

Super Bad

For Mark Strong, Shazam! star and screen villain extraordinaire, there's no rest for the wicked

Words MATT GLASBY / Photography JULIA KENNEDY



“Excuse me folks, has anyone got a chainsaw?”

True to form, Mark Strong is getting into character. It's quite a sight. The 56-year-old actor, who describes his personal style as “Italian casual” or maybe just “boring”, is clad in a fluffy blue cardigan and making earnest enquiries about power tools. Inspired, he wanders off to ransack the shed, but this being a swanky pad in northwest London, the best he can find is a hedge-trimmer. Frankly, that's not going to – ahem – cut it.

Whether he's appearing in *Syriana* or *Sherlock Holmes*, Arthur Miller or Frank Miller, Strong specialises in racially non-specific bad guys with sad eyes. We're here to talk *Shazam!*, a new DC superhero film (think *Big* meets *Deadpool*) in which he plays the evil Dr Sivana. But if you were to hold your very own Strong-athon you'd see him practising the dark arts in the likes of *Kick-Ass*, *Green Lantern* and *Robin Hood*, among many others.

Sitting down for a chat by the (non-shark-infested) pool, he's fully engaged –

something of a character trait for this most committed of actors – his tone gentle, his words carefully chosen. So why does such a self-confessed “softie” keep coming back to play more bad guys?

“I have played a lot of villains in my time,” he allows, with more than a touch of understatement. “The problem is that they're often just black and white; they're just designed to be a problem for the hero. So as an actor you try find a way to make them, if not liked, then at least understood, to give you an idea of why they might be the way they are.”

On that basis, Dr Sivana has a fairly well-drawn backstory, especially when compared to *Shazam!* (Zachary Levi), the pratfalling avatar of troubled kid Billy Batson (Asher Angel). “I remember doing *Green Lantern* with Ryan Reynolds,” he begins.

“He said that his job was essentially to throw a punch, crack a smile and kiss the girl. But American culture reveres the hero, you know? John Wayne, the winning quarterback, the homecoming king and queen – it's all about winning and being the hero. Whereas we're a little more forgiving of, or interested in, what the dark side is and why people become the bad guy.”

When he's dressed up in supervillain chic threatening kids, does he ever think: “What am I doing here? I've got an Olivier Award!” He laughs. “No, I'm not precious, it's a broad church, entertainment. I'm in the business of telling stories and if it's told successfully in a superhero movie that's just as valid as doing it on stage.”

Scratch the surface with most actors, and you'll find an inciting incident that makes pretending to be other people for a living seem like a good idea, particularly if they favour darker roles. But Strong isn't biting. Born in London, and left with nothing but those Italian good looks by his father, he had a happy childhood with his mother, and seemed an unlikely candidate to go into show business.

“I'm not someone that needed attention as a kid, I was quite easy – the opposite,” he says. “But I found, as an only child, that I had to learn received behaviour from people I met as I wasn't being told it by my father or siblings. So I think that made me very observant of people and their characters, and it encouraged sensitivity to understand how people tick. It's a short hop from there to wanting to explore why people behave the way they do. And then I found out you could do it for a living...”

Not without a few twists and turns first, though. After playing in punk bands in his teens and briefly studying German constitutional law, he went to drama school, then into the theatre. His first TV job was *EastEnders*, where he played a telephone engineer. “All I remember is that I turned up at Sharon and Michelle's flat to put the phone in, and the gag was that they both thought I was a bit of alright, so they >



Above Dr Sivana squares up to Shazam! (Zachary Levi)



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Previous dressing gown by **New & Lingwood**. Shoes by **Manolo Blahnik**. Sunglasses by **Kaleos**. Ring by **Thomas Sabo**

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Suit and tie by **Paul Smith**. Waistcoat by **Arket**. Shirt by **Dunhill**. Socks by **The London Sock Company**. Shoes by **Manolo Blahnik**. Pocket square by **Richard James**

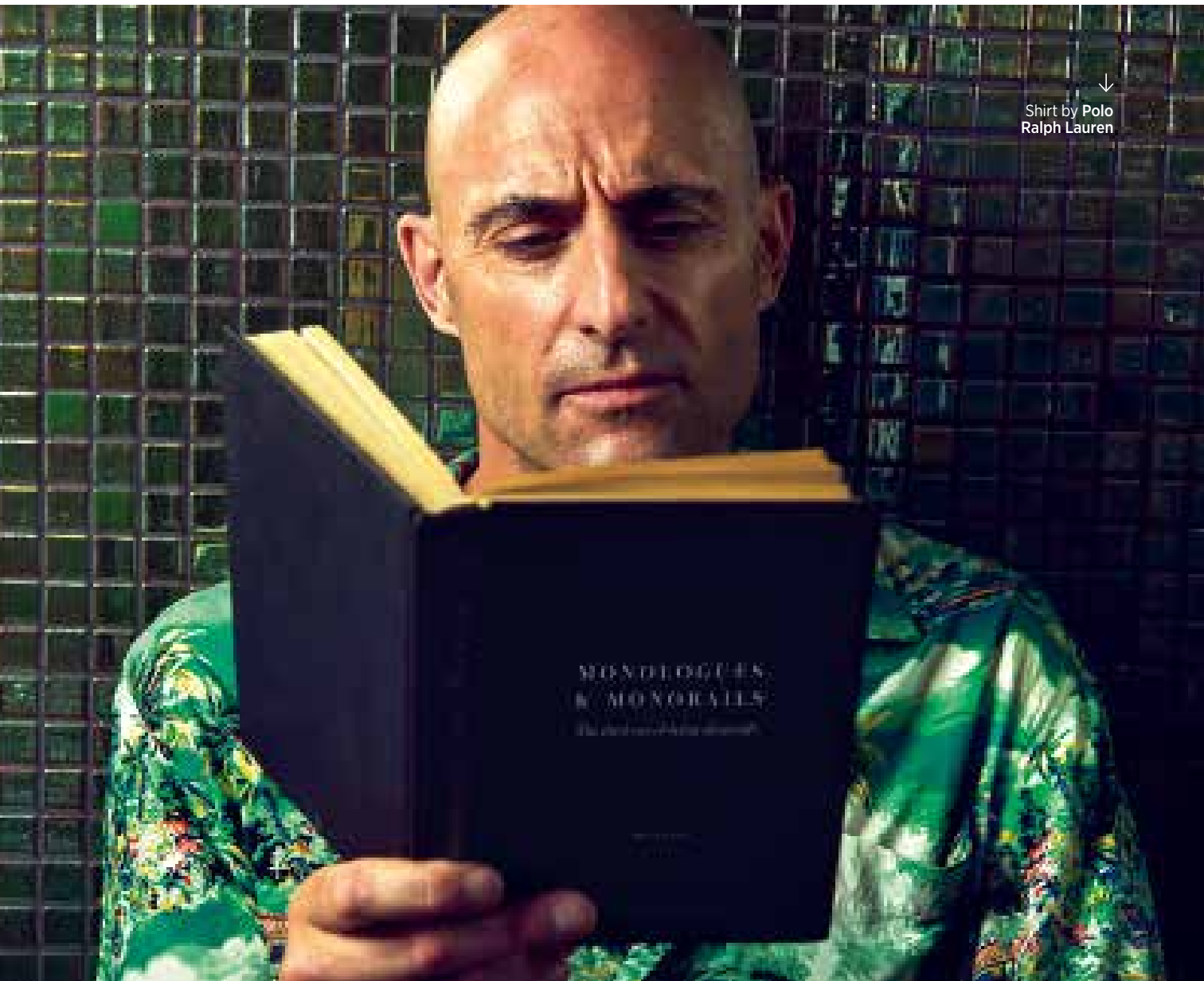


Tuxedo
by **Dunhill**.
Jumper by **Cos**.
Sunglasses by
Sheriff & Cherry.
Ring by
Thomas Sabo



Opposite shirt
and coat by
**Alexander
McQueen**. Ring
by **Thomas Sabo**





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Shirt by Polo
Ralph Lauren

both brought me a cup of tea at the same time to come and flirt with me," he laughs.

It's a strong set-up for a porn film, but classier material soon followed – the epochal TV drama *Our Friends in the North*, Jane Austen's *Emma*, a big-screen *Oliver Twist* – before the bad guy roles began, well, rolling in. "Then, of course, *Syriana* came along, where I pulled out George Clooney's fingernails," he says with a smile. "I just remember being in Morocco, briefly meeting him, then battering the life out of him."

Apparently the Coen brothers were so impressed they considered Strong to play one of their greatest screen villains: Anton Chigurgh, *No Country for Old Men's*

bowl-haired bounty hunter. "I got very close to it as well," he says ruefully. "It was down to me and Javier Bardem and there was a time when it looked like his dates weren't going to work, so there was a weekend when I thought, 'Wow, I'm going to work with the Coen brothers,' who are my heroes. But Javier eventually played the part – and what happened to him?!"

Perhaps the Coens did Strong a favour. As a character actor, he gets to move from part to part with impunity, and one huge role could ruin that. That's why he always comes prepared ("I make dead sure I do my research," he says seriously), and why he stays away from social media. "As an actor you want to surprise people with stuff," >

“American culture reveres the hero, but we’re more interested in the dark side”

he says. "If you're trying to play the head of the Jordanian secret service or something that's completely removed from you, it becomes trickier if people know what you had for breakfast or see you and think, 'Hang on, he's from Islington.'"

For a full rundown on the drawbacks of stardom, he only needs to ask his old mucker Daniel Craig, who's godfather to the elder of his two sons, aged 14 and 10. What do they make of their dad's career? "Well, they really enjoyed *Shazam!*" he says. "But they've been on so many film sets and they've been around me doing it for so long I've kind of purposely made it unexotic for them. So if people come up and ask for a picture I'm at pains to tell them it doesn't mean anything, it doesn't mean that I'm important, it's just a job. But I might have gone too far because I'm not sure they're all that interested anymore!"

Another aspect of the job you sense Strong would rather skip is the red carpet. Watch carefully when he's interviewed and you'll see a momentary flash of panic before the first question comes. What's that about? "To be honest, it's that I know I don't have a filter when I'm talking with journalists," he says. "So the faint second of terror is just, 'What am I going to be asked and what am I going to say that is now on camera for the rest of my life?' Because you can go one of two ways: you can clam up and be terrified that you're going to say the wrong thing that will be out there forever. But I tend to choose the other route. I think if you're fairly free and open and honest about everything, people won't stitch you up."

He's right, of course – being a nice guy is tremendously bad copy. He'll even be trying it onscreen in his next projects. Sam Mendes' upcoming *1917*, a heroic WWI chase thriller, features Strong plus (deep breath now), Colin Firth, Benedict Cumberbatch, Andrew Scott and Richard Madden. Thankfully, there were no major accidents on set or the British film industry might never have recovered.

Sky's *Temple*, meanwhile, sees him playing a surgeon who operates a (literal) underground clinic beneath the eponymous tube station. Did he prepare? Of course he did. "I went to Guy's Hospital and watched a lung operation," he says. "I didn't know how I'd respond, but in the end the actor took over and I was really inquisitive. It was interesting seeing what the vibe is in an operating theatre. On TV they're playing Wagner and everybody is really together, but they were just chatting about the weekend. I found that fascinating."

ILLUSTRATION JUSTIN HETZ. PHOTO ALAMY



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Jacket by **Bottega Veneta**. Shirt by **73 London**.
Necklace by **Tateossian**

Stylist
Prue White
Grooming
Julia Carta

“I remember briefly meeting George Clooney, then battering the life out of him”

One scene features Strong and his co-star Daniel Mays performing an impromptu spleen removal, and is definitely not for the faint-stomached. "I worked with a surgeon on set, so when I use a particular clamp or scissors, or when I'm in the wound doing something, I'm doing the correct thing," he says. "Now there's part of me that feels, in a mad world, that if anybody should ever have spleen problems I could probably help. I weirdly feel if it was like, 'Is there a doctor in the house?' I'd say, 'Well I'm not exactly a doctor, but I am an actor...'"

This is typical Strong. Whether supervillain or super-surgeon, he's prepared for anything – even a spleen operation. Does he ever find time to sit back, relax, hang up his chainsaw? He laughs, "You mean my hedge-trimmer?" Touché. ■

📺 **Watch *Shazam!***