

spotlight on... George Blagden

By Tom Stacy

It is good to be the king," declares George Blagden, who plays Louis XIV on the Ovation period sudser *VERSAILLES*, now in its third and final season. "It's the first role I've done that has become more challenging the more I do it. I didn't really know at the age of 24 what I was taking on with this role — what this role in its entirety encompasses. To represent a historical figure with this level of notoriety, and then represent the man and what he achieved, it has been the most amazing journey. It keeps me on my toes continually."

Blagden admits that the idea of researching his alter ego was initially mind-boggling. "I was cast about four-and-a-half-weeks before we turned over on season 1, and I was shooting another project at the time," he recalls. "If the producers had given me a year free with nothing else to do but be on my own in a locked room with all the research available on Louis XIV, I still could not have gotten even halfway through it. So many things that we take for granted in today's society — luxury and art and fashion — it all happened in this incredible building. So, I had a lot of faith and trust in our fantastic show runners, David [Wobstencroft] and Simon [Mirren], and thank God I did because they really have created a script that is very detailed and sensitive to historical accuracy. David studied this period while he was at Cambridge. We had the chief scientific researcher from the actual Palace of Versailles as our historical consultant. They pieced this story together so I could walk onto that set and do my job, which is to interpret that character in its most human form, and that is the most exciting part for me. He may be an omnipotent king, but what you see on your TV screens is a fragile, mentally unstable boy king who is constantly trying to grow into this man that everyone needed him to be."

MAINTENANCE BOSS/GETTY IMAGES

just the facts

Birthday: December 28

Hails From: London, England

Nordic Flair: Played Athelstan on *VIKINGS* from 2013-16.

Where To Watch: In the U.S., *VERSAILLES* can be seen on Ovation, Netflix, iTunes and Amazon.

Oh, Brother: When it comes to Louis's combative relationship with his bisexual brother, "Philippe is everything Louis cannot be, one of which is flamboyant. Philippe is whatever he wants to be. Louis is very much shackled to the straitjacket of the monarchy, which is intensely frustrating."

Ladies' Man: Despite Louis's womanizing, "One of his greatest strengths was to surround himself with the most powerful, impressive and resourceful people that he could — and that obviously extended to the women in his life. A lot of decisions happened through suggestions from these women whilst in the bedroom, which were like boardrooms, really. That's where business took place."

"It has been the most amazing journey."



(Louis XIV, *VERSAILLES*)



Brotherly Shove: Of the fraternal drama with Alexander Vlahos (Philippe), Blagden shares, "I don't have a brother in real life, and I don't particularly want one now having so many hours with this relationship [laughs]. They were the most powerful men in the world, and they were brothers, and one was in charge and one wasn't. I mean, that is a recipe for disaster."



Blagden is thrilled that the show has caught on with the Ovation crowd. "When we started shooting the first season, I remember us all, the director of our first three episodes and the writers and our executive producers, we all discussed what we thought the tone of the show was, and everyone had a different opinion," he says. "That place and that time cannot be put in a box, and I thought that what we would eventually end up making would stick into some sort of genre. We would be able to refer to it as, you know, DOWNTON

ABBEY meets GAME OF THRONES, but even now, it's very unspecific in its genre. But, it has all the right ingredients: love, sex, violence, jealousy, heroics, passion. It's all there, just with wigs and heels."

Speaking of which, Blagden says it takes about two hours for him to transform into the legendary Sun King. "It's not too bad," he shrugs of his time spent in the makeup and hair chair. "But four months in, shooting at 5 a.m. and having each individual hair on your mustache adjusted with a pair of fine tweezers is... No, honestly, I love it because it gives me a couple of hours in the morning to get into character. The result of what you see on-screen of Louis XIV is not just me. It's the result of 250 people's hard work in bringing this guy to life. It's very much his costume and hair and the rooms he inhabits that are very much part of him — as much as what I'm doing. I'm so grateful we get to work with a team like that."

Though this is one of the most prolific roles of his young career, Blagden notes that

she said, she said

■ Can a queen and the king's former lead mistress ever be friends? Digest asked VERSAILLES's Elisa Lasowski (Queen Marie-Thérèse) and Anna Brewster (Madame de Montespan) that very question:

"There is so much more to it than just girls not liking each other. They're two very different personalities. Montespan has this passion for the king, which a lot of people did. It just so happened that hers was serious. I think if they had similar views on things, they could have liked each other."

"They started off as friends. All the women at court knew each other and later on in life, for Marie-Thérèse's character, there was a point where she went, 'The King is going to cheat on me with these women. They live at court. They're by his side. I might as well know them.' There ended up being a form of acceptance on some levels."

"In some parts of the scripts, the scenes where I could have played it very bitchy, we decided to play it with a bit more compassion. There is a respect there. Montespan is not one for hiding. She's very much, 'I've got him,' but if you get on the wrong side of the queen, as she kind of maybe does [laughs], it could cause a lot of trouble. So, as the season goes on, you'll see that."

"I also think there was an understanding, which is also historical. There is nothing you can do in the face of the power of the King, and at the end of the day, we're all women and we can be against one another or not."



Anna Brewster (de Montespan)



Elisa Lasowski (Marie-Thérèse)

PHOTOS: THEATRE COMPANY

the period garb keeps him from being recognized in public. "It's quite nice, actually," he chuckles of the anonymity. "Quite nice. I look very different from my character, and it's funny because if I'm out and someone is talking about the show, I might get an honest opinion in someone saying what they really think [laughs]. I have thought maybe I should start growing my hair out and just walk down Brick Lane in East London with my heels and see what happens. I don't know if you've ever worn heels, but they do amazing things for your confidence about how you see yourself. It sounds really silly, but just try it. Walk around in a pair of heels for the day. In the evening, you will feel supremely confident."



Busted! Blagden on set with a look-alike statue of the king. "A new addition to our halls," he shared.

INSTAGRAM: BLAGDEN

Did You Know?

- Currently appearing in the London West End production of *Company*.
- He played cynical revolutionary Grantaire in 2012's Oscar-winning film adaptation of *Les Misérables*.