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INTERVIEW

# Michael Fassbender

Jane Eyre



By Sam Adams March 8, 2011

Although he's only five years into his big-screen career, Michael Fassbender has cut a wide swath through the movie business, with roles ranging from *300*'s Stelios and the young Magneto in the upcoming *X-Men: First Class* to the Irish hunger-striker Bobby Sands in Steve McQueen's 2008 feature, *Hunger*, and the charming World War II spy Archie Hicox in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*. *Jane Eyre*, in which he plays the brooding, volcanic Rochester to Mia Wasikowska's beleaguered governess, is only the first of half a dozen films Fassbender is scheduled to appear in this year, including Steven Soderbergh's *Haywire* and David Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method*, in which he plays Carl Jung to Viggo Mortensen's Sigmund Freud. Fassbender recently called *The A.V. Club* from his New York hotel to talk about embodying a classic Byronic hero, playing Mr. Pink in a stage version of *Reservoir Dogs*, and the dangers of pantomime.

**The A.V. Club: With *Jane Eyre*, you're dealing with a story that has been filmed and reinterpreted dozens of times. What convinced you there was something to add?**

**Michael Fassbender:** It's a classic, and the reason people keep doing it is because there are so many things that seem to still resonate with audiences today. They like to disappear in that world. I did it because my mother and my sister are really big fans of the book, and I wanted to see what they would think of the Rochester that I would bring to the table. That's the first reason I wanted to do it. And then when Cary [Fukunaga, director] came on board, I was really excited, because *Sin Nombre* was such a good film, such a beautiful story, and so beautifully told. I was like, "This is going to be interesting, an American director coming over and doing his take on this, the classic British piece." Then Mia got involved, and she's really mature and interesting, I saw her performance in *In Treatment*. I was like, "This could be really exciting now."

**AVC: What about the story resonates for you?**

**MF:** I like that the characters are ugly and they're beautiful and they're cruel and they're nurturing. There's so much complexity to the characters, they're so well-written, and I find that interesting. There's ambiguity within the characters, and that's what really attracted me to it, to the performance.

**AVC: To use contemporary movie parlance, Rochester isn't very likeable. It's not the kind of romance where you feel they're fated to end up together from the beginning. The pairing between a wealthy man and his governess seems as odd to us as it would have to the people around them.**

**MF:** I think Victorian England was so restricted and repressed that when there are moments, it's like a volcano. When there are weak areas where it just sort of comes out, it's pretty primal, because it's being repressed 24-7. People aren't allowed to express themselves very openly with each other, certainly not physically. So when it comes out, it really explodes.

**AVC: There are similar themes running through François Ozon's *Angel*, which is finally out on DVD. Your character, Esmé, is a lover and rival to Romola Garai's novelist, who in a sense is destroyed by the world she creates. It's a much more aestheticized and ironic take on repressed passion and social strictures.**

**MF:** François was the first director to take a chance on me. I did it right after *300*, but he cast me before I got cast in *300*. So it was an opportunity for me to play a leading male role in a film, which was great. François wanted to do a very specific kind of style, tipping his hat to the melodrama of the early '50s. It was a very styled piece, and the book is like that. I remember reading the book and I was like, "Wow, the character is really unlikeable, but then you sort of feel sorry for her. You have an empathy toward her because you realize she's also an extraordinary woman to be doing such things at that time." But the characters are very different, I mean, Rochester and Esmé—Esmé is the black sheep of the family-type-thing, while Rochester is in many respects as well, but that's down to their different histories. Esmé doesn't really love Angel.

**AVC:** You've done some highly stylized films, ranging from *Inglourious Basterds* to *Hunger*, but your performances are well-grounded. Even in *Basterds*, where you're riffing on George Sanders, there's an earthiness that prevents it from seeming like play-acting. Is that instinctive, or is that something you discussed?

**MF:** I did want to do that, especially with characters like in *Inglourious Basterds*. Archie Hicox—even though it was a very specific way of speaking, I think I find that in the quirks of the character, you know what I mean? Just the little details that hopefully don't make it like a pantomime character.

**AVC:** There's always that bugaboo for British actors, the panto line you don't want to cross.

**MF:** Exactly. I find that Quentin Tarantino does that so well, the fine line between absurd and real—this absurd scenario and characters, but they're very real. When you're introduced to the two hit men in *Pulp Fiction*, Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta, they're very Shakespearean-type characters, with strange dialogue between them, but you go with it. It's that strangeness that makes them real as well.

**AVC:** Your relationship with Tarantino's material goes way back. You directed a stage production of *Reservoir Dogs* when you were 18, and played Mr. Pink as well.

**MF:** That was the really amazing thing, to be on set being directed by him. Because when I started acting, I was 17, and then I put that play on in my town, so to be sitting on set with him was pretty surreal and amazing. I've been a fan of his from *Reservoir Dogs* up to this point. That was a major get, for me to be in his film. To be in a Mexican standoff in a Tarantino film is pretty special.

**AVC:** When you imagine being in one, that's probably where you want to end up.

**MF:** Yeah, exactly. That scene in *Reservoir Dogs* at the end, it's a classic standoff. He does them so well. That's what he can do, stretch that elastic band, keep it at the breaking point for excruciating amounts of time.

**AVC:** You were also in *300*, and now you're playing Magneto in *X-Men: First Class*, which has to require a high degree of stylization. You have to create a character who can wear that costume.

**MF:** You have to go for it. If you're caught in a middle ground, you're lost. Like you say, if you put on a helmet, you kind of have to go for it. [Laughs.] That's just part of those sort of fantasy things. If you're not going to go for it, then you can't expect the audience to go along with you. So you just have to commit to it.

**AVC:** It seems like one reason British actors so often get cast in those sorts of roles is that they tend to come from a more technically oriented background. Thinking about what Magneto's motivation is in a given scene might not get you that far.

**MF:** Well, no, the nuts and bolts remain the same. Otherwise, you are just doing a cardboard cutout. Definitely the character has got to be coming from somewhere and has to want to go somewhere, and all the characters have an objective, and then it just depends on how determined they are to get that objective, and what sort of moral things they're willing to bend, and within that, that's where you get the interesting things. With Magneto, there is a very specific history that's happened to him in the comic books, which is pretty heavy. So you use all of that, and then their moral standpoint is formed from their history and their environment. That's the interesting thing about Magneto. The way we were looking at it was that Charles [Xavier, a.k.a. Professor X] is like Martin Luther King and Magneto is more Malcolm X.

**AVC:** As far as the characters in *X-Men* go, Magneto has the most compelling backstory by far. He's a Holocaust survivor, which makes his fear of persecution perfectly justifiable.

**MF:** Human beings, he hasn't had a very good relationship with them, and doesn't have a lot of faith or any trust in them. That's the difference between him and Charles. Charles has hope in human beings, and Magneto thinks they're just standing in the way of evolution. They're going to wipe us out if we don't wipe them out.

**AVC:** On a set like that, where there's so much more going on technically, in terms of green-screen and CG, do you concern yourselves with those aspects, or let that be the director's business, and try and concentrate on what you're doing on the set?

**MF:** Yeah, that's it, really. Everybody's got their department to look after, and hopefully everybody's doing that. I'll be more, in terms of the script, trying to work out the different beats of the relationship with Charles, so James [McAvoy] and I sat down a lot with Matthew [Vaughn, director] and made sure that was tight. In terms of green-screen, it's always great to learn new stuff, and to get technically more proficient as well. I had a lot of experience with the green screen, or blue screen, on *300* as well, so that was a good learning experience.

**AVC:** You're also playing Carl Jung to Viggo Mortensen's Freud in David Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method*. That sounds like a fascinating project.

**MF:** He's a real technician as well as an artist, he's so precise—and very nice, actually, very light, great sense of humor, a very pleasant atmosphere on set, even though sometimes the films are quite dark. I just tried to learn as much as I could about the man, Jung, and then deal with [Christopher Hampton's] script. It's a very wordy script, so just a lot of rereading the script to try to get the rhythm of the piece right, and get the music right, in terms of the text. Working with Viggo was really special, he's an amazing human being, and obviously a brilliant actor, and Keira [Knightley], I think a lot of people are going to sit up and take notice of what she does in this film. She does a really extraordinary performance in it, and she's lovely as well, and super well-prepared.

**AVC: People tend to focus on Keira Knightley's appearance, and overlook her acting.**

**MF:** I think so as well, unfairly so. She's gotten a lot of stick, and like I said, I think that's about to change. She'll come into her own now. I think people are going to be impressed by what she does in this film.

**AVC: Did reading up on Jungian psychotherapy have an effect on you besides informing the character? Did it change your perceptions at all?**

**MF:** It's that thing, you sort of ask yourself philosophical questions anyway. It's always interesting to think about what's the point in life, and what's our position in it, and all of those things. With the Jungian approach, it's actually really interesting in terms of using it for acting. You use words like "introvert" and "extrovert," various traits of a personality. A lot of that stuff, we used in drama school, and that was kind of interesting, to realize my teachers sort of ripped off a lot of Jung. [Laughs.] And how much of it is part of our society now, these phrases, introvert and extrovert, where it actually came from. People in the early 1900s, they just weren't talking about those things, or weren't aware of them.

**AVC: "Introvert" and "extrovert" are particularly interesting in their original context, which isn't really related to how most people use the words now. It's not about how outgoing you are, but whether you're focused more on the internal or external world.**

**MF:** Exactly. It's funny that the word gets invented, let's say, and then it's tossed around so much that by a hundred years later, it's used in a different context than where it was originally born. That's also interesting, too, how language takes its own life and evolves. There's so much there with Jung, and we were dealing with a very specific timeframe, just before he started to write the Red Book and go into a sort of breakdown is where we leave him.

**AVC: It would be interesting to retroactively apply Jung to Rochester, whom you could certainly interpret in terms of archetypes.**

**MF:** I just played him like your typical Byronic hero. Everything is in that for Rochester, everything from the shady history, courage, passion, intelligence, and destructiveness, self-destructiveness, that's all in there—well, hopefully that's there. That's what I was trying to get with him.

**AVC: Do you read up on other writing from that era? Is the Byronic hero just bred into you from birth, growing up near the UK?**

**MF:** Being in Ireland, obviously the neighboring country to England, the classics, we learn a lot about them at school. It's the classic sort of thing you see in male heroes, or tragic heroes, whatever it is, they're all very recognizable things when you read it today.

**AVC: People talk about Jane Eyre as having a similar childhood to Charlotte Brontë, but you can see Rochester as an authorial stand-in as well. He's imprisoned by his relationship to this woman in his attic, who keeps him from being free or achieving happiness.**

**MF:** I always think it's kind of like Chekhov, where the dead person is the central character; they all talk about the dead person, the dead person has continued to influence them. Bertha has a massive influence on Rochester, and Jane, now that she's come into Thornfield. And she has an impact on the house itself, in terms of the house being haunted because of her presence. That's definitely the thing as well, that she's always there in his mind, and physically there as well as upstairs in the attic, poor woman. [Laughs.] No wonder she wants to burn the house down.

**AVC: Did something like Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which reinterprets the story from Bertha's point of view, come into your understanding of the character?**

**MF:** There is that argument that Bertha may have just been a horny woman. Back in those days, that wasn't cool. She may have just enjoyed sex a bit too much, so they said "The devil is in her," or "She's too crazy." That is definitely one way to look at it. I didn't take that approach, although I was aware of it all the time. I feel it's a terrible deal that she's got, there's no doubt about it, but I did go along the lines that she did suffer from insanity and that it was a hereditary trait that her mother suffered from before. I just chose that path for my backstory.

**AVC: We'll have to talk to Mr. Freud about that.**

**MF:** Exactly. [Laughs.]

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