

‘A bounty is on my head, definitely...’

BRAD PITT HAS JUST GOT OUT OF BED. “YOU GOTTA forgive me... I just woke up... We’ll get some concise thoughts.” He’s a little muzzy-headed, having flown into Venice from the US, “settled the kids, put the head on the pillow” and dragged himself up a few hours later to meet *Total Film* in a sheltered garden at the Hotel Cipriani.

A brief, watery hop from festival hub the Lido, the Cipriani is the A-list’s luxury hidey-hole (cheapest room? £500): Jude Law and Michael Caine are in the bar; somewhere inside, Pitt’s other half – Angelina Jolie – is busying herself with the couple’s four children. Pitt sits sipping iced tea, in Ray-Bans and flatcap, trying to render coherent sentences about his latest picture, *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford*. A haunting western, adapted from Ron Hansen’s novel by *Chopper* director Andrew Dominik, it traces the final year in the life of the legendary/notorious outlaw: a charismatic thief and murderer whose killer was first fêted, then reviled, when James’ Robin Hood persona grew after his death. It’s a beautiful, mesmerising movie: touching as it explores hero worship and disappointment, fascinating for its comment on the distorting nature of celebrity, terrifying in Pitt’s portrayal of James. The actor has often fought the casting strictures of his corn-fed, model American looks, but is at his best subverting the leading man charisma that first jolted audiences in *Thelma & Louise*; a charisma he learned and crafted, if watching early sludge such as *Cutting Class* or *Across The Tracks* is any guide. He ably exploits his star persona, as when playing the buff über-man in *Fight Club*, and uses his magnetism to frightening effect. The festival accord, naming him Best Actor a week after our chat.

Perhaps it used to be that Pitt’s ambition surpassed his ability – or that the pressure of trying to be taken seriously drained the life from some of his early above-the-title turns (he was as bored as the audience in *The Devil’s Own*). Now, Pitt’s ability surpasses his apparent ambition: he doesn’t take it too seriously and is more enthused talking about his children, the media and *A Mighty Heart* (which he produced) than going over his own performances. But if he isn’t all that interested in himself, others certainly are: a screen has been placed around our table, to shield from the boats of paparazzi floating outside. Half-way through our chat a camera will appear from nowhere, snatching a quick shot. “Welcome,” says Pitt, “To my life, man...” >>

The world’s most wanted man is back with his best film since *Fight Club*. In his only interview, **Brad Pitt** talks to *Total Film* about gunplay, child’s play and *The Assassination Of Jesse James...*





When we met on the set of *The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button*, you talked about *Fight Club*'s reception at Venice. It tanked...

It was funny, man. Me and Edward [Norton] were the only ones laughing. It was one of those midnight showings, so we were already half-cocked by the time we went in. And I'm sitting next to the festival grand poobah and he was *not* having it... He ended up walking out. We thought it was funny as shit, but it didn't translate that evening.

Edward made a western himself last year: *Down In The Valley*. Did you see it?

Not yet. Edward's great. We were actually learning the whole quick draw thing at the same time. I was right in after him, with the same guy.

Could you beat him?

I like to think I could... It's surprisingly much simpler than you think, drawing from the hip and shooting. You can hit things! For some reason, it connects, the geometry of the aim... it's not as difficult as it seems.

But there's not a great deal of gunplay in the movie. Warner Bros probably thought there would be more....

Yeah... I think most people thought there would be more! Andrew [Dominik, director] describes this as more of a gangster movie and not a western and I think he's right...

Jesse James is a pretty fascinating character; right there at the birth of celebrity...



'The hunted aspect I certainly understand! Having to be on the move, living under aliases...'

That's what I was looking at, certainly. Here was a guy who ended up getting... The façade, the image, became bigger than the real life. Certainly one of those first few we understand getting trapped behind the façade and not really knowing who he is behind it. Or at least that's the way it's presented in the book.

There must be parallels with your own position. He lives with paranoia; trying to make connections with people, but not knowing if he can...

I think that's precisely it. The paranoia is certainly justified and you can see it coming to the end. I think his brother [Frank James, Jesse's partner in crime] and he splitting up really left him untethered... A bounty is on my head, definitely... The hunted aspect I certainly understand! Having to keep on the move, living under aliases...

You had your years before you made it big, though. Tom Cruise had *Top Gun* and boom, he was an icon...

I was still in Missouri at that point. Home of Jesse James, by the way...

Were you familiar with him growing up?

Yeah, sure, to some degree, but just more lore... and this film deals with the last year of his life, which I really didn't know anything about, other than *The Long Riders*, which was a movie that was out when I was a kid. But it's nice...

I get a little odd pleasure every time I see the Missouri crawl come up, just because it's my stomping ground and I've never gotten to do anything that was close to home, but I understood the hills where they'd hide out; I knew the country well.

Have your parents seen the film?

They saw one cut; I guess there have probably been about 40 cuts of this film!

It's had a really long post-production process. Andrew said that when the pair of you disagreed, it got bloody...

Yeah, we're good that way. What I love about him... his focus – looking at *Chopper* and looking at this one – is the minutiae of the psychology. He focuses on that more than anyone I've come across... He makes very compelling arguments. I come from a place of, as I say, understanding what I call a healthy paranoia and sometimes an unhealthy paranoia, but a justified paranoia. I bring my own experiences to the fight, to the argument... But, yeah we're good that way.

But were you ever worried about the movie?

No, I was never worried about it. It's always been a good film. And even... his first cut was over four hours and it's good; I *liked* it; it's just not something that's going to play in today's world. But there's always been a good film in there.

Talking of which, we've been watching a lot of your films over the last couple of weeks...

Oh God, I'm sorry.

Such as *Cutting Class*...

That's just mean! Why? I say this, I believe I'm quite capable and we, as people, can learn to do anything, and that's proof of it! And my education is on film, on record!

You can see how you change as an actor, even in stuff like *Seven Years In Tibet*, which isn't a favourite...

I understand that. That movie evolved into a history lesson somewhere, it lost it... and truthfully I was a bit lost at that point. That was after everything hit... *Legends* had hit, I'd just finished filming *Se7en* and then *12 Monkeys* and I had direction at that point and then there were too many things coming at me and I lost direction, in a sense. And I did that, which took seven months, I did... the Irish one...

The Devil's Own...

The Devil's Own, which took another seven months. So it was a year and a half where I lost direction. But now I feel I can take on anything that comes my way and find truth in it and do a pretty good job. Time becomes more valuable, because with kids, you know, there's so much time I want to spend at home and make sure they get time, so when it's work time I actually focus more and get more done...

Is it tricky juggling stuff with the other half?

We work out really well. We alternate films. We never work at the same time and we keep everyone together. >>

ESSENTIAL

From the shocking to the slick... Pristine Pitt.

SE7EN 1995



"Him-bo," they say? Well, watch this. For David Fincher's grunge-sermon thriller, Pitt scuffed the sunshine-dude

glamour, deftly counterbalanced Morgan Freeman's gravitas and supported the Gwyn-in-a-box twist. "I had it put in my contract that it stays," he said. But did he crow over his decently deglamourised delivery? Hell, no. "I would love to do that scene again," he said of the prized climax. "To be truer..." Give him this: he pushes himself. ★★★★★

FIGHT CLUB 1999



Pitt gorged on *OK Computer*, Radiohead's entropy-of-the-soul '97 album, while tuning into Fincher's Chuck Palahniuk riff.

The connection? "We are heading for a dead end," Pitt explained, "a complete atrophy of the spiritual being." *Fight Club* plays fast, funny and furious with these Big Themes, notably via a radically remixed Pitt. He's like a rock star through a mincer: ass, crotch and six-pack bloodied in conceptual satire of his charismatic allure. Block-rocking genius. ★★★★★

OCEAN'S ELEVEN 2001



Pitt proved willing to gamble on an ensemble turn here – and loved it. "It takes the focus off you," he said,

"It's such fun." Steven Soderbergh's revisionist Rat Pack romp is class teamwork, the mechanics of its Las Vegas heist well-reflected in a polished gang-of-stars surface. Pitt cases the joint and gives good besuited swagger. What's the vibe? "Great laughs and great people," he said. Sound like a steal? It is. ★★★★★

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WORTH A LOOK

Bloodsuckers, studs and saving the world...

THELMA & LOUISE 1991



"Ridley [Scott] really did me right when he gave me that role..." Pitt's JD does Geena Davis right and wrong with that "\$6,000 orgasm", hotwiring Thelma's lust and his career. ★★★★★

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE 1994



Pitt's role? A moody vampire. Less pout and more hunger might've helped, but Neil Jordan's Anne Rice skit

remains a sumptuous spread. ★★★★★

12 MONKEYS 1995



Pitt rejected Apollo 13 to freak out in Terry Gilliam's designer-grunge daydream. The duly shorn-up-top golden

boy grabbed a Golden Globe for his paranoid pains. ★★★★★

MR & MRS SMITH 2005



The 'Brangelina' furore overshadowed the film, but the Jolie-Pitt chemistry is extraordinary. Doug Liman's DVD

director's cut smoothes out wrinkles for a superior shoot-'em-up. ★★★★★

BABEL 2006



Global Brad is nicely restrained in Alejandro González Iñárritu's multi-threaded epic. Letting the lines

around his sandy eyes do the talking, he blends into an ensemble. ★★★★★

COMPLETISTS ONLY

The Pitts (sorry).

SEVEN YEARS IN TIBET 1997



Mountain-climbing? "It's such a metaphor for life," Pitt said. Alas, Jean-Jacques Annaud's tale

of Heinrich Harrar's Himalayan-conquering overlooks its hero's Nazi associations, climbing instead of digging and elevating woolly self-discovery over historical heft. Epic, sincere and woefully misguided. ★★

MEET JOE BLACK 1998



Talk about a critical pasting: "We got slaughtered on it," Pitt admitted. He looks ill-at-ease as a peanut butter-

munching Death in Martin Brest's eternal love-eternal fable. Sure, life is nasty, brutish and short. But this added whimsy drags on. ★

We dragged everyone out here for the weekend. We've become this very nomadic family.

Looking back at your career, what are your favourite films?

I like the more irreverent ones. They've been my favourites, the most fun... and certainly working with Fincher. That's the other thing; the older I get, or the more I do, it becomes more about the people I'm working with.

Soderbergh says he's gone past the point where he'll put up with assholes...

Yeah, Soderbergh has a strong no-asshole clause. Fincher has got a no-crybaby clause!

So, what else stands out for you?

A *Mighty Heart* this year, which we produced. I feel as strongly about that as anything I've been a part of. But I don't know. I don't spend much time looking back. I'll do that I guess when I'm old and sad [laughs]... That film is so worth seeing. I think what most people don't understand,



'I feel like I can take on anything that comes my way and find truth in it and do a pretty good job'

even reviewers, is the mines and the traps that were avoided and how easily the film could have gone off the rails. They don't see all the years that go into the final product to make sure it's quality. There was great responsibility with that one. It could have been done so badly... [Click! A camera shutter snaps, a blur of movement, the lens is gone. Pitt points up to our left...] See that? There's a little camera, just peeks over there.

That must be very odd.

It's odd for my kids, man. They have this view that anytime they go round the world there's this sea of people with cameras. This is their idea of the world they live in. My two-year-old hates it. Hates the cameras. It's a strange idea. You got kids? They are the most fun, aren't they?

They're great. But it takes a while to get used to; you can't live your life the way you did before....

Yeah, that doesn't work.

It's difficult being a good drinker and a good father, isn't it?

I had the same thing! I had a couple beers and our two-year-old, when she was one, she had this piece of ice that had been dropped on the floor and was just putting it in her mouth and began to choke on it and... that's it. You have to be absolutely on top of every situation. The other shit doesn't work any more. And when they wake up in the middle of the night... You gotta be there.

You can't deal with children with a hangover...

That's just misery.

Generally, you seem more comfortable with fame now, though. You hated it in the '90s didn't you?

Yeah, I did. I mean there is no rulebook for it. Angie and I talk about this... it's gotten so out of hand. This constant assault on your peace is not what we signed up for, for films.

There no longer seems to be any contract between journalists and actors...

No, no, the big money story, the big money shot... There are so many of us out there, there's so much product. It's more of a machine now, isn't it? I mean, you've got an editor.

Yeah, well: a publisher...

So you're like the director, who's at the mercy of their studio...

...And it's the studios who have the money. Why is it that the people with the vision don't have the money?

[laughs] It's really a question that must be answered! Why don't the people with the vision have the money: aren't they creating the thing? Why are they beholden to the middle man? It's a good question. Maybe that'll change now with the way films are going to be viewed and downloaded. Fincher will go on for hours about this: people are making their own films, cameras are so cheap, becoming cheaper.

We're looking forward to seeing *The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button*...

Me too. It's good, man. Something no one would expect from Fincher. It's Fincher as family man, as a father. No one would expect it from the Prince of Darkness!

And you're playing a journalist in *State Of Play*. How was it playing the other side?

How about this, man, so the papers in LA and New York have shrunk what stories can get on the cover now because of competition with the internet. Now their internet sites are controlled every half hour: monitored by how many hits they get, so now there's no longer this idea of the editor as gatekeeper of important information we should know as a society. Now the people dictate the stories that are going to be there. So, you know, if Paris Hilton forgets her panties that day, that's gonna be the story versus Gonzales [the controversial US Attorney General] resigning or something. They monitor it every half hour and if the story doesn't get the hits, they pull it. That's frightening.

As a journalist you should see *A Mighty Heart*. I think it talks a lot about the power of journalism and something I believe in the importance of, that we're informed and know what's being done in our name. And understand it beyond a soundbite, really understand context. Because it's context that's being sacrificed. That disturbs me.

Things do get boiled down: like pitches, with 25 words or less. With *Jesse James*, Andrew said it was tricky selling the movie to the studio; it isn't an easy sell...

He said one of my favourite things starting the movie, he said, "Making a film is like watching all your great ideas just crumble, come crashing down around you. It's really agonising for you. And yet it's something you must do..." **TF**

The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford opens on 30 November and is reviewed on page 42.