

'Humans are both ape and angel. I have daily ape moments'

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Michael Odell

Christopher Eccleston tells Michael Odell what makes him angry and why he said no to Hollywood

The internet cliché is that you're a stropky bachelor, ex-Time Lord who's moved back up North to tend to his whippets. "That's misinformation. I hate to disappoint you." Christopher Eccleston has bad news for the online trolls. He is married. In February he will become a father for the first time. Also, he lives in north London where he jogs past Julian Barnes and Melvyn Bragg on Hampstead Heath of a morning and sees Liam Gallagher in the local butchers. "I don't say hello to Liam because there is something fundamentally absurd about interrupting a rock star buying his sausages," he says.

Perhaps the most unexpected revelation is that he is happy. Yes, happy and "enjoying life". But don't get carried away. Eccleston offers this information willingly enough but becomes as terse as a Dalek if you push him too far. "What's any of that got to do with playing a dad who lives under Victoria Wood's floorboards," he asks reasonably.

We are sitting in a Manchester bar to discuss his role as Pod Clock in a new BBC One adaptation of *The Borrowers*, also starring Stephen Fry and Victoria Wood, to be screened on Boxing Day. To ensure this interview remains on-message after this brief foray into the personal, he gives a classic Eccleston three-pointer: a flash of massive blue eyes, a clench of hallmark bladed cheekbones and nostril-flare set to "full indignation".

All Eccleston admirers will know the face: it has featured in an astonishing CV of landmark TV drama stretching 20 years: *Cracker*, *Our Friends in the North*, *Clocking Off*, *Hillsborough*, *Flesh and Blood*, *The Accused*, *The Shadow Line*.

And then there was *Dr Who*, of course. When Eccleston was tasked with reinventing the Doctor in 2005, he imbued the Timelord with gritty, Salford angst. Facing down the Cybermen, he snarled as though seeing off a bunch of poncey southerners rolling on to his manor in four-wheel drives with plans for a chain of gastro pubs.

"I am very proud of having been Doctor Who. I'm especially proud of trying to do him in my own way and the reaction I get from kids," he says. This includes some who actually cry when they meet him.

No wonder his friends called him Ronseal, for his ability to detect the angst in any script and then "do exactly what it says on the tin". Which makes his role as a microscopic dad living under Victoria Wood's floorboards in *The Borrowers* all the more striking. Mary Norton's children's book, published in 1952, is a postwar tale of family survival, persecution and austerity seen through the eyes of 14-year-old Arrietty. In the new version Eccleston plays Pod, the overprotective and quietly heroic father of an eye-batting 16-year-old as she faces giant cats and vacuum cleaners. But when she "borrows" a figure-hugging purple catsuit and catches the eye of be-quiffed, leather-jacketed biker Spiller (Robert Sheehan from *Misfits*), you know this is aimed at a generation not concerned with rationing or genocide.

Eccleston was introduced to the original by his English teacher, Mrs Hayes. He hasn't had a chance to see the finished product and didn't get to meet his co-stars — but hopes this version keeps the integrity of the book. "I hope that the heart of the piece hasn't been lost. The temptation is to update it and be ironic and too clever."

Rest assured, it's great fun. Eccleston is grizzled and conflicted but also plays it for laughs, diving into a tin of Quality Street the size of a swimming pool to haul out a strawberry cream the size of a garden shed for a family treat. "I always chose the heavyweight Chekhov roles at drama school. I've always done psychologically intense parts. But comedy is something that appeals. *The Borrowers* was like going out to play every day."

These borrowers are a northern family whose persecutors are the inhabitants of a London house, and then Stephen Fry, a cruel, tweedy anthropologist, wants to dissect them. Was this Eccleston's idea? He has played up to his distrust of the metropolis in the past, claiming the beer and football are better up north. "I live in London. Everyone thinks I don't but that's just lazy journalism," he says. "I suppose we play it northern (in *The Borrowers*) because we are seen as homely, honest, salt-of-the-earth and trustworthy people," he says only half-joking. "The opposite of your southern metropolitan guile. That's why northerners get used in all the Morrison's adverts. We're homely enough to be trusted to run a meat counter."

He was raised in Salford by parents who began their working lives at age 14 and who met at the local Colgate Palmolive factory. He and his older brothers were encouraged to think, read, apply themselves, to have no deference but treat others with respect. His brothers became a furniture-maker and shopfitter. For the younger Eccleston, though, local hero Albert Finney was an inspiration and he went to drama school. When success came in the early Nineties with films *Let Him Have It* and *Shallow Grave*, Eccleston could have chanced his arm in Hollywood, but decided that homegrown television drama was his natural arena. "TV can reach huge audiences with amazing immediacy. It's relatively cheap compared to film and we have great writers. I was idealistic and still am about trying to say something that needs saying to the greatest number of people."

His role as Pod Clock in *The Borrowers* anticipates imminent fatherhood. But in his next role, a BBC four-part drama, *The Fuse*, he is on more familiar ground: a tortured, alcoholic political firebrand embroiled in Manchester townhall politics. "I love that Dennis Potter idea that all humans are a mix of ape and angel. I like characters where you see the two fighting each other. I know I can be like that. I have ape moments every day."

Like when?

"Kids leaving their litter on the Heath for some other f***** to pick up is a major ape moment for me. I cannot bear it."

The last time he had a simian meltdown was on-set, though he won't say which production. "If I see a director tear someone junior to him a new arsehole then I can't let that go," he says. "Sorry. I just can't. The best directors, such as Alan Clarke, have a humanity that means they will ask the most junior prop guy for their opinion."

With the baby due and *The Fuse* to finish, he has not been doing his daily run. This causes problems. Eccleston tends to take his work home with him and when that work is portraying an addict politician in meltdown you need an outlet. "Playing someone as operatically damaged as my character means he gets into my head. I have to have a release for that. If I can't run then I need a good bottle of red wine."

But he hates not working. Before *The Borrowers* he was unemployed for a year. Last time the work dried up, he packed his bags and moved to LA for a couple of years. He slept on sofas and hired a car. He had rages at the traffic and stood in queues for open auditions. "In a way, that's the way it should be. The culture is you are as good as your last job and you are up against everyone else. In Hollywood you stand in the queue with great, great actors."

Recently he has been thinking he might try directing. He made enquiries about the film rights to Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* because he thought the character Christopher Boone's autistic vision was a brilliant evocation of Britain today. He was told that Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston had acquired the rights. "Pity that," says Eccleston with a slight flare to the nostrils. He will keep looking for great writing he says, something that "needs saying". In the meantime there is fatherhood and the lessons learnt from his character in *The Borrowers*. "I think Pod Clock is a great example. He's confused, concerned, he's daring but also selfish. But diving into a giant tin of Quality Street trying to pull out a gigantic strawberry cream for his loved ones. You can't argue with that."

The Borrowers is on Boxing Day, BBC 1, 7.30pm

Christopher Eccleston's perfect weekend

Sun or ski Ski. I've never tried it but I'd give it a go.

Scrooge or Santa Alastair Sim as Scrooge was brilliant. He's a more complex character than Santa. But Santa.

Delia or Domino's Dominos.

Turkey or nut roast Turkey. Moist, mind.

Slippers or shoes Shoes.

Play footie or watch it Play it if I can.

Family night in or lads' night out Family night in. Lads' night out just sounds terrible.

Ronseal yourself or get builders in I'll have a go myself.

I couldn't get through the weekend without . . . Pounding the streets. I have to have a run.