

# TENDER IS THE KNIGHT

*Sir Ben Kingsley's combustible blend of sensitivity and strength makes it impossible to ignore his work. From where does he draw such potency and presence? The answer, he tells NICK SCOTT, lies in the darker fringes of human experience.*

photography **austin hargrave** stylist **alvin arcangel stillwell**  
fashion direction **grace gilfeather**

White linen jacket, **Dolce & Gabbana**;  
light blue cashmere, silk and linen  
sweater, **Ermenegildo Zegna**; denim  
jeans, **Paige**; navy silk pocket-square,  
**Ermenegildo Zegna**; black leather  
custom-made brogues, **Borgioli**.

A choice nugget of Kingslian folklore takes us to Sir Ben's childhood, and a small cinema in Salford, Greater Manchester, about 100 miles south-west of his birthplace near Scarborough. The movie unfolding before the young boy then named Krishna Pandit Bhanji is 1951's *Never Take No for an Answer*, a tender fable about a nine-year-old war orphan, Peppino, who walks 100 miles south to Rome so that the Pope might heal his beloved, sick donkey.

Sir Ben, speaking in Los Angeles before the photos you see here are captured, picks up the story: "The last shot of the film is the little boy leading his donkey into a shaft of light coming into the chapel, by which time I was reduced to a bundle of tears. It was so beautiful to watch that redemptive gesture on film. After the movie the cinema owner saw me in the crowd and lifted me up in his arms and shouted, 'It's little Peppino, it's little Peppino!' Physically I

looked very like him. It was just an extraordinary afternoon. I'm sure that it was the life-changing moment."

Fast-forward almost seven decades, and the latest chapter of Sir Ben Kingsley's career is unfolding in *Perpetual Grace, LTD*, the American television neo-noir thriller that has drawn praise from some of the most critically parsimonious observers thanks to its ever-thickening plot, finely judged dramatic tension, and stellar performances from a cast that also includes *Westworld*'s Jimmi Simpson, Luis Guzmán (*Traffic, Punch-Drunk Love*), Jacki Weaver (*Silver Linings Playbook*) and Terry O'Quinn, of *Lost* fame.

Sir Ben is bristling with enthusiasm about the 10-part series. "I would say, summing up all the ingredients — the writing, the directing, the camera positioning, the experience of discovering another actor like I discovered Luis Guzmán, who was discovering me — I would say that it's up on a pinnacle of experience for me."

Created by Steven Conrad and Bruce Terris, the team behind *Patriot, Perpetual Grace, LTD* is a *Fargo*-esque tale of convoluted and often bungled criminality that takes place in the vast, foreboding wilderness of New Mexico. For the uninitiated, Sir Ben plays arguably his second-most terrifying character to date: Pastor Byron Brown, aka 'Pa', a crooked, remote-America cleric who, along with his wife, Lillian (Weaver), proves to be

a more formidable antagonist than expected when two young men attempt to fleece his ill-gotten gains by kidnapping him. The plot-weave becomes more dense at an impressive pace (the show is no dip-in-and-out viewing), especially when, later in the series, Timothy Spall enters the scene as one of Pa's childhood friends ("Tim and I do, as adults, pursue each other quite relentlessly," Sir Ben says, laughing).

And this, as you'll concur if you've been as absorbed as we have, barely scratches the surface of a T.V. series that is made for the post-box-set/Netflix binge-watching era. "What Steve and Bruce have basically created, and what Steve's directed and produced, is in fact a 10-hour film," Sir Ben says. "It's

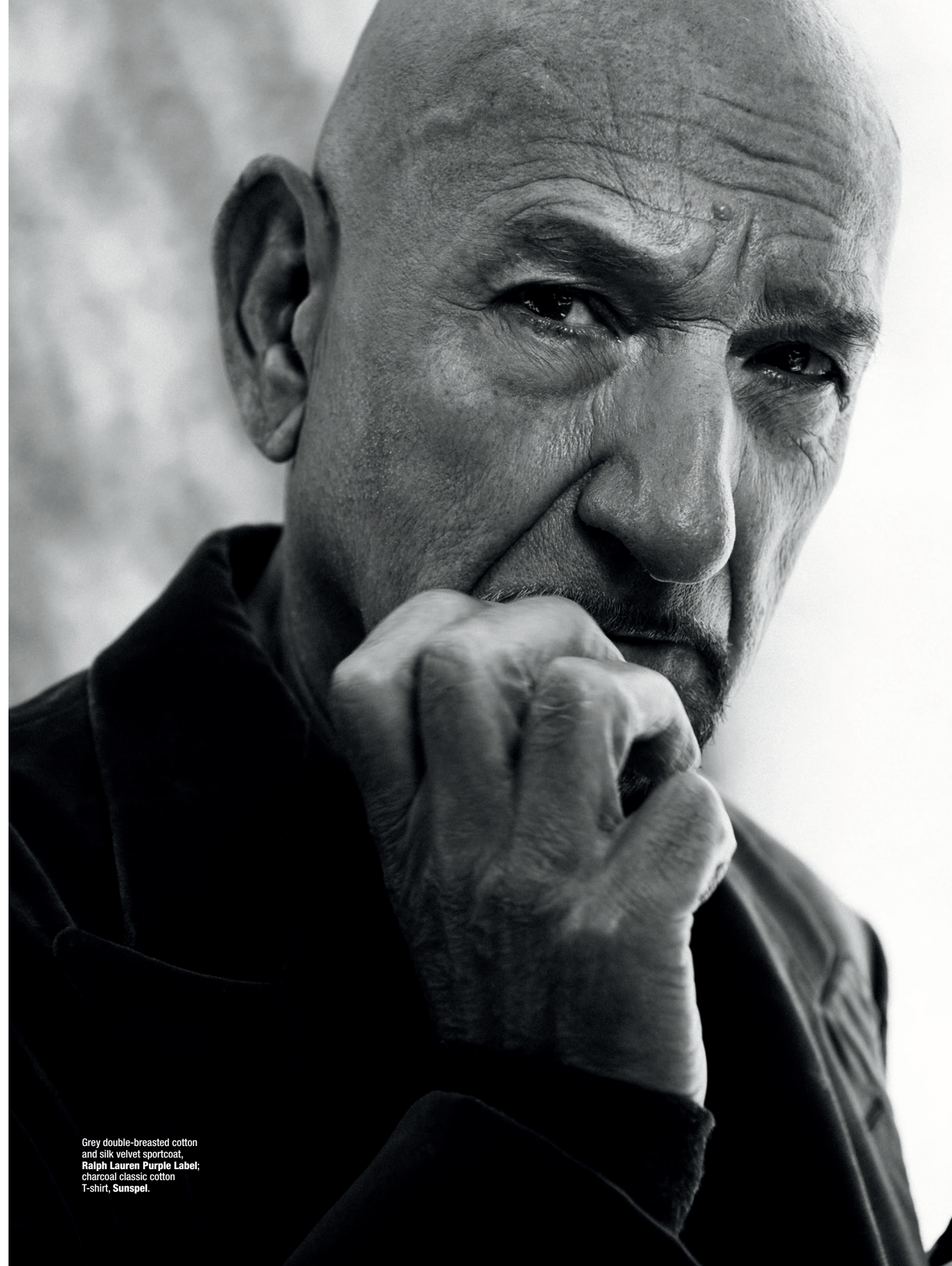
episodic, but when you stitch the episodes together it's quite seamless, and not every episode is a story unto itself. Steve has said that he'd rather like people to watch it in a 10-hour sitting. I don't know how

they conceive of the spider's web of intrigue and interconnection and relationship. It's a little bit like George Eliot's great novel, *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe*, the way the strands weave together and, in the last chapter, all connect. Such brave writing."

If you have been watching, you'll have noted how deftly woven is the tapestry of Pa's back story, and how it led him to where he is today, geographically and existentially. "You see Pa's arc in an extraordinary way — sometimes through a sequence of flashbacks and sometimes through extraordinary soliloquies that he delivers about his past, his journey, his attitude to fellow human beings," Sir Ben says. "He poses as a preacher, and one would think that the essential physical gesture of a man of the cloth is a man with open hands, whereas Pa enters the world with clenched fist. That is his psychological gesture, but he's managed to disguise that as the opposite."

You get the impression that Pa's criminality is an end in itself rather than a means — an un-righteous path — to riches. "Knowing himself, and projecting on others how treacherous the human being can be, he succeeds in surviving as a hunter, preying on those in need of guidance, in need of succour, in need of advice," Sir Ben explains. "He entices them into his flock by giving what seems to be very life-affirming, strong but tender

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Grey double-breasted cotton and silk velvet sportcoat, Ralph Lauren Purple Label; charcoal classic cotton T-shirt, Sunspel.



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advice, and when he or she, the victim, is at their most vulnerable, he makes his move — he convinces the new recruit to his flock that they should in fact hand over their life savings to the church, to Pa, for their well-being, their safety and their benefit. Of course, that accumulates into people seeking revenge — against him or against his son, who they wrongly believe has absconded with their money. Not only is he preyed upon by his present, he’s preyed upon, as we see as the story is revealed, by his past.”

Sir Ben describes the character as “a great orator” who “can convey a biblical authority to his interlocutor that is very hard to resist”, and, indeed, it’s hard to think of another screen character bar Samuel L. Jackson’s Jules Winnfield who harbours a more grizzly relish for theological rhetoric than Pa, which feels very appropriate amid the rugged, expansive realm in which the narrative is set. “The New Mexico landscape does lend itself to our film’s biblical authority,” Sir Ben says. “It unfolds itself like an Old Testament fable — about the prodigal son, the wayward son, the disguised son, the loving father.

“What’s also extraordinary about Pa is that he’s a loving husband. In fact, the main anchor in his life, the constant, stable element in his life, is his love for his wife. And she reciprocates this extraordinary love, too. Both Pa and his beloved wife are wounded children. Their childhoods were pretty devastated. Institutionalised. They suffered terrible neglect, were orphaned, and they found each other in their youth. And there was an echo between the one and the other — together they are, in a sense, the Macbeths of our film. But as somebody pointed out to me once, probably the happiest couple in that play are Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth, because they’re on the same page. They’re not nice people, but they’re devoted to each other.”

So what made the character this way? “I would imagine Pa fought for his life, literally, from a very, very early age and fought for his place in the world and fought for recognition. Because I think this faces the orphan: whether it’s literal or psychological, it stays with the orphan and does propel them into being just totally un-empathetic and defensive and really thinking that, in fact, the only mandate in life is to survive. That

imperative to survive in a very hostile world is so embedded in their DNA, it develops into an extraordinary skill, of operating behind a mask that is initially so benign that the parishioner is completely seduced and falls into a pattern of profound trust. Until they realise that they’ve lost everything. I don’t know how the film will resolve itself and that father-son relationship will resolve itself. Whether there’s redemption, whether there’s recognition, whether there’s patricide, I don’t know.”

#### **Mother Nurture’s children**

What made people how they are is a question that preoccupies Sir Ben Kingsley a great deal, not least professionally. We’re not talking that glib ‘method’ concept here. Previously he has pointed out, very emphatically, that his performances come from within, not from months of Stanislavskian osmosis, but to say Sir Ben does his homework would be an understatement. In

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preparation for what would become his Oscar-winning, career-forging turn as Mohandas K. Gandhi (between the ages of 23 and 78, no less) in Richard Attenborough’s 1982 biopic, Sir Ben lost 20 pounds via Gandhi’s vegetarian diet, studied yoga, meditated extensively, and learned to spin cotton thread on a wooden wheel. And then there was the research — the devouring of a rumoured 28 books on his subject — during which he learned that his physician father’s family had come from the same village as Gandhi (Sir Ben’s paternal grandfather, a spice trader, left India for Zanzibar before taking the family to England when his father was 14).

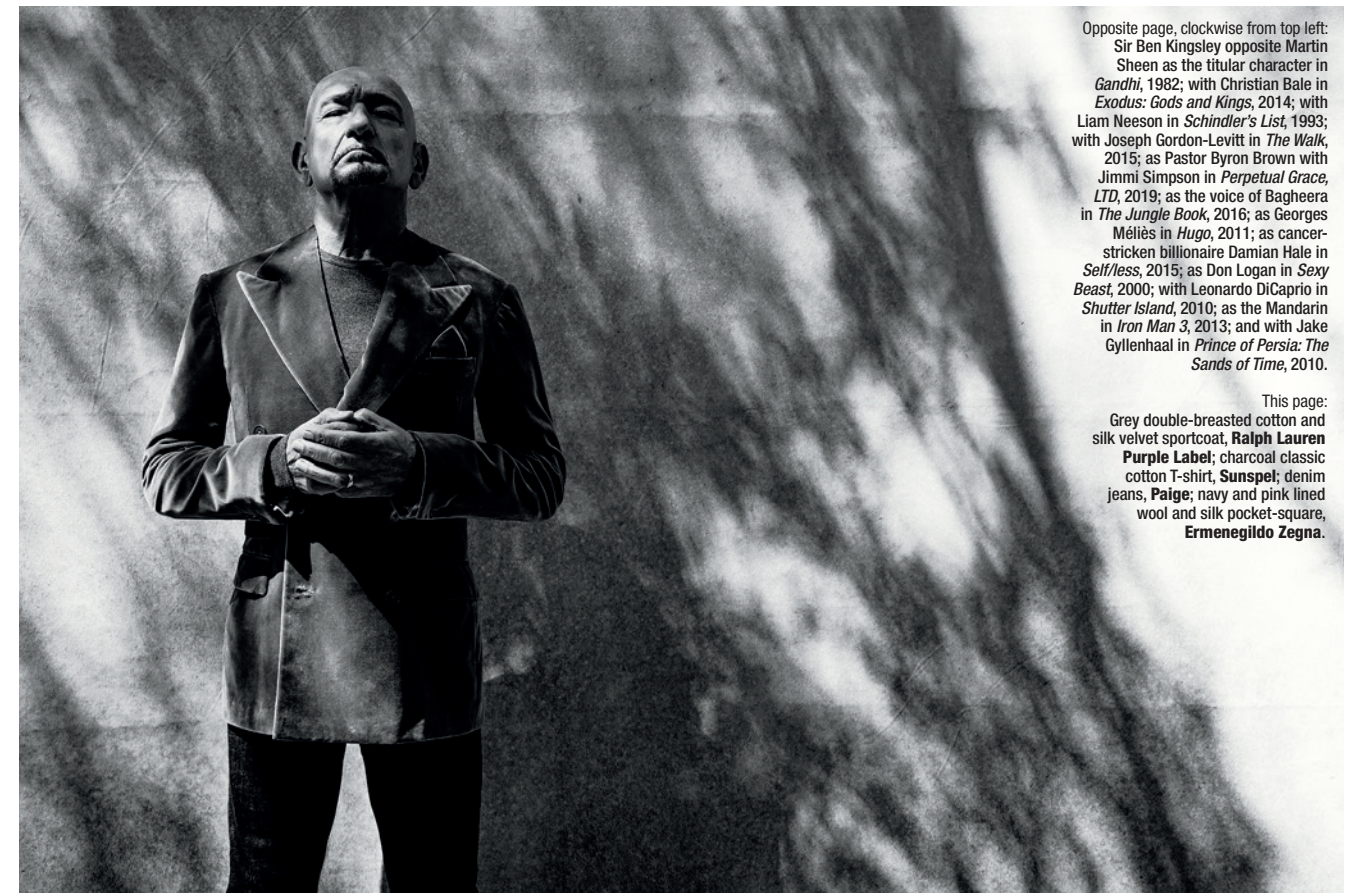
Elsewhere, and perhaps more so with fictional characters, Sir Ben has drawn on something very different: contemplation of exactly how formative our formative years are, based on accumulated life experience and meticulous observation. “Sometimes research is, in fact, built up inside oneself and one needs to look no further than one’s own experience,” he says. “One can only invest a great deal of memory in a character. I think survival mechanisms and defence mechanisms — the clenched fist syndrome that I was alluding to earlier — these

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Brown suede jacket,  
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navy cotton shirt, COS.



ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Sir Ben Kingsley opposite Martin Sheen as the titular character in *Gandhi*, 1982; with Christian Bale in *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, 2014; with Liam Neeson in *Schindler's List*, 1993; with Joseph Gordon-Levitt in *The Walk*, 2015; as Pastor Byron Brown with Jimmi Simpson in *Perpetual Grace, LTD*, 2019; as the voice of Bagheera in *The Jungle Book*, 2016; as Georges Méliès in *Hugo*, 2011; as cancer-stricken billionaire Damian Hale in *Self/less*, 2015; as Don Logan in *Sexy Beast*, 2000; with Leonardo DiCaprio in *Shutter Island*, 2010; as the Mandarin in *Iron Man 3*, 2013; and with Jake Gyllenhaal in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, 2010.

This page: Grey double-breasted cotton and silk velvet sportcoat, **Ralph Lauren Purple Label**; charcoal classic cotton T-shirt, **Sunspel**; denim jeans, **Paige**; navy and pink lined wool and silk pocket-square, **Ermenegildo Zegna**.

are laid down at a very, very early age. Do not the Jesuits say, 'Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man'? It's those first formative years."

Nearly 20 years later, Sir Ben's portrayal of the rage-addled sociopath Don Logan in *Sexy Beast* (2000) earned him almost equal acclaim to his performance as Gandhi. To play Logan (who manages to out-hardnut Ray Winstone), Sir Ben applied a backstory never explicitly revealed to the viewer. "When it came to reading *Sexy Beast*, I immediately wanted to play Logan so much. That degree of pain! His primal cry being, 'I don't want you to be happy; why should I?'" That extraordinary line in that wonderful screenplay is the summation of him. That is his psychological gesture: Don Logan, the weeping, screaming child who has decided never to weep and scream again. I realised — because the writing is so pure and because, as in Shakespeare, the patterns of human behaviour are so beautifully exposed and examined and shared — that Don Logan was an unhealed, abused child."

It may be because he engaged with the subject so intensely in his portrayal of Logan that Sir Ben is impassioned about the subject of child abuse. "I think that the most horrendous poison we can inject into our future is the abuse of children, it's the greatest threat to our civilisation. [Interpol] recently caught a paedophile ring involving 50 children spread from Germany to Holland to Indonesia to God knows where. Hitler was an unhealed abused child. And if you did physics at school, or mathematics, you'll realise that there's a law of inverse proportion. There's proportionality between the abuse that man

suffered, unhealed, that he wanted to mete out to the rest of the world with utter indifference. That's the empathetic connection that I was able to make between the portrayer and the portrait. I think of myself as a portrait artist more than anything else, really, now."

He describes making such an extreme psychological transition — that of Sir Ben Kingsley to a damaged, stubborn, violent underworld figure — with the analogy of a trapeze artist. "I had the great pleasure of addressing the students at the New York Film Academy, which held a great fair in Los Angeles, only yesterday. There were students of acting, directing and writing. It was a wonderful room and I was there as a genuine patriarch, not a phoney one [laughs], and I was able to offer them an image of what truly hypnotises and compels audiences. It's when an audience holds its breath. And I used the analogy of a trapeze artist who is holding on to one trapeze swinging backwards and forwards, way above the heads of the audience, who are watching her in religious awe.

"On one of the swings, she lets go of the trapeze, triple-somersaults in the air between one trapeze and another, and catches the other trapeze. During which time the audience has stopped breathing. They're all human beings in that room and they're watching another human being doing something seemingly impossible, but there's a little voice in them that says, 'That's a human being. I can do that. I am capable of that. If I'm a human being and I have the same DNA as that wonderful creature who has let go of one trapeze and leapt, somersaulted

through space and grabbed another one...’ It’s exhilarating to watch, it’s death-defying, it’s brave, it’s thrilling, it’s highly skilful, and it’s also human. This is an extraordinary combination of ingredients. Those moments of letting go of yourself and landing in the portrayal of your character — that jump, that leap, is what audiences find thrilling.

“It’s when the camera captures that leap from one trapeze to the other that will make that scene memorable for years and years and years to come. Steve Conrad, as I had the pleasure of conveying this to him, managed to put on the screen every single gesture that I lovingly offered to him as Pa on set. Everything I was trying to do, every brushstroke of my portrait of Pa, he captured on film, and that’s very, very gratifying. He put the camera in the perfect place, he watched my work unfold, and he caught it unfolding. I say unfolding because very often he printed take one. He never got to take three. I was astonished at that level of trust and that level of delight in capturing. In that one take, he’d actually let go and spun in the air and caught the other side. But if you do too many takes, you’re just repeating. It’s no longer death-defying, it’s a ritual.”

#### Eclectic vehicles

Sir Ben’s career is nothing if not varied. He’s played bird experts as well as bastards (2013’s *A Birder’s Guide to Everything*), psychiatrists as well as psychopaths (2010’s *Shutter Island*), political establishment as well as political activists (1993’s *Dave*), not to mention Jewish mobsters (1991’s *Bugsy*), grumpy toy shop owners (2011’s *Hugo*), chess coaches (1993’s *Searching for Bobby Fischer*), cuckolded husbands (in 1993’s adaptation of Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal*), and fictional household names from Moses to Fagin via Sweeney Todd and Doctor Watson.

For all the screen intensity that has brought him a cavalcade of honours, including an Oscar, a Grammy, a Bafta, two Golden Globes, and a Screen Actors Guild award; for all the gravity he injects into even his lesser-known roles (as a handler to an undercover IRA mole in 2008’s *Fifty Dead Men Walking*; as a Russian narcotics detective in the murder/suspense thriller

*Transsiberian*; as a shy bookstore clerk in 1985’s *Turtle Diary*) — for all of this, Sir Ben’s early career is also sprinkled with lighter moments. Like his first major screen acting, in sporadic appearances in *Coronation Street* in the late sixties (he had resolved to take up acting a few years previously, after seeing Ian Holm play Richard III at the RSC). Like being watched by The Beatles singing selections from *The King and I* with Julie Andrews, then being told by John Lennon and Ringo Starr that he should pursue a musical career. Like playing The Hood in the movie version of *Thunderbirds* and being eaten by a ‘Grasshopper-raptor’ in an episode of *The Simpsons*.

In tandem, there’s a lighter core to Sir Ben’s famously private persona beneath the dark-brown baritone and beatific smile (visit YouTube to watch the moment he goes on *The Tonight Show* and duets with Jimmy Fallon before jauntily going into full Don Logan mode when an audience member’s phone goes off). His reputation as a serious actor — in the sense that Alice Walker is a serious author, and Wilfred Owen is a serious poet — derives in large part from his professional forays into the most atrocious episode in modern human history. The most famous of these roles, of course, is his achingly sensitive performance as Itzhak Stern, Oskar Schindler’s Jewish accountant in *Schindler’s List*; it is Stern who acts as the title character’s moral foil. Sir Ben has also played Otto Frank, in the 2001 TV miniseries *Anne Frank: The Whole Story*, and the SS officer Adolf Eichmann, in last year’s *Operation Finale*.

Among the Holocaust survivors with whom Sir Ben forged close relationships over the years was the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, author of *Night*, a 1960 work detailing his experiences with his father in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and a man Sir Ben describes as “the greatest voice of the Holocaust alongside Simon Wiesenthal”. The bond he formed with Wiesel was so strong, in fact, that it not only informed his performance in *Operation Finale* (he carried a photo of Wiesel on set), but prefaced one of the major moments of Sir Ben’s life: “I loved him, and once, when we were together — I think probably for the last time; we were together a few times — he described me, and I say this with all

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humility, because I'm quoting Elie, he described me as 'a lover of truth and memory'. Which is a very, very beautiful thing to say of my craft, and exactly what I'm trying to do."

The aforementioned Wiesenthal "is another great patriarch I've had the honour of portraying, quite early on in my association with the Holocaust", as Sir Ben puts it, and another man with whom he forged a friendship. "I spent months with him," he says, "and he actually once publicly embraced me and said that I was like a son to him, which was very life-affirming for me. I thought, 'Well, if that's as far as I get in this business, that's as far as I want to go' — for that man to put his arm around me and say that, that's it. That's fine by me. If I stop now, it's fine by me."

The sense of humanity Sir Ben felt from Wiesenthal brings us back to the subject of formative years, and just how formative they are. Sir Ben says: "Simon, bless him, used to speak of his mother, yes, but also his grandmother.

He said, 'She was the wisest person in my life'. What a beautiful thing to be able to say. Simon quoted his grandmother, and I was sitting with him in Vienna in a restaurant. I just had to put my hand on his as we spoke about his childhood, his past, then his years in Mauthausen concentration camp as the tears rolled down his face. And I realised that, thanks to his generosity in expressing his grief, that he's allowing me to become what they call a 'witness'. I'm now referred to by Jews as a 'witness'. It's a huge responsibility to live up to. And in everything I'm privileged to do, I try to project as I learned to so joyfully from Shakespeare, of whom one could say in a much louder voice, 'There is a lover of truth and memory'. And look how long his echo has lasted, because the sound was so beautiful. If I'm able to recognise a genuine compassionate pattern of human behaviour in the writing, then all of my molecules — and even some I didn't know existed — will go into that portrait."

All of which brings us back to Pa, Peppino the orphan, and the story, related early on in our meeting, of a young Sir Ben Kingsley-to-be weeping at a charmingly sentimental cinematic yarn in a Salford cinema. Sir Ben's life to date hasn't lacked watershed moments: his knighthood, which, he has implied,

made him feel loved and accepted for the first time in life; those warm moments with Wiesel and Wiesenthal, men who have experienced humanity at its darkest; and seeing his actor sons nail Hamlet's Rosencrantz and *The Taming of the Shrew's* Lucentio.

Talking to him today, you can't help but wonder if another of those watershed moments was the first time he read the script for *Perpetual Grace, LTD*. You get the impression there has been some catharsis in his portrayal of Pa, and a bringing full circle of his attachment to that fictional Italian boy Peppino. "I hope I've managed to convey that [childhood cinema] story intelligently, because there are lots of intangibles there that all came together at the same moment," he says, before turning to

the subject of his childhood and his parents, who became indifferent to his acting career (he'd grown up expecting, and being expected, to become a doctor). "We have used the word 'orphan' quite a lot in our conversation," Sir Ben says.

"And because of a certain set of circumstances in my childhood that were most unfortunate... in that comfortable middle-class home, in a suburb of Manchester, I felt as a child that I was living in a vacuum. I felt that I was never seen nor heard.

"I therefore, even at the very young age at which I witnessed the film, had a rush of empathy towards the boy on the screen. I suddenly felt that actually I wasn't alone, that there were other little boys like me. Because Peppino in that film, he's truly an orphan. He lost his parents in the Allied bombings in Italy. All he had was a little donkey, and he's determined to save the donkey's life. The donkey's very ill, the donkey is the transport system of the village, the donkey is his best friend. She is the haulage contractor, she gets the junk home. He's almost a little mayor of the village, and he's determined to heal his donkey, and he does. He manages to get a chapel wall demolished so that he can lead his donkey into the chapel; the door isn't big enough. You have to knock a wall down to get the donkey in. The papacy and the church give him permission to have the wall demolished."

Possibly it is just a serendipitous metaphor, though surely an apt one, too? ■

**"I realised that, thanks to his generosity in expressing his grief, Wiesenthal is allowing me to become a 'witness'. It is a huge responsibility."**



FASHION ASSISTANT: REY SCHIMANSKI  
PRODUCER: LODIE YOUNISE  
GROOMER: JILL POWELL AT DEW BEAUTY AGENCY, LA

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