

# PRIME TIME

*Last year proved James Norton to be television gold, with the looks to match. Chloe Fox talks to him about getting comfortable with becoming a bona fide star – and a sex object*

Photographs by Bruce Weber. Styling by Joe McKenna

James Norton hates being called “the man of the moment”. He *really* hates it. Not least because it seems to suggest that it’s downhill from here. “Maybe this is my apex?” suggests the 31-year-old actor. “Maybe this is as good as it gets?”

At the current time – the eve of commencing filming on *McMafia*, an eight-part, multimillion-pound BBC drama dubbed the next *The Night Manager* – it seems unlikely.

While 2016 was, by common consensus, an unmitigated disaster for the rest of the world, Norton’s planets were firmly in alignment. For every one of the first 18 weeks

of last year, he appeared on our prime-time screens, first as the brooding, inscrutable Prince Andrei Bolkonsky in the BBC adaptation of *War and Peace*, then as skinhead psychopath Tommy Lee Royce in the second series of Sally Wainwright’s brilliant Bafta-winning crime drama *Happy Valley*, and finally as the handsome vicar-sleuth Sidney Chambers in ITV’s second series of *Grantchester*.

“On paper, I should have been happier than ever but I’ve rarely felt so low,” Norton admits, of a moment in January last year when he found himself alone and sobbing on the balcony of his Hollywood

hotel room. “I had been flown over for the Golden Globes and stayed in town to promote *Grantchester*,” he recalls. “But for all the heady, boozy, all-expenses-paid fun of it, I was actually just really lonely and really confused by what was happening to my life.”

So Norton did what anyone in a similar position would do; he called his best friends from the University of Cambridge, “who I could always rely on to laugh at my ridiculous life”. Only this time Norton (who incidentally got a first in theology) didn’t feel like laughing and neither, from the January gloom of real life, did they. “When I told them I felt miserable in my free hotel room, they told me to fuck off.”

Today, one year on, Norton – thoughtful, twinkling good company with a healthy propensity for self-mockery – is back to breezy. Fresh from the gym, struggling with a New Year’s resolution to give up alcohol, and pining for his girlfriend, Jessie Buckley (his on-screen sister in *War and Peace*), who left for a two-month job in South Africa only yesterday, he chats animatedly about everything from fashion to faith, and most subjects in between. When the manager of the hip Bermondsey café we’re in approaches, embarrassed, to ask for a photograph for his wife – “She loves you, mate” – Norton obliges with charming good grace. “Makes a nice change,” he smirks as he sits down again. “It’s usually someone’s mum.”

For the most part, Norton is enjoying every minute of his new-found fame. After all, the > 201



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Hair: Paul Hanlon.  
Grooming: Kay  
Montano. Production:  
Little Bear Inc.  
Location: Fulham  
Palace and Gardens



THIS PAGE VESTS, MARGARET HOWELL. OPPOSITE SWEATER, MARGARET HOWELL. VINTAGE TROUSERS, STORM IN A TEACUP. BROGUES, THE VINTAGE SHOWROOM. SOCKS, PANTHERELLA

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VINTAGE JACKET VINTAGE SHOWROOM VEST MARGARET HOWELL



struggling nonentity of a fledgling career is not far from memory. "After I left Rada I worked as a children's party entertainer for Sharky & George," he recalls.

The leonine 6ft 1in actor, whose jawline regularly sends the female Twittersphere demented, has very mixed feelings about being a pin-up. He loves to recount how his 91-year-old great aunt, Grania, recently looked at him across the table at a family lunch and said, "I simply don't understand how you look so good on the telly because you are incredibly bland in real life." Modelling, in particular, is something he found extremely awkward, until this *Vogue* shoot with Bruce Weber.

"He made it pure pleasure," Norton remembers of the misty winter's day in Fulham's Bishop's Park. "Early on, loads of us were crammed into a tiny gardener's hut. I felt petrified." But Bruce drew him in with his photographic narrative. "You're a young gardener," Norton draws, in a pitch-perfect impersonation. "You're applying for a job, and the daughter of the head gardener has just walked in. She's the most beautiful girl you've ever seen. And she's standing just behind my left shoulder. Give her a look." For weeks after the shoot, Norton and Weber emailed back and forth, jokingly continuing the tale. "He and the girl ended up having two children, but then he went to Broadway to star in a play." Norton laughs. "God, I hope it works out."

By his own admission, Norton is a hopeless romantic. When talk turns to Buckley, a vibrantly pretty Irish singer and actress (who shot to fame in 2008 as the runner-up in Andrew Lloyd Webber's BBC talent show *I'd Do Anything*), he turns visibly dreamy. "It was the best New Year I've ever had," he says of the five days that the couple spent together in Venice. "And now she's gone." For the next two months, the couple – who consciously keep the romance alive by not living together in his Peckham flat – won't see each other. "We normally have a three-week rule, but this time I don't think it's going to work," he grimaces. "It's horrible."

Thankfully, there's plenty of distraction in work. Filming *McMafia* will consume his next four months, spent between London and Croatia. Based on Misha Glenny's bestselling book of the same name, the series tells the story of a global gang war, seen through the eyes of a Russian family living in exile in London. For Norton, who plays the Michael Corleone role of the reluctant son who can't resist the pull of the family game, this will be his most high-profile role to date. Tom Hiddleston, watch out. To prepare, Norton (who at the time of writing was one of the bookies' top-ranking favourites – over Hiddleston's fifth place – to be the next James Bond) is dragging himself to the gym. "I'm not an idiot," he says. "I know how it all works and I know why the producers want me to take my top off occasionally. But I reckon it's about time that male actors experience the sort of objectification that actresses have been putting up with for years."

If only they were all as grounded as James Norton – an attribute he puts down entirely to his parents, lecturers both, who provided him with a stable, loving, Yorkshire childhood and worked hard to send him to Ampleforth College. They are quietly proud, of course, but they don't put much value on fame and fortune. "Besides, any minute now they could pick up the paper and some other nonce will be the 'man of the moment,'" he laughs. "God, I hate that expression!" ■