

ROYAL ASCENT

The British actor George Blagden, fresh from his breakthrough role as King Louis XIV in the raunchy television show *Versailles*, tells us about his inspirational father and why, if not for a life on stage and screen, he might have become a soldier.

by tom chamberlin photography sandro baebler fashion direction jo grzeszczuk

George Blagden, dressed in contemporary clothing, as he is in this shoot, is breaking away from his recent norm. Whether in Tom Hooper's *Les Misérables*, *Vikings*, or as the protagonist in one of the new behemoths of box-set culture, *Versailles*, he tends to be in clothing representative of older times — or indeed wearing nothing at all. In case you haven't heard, *Versailles* is the depiction of the 18th century's Sodom and Gomorrah, all under one roof. In other words, there's a whole bunch of sex and scandal, and it is fantastic. It is also the most watched television show in France, a big hit on the B.B.C., and is soon to be released on Netflix. Blagden's leading role, as King Louis, gives him the latest of many reasons to feel more smug and over-confident than he actually is. Without being self-aggrandising, he is proud of where he is at and places more value on his *Triumph Bonneville* than the size of his social media following. In front of a camera, his timid nature begins to unravel into something magnetic, charismatic and playful. And because he is only 26, we can be sure this prodigy's best years are still ahead.

How did acting come on the radar?

I suppose it all started with a production of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* at Sadler's Wells in 2000, when I was 10. I remember going to see it and sitting in the audience with my mum and turning to her and asking, "How do I do that? I want to be one of those people one day." That led to me being in school plays, and it went from there. I became unhealthily obsessed with it at school. It was the only thing I was passionate about. By the time I was 14 or 15, someone said, "You know you can do this as a job?" And that was that, really, the death of my A-level results and university. In some ways it was formulaic: I did school plays, applied for drama school at 18, and very luckily got into Guildhall.

Did you find yourself plugging into a specific genre?

I am only analysing it now that you have asked the question. I love things that allow me to escape. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the ultimate escape, isn't it? Actually, my taste in this industry has been very much about that theme: escaping into a different world. It is maybe why I have been doing historical fiction, because it is a totally different world to the one we inhabit now. I like to be transported: I go to the cinema to be transported, taken away from my own life for two hours. Same with theatre, so I suppose that is a recurring theme.

How comfortable are you in your skin?

I'm almost always described as an introvert. A lot of my life experiences have made me what I am now. I think I have problems with living in my own skin, which is why I like to put on the coat and jacket of other people. I think a lot of actors are designed that way.

At the same time, you haven't got where you are without talent. Have you ever believed your own hype?

I will try to accept that compliment. It depends what hype you are talking about. If you are talking about the hype my drama teacher tried to instil in me, I suppose I would never have got up on stage without him encouraging me. If you are talking about the hype of being Aidan Turner in *Poldark* and every newspaper

is about you being a heart-throb and every social media platform writing about you in a certain way... The danger of believing that hype is that none of it is real or tangible. It is often designed in a way for marketing reasons. The problem is when you start truly believing everything that people tweet you or message you.

What has made getting to where you are now difficult?

Sickeningly, I don't have an answer for that. I have lots of answers for the opposite question — what has made it easy. There are lots of aspects of my life, the simple one being that when I said, aged 15, that I want to be an actor, I had no opposition from any of my family or friends as to how I should get a proper job. They were supportive from day one and never questioned it, never stopped me from following that dream. That is a really important thing for a young adult wanting to get into a creative industry. To be emotionally supported by the closest people around you makes you believe that the sky is the limit. It is very true that I have been extraordinarily lucky, being in the right place at the right time. Getting work in this industry is all about luck, and while many claim that it is their own work and talent, I have just been very lucky and feel blessed.

What is your first move in a zombie apocalypse?

I'd go to my sister, she knows everything. I like to think I know a bit about the undead world and what to do in those situations, but she is quite the expert and wouldn't mind me saying so. She just would know what items to take in the car, what petrol station to go to that would have fuel, which location to go to. I think she's definitely got a plan.

What do you want to do before you die?

I've been talking recently about really wanting to explore the U.S. I drive a motorbike and I would love to do that at some stage, take two or three months out of my life and just explore, like a nomad. Maybe it is growing up in cinema and seeing that continent and the scale of landscapes that you can cross — I feel the gap year I never had is three months of exploring that continent on two wheels.

RAKE-IN-PROGRESS



Harry Hosen slub blazer, Kiltgear; light blue cotton striped shirt, Cartier; Harry James and silk tie, Hardy Amies.



Apart from acting, what are you good at?

I wouldn't want to be part of the MotoGP, but I have a Triumph Bonneville. What my mother would call a posing motorbike, which I love. I am good at following orders. I think if I had not been able to be an actor for whatever reason, I think the next best thing I would be good at is a soldier.

What is the greatest piece of music ever created?

I have listened on many different occasions in my life to a track from the soundtrack of Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun*, with Christian Bale as a small boy. I love that film, and there is a particular song in there that John Williams does so brilliantly. I don't know why but there have been some key moments in my life when for some reason it has been playing on my phone. It almost takes a spiritual resonance. It is called *Cadillac of the Skies*. I think anything by John Williams is good.

What is the meal you would have every day in heaven?

Anything with chicken. Give me a chicken Caesar salad or chicken korma. With a French Martini, which is basically alcoholic Ribena. If you ask for one in France they won't know what you are talking about. And rice pudding, with raspberry jam.

Who is the most beautiful woman you know of?

My girlfriend, because Iwan [Rheon] said that in the last issue. No, really, genuinely she is one of the most classically beautiful women I have ever met. Often I will be looking her in the eye and thinking, 'Not quite sure why you are with me'. I am a very lucky man.

Who is the most beautiful man?

Leonardo DiCaprio is extremely beautiful. There was a shot in *The Great Gatsby* where Tobey Maguire's character is describing Gatsby, and DiCaprio turns to camera and smiles. I saw it in the cinema and everyone in the room smiled. I can't explain it, it was that level of charm that in a moment reduces everyone to their knees.

What is your icebreaker?

I don't think I have one. I am terrible in awkward situations and let them run on and on because I am too scared to do anything about them. You have highlighted to me that I need one now.

What is your inspiration?

My father is a huge inspiration for me.

What is the best lesson he has ever taught you?

He would always say three things to me and my sister whenever he would go off to work in London or leave us for a day or two. He'd say, "George and Katie, work hard, play hard and be kind". I think at the time I was very dismissive, but trying to be useful to someone and being kind — those two things are very important, and he has taught me that in buckets and spades over the years. He is an exceptional man, I am pretty sure there will one day be a book written about his life. And if not, I'll write it. He is just one of those people who whenever people meet him they say to me, 'You do know, George, that you have the most exceptional father'. I am constantly trying to live up to him. A 'daddy issue' is an understatement. ¹³



RAKE-IN-PROGRESS

This page:
Beige wool double-breasted suit, Richard James; grey cashmere crew-neck jumper, Giorgio Armani; black Dandelion Tassel in Trusse Tregua/Calf leathers, Christian Louboutin; cream silk pocket-handkerchief, Budd Shirts-makers; grey wool and nylon socks, Pantherella.

Opposite page:
Brown suede shirt, Oliver Spencer; grey cashmere crew-neck jumper and black velvet belt, both Giorgio Armani; indigo blue denim jeans, 7 for all Mankind; blue crocodile-leather high-top sneakers, Saint Laurent.

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