



interview

John Simm plays Ace in *The Knight's Tale*

With a street savvy learned in the school of hard knocks and a tough upbringing on an inner-city council estate, Ace in *The Knight's Tale* has already got prison life sorted. But this young, bright man seems set on careering to a dead end – until prison education comes to the rescue.

"Playing Ace is an interesting one for me, he's like no one I've played before," says the critically acclaimed *State of Play* star John Simm. "He is really streetwise, a kind of white black guy because of the way he's been brought up.

"It doesn't really matter what colour he is, nowadays the kids who live on those estates are interchangeable in many ways. I meet them in London every day, with that kind of gangster swagger that has nothing to do with whether they are black or white.

"In fact Paul and Ace could easily have been cast the other way round. It didn't matter which of them was black or white – they had the same experiences growing up where they did."

Simm admits he was apprehensive about playing someone younger than himself for

the first time, but was determined to give it his best shot. "When I knew I'd be playing Ace I started noticing the kids in London, coming out of school, all walking and talking the same, almost like a gang mentality. I tend to do that with characters I play – I try and find people that are similar, physically or mentally, either to people that I know or have met or just see on the street.

"I was given a pretty free rein to do him how I liked and I picked up on that kind of style, that swagger – even at the risk of looking like a clown. I've not seen it yet so I don't know if I pulled it off or not," he adds, slightly nervously, "but I thought I'd better be brave and just go for it!"

Despite having played the desperate and delusional Raskolnikov in the BBC's acclaimed adaptation of Dostoevsky's

Crime and Punishment, Simm admits that even the deprivations of 19th-century St Petersburg didn't rattle him as much as shooting in a London jail.

"I've done it before. In *The Lakes* I was in prison and we filmed in one in Liverpool and that was similar, but the London one was far grimmer. We filmed in Wandsworth prison and that was a hard day, a very hard day," he reveals.

"I didn't have time to do much research beforehand and I found it really grim – like something out of a Dickens novel. Not a nice place to be. We were filming in the sexual offenders' wing where, apparently, the prisoners don't shout out – that's why we used it.

"It was quite spooky, looking up at the windows and seeing a wall of faces staring out from behind bars. It was best not to think about it too much."

The real-life prison is backed up by a carefully reconstructed set which Simm found almost too realistic. "It was quite easy to imagine being in prison on the set because it was so authentic – except the food was a bit better!"

Simm says he was only vaguely aware of *The Canterbury Tales* from school, but did attempt to go back to the original texts to get a feel for the 'all's fair in love and war'

story of two cousin knights who do battle for a fair maiden.

"It was like ploughing through mud," he admits with a laugh. "They are so hard to read even though there are many quotes that we use today that come from them. But these are such radical reworkings that I don't think it matters whether people know the Chaucer *Tales*.

"They are all believable situations and very relevant to today. Tony Marchant wrote this one and he is a fantastic writer and he's managed to blend the original idea of *The Knight's Tale* into something totally up-to-date."

Ace and Paul both fall for Emily, a new literacy tutor at the prison, and their lifelong friendship disintegrates under the terrible impact of their jealousy. "It's an obsessive love story to me," insists Simm. "That's what it is – a tragedy."

John Simm's CV is packed with characters who are outside society in some way: troubled souls with little love in their lives and even fewer laughs. It's a trend Simm acknowledges, but insists is changing.

"*The Lakes* was a kind of romantic lead," he begins brightly, "but I guess he was really an anti-hero. When I first left college I did two series of a sitcom, so I have done comedy. Also in the romantic comedy film *Miranda*

my character is very light – although quite complex, and a bit geeky.

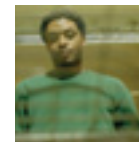
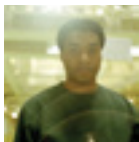
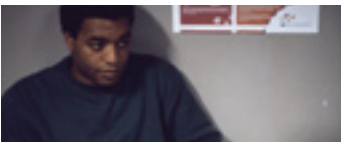
"No, I really am getting away from it," he laughs. "After Raskolnikov I really couldn't go any darker. I don't think I can really play anybody like that again. Because it was so grim in that prison, me and Chewie both said 'Right – comedy next!'"

There are though, thank goodness, lots of laughs in Simm's life – mostly brought on by his two-year-old son Ryan. "I do miss him when I'm away filming, so after this I've loved just being able to spend time in the garden with Ryan," he says happily.

"He's definitely got a 'terrible twos' temper on him. It hasn't happened in a supermarket yet but I know it's going to, it's just a matter of time."

Simm's partner is actress Kate McGowan, so Ryan is already cool about having screen stars around him. "He's sometimes caught sight of me on the screen when he's stayed up late and just nonchalantly pointed, said 'Daddy!' – then just walks past.

"He must just think it's the most natural thing in the world. He's not fazed by it at all. That's the way normal mummies and daddies are!"



interview

Chiwetel Ejiofor plays Paul in *The Knight's Tale*

Hailed as one of the best actors of his generation, Chiwetel Ejiofor is already weighed down with awards at the age of 26 – yet he confesses that he is still tormented by fear of failure.

Having stunned audiences in everything from Noel Coward's *The Vortex* on stage to Stephen Frears' acclaimed cinema hit *Dirty Pretty Things*, this unassuming south Londoner admits that his rapid rise has had its scary moments.

As a 19-year-old student at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, he was plucked from obscurity to play a small part in the Steven Spielberg film *Amistad*. "It was a really bizarre experience and quite terrifying," he reveals. "You know that something has radically changed in your life because of your involvement in something, but you don't really know what it's going to mean.

"Then you spend a number of years working out how best to work with that advantage of having worked with someone as prolific as Steven Spielberg." That advantage came to fruition this year when he wowed critics with *Dirty Pretty Things*.

"When I read the script, I did feel that here was a film that had the ability to be very good – I was just panicked that I'd destroy it!" he laughs.

"I calmed down after the first week or ten days of filming, but the build-up to that can mean being racked with self-doubt and that can be in any form of acting, stage as well. I think it's a steady build. In rehearsals you feel as though you have so much time, everything is so relaxed and then, as it dawns on you that you open in one week, the panic kicks in.

"That level of anxiety runs through until you open the show, then you can begin to relax and enjoy it."

He did enjoy *The Knight's Tale*, despite its prison setting and tragic end. "I actually studied it at school, but I hadn't realised how it could lend itself to being adapted to a modern time," he says. "It makes the

scale slightly smaller – in the original there are hundreds of knights who get involved by the end!

"This is very centralised but I think it still holds very true to the story, it is just more specific to keep it to that triangle of three people. This makes it much more intense as a piece, a very emotional journey."

The son of Nigerian parents – his father a doctor, his mother a pharmacist – Ejiofor went to prestigious Dulwich College, far removed from Paul's tough, council-estate roots. But this sensitive actor tuned into the effect that teachers can have on young lives.

"A lot of my teachers, especially in the English and drama departments, were excellent," he says. "They made you more intrigued and interested and focused. That's the mark of a good teacher, someone who can inspire students and also give them the belief in their own ability to utilise their own imagination and skill."

Ever eager to stretch his own performance, Ejiofor relished the time spent shooting in Wandsworth prison. "There is that awful feeling of enclosure," he explains. "But that crucial loss of freedom and sense of isolation can create very powerful emotions.

"Tony Marchant's script uses the power of love – of Emily, the tutor – as a

metaphor for freedom and release, showing that there is no artificial constraint that can take away those human responses to each other.

"That allows you to understand more deeply why it is set in a prison and what that offers you in terms of the triangle of relationships."

The idea of educating prisoners while they serve their sentences is one that appeals to Ejiofor. "It can free you from the mental constraints of prison life. Also it physically gets you out of 'lock-up' for 23 hours of the day and gets you into a different area of the prison."

He understands that Paul – entering prison unable to read properly – did not stand much of a chance on the outside. "There is a lot of stuff that Paul could do, he just happens to have taken a slightly shadier line but hadn't really expected such a harsh penalty of a year in prison. But it might be what he would need to wake up and smell the coffee.

"He's got a keen mind and is pretty good with technical stuff – that's what he was in prison for, the re-programming of mobile phones – so you think there is some kind of ability there that just needs to be harnessed.

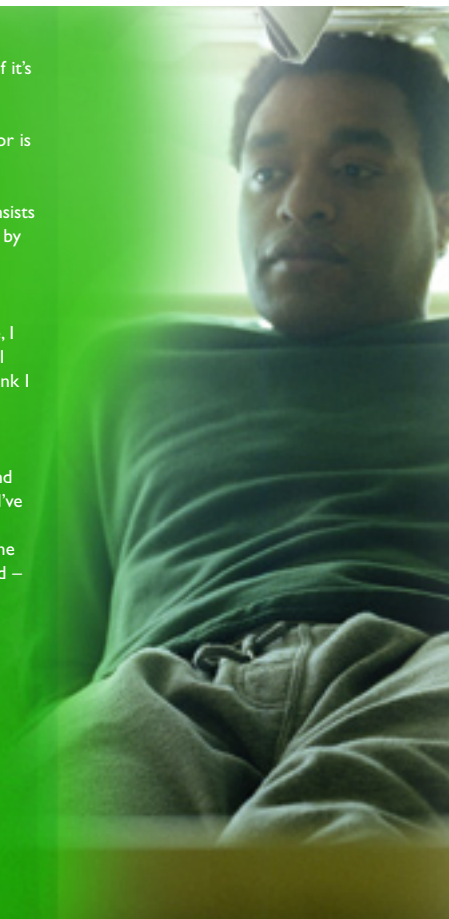
"The trouble is a lot of people come out of prison far more skilled at doing wrong

than doing good. You have to wonder if it's the best solution."

As far as this extraordinary young actor is concerned, his skills have brought him acclaim and the beginnings at least of worldwide fame and fortune. But he insists he isn't tempted by the thought of life by an azure LA pool.

"I just want to do good scripts and geographically it doesn't matter where, I just want to continue acting at a level I enjoy," he says tactfully. "But I don't think I could ever not be based in England."

"Acting gives you the chance to meet people that you admire and respect and can have a common ground with. But I've always had a very small, close circle of friends who I've known since before the age of ten and that's not really changed – they keep my feet on the ground!"





interview

Keeley Hawes plays Emily in *The Knight's Tale*

The harsh reality of life behind bars came as a distressing eye-opener to Keeley Hawes, as the young actress witnessed first hand the deprivations prisoners have to endure.

"I have no idea how people do it," she confesses. "It totally changed my whole image of what prison was like. I really thought it was an easy punishment to receive. But it is such an unnatural environment and the whole thing – the smell, the atmosphere – is awful!"

Hawes experienced the penal regime during filming for *The Knight's Tale* in which she plays Emily, an idealistic prison tutor who becomes an object of the obsessive passion of two prisoners in her adult literacy class.

"We filmed at Wandsworth prison and I just about stuck with it for a day," she reveals. "One of the officers took me round and introduced me to a couple of the inmates, who invited me into their cell. It was pretty horrific."

"I sat there for 45 minutes and spoke in quite a lot of detail to these two prisoners about what their life's like and what the classes are like – when they get the opportunity to do them. The trouble is

they don't get that opportunity as much as they'd like. The budget is just so tight – even for things like meals – that education is not exactly on the top of anybody's list."

Although Hawes insists that she was treated well by the prisoners she spoke to, she also witnessed the coarse heckling from men behind barred windows as the crew filmed within the prison grounds. "Some of them were being quite offensive, but it was just that seeing us there was a break from their mundane existence, just as the education classes are," she reasons. "They are so pleased at doing something different from sitting in a cell, because they're locked up for most of the time."

Hawes also learned that Tony Marchant's 21st-century interpretation of Chaucer's knightly illustration of 'all's fair in love and war' was spot on. "I was told that somebody had recently been given the sack for having a relationship with a prisoner. In that enclosed atmosphere I think all emotions must become so heightened that

that kind of thing is inevitable. So actually experiencing the reality of prison life, really helped me to understand Emily. I think she handles the situation quite well – I'm not sure how I would have coped with it.

"She's getting all this attention from these two lovely men and then it all spirals out of control. I don't think she ever feels it's going to go that far – and then suddenly it's all out of her hands and not something that she can deal with. It takes on its own momentum."

The star of the BBC espionage hit *Spooks* reveals that she sacrificed a well-earned break in order to play Emily. "I had spent seven months on the second series of *Spooks* and was planning on having a rest – but I couldn't resist this," she laughs. "It was only a 12-day shoot and I am so glad that I did it. It was so great to be able to do something so very different and with people like Chewie [Ejiofor] and John [Simm]. Plus the director Marc Munden was a joy – he gave us lots of time for rehearsals and that's rare in television."

"That was such a luxury and we were so grateful. I think it really shows, because you all get to know each other and trust each other. I think a lot of telly would be much better with more rehearsal!"

The success of *Spooks* came as something of a surprise to the 26-year-old ex-model. "We were a cast of nobodies rattling on

about the IRA," she jokes. "We were all taken aback when it really seemed to catch everyone's imagination and it's lovely to be in something which seems to have respect."

The series also brought her the new love in her life, co-star Matthew MacFaden. "We get on really well, I don't think we ever have a row on set, which could easily happen with any couple," she says. Then adds with a laugh, "After 16 hours of television I think we know everyone well enough for them to tell us to shut up or grow up when necessary!"

"Now I'm just getting ready to fly over to the States to promote *Spooks* over there. The only trouble is that they are calling it *MIS* because they use *Spooks* as a derogatory term. It will be very strange to have to refer to it as something totally different!"

Joining her on his very first transatlantic flight will be Hawes's two-year-old son Myles, from her brief marriage to cartoonist Spencer McCallum. "The last time I went to New York I was pregnant with him!" she grins.

But being an in-demand actress and a mum can take its toll and Hawes confesses that she sometimes finds it hard to balance the two demands on her busy life. "I'm very lucky because Myles is very good and easy and his dad works from home, so I don't

have to have a nanny. So really I've got the best of all worlds, and yet it's still extremely difficult.

"I'm reading *I Don't Know How She Does It* by Allison Pearson at the moment, about a working mother's problems – and that's my life. It's a fabulous book, it's like getting counselling. I sometimes find it really, really hard just with Myles – for women who have more than one, I just don't know what they do!"

Unless another must-do script drops on to her doormat, though, Hawes has the chance for a real rest when she returns from the States. "I'm not doing *Spooks* again until January and anything I do in between will only take a month or so and the rest of the time I'll be able to be with Myles," she says happily. "I know not a lot of working mothers get that much time with their children. I'm very lucky."

Hawes is also hoping for some luck with her latest film project, *Chaos and Cadavers*, in which she stars with Nick Moran and Rik Mayall. "It's a small-budget British film, a black romantic comedy," she grins.

"Nick and I play a honeymoon couple who arrive at their hotel only to find that it has been booked out by a conference of funeral directors! It's very funny and it was shown at Cannes, so who knows – it may just take off!"