

Photographs by ASTRID MUÑOZ Styled by GIANLUCA LONGO

Big Ben

Ben Barnes didn't let an unpromising start in a boy band that failed to make the Eurovision final put him off the quest for stardom. And his determination has paid off: as Prince Caspian, he's the hero of Disney's Narnia series, and he's now filming *Dorian Gray*. Marianne Macdonald hunts for the portrait in the attic

He's tall and slight and pale, and looks like a houseplant that needs more sun. He has long, thick, lank brown hair and piercing almond-shaped eyes. Ben Barnes has spent the day strangling Rebecca Hall to death, and sacking his butler of 25 years, in the role of the decadent Wildean aristocrat Dorian Gray, and consequently - particularly as it's late, 7pm at the chichi café above his Paddington basement flat - he's a bit subdued. 'I feel sick at the beginning of every evening when I look at the list of what we have to do the next day,' he admits. 'We have tag lines of what happens, you know: "Dorian confronts and murders Basil," and I think, "How do I go from portraying someone who's not a murderer, to deciding that I need to end this person's life, and actually do it and make it seem real to a camera that's a foot away from me?"' And he has been working nonstop for months, including week-long shifts of 90 interviews a day to promote his breakthrough movie *Prince Caspian*. His face was on the 15-storey-high posters - they made him a star overnight. 'Barnes has the dark, dashing looks that will make teen girls turn out more than they normally would for a battle epic,' the →

54 ES MAGAZINE



Ben wears suit, £700, and shirt, £80, Hackett (020 7939 6865). Tie, £59, Gieves & Hawkes (020 7434 2001). Shoes, £752, Louis Vuitton (020 7399 4050)

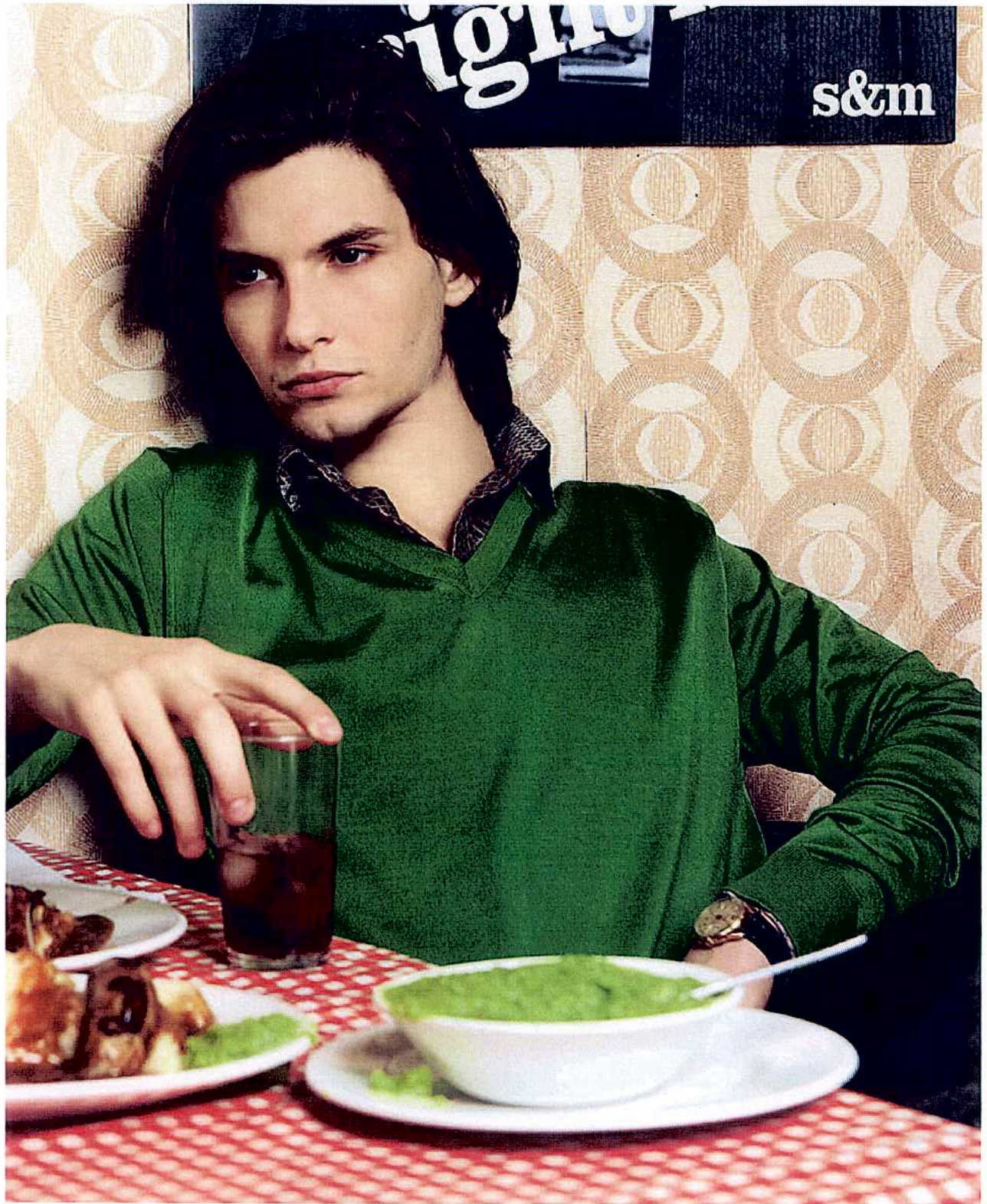
Ben wears shirt, £395, Burberry (07000 785 676), Jumper, £590, Hermès (020 7499 8856), Watch, Ben's own

critic Todd McCarthy observed in *Variety*. The film, the second in Disney's Narnia franchise, got reasonably approving reviews: the critics agreed the sequel was considerably darker than its predecessor, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. (He's also signed up for the next two in the series: *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and *The Silver Chair*.) Last year Ben had a smaller part in Matthew Vaughn's romance fantasy *Stardust*, alongside Michelle Pfeiffer and Sienna Miller, and has followed up his blockbuster success with a lead in a low-budget London gangster movie called *Bigga Than Ben*, following the exploits of two freewheeling Russians in London's seedy underworld, based on the award-winning diaries of Pavel Tetersky and Sergei Sakin. He has also just finished *Easy Virtue*, a Noël Coward adaptation directed by Stephan Elliott, playing a loveable upper-class English twit who marries Jessica Biel's gorgeous American bride, and is finally reaching the end of the full-on shoot for *Dorian Gray*, directed by Oliver Parker, at Ealing Studios.

Is it a pressure to play Dorian Gray, who was so famously beautiful? He shakes his head. 'I've really put that on one side. What it has done is given me a bit of perspective, really, on the power of being 21, in your prime and really, really vital, because I'm playing a 21-year-old at the beginning.' And is that how he felt at 21? 'God, no. I felt about 16.' He alternates between an unpretentious down-to-earthness - he says openly that he feels younger than his little brother Jack and exclaims, 'Oh, cool!' when the owner of the café in which we are sitting offers him his unsold day-old sandwiches, and remarks, 'Even now some days on set I still feel like the child' - and a curiously analytical outlook. 'I spend far too much time thinking about balancing the *carpe diem* attitude with living sociably, so I spend all my time thinking about it and forget to do either, really,' he observes, for example, when I ask if he likes to go out.

I suspect it is key to his character that he's the son of a psychotherapist, Tricia, and a professor of psychiatry, Thomas, who works with severe schizophrenics in London hospitals. This is presumably the root of his intellectual approach and undoubted sensitivity - he gives the impression of someone who is gradually unknitting himself. 'I was certainly raised thinking about how I felt about situations,' he concedes. 'If I came home from school saying, "This person said →







Clockwise from top left: as Prince Caspian in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 2008; with Rebecca Hall on the set of *Dorian Gray*, 2008; with Jessica Biel in *Easy Virtue*, 2008; with Thomas Morrison and Steven Webb in *The History Boys* at Wyndham's, 2006

His mother has been giving Madonna and Guy Ritchie marriage counselling

this!" They'd say, "How did that make you feel?"

Recently his mother has reportedly been giving Madonna and Guy Ritchie marriage counselling at her Harley Street clinic. 'Yeah, she doesn't talk to me about that side of her work,' he says, his almond eyes withdrawing slightly. Would he have therapy himself? 'I'm sure, if I felt I needed it.' But later he exclaims, relaxing: 'I've had it on tap so I can't see myself going to a stranger when I can just call up my mum. She's extremely empathetic and very, very emotionally aware and intelligent. She's a lovely and, behind closed doors, very silly woman. A lot of fun. I'm very proud of them both. They've both devoted their lives to helping other people.' They have certainly been very supportive of their son's showbusiness career, which at certain points looked far from successful.

He chose a very different route from them with acting, which he puts down to a classic piece of 'escapism - I love disappearing into my own world'. He was already doing pretty well, playing the roguish Dakin in *The History Boys* at Wyndham's (Ben Barnes's bisexual History Boy brilliantly plays a History Boy with a nonchalant talent to seduce, the *Standard's* Nicholas de Jongh applauded) when he landed the role of Prince Caspian. The National Theatre was furious at his defection: 'Barnes probably isn't the National's favourite actor right now,' joked *Prince Caspian's* producer Mark Johnson, and the National itself

released a distinctly huffy statement, saying his departure 'is something we are taking very seriously. He has accepted an offer to be in a children's Disney film and we have had to fly Jamie King back on extremely short notice this week.'

Ben was a film unknown and had never remotely expected that kind of pin-up success: 'I thought I'd do West End, a couple of musicals, the Royal Exchange maybe, and just bumble along until no one would hire me and then go into directing or production.' He loved it at first. 'But very quickly, after a week, I found it just a bit awkward, really, it was a bit all-encompassing. Anything with "stud" or "sex appeal". I don't cringe, really, I just assume that they're talking about somebody else.'

He grins, mimicking a French female journalist, on one of his marathon junkets in New York, asking, 'What is life?' I said, "What do you mean: what is life?" Even if I could think of some sort of Stephen Hawking quote to give you, who would care? I'm still quite fascinated as to why you would be interested in asking me questions about me outside of approaches to acting.'

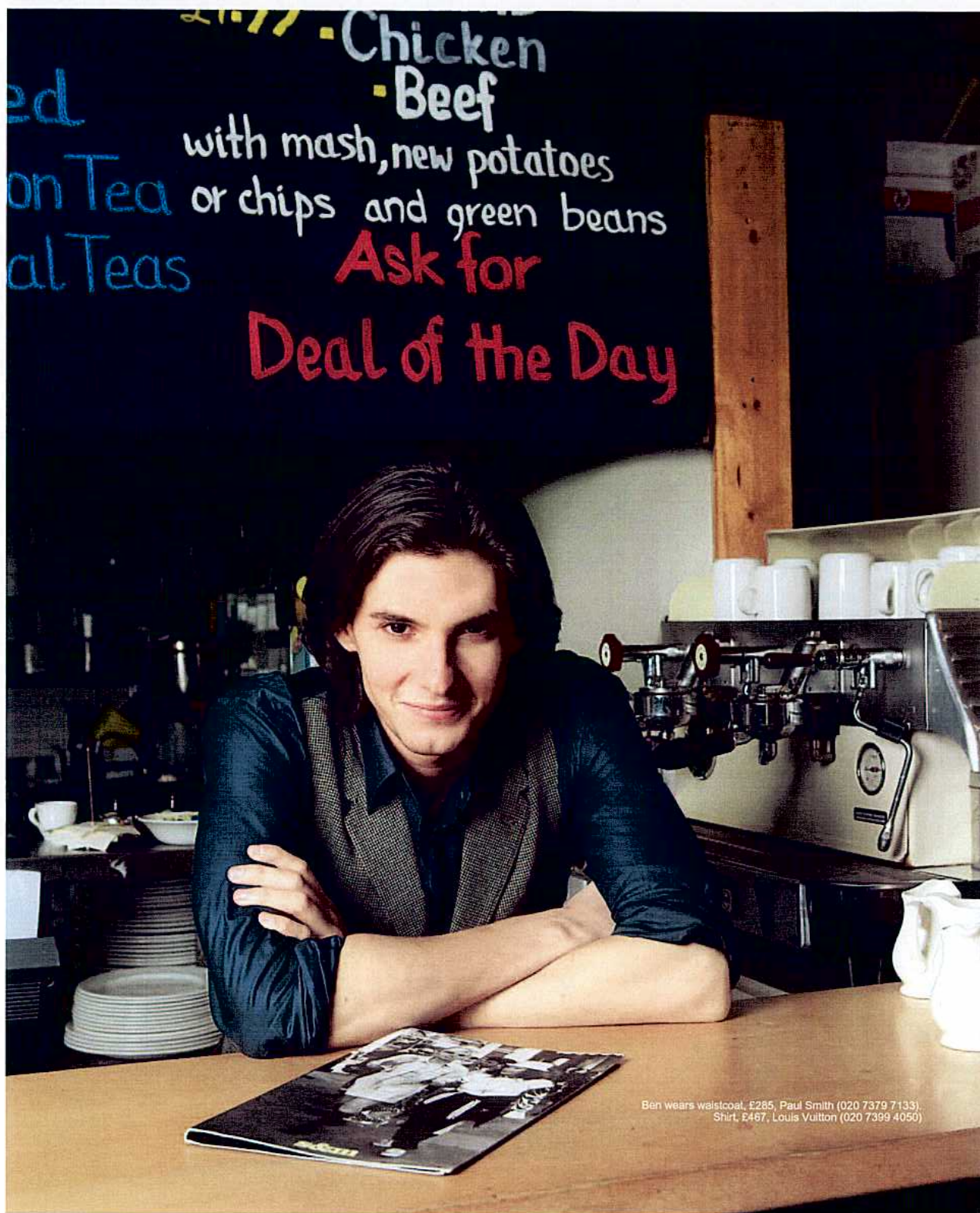
His manager says he gets away with murder because of his grin. In person he's not wildly beautiful, it's more that he's photogenic on screen, I suspect, even though the internet hums with teenage excitement about his sex appeal. He's

been named 'the second coming of Orlando Bloom' by *Entertainment Weekly* in the US. But that's not really his style. Ben enjoys a quiet life and will quite happily stay in listening to Motown. He frowns ruefully: 'I make it sound like I'm really boring and don't go anywhere. It's not true!'

He spent his childhood in leafy Merton, and then Wimbledon, and went to King's College, Wimbledon, which he didn't much like. 'My life has been better every year since I left school, put it that way.' In the past, he's said that he was the youngest in his year group so he was 'always a little bit shy'. Add to that the fact that he was teased because of his mother's job as a 'sexpert' and that he has claimed he 'can't run' because he's got such terrible knees, and you have sufficient ingredients for a fairly miserable school life. For distraction from school, he threw himself into acting and that was where he made his closest friends. 'It was a buzz,' he's said, 'having something that separated you from the other guys at school.' He did plays every year at the National Youth Music Theatre company, and kept a low profile at King's, where, unlike his brother, he was never one of the trendy or sporty boys. A friend from that time says he would always steal the show on stage, though. 'He was always one of those people - it's a cliché - most at home on the boards or singing Sinatra in the school theatre.' Another, less kindly, has said: 'I remember him prancing round in a toga.'

Ben was determined to be a showbiz brat. He played the drums in a stage production of *Bugsy Malone* in the West End and from this he signed →

Eliott Frank, Above: Film Archive, Paper Photo, Shutterstock



Ben wears waistcoat, £285, Paul Smith (020 7379 7133).
Shirt, £467, Louis Vuitton (020 7399 4050)

Grooming by Liz Taw for Bobsoho at Naked Artists using Dermalogica.
Fashion assistant: Orsolya Szabo

At 22, he found himself in a manufactured boy band

with Simon Fuller at 16 with the aim of pursuing acting and music professionally. Instead, Fuller put him into his show, *S Club TV*, as a TV presenter, which wasn't what he had in mind at all. 'And I didn't like doing it because I knew I wasn't very good at it. I knew it was just one of those jobs in which you had to be yourself and emanate enthusiasm and I just didn't feel I was good at that,' he says.

'My job was to interview stars, but every week they had me putting the questions to a floating tennis ball, while someone else went off and met the star, and they added my bit later. It was a bit bizarre,' he's said.

At 22, he found himself equally uncomfortable in a manufactured boy band called Hyrise which went on the 2004 Eurovision Song Contest trials. He's still quite embarrassed about this. 'It was more brief than... it was four and a half minutes. I was at Kingston University at the time, playing Don Juan, and that was what I was interested in. And I love music, I love singing. And then they told me what the band actually was and I thought, "I don't want to do this" and quit.' A cursory inspection of the Eurovision archive reveals that this song, 'Leading Me On', was a forgettable piece of tinny Europop which goes: 'Somebody wake me somebody just pull me out/She's gonna take me show me what it's all about...' According to his protests, the band's management kept the fact that they were trying out for the Eurovision a secret from him 'until it was too late to back out'. 'I don't feel it's a skeleton because it really wasn't anything - although my mum did make a banner,' he's said. He quit Hyrise the day after its failure to make the grade and go on to the finals of the contest. 'I'm thrilled we didn't win,' he's said.

Inspired, perhaps, by his mother's discretion in her own line of work, he prefers not to talk about his love life, though he says he's had girlfriends. 'Not that I'm hiding anything,' he explains. 'I just wouldn't want to read about it, because I find it hard enough reading about my work in a

newspaper. If I was engaged to someone, I'd be more than happy to show it off to the world, but I'm not, so.' Would he like to get married? 'I love the idea of it. I love that I have what I consider to be the ideal of my parents to aim for. But whether I'll ever...' he pauses, 'get there, who knows. But I'd like to think so.' I ask if girls throw themselves at him. He grins. 'Yes - sometimes. Usually, more often than not, they don't.'

I hear that he's been hanging out at *St Trinian's* actresses Tamsin Egerton and Talulah Riley's flat, so it can't be all bad. But I'm afraid the top spot in his heart is taken. 'Jessica Biel,' he says flatly, when I ask him to name the most attractive girl he's worked with or met. 'She's spellbinding. She's definitely got it all.' And he scoops up his sarnies, kisses me, and bears his booty to his basement. ■
Bigga Than Ben is out in cinemas now

Shot at the S&M Club, Portobello Road, W1D

