

'We've lost the link between effort & reward'

Sam West is hitting new heights playing an angel, but he's not your average pretty boy – he even likes washing up. Alison Jane Reid talks to him about trainspotting, twitching, Tories – and wearing a VERY awkward pair of wings

Just who is actor Sam West? In an entire galaxy of one-dimensional, pretty-boy actors, West is hard to define or to pigeonhole. He acts, directs, tinkers with politics and goes off to Palestine to conduct The Choir Of London in *The Magic Flute*. He is also an unrepenting atheist, 'and doesn't care who knows it'. Yet he is currently, very happily, playing an angel, in ITV's bold new drama *Eternal Law*, with a delicious mix of charm, cynicism and masculine vulnerability. Oh, and a pair of wings that have a tendency, in Sam's words, to 'pop out at very awkward moments – like an unwanted erection'.

The latest offering from Ashley Pharoah and Matthew Graham – the writers of *Life On Mars* – *Eternal Law* is whacky, whimsical and very good television. It will certainly deliver Sam many new admirers, most of them, I suspect, women.

The truth is that Samuel Alexander Joseph West belongs to the great, British, swashbuckling, politically incorrect and imperfectly talented tradition of Oliver Reed, Richard Harris and Richard Burton.

He thinks and worries far too much about the human condition: about beauty, politics, the death of British manufacturing, sex and, yes, bird-watching (of which more later). He also uses the word 'fecund' a lot.

West is clearly talented, so why isn't he a first-degree Hollywood star? He was very good as Anthony Blunt in *Cambridge Spies* and his performance in *Hamlet* for the Royal Shakespeare Company garnered an award for Best Shakespearean Performance.

My guess is that it's because he doesn't really care to be; he has too

gossipy, patrician leading man in *Notting Hill*?) What he does possess, however, is animal magnetism – and you only have to look on film forums to see how he inspires devotion in his female fans.

Anyway, back to *Eternal Law*, in which he acts everyone else off the screen as Zak Gist, a deliciously cynical, wise-cracking, world-weary lawyer who has another secret life as an angel, dispatched to earth to clean up the lives of messy humans, when his own life is just as complex, and he can't be with the woman he is mad for.

West has never looked more appealing or quite so fallible; hanging out on the pinnacles of York Minster, suited, cigar and whisky in hand, and flexing a fine pair of lusciously downy, anatomically correct wings, complete with all primary feathers. He is magnificent.

And soon we'll have the opportunity to compare West's portrait of George VI with Colin Firth's Oscar-winning turn in *The King's Speech*. West is taking on the shy monarch with a life-long stutter, for his role in *Hyde Park On Hudson*, a film about the love affair between Franklin D Roosevelt and his distant cousin.

When we meet for the launch of *Eternal Law*, Sam has 40 minutes to spare before dashing into town to put the finishing touches to a paper he has written 'attacking the Coalition government on the cuts to arts funding'. In a few days time, he is off to Newcastle to direct *Close The Coalhouse Door*, a play about the demise of British coal-mining. 'There are public-sector work-

ers who have just had a pay freeze, lots of ex-miners, and 75 per cent of the coal is still in the ground and nobody is making anything; it does feel wrong,' he says.

Somehow, I can't imagine most pretty-boy actors even knowing about the miners' strike, let alone caring. West, however, is different.

He is complex, interesting, and has lovely manners. He



'Public-sector workers have just had a pay freeze and nobody is making anything. It does feel wrong'

many other facets to his life that he enjoys more. Nor does he have the soft, bland, conformist perfection that Hollywood currently craves for its leading men.

Somehow, his features just seem a little wrong. Take that mop of unruly, chorister-boy curls, and those strong, aquiline features that can make him sometimes look rather fierce on screen. (Remember him as Julia Roberts's cold,



Sam West - born into the family business of acting
Left: Winging it in *Eternal Law*



Sam with parents Timothy West and Prunella Scales; outside Number 10 with fellow actors



speaks in a tone of mellifluous, rather beautiful, received English. He is also full of fascinating contradictions. He is the son of actors Timothy West and Prunella Scales. And he knows all about *The Lady*. 'My mother has advertised in the magazine for nannies and housekeepers since before I was born,' he explains.

He was educated at Alleyn's, a private school in Dulwich, and he went on to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where he read English Literature. When he broke the news to his parents that he wanted to act, they suggested that becoming a plumber might be a better career. He didn't listen.

On screen he frequently plays toffs, yet he is no Tory. In his 20s, he was briefly a member of the Socialist Workers Party, and he maintains a life-long passion and interest in politics.

Twice a year, since he was 17, Sam takes the sleeper, around midnight, from Paddington to Penzance, 'a whisky in hand until Reading,' at which point he retires to his bunk. He adds that if he times things just right, 'I wake to

couldn't fly. I've also subsequently discovered that Nairobi is the most fecund city in the world for birds.'

But he only took up twitching seriously when he succeeded Michael Grandage as artistic director of Sheffield Theatres, a job he candidly describes as 'reasonably stressful'.

'I lived eight miles from the middle of a grouse moor. So at six in the morning, I could just bomb west, and go for a walk before breakfast. And although the birdlife on a moor isn't amazing, it was the first time I had lived anywhere near the country. I found it completely captivating.'

'There is also the slightly nerdy, boyish need to catalogue things, to list things. I used to be a trainspotter, and a very proud one, too. There is something enormously beautiful about steam trains, and the fact that we made them.'

'I do worry very much that we've lost the connection between effort and reward that comes from making things.'

Sheffield, he says, is a very good example of this decline. 'It used to be a city that made things; now it is a city that sells things. And it's losing its memory. It may be a very nice city – it is certainly cleaner, and there are more fountains. But there's something about the satisfaction of producing things with your hands, the sense of achievement, and pride.'

West is certainly complicated but he isn't a hypocrite. When he says there is satisfaction in using your hands, he means it. When he isn't washing up, he goes birdwatching.

'There's this valley near Land's End, called Cop Valley – and it must be the most beautiful setting in Britain. It's this incredibly damp, warm valley, and the birds are amazing. The chances of seeing a rarity are really quite high.'

'Going birding gives me a completely different attitude to the year. Now I see the seasons as heralding different, migratory birds. Instead of November and it's freezing, I think it's November and the geese have arrived.'

Several days after interviewing Sam West, I stumbled across this quote from him on his entry for IMDB – the leading information website for filmmakers and actors.

'Oliver Reed regretted not sleeping with every woman in the world, and Betjeman said he wished he'd had more sex. It doesn't matter how much sex I have, I'll be of Ollie Reed's mind when it comes down to it. And so will anybody who is honest.'

Well, I would say that Sam West is a man who frets and thinks too much. But he is also a man who truly lusts after life – and what's wrong with that? It's not like he ever claimed to be an angel. ◆

◆ *Eternal Law* is broadcast on Thursdays on ITV1 at 9pm.

◆ *Alan Plater's Close The Coalhouse Door*, directed by Sam West, runs from 13 April to 5 May: 0191-230 5151, www.northernstage.co.uk

'There is something enormously beautiful about steam trains, and the fact that we made them'

the view of St Michael's Mount.'

He then spends a very happy, contented few days cooking, washing up piles of dishes and generally grafting behind the scenes at the International Musicians Seminar in Prussia Cove.

Why, I ask? For the first time in the interview, he grows quiet. Is it the contrast between thinking and physical grafting? 'Yes, it is partly that. I just like washing up... actually I don't like washing up. But if you have a team of five, washing up together, and you get to the end, it is enormously satisfying.'

Well, I did say West is complicated.

But West's Penzance trips also coincide with the main spring and autumn bird migration patterns. Originally, he was inspired to study the birds, after a trip to Kenya in his teens to visit his uncle who was a solidier working there.

'I went out on safari and I just loved the fact that birds were either four inches long and bright blue, or seven feet tall and

GOING WEST

◆ Born 19 June 1966. His parents are the well-known actors Timothy West and Prunella Scales.

◆ At Oxford University he was a member of the Socialist Workers Party. 'Actors are generally poor and they work together,' he said in a recent interview, 'so left-wing politics are a natural fit.'

◆ He confessed to *The Stage* that one of his golden rules for acting is 'trying to remain solvent so you don't have to do rubbish'.

◆ Off-screen he is a keen birdwatcher – and much-loved narrator. He has recorded more than 50 audio books, including *Coriolanus* and *Birdsong*.