

SOMETHING WITH A GUN



BEN BARNES WAS NARNIA’S SWASHBUCKLING FLOPPY-HAIRED HEARTTHROB. BUT IN NEW FILM KILLING BONO HE’S LAYING DOWN HIS SWORD

*Photographer Rankin Fashion Editor Way Perry
Words Matt Mueller*

In 2007’s *Bigga Than Ben*, Ben Barnes played an immoral Muscovite named Cobakka, who descends on modern-day London with his Russian pal to make a fortune from scams and deceit. Not a film to set the world alight, but a sly comedy none the less, and one that featured an edgy, whip-smart turn from Barnes – his hair is sheared short, not a frock coat or broadsword in sight... It’s a shame that hardly a soul witnessed Barnes’s debut starring role, otherwise he might have avoided the floppy-haired romantic typecasting that trailed his anointment as the swoony royal at the heart of *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* and its follow-up, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

“I still get lots of offers to play royalty and [for] films with swords in them,” sighs the lifetime Londoner. “The industry loves to pigeonhole you, and most actors do everything they can to not have that happen, so I say, ‘No, I want to do something with a gun ...’”

Barnes’ latest, *Killing Bono* was just the ticket. It may be the project that finally shatters the “period-stud” glass ceiling looming over Barnes’s newly-shorn head. Adapted from *Daily Telegraph* music critic Neil McCormick’s autobiographical tome *I Was Bono’s Doppelganger*, the film is a knock-about comedy about what it’s like watching your school mate launch the world-conquering, anthem-belting band U2 while trying to become a rock star yourself – and failing abysmally.

“I like to pretend to people that I’m cool even if I’m not,” chuckles Barnes, tucking into a plate of spaghetti bolognese in a quiet corner of Rankin’s Kentish Town studio before getting down to the *Wonderland* photo shoot. “In *Killing Bono*, you’ll realise what an idiot I truly am.” He says this with such gusto, you can tell it’s sweet music to Barnes’s ears that movie audi-

*Tuxedo and shirt by RALPH LAUREN,
bow tie by VIKTOR & ROLF,
straitjacket from ANGELS*



Bowler hat by KENZO, padded black bomber by CALVIN KLEIN COLLECTION, trousers by DOLCE & GABBANA, black strap wrist watch by HERMES and shoes by MR. HARE. Right: Fedora by JOHN VARVATOS, jacket by EMPORIO ARMANI



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ences will finally get to experience him in another light – as a “complete fuck-up who can’t get out of his own way”. With giddy, loose-limbed enthusiasm, he offers a virtual blow-by-blow re-enactment of how he came to be cast in *Killing Bono* that’s not far off his goofy, appealing performance in the film (modelled, he confesses, a little bit on *Withnail ...*)

The clincher, it seems, was belting out the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction” while dancing around his *Dawn Treader* trailer and filming the number holding his laptop in his hands. Cue a ring-a-ding from *Bono* director Nick Hamm, who opened

with, “Hi darling, I don’t really want some Disney boy in my film, do I?”

“It was so obnoxious!” laughs Barnes. “But then I was like, ‘Hang on, you’re phoning me ...’ He later told me that within 40 seconds of watching my tape, he knew I was going to play that part.”

The actor felt well suited to the role. McCormick’s book was adapted by Dick Clement and Ian Le Frenais, who also scripted one of his favourite films, *The Commitments*, “about white boys trying to sing soul, which was completely me when I was growing up. I wanted to be Stevie Wonder when I was 16 and

it clearly was never going to happen.” Like McCormick, it didn’t stop him trying and served him in good stead when it came to portraying a desperate wannabe who hops aboard every musical trend of the era trying to crack open fame’s door, with Barnes mimicking the on-stage styles of Bowie, Jagger (“intense eyes and flappy arms”) and the “weird dancing” of the New Romantics.

“He basically gets more and more irritating,” says the actor, who went directly from *Dawn Treader*’s Australian set into *Killing Bono* and admits that segueing from a mega-fantasy franchise into someone’s real-life

story was “weird ... but brilliant.”

“I was so ready to do the opposite of what I’d just been doing. It’s just a change of mood you want ... After *Bono*, I was clearly looking for something heavy because I spent six months in the West End doing *Bird-song* – grim, depressing World War One ... After that I weighed nothing, I was grey – it ripped me apart.”

Which helps explain today’s short locks and thin, sylphlike appearance, although even when required to pump iron to play Narnia’s Hispanic majesty, he never embraced the beefed-up look. Barnes once said to me, in an earlier interview at



White shirt by DOLCE & GABBANA, frilled braces from BEYOND RETRO
Right: Black overcoat by ALEXANDER MCQUEEN, crew neck fine wool sweater by EMPORIO ARMANI, black trousers by DOLCE & GABBANA, grey socks by PANTHERELLA

Hair CARL REEVES using KEVIN MURPHY PRODUCTS, Make-up ADAM DE CRUZ at PUNISHMENT LTD using DIOR S/S 2011, Photographic Assistance ANDREW DAVIES, NEIL DAWSON, MAX MONTGOMERY, JACK MCGUIRE, DOM STORER and DOM CHINEA, Fashion Assistance ALEX HARLEY and LIZ RINGNES NYGAARD, Make-up assistance HOLLEIGH GALLON, Production NINA RASSABY-LEWIS and LIESHA BLACKWOOD, Digital MICHAEL TINNEY and MATTHEW THOMAS, Shot at RANKIN’S ANNROY STUDIO



the time of *Dorian Gray*’s release, that he still thinks of himself as the “pastiest, smallest boy in class”. On this chilly March evening, self-deprecation is again in evidence as he emerges for the first set-up of the night, wearing a long, stylish black coat that displays plenty of bare chest and quipping: “I’m showing off all seven of my chest hairs ...”

The son of a psychotherapist mother and psychiatrist professor father, the raven-haired actor grew up in Wimbledon and fell in love with music before acting, singing and playing drums in various jazz, rock and soul bands in his teens before taking a brief, ignominious stab at pop stardom. His stint in the short-lived band Hyrise, longlisted as the UK’s Eurovision entry in 2004, still raises a grimace. “That definitely put me off [pursuing a music career],” Barnes groans. “Not so much at the time – I’ just saw it as something fun

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to take part in. It was very short – literally, we performed that song two or three times and it was over.” Thanks to YouTube and Barnes’s burgeoning film

career, however, it’s seeped permanently into the pop-culture ether. “I don’t resent that but I’m not too proud of it because boy bands will never be cool.”

With his 30th birthday looming, Barnes still shares a flat with his brother in south-west London, just round the corner from their parents. “When I come back from other countries, I want to be around things that feel like home,” he explains. One thing that never changes is how he keeps most of his personal life very private. When I mention that I’d recently interviewed Jeremy Irons’s actor son Max, who had told me he was going out to dinner with Ben and Ben’s girlfriend that same night in LA, the actor doesn’t volunteer any details “Yeah,” he nods, implacable. “Suddenly Max is playing leads in big movies, which is great for him.”

Not that Barnes has particular reason to fret about his own career. When Trevor Nunn casts you in his stage adaptation of a renowned Sebastian Faulks’s novel, as happened with *Birdsong*, you’re part of the conversation. The Narnia franchise might be over for Barnes (Caspian doesn’t appear as a young man in further adventures), and he’s currently hanging out in LA. What comes next, however, is unpredictable. And that’s fine for Barnes. “I rely on this job to give me spontaneity in my life. I’m not an adventurer. I rely on this job to make me cool ...”