

Bale is the Chief

The Brit Who Played 'American Psycho' Gets Serious About His Movie Career

Empire of the Sun' changed my life quite considerably and I didn't like it one bit," remembers "Reign of Fire" star Christian Bale, who was only 13 when cast in the Spielberg-directed tale of Japanese-occupied China.

"It's always a 'catch-22' with acting," says the 28-year-old Welshman. "You're encouraged to go out and 'get exposure,' as it's called. And, yes, you'll get put on all the lists they have, but you run the risk of becoming a celebrity who happens to act. I did a fair amount of publicity for 'Empire of the Sun' and felt like I'd been kicked in the teeth by it, so I really didn't do much after that. As far as most people were concerned, I never worked again after 'Empire of the Sun,' and I found that beneficial for my own life."

Despite any widespread perceptions, he did work, and worked consistently, appearing in more than 25 films over the last decade and a half. He broke hearts opposite Winona Ryder in "Little Women," essayed Calista Flockhart's object of desire in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and garnered much critical praise for work in movies as diverse as "Portrait of a Lady" and "Velvet Goldmine."

Then came "American Psycho," which proved a turning point for the actor.

Bale was director Mary Harron's first choice to play lead psycho Patrick Bateman, but the Brit was effectively bumped off the project when it was reported that the far more bankable Leonardo DiCaprio was interested. The "Titanic" star ultimately decided to pass, and the title role reverted back to Bale – but a lesson was learned.

"'American Psycho' was a wake up call. It said to me that – while I don't want to do so much publicity that I can't really be called an actor any longer – I also don't want to wait another year and a half to do a movie that I think is worthwhile."

The thriller was important also in that it demonstrated Bale's ability to effectively impersonate an American, and he was soon cast as another evil Yank yuppie opposite Samuel L. Jackson in "Shaft." More high-profile opportunities followed, including the lead role in Miramax's upcoming science fiction actioner "Equilibrium."

In "Reign of Fire," Bale butts heads – literally – with costar Matthew McConaughey. In an interview with *Premiere Magazine*, Bale said that when he and McConaughey cracked heads, "It echoed around the castle walls like a ripe watermelon being split."

You play Quinn in "Reign of Fire." What's his story?

Quinn is stuck in a nightmare really. The story begins with Quinn as a young boy, when he accidentally unleashes the creature with hideous results, both for him personally and for the world. When I start playing Quinn, it's in a kind of apocalyptic future where man is no longer the dominant species. Quinn has built a community that is barely managing to survive within the grounds of an old castle in England. He feels responsible for everything that's happened because if he would just have done what he was told [as a boy] it wouldn't have happened. Unleashing the creature also resulted in the death of his mother right in front of his eyes. So he's a little bit screwed up.

This role is different from any you've played before. How did you approach it?

It is, yeah. I purposely tried to ignore the fact that there was this fantastical creature in the midst of the story, because I've always felt that the problem with so many thrill-ride movies like this – special effects movies – is that for some reason they spend an awful lot of time and money on the special effects and often completely neglect to have any interesting characters or scenes in the film. It's like they're just biding time until the next

incredible explosion, or the alien appears, or whatever the hell it is. It always feels like such a waste. I've never believed that special effects movies have to be that way.

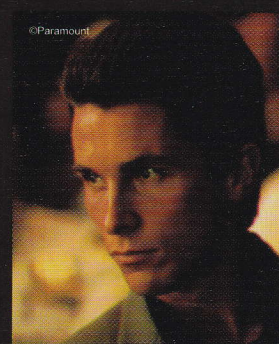
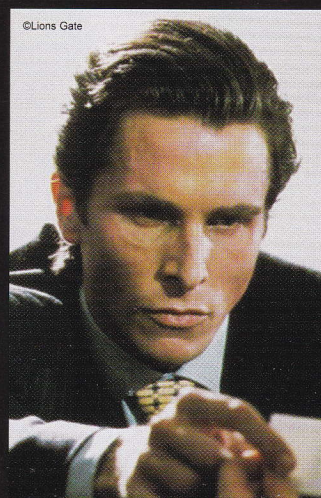
You chose to make the film based on Rob Bowman's take on the material?

Essentially that was the reason. He did convince me. It was also me wanting to make something that I hadn't done before. I was curious to see if I could do a movie like this. I hadn't really been approached to do this type of film before. But, yeah, for this specific project it was completely Rob. It was the confidence I had in him that made me commit. I went in thinking, "There's no way I'm going to make this movie." I came out thinking, "OK, here's someone who has exactly the same problems with these kinds of films that I do, and he's very straightforward and forthright. Here's somebody who, if he says this is what he wants, he's going to try his damned hardest to get it." So suddenly the project changed from something I wasn't interested in doing to something I really liked, which was a different genre, a different kind of movie for me to do.

Just before the release of "American Psycho," we talked about the possibility of that film opening new doors for you. Has it happened?

Yeah it has. Even before "American Psycho" came out I was asked to make "Shaft" because they'd seen some of the footage. And I very much doubt that Rob would have known anything about me had it not been for "American Psycho," and therefore he would never have asked me to do "Reign of Fire." So it has helped a great deal. It created more news than other movies I'd made before then, which obviously helped, but also there's been a change in my own out-

(continued on page 41)



Bale made his big splash playing evil American yuppies in "American Psycho" (left) and "Shaft" (above).

Christian Bale

(continued from page 17)

look. I mean, just getting "American Psycho" made was a headache because of me – because the director wanted me for it. I just got fed up with thinking that I was going to have to continually put up with situations where there were good scripts that I wanted to make, that the director wanted me for, but being told by the business side, "No." There's a level of aggressiveness that has altered in me. I know I can't sit back and expect that it's all just going to happen. I've got to go out and try to create it.

Do you think appearing in a big summer film like "Reign of Fire" will open a new set of doors once again?

Hopefully so, because it's obviously a great thing to have a lot of choice, whether that be the choice of making the tiniest movie that only four people will see, or whether it be some big summer movie. I do really crave having that choice. If not being outright offered then at least being able to get my foot in the door of a variety of movies. If I'd have done something on this scale before "American Psycho," we would not have had that year-and-a-half of trying to get it made. It would have gotten made straightaway. So while I made "Reign of Fire" for itself, and I really believe it's going to be a good movie, it will

undoubtedly help me with all sorts of other style movies.

What made you choose "Laurel Canyon" as your follow-up to "Reign of Fire."

Once again it was something completely different after coming off of "Reign of Fire." I knew that Frances McDormand was attached, and I really wanted to work with her. I met up with [director Lisa Cholodenko] and got along with her. I liked her writing. She wrote the script and I liked her take on it. It was the complete opposite of "Reign of Fire," which was a monster of a movie with a 20-week schedule. "Laurel Canyon" was five or six weeks and had very real characters. The complete other end of the spectrum.

Can you talk about "Laurel Canyon?"

Well, it's a funny thing really. I haven't started doing interviews for "Laurel Canyon" yet and, making the movie, I tried to avoid forming any kind of sound bite explanation of what it's about because that always seems to make it far more simplistic than it should be. I haven't really worked one out yet, to be honest, but it is an ensemble piece. It's essentially about relationships, sexual relationships and family.

You also have "Equilibrium" coming out this year. What's that about?

"Equilibrium" is a science fiction, action movie. It's a blending of, maybe, "Brave New World" – its theme is about a society where drug-taking is enforced to prevent emotional outbursts – a blending of that and some kind of Hong Kong action movie (laughs). I play a law enforcement officer who ceases his dose because of various circumstances. He comes to see what he's been doing and hates the regime he's been working for.

"Equilibrium" was shot prior to "Reign of Fire," correct?

Yes, I did it before I did "Reign of Fire." I was sent it while I was out on a tiny Greek island making "Captain Corelli's Mandolin." Once again, it was as radically different from what I was doing there as is possible. It takes place in a futuristic society where emotions are virtually nil between people. They're almost android-like in their existence. On top of that, I was asked to be this serious ass-kicker. So it was the idea of that, along with the idea of doing a science fiction story that's something akin to "Brave New World" or "Fahrenheit 451." One of the indicators that made me think the movie may be going in the right direction was that the director had already offered the female part to Emily Watson. Emily and I are friends, so I called her and we chatted about it. Neither of us had ever done a movie like this. We both said, "Well, if we're going to try this kind of movie, this one seems like a good bet, so if you're going to do it I will too."

You've never played the leading man in a romantic comedy or drama – at least, not one where you "get the girl." Do you think you'll consider doing so?

I will always consider absolutely everything. Probably will do at some point, but I have no plans to at the moment.

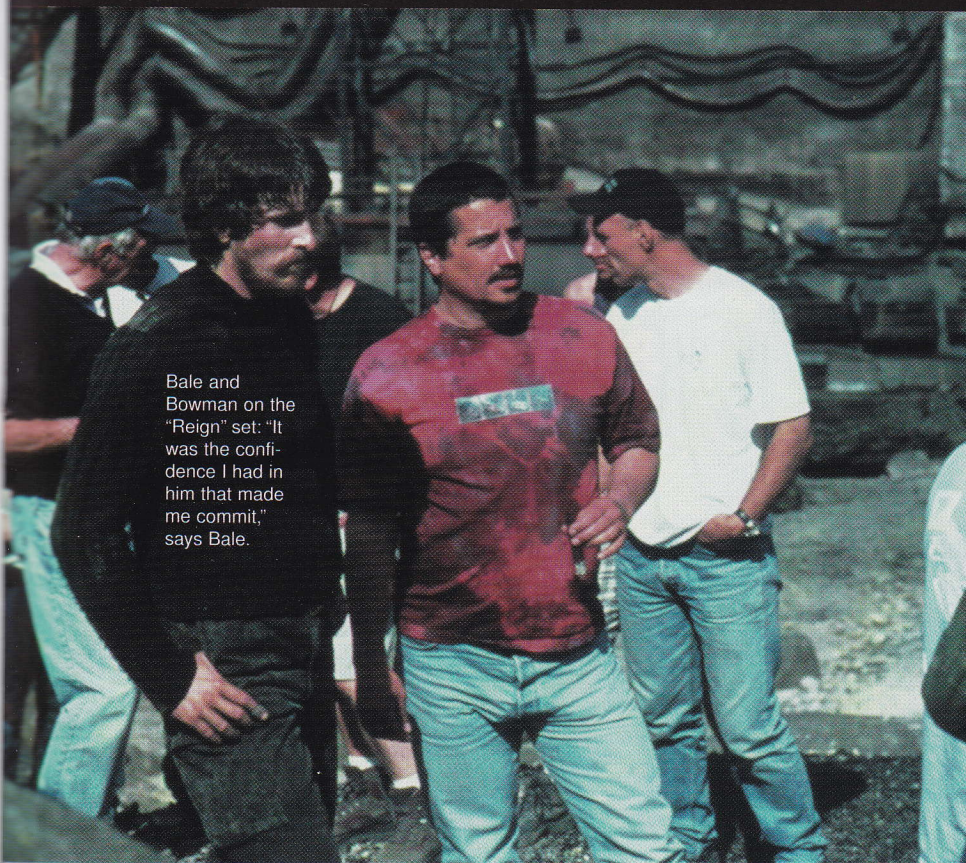
Any other projects lined up?

There are a couple of things that are hopefully going to come together that I've been talking with a couple of directors about, but nothing is definite at the moment.

Perhaps new choices will emerge after "Reign of Fire" opens.

I hope so. I'd like to avoid doing dinner theatre somewhere.

– Deborah Baxtrom



Bale and Bowman on the "Reign" set: "It was the confidence I had in him that made me commit," says Bale.