

LORD OF THE DANCE

If turning up early to a party is the best way to call the tunes, Christoph Waltz did not get the memo. It is only a decade since the actor, epicurean and acerbic philosopher won his big break at the age of 53, but he is now surveying Hollywood from the summit. And as NICK SCOTT finds, his worldview is unique.

photography **brian bowen smith** fashion direction **grace gilfeather**





Opening spread:
Burgundy silk and wool
single-breasted suit,
Ermenegildo Zegna;
teal brushed cotton shirt
and red and silver silk
diamond tie, both **Emma
Willis**; orange and blue silk
peacock pocket-square,
New & Lingwood; brown
cotton socks, **London Sock
Company**; burgundy leather
shoes, **George Cleverley**.

L.U.C 1937 Classic watch
from the L.U.C collection
featuring a white dial with
roman numerals, COSC-
certified chronometer set
in stainless steel on a black
alligator strap, **Chopard**.

This page:
Grey and cream tick-weave
sportcoat, grey and cream
tick-weave dress shirt, tan
crepe trousers, and grey and
cream tick-weave neck-tie,
all **Ralph Lauren Purple
Label**; navy felt fedora, **Lock
& Co.**; Green silk paisley
print pocket square, **New &
Lingwood**; burgundy leather
shoes, **George Cleverley**.

It's common knowledge that Orson Welles, during the making of the 1950 action flick *The Black Rose*, insisted on a mink-fur lining for his character's coat, despite the fact that it would never appear on celluloid. Rumour also has it that George Clooney, during the filming of Alfonso Cuarón's out-of-this-world sci-fi thriller *Gravity*, insisted on a slice of California being created outside his trailer on the set in Surrey — landscaped garden, basketball court, hot tub, custom-made beach hut and all.

So we were naturally unfazed when a two-time Academy Award-winning actor with a well-documented appreciation of all things oenological asked for a bottle of Pauillac Château Lafite Rothschild 1er Cru 2010 ("or similar") to be on site for his photoshoot with *The Rake*. "I thought, like a smart alec, that I was making

a sophisticated joke about how the so-called talent can go a little overboard with the perks," says Christoph Waltz as we embark on the interview some days later. "They'd asked me if I had any special requests — drink or food — and they gave me this fabulous bottle of wine, and I was so embarrassed. Embarrassed but flattered."

Waltz, 63, is a genuine epicurean. He'd definitely identify with a concept alluded to by the comedy personality David Mitchell in his book *Thinking About It Only Makes It Worse* — the 'valve decision', the notion that once you experience better, your newly piqued sensibilities (whether via your palate, your eardrums or your sleep quality on a plane) can't go back. "I appreciate a good drop, and once you taste the good stuff it's difficult to drink plonk — as with talking to certain people, or taking certain jobs," Waltz says. Does that go for the rolled leaf he's clutching in some of the shots here? "Very much so — but it's the same thing. I would rather not smoke than smoke some vile herb. I'd rather not drink than drink some crappy plonk. You don't want to fall into the trap of inflationary indulgence because you lose your appreciation.

"It's nice to have special occasions here and there, and I think by choosing quality you can put dots on the i's and sort of string yourself along — it makes it worthwhile." Yet Waltz, a man who seems to spend a good portion of his life fixing his pupils on a gold needle of truth in the fetid haystack of falsity that dominates modern existence, has no time for what he calls "professed expertise." "Aficionado" is a nice word," he says, "but 'connoisseur'? Really? Just get on with it and enjoy it and make it special."

The risk of slipping a clumsy segue into the conversation

notwithstanding, it's impossible here to suppress a question: what would Ernst Stavro Blofeld think of all this? For those late in the room, Waltz is the latest of seven actors to play a character who has a confounding set of guises. Blofeld is a 20-stone former amateur weightlifter with a black crew-cut atop Benito Mussolini features, a 12-stone silver-haired fox with nasal syphilis and green-tinted contact lenses, or a six-foot-three bruiser with a gold-capped tooth and droopy grey moustache, depending on whether you take Ian Fleming's descriptions in the novels *Thunderball*, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, and *You Only Live Twice* as gospel.

Take the film adaptations as your source, and Blofeld becomes, in the earlier films, nothing but a close-up of a hand stroking a cat; in the later ones, a villainous

presence personified by Donald Pleasence, Max von Sydow and Telly Savalas, among others; and, most recently of all, the five-foot-six Austrian gentleman photographed in these pages — a man whose naturally affable features can, at a twitch, convey oceans of inner malevolence at the shout of the word 'action!' Having survived the helicopter crash at the end of 2015's *Spectre*, Blofeld is back in the Bond franchise's 25th outing, *No Time to Die*, although the leading antagonist's podium has been taken by Rami Malek, playing a villain by the name of Safin.

At the time of writing, so-far-released clues about the jigsaw in which Blofeld appears to be a corner piece show him in prison attire with facial injuries, placing him in the disfigured, dastardly movie-villain canon alongside Anakin Skywalker, Scarface and The Joker as well as previous Bond baddies Alec Trevelyan (from *GoldenEye*) and Le Chiffre (*Casino Royale*), not to mention the character's former self as portrayed by Pleasence in *You Only Live Twice*.

So — to rewind a bit — what would Blofeld's reflections be on restrained indulgence in all things bacchanalian? "You should ask him," Waltz says. "I have no idea. It's actually a fun game to play, that kind of inquiry... You can play that same thing with power, or influencing others, or dictating terms, and then it really depends on the awareness and the intellect and the education and the level of existence of the person who exercises that influence... What I'm trying here is to make my own clumsy segue — into politics."

Tangent complete, the floodgates open. "We're actually governed by mediocre people, and that's why the course of

events in our society is mediocre at best. It should be excellent people who influence our lives. It would make an enormous difference... To watch how this one person can drag down, dramatically — like some wild beast that drags down its prey into its hole — the lives of not everybody but immense masses of people around the world... I am referring of course to President 45, and it's shocking to watch."

Would Blofeld not admire Trump? "I would never grant him the honour of comparing him to Blofeld — a 'connoisseur' of the power game [compared with] this barbarian, primitive Cro-Magnon, bullying

everyone into submission just because he has the machinery behind him. It's interesting that humanity takes this swing, from a good wine and a good cigar to the extreme opposite — the sophisticated pleasures that make life enjoyable and celebratory as opposed to the wild barbarian swinging into the kneecaps of everybody on Earth..."

Does Waltz have any explanation as to why — in a world so parsimonious with its talent-to-success ratio, one in which only maestros become concert pianists, and even sports prodigies often sacrifice their childhoods only to fail to make the cut — so many of us in the English-speaking world feel compelled to ponder 'least-harmful flaws' over 'greatest strengths' at the ballot box? "Because it goes by the same rules, only inverted," he says. "Anybody with their two cents' worth in place shies away from [politics], and it shouldn't be like that. It should be the classic Greek or Roman idea of it being the highest honour to serve society for a period of time and dedicate our lives to it; to be given periods of time to be the best we can possibly muster. But it's exactly the inverse — 'Grab it while you can and never mind the consequences'. I shudder when I think of it."

Returning from bitter reality to the more palatable realms of unrealistic realism, Waltz has in the past mentioned that his attraction to the role of Blofeld was in part related to *Spectre* (the movie) touching upon the zeitgeist-y topic of internet-enabled data harvesting in the post-Edward Snowden era. ("This movie is... speaking about relevant social issues in a way that few Bonds have done before," is how Waltz put it before *Spectre's* release.) What can he reveal about the next instalment of a franchise whose culture of secrecy and controlled 'leaks' resembles that of the actual British Secret Service? As little as one might expect. "In terms of Bond it's an interesting question that you

ask, because Bond, over the past 50 years, always tunes into the momentary zeitgeist," Waltz says. "We're now on number 25, and over the course of 50 years, that's remarkable. These [writers and makers] seem to feel the pulse because Bond has become an institution. It tunes in and it speaks to people for the past 50 years. That's more than a generation."

"Bond has become maybe not yet the collective sub-conscience but certainly an element in the collective conscience. Anybody can quote from Bond, a kid or an adult. People who've seen the first Bond movie when they were, let's say, 15, they're now almost 70. It's incredible.

And actually, we're still talking about one and the same character, even though the *gestalt* that youngsters today talk about is entirely different because it tunes straight into the zeitgeist and it tunes straight into the moment. I find that phenomenon — one that slowly, slowly turns from a pop culture into a historical phenomenon — I find that really, really fascinating."

Is societal observation like that an important aspect, an important criterion, when choosing whether to take a role? He chuckles gently. "No. That would mean putting the bar a little high. I think if I made that a criterion I'd be reading a lot more [rather than] sitting at home practising piano and drinking the occasional good drop."

Theatrical family

The apronym gods have given us William Wordsworth, Usain Bolt and the former World Series poker champ Chris Moneymaker, to name just three famous figures with bizarrely apt surnames. But they were in the mood for subtler wordplay when they bestowed overnight success upon a 53-year-old man named Waltz, a word that comes from the German verb meaning 'to turn around', hence the dance genre that emanated from the folk music of the western Tyrol region in Waltz's native Austria. He's candid, humorously so, about how frustrating those three decades in the wilderness were ("It feels like someone keeps trying to switch the light on, but the dimmer switch is broken," he once said. "And then sometimes the bulb blows altogether").

Waltz was born in Vienna in 1956 into a theatrical family. His maternal grandmother was the Viennese Burgtheater actress Maria Mayen; his step-grandfather another Burgtheater actor, Emmerich Reimers; his mother, Elisabeth Urbancic, was a costume design; and his father, Johannes Waltz, a German

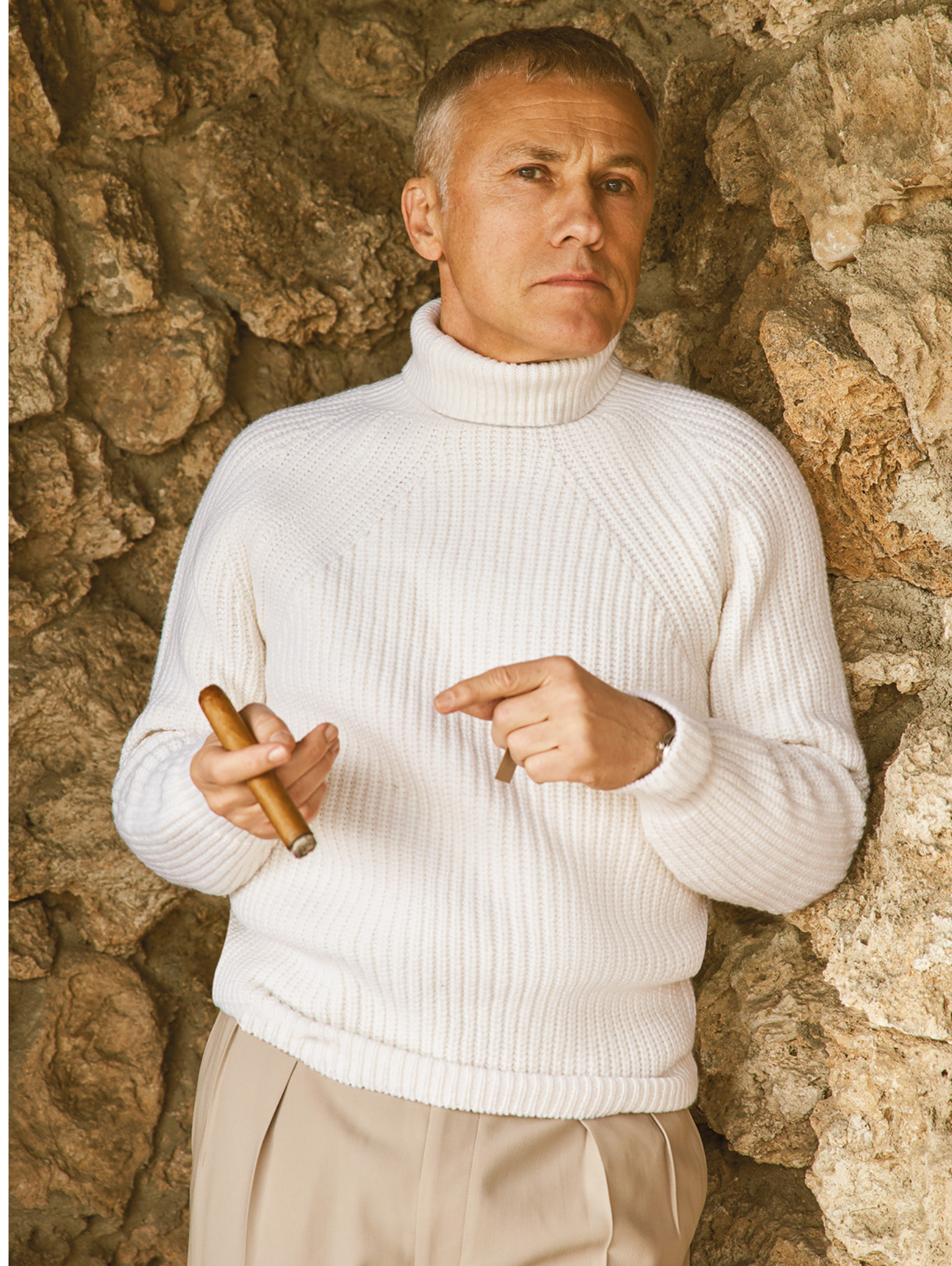
"Bond has become an institution. It speaks to people for the past 50 years. That's more than a generation."



Cream wool safari jacket and brown and gold long-sleeved cotton polo shirt, Cifonelli; light grey wool flannel pleated Manny trousers, Rubinacci at The Rake; brown cotton socks, London Sock Company; tan suede loafers, Edward Green.

L.U.C 1937 Classic watch from the L.U.C collection featuring a white dial with roman numerals, COSC-certified chronometer set in stainless steel on a black alligator strap, Chopard.

This spread:
Cream cashmere roll-neck,
Anderson & Sheppard;
tan crepe trousers, Ralph
Lauren Purple Label; brown
cotton socks, London Sock
Company; brown leather
loafers, George Cleverley.



stage builder. Waltz trained at the Max Reinhardt Seminar in Vienna and the Lee Strasberg Institute in New York before embarking on a life commuting from London (where he'd made home with his American first wife) to Germany for theatre work, and spent three decades treading similar boards along with occasional television and movie work.

There were turns on German children's T.V., historical miniseries, and a couple of appearances on British television: as Dr Hans-Joachim Dorfmann in the Channel 4 miniseries *The Gravy Train* in the late eighties and as a German villain named 'Weak Mustache' in the early nineties sketch programme *The All New Alexei Sayle Show*. (During the latter, he and the eponymous Liverpoolian comedian struck up a friendship that now affords players of the parlour game Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon an irresistible, Suez Canal-like link between Adrian Edmondson's Vyvyan Basterd in *The Young Ones* and Samuel L. Jackson's Jules Winnfield from *Pulp Fiction*.)

Waltz was in his early fifties when he came to the attention of Quentin Tarantino as the perfect candidate for the role of Standartenführer Hans Landa in the 2009 world war II genre-blender *Inglourious Basterds*. "I knew Landa was one of the best characters I've ever written and probably one of the best characters I will ever write," Tarantino told *The New York Times* of the trouble he'd had filling the role in question. He'd even told producers he was considering abandoning the movie hours before Waltz stepped up for the audition. "[The other auditioning actors] didn't get my poetry. I literally had to consider I might have written an unplayable part... He gave us our movie back."

This last point was by way of reciprocation: on the podium at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, accepting his best-actor gong, Waltz had said of Tarantino, "You gave me my vocation back". And Waltz had found more than a fast-track to 'overnight' success — he'd found the perfect outlet for his knack of blending fine brushstrokes of charm and menace, mischief and malice into a single, horribly arresting portrait. (There really is no other actor who could make the task of eulogising a glass of milk when about to murder a family hiding below the floorboards on which he stands so unsettling.)

Many of Waltz's most brilliantly chilling moments in *Inglourious Basterds* involve tiny fragments of dialogue ("*Au revoir, Shoshanna!*", "*Attendez la crème*"), but asked why Tarantino's scripts and his

delivery make such a potent combination, Waltz bats the credit squarely in the direction of a filmmaker whose ability to jump realities he refers to as 'Quentin physics'. "That's easy to answer — it's because Quentin is an incredible writer," Waltz says. "It's like playing music, music that is close to me and close to the sounds in my head. That's it — it's not complicated at all. You can't do what's not written. I'm dependent — he's not, he can pick someone else." Tarantino, whose trust was again repaid with interest when he cast Waltz as the dentist-turned-bounty-hunter Dr. King Schultz in *Django Unchained* three years later, may disagree.

But this is the strange thing when interacting with Waltz. He's quit theatre productions acrimoniously in the past, and can seem not quite prickly but unwilling to suffer fools gladly in the occasional interview, yet he frequently disarms you with bursts of affability and, indeed, modesty. When I thank him for his insights at the close of our interview, he substitutes the word 'insights' for "onslaught of babbling". A YouTube Waltz-a-thon, taking in his various late-night American talk-show appearances, will attest further to his congeniality.

He's certainly no chest-thumping thespian when it comes to 'method', despite having been schooled in those aforementioned illustrious institutions. "Sooner or later you liberate yourself from those influences," he says. "I've been doing this for more than 40 years now. If I was still sitting on the people I studied with then I'd have a serious problem. It's like psychotherapists today" — it might be noted here that both Waltz's maternal grandfather was a noted psychologist, his first wife a psychotherapist — "they don't follow a specific school any more. They're not Freudian or Jungian or Reichian or Adlerian or whatever, because then people may as well go straight to the source. They study that, they learn it, they know it and then they move on and become their own entities, and that's the case in art, probably even more than in psychotherapy. Rembrandt's disciples could have continued the line until today, and they'd still be painting like Rembrandt's [original] disciples. Thankfully that's not the case."

Usually in a celebrity interview, actors will deflect questions driving at their deeper philosophies by talking blandly about their careers. Waltz — again, those apronym gods making their mischief — turns that axiom around. He's said before that, "Acting is being private in public", but pressing him on that, not for the

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Clockwise from top left: Christoph Waltz in *Horrible Bosses 2* (2014); *Big Eyes* (2014); *Django Unchained* (2012); *The Legend of Tarzan* (2016); *No Time to Die* (2020); *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019); *Spectre* (2015); *Inglourious Basterds* (2009); and *Carnage* (2011).



ALAMY, REX FEATURES

“I would never grant [Trump] the honour of comparing him to Blofeld — a ‘connoisseur’ of the power game [compared with] this barbarian, primitive Cro-Magnon, bullying everyone into submission just because he has the machinery behind him.”

Yellow sunflower terry towelling resort polo, **Orlebar Brown**; black and ecru check Vitale Barberis Canonico pleated wool flannel Aleksandar trousers, **Kit Blake** at **The Rake**; black cotton socks, **London Sock Company**.

L.U.C 1937 Classic watch from the L.U.C collection featuring a white dial with roman numerals, COSC-certified chronometer set in stainless steel on a black alligator strap, **Chopard**.



Cream linen herringbone jacket, **Huntsman**; white cotton shirt, **Budd Shirmakers**; brown wool trouser, **Lardini**; tan silk printed tie, **Rubinacci**.

L.U.C 1937 Classic watch from the L.U.C collection featuring a white dial with roman numerals, COSC-certified chronometer set in stainless steel on a black alligator strap, **Chopard**.

FASHION ASSISTANT: VERONICA PEREZ
 PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANTS:
 KEVIN MCHUGH, BILL KENNEDY, KEVIN PERSHIN
 DIGITAL TECH: BRANDON SMITH
 PRODUCTION: VIEWFINDER
 PRODUCER: DANA BROCKMAN
 PRODUCTION COORDINATOR: CAROLYN BRUGH
 PRODUCTION ASSISTANT: DIN MORRIS

first or last time, leads us down a tangential thoroughfare. “We live in an era where living seems to be both public and private, and I find that upside down,” he says. Does he mean social media? “[That is] something in which I do not participate! Recently the destructive force of social media has become visible, and only the really dull, today, believe it is a benign affair that amuses the participants and links people together in benevolent networks. It’s one of the most destructive instruments of power ever.” Does he feel that we’re yet to see the full malice of its influence? “Yes, but it’s too late. This ravenous, raging, rabid beast is let loose and there’s nothing and no one who can rein it in any more.”

He’s fond of a Carl Jung hypothesis that states that in taking a thousand pebbles from a beach, you could calculate the average weight but never find a single one that matches that average weight. So what — critical response, box office success, personal opinion, Academy, Bafta and Golden Globe awards for *Inglourious Basterds* — most gives the idiosyncratic being that is Christoph Waltz a feeling of validation? “It’s like talking about colour. When I say blue, and you hear me say blue, that doesn’t mean that you’re seeing, in your inner eye, the same colour that I’m talking about. There’s an old example that Russians have, about 15 different terms for blue. It’s like Inuit for ‘white’. And so success as such is like an approximation at best. It’s a very complicated web of very confusing elements. A little bit like social media...”

Here, our conversation returns to what is most on Waltz’s (today very restless) mind. “It’s nothing new that language or communication can be an approximation at best, and that’s why the hijacking of language by the barbarians for their nefarious ends is dangerous and hugely intentional. All of a sudden they take a word and turn it around through social media and press; the new meaning becomes the meaning of the word, and it’s the same with a symbol — see how the kneeling at [American] football games during the anthem is all of a sudden defined as disrespectful.

“Now I ask you, why do we kneel in front of something or someone? Always to show more respect than standing up. Kneeling is not a sign of disrespect, it is a sign of heightened respect. But within two tweets, and one rant, all of a sudden kneeling is disrespectful. If it’s that easy to redefine what we accept as our guidance to make sense of the world, then I’m afraid we’ve lost it all. In [U.S. congressman] Adam Schiff’s statement at the impeachment trial, at the end of the third day, he said, ‘If

right is not right any more, then we’re lost’. And I’m totally with him. Unconditionally. And that refers to all the other anchors that we use to find our place in the world and society.”

Waltz has done plenty to impress between his portrayals of Blofeld, Landa and Schultz — notably in Roman Polanski’s screen version of French playwright Yasmina Reza’s Tony award-winning black comedy play, *Le Dieu du Carnage*; as the hard-partying Serbian sybarite Dušan in *Downsizing*; and with his turn as Qohen Leth, an unhinged data cruncher who lives in an abandoned church in *The Zero Theorem*, a 2013 futuristic fantasy movie from the rabid

“The destructive force of social media has become visible. Only the really dull believe it is a benign affair.”

imagination of Terry Gilliam. With a lead role in the new Woody Allen film, for which principal photography is about to begin in Spain, coming up next, professionally Waltz is on the same lofty branch on which

Inglourious Basterds placed him more than a decade ago.

And, philosophical misgivings about the modern world aside, he’s in a very, very positive place. The bottle of wine and fine cigars at the shoot, it transpires during our time with Waltz, are far more than just well curated indulgences — they’re an antidote to much that he perceives to be wrong with the world. The same can be said of classical music: Waltz, whose stepfather was a composer and conductor, and who was attending two operas a week by the time he was a teenager, has directed a production of Verdi’s *Falstaff* for Opera Vlaanderen, performed in Antwerp then Ghent, and has just turned his creative hand to a production of Beethoven’s only opera, *Fidelio*, in Vienna.

Watchmaking, he says, is another edifying presence in his life. “Chopard are dear, dear friends,” he says. “I’m very happy to associate myself with them. I’ve visited their workshop and their other places in Geneva, and it’s nothing like you’ve ever seen before. They’re incredible. Those are specialists. Those are creative people. Those are people with expertise and craftsmanship on a level that you cannot imagine. Do they make a big deal about it? No, they just get on with it. It’s a family business. It’s not listed on the stock exchange for profit for anonymous shareholders. They invest their lives into what they’re doing. That’s why it comes out how it does.”

And with fine watchmaking serving as a microcosm for all that can save us from banality, an exceptionally nuanced actor, and a man seemingly torn between frustration at life’s peccadillos and enchantment at its marvels, parts company with *The Rake*. In the physical sense, at least. ■