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Made IN IRELAND

Quiet, moody, intense. All words to sum up Cillian Murphy's most famous roles, whether in indie hits or mega-buck blockbusters. But, in person, he's funny, charming and, well, just happy being a dad. Scarlett Russell travels to Dublin for a lunch date

Photography LORENZO AGIUS

Cillian Murphy is a hard man to pin down. Four months after conversations begin about profiling him in *Red*, I am given a date for our interview. It changes several times. At one point I'm to travel to Liverpool, to the set of *Peaky Blinders*, where Murphy is filming series four of the 1920s-set gangster epic. Then, we're going to have tea the following month. Scrap that: he's flying over to London to have lunch with me at the Savoy Hotel before attending a celebrity awards show. "Sorry, Cillian's sick," his agent says that morning. "Can you fly to Dublin next Wednesday?" Five hours later: "Actually, no, Thursday?"

The following week, I am sitting opposite the embarrassed actor, telling him that I've never known a man play things *this* cool. "I'm so sorry," he says in

a soft but very distinct Cork accent. The ever-changing schedule of one of Europe's most in-demand actors is entirely out of his control. "And I really was sick last week. Caught a stomach bug from the school gates. You wouldn't have wanted to see me." Aside from the blue puffer parka he throws over the chair, he's dressed in the classic, sexy, off-duty actor kind of way: jeans, a v-neck blue t-shirt, and simple gold wedding band. Fresh from the *Peaky Blinders* set, he's still sporting the trademark hair cut – undercut sides and textured length on top. I ask if the awards party minded him bailing on them. "I don't think they would've missed me," he shrugs, his huge blue eyes staring straight into my own. Murphy, as is quickly evident, is the least-starry star of them all. Sure, he's got the remarkable credentials: working under the »





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helm of directors Danny Boyle, Christopher Nolan and Ken Loach, seamlessly gliding from praised performance to praised performance in popcorn thrillers (*Inception*, *Red Eye*), cult classics (*28 Days Later*, *Sunshine*), a million-dollar franchise (Nolan's *Batman*) and a television masterpiece (*Peaky Blinders*) – not to mention 20-odd years in theatre. And he adores his job. But now, at 41, his non-working life is dropping his sons, Malachy, 12, and Aran, 10, at school, turning on the kettle and curling up with a Henry James novel. "I fucking hate actors who complain," he laughs. "We're so lucky and pampered. And overpaid. It's embarrassing sometimes, the way actors or musicians sometimes get made untouchable. When they talk about their 'exhausting schedules' it just makes me... Anyway, for

me, [it's about] being at home and living a life. Taking the dog for a walk, doing the shopping, emptying the dishwasher, going for a run." It's clear this – not a red carpet – is Murphy's happy place.

DAD DUTIES ASIDE, HE IS STILL A SERIOUS ACTOR with a typically middle-class penchant for falafels and decaf Americanos. We're having lunch in Monkstown, a beautiful and upmarket area of Dublin where Murphy lives with his wife of 13 years, artist Yvonne McGuinness, and their boys. He's chosen a restaurant that sits among an organic food market. He comes here all the time. "The food's great," he enthuses. "You want to try some fritters?"

Cillian Murphy (that's a hard C), is a Cork native. His mother was a French teacher, his father worked for the Irish Board of Education. Childhood for Murphy and his two sisters was "very conventional, normal, middle class." A keen musician, he caught the acting bug in his late teens. "There was a lot of creativity in my family but no one made a living out of it," he says. "I was desperate to meet artists, musicians... When I did I thought, 'Fucking hell, these people are so interesting and stimulating'." His band, The Sons of Mr Green Genes, was offered a contract the same day Murphy was offered a role in a tiny, touring Irish theatre production called *Disco Pigs*. He chose the latter and spent 18 months "travelling around the world. Best experience ever." It was around this time, 1996, that he met McGuinness. Alas, while raw beetroot is on the table today, questions about his relationship are off it. "I try to keep that stuff private," he apologises. "It's just for us." Anyway, *Disco Pigs* was made into a film, which caught the eye of Boyle, who cast Murphy as the lead in

what was to become the actor's breakout role, *28 Days Later* (2002), an apocalyptic zombie flick.

Roles followed thick and fast. In 2006 Murphy was nominated for a Golden Globe for his wonderful portrayal of a transgender woman in *Breakfast On Pluto* (also starring a young and fabulous Ruth Negga). But it's the moody, intense, pained characters Murphy is most famous for, in particular war-ravaged soldiers he played in *Dunkirk*, *Edge Of Love* and *Anthropoid*, in which he co-starred with his pal Jamie Dornan, "Sexiest man alive," Murphy chuckles. They text all the time. "When you work with someone 17 hours a day for 12 weeks, it's very intense," says Murphy. "Sometimes you're involved in very heavy, emotional scenes. The level of getting to know someone is accelerated, so

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you form a bond that never really goes away. When we did the junket for *Anthropoid*, people were like, 'You guys are hilarious, you should do a comedy together.' Really? The guy from *The Fall* and the guy from *Peaky Blinders*? Who's going to pay for that?"

He's an ex-soldier in *Peaky Blinders*, too. Murphy's protagonist, Tommy Shelby, returned from WWI France to the bleak streets of Birmingham, where he forged a family empire run on violence and corruption, with sidelines of sex, drugs, betrayal and the Suffragettes. Four series on, it's still fantastic viewing. We discuss whether Shelby – ultra-violent, ultra-ruthless – is a feminist. "I was talking to someone about this at length the other day, and I think he is," says Murphy. "He doesn't care if it's a man or woman, he just wants the best person for the job. You can never condone his behaviour, but he's never violent towards women." He doesn't mind the odd tryst with a prostitute, though. "Well, yeah," he half smiles. There are plenty of heated love scenes in *Peaky Blinders*, often showing Murphy near naked. "It's awkward, you just have to try to make it look convincing." Do you work out more before you do those scenes? "Yeah," he replies instantly, smirking a little. "Obviously. He's supposed to be a tough guy, though; he's supposed to be in shape." In most of the interviews I've read with Murphy, he's portrayed as quite serious, introverted, much like Shelby, so I'm delighted by how open he is about discussing "the whole sex symbol thing". A friend of mine has his picture as her WhatsApp profile image, which he finds hilarious. "It's not me, it's Tommy!" he protests (though I suspect he quite enjoys the adoration). "Look, when something is beamed into your room every week or devoured in one sitting, you get this real ownership thing. You feel like you know these characters, you feel let into their lives. People are terribly underwhelmed when they meet me in public. I'm not anything like him. They expect me to be tough and distant, mean and moody. I'm not like that. It's make believe."

A FEMINIST JUST LIKE HIS ON-SCREEN ALTER EGO, Murphy credits his values to being surrounded by female role models from a young age. "My mother and my grandmother, who also lived with us, were both strong, opinionated and worked their whole adult lives," he says. "There was no sense that being a woman should be an impediment to success. It wasn't discussed, it was just demonstrated by my mum working all the time, being a mother and just getting on with it." It's the same example he and McGuinness set for Malachy and Aran. "I don't




ABOVE: Murphy as Tommy Shelby in *Peaky Blinders* LEFT: With Tom Glynn-Carney in *Dunkirk*

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believe in lecturing children. I think you just lead by example. I think we're pretty progressive, liberal and well-informed in our house." In an industry so youth-obsessed and volatile, Murphy is aware of the advantages of his gender. "The pressures on actresses are much more intense. We're allowed to grow older without that fucking terrible judgement that women are subjected to."

Murphy has just wrapped a small film, *The Delinquent Season*, about two seemingly happy marriages that crumble. I see an opening to ask about his own marriage again, fascinated by how a 21-year relationship can survive in a job as unstable as acting. I'm met with a quiet laugh, but then: "I guess I'm lucky. It's something that I need and value. The stability. After kids, the desire to improve as an actor remains, but time becomes hugely important," he says. "I want to do good work and do it well, but then be at home. I love hanging out with my children, seeing how they behave and stealing ideas off them. You can't do that if you're in a hotel, on a plane or a film set. It's not real life."

After lunch, he insists on pointing me in the direction of one of his favourite walks, down a cobbled street and leading on to the beach. It's clear why he loves living here: serene, green and a far cry from bustling London. We shake hands goodbye, he apologises again for cancelling on me last week and then strolls off, back to the school gates to pick up his sons. His happy place.  *Peaky Blinders* series four starts this month on BBC Two