

## 12 Body + Soul

SARAH LEE/GUARDIAN; GETTY IMAGES

## Interview

## 'Believe me, the hell-raising years were a lot of fun'

Ian McShane talks to **Helena de Bertodano** about his hit show *American Gods*, and why he gave up alcohol

It is a refreshing experience to interview Ian McShane, who has no compunction about what he says — a surprising trait in a TV series actor, most of whom are tied up in non-disclosure clauses. McShane snorts derisively. "I can say what I want. They're not going to muzzle me."

Such openness can land him in trouble. Recently he dismissed *Game of Thrones* — in which he guest-starred — as "just tits and dragons" and further infuriated fans by giving away crucial plot twists. When the internet went into meltdown he suggested fans "get a f\*\*king life". Today he shrugs. "So precious! I probably got the show a million more viewers."

In the UK McShane is still most associated with *Lovejoy*, the antiques dealer in the popular TV series of the same name that ran from 1986 to 1994. Dressed in high-waisted blue jeans and a leather biker jacket, his roguish yet loveable character became a Sunday night staple. However, in the US, where he has been living for the past few decades with his American wife, he is well-known as a TV and movie actor, a go-to Hollywood gangster.

McShane, 74, is proud of *American Gods*, the new, much-raved-about US TV series in which he stars as the mysterious Wednesday, a weaselly con artist and — as we will discover, confirms McShane — the earthly incarnation of Odin, the chief god. "I thought *American Gods* would be good — but that good? It's unbelievable," he says enthusiastically when we meet for breakfast near his home in Venice, Los Angeles, just after the series has been renewed for a second season.

He's right. It is sensationally good, albeit strange. Based on the cult novel of the same name by Neil Gaiman, it portrays a war brewing between the old Norse gods and the new gods of technology and

industry. Despite the supernatural element, reminiscent of *Game of Thrones*, it is also a gritty, humorous road-trip movie.

His character says, with relish: "I'm a hustler, cheater, swindler and liar." It is a version of a role he has played many times — as Judas in *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977); as a gangster in *Sexy Beast* (2000); as the lawless saloon owner in *Deadwood* (2004-06), which won him a Golden Globe award; and as the murderous pirate Blackbeard in *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011). Even *Lovejoy* was a trickster.

I ask how he feels about being offered such roles again and again. He chuckles. "I read the scripts and they always describe [my part] as a 'huge, hulking, heavy-set man mountain'. I go, 'Jeez, have you met me?' [McShane is barely 5ft 8in and trim]. But I do have a personality..." That, he explains, is "a bit of gravitas combined with menace and charm and humour".

In real life, he says, he is "boring as hell. I do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, walk on the beach..." The man I meet, though, definitely has some of the qualities he brings to the screen. Charm, of course. He is dapper in a bespoke suit and Cartier watch, with a dash of hip: zipped black ankle boots and a grey-flecked T-shirt. Looking younger than his years, he still has a thick head of hair, more black than grey, and he sports perfect Hollywood teeth.

Luckily I don't see any menace — although maybe a flicker of boredom when the subject of what he calls his "hell-raising years" comes up. "It was a whole different world then," he says of the Sixties and Seventies, when he used to drink vodka for breakfast with Richard Burton and party in Ibiza with "Johnny" Hurt. "I worked with George C Scott and Robert Mitchum too — all these guys were like legends. We all used to learn our lines in the pub. Now people are paranoid if somebody has a glass of wine at lunch."

Today he is drinking green tea and tucking into a hearty plate of ricotta and blue-



Ian McShane and Ricky Whittle in *American Gods*



berry pancakes. He hasn't touched alcohol for 30 years and a few years ago gave up smoking. "Believe me, the hell-raising years were a lot of fun, although some of it was rather painful. I'd never thought of [stopping], but one day I thought, 'This is not good,' and went to AA. And that was it."

He was born an only child in 1942 in Blackburn. His late father was a professional footballer for Blackburn Rovers and later Manchester United. His mother, who is 96, still lives independently in Manchester and he goes home to see her at least three times a year. He went to the National Youth Theatre, then moved on to Rada, where he was a contemporary of Anthony Hopkins and the late John Hurt. He shared a flat with Hurt, whom he says was "my oldest friend in the business".

While still at drama school he got his first professional role in 1962 in *The Wild and the Willing*, a romantic drama. "They couldn't find a guy to play the lead, this 19-year-old obnoxious, bright Manchester student." Pregnant pause before he delivers the punchline: "And I wonder how they found me." He chuckles. "I'm not obnoxious, but you know me: bit up it, bit cocky..." It is now 55 years later, and McShane has done more than 100 films and television shows.

In the early years his personal life was a rollercoaster. In the mid-Sixties his friend George Best introduced him to Suzan Farmer, who became his first wife. They divorced in 1968 and he later married Ruth Post, with whom he had two child-

Ian McShane, above, and left with his wife, Gwen Humble

### Ian McShane's perfect weekend

**Green juice or builders' tea?**

Both. Builders' tea at 6am and a big green juice at 8am

**Suit or tracksuit?**

It depends — never come as expected

**Venice beach or Blackpool beach?**

Venice beach

**TV or theatre?**

TV. And ballet

**Local pub or Michelin-starred grub?**

Hipster café

**Takeaway or budding chef?**

Both

**Night in or night out?**

Night in. I'll only go out if I can be home by 7.15

**I couldn't get through the weekend without...**

A tuna poke

ren, Kate and Morgan. They split up when he had an affair with Sylvia Kristel, best known for the *Emmanuelle* soft-porn films. Kristel later wrote about their cocaine and alcohol-fuelled relationship.

In 1979, having resolved never to marry again, he met his present wife, the American actress Gwen Humble, while shooting what he describes as one of his "alimony movies". They are still together 38 years later. His secret? "I really like her and I still get a kick out of looking at her."

He says he once told his daughter: "I rebuke myself for being such an appalling dad," but circumstances were not easy. He talks very fondly of his three grandchildren, who call him GD, for Granddad, and says he gets on well with his children. "I wish I'd spent more time with them as kids, but maybe then we wouldn't have the relationship we do now, which is very close. I like them, they like me." He doesn't waste his time wishing he had made different choices. "You can unpick everything and spend [your life] in regret or you can just look forward and try to be as responsible a human being as you can."

If he suffers delusions of grandeur, he recalls one of his last conversations with his father, who died in 2012 after suffering from Alzheimer's. "He looked at me and said, 'Who are you playing for these days?' I said, 'Dad, come on, you know me, you're the footballer, I'm the actor.' He said, 'Oh, would I have seen you in anything?'"

"If I ever write a book, that will be the title: 'Would I have seen you in anything?'" ***American Gods* is on Amazon Prime Video, with new episodes every Monday**