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# United ARTISTS

Sex addiction drama *Shame* reveals there's no actor/director combo more exciting right now than *Michael Fassbender* and *Steve McQueen*

**T**here's a lot of laughter. With an ever-present grin and rising amusement, Michael Fassbender clearly enjoys his director's company — whether nodding at his insights or gently teasing when Steve McQueen's artistic soul sounds a little highfalutin.

*Shame*

The pair broke through with 2008's *Hunger*, which won the Caméra d'Or at Cannes, before McQueen picked up the Carl Foreman BAFTA for best newcomer to add to the Turner Prize he had already for his acclaimed artwork. This year it was Fassbender taking the plaudits at Venice, where he won Best Actor for his portrayal of tortured sex addict Brandon in *Shame*, their powerful, New York-set drama. Fassbender always dreamed of finding a director he clicked with as once De Niro did with Scorsese — and here he has it: a warm, collaborative relationship producing extraordinary, challenging work. Empire sat down with them at the Soho Hotel during the London Film Festival, to get inside the beginnings of this beautiful friendship...

Steve McQueen and Michael Fassbender, photographed at the Soho Hotel, London, on October 14, 2011.

**E**MPIRE: When you two met on *Hunger*, did you hit it off pretty much straight away?  
**STEVE McQUEEN:**

Well... I think with every good relationship there's things that happen, especially in the beginning... but that's great because it shows who that person is and where they stand. And that's that. It's always good to have a bit of friction at the beginning. Then you know who you are.

**MICHAEL FASSBENDER:** He didn't like me, basically, is what he's saying! *(Laughs)*  
**McQUEEN:** I'm not saying that! When he came to the interview he was a bit...  
**FASSBENDER:** Cocky.  
**McQUEEN:** Very cocky. Even the way he was sitting. He got my back up a bit.



Here: Fassbender's Brandon broods over his complicated feelings. Below: "Do you have a map? Because I keep getting lost in your eyes..."



When he left the room I was like, "Who was that guy?" And Gary Davy, the casting director, said, "He's really good, he should come back tomorrow." So he came back. And he was a different guy. I don't know what happened. Complete 180. I thought, "Okay, this guy's great. I think he's the guy." It was totally different. It's partly to do with my own naivety, because at that stage I had no idea: actors come into auditions and they're being judged. They have rejection a lot. So it was a big learning curve for me.

**EMPIRE:** Were you aware of that, Michael, thinking, "That didn't go brilliantly?"

**FASSBENDER:** I thought, "That was a really good meeting!" *(Laughs)* No, I mean... You're dying to sort of prove yourself in a way, at that point.

I wanted to show I had some possibility of making a career out of this job. "I'm good enough to be working" was what I always would tell myself. So there must be elements of that — you're protecting yourself. And also the subject-matter *(the hunger strike of IRA member Bobby Sands)* was something that was close to me, in that all my Irish family come from the North, and I'd seen a lot of films that dealt with the North and I found it kind of insulting to the people there. So I suppose I was wary and that sort of wariness probably shows itself as somebody who's cocky, you know? But I was really very impressed by Steve. His answers were unusual and he just seemed to be somebody that I felt I definitely needed to work with. I knew I would learn from this guy.

**EMPIRE:** This may sound flippant, but it's not meant to be: when you were making *Shame*, did you worry, "What will my mum think?"

**FASSBENDER:** Yeah! *(Laughs)* Actually my dad as well. I kept saying to them: "Be prepared — this is gonna be hardcore in places... I'm going to places that could be quite shocking." And they were like, "Look, you gotta do your thing." Thankfully, I have a really good relationship with them, it's a very open and honest one, so I did have their support. But I was glad my mum wasn't there in Venice.

**McQUEEN:** *(Laughing)* It was the first time you saw the film as well, so — God — there'd be a lot of explaining to do!

**FASSBENDER:** *(Laughing)* She'd be coming up to you, "What have you done to my son? Again! What's the matter with you?"

**McQUEEN:** Unfortunately my father passed away about six years ago. My mother's always been the person to be quite open, quite liberal... I'll be testing her liberalism tonight — she hasn't seen *Shame* yet.

**EMPIRE:** Is it true *Shame* came purely out of a chat with Abi Morgan, your co-writer?

**McQUEEN:** More or less. There were certain limitations for me. I didn't want to use a gun. I wanted to make a love story.

**FASSBENDER:** *(Laughing)* "This is my weapon, this is my gun, this is for fighting, this is for fun..."

**McQUEEN:** What's that from?

**FASSBENDER:** Full Metal Jacket.  
**McQUEEN:** Of course! And, yeah, what happened is we started this conversation about the internet and how it's affected all our lives, of course, and also pornography on the internet. That's the most popular thing on the internet. And when you think about it, almost every visual technological achievement has been pioneered by pornography. It's kind of interesting. Even cinema.

**EMPIRE:** With the next-generation DVD players, as soon as porn picked Blu-ray you knew that format had won...

**FASSBENDER:** So you *do* know quite a lot about this! *(Laughs)* Some people are still getting their porn on Blu-ray!

**McQUEEN:** Vintage!  
**EMPIRE:** Sexual addiction hasn't really been talked about before, not in a serious way...

**McQUEEN:** I think people didn't really take it seriously. Like myself when I first heard of it: I laughed! But actually it's quite a devastating affliction. It can destroy lives.

**EMPIRE:** There's that Bill Hicks routine where he says, "The Supreme Court says pornography is 'anything without artistic merit that causes sexual thought'... Sounds like every commercial on television!" That was in the early '90s and it's worse now...

**FASSBENDER:** Yeah. The thing is, the urge to participate in sex is obviously a very primal one, because it's all to do with survival and reproduction, so people seek to make money with it

and use it as a tool. You don't have to look far at airports or driving down the roads, whether it's buying a pop drink or a breakfast cereal... Scantily clad women usually is the way to go. It's something that's a safe bet, I guess.

**EMPIRE:** People mistake experiences for intimacy — which is what you're really after as a person.

**McQUEEN:** Hmm. I don't know. Sometimes people just want experiences. With sex addiction, the majority of these people do not want intimacy — they want control. It's heartbreaking really. Brandon is a very sympathetic character because he's one of us: I understand how he's trying to get by. And on the other hand you have Sissy *(Carey Mulligan)*, who's the other half of Brandon, who is exploding rather than imploding. She's very expressive, very communicative, wanting to understand her own sort of problems.

**FASSBENDER:** She's very liberal with her emotional content, isn't she? She almost throws it on the first person she meets. Both of them are trying to connect in two very different ways.

**EMPIRE:** When you were researching you spoke to sex addicts — what kind of toll does it take on people?

**FASSBENDER:** Well, it's all-encompassing. It's never far from the door. I think what happens is you develop a pattern that you become familiar with, whether or not it's having a positive influence or not, and it starts to solidify itself in your everyday routine and to break that becomes very difficult. Allowing himself to be open and vulnerable is not a place that this particular character feels at ease with. That's why you have a scenario where he pays a prostitute to come round, they have sex, she leaves, she takes her life with her, he's left in his controlled environment. I feel so grateful that one man in particular allowed me to pick his brains a little bit about this because that is the crux of it, the core of the character, this problem with emotionally letting yourself go with another person, investing an emotional thread of any sort in a relationship.

**McQUEEN:** Another example of that was one person said to us he has a very beautiful wife but there's a thousand women he'd rather have sex with. He'd rather go out and have sex with any other woman than his wife. It's odd.

**EMPIRE:** The film is reminiscent of *Taxi Driver* — another of God's lonely men. When Paul Schrader wrote that, he was drinking a lot and watching a lot of porn. On the DVD



A healthy dose of fear is good.  
Michael Fassbender



commentary he says, "Pornography, like alcohol, is a kind of anaesthetic, and it's a kind of way to dull you."

**McQUEEN:** Every addiction is definitely to numb you, to dull you. They're 35 years apart and they're two different New Yorks: the New York where 42nd Street has been polished, the other where it's not. But if you scratch beneath the surface, it's all there. That's an interesting comparison.

**EMPIRE:** Was the New York setting key? I've been there a few times...

**FASSBENDER:** Found yourself waking up in strange rooms!

**EMPIRE:** You never feel more alone than when you're surrounded by people.

**McQUEEN:** And also it's to do with architecture. When I was staying there, for three months, on the 25th floor, I had this huge window, this panoramic window, and it does make you feel small, it does make you feel on your own when you see the people milling about this huge cityscape. You mean nothing.

**EMPIRE:** Is it important for the two of you to like the characters you write or play?

**FASSBENDER:** For me it's important, number one, to understand them. It's important not to judge them. I just try and identify with them as best as possible and search for various things in myself and if that doesn't work: imagination. But definitely to understand them and try to make them a living, breathing animal and not like a creation of judgements.

**McQUEEN:** I can only agree. There's nothing not to like — he's one of us.  
**EMPIRE:** It seems that in both acting and directing confidence is important, but there must be moments of doubt...

**FASSBENDER:** Lack of confidence is important also, because that lets you know there are other options and not to get stuck and be overconfident and think, "Yeah, I've got this thing fuckin' sorted!" No, it's like, "There are other possibilities here: have you explored them? Are you listening to the people around you?" For me, I think a healthy dose of fear is good.

**McQUEEN:** I love fear! I love it. I embrace it. I dance with fear!  
**FASSBENDER:** "I DANCE WITH FEAR!" *(Laughs uproariously)* That'll be the quote: "I dance with fear" — Steve McQueen".

**McQUEEN:** Waltz, baby!

**FASSBENDER:** Dancing With Fear. That'll be your autobiography!

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**Shame is out on January 13, 2012, and will be reviewed in the next issue.**