





**UP FOR AIR**

**Brendan Fraser**'s been spending a lot of time in middle earth, battling 3-D dinosaurs and saving the world from angry mummies. The experience has made him one helluva shot

BY MARGOT DOUGHERTY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN STEPHENS



**Brendan Fraser** has crumpled his six-foot, three-inch frame beneath a tableau of tumbleweeds and sand at a photo studio in Hollywood. The idea is for the actor to pop his head through a hole in the middle of the ersatz landscape (as you can see, voilà, on the previous page). Instead, the squished Fraser, his head at an awkward angle, his torso just about parallel with the floor, looks impishly at photographer Justin Stephens from the underside of the set. “Let’s take the pictures from down here!” he says. “I double-dog dare ya!”

If you think world-weariness and cynicism are inevitable by-products of the Hollywood machine, Fraser, star of *Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*, the third installment of the *Mummy* franchise, and of the upcoming *Inkheart*, a children’s movie with Helen Mirren—not to mention *Journey to the Center of the Earth*—is here to prove you wrong. That “double-dog dare ya” wasn’t uttered with a nanospeck of irony, and it’s a harbinger of sarcasm-trouncing statements to come. “Last night I got to present an award to Harrison Ford!” he says as we settle into a Mercedes and head for the Firing-Line, an indoor shooting range in Burbank. “I

gave the Brass Balls Award to Han Solo! Indy! The president! When I got home, I couldn’t believe that this is my life.”

Spending an afternoon with Fraser—and it’s pronounced *Fra-zer*, not *Fra-jher*, in the event you run into him—feels like speed dating a lineup of his sunniest movie characters: the ever-marveling Encino Man, the goofy rocker from *Airheads*, the sweet George of the Jungle. George’s leopard loincloth, which showed off Fraser’s mile-long legs and rippling abs to sublime effect, has unfortunately slipped from fashion, and today the actor is wearing dark-wash jeans with discreet rips, a navy NYFD T-shirt, and black boots with a tapered toe, neither too pointy nor too round. His politeness is almost startling. He locks eyes on meeting and says, “The pleasure is mine,” as he shakes hands. When the GPS voice, a woman’s, instructs him to turn right in 800 feet, he says “Thank you” under his breath. You can see why a casting agent would nail him as Dudley Do-Right (Sarah Jessica Parker was Nell), but you might not guess why Fraser took the job. Not because his great-great-grandfather was a Royal Canadian Mountie. No. “I wanted to wear the outfit,” he says. “There! I said it. If you are wearing that red tunic and that hat and those boots, you are feeling sharp as a tack.”

When Fraser, who is 39, first came to L.A., it was 1989 and he’d just graduated from the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. He rented an apartment not far from the intersection we’re approaching, Magnolia and Victory, planning to stay for the summer. “I was 20 and had my AAA map and an appointment to read for Taylor Hackford,” he says. “I didn’t get that part, but I got an agent and things snowballed.” He got a one-liner in 1991’s *Dogfight* with River Phoenix: “How’dya like to eat my shit, huh?” A producer told him to lose the “huh”—even so, the cameo was cut. He fared considerably better with *School Ties* the following year, starring as a Jewish scholarship student at a 1950s WASP-filled prep school where Matt Damon does him oh-so-wrong. While innocence has a sappy connotation, Fraser can subliminally charge his with an unexpected force when needed. In the award-winning *Gods and Monsters*, he’s elusively seductive; an aging Ian McKellen sees a carnal ideal in his open eyes, lips so plush they could belong to a woman, and a body radiating the brute physicality of a marine. The innocence turns darker in *The Quiet American*, in which Fraser’s CIA operative causes untold damage under the guise of beneficence.

It’s celebrity-chic these days to voice pandas, toys, and roosters, but Fraser, who cites



**SMOKIN' ACE:** Fraser in *The Mummy* (top) and with Ian McKellen in *Gods and Monsters*

*Ratatouille* as his new favorite movie and likes to quote Yosemite Sam, throws his whole body into animation projects; he's king of the green screen. Take *Monkeybone*, a trippy comedy with Whoopi Goldberg, Bridget Fonda, and a raunchy cartoon monkey, Fraser's nemesis. It was so much fun to make, he says. It shows what happens when a studio gives a director \$80 million and doesn't pay attention. It turned into an art house movie. A juvenile part of me goes, Ha-ha, we got to make this movie and they didn't know! As a follow-up, Fraser worked with celluloid greats Bugs and Daffy in *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*. Now, with *Journey*, he's holding his own against 45-foot dinosaurs and ooze-filled man-eating plants. But Fraser's payday has been the crazy success, \$40 million and counting, of the *Mummy* series. He is, after all, a natural as the accidental swashbuckler, a chip off the old Indy rock.

It's been seven years since the last *Mummy*, and this one costars Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, and Maria Bello, who replaces Rachel Weisz as Evelyn. Fraser's Rick O'Connell and Evelyn are married now, with a grown child (Luke Ford), a swashbuckler-in-training. I couldn't not think of Rachel when I read the script, Fraser says. She's indelible that way. But Maria delivers in spades. He is annoyed

by a tabloid report that they had a set romance. She has a boyfriend! he says. Fraser separated from his wife, Afaton, with whom he has three young sons, in December.

Going to a shooting range, it turns out, is different from going to a bowling alley. You can wear your own shoes, but you can't get past the front desk without proving someone in the party can load and unload a gun. Fraser's training has come on the job: You're just firing blanks, but you still treat the prop like a weapon, even if it's plastic. It's just the rules. He had asked that a coach come along, so Mike Mello, who is a cop and a licensed weapons consultant, has agreed to meet us. He helps Fraser choose two guns, a .45-caliber semiautomatic Government model and a .357 Smith & Wesson magnum revolver. I get a Glock 17 9mm semiautomatic. As we head for the lanes, mandatory ear and eye protectors in place, Fraser puts his NYFD cap on

my head to protect against errant casings inging themselves my way.

By the time I've managed to wrestle a single slippery bullet into the tightly sprung magazine, Fraser has neatly perforated the chest and abdomen of a paper silhouette suspended yards away. His stance is steady as his bullets follow each other through the same holes. He starts calling them, like in a pool game: Earring! Nipple! Impressive. My paper man is dead as a doornail, too. So is his entire village. My bullets have minds of their own.

He's a good shot, Mello says when we've finished. I'd like to take him to an outdoor range and push him further. Fraser is not so sure. Back at the photo studio we park ourselves on the patio. I'm far more comfortable being given a task where I know what to do and how to do it, he says. I find it satisfying to be certain of what I'm doing. Sometimes that certainty shows itself in unexpected ways, as when Fraser asks if I'd like to see his imitation of his muscles in training. It's a one-man show, with exuberant support from his arms and legs and cartoon voices imploring, cajoling, and stonewalling their master. The question seems redundant, but I love it anyway: Why do you act? I ask myself that a lot, he says. I act so I can stay happy.