



DECONSTRUCTING FASSBENDER

EXCLUSIVE PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID BAILEY



He's cornered the market in depravity, angst and deviance. But ELLE's Annabel Brog says Michael Fassbender is reinventing chivalry

W ee-gate was the turning point. I am strolling through London Fields with Michael Fassbender and all I can think about is my urgent need to relieve myself. 'I'm sorry,' I eventually blurt out, 'but I *really* need a wee. We are either going to have to stop walking and sit down, or find a loo very quickly.' He is solicitous, but intrigued. 'Oh, um, right. So when you're moving you need to wee, but if you're sitting down you don't have to?' 'Sorry, sorry, sorry,' I say. 'No, listen,' he replies. 'When you gotta go, you gotta go.'

He is gleeful. The overbearing journalist who has grilled him about women, his family, his body, brought

down by biology. Five minutes later, we are still looking for a loo. 'I'm thinking that must be a public toilet... but no, it looks like a pagoda. OK. How bad? Shall we step up the pace? This is terrible. There's nothing worse. In fact, there is something worse. If you need to go for a number two...' ('I don't!') I shriek. Dear God, Fassbender thinks I need a pool!

Things have been a bit stilted up until this point. I had originally been thoroughly over-excited at the prospect of this interview (Editor-in-Chief Lorraine Candy: 'Try not to embarrass yourself, Brog.') But that was before my research culminated in a five-day Fassbender film-fest. You see, Fassbender has cornered the market in emotional

Charcoal wool-tweed suit, Givenchy by Riccardo Tisci. Black cotton T-shirt, Emporio Armani.

torture and sexual depravity. He won awards for playing IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands in *Hunger*; was disconcertingly likeable as morally ambiguous Connor in *Fish Tank*; and dazzled as a sex addict in *Shame*, with a brutal performance that was overshadowed by the fact he revealed every inch – quite literally – of his body. If you haven't seen these films, you really must. Just not in one straight run, unless you want to feel like someone has turned you inside out and bashed you over the head with your own spleen. Even when Fassbender does big-budget crowd-pleasers, he takes on the tortured souls – such as concentration camp survivor-turned-sociopath Erik/Magneto in *X-Men*.

So, before our dreaded walk, over a Full English (him) and pancakes (me) in a cafe in East London's Broadway Market, I was still trying to shake off the jittery misery evoked by watching uncomfortable films back to back. And then there's the way Mr Fassbender looks, which is distractingly lovely. I have enjoyed encounters with other attractive men without feeling remotely off-balance: David Beckham (casually, and not fleetingly, naked but for wet white boxer shorts); Harry Styles (17 at the time, with the charisma of a man twice his age); Bill Nighy (louche knows no age limits). But when it comes to sex appeal, Fassbender is in a league of his own. Today, he's wearing a muddy-coloured T-shirt and trousers, aviator shades and a predatory smile.

To relax him, and myself, I ask him about acting. For an hour. (This, he tells me later, was a mistake: 'You know, I don't really like talking about acting. A lot of the time I don't know what I'm doing, it's just happening.') Then, breakfast finished, we go for a walk, all that coffee catches up with me, and Fassbender visibly relaxes. His voice, deep to begin with, drops half an octave; he starts to have fun. The real man emerges and the truly dangerous truth becomes evident. Because, once you get over his sheer physical beauty, what you're left with is... endearing. I was prepared for charm, intelligence and an aura of 'dirty bin sex' (a description offered to me, off the record, by one of this country's most esteemed broadcasters). I didn't expect him to be, well, cute.

Fassbender is 36. He loves his parents ('they're great, hard-working people') and flies them out to all his film sets. By all accounts, he had a wonderful upbringing, and was a well-behaved child. Then, as a teenager, he formed a heavy metal band ('well, there was two of us, it didn't really constitute a band') and 'started playing the fool to try and fit in'. It didn't help that, back then, he was not exactly a looker: 'I've never really thought of myself as good-looking. I think of myself as, you know, alright. I used to have bad acne as a teenager, so all of this is a bonus now, the fact that I don't have pimples any more. And my hair was also, you know,

unfortunate. I had really long hair. I mean, I tied it back most of the time, but I had all these frizzy bits coming off the top and whenever I let the hair down, it went like this.' (He indicates big, bushy frizz.)

Which brings us on to women. Teenage Michael, he admits, 'did OK, considering, you know, my appearance. I wasn't the most popular, but somewhere in the middle'. Adult Michael, of course, is enjoying a different experience. He appears genuinely mortified when a pretty girl approaches him for a photograph, then hands him her number. 'Thank you very much,' he mutters. 'If you throw it away, just don't throw it in the street,' says the girl. 'Oh, OK, I won't,' he squeaks. She walks off. 'Um, that was strange,' he mumbles, finally. Then he jokes. 'I paid her, actually, to do that...'

Fassbender was in his 30s when he became famous and, although I imagine he also did pretty well in his 20s, he probably didn't enjoy quite the same level of opportunity with women then. That's got to make a person a little bit cynical about the opposite sex? 'I'm not oblivious to it,' he finally admits. 'It's not like I think I've become more charming or good-looking overnight. But, no, I haven't lost any respect [for women]. I'm an alright judge of character, so you can figure these things out.'

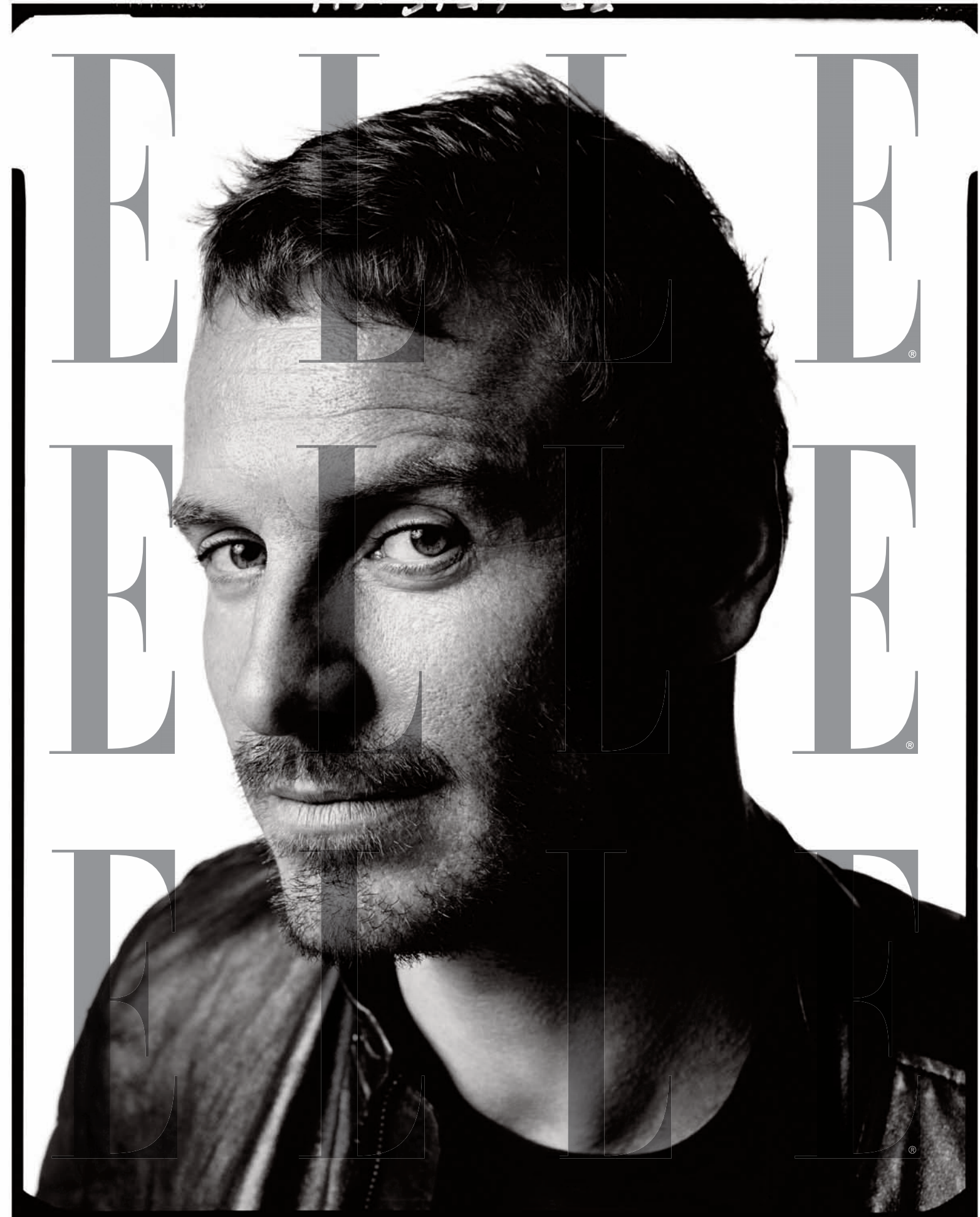
Fassbender has remained close to all his ex-girlfriends (known associates include *X-Men: First Class* co-star Zoë Kravitz, *Shame* co-star Nicole Beharie and Olympic heptathlete Louise Hazel), but he won't say whether he is in a relationship at the moment. He gives the impression of really, truly liking women. He is chivalrous with things like ordering, paying and looking for public facilities. And he's uncomfortable with the objectification of actresses.

He studied at the Drama Centre London, a school notorious for putting its students in degrading situations in order to break down their inhibitions. It clearly hasn't done his career any harm, but he has his reservations about the technique. The school has a practice called 'Private Moments' where students are asked to perform something they would stop if someone caught them at it. Fassbender's involved dancing and singing in front of a mirror. I tell him about an actress who did the same, but the tutor insisted she do it in just her pants. Was he asked to strip?

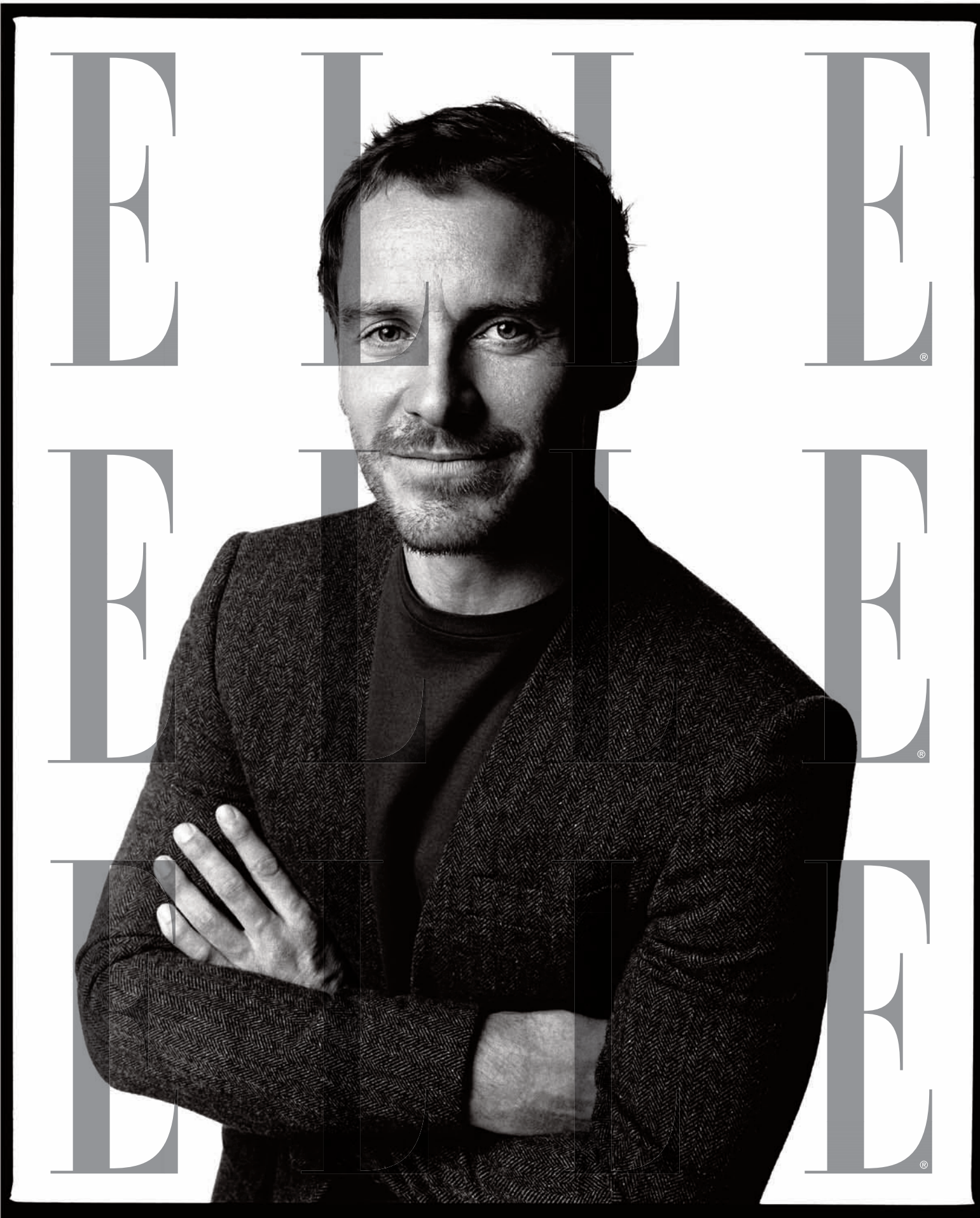
'No, I wasn't! And you know what, I would have told him to fuck off if he did. That's horrible. I guess a lot of people were forced to do things there that they wouldn't have done, because they didn't want to get kicked out. Actresses in general in that school got a much harder time.'

An attitude he has joked he redressed when, in *Shame*, he did full-frontal nudity. He wasn't that bothered about it at the time, though not because he lacks insecurities: 'For god's sake, I'm insecure, of course I am. But that was just a matter of me going, OK, and just getting naked.' Subsequently, though, he had George >

'I'm not oblivious to [attention]. It's not like I think I've become more charming or good-looking overnight'



Photography: David Bailey. Black leather jacket: Beistaff.



Photography: David Bailey, Fashion: Natalie Wansbrough-Jones, Grooming: Syd Hayes at Premier Hair and Makeup, using Bumble and bumble. Post-production: Paperhattp.co.uk, Wool-tweed jacket, as before. For shopping details, see Address Book

Clooney, Charlize Theron and Sarah Silverman joking about the size of his penis - *to his face*. He took it on the chin and laughed ('I can't start saying: "Wait a second, there's more about the film than my dick; it's one scene and it doesn't go on for very long"'). And he appreciates the irony of a man enduring the sort of smut that women are, finally, a little bit protected from: 'It wouldn't be acceptable, it would be seen as sexual harassment, people saying [to an actress], "Your vagina..." You know?' At the time, he said he was taking one for all the actresses who'd ever been objectified.

If Fassbender can handle a bit of smut and banter, it's because he enjoys it. If he is at all cool, it is because his lack of coolness makes him so. He does mock running commentaries through table-tennis marathons with his friends, and has a man-crush on Pharrell Williams ('He is amazing. He's the coolest man on the planet, for sure. No doubt'). We talk about the unedited *Blurred Lines* video: 'Um. It's an interesting video, isn't it?' No, not remotely. 'No. You're right. Totally not. But Pharrell is STILL cool!'

He is also very blokey, in that he can talk non-stop about motorbikes but when grilled about fashion, his verbal skills fail him: 'I suppose Tom Ford is pretty cool,' he says bravely. 'Girlfriends have had clothes of his, and I'm like, "Wow, that's really stylish."' Fassbender does look great in a suit, of course, favouring Tom Ford and Armani - who dressed him in his latest film, *The Counselor*, penned by Cormac McCarthy and directed by Ridley Scott. It's a brilliant, violent, perplexing tale of drug heists and corruption, co-starring Javier Bardem, Penelope Cruz, Cameron Diaz and Brad Pitt.

Then, in January, we'll see him reunited with Steve McQueen - who directed him in *Hunger* and *Shame* - in *12 Years A Slave*, the true story of a free man abducted and sold into slavery in pre-Civil War America. Fassbender is chillingly brilliant as Edwin Epps, a brutal slaver both obsessed with, and repulsed by, his human property. He has always managed to display the humanity in his coterie of disturbed characters, but it's a huge achievement to play Epps - who Fassbender describes as 'a boil on the skin of that period in America' - as anything other than a caricature of evil. Fassbender manages it, though, by empathising with, and then humanising, him. 'Liking, disliking, doesn't really matter. I just have to do them justice.'

Yet despite the intensity of his roles, he has enormous

fun at work. On *X-Men*, he and James McAvoy were banned from using the on-set golf buggies after James crashed one into a Lexus: 'I went flying over the back seats and hit my head on the steering wheel, so everyone thinks it was me driving.' When I query James McAvoy about this event, he laughs. 'I tell it kind of differently to Michael,' he retorts. 'He landed in the driver's seat... and then ran away, with this comedy-caper run. And his shins were all cut up and bleeding.'

Fassbender is famously popular on set. McQueen describes him as 'a team player, a dad who embraces everyone around him, but he's also very serious'. When Fassbender hears this, he cracks up and says: 'Yeah, well, Steve's a dirty liar.' But Javier Bardem backs up McQueen. 'Michael's always making the most ridiculous jokes. It's like: "Jesus man, stop it, I need to concentrate here." [But] the guy... he's an acting beast. When they say 'Action'... boom, he goes to a place that I want to visit in the scene. So I just have to follow him.' McAvoy says more of the same: 'He's a proper gentleman. Yeah, he plays hard as hell, but he works really hard and gives everybody respect. There's something quite old-school about Michael, and I love him dearly.'

For his part, Fassbender hasn't got a bad word to say about anyone. On Steve McQueen: 'I love him too. You know, he changed my life. Simple.' James McAvoy, he clearly adores. When I suggest that McAvoy - after a stomach-churning turn in the recently released *Filth* - might

topple Fassbender's monopoly on deviance, he is delighted. 'I've heard he's AMAZING in it. Anything that he does, I'm gonna go see.'

The work shows no sign of letting up. Fassbender is prepping for *Macbeth*, and producing and starring in an adaptation of video game *Assassin's Creed*, while Steve McQueen is developing - of all things - a musical for him. There have been some misses - he auditioned for the Coen Brothers' upcoming *Inside Llewyn Davis*, but lost out to Oscar Isaac - but he sucks them up with the same good humour as the hits:

'I didn't get the fucking [Coen Brothers] part, did I? That's the dream, to work with those guys. I wait by the phone.'

When I get back to the office, my colleagues ask me if he is better looking in person. Yes, I say, probably the best-looking man I have ever met. And is he nice, they ask. The truth? Michael Fassbender: Even nicer than he looks. ●

The Counselor is out 15 November, *12 Years A Slave* is out 24 January

'Actresses in general have a much harder time,' he says, when talking about his time at acting school



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