

# F R E E A G E N T

OUR MAN IN LONDON **SIMON PEGG** HAS  
INFILTRATED THE **HOLLYWOOD** A-LIST. NOW  
HE'S **READY** FOR HIS NEXT **MISSION**



MATT GLASBY



MATT HOLYOAK



ARABELLA BOYCE







THE 007

Tux by **Richard James**. Shirt by **Emmett**. Shoes by **Underground**. Tie by **Ede & Ravenscroft**

S

tanding outside a suite at The Berkeley hotel that boasts 007-levels of swank, Simon Pegg is busting out his best secret agent moves. Mostly this means arseing around in a series of swish tuxedos, but after two decades in the business (er, show, not

spying) he knows the key to comedy – to everything, really – is commitment. He even jumps over the fire-pit without calling in a stunt double, or Tom Cruise.

Inside, with 360-degree views of the west London sprawl, and walls that, if they could talk, would call you “dahhhlling”, it’s the perfect place to meet a movie star. Thing is, we weren’t really expecting one. Every interview we’ve read with Pegg pitches him, reductively, as the nerd-next-door done well (although calling his 2010 autobiography *Nerd Do Well* probably didn’t help). But the man we meet today has, in football parlance, undergone a full Gareth Southgate. Lean and tanned, he looks every inch the dapper Hollywood denizen – he even says “fall” instead of “autumn” for Christ’s sake. Indeed, it’s hard to disagree when, looking over the photographs, he offers the following, tongue-in-cheek assessment: “Suave bastard.”



In truth, Pegg has come a long way from *Spaced* and *Shaun of the Dead*, and he’s looking to go even further. A veteran of the *Star Trek* and *Mission Impossible* mega-franchises, he’s hoping to break out – not of The Berkeley, it’s lovely – but of the roles he’s been pigeonholed into. This year has been a rollercoaster: he’s been to rehab, and appeared in Steven Spielberg’s *Ready Player One* (adapted from Ernest Cline’s 2011 bestseller) and *Mission Impossible: Fallout*, both massive blockbusters, so there’s no escaping just yet.

As we sit down to chat on one of the three – three! – chaise longues, he tucks into a tuna Niçoise and remarks: “It’s like therapy, this.” We don’t want to delve into his personal demons, we assure him, we just want to hear about Spielberg. “I was going to take some time off after *Star Trek Beyond* and I said to my agent, ‘Don’t call me for this amount of time unless Steven Spielberg calls,’” he says. “Then Steven called – he’s very personal – while I was out for dinner at the Chiltern Firehouse and

he explained what he was proposing, which, um, he didn’t really need to do because I was going to say yes anyway.” He could have just texted, right? Pegg giggles, a sheepish, smirk-made-sound. “Exactly.”

What Spielberg was proposing was that Pegg, who’d appeared in the director’s *The Adventures of Tintin*, play the key role of Ogdon Moss. Moss is a kind of pop-cultural curator, who helps hero Wade Watts (Tye Sheridan) navigate *Ready Player One*’s virtual worlds. These feature too-numerous-to-name allusions to 1980s movies such as *Back to the Future*, *Gremlins* and *The Shining*. The sense of déjà-vu, says Pegg, was extraordinary. “When I was on set, I went to say hi and Steven was shooting *The Shining* sequence. Room 237 [where a key scene in Kubrick’s earlier film takes place] >

#### THE MOLE

Tux and shirt by **Stella McCartney**. Tie by **Ede & Ravenscroft**



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was a practical set, so I basically found him on the set of a movie that had been made 40 years previously. I said to him, 'How weird is this for you – to be making a film that's been already made, and by a mentor and friend of yours?' He said, 'Yeah, it's pretty fucking weird.'" Maybe Spielberg needs to break out a little too?

So if Pegg could port, *Ready Player One*-style, into any film, which would it be? "It would have to be something like *The Matrix*, something fun to be inside," he says. Come to think of it, he did look a little Agent Smith in those dark glasses. "I want to be a good guy, though," he stipulates. "And only the first *Matrix* – not the other two. Otherwise I guess I'd pick the films that are set in fantastic contexts like the original *Jurassic Park*, *Close Encounters* or *ET*; films that have great spectacle. It would be fun to be in those, as we will be able to soon, with the virtual reality that's coming." Of course, we venture, Pegg already *is* in some of these films. He looks sheepish but pleased again: "I know!"



Pegg's other blockbuster, *Mission Impossible: Fallout*, couldn't be more different. "The mantra for the franchise has become that the stunts are real," he says. "After *Ghost Protocol*, when Tom did that incredible scene hanging off the Burj Khalifa [the world's tallest building], people really responded to that, and we identified a gap in the market. As film-making technique has improved, you can literally depict anything onscreen using CGI, which is a brilliant tool, but there's no wonder in it really. But when you *know* that it's Tom or us really doing those things, there's another level of tension that exists, which is the thought that it's not just Ethan Hunt doing that, it's Tom Cruise – it's a guy with a life and stuff."

As Benji Dunn, Hunt's right-hand man, Pegg had to step up to the plate as well. "I had to learn to drive a speedboat on Denham lake, to then drive on the Seine, which was great," he says with pride. "They shut part of the Seine from 10am-11am one morning. I was bombing up and down doing speed turns – which is a real skill." It's also one he's unlikely to need again. "That's the thing about these films, you always get to learn something new but it's never particularly anything you're going to carry on with in real life. Unless you're going to infiltrate some sort of secret organisation or something." Or win *Bullseye*? "Yeah, exactly." There's that smirk-made-sound again.

It's telling that, although Pegg couldn't be warmer or more engaged throughout our chat, the only time

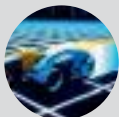
# "WHEN YOU KNOW THAT IT'S TOM OR US REALLY DOING THOSE STUNTS, THERE'S ANOTHER LEVEL OF TENSION"

## GAME THEORY

Ready Player One's movie maths



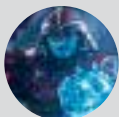
Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory



Tron



Be Kind Rewind



Ready Player One

he laughs – *really* laughs – is when talk turns to his best friend and partner in movies/mischief, Nick Frost. Together, the pair have formed a production company called Stolen Pictures, which releases its first film this autumn – or fall, if you prefer. Pitched, rather enticingly, as "*If....* meets *The Faculty*", *Slaughterhouse Rulez* is about a public school beset by monsters. Explains Pegg: "I play a teacher, Nick's a kind of woodland activist, it's really fun. It's silly, it's allegorical and it's a horror/comedy so it has relevance to us."

But what inspired the company moniker? "Well, we wanted to pick a name that meant something to both of us, that had something to do with our history together," he says. So it's not a clever-clever film reference? "No – Nick once literally stole a picture from a pub noticeboard, and showed it to me weeks later in a fit of guilt." It's here he properly cracks up. "It was a picture of a dog, I still have it in my photo collection, and that was it. It came from that one little incident that happened probably in 1999." Do the people who lost the picture know? "No, nor will they ever." Unless they happen upon this article, that is.

Also top secret is the subject of Pegg's forthcoming directorial debut. "I've wanted to do it forever," he says. "It's always something I envisaged doing at some point, it's only the fact that my acting work has been pretty much back to back for the last 20 years. It's not a comedy particularly, it's not a genre movie, it's nothing that people would assume I'd do." Is that part of the appeal? "Yeah, absolutely. I'm a big fan of comedy, and I ended up specialising in comedic acting a bit, but it wasn't my intention to end up a comedic anything, you know?"

I want to work on getting rid of that assumption. I get called a comedian a lot, but I was a comedian for, like, five years in the 1990s, and I'm not one any more. I have sort of specialised in comedic films, but you do sometimes feel a little bit marginalised as a comic actor because comedy isn't taken seriously – purely because >

## THE PLAYER

Suit, shirt and tie by **Ozward Boateng**. Glasses by **Black Eyewear**



Pegg in Spielberg's *Ready Player One*



THE GENT

Suit, shirt  
and shoes  
by Paul Smith

FUN AND  
GAMES

Can you spot these  
Ready Player One  
Easter eggs?



Slasher icons  
Freddy Krueger  
and Chucky



Monty Python's  
holy hand  
grenade



The logo from  
1980s cartoon  
ThunderCats



Blanka and  
Chun-Li from  
Street Fighter



Last Action  
Hero super-cop  
Jack Slater



John Travolta's  
Saturday Night  
Fever strut



Graffiti showing  
Spielberg's very  
own Jaws

"COMEDY IS A **SKILL** – NOT  
**EVERYONE** CAN DO IT"

it's not serious, ironically. But it is a serious business; it's a skill and not everyone can do it. You don't see awards given out for best comedic performance. Someone like Jim Carey has given virtuoso comic performances throughout his entire career that nobody has even come close to matching, but he'll never be given a credible award until he plays it straight."

This, for Pegg, is the crux of the issue. He knows he's been lucky – well, as "lucky" as someone who's been honing his craft for decades – and it's not that he's ungrateful. "I always say this to my kid [Matilda]; I say find the thing that you love doing the most in the world then try and do that for a living," he confides. "I feel like that's what, fortunately, I've been able to do."

But there's a difference between being fortunate and just falling into something. And you sense the ambition that took Pegg from *Spaced* to *Star Trek* won't be stilled yet, if ever. As a writer, actor and (soon) director, does he find it galling to be dismissed as "just" a comedian? "Yeah, it is and it isn't," he says evenly. "People expect a certain thing and maybe I want to do something different." He pulls a face that's half modesty, half mischief. "So, we'll see how that goes."

Suave bastard or not – and, on balance, we're going to vote not – don't bet against him. ■

Watch all **Ready Player One** onboard now