

Norfolk broadens horizons

Mike Davies dukes it out with Christopher Eccleston

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Mike Davies

Most stars tend to take away some sort of souvenir from the films they've worked upon. But few can have one quite as unusual as Christopher Eccleston's souvenir from Elizabeth. It's his head.

As the Duke of Norfolk in Shekar Kapur's stirring bio-drama about Elizabeth I's ascendancy to the throne and her struggle to keep it, as any history buff will know, his character's plotting resulted in a severing of relations between body and bonce. So, when the decidedly lifelike, or perhaps deathlike is a better term, model was finished with, Eccleston duly claimed it. Though not, one assumes, for fond memories of its creation.

"How they do it is that they completely cover your head with plaster, with these two lollipop sticks keeping your nasal passages clear. That then becomes a plaster cast and from that they make the model you see in the film."

Hardly the most comfortable of experiences, but then getting authentically toggled up for a period drama rarely is. Let's face it, lightweight lycra isn't exactly Elizabethan. Cumbersome costumes are.

"Several of the male actors, myself included, had real problems with pains in our shoulders. It was those cloaks. They were so heavy."

But, needless to say, Eccleston has, erm, shouldered the weight of both costume and role with the customary dramatic clout evidenced in past work such as Shallow Grave, Jude, Cracker, Hillsborough and Our Friends In The North. Even so, he readily admits he wasn't one of the usual suspects for the part and was surprised to be asked to audition.

"Costume dramas aren't my first love. I much prefer contemporary based drama like Hillsborough and Our Friends. But the plain fact is I was out of work and I needed the money. I'm not in a position to know where the next job's coming from, so I simply go where the work is and try to bring to it a quality that people can respect.

"Also I'd never played someone in power. In Jude, for example, it was the complete opposite, so I thought this might stretch and improve me as an actor. So I want to thank Shekar for having the imagination to see me in the role and for the freedom he gave me.

"When we met, I told him I felt Norfolk could be very one-dimensional. Did he want a comic strip character or did he want a man of importance? If we were going to be impressed by what Elizabeth achieves, then we should be equally impressed with the people she defeats.

"There are conflicting historical accounts of Norfolk's history, after all Elizabeth was a master of propaganda. So I did some research and then went with the script. I think what we show is that Norfolk is very contemporary, very intelligent."

However, while he may have invested Norfolk with a dark, deep complexity and passion in his duplicity, Eccleston candidly confesses it's not a role that will figure high in his all time personal favourites.

"I'm very proud of my work in Elizabeth, but I have to admit it's not close to my heart by any stretch of the imagination. I look for an agenda in the roles I take, an intelligence of script and presentation, and I've tried to be involved in things that I would want to watch

myself.

"But, as I say, sometimes you have no choice and you take what comes along. I have to own up and say that I feel a bit lost, generally, especially in television terms where formulaic dramas seem to be the norm. I don't know what younger actors aspire to these days. When I came out of drama school I had a television culture. Bleasdale, Loach, these were my influences. Now I worry what the next influences on the upcoming generation of actors will be.

"It's been suggested that I go to Hollywood and wait for the phone to ring. And it may yet come to that. It's getting thinner on the ground here in some respects. When you first get noticed, they do a run on you and there's a lot of work. But then it bellies out, unless you go for very commercial stuff. When Jimmy McGovern cast me in Hearts and Minds he said he was tired of the same old faces. That was the first time I actually believed I could really act. Now I'm one of the same tired old faces."

Even so, to all intents and purposes, with A Price Above Rubies, Heart (written by McGovern), David Cronenberg's Existenz and Michael Winterbottom's Old New Borrowed Blue, Eccleston doesn't seem to be doing too badly from the renaissance of British cinema.

"I wouldn't want to sound bleating, and there are actors and people in other professions in much worse situations to me, but for every Nil By Mouth there are many films that should never have gone into production.

"People are rushing films into production with underdeveloped scripts and very slight premises and I wonder if in ten years time, people will look back and still think this was such a great era for British film."

Norfolk may lose his head. The chances of Eccleston losing his seem very remote.

Elizabeth opens tomorrow.