for once not to have a father who hated me or children trying to kill themselves in Clocking Off. It was a nice change to play a bit of a loon, a daft lad. It was also great to smile. My brothers say that when I smile it looks like the top of my head is going to fall off."

Eccleston admits that he was becoming fed up with his unsmiling, puritanical image. "It was a burden because it meant I was spending a lot of time sitting on my arse not working. I wasn't able to develop because some producers find it disturbing when somebody they think does one thing, wants to do another. Some actors aren't allowed to act - they just use the same old faces."

All the same, Eccleston now concedes that he didn't do his cause any favours by adopting an uncompromising - not to say confrontational - approach to his work. This is not a man given to calling a spade a pickaxe. "On my very first film, Let Him Have It [about the Derek Bentley case], I found myself disagreeing with the script and that politicised me. I realised there were two choices - doing what the writers want and taking part in the sentimentalisation of the working-classes, or maintaining my integrity and doing my own thing." Guess which option Eccleston has chosen ever since?

He now has a lapel covered in campaign medals from bloody battles with film-makers. While he clearly hasn't read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Eccleston at least has the virtue of honesty. Look what he has to say about his own career: "With *Let Him Have It* and *Jude*, I had two great opportunities to break through to another level, but frankly my performances fell short and I found myself unemployed."

He is equally candid about one of his most feted films, *Shallow Grave*, Danny Boyle's black comedy about Edinburgh yuppies trying to dispose of their flatmate's body. "I didn't like it," he says. "I thought it was superficial and thin, an example of style over content. I was embarrassed by all the hype."

For all his self-criticism, Eccleston has still produced some cracking work. With his haunted eyes and angular features, he invests everything he does with a compelling sense of urgency. Anybody would be proud of a CV containing *Our Friends*, *Hillsborough*, *Elizabeth* and *Cracker*. And he has some pretty decent work coming up, too, including American films opposite Nicolas Cage and Cameron Diaz and a West End run of *Miss Julie* with Aisling O'Sullivan, which opens next month.

Even so, the 35-year-old, Eccles-bred actor seems in some ways an unquiet soul, wrestling some unperceived demons. Leaning forward to add emphasis to his opinions, he views the world with a youthful passion undimmed by the passing of the years. "Commitment over talent has always been my motto - it was the way I played football," he laughs. "On *Jude* we used to have this joke about committed actors - 'he's not good, but he can't half learn his lines'." Eccleston rails, for instance, against the fact that there are so few portrayals of working-class life in TV drama.

"You feel frustrated when 95 per cent of the scripts you read are televisual wallpaper, with no concerns above getting the figures up and offering a nice middle-class setting for advertisers. That's what's so good about *Clocking Off*. It shows a world we rarely see on TV - with none of that 'Northern clogs' bollocks you get with some writers, who shall remain nameless ... and clueless. The working-class world is not seen often enough because all TV drama is supposed to be aspirational these days."

'*Clocking Off*' is on BBC1 at 9pm on Sunday