

He's Swedish.
He's single.



Alexander Skarsgard, 42,
photographed by Michael
Schwartz. Opposite:
in the BBC drama
The Little Drummer Girl

And he wants
to marry a Brit

Alexander Skarsgard loves Leeds, pubs and Steve Coogan. Helena de Bertodano meets the Scandi star of John le Carré's latest TV hit thriller, The Little Drummer Girl



In the first episode of the BBC drama series *The Little Drummer Girl*, Gadi Becker, played by Alexander Skarsgard, is described as “an international man of mystery”. The same might be said of Skarsgard himself. He is a hard man to pin down. It takes weeks to arrange a meeting with him, across continents and time zones – the location switching from New York to Stockholm to Los Angeles, then Toronto. Even en route to Toronto, I have no idea when or where – or, to be honest, if – we will meet. The next day, I receive my instructions: come to the Ritz-Carlton hotel at Ilam. As soon as that is tied down, the location and time change. Now it’s 11.15 at the Shangri-La Hotel, where a private dining room has been reserved: “Take the elevator to the ground floor, turn right and there will be a host desk. The reservation is booked under the name ‘Andrew Kerr.’”

As I wait alone in the room, the minutes ticking by, I idly google “Andrew Kerr”, just in case he shows up instead. A photograph of a laughing red-faced man with sweeping white hair – the co-founder of the Glastonbury festival – fills the screen. But he died in 2014. Noon comes and goes. The walls are mirrored glass, so I can’t see the corridor outside. Then, just when I have given up all hope, one of the mirrored panels opens and a tall man, dressed from head to toe in black, lopes in, black sunglasses covering his eyes. “Hi, I’m Alex,” he says, removing the glasses to reveal ice-blue, tired eyes. He apologises profusely for being late – he is too nice to say so, but none of the uncertainty is his fault. He has no control over his Toronto Film Festival schedule, which is managed by a team of publicists and includes back-to-back screenings, conferences and panels. “This week is killing me,” he sighs, pulling out a chair. He is too tall to fit his knees under the table so he sits sideways, legs flung out in front of him, pouring himself a cup of black tea from a dainty china pot.

The Little Drummer Girl is a six-part television adaptation of John le Carré’s espionage novel, produced by the same team that created the excellent *The Night Manager*. Skarsgard, 42, plays a mysterious Mossad agent who entices a young English actress called Charlie, played by Florence Pugh, to help him undermine a Palestinian terror network. For the role he drew on his own experience in the Swedish military. “You quickly assess a situation and learn how to navigate it.”

The director of the series, Park Chan-wook, best known for the notorious revenge thriller *Oldboy*, has said of Skarsgard’s role as Becker, “To play an enigmatic man who hides his true feelings deep inside, I couldn’t think of a more fitting actor.”

Few actors have played a wider range of characters than Skarsgard. He kicked off his



With Florence Pugh in *The Little Drummer Girl*

‘My father wasn’t like my friends’ dads. He’d just walk around naked with a glass of wine’



Clockwise from left: in *The Legend of Tarzan*; with Lady Gaga in her 2009 video for *Paparazzi*; with his father, Stellan Skarsgard

career in *Zoolander* as a vacuous male model. “Did you ever think,” asks Ben Stiller peevishly of his character, Meekus, “that there’s maybe more to life than being really, really, really ridiculously good-looking?”

It was Skarsgard’s first Hollywood movie and it seems he has been trying to formulate an answer ever since, often running in the opposite direction to make himself as unattractive as possible – not easy for a 6ft 4in, blue-eyed blond Swede who is absurdly handsome even in Scandinavian terms. In *Big Little Lies*, the HBO series that won him both a Golden Globe and an Emmy, his expression is often one of twisted rage as he beats up his wife, played by Nicole Kidman. In *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, he plays a moustached paedophile; in *Hold the Dark*, a recently released Netflix movie, he wears a sinister wolf mask as he wreaks murderous mayhem on a small Alaska town.

Part of a Swedish acting dynasty, Skarsgard is the eldest of eight siblings, some of whom – Gustaf, Bill and Valter – act too. His father, Stellan Skarsgard, stars in Lars von Trier movies and is one of the trio of fathers in *Mamma Mia!*. Although well established as an actor for the past decade, Alexander Skarsgard does not live a movie-star lifestyle. Until recently, he did not even have a place to live. “For the past three years I haven’t had a home. Just a suitcase with the bare essentials.”

So he has been travelling from one film set to another, then returning to Stockholm to sleep on his father’s futon. “I stay in their gaming room,” says Skarsgard, speaking without a hint of a Swedish accent. “He has a six-year-old and a nine-year-old [Alexander’s half brothers from his father’s second marriage] so at seven in the morning the kids come in and sit on my head and play video games.” Recently, however, he has bought flats in both New York and Stockholm, although has spent hardly any time in either.

Skarsgard describes his upbringing as bohemian, living in a large apartment with his cousins above and his grandparents over the road. Every night there would be big raucous dinners at home with extended family and his parents’ hippy and anarchist friends. Skarsgard was embarrassed by his extrovert father. “He wasn’t like my friends’ dads, the archetypal Swedish businessmen. I wanted him to wear a grey suit and go to the office.” What did he wear? “Kaftans. Or nothing. He’d just walk around naked with a glass of wine. He’s an extraordinary cook. I think he’s more passionate about cooking than acting. So he’d cook and hang out and be social and lovely – everything I appreciate today, but at the time I was just, ‘Be normal, dude.’”

“It’s always fun to embarrass your children,” says his father with relish, speaking by phone later from his Stockholm home, which sounds



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like merry chaos with his two youngest sons shrieking in the background. “Now Alex has become like me. I’m very pleased when he goes to a premiere in drag or when he tells everybody on the *Conan* show that I have a small penis. That makes me proud.”

Like his father, the younger Skarsgard has an off-kilter sense of humour. Although he doesn’t really engage with social media, he has an account under the pseudonym @rexdanger (“Danger is my maiden name”), where he posts mysterious photographs: a strapless thong; a hairy man smoking a pipe with the caption, “Happy Mother’s Day”.

Growing up, Skarsgard spent a lot of time

From top: picking up Emmy awards with Nicole Kidman for the HBO drama *Big*

Little Lies, 2017; with his former girlfriend, Alexa Chung, in New York, 2016

at the theatre. “Most of my childhood memories are backstage when my father was working with Ingmar Bergman. I didn’t care about him; he was just an old man reading Strindberg lines. But I loved being in the catacombs where they had all the prosthetics and wigs. The make-up artist would try everything on me.”

Inevitably, Skarsgard was drawn into acting. “It was haphazard. Once, Allan Edwall, who was a formidable actor and film-maker in Sweden, needed a seven-year-old kid for his film and he was over at our place. I happened to be seven and he was like, ‘Hey do you want to be in my movie?’ I was like, ‘Yeah, sure.’”

His father, who was in the film as well, says, “It was obvious Alex had a talent. He had a very vulnerable, open face, which he still has. Even when he plays this awful character in *Big Little Lies*, you see a streak of vulnerability that makes him – even as a monster – human.”

But when he played the lead role aged 13 in another Swedish movie, Skarsgard struggled with the ensuing attention. Girls would be waiting outside his home for autographs. “It made me very uncomfortable. So I quit.”

He finished school, and then – in a bid to show how different he was from his pacifist parents – enlisted in the Swedish navy for 18 months, joining an antiterrorism unit. Then came another strange move: he went to Leeds to study English, deliberately avoiding London “because all Swedes go to London: it’s an adventure, but a safe adventure”. Skarsgard doesn’t do safe adventures. He loved Leeds, embracing the pub culture, becoming a passionate Leeds United supporter and soaking up British comedy, especially Alan Partridge/Steve Coogan – still his idol. He lived in an unheated basement flat “like a bomb shelter”, sharing a bathroom with two dodgy men. “One looked like the killer from *Twin Peaks* – he had long grey hair and screamed at himself – and the other was a drug dealer who fried fish in his room.”

Still uncertain about his future, Skarsgard visited his father, who was working in Los Angeles, and on a whim auditioned for *Zoolander*. Completely unprepared, he turned up in flip-flops, met Ben Stiller, read a couple of lines and landed the role. When he moved later to LA to pursue an acting career, having decided it was the only thing he was any good at, he found it much harder than he had thought. “I was the bottom of the barrel.”

For years he tried to get a foothold, with very limited success, and was on the verge of going home. “I was auditioning for a horror movie to play the boyfriend who gets eaten by the monster in the third scene. I thought, ➤

‘What is the point?’ I don’t want to do this and it’s not like I’m even being offered it; I have to chase after it. I was only doing it to please my agents.”

Then, just before his visa ran out, his luck changed. He was offered the role of Sergeant Brad “Iceman” Colbert in the Iraq War miniseries *Generation Kill*. Thirty-six hours later he was on a plane to Namibia, where he filmed for seven months in the desert. “That changed everything,” he says. *True Blood* – the fantasy horror television series that made his name, albeit as a Viking vampire – followed, then he was asked to play Lady Gaga’s boyfriend in her 2009 music video *Paparazzi*, which has had more than 225 million views. “I was completely oblivious to who she was,” says Skarsgard. “But I knew Jonas [Akerlund, the director], and he told me his idea for the music video. As far as love stories go [he throws Lady Gaga off a balcony; she comes back and poisons him], it felt like a pretty fun one.”

Perhaps *The Legend of Tarzan* is the only movie in which Skarsgard has unabashedly traded on his looks. Even so, he was not a shoo-in for the role. Warner Bros was concerned that he was not “primal and animalistic” enough. That changed when a video of a very drunken Skarsgard leading a football chant in support of his beloved local team, Hammarby, popped up on YouTube. Skarsgard recalls the embarrassment he felt the morning after the match when he woke up with a hangover and realised the video had gone viral. “I was like, ‘Oh God, that’s it.’” In fact, instead of sabotaging his career, it solidified it. “My agent sent it to Warners and said, ‘Is he not animalistic enough for you?’”

Skarsgard doesn’t move in Hollywood circles. “One of my closest friends makes yoghurt,” he says. He is referring to Siggi Hilmarsson, an Icelandic entrepreneur who has set up a very successful yoghurt business in the United States, Siggi’s Dairy, soon to launch in the UK. “We met eight years ago at a *glögg* [mulled wine] party. It was almost like an epiphany. I knew immediately, ‘Oh shit, I think we’re best friends.’ And we are. It was like a love story, but on a platonic level.”

Single at the moment, he is waiting for a similar epiphany in his love life. “I’m not going to settle and say, ‘Oh, you’re all right – let’s make a family.’ I’m more romantic than that. I have friends who’ve done that and they’re not happy, and then they go through horrible divorces. I was with a girl for a couple of years and it ended up not working out, but we’re still close friends.” He is referring to Alexa Chung, the British television presenter.

Does he think he’ll end up with someone Swedish? “No, I think British,” he says immediately. “From a very early age, I’ve always thought I’ll end up with a Brit. There’s something about the mentality. Brits have a

sensibility that I respond to. They make fun of themselves in a way that I really appreciate.”

However, before the stampede begins, there are two things to bear in mind. One: he wants to have “at least” nine children – “to beat my dad”. And two: he is in no hurry to settle down. “That’s not to say I want to wait until I’m 65,” he explains. “I come from a huge family and I hope one day to have that myself. But I am having the time of my life: I’m working with extraordinary film-makers. I feel like I’m in a good space. I’m not avoiding a relationship, but I’m also not desperate for it. If it happens, it happens.”

His friends and family all say that Skarsgard has not changed since becoming famous. “The good thing,” says his father, “is that he, and all his brothers, have a very healthy attitude towards the fundamental silliness of fame. I don’t know how they got inoculated against it, but it makes me happy.”

“There are definitely moments when I feel that what I am doing is trivial,” says Skarsgard.

‘Brits have a sensibility I respond to. They make fun of themselves in a way I really appreciate’

“One of my brothers is an ICU doctor, and when I’m in Sweden he’ll come home having been up for 18 hours literally saving lives, and I’m on the couch working on a script saying, ‘I’m not really feeling this love scene.’”

His friend Siggi Hilmarsson describes how Skarsgard avoids the glitz, preferring “the local dive” when they meet up. “And he’s a good guest. My girlfriend is always impressed by the fact that when he comes over for dinner, he cleans up the dishes.”

Hilmarsson describes taking Skarsgard on a week-long hiking trip with some other friends to Hornstrandir in Iceland, a nature reserve that is only accessible by boat. An hour into the hike, Skarsgard’s old hiking boots were falling apart. “The glue under the sole just disintegrated,” says Hilmarsson. “We tried to fix them with tape, but nothing worked. He was feeling absolutely miserable, because he didn’t want to be a nuisance: he was the new guy and we were all old friends. We were debating whether to ask the boat to return or try to hike back. But he absolutely refused. He said, ‘There’s no way in the world I’m going to disrupt this hike. We’re not turning back.’ He wound up hiking the entire mountain trip barefoot and in wading shoes – which he had brought for crossing rivers.”

With all this unremitting niceness, no wonder he seeks unlikeable characters to play. “I gravitate towards roles that are dark. I find that psychologically interesting to explore. I’m quite an optimistic guy in real life,

quite upbeat, but I find it cathartic to explore aspects that are so different.”

It is hard to imagine someone more hateful than Perry in the last episode of *Big Little Lies*, beating and kicking his wife at a party while dressed as Elvis. Before filming, he and Kidman spent time together with the two boys who play their sons, so that they would feel like a real family when shooting began. “[Nicole and I] became very close and we really trusted each other. It was crucial in diving into the darkness of that relationship that we were always there for each other. Perry was not the stereotypical wife-beater. He was tormented ... We were both drained after those scenes.”

To everyone’s relief, Perry was killed at the end of season one. Yet he has just been filming the second season in Monterey. How does that work? “I don’t think I can say anything,” says Skarsgard. There was even a glimpse of Perry’s funeral – although you don’t have to watch many television soaps to know that a funeral is not always confirmation of a death.

Skarsgard laughs. “I’m not going to be stepping out of the shower [he is referring to Bobby Ewing’s return from the dead in *Dallas*]. But there could be other ways.”

Rumours include a twin brother, played of course by Skarsgard, or perhaps more likely, flashbacks. One detail he can confirm: “Meryl Streep plays my mother.”

Who is Andrew Kerr, I ask. He looks surprised. Someone has blown his cover. “Oh no, I’m going to have to change my alias.” I don’t have to mention it, I say. He shrugs. “I have to change it anyway.” I show him the picture of the Andrew Kerr I found. “Is that him? Shit, I never knew. I love Glastonbury. It’s my favourite festival.” His Andrew Kerr is different. “I was reading a book about Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh and their secret love affair. Olivier would check in to hotels in the English countryside as Andrew Kerr. Literally, the book was in my hand when my agent called me and said you should think about an alias when you travel.” He looks embarrassed. “It sounds very pretentious now.”

In fact, Skarsgard could not be less pretentious. “I’m very aware of how disgustingly lucky I am,” he says. “I don’t expect it to last for ever.” So where does he see himself in ten years? He looks baffled, as though he has not given it a second’s thought. “I don’t even know where I’ll be in ten days.” ■

The Little Drummer Girl continues at 9pm on Sundays on BBC One