


ROBERT SHEEHAN

words : Mark Williams | image : Lorna Roach



On a grey Friday afternoon, somewhere in the vicinity of Ladbroke Grove, West London, we were on our way to meet Robert Sheehan, a young Irish actor, known to many E4 viewers as Nathan from Misfits. He made a big impact in the Channel 4 series Red Riding a couple of years ago, and since then he's been regularly popping up in all sorts of film and TV roles.

In 2009, he starred in Cherry Bomb with Rupert Grint and has recently made his first waves in Hollywood, appearing in Season of The Witch with Nicolas Cage and this month, he co-stars with Ben Barnes in Killing Bono, an Irish comedy about two brothers desperate for their band to make it big, but somewhat living in the shadow of their classmates, who just happened to become U2.

When I caught up with Robert, he had just finished a seven hour photo shoot, but was surprisingly talkative for a man who had just spent all day doing costume changes and seeing a flash go off in his face every five seconds. So, once he had a cup of tea and a packet of cheese and onion crisps, we sat down and had a chat. He began by telling us about Nicolas Cage's rather peculiar doodling habits...

‘I was in New York recently for the Season of the Witch press conference in a hotel, there were about thirty five-odd journalists and myself, Ron Perlman, Nick Cage, Clare Foy and Stephen Campbell-Moore and we all had a pad and pens and so we immediately all started doodling. We’re like ‘yeah, we’ve been doing a lot of research into the fourteenth century...’ and we’re doodling away as someone else is speaking, and I was doing a house on the hill, with the sun and that. I looked over and Cage had done a massive, detailed cock and balls on his pad! He just coughs and throws it over to me and Ron. I was going to get it as a souvenir but one of the journalists stole the pad!’

WJ: Journalists will do that, they’re shameless. Tell us a bit about Killing Bono.

RS: Killing Bono, is about a master plan to assassinate Bono by two brothers... no it’s not, I’m kidding... it’s about two brothers [Neil and Ivan McCormick] who went to school with Bono and the lads. Bono forms U2, then called The Hype, or originally Feedback as they were known, and then the two McCormick brothers start their own terrible garage band as well.

At the age of about 17, U2 land themselves a manager and start becoming a professional outfit, whereas the two lads are standing gawping, thinking, ‘shit, what are we doing?’ All the while their friends are being launched in to the stratosphere of rock stardom while the brothers are slogging it out in Dublin, trying to get just one gig.

Nothing’s really happening in Dublin so they decide to go to London to try and make it, and they’re both very sure of the fact that they will... well Neil more so than Ivan, Neil being the older brother, Ben Barnes’ character, Ivan being my character. Neil’s very sure of the fact that they’re going to make it; a record deal in six months, first album in year, a million fans in two years, and of course, it doesn’t quite work out like that.

WJ: And Neil McCormick’s the journalist who wrote the book I Was Bono’s Doppelganger, which the film was based on?

RS: Yeah, it’s kind of like his memoirs of his musical career. He still thinks he’s brilliant, he’ll still tell you ‘I don’t know why we didn’t make it!’

WJ: So the film’s an alternative rock biopic, where the band doesn’t make it big?

RS: Yeah, it’s very loosely based on the actual book, so you get this light-hearted, fast moving, comedic, very

Irish film about two brothers who both love and despise each other, and you get this very Withnail and I relationship between them.

WJ: Were you a fan of U2 before filming began and are you now?

RS: Well, in an effort to research, or do some kind of homework, I watched all of the tours of U2...

WJ: Getting gradually more and more spectacular I guess?

RS: Yeah, they’re major stadium rockers. It was good to see the massive levels of charisma that Bono has on stage, and always has had, and it’s very obvious as to why they could hold 160,000 people in the palm of their hand. So they are deserved of being the biggest band in the world, or having that title. And yeah, I am a fan of theirs I suppose, I’m proud of them, because they’re Irish, they’re probably the biggest thing, musically, to come out of Ireland, other than Riverdance or Enya!

WJ: According to the Killing Bono blog and the U2 website, U2 have seen the film and loved it?

RS: They did, they saw it in Australia recently. It’s kind of terrifying to think that Bono’s aware of my existence.

WJ: Peter Serafinowicz is also in Killing Bono. Did you know he was the voice of Darth Maul in Star Wars? (And did anyone ask him to do the voice?)

RS: I only found out that he was the voice of the Darth Maul guy after filming, but he’s always doing impressions for you, whether you ask him or not! He’s a comedian who just does it for the love, he’s always doing his Michael Caine or his Kevin Spacey impression or his impression of the director Nick Hamm.

WJ: It was sadly Pete Postlethwaite’s final film. What was he like to work with?

RS: We had loads of scenes with Pete, which was quite an honour when it comes to an actor like that, because he’s been around for twenty five, thirty years. Before I even took my first piss! He was such an unfussy guy, for the adverse condition he was in, because he was having chemotherapy at the same time that we were shooting the film, and you’ve got to be one tough cookie to do that.

Nick Hamm was a good friend of his for years, he used to direct at the RSC and Pete was a resident actor at the RSC for years, and they lived together. Nick was fussing around him quite a bit but Pete was like, ‘fuck off, leave me alone, I’m fine!’ (laughs). It’s a pleasure to say there’s a scene where I bend over and he gives me a pat on the bum, in a kind of a gay landlord, flirtatious kind of way.

But yeah, he had great craic, it was an honour and a pleasure to even get to chat to him, because he had some amazing stories about his life and his career.

WJ: Is making a film about being in a band more fun than making a film about kids taking part in a suicide pact, as in Suicide Kids? (Out in May this year)

RS: I suppose, day-to-day, it’s more fun in the sense that you get to do a lot of extra curricular activities like guitar lessons, and you get to go into a bona-fide studio and sing your heart out, pretending to be a rock star for a few hours. But Suicide Kids was great craic as well, because it was quite a large main cast and I’m happy to say they were all lovely people.

So, day-to-day we were all just sitting round, drinking tea and having a laugh. When you’re shooting a film, the bit between ‘action’ and ‘cut’ is a very small portion of the day in comparison to all the nonsense you talk to each other and all the mates you make.

I did a thing, the Red Riding trilogy, which is all about paedophilia and the murdering of small children in the North, which is horrible content, but again, you just have a laugh because you have to if you’re going to survive the day, you can’t have your head in that kind of shit for too long.

WJ: Was the character of BJ in Red Riding (on Channel 4 in 2009) one of the most difficult to play, in terms of the background history and psychology of the character?

RS: Yeah, it was probably one of the hardest. I suppose each one is difficult for its own reasons, like Season of The Witch for example, because you had two or three producers staring at you every time you did a take, and they’re looking at playback going (mimes rubbing chin and scowling), and you’re shutting yourself because you’re getting constantly tested! It’s like several job interviews, after you’ve got the job. You’re thinking, they’re going to cut me out of the film, because I didn’t do that the way they wanted it. But, in fairness, you can’t blame them, because they’re playing around with a lot of money and they’ve got a lot at stake, that’s just their way of doing things.

WJ: So after that, it’s nice to do something with a smaller budget again, like Killing Bono?

RS: Yeah, it’s far more relaxed, it’s a far smaller unit of people, it’s not like an audience, it just becomes very comfortable, and I find the more comfortable you are, the better the stuff will be.



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You can't do anything nervous, and if you do it'll be shit, in my opinion. The quicker you get comfortable with the bunch of people you're working with, the better for your own performance.

WJ: Arguably your best known role is Nathan in Misfits, who discovers he is immortal. If you could have any superpower, what would it be?

RS: I think I'd be able to see people's farts, right, so that when you're in a lift, you can turn around and go 'it was you, don't try and deny it, because I can see it!' Actually, you know what, I went scuba diving recently, and I didn't like all the equipment, so to be able to breathe underwater would be nice!

WJ: If you were assembling a fantasy film cast and you could choose 3 actors or actresses, dead or alive, which ones would you pick and why?

RS: (Thinks for a bit) I don't know why, but they would probably all be male, I think as a male actor you tend to study other male actors more and relate far more...

WJ: ...Well, it's not like you're trying to be the next Audrey Hepburn, is it?

RS: No, I don't think people would like me if I went around saying I was the next

Audrey Hepburn! I think Burt Lancaster would be an amazing one, I've watched three of his films of late, I watched Elmer Gantry, The Rainmaker and Birdman of Alcatraz, and they're all just amazing performances. He was very theatrical, so charismatic, so cool.

I might say Leo Di Caprio, just because in the last few years, he has become Hollywood's undisputed number one, and that took a lot more than people think, to have such an elongated list of fantastic films. He never really makes a bad film. Well, Gangs of New York I didn't like, but that's just one in his whole back catalogue. I enjoy him every time I see him, he's brilliant.

Mark Rylance would be a good one, I saw him recently on stage, doing La Bete, in New York with David Hyde Pierce. Astonishing, just breathtaking and I also saw him in Jerusalem, he's on a different level and I think he's probably the best theatre actor of his generation. So yeah, that's not a bad three.

WJ: And who would direct your fantasy film?

RS: I'm going through directors madly in my head, and I'm going to say, just because at the moment he's the most interesting I think, Chris Nolan.

Everything he does... he's well... saved Batman, what he did with The Dark Knight was fucking amazing, the best superhero film I've ever seen and Inception I absolutely loved as well, brilliantly written and brilliantly directed.

WJ: Do you ever Google yourself and if so, what's the strangest thing you've read written about you?

RS: Yes, I have been known to Google myself, just to see what's out there, but there's not much, the IMDB page and the page from my agency! Around the time of Season of the Witch opening, Ron (Perlman) said, use Google Alerts, put in 'Robert Sheehan, Season of the Witch' and anything new with those words in will come up. I wanted to see any reviews, things like that. One thing came up and it was a gay site, with lots and lots of still photos of me, semi-naked in Misfits, just lots of stills and people commenting on them!

WJ: Gay icon perhaps?

RS: You never know. Someone sent me a link to a Facebook group that was called 'Robert Sheehan is gay'. That was it. I'm glad there's some rumours flying about out there!

Killing Bono is in cinemas on 1st April 2011.