

# “What can I say? It’s been emotional...”

The month *Total Film* launched, Ewan McGregor was fresh off *Trainspotting*. This summer he will kill Anakin and give birth to Vader. In a world exclusive, The Actor Of Our Lifetime looks back on his journey from junkie to Jedi...

WORDS NEV PIERCE PORTRAITS SCOTT MILLER

“It’s The Guv’nor!” mouths Ewan McGregor, grinning. He hands *Total Film* the coffee he’s just kindly bought and nods conspiratorially across the cosy Californian café. Sure enough, there by the counter in some rather ill-judged shorts, ordering an early morning caffeine-kick for his missus Maria Shriver, is Terminator turned Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger. “That’s funny,” says McGregor. “The Governor in for his Starbucks! It’s an amazing place for that, Hollywood.”

There was a time when an 8am chat and snapping session with McGregor would have been almost unthinkable — unless you wanted a severely hungover interviewee. When *Total Film* launched and the boy from Crieff was taking off for the A-list on the back of Brit-grit classic *Trainspotting*, you’d have been much more likely to share pints and tabs than lattes and muffins. This, though, is very much the new McGregor. New and improved. Presently not doing any press in the run-up to a summer full of *Star Wars* soundbiting, he’s taken time out from a frantic shooting schedule on Michael Bay’s \$120 million futuristic thriller *The Island* and is on magnificently perky form, all smiles and backslaps as we reflect on a career that has landed him the honour of The Actor Of Our Lifetime.

Over the past 100 issues, he’s made a phenomenal 21 movies. Of course, not all have been phenomenal (*Rogue Trader*, anyone?), but then we once put Posh Spice on the cover, so nobody’s perfect. He has grown in both ability and stature with each passing year, smartly switching between commercial juggernauts (that Midichlorians movie) and edgy, independent-minded fare (*Velvet Goldmine*, *Nora* et al). Like any discerning movie fan, much like you, he has always wanted the whole enchilada: brains and blockbusters.

Later today singing lessons are in order, to prepare for an imminent six-month stint on the London stage in the musical revival of *Guys And Dolls* at the Piccadilly Theatre. After charming retro-com *Down With Love*, the erotically charged *Young Adam* and heart-hugging *Big Fish*, McGregor’s on a roll — even before you factor in Bay’s picture, Marc Forster’s thriller *Stay* and this month’s kiddie-pleasing animation double bill of *Robots* and *Valiant*. And then, of course, there’s that minor matter of sorting out Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars – Episode III: Revenge Of The Sith*.

“I wanted to make my mark, I suppose,” he says, looking down his filmography as Schwarzenegger heads back out to the Humvee. “I wanted to hit it really hard. What can I say? It’s been emotional.” >



Ewan McGregor,  
Santa Monica, 31  
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## “The fighting in *Episode II* was unsatisfactory. We make up for it in *Episode III*. We fight our arses off... Even though that meant more bluescreen, I enjoyed making this one more than the other two”

### So, how's *The Island* going?

It's good. It's a long shoot, five months. I can't really put my finger on why. I guess it's because there's quite a lot of action in it. It's probably the most action-type movie I'll have done. I'm working with Scarlett Johansson, who I like very much. She's terribly young – she was 19 when we started this film, she's just turned 20 – but she's terribly together and wise about the whole thing. She's quite a tough cookie. Michael Bay can be really... Intense [*Grins*]. He's quite a card, he really is out there. But he certainly knows what he's doing.

### Who is your character?

I don't want to give the story away too much, but I play a clone who escapes from an institute where clones are being manufactured for spare parts for people. My guy finds out what's going on and escapes with Scarlett, who's another clone. I go and find the guy who's cloned me, so there are scenes where I'm playing the clone with the real guy, which is interesting. The real guy's Scottish and the clone's American.

### Accents. Tricky. But you nailed it in *Big Fish*. What was it like working with Tim Burton?

I love Tim Burton. I'd work with him for the rest of my days, very happily. I think he's excellent. He's one of the few great filmmakers, you know? He's a

professional, proficient movie director and you work with them very rarely. You're not left in any doubt that he knows what he's doing. He's great. He just lets you play. At first I couldn't work out what felt different about the movie and then I realised that from when he said, “Action” to when he said, “Cut” there was no stress. There was no tension there, it was just fun.

### It must be nice to mix it up: doing *Big Fish*, which felt like play, and then the challenge of all the bluescreen stuff for *Star Wars*...

Yeah, absolutely. One of the things I asked Michael Bay before I said I'd do this film was, “How much bluescreen is in it?” Because I've had my fill of it. He assured me that there wasn't much and there hasn't really been any. It's old-fashioned... We've got sets and cameras with film in them and stuff! It's really nice!

But I think you've got to mix it up. *Big Fish* was a really nice character to play and it was challenging in that it was treading that fine line between fantasy and reality. I was playing somebody's memory of themselves, where he's a helluva good guy and everything's through rose-tinted spectacles, but I didn't want to play it as over-the-top. You had to be quite accurate about where you played it. And then *Stay* was a real challenge because it was really minimal. I loved it. I hardly did anything; I just let

everyone else act their socks off around me. It was far more artistic and rewarding for the actors than many movies I've made. It was like *Young Adam* in that respect, where it was real performance-based and so you had time to play the scenes; there wasn't this, “Well, that scene was 37 seconds. We want to bring it in at 34, so can you speed it up?” which you often get from directors. And I don't really act to time, to a stopwatch, but you're required to now and again.

### *Young Adam* is a grower...

I loved *Young Adam*. I think it was the best filming experience that I've had since *Trainspotting*, maybe. I was desperate to work back up at home again and it was such a great film. It was dark and sexy and erotic. I was gagging to do it. It was just so fantastic – small crew, no time, six days a week. We just got out there first thing in the morning... I had this fantastic driver called Jaz. Most actors who've worked up in Scotland will know Jaz, he's a legend. He's a driver and he swears more than any man in the world, but he's a diamond – a lovely, lovely guy. [*Adopts parched Scots voice*] “Alright, ya cunt? Fuckin' come on then, cunt. Get in the fuckin' car, you gotta go to work.” He'll drive and babble away and then we'd get on set somewhere beautiful, or quite a lot of grim places as well. And it was cold and miserable but God, we had such good material,

you know? David [Mackenzie] wrote the most phenomenal script and very often we didn't have to say anything and I really like that. I love acting without words. You know all that stuff in the cabin when it's really moody and no one's saying much and everything's in the eyes... I loved it.

### Are you looking for contrasts and new experiences when you're choosing projects?

Yeah, I think that's true. Like in *The Island* – it's the challenge of playing two parts. And you get a certain thrill out of playing someone who's alive, like playing Nick Leeson in *Rogue Trader*. You think, “God, that's such a responsibility.” Or you play somebody's favourite novel character, like Julien Sorel in *The Scarlet And The Black* and you think, “God, the pressure of that!” They're all really exciting and different. I'm just reading a script which would require me to play four parts. I turned round to my wife and said, “I'm fucking doing this!” before I'd read it.

### When did you realise, “I've arrived”?

When I was doing *Lipstick On Your Collar*, which was the first job I ever did. I moved into this flat in Primrose Hill and I loved it. I lived there for years. It was my bachelor years. It was fucking fantastic. I had such a laugh. And then *Trainspotting* was monumental. It was like being on a massive rollercoaster, you know? It was incredible, because it just seemed to get bigger and bigger and bigger and crazier and crazier.

### Playing a junkie and then going on to appear in *The Pillow Book*, an arthouse movie with a lot of nudity, doesn't seem like a Hollywood calling card...

Yeah, yeah, you're right. But Hollywood's good at picking up people who are hot, you know what I mean? Harvey Weinstein at Miramax; that's what they do. Someone's hot in Europe, they try and put them to good use. Very often they're brought over here and not allowed to do what made them great in the first place and they disappear – I'm thinking about the guy that directed *Nightwatch*, Ole Bornedal, who I made the remake with. I met Nick Nolte the other night, who I haven't seen for eight years, and he was like [*adopts impressive Nolte voice*], “Fucking Ole's back in Denmark, with his tail between his fucking legs.” And he's right, because Miramax fucked up his movie. He did just film it frame-by-frame like the original and he should have brought something else to it, but then Miramax started fucking around with the end and they took all the interesting things out of the movie. So *Nightwatch* ended up a kind of slightly spooky but bland movie, whereas the original is really weird and terrifying.

### The original is brilliant...

Yeah, it is, but Ole would get us to watch scenes from it! He said, “At this point can you look away and close your eyes and look back?” “Why?” “Well, Nikolaj [Coster-Waldau] did it and it really worked, can you do that?” I thought, “Are you fucking kidding me?” I think I said, “Why don't you fucking get him on the phone, see if he can come over and do it?”

That was in 1997, of course, *Total Film*'s first year, and *Nightwatch* didn't spark and neither did *Serpent's Kiss*. Then *A Life Less Ordinary*, when the press decided... Time to kick them in the nuts!

### What did that feel like?

I never really bother if films aren't successful, because they've always been good for me in one way or another. I liked doing *The Serpent's Kiss*. I met my best friend Charley Boorman and I spent a lovely time in Ireland, got very drunk all the time, had a laugh and produced not a brilliant film, but it's not the be-all and end-all. Like *Down With Love* wasn't [commercially] successful, I think because it was so badly fucking managed. They released it on the same day as *The Matrix Reloaded*! But I really don't lose any sleep over it and it's not in the nature of the British press to herald you forever. So I don't care what they write. But now you mention it, it



was a bad run and [*mocks sobbing*] I feel bad about it. What broke it? Or has it been broken?

### *Velvet Goldmine*, which is an amazing movie and was quite a shoot...

Yeah, I always like to tell this story: I was fucking Christian Bale, Batman, up the arse on a rooftop in King's Cross and the crew was filming from another rooftop on the adjacent building. I hadn't done gay penetrative sex, this was my first shot at it, so I'm standing behind Christian's big naked back, going, “Wow, this is so... Peculiar.” So I start, you know, pumping away slowly and I start to go more like a bunny rabbit, then like a Jack Russell. And I put my head to the side of his head, away from the camera, and I say, “I'm sure I'd have come by now. I'm going to have a look,” and I glanced back and I saw the crew packing up and walking away! I think Todd [Haynes] had been so respectful of us that he hadn't wanted to interrupt us by saying, “Cut”... Or we didn't hear “Cut”. It was very funny. Christian's never written to me... He never phones any more... It's really upsetting.

### And then you got the call from George...

Yeah, I seem to remember we were shooting at the West Hampstead Social Railworkers Club or something. I was dressed in the Iggy Pop wig and leather jeans and spoke to my agent and she just screamed down the phone, “Waaaahhh! They want you to be Obi-Wan Kenobi!” A year later I went to do a screentest with Liam Neeson and was offered the part, but I didn't know what to think. It seemed so *outside* of what I do. Then I thought, “It'll be such a blast being in *Star Wars*.” And it is. Even though I've talked about how hard they are to make, it's still great being Obi-Wan Kenobi. I have my own doll and stuff! It's really weird and I like it. I feel really satisfied. I've no regrets about anything in my career. I don't see it like they do out here, because in LA if you have a bad film it seems to reflect badly on your career. The old adage, “You're only as good as your last movie” is kind of true out here, but I don't see it that way. I'm a working actor, I go from role to role... I would feel terrible if I fucked up a part and therefore the film was no use, but I don't think it's ever happened that way.

### Were you offered the part of Neo? That's the rumour...

No. I would have loved to have been in *The Matrix*! I never turned it down. Unless I wasn't available and you do worry sometimes that the call goes in and you never hear, but I certainly didn't turn it down!

### Get on the phone to your agent...

Yeah! “Did you turn down fucking Neo? Do you know how much fucking money he made?”

### So with *Star Wars*, you're glad you made them, but glad they're done.

I have to say I'm glad that they're complete, but not in a negative way. I actually enjoyed the third one probably more than the other two. Even though it was the most heavily intense bluescreen and greenscreen. You know, I can do it, I can act without anything being there and it's hard work and it's a skill – it's not a skill that you really hopefully will need much in acting – but I can do it. So I just got on with it and it was fine. I enjoyed the company of Hayden Christensen and Natalie Portman. >



**“I did Christian Bale, Batman, up the arse. He never writes, he never calls...”**

**And you got to fight Darth Vader...!**

We had a fucking huge, huge fight at the end of the film. Like weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks. I'd never experienced exhaustion like it at work. It was a fucking killer, 'cos each take has to be at fever pitch to work. I think me and Ray Park set the standard when we go at it in the first film. It was so fast and furious they had to speed the camera up so that it would look slightly slower, 'cos it was too quick and they thought it looked speeded-up.

The fighting in *Episode II* was unsatisfactory, I think. I don't think the fight was nearly as good as it should have been and I certainly didn't have as big a crack of the whip as in the first one, but I made up for it in number three because we fucking fight our asses off in that film. Seriously, for weeks we were filming that fight.

**Everyone dies, right? So the script must be a lot darker?** [Long pause] It's quite dark, yeah. It's quite dark. I don't know that everyone dies though, do they?

**Jedi Armageddon is what we're thinking...**

Oh yeah...

**How important for you was *Moulin Rouge* in terms of your career?**

Huge. 'Cos I've never done anything like it... There's never been anything like it. The opportunity to sing and dance and be part of a company like that; it felt like we were in the circus. It was an extraordinary experience going to work every day – the colour and the music and crazy Baz [Luhrmann]. It was fantastic! I'd do it all again tomorrow. I'd be quite happy to make *Moulin Rouge II*.

**The press kept asking about you and Nicole Kidman. How does it affect you, when they speculate about your life like that?**

It's horrendous. I mean, if someone came up to you in the street and suggested you were cheating on your wife, you'd fucking deck them, wouldn't you? And this happened a lot. It's just extraordinary:

the rudeness of it, for a start. I mean, I didn't have an affair with Nicole. It would have been hugely embarrassing if I had had an affair with her, but I didn't.

**Do you still think *Heat* magazine is “a dirty, filthy piece of shit”?**

It really is! They published pictures of my kids. I wrote to them personally asking them not to publish them and they appeared in the next copy. You just think, “You dirty fucking cunts! Don't do that!” You know, that's my children. I've started suing photographers and agencies and newspapers. I've got this great lawyer and we do it with great gusto, you know? It's my human right to protect my kids. I would condone violence against the paparazzi. People should be encouraged to beat the shit out of them, you know? Jude [Law]'s had a pop at a few – I think it's good. I think they're asking for it. Anyway...

[He looks down Total Film's list of his movies.] There's some things here I'd like to see again. *Desserts* is good fun. *Serpent's Kiss*, because now there's enough distance to really say whether it's bad or not. *Nora*'s a great film. It's so lovely. I can't remember watching *Eye Of The Beholder*. I can't actually remember making very much of it either! It was back in the day, you know what I mean?

**Yeah, you had a rep as a very hard drinker. Have you knocked booze on the head now?**

Yeah. I haven't drunk for four-and-a-half years.

**Do you miss it?**

No. Never. It was very hard to stop but I absolutely don't miss it. I was always drunk, you know? And because I was a dad I was very often drinking at work, which is fucking rubbish. And I kept thinking about who I was when I made *Lipstick On Your Collar* and thinking, “What the fuck are you doing?” So I just stopped, 'cos I couldn't deal with it anymore. I hated feeling hungover all the time and I hated feeling that I needed a drink.

**So you got to a point where you thought, “This is a real problem”?**

Yeah. I think, if I didn't have already, I would soon have got a reputation for being a drunk actor and therefore not get any work, so I really felt it was time to give it up. But I remember doing interviews, drinking and smoking, just saying, “I am never, ever going to fucking stop!” And I said it with real pride, you know? 'Cos I wanted to be the best drinker as well as everything else and that's a really bad slippery slope.

So it's much easier now and my work's much better. I find that life in general's much more fun without it. My wife's delighted that I stopped, because I'm much more present in our marriage and I'm a much better father.

I remember, funnily enough, the last time I had a drink. I was sitting with these guys and we're all talking about how much we love our kids and I thought, “Well, why are we all sitting in a pub? It's four in the morning. How much do we love our kids? Because tomorrow morning none of us will be any use to them.” And I thought, “Fuck it.”

I don't have a problem with people drinking; it's something I chose not to do. It just took me a long time to grow up. ☞

THE MCGREGOR COLLECTION

From Scotland to Hollywood: the rise of a star over 100 issues of *Total Film*... By Neil Smith



**TRAINSPOTTING (1996)**

“Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a fucking big television...” Danny Boyle's angry, edgy urban classic mainlines adrenaline. The incendiary style – the toilet-bowl dive, Lou Reed overdose – is underpinned by McGregor's effortlessly charismatic skag-head anti-hero. The bloody birth of a star; the Brit flick of the decade. ★★★★★



**BRASSED OFF (1996)**

Showcasing everyman charm after his in-your-face breakthrough, McGregor's a young coal miner whose romance with a management stooge sets him on a collision course with colleagues. Ewan played his own cornet in Mark Herman's affecting dramedy but graciously let Pete Postlethwaite's brass-obsessed conductor call the tune. ★★★



**NIGHTWATCH (1997)**

Every star has their stumbles and McGregor's first step Stateside was shaky, playing a watchman fitted up for a series of grisly murders. Even a script polish from Steven Soderbergh couldn't stop this mortuary-based horror stifling, with director Ole Bornedal unable to recreate the clammy fear of his terrific Danish original. ★★



**A LIFE LESS ORDINARY (1997)**

It didn't deserve such a harsh critical drubbing, but Boyle and McGregor's follow-up to *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting* is definitely disappointing. A road movie/rom-com that sees McGregor's lowly caretaker go on the lam with Cameron Diaz's spoilt heiress, it should have been *Bringing Up Baby* meets *Ransom*. It was a bit of a mess. ★★



**VELVET GOLDMINE (1998)**

Todd Haynes's glam-rock extravaganza is a love it/hate it affair, but there's really no denying the vision and ambition. *Citizen Kane* in mascara, it's a journo's journey to discover a reclusive rock star, with our man channelling Iggy Pop via Kurt Cobain as self-destructive, bisexual headbanger Curt Wild. ★★★



**STAR WARS – EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE (1999)**

*Attack Of The Clones* saw McGregor really get to grips with George Lucas's bluescreen digi-fantasy, but *Menace* was his big blockbuster breakthrough. Shame his young Obi-Wan Kenobi is saddled with Alec Guinness's voice, a space mullet and Jar Jar flippin' Binks. ★★



**NORA (2000)**

Understated and involving, McGregor stretches himself for this earnest exploration of the love between James Joyce and his patient missus (Susan Lynch). More admirable than enjoyable, it deserves credit for taking a fresh approach to the biopic, while fans of the firebrand Irish writer will find it fascinating. ★★★



**MOULIN ROUGE (2001)**

As another troubled writer, McGregor excels in Baz Luhrmann's exuberant musical extravaganza, warbling fit to bust through a doomed amour with Nicole Kidman's tubercular courtesan. She took all the plaudits, but McGregor's gut-wrenching performance showed Hollywood there was much more to him than just a lightsaber. ★★★★★



**BLACK HAWK DOWN (2001)**

“I always wanted to be in a war film. I spent a lot of my youth running around pretending to be a soldier and now I'm getting paid to do it...” McGregor's a Yank pinned down in a murderous Mogadishu in Ridley Scott's visceral take on modern war. Criticised for its “hurray America” take on a tragedy, it's still a bloody, impactful picture. ★★★★★



**DOWN WITH LOVE (2003)**

Audiences avoided Peyton Reed's peppy pastiche of those classic Rock Hudson/Doris Day rom-coms, but there's still much to enjoy here. McGregor projects campy charm as the hack-about-town keen to undo Renée Zellweger's proto-feminist, though there's too much nudge-nudge amusement around to really move. ★★★



**YOUNG ADAM (2003)**

One of McGregor's finest films, this is a grim study of guilt and betrayal, set on the muddy canals of '50s Scotland and infused with a palpable sense of existential angst. He's superb as Joe, the failed novelist turned bargemand who expresses his disaffection through casual adultery, emotional cruelty and angry, sticky sex. ★★★



**BIG FISH (2003)**

Channelling the charm of a young Jimmy Stewart, McGregor dazzles in Tim Burton's feel-good fairytale, his can-do hero providing the perfect counterpart to Albert Finney's geriatric fabulist. His infectious glee ensures we can swallow Edward Bloom's far-fetched adventures; his sincerity ensures tears come the credits. ★★★★★

