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‘I had people when I was younger trying to feel me up’

He hates rules and loves controversy but Jeremy Irons tells Helena de Bertodano he has mellowed, at least on set

It's not the sort of film that I would ever go and see," says the actor Jeremy Irons bluntly about his latest movie *Beautiful Creatures*, a supernatural tale in the *Twilight* genre, in which he plays a sinister uncle trying to save his niece from the forces of the Dark.

Irons has a penchant for making rather ill-advised comments — making him fun to interview but a publicist's nightmare. Which is, no doubt, why one of the coterie of publicists accompanying him today tries to sit in on our interview at a Los Angeles hotel. I ask politely whether she would mind leaving us to talk. Irons backs me up — less politely. "She's very nosy," he says. "Go away — go and have a swim, darling." She harrumphs but leaves.

Although a room has been booked for the interview, Irons shuns it. "They won't let me smoke — which I know is all healthy and lovely but let's find somewhere outside." Putting on a pair of Ray-Bans, he leads the way out on to the roof terrace, where he sits in the full glare of the midday sun and starts rolling a cigarette with liquorice paper.

So why did he agree to the movie? He sighs. "[As an actor], you should have a business box and an artistic box and

they should never cross. In truth, it was a studio movie, which I hadn't done for a long time, and part of the job is placing yourself for future employment. I liked Richard [LaGravenese], the director; I knew Emma [Thompson] was involved; and it was [being shot] in New Orleans, which is a city I had a great time in when I made *Lolita*."

Admittedly, aged 64, Irons is not the film's target audience and has barely heard of *The Twilight Saga*. "It doesn't mean anything to me. . . I'm sure kids will love all the supernatural stuff."

With more than 50 films to his name, as well as an Oscar for *Reversal of Fortune* and an Emmy for *Elizabeth I*, Irons no longer needs to prove his acting credentials. Certainly he has little doubt about his own legacy. When I first interviewed him in the mid-Nineties, he went so far as to compare himself to Van Gogh. Yes, he said, he knew he had a reputation for being difficult to work with but so did Van Gogh: "I'm sure that there are painters we have never heard of who were absolute darlings. Yet where are their pictures?"

"I've grown up since then," chuckles Irons when I remind him of this quote. "I've realised that there is a very thin line between being a perfectionist and a c***." He wasn't that bad, surely? "I was sometimes. I was so concerned to get it absolutely right — I think it culminated on *Damage* [the 1992 movie with Juliette Binoche, who later complained about working with him]. I realised that actually there is no right way. And if everybody is having a good time when they are shooting, it's more likely to be a good movie than if there are ructions and difficulties. I thought, 'Just forget it, Jeremy.'"

In the meantime, he has acquired something of a social conscience — soon he will appear in a documentary,

Trashed, about the effects of global waste. "I've come to feel strongly about it and I get crosser and crosser when I'm given plastic bags in stores."

But the politically incorrect Irons is still alive and well. In 2011 he caused outrage when he was quoted in the *Radio Times* as saying: "If a man puts his hand on a woman's bottom, any woman worth her salt can deal with it." He happily wades back into the same territory again today: "I love touching. I always touch people. I don't think I said 'bottom' but of course I was misquoted. Basically, I said that any self-respecting woman would tell you to f*** off [if she minded]. I think we're very robust as human beings. I had people when I was younger trying to feel me up. Older men. I just told them to get lost."

Then, sailing even closer to the wind, he volunteers that before he took on *Lolita* (in which he played an older man obsessed with an underage girl) an acquaintance told him about a love affair she had, aged 13, with a much older man. "There was sex involved. She said: 'By the time I was 16 or 17, it petered out — it's never affected me at all.'" Irons exhales a plume of smoke and adds: "There are people who are victims in life and I don't think they should be encouraged."

He shrugs at the spluttering he causes: "I think the job of artists is to stir things up."

Born in 1948 on the Isle of Wight,

“At school I would play the rules very close to the edge. I still do it

Irons has always had a rebellious streak. "At school, I would play the rules very close to the edge. I still do it. My wife [the actress Sinéad Cusack] always says, 'Why do you break the rules?' And I say, 'Because the rules make no sense.'"

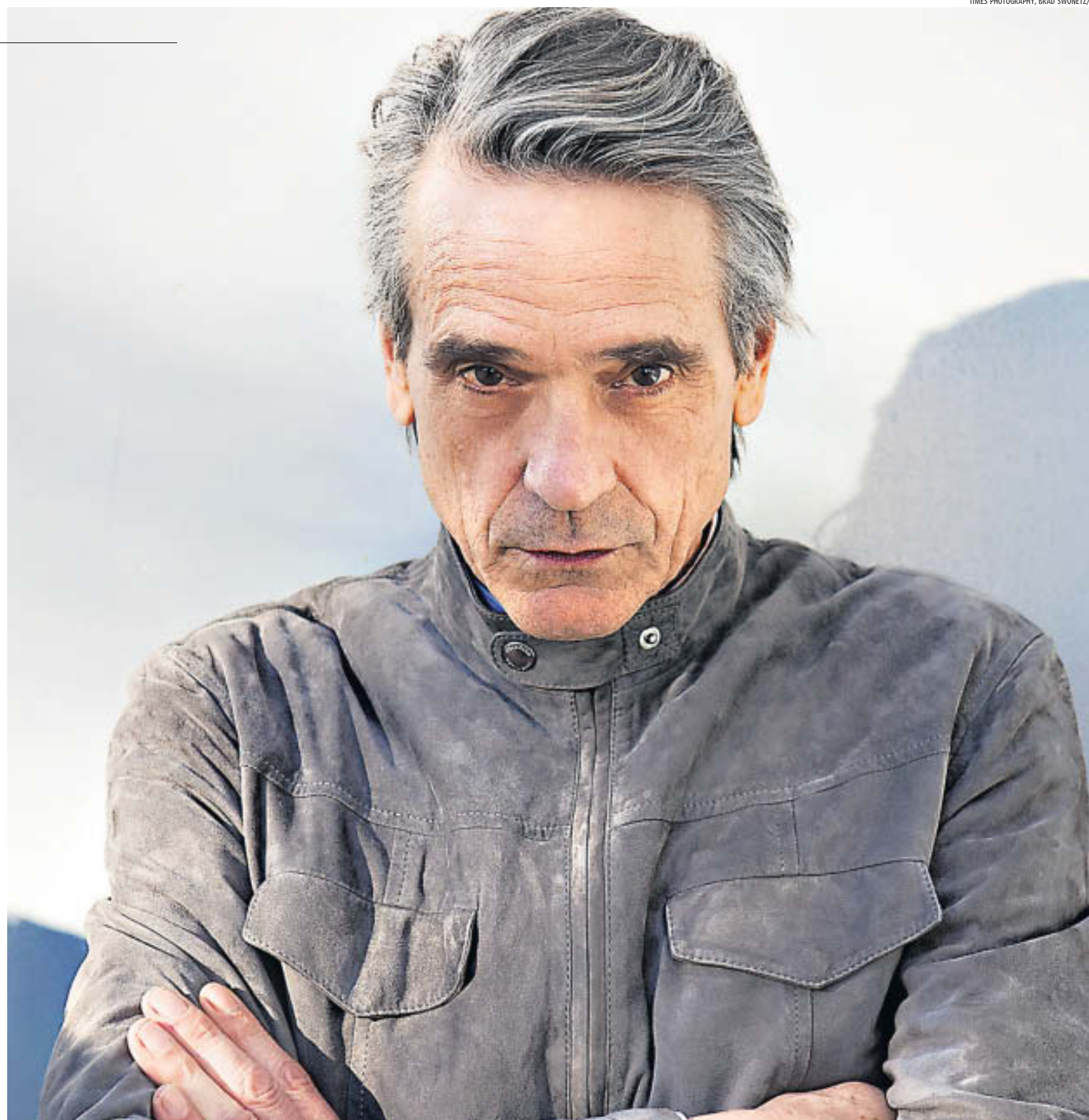
Does he ever get into trouble? "I was stopped by a policewoman the other day driving the wrong way [out of the square near his London mews house]. She said, 'It's one way.' I said, 'I know but this way is much shorter.' She said, 'You could have an accident on the corner.' I said 'No, because I'm always very careful.'"

She let him off but he was not so lucky in 1995, when he had his licence revoked for three months for speeding on his motorbike. But, of course, he got round that too. "I was about to go to Italy to make *Stealing Beauty*, so I photocopied my driving licence and took the car and motorbike there."

After leaving school with poor grades, Irons determined to find himself an unconventional job. "I wanted to be outside society." He considered the circus but decided instead to pursue acting, winning a place at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. He was 30 before he landed a starring role opposite Meryl Streep in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, followed swiftly by his defining role as Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited*.

Dogged by the "creamy English charm" that characterised these early roles, he set about sabotaging it. "I don't think there's anything left of it now," he laughs. He memorably portrayed Claus von Bülow — the British socialite cleared of the attempted murder of his wife — in *Reversal of Fortune*.

Of Von Bülow, Irons says: "I think I knew the truth, which I hopefully obscured from the audience." Is he prepared to say what he thought



happened? "I don't think he gave her that stuff [an insulin overdose] but I think he left her on the floor because he thought that's what she wanted. . ."

During filming, he refused to meet Von Bülow so it would not affect his performance. "A few years later I was at Paul Getty's house. I heard this voice behind me saying, 'You see, I'm not fat.' I turned round and said, 'Claus, I never said you were fat, I said you were bigger than me — which you are.'"

Maintaining the darker trend, he plays the camp and immoral pope in *The Borgias* TV series. "I do have a bit of a laugh. We're talking about doing series 4, which would kill him off."

After a very brief first marriage, Irons married Cusack, with whom he has two sons, Sam and Max. The couple are still together 34 years later. "It goes on," he says nonchalantly of his marriage. They divide their time between London, a farmhouse in Oxfordshire and a restored castle in Ireland — painted a controversial shade that some neighbours have described as pink. "It's not pink," Irons says, adamantly. "It's this colour." He holds up an ochre-coloured crisp, one of a variety of snacks his publicist delivers as she tries to keep tabs on the interview.

He has two movies in the offing — *Night Train to Lisbon* and *A Magnificent Death from a Shattered Hand* — but otherwise does not know what lies ahead. "I want to take a few months out and just build up an appetite again." Does he get jaded? "I do a bit — which sounds awfully spoilt. . ."

But he cannot imagine giving up acting. "Sinéad thinks I'm very ambitious. I've never felt ambitious. I think I'm driven and focused. I remember someone once saying: 'You're on a great wave.' And I said 'I'm not interested in waves — they come and go. I'm interested in the sea; I want to keep going to the horizon.'"

Irons says he would like to be remembered for "having touched people in some way". Then, recalling the controversy of 2011, he grins: "Not literally, of course." *Beautiful Creatures* is released today

“I love to touch. I always touch people

Jeremy Irons with his wife of 34 years, Sinéad Cusack

