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hen in *Rome*, James Purefoy has a rule. He is quite prepared to do as the Romans did, but only if the story demands it. In the first season of the HBO historical drama—which starts its second season this month—this included a scene in which the actor, playing Mark Antony, was towed down by a slave. By the standards of American television it was explicit, and you don't have to Google for long to arrive at a screen grab of Purefoy's meat and two veg. But, says the 42-year-old English actor, it was justified.

"It was really right for the character," he says. "Somebody who's naked, talking to somebody who's clothed, is normally the weaker of the two, normally the more self-conscious. But in that situation it was very clear who had the status—the naked man. And that says a great deal about a man. That you can stand there and be completely confident and talk to a soldier in front of you, naked, and not give a flying fuck. It says a lot about the times and a lot about the man. So I had no qualms about doing it in terms of the character."

You might, if you examine the nuances of Purefoy's phrasing, note a qualification—were there any qualms about putting his privates on parade?

"It wasn't really me, though, was it?" he says. "If you're a vaguely bright actor, you can justify it in terms of the character. There were directors who were disappointed that I didn't get buck-naked in [the second] series, because I would just go: 'Why? Tell me the reason. What does it add to the character now that we haven't already got?' One of them said, 'Oh, I just want to show he's relaxed.' We know he's relaxed! How much more relaxed could I possibly be? No, you just want to see my cock in rehearsal. I'll show it to you now, shall I? And then we'll get it out of the way. We don't have to show it in front of millions of people."

To which defensiveness we may add a note of mirth. Purefoy laughs explosively when I quote him a section of the Wikipedia summary of his career, in which two decades of treading the boards are reduced to a speculation about the veracity of that scene in episode 4, series 1. "His full-frontal nudity...caused a sensation. However, an interview from a special-effects technician who mentioned 'digitally altering' the appearance of penises for

actors who 'didn't want to remove their g-strings' casts doubt on the veracity of Purefoy's nude scene."

"Hahahaha!" He turns tumescent with mirth. "That's absolutely hilarious! I won't say whose it was, but there was a penis in the series that may have been slightly enhanced. But it wasn't mine. Mine's all mine, I'm afraid. Believe me, I can look at the episode and go, 'Yep, that's me!'"

In some ways, such talk is a continuation of a theme that has bugged Purefoy throughout his career. In the years before *Rome*, this often manifested itself in speculation that he was in contention to be the next James Bond—a fate he has now been spared with the appointment of the younger, rougher Daniel Craig. But there is something about Purefoy's looks, and his bearing—slightly posh, very well-mannered—which leads him to be judged for his beauty rather than his talent.

He is, of course, smart enough to know that he won't get far complaining about being too handsome, but the thought lingers behind much of what he says. "I'm not saying I'm good-looking, but I think I know now, having played this run of parts, that I probably do fit into a stereotype of what people perceive to be good-looking. And it's not particularly useful."

He says he felt liberated when playing the pirate Blackbeard from behind a big beard for British television: "You can hide behind that. And also there's no neurosis about it, because you're not having to be the sexy one. The worst directors in the world are the ones who come up and say, 'Be more sexy.' Well, what does that mean? I have no idea, because that's an entirely subjective thing, isn't it? 'Be more beautiful—be more sexy.' It's thick. That's what it is. When a director says that, I just think, Oh, fuck, you're thick."

This logic may have led him to sign up for the Wachowski Brothers' comic book adaptation *V For Vendetta*, but that film remains the only significant blot on his résumé. He quit halfway through filming. "That was a bit of a debacle. I don't really want to talk about it," he says. "We all promised that it was best left that we had creative differences. Sadly, some people since have broken that promise. But I'm a gentleman."

A gentleman, that is, who yearns for longevity: "If your career is based on you looking young and handsome, you're fucked, aren't you, when you're 50?"

"Look at me—it's like a fucking field in Suffolk, my forehead. In winter. You could plant barley in these lines. And I'm 42. This will get worse. Good."

"Look at Samuel Beckett's face. What a face, what a life! When you look at those old actors—Jason Robards lying on his bed in *Magnolia*—old faces have so much more life to them. They're so much more interesting to watch. A young, unlined, clean face has no experience and no life. It's got no secrets, no bruises."

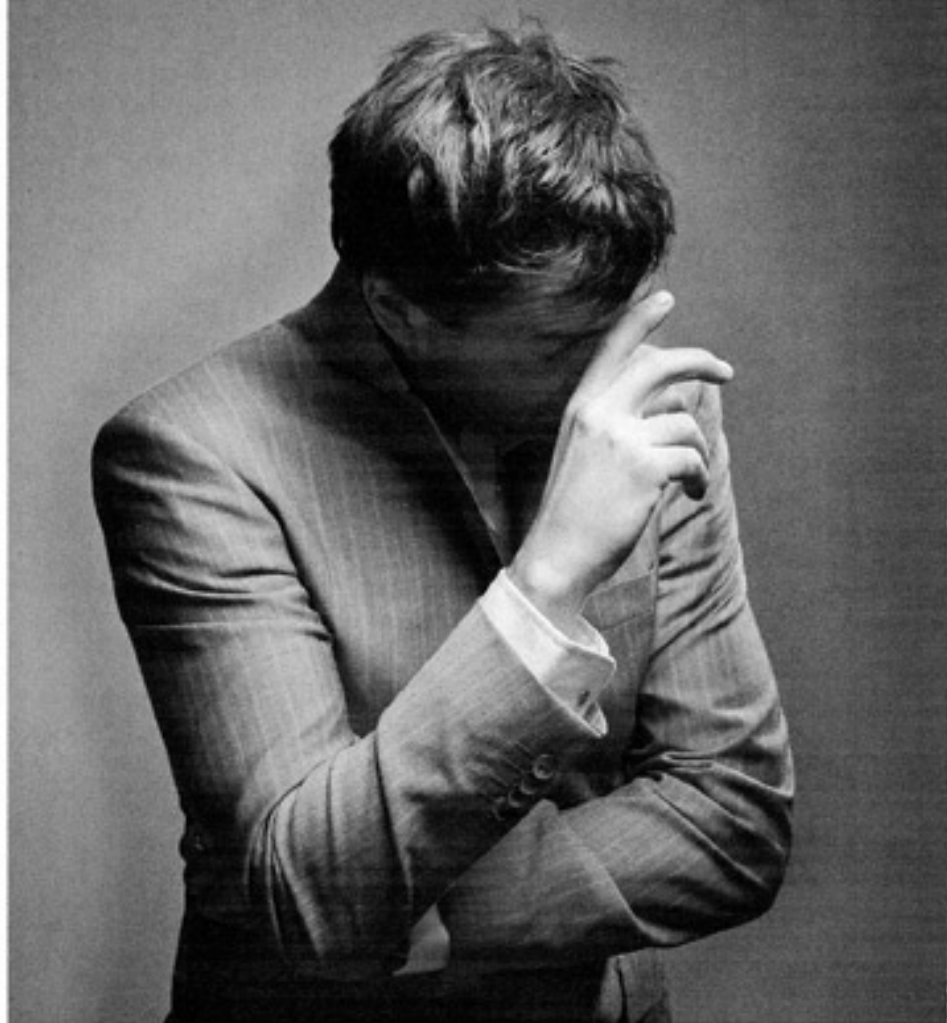
Purefoy's bruises came in the form of reviews of his stage work. His contribution to Noel Coward's *Present Laughter* was, he says, hailed as the worst performance one reviewer had ever seen

Opening spread: Blue cotton shirt by DKNY.

Second spread: Black suit and shirt by Emporio Armani.

This spread: Beige and blue striped suit by DKNY.

Groomer: Tracey Cant at Premier using Bumble + bumble



in London's West End. But he also had a tough time at the exclusive boys' school Sherborne, in Dorset. He says only that the Victorian ethos of the place "gives rise to all kinds of neurosis and problems later in life, but I'm pretty level now. I don't have much anger about it anymore."

He left school at 16 and worked as a hospital orderly. He was thinking of applying to become an operating theater assistant when his father persuaded him to go to college and study again for his exams. One of them was drama.

From there, all roads led to *Rome*, with one of his first big screen roles being alongside Kevin McKidd (*Rome's* Vorenus) in the 1998 film *Bedrooms and Hallways*. "It was the first—probably the only—British gay 'romcom,'" he says. "It was all about the fluidity of sexuality. Never say never. You'd be a fool and an unwise man to say never. I haven't as yet had a gay relationship—not since school anyway—but I never say never. That would just be foolish. I know lots of people who've been straight and turned

gay; I know lots of people who've been gay and turned straight. I think the more of a big deal we make out of that stuff, the harder it is for people to act how their heart wants to act."

And at school? "Anybody who went to an English public [i.e., private] school in the 1970s will have had some kind of a gay experience. You bang 500 adolescent hormonal boys together at exactly the time when they're exploring their sexuality, and don't be surprised if some shenanigans comes out of it. Or shocked."

With *Rome* coming to an end, Purefoy has signed up for the pilot of *Manchild*, Darren Star's male *Sex and the City*, with John Corbett, Kevin Smith, and Paul Hipp: "Four blokes in varying degrees of fucked-upness who are trying to deal with the various crises that we at 40ish have."

Purefoy's character is reportedly a 40-something who sleeps only with girls under 25. In real life he is a serial monogamist. He is currently involved with an art historian—"she's supersmart and

very strong-minded"—and has a 9-year-old son, Joe, from his relationship with English actress Holly Aird. Joe is too young to see much of what his dad gets up to.

"I wouldn't show him *Rome*," Purefoy says. "I don't think he wants to see his dad do that. There are some scenes I've shown him, but I keep my hand hovering over the pause button. I know what's coming. There's gonna come a time when he will watch them. And then he'll go, 'What did you do?'"

"He's always saying to me, 'Is he the baddie or is he the goodie?' I'm always saying to him, it's never quite as simple as that. There are baddies and goodies in *Star Wars*, but I don't really do *Star Wars*. In some things there are bad people who've got good hearts, or good people who've got bad hearts, and it's just a little bit more ambivalent and ambiguous. Life isn't always black-and-white."

Mark Antony, he concedes, is mostly bad: "He's flawed, but he's human. I think the audience can tell that there's hot blood running through those veins."