

TRUE COOL

Alexander Skarsgård, the Viking vampire of *True Blood*, is more than just a beautiful blond bloodsucker, as his exciting new film roles would suggest *BY MATT MUELLER*

You could say it's in his blood. The progeny of Swedish screen veteran Stellan (who has graced everything from *Good Will Hunting* to *Mamma Mia!*), Alexander Skarsgård has been sinking fangs into nubile necks for the past three years as *True Blood*'s immorally sexy Viking vampire Eric Northman. The role has helped him eclipse his father's career on at least one front: as a bona fide global sex symbol. And he certainly lives up to the tag in person.

Meeting at London's Soho Hotel while he's on hiatus from shooting the \$200m Hollywood blockbuster *Battleship*, we grab a quiet table in the corner and order coffee and biscuits. Dressed in a fitted grey V-neck sweater, dark trousers and boots, Skarsgård is both athletically imposing – his chiselled six-foot-four frame and riveting pale-blue eyes commanding attention – while also possessing a calm, unaffected demeanour that instantly puts you at ease. His speech

contains hardly a trace of his native language (he sounds like a born Californian, bar the odd telltale inflection), although a whiff of cool Nordic reserve reminds you of the coiled blond bloodsucker that has propelled him to stardom.

Skarsgård had worked for years in his native Sweden (where he was voted sexiest man alive five years running) before landing his breakthrough role. Prior to *True Blood*, his most notable English-language roles had been a cameo in the 2001 Ben Stiller comedy *Zoolander* and HBO's Gulf War mini-series *Generation Kill*, in which he drew rave reviews as US Marine Sergeant Brad "Iceman" Colbert. But *Six Feet Under* creator Alan Ball, also the brains behind *True Blood* (adapted from author Charlaine Harris' *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series), had earmarked Skarsgård for *True Blood* months before the actor had ever heard of *Generation Kill*. "I met with Alan in January 2007; in May I auditioned for and got *Generation Kill* and went off to Africa for six months to shoot it; in October, Alan called and said, 'That vampire show I talked to you about 10 months ago – we're ►

Portrait: Ben Watts

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shooting the pilot now if you're still interested."

After a few brief but mesmerising appearances in Season 1, Skarsgård's coldly menacing vampire sheriff came into his own in Seasons 2 and 3, toying with the show's loved-up leads Sookie and Bill (Anna Paquin and Stephen Moyer) and regularly shedding his kit for the sequences that have helped make the show such a hit. "It gets pretty graphic," laughs Skarsgård, who insists that despite Eric's growing prominence in the series, he never took anything for granted. "After Season 1, I didn't even know if I was going to come back at all. I thought that Alan might want to take it in a completely different direction."

With Skarsgård's smouldering Nordic vamp sending fan adoration off the scale (his followers call themselves Skarsgårdians), there's no danger of Ball dropping him now, although the 34-year-old actor reacts modestly to the notion of so many people whipping themselves up into a frenzy over him. "In the beginning, Eric was so much the traditional bad guy that I think people were surprised when they saw a different side to him in Season 2; he showed that he could be compassionate and loyal and that he actually had emotions." He laughs at the notion of the sensitive bloodsucker. "I think the fans liked that there was more to Eric than first met the eye."

Like his father, Skarsgård started off as a child actor in Sweden, although being recognised at a tender age freaked him out and he quit for most of his teenage years. He joined the Swedish marines for 15 months as part of the anti-terrorist unit, before deciding to return to the fold when he was 20. "I missed it," admits Skarsgård, who spent six months learning English in Leeds upon leaving the military.

With *True Blood* putting him in high demand – not least with Lady Gaga, who recruited him for her "Paparazzi" video – Skarsgård hasn't been hanging out back home during *True Blood*'s short off-season (the series, shot entirely in LA, eats up seven months of the year). Instead he's been quietly carving out a film career. He was an early contender for the title role of the Norse god of thunder in Kenneth Branagh's superhero adaptation *Thor*. But although he missed out, he still has plenty to crow about, with *Battleship*, a remake of the notorious Sam Peckinpah film *Straw Dogs*, and *Melancholia*, the latest outing from Danish bad-boy director Lars von Trier. "Just a couple of years ago, my agent would call up producers saying, 'Check out this guy, he's been in a bunch of Swedish projects you've never heard of,'" says Skarsgård. "Now film producers are calling my agent saying, 'I'm a big fan of the show, I'd love to meet him.' I have *True Blood* to thank for everything."

Based on the novel *The Siege of Trencher's Farm*, about a timid couple terrorised by local thugs in Cornwall, *Straw Dogs* casts Skarsgård in the role of the central villain, with the actor confessing that director Rod Lurie's reimagining won't skimp on the graphic violence that made Peckinpah's original so controversial (it was banned in the UK until 2002). As for *Melancholia*, which he shot last summer in Sweden, playing opposite Kirsten Dunst and his father, Skarsgård describes it as "one of my top two projects ever, along with *Generation Kill*". Set over the course of a single evening at the wedding reception of Skarsgård and Dunst's characters, the film rather bizarrely descends into science fiction.



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FROM TOP Skarsgård and the cast from Season 3 of *True Blood*; as Viking vampire Eric Northman in *True Blood*

"It starts out very happy – and then the shit hits the fan," he says. "Nothing's unusual when it comes to Lars, so expect the unexpected."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, *Battleship* is a megabucks action movie drawn from the famous board game. It features Skarsgård, playing opposite Liam Neeson and pop singer Rihanna, as a naval officer on a US Navy destroyer that comes under alien attack. Having just returned from the Hawaii leg of the shoot, he describes the experience as "crazy and huge... It's big ships and cranes and helicopters. We've just been shooting on the *USS Missouri* in Pearl Harbor, which is insane. World War II ended on that ship!"

Hopping straight from *Melancholia* to *Battleship*, and then from *Battleship* into the fourth series of *True Blood* leaves Skarsgård no time for a proper break, but with all the opportunities flying his way, he's willing to make the sacrifice. During *Melancholia*'s shoot he was able to spend weekends hanging out with his family in Stockholm (he's the oldest of seven brothers and sisters), and he makes an effort to fly back any time he gets more than two days off in a row. "I still call Sweden home, but I'm only there a couple of weeks a year now," says Skarsgård, who looks prepared to keep Skarsgårdians happy for years to come even if his clan might see less of him. "As long as you're working on projects that you're excited about and you're having a good time working with good people, it's all worth it. I'm having a great time. So far, so good, man." ■

***Melancholia* opens on 1st July in the UK**

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian