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# “I’m not a scary guy in real life ... most of the time”

**B**en Mendelsohn is not a bad man. One-on-one, he’s as affable, laconic and foul-mouthed as you could hope. In short, despite a long stint living in LA, he’s still Aussie as. Back home as a guest of the Sydney Film Festival and Vivid Ideas, Ben has been enjoying a rapturous reception, with fans across the country fighting for tickets to any and all of his appearances.

He says his new level of fame – brought on by starring roles in a *Star Wars* film and hit US series *Bloodline* – is yet to change his life. But there’s no doubting how important it is that, two decades after making a splash on Australian screens, he’s finally made it overseas.

“It was absolutely something that mattered to me,” he says. “For 15 years, people would ask me about that. And it never had a celebratory quality to it. It’s never posed to you as, ‘good on you for staying’. Don’t ever let anyone f---ing tell you it’s otherwise, because it isn’t.”

After a long stretch dedicating himself to Australian film and TV, the Melbourne actor has conquered Hollywood. Although he began his career as a fresh-faced leading man in films such as *The Year My Voice Broke* and *The Big Steal*, his true calling turns out to be playing the baddie. It was 2010’s *Animal Kingdom* that transformed his career, beginning a run of roles as dangerous, wounded beasts in films such as *Killing Them Softly*, *The Place Beyond the Pines* and *Mississippi Grind*.

Such is his infamy that, on stopping by triple j as part of the publicity tour for his new film *Una* (in which he plays Ray, a middle-aged man who has an affair with a 13-year-old girl), Ben was asked to read an innocuous excerpt from *The Lion King*, to prove there’s nothing he can’t make scary.

Is he happy with his new status as chief villain? “Perfectly, perfectly happy. I’ll take it. Sometimes people are a bit wary. I noticed a lot of people really shaking when they came up to meet me at the Astor Theatre screening [of *Una*]. It’s nice. I’m not a scary guy in real life, most of the time.” He hesitates. “I can be, I’m told.”

Ray is the latest addition to his line-up of morally dubious men. Later this year, he will be the Sheriff of Nottingham in a new take on *Robin Hood* and the antagonist in Steven Spielberg’s sci-fi thriller *Ready Player One*.

## MYKE BARTLETT MEETS BEN MENDELSON



**Teen tragedy:** Loene Carmen (Freya) and Ben Mendelsohn (Trevor) in *The Year My Voice Broke*. (KENNEDY MILLER PRODUCTIONS)

You might think it would take its toll, getting under the skin of these dark characters, but Ben says he keeps sane by focusing on the script.

“For an actor, the job is being a translator of what someone wrote,” he says. “I’m not worried about getting into the skin of characters at all. All they are is a series of exchanges and whatnot.”

There’s certainly no sense of bad guy menace on show this morning. Well, maybe just a glimmer when I dare to ask about his notorious past with booze and drugs. In the early ’90s, Ben had quite a reputation as a wild child, to the point that ex-girlfriend Kate Fischer once said his drug use drove her “insane with worry”.

In the past, Ben himself has admitted giving way to “excessive hedonism” as a way of dealing with tricky emotions. But today, all he’ll admit is: “I’ve lived a life, and that’s all there is to say.” Fair enough.

A bundle of restless energy (sitting still

seems to be a struggle), Ben is serious yet not reverent; playful, but not frivolous; considered yet plain-speaking. He’s been doing this a long time, after all.

He was 14 and still enrolled at Heidelberg’s Banyule High School (now Viewbank College) when he scored his first acting gig, although he says he never entertained childhood dreams of stardom.

“F--- no, I didn’t want to be an actor. That would be ridiculous,” he says. “It would have seemed incredibly audacious or foolhardy. I did it at school and got a reaction for it and people noticed me with more affection than they had prior. And I liked that.”

Turns in *The Flying Doctors* and *The Henderson Kids* on TV led to film roles. In 1987, he won an AFI award for best supporting actor in *The Year My Voice Broke*. He was 17.

He says he soon started taking acting seriously as a career, aware that success might be fleeting. But he’s proud that he

learnt his chops on the job, rather than taking time off to study at drama school.

“I don’t think I got into the public eye too young. The public eye then was pretty mild, compared to, say, Kim Kardashian. I did an apprenticeship. There are industries that make a decent amount of money by teaching these things, by making it seem a little more difficult and arcane than it really is.”

**T**here’s undoubtedly a touch of working class pride there, but the common touch is part of his appeal. If ‘Our Ben’ has proved immune to the infamous tall poppy syndrome, it’s likely because he doesn’t seem to have lost touch with his roots. He still seems like one of us, an ordinary Aussie who worked hard for the keys to the Hollywood palace.

“I got papped eating a meat pie,” he says. “There’s no better pap than you could possibly get for me. I’m Australian. I know the way we are. I’m not a comfortable self-promoter and maybe people sense that.”

“I’ve had a f---ing normal job, I come from a half-working class, half-intellectual migrant family. There’s Greek there, there’s German, there’s Jewish, there’s Anglo, so I’m a proper regular sweet dumb old Aussie.”

Indeed, Ben is so Aussie that his name has even entered the local vernacular. The phrase “the full Mendo” seems to have become shorthand for his unique brand of sweaty, slow-burning and slightly crazed intensity.

“I’ve heard that expression,” he says. “I don’t know what it means exactly, but I’m quite happy to not know. I’m also f---ing tickled pink.”

Foolishly, I attempt to define the term, aware that this might appear dangerously close to the film-critic equivalent of mansplaining. I came late to the expression, first aware of it when reading about his role as chief villain Krennic in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. The expectation with a role like that is for the actor to treat it with a certain moustache-twirling disdain.

“I thought you wouldn’t take it seriously,” I say. “But you went the full Mendo.”

To my relief, Ben almost falls off his chair laughing. “I f---ing love that. That’s beautiful.”

Our Ben. Really not a bad man at all. ●

[mbartlett@theweeklyreview.com.au](mailto:mbartlett@theweeklyreview.com.au)

**WATCH » *Una* (M) is in cinemas now.**