



# To boldly go

As a racing car fanatic with a home in Melbourne and background in stand-up comedy, Eric Bana is not the first person one would cast as a Star Trek baddie. But as **Claire Scobie** discovers, his career history is full of such strange juxtapositions. Photograph by **Richard Bailey**

**E**ric Bana is comfortable with tattoos. As the villain Nero in the new *Star Trek*, jagged intergalactic designs cover his face like armour. 'Hopefully I won't spark a trend,' he says. It is hard to square the tousle-haired Australian actor with Nero, the bald Romulan leader with large pointy ears and a warped, gravelly voice. The transformation took hours of make-up. 'It was so much fun,' Bana says. 'There you are in the make-up chair, freaking out. By the end of the first week it's very normal, and when the other Romulans took their make-up off, I didn't know how to take them.'

This *Star Trek* prequel, directed by JJ Abrams (*Mission: Impossible III*, *Cloverfield*), centres on the early years of Captain James T Kirk (played by Chris Pine), Spock (Zachary Quinto) and his crew, when the alien Romulan race attacks their Federation starship. For months, ardent fans – 'Trekkies' – have been anxiously waiting to see if Abrams and his team would keep the essence of the original *Star Trek* while appealing to a new, younger mainstream audience.

Bana wasn't a 'mad Trekkie' growing up, but admits he 'fell in love with the script in the first 10 to 15 pages. I knew it was going to be a cracker. [Nero] is not the deepest and darkest character. He's complex enough, but not so complex that I didn't think kids would enjoy it. There's enough there for me to inject a bit of humour into him.' To avoid spoilers Paramount has kept the plot secret, and as Bana hasn't seen the final cut, he's none the wiser. 'If I were in LA I would have seen it, but because I live here it's harder.' Here is Melbourne – the 40-year-old's hometown.

Unlike other Australian film stars who are trailed by paparazzi (Nicole Kidman) or famous for their off-screen antics (Russell

Crowe), what is clear immediately about Bana is the general lack of hoopla that surrounds him. 'It's always bitterly disappointing to people to see how normally one can live,' he says, rolling his eyes.

We meet on an overcast Melbourne day at a quiet cafe overlooking sailboats bobbing in the water. Dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt and beige trousers, Bana is handsome and muscular, standing at 6ft 3in, with mahogany eyes and wavy brown hair flecked with grey. He looks a little tired, but perks up after breakfast washed down by a strong cappuccino.

Before starring in Ang Lee's blockbuster *The Hulk* (2003), Bana was a relative newcomer to British audiences. Since then, he has co-starred with Daniel Craig in Steven Spielberg's controversial political drama *Munich* (2005) and last year played the young Henry VIII in the period drama *The Other Boleyn Girl* opposite Scarlett Johansson and Natalie Portman.

In Hollywood Bana is known for his sure-footed ability in serious dramas, so it may come as a surprise that his background is in comedy. So is he a funny person with a serious side, or a serious person with a funny side? It is tempting to see him as something of a Jekyll and Hyde. On screen he does a mean snarl and brooding stare. In person he is laidback, urbane and very funny, and when he warms up, switches rapidly into different voices, mimicking himself, journalists and Hollywood's movie machine.

Bana does admit to having 'a bit of a temper', as he tucks into his eggs and bacon. 'I can usually tap into it pretty easily,' he says. 'I mean, I don't get into fights, fights in public, nothing like that. But it doesn't take me a few hours to get into it, if you know what I mean.' He won't be drawn on what makes him angry, although

**'I'VE ALWAYS DESCRIBED ROLES AS TATTOOS. FOR ACTORS OUR TATTOOS ARE IN THE FORM OF FILMS'**

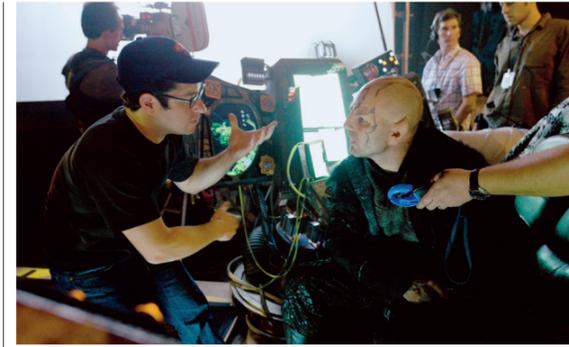
Black suit, tie and belt all by Gucci. White shirt by Emporio Armani.

**Styling** David Bonney at Network Agency

**Grooming** Kevin Murphy for Kevin Murphy Hair Products

**Right** JJ Abrams directing Eric Bana, who plays the villain Nero in the current *Star Trek* film.

**Far right** with Natalie Portman in *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008)



**'HE'S BRILLIANT AT IMPERSONATION, SO HE CAN TAKE ON THE PHYSICALITY OF SOMEONE AND INHABIT IT. HE'S QUITE FEARLESS'**

he says watching 'sad news stories in the mornings' can make him weepy.

In the words of Curtis Hanson, who directed Bana in the gambling drama *Lucky You*, 'He's like the old-time film stars. He loves his home, his family, his motorcycles and cars. He's a man.' He is also a committed St Kilda 'Aussie rules' fan. 'I'm a bit of a tragi' – he translates in his Melbourne drawl – 'football tragic. I go every week if I'm home.'

As Bana makes about one film a year, he is home often and reportedly lives in a £5 million, six-bedroom bayside town house with nine cars in his underground garage, including a 1955 Porsche Speedster. He deliberately does not do films back to back, and has only done so once. Choosing parts, he says, 'is not a decision I take lightly. You'll read things and say, this is a really good project and it's probably going to be a hit, but I can see 20 other people playing that part. You have to have some sense of ownership to do a good job and be married to it for ever.' He pauses, reflective. 'I've always described parts as tattoos. For actors our tattoos are in the form of films.'

Eric Bana's breakthrough cinematic role came from an improbable source – the tattoo-covered Australian gang-leader Mark 'Chopper' Read, who, in real life, proved his mettle by forcing a fellow prisoner to saw off his ears in jail. This violent and shocking film, *Chopper* (2000), has become a cult classic and lends comparison to Robert De Niro's metamorphosis in *Raging Bull*. After two years preparing for the shoot, filming was stopped

so Bana could gain four and a half stones to play the older Read. For a few weeks he stopped exercising and ate chips and doughnuts.

'After that I could see a shift in Eric as he embraced the character in a darker way,' *Chopper*'s producer, Michele Bennett, recalls. 'He's brilliant at impersonation, assuming mannerisms and characteristics, so he can take on the physicality of someone and inhabit it. He's quite fearless.'

A year later Ridley Scott cast him as a Delta Force soldier in his bloody war drama *Black Hawk Down*. Brad Pitt became a huge fan and the pair co-starred in the sandal epic, *Troy*, and are now good friends. When JJ Abrams cast Bana as *Star Trek*'s 'bad guy', he pointedly said, 'He hasn't done anything like this since *Chopper*.'

Without any formal acting training, but a natural gift for mimicry which Bana exploited growing up – 'it got me out of more trouble than it got me into' – his career started in comedy. From 1991, for eight years, he worked Australia's stand-up circuit before shifting to television sketch comedy. He made a name for himself on *Full Frontal*, the Australian equivalent of *Saturday Night Live*, impersonating Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tom Cruise (the skits are still popular on YouTube).

In the vein of Ali G, Bana created a character, Peter (pronounced 'Poida' with a thick 'Melben' accent) – a harmless guy from the suburbs who interviewed famous people. Among his guests was John Wayne Bobbit, who made international headlines after his wife cut off his penis. 'I can't remember what the number one question was to

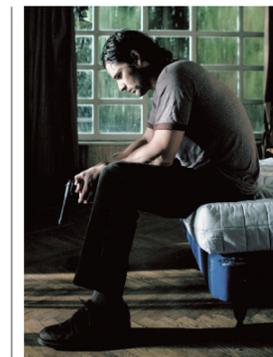
Bobbit,' Bana says, with a wry smile. 'It was probably pretty tasteless.'

After a decade he was burnt out and 'sick of himself'. *Chopper* offered a chance at reinvention as a serious actor. In 2000 he said in an interview, 'It's what I honestly hoped and dreamed for.' He tells me, 'I read the script and said, "This is a once-in-a-lifetime character, not just a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."'

Disciplined and driven, Bana will spend months working on his roles. Although he is 'a firm believer in leaving the character in the trailer at the end of the day', they do live in his head for months afterwards. 'It's like the feeling of having a ghost, but in a good way.' He goes quiet. 'I get inhabited by a character and then you mourn it. There's a period of mourning for me, definitely.'

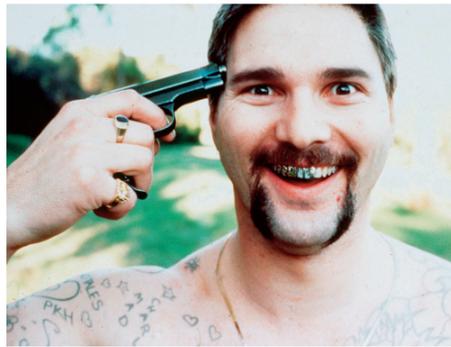
His 'most memorable and overall satisfying experience' was in Steven Spielberg's 1970s thriller *Munich*, based on the grim aftermath of the 1972 Olympics tragedy. Bana played the tight-lipped guilt-ridden Mossad assassin, Avner, whose paranoia spirals out of control as the body count ratchets up. The role was 'creatively as good as it gets', Bana says, and he 'loved the end result'. 'These were the kinds of films that I grew up watching as a young boy, so I felt like I had been cast in one of my favourite films.'

The younger of two brothers, Bana grew up in Tullamarine, a semi-industrial blue-collar suburb next to Melbourne airport. Born to first-generation immigrant parents (formerly known as Banadinovich), his Croatian father, Ivan, worked



**From far left** in *Lucky You* (2006) with Drew Barrymore; in Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005); and as the Hulk in Ang Lee's 2003 film

KOBAL COLLECTION: REVEALING



From far left Bana in his breakthrough role as the gang leader Mark Read, in *Chopper* (2000); as 'Poida' in *Full Frontal*, Australia's version of *Saturday Night Live*; Bana prior to the Bathurst 12-hour Enduro race in New South Wales in February. **Below** with his wife Rebecca Gleeson in January

'MOTOR-RACING IS THE ONE TIME I FEEL TOTALLY COMFORTABLE. THERE IS THIS INNATE PRIMAL URGE TO DO IT'

at the Caterpillar tractor company for 40 years, and Eleanor, his German-born mother was a hairdresser (both are now retired). He had a regular, 'very suburban' childhood, and freely admits to being a 'bogan' – the Melbourne equivalent of the Essex chav.

The young Bana had little interest in school, was hopeless at maths and dreamt of being a racing driver. His father dissuaded him from leaving school at 14 to become a mechanic, but Bana knew he was not going to university. A year later, inspired by Australia's biggest V8 motorsport event, the Bathurst 1000, and Mel Gibson's *Mad Max* 'muscle car', his father bought the teenager a clapped-out 1974 Ford XB Falcon GT Coupe. This car would be the start of a 25-year love affair and would become the subject of Bana's directorial debut, *Love the Beast*, which opened in Australia last month. The film tells how Bana transforms his Ford Falcon into a mean red machine with a super-charged engine to race in the 2007 five-day Targa rally in Tasmania. On day three he dramatically wraps 'his beast' around a tree.

Using shaky home videos and interviews with his parents, friends and wife Rebecca Gleeson, plus cameo performances from the American talk-show host and car fanatic Jay Leno, and the *Top Gear* presenter Jeremy Clarkson – who bluntly told Bana that 'all muscle cars are crap' – the documentary reveals much about Bana's obsession and the enduring constants in his life. He likens his car to 'a campfire' around which he and three mates, ordinary blokes, would gather – and still do – over a few cans of lager.

Bana's other constant, his 'bedrock', is his 12-year marriage to Rebecca, 43, the daughter of Murray Gleeson, formerly the chief justice of Australia's High Court. They have two children, Klaus, nine, and Sophia, seven. When Bana goes away for long film shoots, the family tag along. The children have tutors on set. Keeping the unit together seems crucial for Bana, who admitted recently in an interview with Australia's *GQ* magazine to suffering from 'a mild, non-threatening form of depression, where I hit a wall and go very, very flat'.

He also credits Rebecca for being 'largely responsible for my sanity'. Has she found his stellar rise difficult? 'It's been a very progressive

journey,' he says. 'We are both extremely level-headed, my wife and I, and have a realistic degree of cynicism. She's a very smart lady.'

She puts up with his 'petrol head affliction', Bana says. 'She loves what I get out of it. But she'd be lying if she said she loves the idea of me strapping myself into a racecar. What wife would?' He can now afford to give full throttle to his racing addiction and has custom-built Porsches made. The fact he has already had several crashes and pulled other drivers out of flaming wrecks is no deterrent.

So what is the attraction? 'It's the one time I feel totally comfortable. There is this innate primal urge to want to do it and a huge amount of adrenaline that comes from it.' His eyes glaze over. 'There's an amazing stillness. The week after you compete is like being on pethidine [the painkiller]. I come home and everything is different. The world is bloody fantastic.'

It is an odd mix, this urge to taste the extreme high of circuit motor-racing with a need to be

utterly ordinary. More intriguing is how Bana compartmentalises his life. Even his three friends admit in his documentary that they only meet when Eric is at home. His professional life – going to Hollywood to make films – and home life, he says, 'Don't cross-pollinate at all. The life I have here has no correlation to the life I lead when I hop on a plane and go to work. And that's all because of geography.'

But you could live in America and marry the two? 'That would be a lot easier,' he laughs. 'Purely and simply this is home, where my family and friends are, my life is. Why would I give that up? If I had to, I would. If I didn't have kids, maybe I would have also, but the reality is I'm not the only priority and this is easily the best solution for me and my family.'

You sense Bana is a man biding his time. After saying for years he wouldn't do comedy – 'I could never have dreamt of turning down these dramatic roles' – he is starring with Adam Sandler and Seth Rogen in Judd Apatow's *Funny People* later this year. 'I certainly didn't grab the first script in the comedy genre, but I grabbed what was most appropriate for my style of comedy. If there was something that made me feel I could get the plasticine out and have a bit of fun, I would do it.'

'It's kind of weird how the town [Hollywood] works,' he says. 'They've been circling around it for a while.' He puffs his chest out and switches in an instant to a husky Californian accent. 'How would you feel about a nice, broad' – his hands go wide like a Hollywood producer – 'big comedy?' Bana peals into laughter. 'People are now interested in Ba-naa-r for com-err-dee because someone broke down the door.'

With our time drawing to a close, I ask what car he's in today. 'I'm in the day-to-day family diesel truck.' My dismay is obvious. 'I've disappointed you by not turning up in a sports car. Today it is the domestic run – school, dog to the park, a couple of interviews, back to the office.' He gives me a quick handshake. His hands are cool and the skin is rough – all that tinkering with his beloved beast. When I turn to say goodbye, he's already gone, melted away. The waiter then asks me who I have been talking to. Eric Bana, the film actor, I say. 'Eric who?' he says.

*'Star Trek' is out on May 8*



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