

# PRINCE OF DARKNESS

Enigmatic Irishman Cillian Murphy steps out of the shadows to talk exclusively about *Inception* and *Batman 3*...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER** POTRAITS **MATT HOLYOAK**

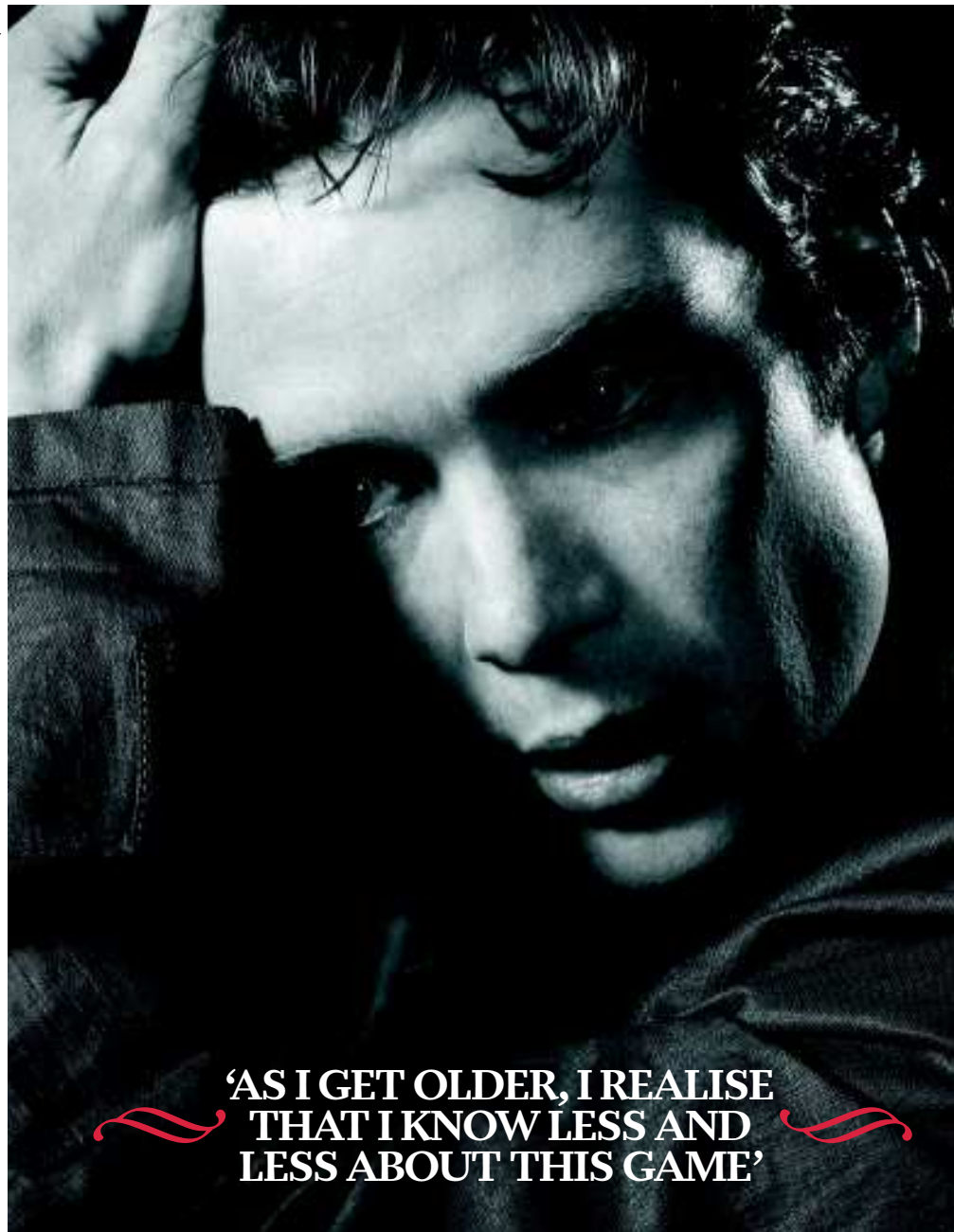
**U**m... well... oh man, I wish I could tell you but I can't..." Cillian Murphy breaks off, laughing at his own intransigence in the face of questioning about Christopher Nolan's summer mind-maze *Inception* (and all we asked him was, "Are you playing an American?"). If this were a film, Murphy would be fending off *Total Film*'s probing with a blank, impassive gaze that revealed nothing and everything, boring his crystal-blue eyes into us until we were forced to avert our own, afraid he might unleash the fear-toxins. As it is, we're not, and while Murphy's super-chilled orbs are as arresting two feet away as they are gazing out of a cinema screen (and he's not averse to pokerfaced expressions), he also appears genuinely contrite that he can't spill the beans. Not that we're shedding tears of sympathy, but it can't be easy beating the drum for *Inception*, which appears as cryptic as it's possible for a Hollywood blockbuster to be...

Settling into a table at a swish Hoxton café, fresh from *Total Film*'s photo shoot, Murphy orders black coffee and pink grapefruit juice — "I'm craving some fruit," he says in the soft Irish lilt he's managed to retain despite years away from his homeland — before launching into as much spiel about his third collaboration with Nolan as he comfortably can. For a start, Murphy vouches he was blown away by "the concept and ambition and audacity" of Nolan's brainy follow-up to his history-rewriting Bat-sequel, *The Dark Knight*. It was just over a year ago that Nolan gave the actor a two hour window to read the script and earmark the part he felt best suited to. "He didn't say, 'Take whatever role you want,'" Murphy hastens to add. "I wasn't going to steal Leonardo DiCaprio's part. But he said, 'I have an idea what you might be good for... Tell me what you think.' And we both agreed. It's different for me. It's not like any character I've played before."

For an actor who's impressed as a transgender bombshell (*Breakfast On Pluto*), a Loachian revolutionary (*The Wind That Shakes The Barley*), a solar scientist (*Sunshine*) and Batman's bag-headed nemesis Scarecrow (*Batman Begins*, a *Dark Knight* cameo), that's an enticing prospect... Murphy reveals that his *Inception* character Fischer "is central to the narrative of the film. Chris has talked about it being an existential heist movie and if you take that, I would be a crucial cog in that heist set-up." A recent *LA Times* article (which the 34-year-old admits he pored over before meeting us to see how far he could go) partially decoded Nolan's sci-fi puzzle, unveiling among other things that DiCaprio is "a dream thief who plucks secrets from the minds of tycoons after pumping them full of drugs and hooking them up to a mysterious contraption" — and Murphy is one of his targets. "Well," chuckles the affable Irishman, "I'm not going to argue."

He's happier discussing the film's lofty conceptual ambitions — what Nolan calls 'lucid dreaming,' that hazy state between sleep and consciousness where it's possible to manipulate your own dreams. "When we dream, we create this fantasy world for ourselves but it tends to be quite mundane," Murphy muses. "You tend to try and work shit out in your personal life, you don't tend to be rescuing a princess from a building on fire. And I think he's looking at that. Unlike the fantasy films we tend to see nowadays, where it's this completely constructed alternative world, Chris' fantasy world is borne of the mind and of the subconscious. It's grounded in reality, like the Batman movies were, where things are heightened but nothing's there just because it looks cool."

*Inception*'s dream-world is highly volatile, prone to abrupt lurches into abstract chaos that plunge DiCaprio and his fellow dream-thieves into mortal peril. "The >>



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film has a strong emotional core to it — Leo’s character and some of the other characters are trying to work emotional stuff out — but, having said that, it is a big exciting action film,” says Murphy. “It’s not all about people with their heads in their hands going, ‘Why did I leave that girl?’” Murphy shot his role on and off between July and December last year, skirting between LA, the Cardington airship hangar in Bedfordshire and snow fields in the Canadian Rockies, sharing ample screen time with DiCaprio (the object of Murphy’s awe: “one of the greats for any actor of my generation”) and taking part in “a few cool stunts that I was very pleased with”. Did he ever get confused about how Fischer slotted into the complex dreamscape? “There is never confusion on a Chris Nolan set,” he counters. “Just to be around him... he has complete confidence in his abilities without ever appearing arrogant. He’s just at ease, and he gives actors great confidence. To feel a director like Chris has faith in you is very liberating.”

Eight years on from his breakout in Danny Boyle’s zombie actioner *28 Days Later...*, the modest Murphy claims he’s none the wiser about what it takes to stay successful in the industry, despite the range of sublime, surprising and savage roles under his belt, the high calibre of directors he continues to work with, and an ethereal visage that must be the envy of his peers with its uncanny facility for appearing both angelic and sinister, often in the same scene. “As I get older, I realise that I know less and less about this game,” he confesses. “You can be in a film



**Scary stuff: Cillian Murphy as Dr Jonathan Crane aka the Scarecrow with Katie Holmes in *Batman Begins* (2005).**

that you think has got everything going for it and it doesn’t connect with an audience. It’s baffling to me... What I have learnt over the last few years is patience. It’s about keeping the bar high, and that can be frustrating if you get five scripts in a row that don’t reach that bar. You have to learn to be at home and cut the grass and unload the dishwasher and go to gigs and be confident that the right thing will turn up. As it always does...”

Murphy’s prepared to hold out for two reasons: he hates repeating himself; and he’s never felt the need to reach starburst speed, content to coast comfortably along (that applies to his taste in cars too, explaining that, before his kids were born, he pootled around in a Mini One rather than a flashier Cooper because “the only difference is it takes less time to reach 60mph and I don’t need to be bothering with that”). On the back of

his hallucinatory Scarecrow and *Red Eye*’s coach-class psycho, he could have cashed in with a stream of Hollywood madmen, but his agents knew better than to clog up his inbox with second-rate baddies. “Not that it happened but if it had, I would have said, ‘Look, that’s done now.’ There would be no stimulation in doing that again.”

Unless, of course, it involves Nolan... So come on, Cillian — you can keep schtum about *Inception* but toss us a bone on *Batman 3*. Will deranged psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Crane be returning to wreak more Gotham City havoc? “I don’t know anything about it,” he insists. “I’m sure Chris is going to make it — that’s on the cards. Whether or not it involves the Scarecrow, I wouldn’t suppose and I wouldn’t ask either... You gotta let these guys come to you. It’s not for me to start campaigning for the Scarecrow to come back but if Chris wants me back in that role, yeah, absolutely, I would love to do it...”

As we exit the café and he prepares to return to the north west London home he shares with his wife and sons, Murphy apologises again for his self-imposed gagging order, but swears blind that we will be blown away by what we see. “In this age of 3D and phenomenal special effects, we tend to be a little inured to big movies, like, ‘Whatever...’ But Chris is really going to challenge that with *Inception*. I don’t doubt it.” Nor do we... **TF**

***Inception* opens 16 July. For the latest features and video, go to [tinyurl.com/tfincep](http://tinyurl.com/tfincep)**

STYLING: RICHARD PIERCE; HAIR AND MAKE UP: JO SELF