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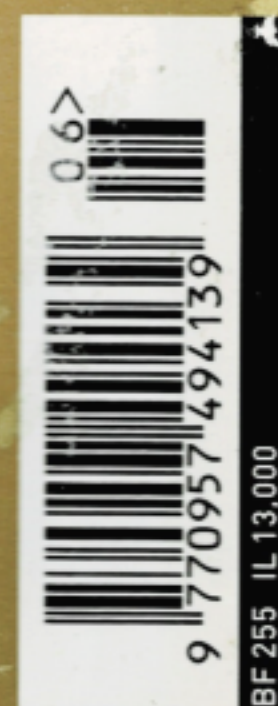


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# THE MUMMY RETURNS





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## THE MUMMY RETURNS

Rachel Weisz,  
Brendan Fraser,  
director Stephen Sommers  
and ILM talk exclusively  
about the summer's  
first blockbuster.

COVER  
STORY



THE  
MUMMY  
RETURNS





# THE PRINCE OF EGYPT

Action hero, character actor and comedian, the irresistible rise of Brendan Fraser continues...

At the rehearsal dinner to celebrate his marriage to Afton Smith, Brendan Fraser regaled guests with a story that took place a few weeks earlier when the actor purchased the engagement ring. Fraser had needed to get the stone set in a hurry and the woman in the shop suggested that — while the family they used for this kind of job were nice people — it might speed things along if Brendan signed a few photos. Turns out the son of the jewellers — just a toddler, mind — was a huge *George Of The Jungle* fan. This was back in 1998, the year after cartoon swinger George and his magnetic attraction to trees had established Fraser as a star, especially with young boys. Anyway, in an effort to ape his hero, the toddler in question had recently built a tree out of pots and pans, climbed onto a kitchen counter and launched himself at the ‘tree’. The boy crashed into the pot pile with so much force he separated his gonads. Now, the woman in the shop assured Brendan that the boy was well on his way to recovery but, she said, a signed card could not hurt. Shocked and shamed he may have been, but Fraser could not resist. The boy’s parents were in the business, after all. On the card he wrote, “Take care of the family jewels. Love Brendan Fraser.”

Repeating this story to a sadly hysterical *Empire*, Fraser is caught between impish glee and paternal horror. It turns out that ‘gonad boy’ — “Names have been changed to protect the innocent” — was hardly an isolated incident. Even now, some three years later, Fraser is constantly stopped in airports. “I can’t tell you the number of mothers and fathers who have come up to me and said, ‘My kid has four stitches on his forehead thanks to you.’” Guilt-wracked for having repeated the story, Fraser begs

*Empire* to include a disclaimer near the top of this feature. “Please, kids,” he dictates, “if you’re going to throw yourself at trees, please wear a helmet.” (NB: Any pun is not intended.)

Any helmet-wearers should adjust the chin-straps, we are Down Under. Sydney, to be exact. Brendan Fraser, however, is just back from his first tour of Vietnam. As the central location for Phillip Noyce’s *The Quiet American* — based on the book by Graham Greene and co-starring Michael Caine — the well-travelled Fraser was much taken with a country which on celluloid has usually required a stand-in. Shin-deep in paddy fields, Fraser was unsure which was more stunning: the scenery or the endless bureaucracy needed to obtain locations. “That’s just the way things are done in certain parts of Asia,” he shrugs, with a slightly world-weary air.

Fraser chats to *Empire* on a Sunday, his day off from shooting *Quiet American* interiors at Sydney’s Fox studios (home of *Episode II*, *The Matrix et al*). Every day at the lot entrance, Fraser passes a casting agency where eager hopefuls gather anxiously. “I see the crowd of good-looking guys and girls and they’re talking to a bush going over their lines,” he laughs nervously, “and my heart just thumps in my chest.”

He lets out a long sigh. Fraser has not had an audition in eight years, and still he suffers the occasional anxiety dream. And yet, as with so many actors, it was an audition that changed his life. The movie was called *School Ties*. When the name is brought up, Fraser’s voice drops to a respectful whisper, “Wow, that was a big event in my life... for the path that it sent me on.”

Although initially lost in the pile of videotapes, eight months later Fraser found

himself at a new set of auditions, and suddenly he was back in the frame. But faced with a group of actors — including Matt Damon and Chris O’Donnell — who had been cast for some months already and had formed a good bond, Fraser found that he “stuck out like a sore thumb”. Softly, instinctively, he recites the mantra that saw him through the ordeal. “Do I belong here? Am I allowed to be here? I can do this, I know I’m good at it. Just give me a shot, just give me the ball and I’ll run with it.”

As fate would have it, the part of David Greene — a Jewish kid at an uptight prep school — was a misfit himself, and Fraser simply let “the given circumstances speak for themselves”. *School Ties* came out in 1992, the same year as hit comedy *California Man*, and two motifs for Fraser’s

**“I ALWAYS LOOK FOR SOMETHING I’VE NOT DONE BEFORE. IF I CAN EMPATHISE WITH ONE THING, IT’S THE FISH OUT OF WATER CHARACTER.”**

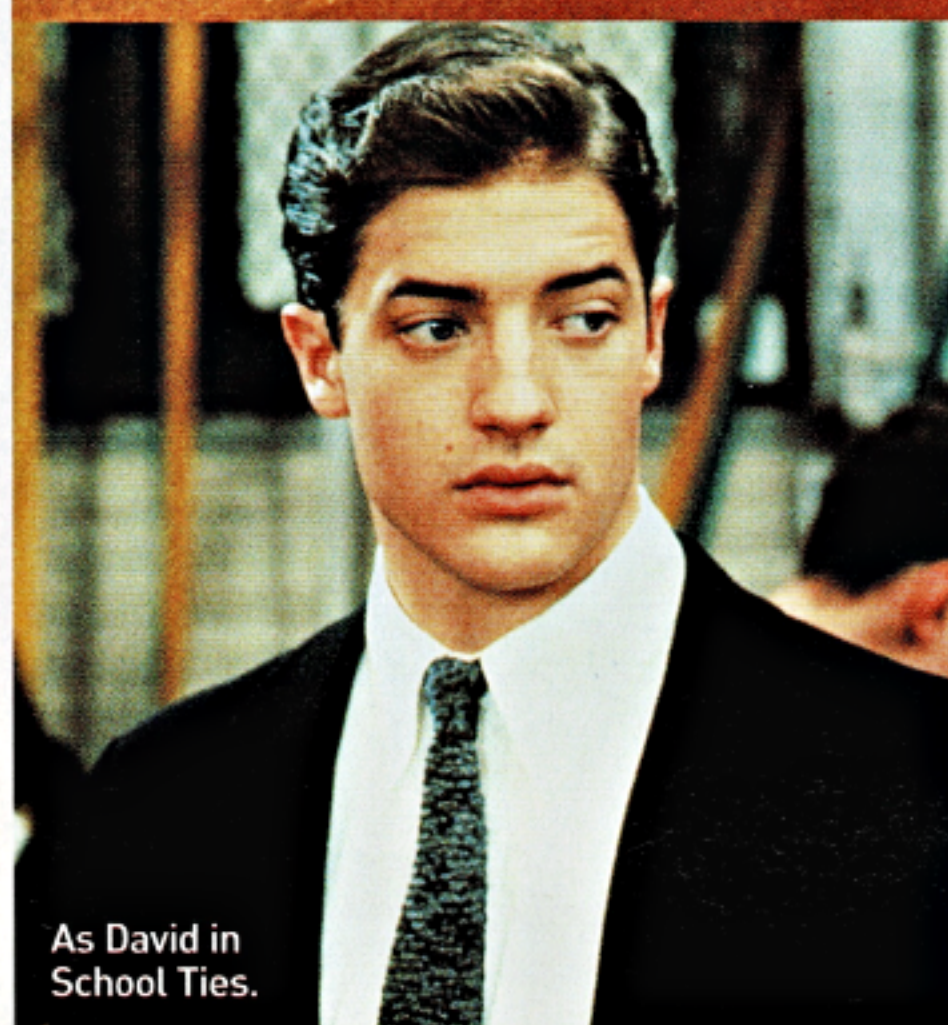
career were set. First, the ‘sore thumb’ — the outsider characteristics which draw common ground between a Jewish student and a de-frosted Neanderthal in ’90s Encino. Secondly, the elements that set those two career-making turns apart — which is pretty much everything else. Not for the last time, Fraser made his mark in the broadest of comedies and the most subtle of dramas.

While Fraser points out that the second motif is the only conscious factor in his project choices — “I always look for something that I’ve not done before” — he is also aware that he is drawn to outsiders. “If there is one thing that I can empathise with in the characters I’ve chosen, then it’s ➤

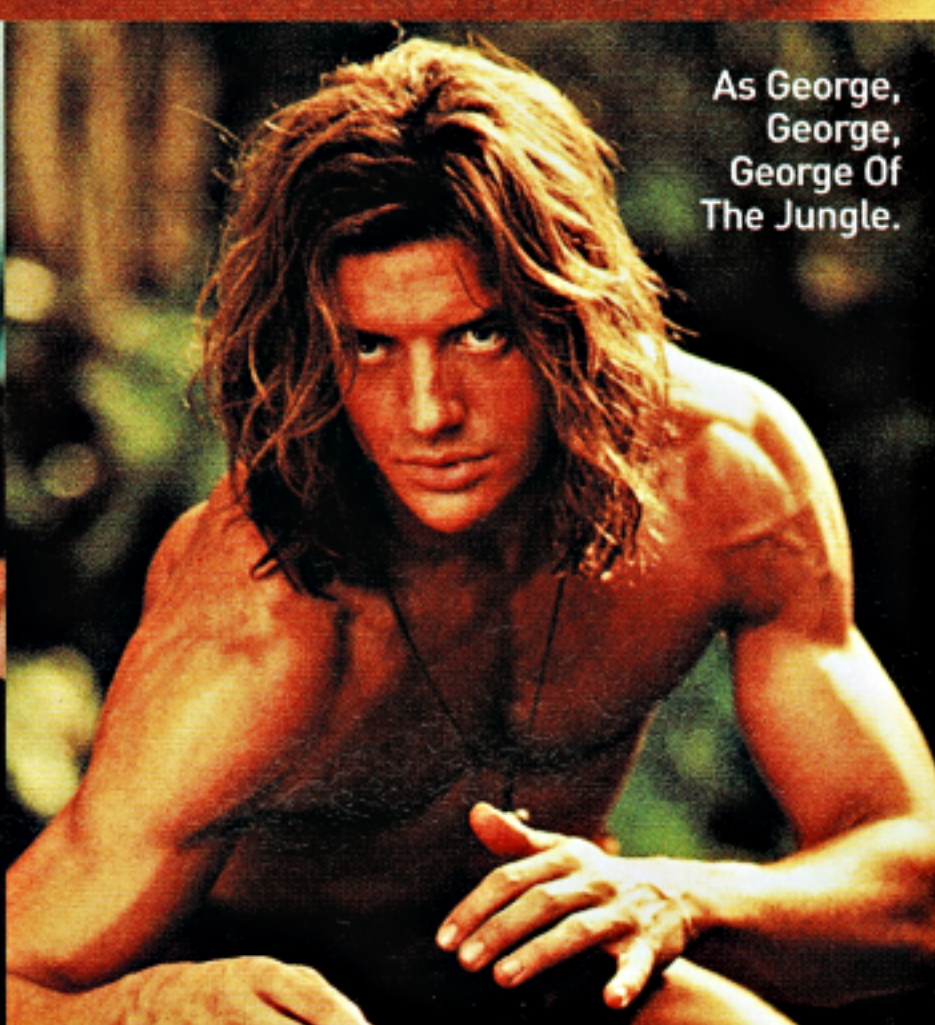


# THE MUMMY RETURNS

"I THINK I'M ONLY AS GOOD AS THE MATERIAL I'M GIVEN."



As David in School Ties.



As George, George, George Of The Jungle.

the 'fish out of water' or whatever the term may be. I can identify with the man who feels like he's new to an environment — I was always the new kid."

Fraser was always the new kid. The son of a Canadian tourist official, Brendan — along with his three older brothers — spent time in almost every European capital. Inevitably, the nomadic existence put special pressures on the youngest son. "It just meant that I needed to be more comfortable in my skin no matter where I was. At that young age, it's kind of a sink-or-swim tactic you need to adopt for survival." And was acting your best swimming stroke? "It must have been. Or at least, just to reach out and make contact with people and own myself, have a resiliency about languages and cultures and ways of being." He pauses. "And it had to have something to do with the path I've taken as an adult."

Fraser began acting seriously in his early teens at a Toronto boarding school in an after-lessons theatre group, who "would knock the hell out of Twelfth Night or whatever it might be". As Fraser says,

"Whether it was good or bad, who knows, who cares, the point was that I was doing it and it gave me a sense of purpose."

It is tempting to ask if that sense of purpose and belonging carries through to the present day, but, Fraser demurs, these days it's mostly work. "It's what I know how to do, and it's a job that in some way defies description, because it's always different."

It is always different. Although Fraser would modestly shrug off the suggestion, a decade into his movie career proper, he has remained an outsider to some degree — always excellent, often overlooked and just slightly to the north of mainstream Hollywood, as befits a half Canadian. It is difficult to think of another actor who would meet at auditions for the gentle gardener Clay Boone from *Gods And Monsters* and ape-man George. "Actually, it was George first, then Clay Boone," he corrects with a deprecating laugh.

Such singular choices have meant certain movies, like the ambitious *Monkeybone*, have failed to find an audience. Fraser happily enters into a typically measured defence of *Monkeybone*, acknowledging that the words which made "the hairs on the

back of my neck" stand up are also the ones that frighten the money men. Words like 'dark', 'macabre' and 'mythology'.

He also admits to a long learning curve. Asked if he is naturally funny, Fraser replies, "I think I'm only as good as the material I'm given" — and it has taken him ten, often frustrating, years to realise that the material he responds to in a script is often unrelated to what ends up on screen. As for what happens upon release... "My crystal ball is broken," he shrugs.

The *Mummy Returns* is the first sequel in Fraser's unpredictable career.

(Unless, of course, you were to include the uncredited cameos he has made in several Pauly Shore movies, always as Link, the caveman from *California Man*. "I count them," insists a giggling Fraser, "I'm always happy to do a favour for Pauly.") Yesterday, Fraser got his first look at the still unfinished film. It was a hush-hush affair. "I'm not joking, Universal flew a copy with an assistant to screen it for me and they picked it up in the morning and put it back on a plane. I was envisioning it in a briefcase handcuffed, and it wasn't far off." The film was on "a buzzy videotape" and missing FX shots, but Fraser was very happy with what he saw. "I don't want to get too cocky, but what I saw was really quite impressive. This is a thrill ride."

**"I DON'T WANT TO GET TOO COCKY, BUT WHAT I SAW WAS REALLY IMPRESSIVE. MUMMY RETURNS IS A THRILL RIDE."**

A few more weeks in Sydney, and Fraser can pack his bags and head home. With the strike looming he has no plans until autumn, when he hopes to return to the West End stage he once frequented as a wide-eyed kid. But this time around, he will star as Brick in a new production of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. The producers approached Brendan after a tip-off from his *Gods And Monsters* co-star, Sir Ian McKellen, and Fraser in turn nominated his Bedazzled leading lady, Frances O' Connor, for *Maggie The Cat*. "She's got a hell of a Maggie in her," he notes.

Beyond that, who knows? Fraser understands he cannot continue busting his balls (pun intended) in the pursuit of laughs forever. "Y'know, I'm at a crossroads," he muses. "I know that I'm gonna have a bit of time to think about it and I don't have plans for booking myself up. It seems so abstract to say, 'Well, in 2002 I will be doing...'" He laughs one last time. "I'm sorry, I don't even know where I'm going for lunch."

Colin Kennedy

● The *Mummy Returns* is released on May 18. Check out Empire Online for the latest reviews.