

A one-man awkward squad

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Christopher Eccleston plays a Mancunian Jesus in a new TV drama. Behind the actor's narky, sarky exterior is a redeeming wit

It's the kind of meaty drama which most actors would kill for, but which few TV networks would dare to commission. Christopher Eccleston, the one-man Awkward Squad who specialises in mouthy and challenging roles, plays the Son of God in *The Second Coming*. But he's a very modern messiah, a flawed anti-hero with a Mancunian accent and a psychotic grin. The kind of tough taskmaster who gives mankind a week to shape up its act - or else. Written by Russell T. Davies, creator of *Queer as Folk*, *The Second Coming* is a classy, ambitious, complex piece of mainstream entertainment. "It's been shunted around the various channels and ITV were the ones with the balls to make it," says Eccleston. "It takes balls to do anything that contains a modicum of intelligence."

The Salford-born Eccleston begins our interview in a genteel Manchester hotel bar as though he's spoiling for a fight. In his first few breaths he has laid into TV drama featuring "bad actors giving the same performances they were giving ten years ago in a soap". This is a Christopher Eccleston most will recognise: sarky, narky, chippy and blunt. Blue eyes glowering, vulpine mouth locked in a perpetual sneer. It's a role he plays to perfection, but it's not the whole story.

When he finally lets his prickly guard down, about halfway through our hour together, Eccleston reveals a dry and self-effacing sense of humour.

So how did this scouring perfectionist prepare to play a modern-day Jesus? "I nailed myself to a cross in my mother's back garden," he barks. "No, I just learnt the lines. It was all there for me, it's so fantastically written. He's a very ordinary man, whatever that means, and I decided what was extraordinary about him was probably his very ordinariness."

There is little ordinary about Eccleston, although he takes great pains to affect a fierce normality. Salford's most famous working-class hero since Albert Finney is so allergic to luvvie pretensions that he sometimes seems to protest too much. Ask why he accepted the role in *The Second Coming*, for example, and he fires back without hesitation: "Oh, the money. I'm an actor, I need to work and I need to pay my rent, and that's how I do it."

Well, perhaps. And yet if any British actor of the past ten years has chosen challenging work over brazen careerism, it is Eccleston. Sour, unsympathetic roles are his forte. An epileptic teenage killer in *Let Him Have It*, a psychologically fragile accountant in *Shallow Grave*, a dour and doomed detective in *Cracker*, a self-destructive stonemason in *Jude*, a disenfranchised radical in *Our Friends in the North* - the list goes on. Always different, rarely compromising.

Eccleston also declined the role of Begbie in *Trainspotting*, which went to Robert Carlyle, on the grounds that he should have starred as Renton. "I'd have been a very different junkie to

Ewan McGregor," he jokes.

Nobody could accuse this unorthodox leading man of taking roles purely to pay the rent. Especially such a "hopeless idealist" who believes television can "transform people's lives" just like it did for him.

Because, for Eccleston, *The Second Coming* harks back to the golden age of *Play for Today* and the small-screen prime of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, when mass audiences were credited with intelligence and wit. "The main thing about that era is that the most important person on any project was the writer," he says. "Nowadays it's soap stars who are more important than the writer, which reflects something about the way we are politically. Writers are dangerous creatures, so you sideline them."

The youngest of three boys, Eccleston was raised on the Little Hulton council estate in Salford. He played for Salford Boys football team to county level, failed most of his exams, and discovered drama late while attending Salford Tech. His decision to study at the Hampstead-based Central School of Speech and Drama in 1983 must have surprised his family of manual labourers.

"I couldn't really do anything else," he shrugs. "My brothers are both manually gifted and I wasn't, so I was at a loss what to do. But I definitely am an attention-seeker, always have been."

With a "nice detached house" in the suburbs of Manchester, does Eccleston still consider himself to be working class? "No," he shrugs. "I've got a middle-class income, a middle-class profession. But my values, yes. You can take the boy out of the council estate but you can't take the council estate out of the boy."

He may be caricaturing himself here, but there are times when Eccleston appears to be playing the professional chippy northerner to the hilt. "I'm sure I do, yeah," he grins. "Anything for a few quid. I'm sure I've played the class card now and again. I think a chip's a useful thing. It's no worse or no better than a poker up your a**e, or any of the clichés."

Although clearly a born socialist, Eccleston refuses to be drawn on his political principles. "I've been careful to keep it to myself," he nods. "As my Dad said to me, never ask a man what he earns and never ask a man how he votes. And I've lived by it."

But those are precisely the subjects *Times* readers want to read about, Chris. "Well you would need to speak to my Dad and get his permission," he quips. Discussion closed.

Also private is any aspect of Eccleston's personal life. All probing in this area is dismissed with a polite but firm shake of the head. "Not even in the vaguest sense, no," he frowns. "Why? Because I don't. It's not interesting." Perhaps some exotic secrets are being concealed. Is Eccleston married, gay, a transvestite maybe? "I'm definitely a transvestite," he grins, "but you've always known that. It's the only reason you're doing this interview."

It looks as though 2003 will be a bumper year for Eccleston fans. *The Second Coming* coincides with the release of his latest film, a meaty and ambitious update of *Thomas*

Middleton's 17th-century drama *A Revenger's Tragedy*, directed by the punky maverick Alex Cox. And in September he will follow up his recent success as Hamlet at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds by playing Macbeth for the same director, Ian Brown.

Eccleston insists: "I won't be wearing tights," but his unbending principles have clearly loosened over the years. Is this the same firebrand who once called for a ten-year moratorium on Shakespeare productions and echoed the war poet Siegfried Sassoon's wish to see tanks rolling over the National Theatre audience? "I have qualms about classical theatre," he protests, "but now I think, if they're going to do it still, why don't I do it? Yes, I'd love lots of things to change. But West Yorkshire Playhouse has got quite a good ticketing policy; it's very conscious of where it sits and tries to address that."

Now that he's about to turn 39, the one-man Awkward Squad finally concedes that his sarky, narky, prickly self has softened some of its sharp edges in recent years.

"Yeah, I'm a bit more relaxed," he nods. "I'm a mellower person. The glass used to be half empty, but it's become half full."

So what's changed? Eccleston ponders for a second, then fires back a wolfish smile.

"It's just a smaller glass."