

**FISH & CHIPS**

CONSIDERED BY  
MANY THE  
**FINEST**  
IN LONDON



# Under the radar

FOR SO LONG THE GOOD LOOKING SUPPORTING ACTOR, JAMES PUREFOY'S NAME IS GOING ABOVE THE TITLE IN EPIC ADVENTURE *SOLOMON KANE*. IS HE READY FOR ALL THE ATTENTION?

Portrait by Hamish Brown

**T**he whole celebrity thing is not really my bag," James Purefoy says, ever so slightly apologetically. "I'm not terribly comfortable with it."

Don't fall over. It's an unusual line, like something from a bygone age, especially from someone who makes their living drawing attention to themselves in front of huge audiences (Purefoy understands the contradiction too) but that's how it is for James Purefoy.

"I watch people do the whole thing. You know, the invitations stack up at home to all the crappy shop openings and premieres that you could go to, but why would I be doing that? What's it about? Maybe if I was doing more of that stuff I'd be better known, but it doesn't make me very happy and it makes me feel a bit awkward."

If you were writing a checklist of required traits for a leading man, Purefoy would tick every box. Handsome? Yes, but not in an alarming way, not too perfect to be real. Charming? Certainly. The man who's dated Gwyneth Paltrow, played dandy Beau Brummell and upstaged even Richard Burton's Mark Antony, in HBO's Sunday night sex and sandals extravaganza, *Rome*, knows how to smoulder. Good sense of humour? Check - an appealing, self-effacing sort, from laughing at getting it in the neck from his son for not landing the role of James Bond in *Casino Royale* (the disappointment was conveyed by a Daniel Craig poster appearing on the 13-year-old's bedroom wall), to welcoming the lines appearing on his square-jawed face (he's now 45).

So how come James Purefoy isn't much, much more well known?

It must be annoying to be asked that question when you're supposed to be being asked about your new film, *Solomon Kane*, in which you star (Purefoy's name is above the title, so he really is the main deal) but if it is, Purefoy doesn't rise to the bait. Looking like an affable, off-duty stockbroker (jeans, brown suede loafers, charcoal jacket on top of a navy v-neck) he smiles wryly and leans his face on his hand. He's heard this before.

"It's so much more about other people than me," he says. "I'm not concerned about it. I'm really very pleased with *Solomon Kane*, I just finished shooting *Ironclad* [an Anglo/US medieval siege movie], I've done *John Carter on Mars*, which is a huge Disney/Pixar film. Obviously you want something to be a runaway success, that'd be great, but there's not much you can do about it. You turn up, you work diligently and professionally and you do as

good a job as you possibly can. If you can do that and have a good life then I'm happy with that, I really am."

For the record, I believe him. Maybe Purefoy has got the balance right - avoiding the fame game and concentrating instead on going for the parts that he wants? Even he, though, acknowledges that it's tricky. "I did five minutes on *A Knight's Tale* [with Heath Ledger] and that film opened more doors to me than three seasons at the RSC or a season at the National or any number of British independent films that I've done."

Purefoy grew up in Somerset and had a "bucolic" upbringing. He was sent to boarding school at the age of seven and stayed until he was 16. It wasn't exactly a roaring success - he left with one O Level, although he went on to get 11 more at night school. During his A Levels he met a drama teacher who turned him on to acting. After a stint as a hospital porter and a bit of selling the *Socialist Worker* outside Brixton Tube, Purefoy studied at the Central School of Speech and Drama (where he met Faye Ripley, with whom he had a relationship for 11 years) and then joined the Royal Shakespeare Company. While he was at Stratford, he starred in eight plays but he also picked up television work. Since then he's done costume dramas (he was Rawdon Crawley opposite Reese Witherspoon's Becky Sharpe in *Vanity Fair*) and plenty of swashbuckling (as Blackbeard the Pirate and last year as a "vigilante philanthropist" in NBC's *The Philanthropist* alongside Neve Campbell).

It's an impressive career by most standards but, despite his protestations, there remains a whiff of underachievement about it. Perhaps that's simply unfair, perhaps it's largely a result of Purefoy's laid-back, modest style, not to mention a bitchy comment from Julian Fellowes some years ago about him being "lazy". He smiles again. "I hate to say this about Julian, I love him, but he does open his big mouth some. Let's not forget that we were talking about kids' telly at the time. I mean you can only cut your suit according to your cloth and I had pretty average cloth; this wasn't *Gosford Park*."

Interview by  
Claire Black



Whether he earned it or not, Purefoy does have a reputation as someone who doesn't really take any of it too seriously. Strange then, that it couldn't be further from the truth. He's easy-going, yes, he finds aspects of "the business" unpalatable ("Botox for actors? I mean, I just don't get it") but Purefoy seems totally committed to his career as an actor and ready for a new phase.

Playing Mark Antony, it turns out, was a transformative experience. Not only did it make him instantly recognisable in the US ("They loved Mark Antony because he's such a bloke. We have a bit more of a problem with blokes here.") and allow him to work with the best producers and directors (they were the talent behind *The Sopranos*) it gave him much more confidence in his abilities as an actor.

"Rome taught me how to act better than I've ever acted before," he says. "I just had a much greater understanding by the end of shooting of the kind of actor that I could be."

"When I watched it I could see things that were interesting and I thought, 'wow, I can be really, f\*\*\*ing manly'." He laughs. "That's quite a learning experience - realising that I could be a really big, butch bloke which I'd never really done before. It really was interesting."

It was a lesson, it turns out, that was perfect preparation for his new role as Solomon Kane. A fantasy action-adventure based on the character from iconic American writer and creator of Conan, Robert E Howard, it's set in a fantasy version of 16th century England, replete with demons, ghouls and evil sorcerers, not to mention Pete Postlethwaite as a Puritan patriarch.

The story is of Kane's redemption from murderous, spiritually bereft buccaneer to Puritan avenger. The titular hero was, according to Purefoy, just the kind of character he was looking for. "He's very much a man," he says. "There's nothing boyish about him and we don't have many of those kinds of parts - he's a big, masculine presence. We don't get many of these full-blooded movie icon characters, with the cape and the hat and doing the [he makes swashbuckling noises], it's just fun to watch."

"I'm not one for banging on about my own work but I'm pleased with this because it works. It works for the audience that it's aimed at - it's scary and it's big and it has an epic feel about it that you don't often see with independent British films."

The other thing that Purefoy is pleased about is that the movie, despite its fantastical premise, is played straight.

"Sword and sorcery films as a genre tend to be - certainly when I watched them in the 80s - rather camp and bit knowing, a bit wink-wink. I always felt slightly distanced by that - I mean if the people in it aren't taking it seriously, how can I? We tried doing the reverse with this and going very dark. Making it very real."

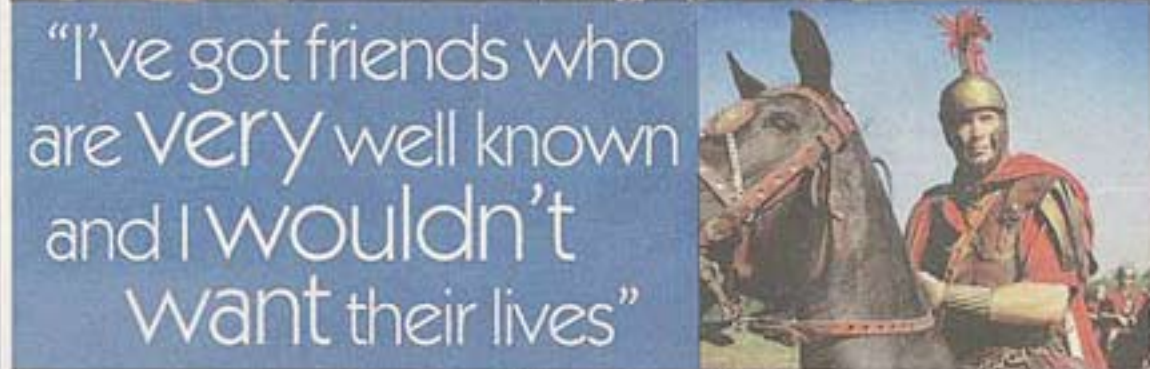
Max von Sydow plays Josiah Kane, Solomon's father (a second appearance for von Sydow in a Robert E Howard adaptation since he played King Osric in *Conan the Barbarian*) and Purefoy says watching him at work was a masterclass. "He's a legend. When those kinds of people arrive on set you just take a back seat. If you're clever at all, you just watch and you learn."

The film was shot in the Czech Republic over four months, in freezing cold weather and under a perpetual downpour.

"It's an exhausting process making a film like this. I'm not moaning about it because you get paid for it but it is tiring. We were shooting in -10 and Mike [Mike J Bassett, the writer/director] had a fetish for mud and rain. He'd pour about 60,000 litres of



Purefoy as Solomon Kane, main; as Mark Antony in Rome, below, with his girlfriend Jessica Adams, inset



"I've got friends who are **VERY** well known and I wouldn't want their lives"

water on us every single day. It'd soak into your clothes and then if you sat down in between takes for a cup of tea or something, they'd then freeze to your body. You'd try to get up and then you'd fall over, they'd help you up and then pour kettles of water over you to defrost you before sending you back out again."

There were other dangers too. Kane fights with two pistols, a cutlass and a rapier. Purefoy did most of his own stunts so he picked up a few knocks along the way.

"You read the script and you know you're going to get injured. It's just a question of how bad will it be and how long will it keep you away from the set. We had a nasty moment when someone nearly took the top of my head off with a sword. There was a hell of a lot of blood so it looked much worse when it happened than it really was."

It was bad enough that he needed stitches but that's not what he seems most pleased about. "Mike, can you believe it, kept the camera rolling. Of course, and I kept acting." He smiles, self-effacing, a bit silly. "The following week I had a terrible moment with a stuntman when I was meant to be stabbing him in the neck. He moved his head at the last second and I stabbed him in the face - through his cheek. He said he felt the blade stop on the surface of his tongue."

Purefoy moves around in his seat as he talks, there are sound effects and accents when required. It's ever so slightly geeky, which is at odd with his suave good looks.

And what about those looks, I ask? "Fading fast," he cuts in with a laugh. I wonder if they've been a hindrance rather than a help in his career? "Let's just keep it going that way," he says. "I've always thought I was pretty bland looking. As you get older, you get more lines on your face and there's more of a story. Bring it on. When I was younger I was just pretty, not dark and chiseled, Daniel Day Lewis-interesting. I was just a bit featureless. As you get older, the life you've lived, the trials, the split-ups, dealing with your child, all of these things get told on your face."

Purefoy's son (his mother is the actress Holly Aird, but Purefoy and Aird are no longer together) is hard to impress, he says. "He's been around me all of his life, filming is not that big a deal. What he's interested in is the trailer and does it have an X-Box in it. He's

now aware that you sit on a film set and you wait for hours for a three-second bit of excitement and then it's over. It's incredibly mundane. He doesn't buy it, he's not interested anymore. But he's interested in the finished product."

He must be excited about *Solomon Kane*? "He is, he pretends not to be but he is. And I'm very happy to say Daniel is off the wall and *Solomon Kane* is up there and I didn't have anything to do with it."

And if *Solomon Kane* is the runaway success that Purefoy hopes it will be, the first in a trilogy that will surely, at last, bring him to wider attention, will he embrace the fame that comes along with it? Purefoy's adamant he won't.

"I've got friends who are very, very well known and frankly I wouldn't want their lives. I don't like the way that people look at them, I don't like the way that they have to deal on a daily basis with the most tiresomely logistical stuff about how they're going to leave the house and which car they're going to use and what back entrance they've got to go through."

He tells about making a film produced by Elton John some years ago. It led to Purefoy spending time with John and he got an insight into that level of fame that stayed with him.

"My abiding memory of it was standing around with Elton in service areas of hotels. Not the nice bits that we all want to sit in, but in the draughty corridors and dodgy service lifts. I just thought, 'Christ is this your view?'"

For Purefoy, he wants balance. "You inhabit extraordinary characters - Mark Antony, Solomon Kane, Blackbeard the Pirate. The list goes on and on. It's hilarious. It's so far away from the mundane life of being a dad in west London cleaning his kid's underpants. It's like a split life, a bizarre split life. You're doing homework, maths and algebra and you're on a plane the following day and you're commanding Caesar's armies."

"If you can work as an actor at the top of your profession, doing really good stuff and be able to go to the supermarket and be able to have a normal life with your kid in the park, it's an amazing balance to achieve. That's the path I'm negotiating at this stage."

Good luck to him.

*Solomon Kane* is in cinemas now. ||