

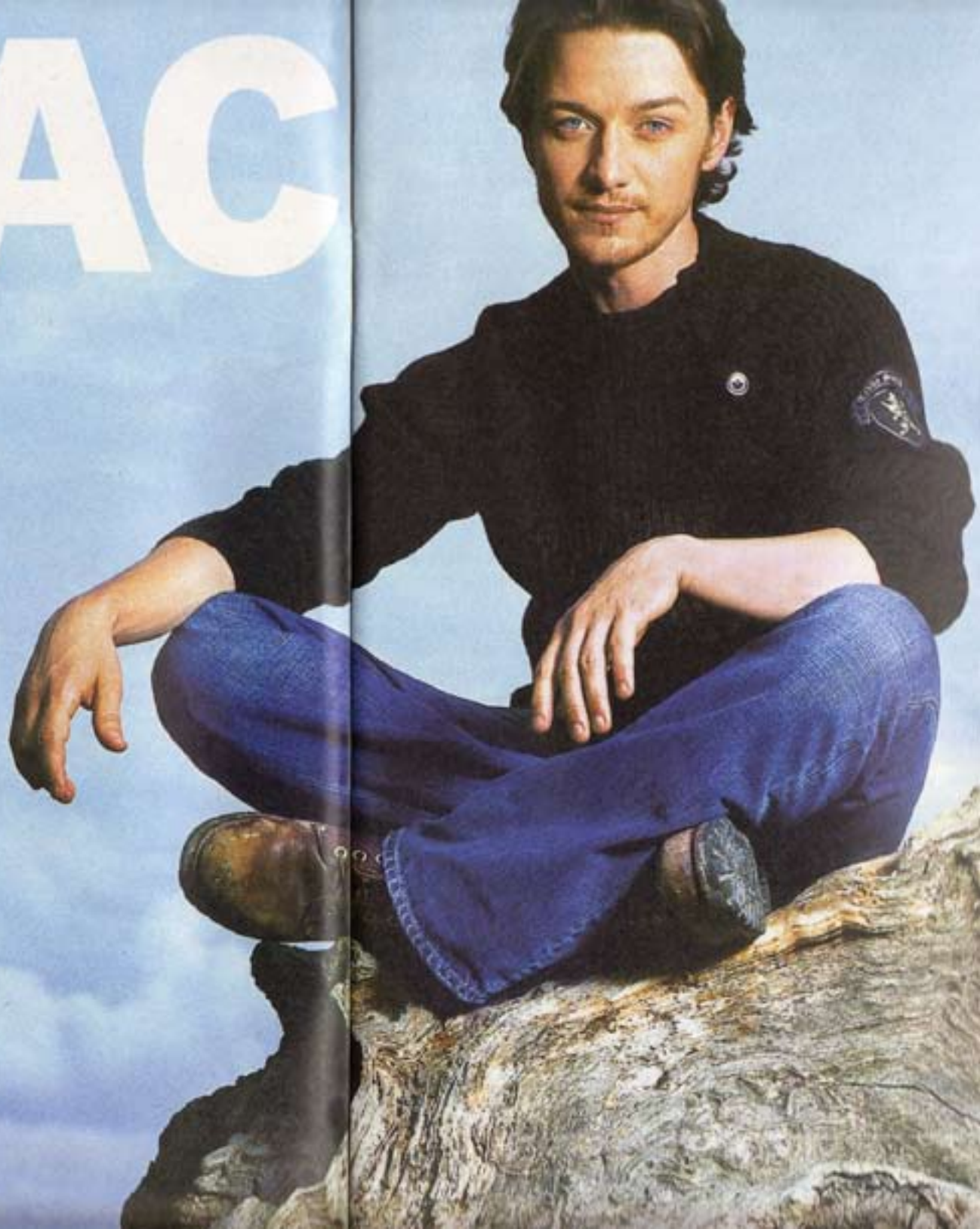
BIG MAC

Bright Young Things star James McAvoy is being hailed as the new Hugh Grant, but he's in no rush to head for Hollywood. Interview by **Karyn Miller**

James McAvoy has been lauded as the next big thing ever since his performance as Dan Foster, the slick young London journalist in the thriller series *State of Play*, put him on the map. But comparisons to Hugh Grant, especially after his latest role in the film *Bright Young Things*, have put him in a spin. 'Gosh,' he says. 'I don't see any likeness whatsoever.'

Horrified, he runs his fingers through his dark, floppy hair. 'It's the hair, I suppose. And my character in *State of Play*, which has brought me more recognition than anything else I do play lots of charming, arrogant Englishmen – as Hugh Grant does so well.'

He certainly didn't expect to become a pin-up. His agent forwards fan mail dutifully, ▶



► but McAvoy admits that he rarely replies. 'It is probably quite rude and I should apologise, but it actually makes me quite uncomfortable because I feel, well, that this isn't happening to me.'

As for the many fan websites that are starting up, McAvoy says he tries to avoid them 'as much as possible'.

So, he hasn't checked out the James McAvoy Shrine, then (www.online-shrine.com/mcavoy)?

He winces. 'No, I haven't. Oh God.'

One of McAvoy's friends contacted him last week and exhorted him to read an online 'fanfiction' – a fan's fantasy story about the object of their affection. 'My friend was laughing his head off. He said, "You're being stalked, mate." With bated breath, McAvoy logged on, although he wishes now that he hadn't.

'It was all about some girl getting mugged in Prague – and who should come to save her, but actor James McAvoy. And we end up having an ice cream, and I speak some Czech and she is very impressed. And my floppy hair' – he sweeps it with his hand – 'is all like that.' His voice drops to a mortified whisper. 'And then we make love

he is playing Lord Simon Balcain in *Bright Young Things* – Stephen's Fry's new film version of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* – and will soon be on TV as Steve, a romantically minded London wide boy, in a drama series called *Shameless*, set to be one of Channel 4's biggest hits of the season.

Currently shooting the romantic comedy *Wimbledon*, with Paul Bettany and Kirsten Dunst, he flies to Dublin the day after filming wraps later this month, to take the lead in a film entitled *Inside, I'm Dancing*. Working Title, the film's production company, were behind Hugh Grant's *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

At 24, McAvoy is already the veteran of 11 films and ten TV series. 'All I do at the moment is work,' he says. 'Which is brilliant, and I'm not ungrateful, nor ungracious. But you do begin to lose a sense of who you are.'

Small wonder. Despite his usual on-screen accent, he's actually Scottish. 'I would love to play more Scottish roles,' he muses in his soft brogue. 'Apart from *Early Doors* [the recent BBC2 comedy series, which was written by Craig Cash, who co-wrote the *Royle Family* with Caroline Aherne], I have hardly ever played a Scot.'

Lamenting that the only Scottish TV programmes are *Take the High Road* and *Taggart*, he attributes his talent for flawless accents to watching English and American TV when he was younger.

Despite the buzz that surrounds him, he seems to have his head screwed on straight. 'I was dreaming of *Holby City* and *The Bill* when I left drama school [the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama]. I never thought that I would be leading in movies.'

In contrast to the privileged backgrounds of many of the characters he plays, McAvoy was raised in Drumchapel, one of Glasgow's less salubrious suburbs. 'It was quite a rough place to grow up, although I didn't know it at the time. I thought it was a great place to live, with bluebell woods up behind us.'

Before carving out a career in film and theatre, he spent two years working in the bakery department at his local Sainsbury's. He doesn't miss it. 'Nothing is wrong with baking bread – it just isn't for me,' he says. 'I mean, even though I no longer work in a bakery, I still have to get up at six o'clock every morning. But now I do it with a lot more spring in my step.'

He is in a strange place right now – halfway between Drumchapel and La La Land. He filmed scenes with *Ghostbusters* star Dan Aykroyd for *Bright Young Things*, but was so overawed that he kept fluffing his lines. 'I only had a couple of scenes with him, but fortunately his character was supposed to talk at mine rather than with him. Just as well, eh?'

Hollywood is calling, nevertheless, and already McAvoy has made two visits this year. 'On my first morning I woke up, sat out on my verandah with a cup of coffee, looked up – and there was the Hollywood sign. I mean, wow.'

'The problem with American films is they're too cheesy,' he says. 'Besides, my base will always be in Britain. I'm a British actor, and a Scottish actor. I like the UK. It has much more life.'

Much to his regret, as a result of his wall-to-wall filming schedule, he has managed to visit Scotland only a few times in the past three years. He says he is simply too busy. 'But when I see my family, I see them all together.'

McAvoy had an unconventional upbringing. His parents separated when he was seven, and he and his sister went to live with their grandparents.

'They sorted out my head – they had all the methods and abilities, from bringing up five children of their own,' he shrugs. 'They were pretty brilliant, and they have been very solid for me.'

He hasn't seen his father for ten years, but remains close to his mother. 'She lives around the corner from my gran and my grandad now. She is very proud of me and chuffed about what I'm doing.'

His mother and grandmother went to the local cinema together recently, and persuaded the man sweeping the steps there to give them a *Bright Young Things* poster to take away with them. Now it has pride of place on his gran's wall. 'I do want to make more time to spend with my family – I love them dearly,' he says.

What McAvoy has discovered, now that his career has taken off and he doesn't have a spare minute to himself, is that balancing his personal life and professional life isn't easy any more. With much reluctance, he reveals that he has just broken up with his girlfriend of nine years, drama student Emma Neilson.

'I really can't talk about this now – it's too close,' he mumbles. 'This is a really hard time for me.'

In *Shameless*, a tale of a Manchester family scripted by Paul Abbott (*Cracker*, *State of Play*), McAvoy's character falls head over heels in love with a teenage girl played by actress Anne-Marie Duff. 'He is the kind of man who will fall in love with a woman straightaway. Not any woman, but *the* woman. I love that you can just "get" someone in a couple of sentences. And decide this is what this character wants.'

It presents McAvoy and Duff in some sizzling scenes together. 'Nudity isn't a problem for me,' he says. 'That was probably the best on-screen relationship I have ever had with someone. I would love to work with Anne-Marie again. She is just – he enunciates slowly – 'unbelievable.'

His next role will present a different kind of challenge. Not only is it his first film lead, but it will transport him away from those well-heeled Englishmen he plays so well. For *Inside, I'm Dancing*, McAvoy is to play an Irish teenager with muscular dystrophy. 'Rory, my character, still has the use of his neck muscles and his head, and most of his right arm. Then the dystrophy will affect his lungs and his vital organs, until he has to be on a respirator.'

He lights another cigarette and says, 'I'm a little scared about it, but that's defi-



and then she has a baby. And then we get married. I am very embarrassed about it.'

In spite of such ardent tributes, McAvoy insists that he doesn't understand what all the fuss is about. 'I have never thought of myself as sexy in any way, or anything like that – and now there are people writing about having babies with me. It is quite scary.'

Heads turn when he walks into the well-to-do Mayfair restaurant where we are to lunch, but in the flesh, McAvoy does not resemble Hugh Grant in the slightest. Today he is sporting a very un-Grantish ensemble of crumpled trousers, a green shirt that looks as if it has been swiped

