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Joseph Fiennes

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SPOILER ALERT

This interview
includes spoilers for the
season finale of
The Handmaid's Tale



He plays the odious
Commander Fred
Waterford in the
award-winning drama
The Handmaid's Tale,
but, the actor tells
Helena de Bertodano,
the role has taken a
heavy toll. Portrait by
Matt Holyoak

Although Joseph Fiennes is hotly tipped for an Emmy nomination as lead male actor in a drama for his performance as the odious Commander Fred Waterford in *The Handmaid's Tale*, he fervently hopes that his loved ones never see the show. 'I've got two young daughters and just the most magnificent wife [Swiss-Spanish photographer María Dolores Diéguez], and I want to do them proud. And of course they're proud I'm in a successful show, but there is a part of me that can't bear the thought of [them] ever watching this.'

Over the past four years, Fiennes has played the main antagonist in the hugely successful television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel about life in a fictional patriarchal theocracy, known as Gilead, where 'handmaids' are forced to bear children for high-ranking men (such as Fred) and their wives. And in the current fourth season he really comes into his own – as the character battles for his freedom and his life, while continuing to try to manipulate those around him. If, when the Emmy nominees are announced on 13 July, Fiennes finds himself among them, it will be his first nomination as lead actor in the series. (In its debut season, he was nominated as a supporting actor.)

'I'm speechless... How exciting,' he says when I ask him about the potential accolade. He adds, 'If there's an excuse to go and see everyone [from the show] again that would be great.'

Casually dressed in a dark-blue T-shirt and khaki trousers, Fiennes, 51, is relaxed and friendly: 'I'm Joe – although I hear my mum's voice in my head saying, "Please get everyone to call you Joseph."' He is talking over Zoom from his apartment in Palma de Mallorca, his tanned face framed by diaphanous white curtains which billow gently in the breeze. It is early Friday evening in Spain – but still oppressively humid. 'My eldest daughter [Eva, 11] has gone for a dance lesson and the other one [Isabel, nine] is quietly next door doing some homework. So we've got some quiet time before supper hits and everyone gets hungry or hungry.'

The family are in Palma for the weekend because Eva has a dance performance at a local theatre. But they are usually based at their house in the nearby Tramuntana mountains, where they have lived since 2009. 'It's in the middle of nowhere... surrounded by eagles and vultures and wild goats. It's off-grid, with its own well. It's our escape from everything and everyone. And it's paradise, it means everything to us. That's where one of my daughters was born and it's filled with memories we cherish of the girls growing up.'

He is enjoying being back with his family after spending half a year filming *The Handmaid's Tale* in Canada, only returning briefly

for Christmas. In previous seasons they have accompanied him, the girls going to school in Canada. 'But they're at an age now where it's just too disruptive, and with the pandemic, it made sense that they stayed [in Mallorca]. But I found it particularly difficult.'

Filming during Covid was challenging, he says. 'The production ethic was extraordinary: we had a total of 27,000 tests, we would have nose swabs up to three times a week, 2,000 litres of hand sanitiser were used. It forced the writers to produce stunning scenes with just two actors... In many ways the reduction has magnified something. Gilead is all about quiet, suffocating stillness, the dread of being overheard.'

Although the show will continue for a fifth season, the fourth marks the end of the road for Fred, as he meets his inevitable and brutal demise. 'I'm quite relieved to be done with it,' says Fiennes. 'I'm also relieved for the audience because they need that moment of catharsis. I too share that cathar-

In the street, people think 'there's something odd and disturbing [about me]...'



Fiennes (left) and siblings, by their father Mark, 1972

sis with them... There's this residue I want to get rid of. I really want done with Fred.'

He has found the role mentally exhausting. 'There's something pernicious and pervasive about Fred. He is pathetic but he lingers. Sometimes you're driven and excited [to play] a villain. This is the first time I've been struck by how I'm not into it. I think it's because there are too many parallels [with the world today] and being a parent to two extraordinary daughters.'

He is referring to political parallels – especially under the Trump administration – and the treatment of women that gave rise to the MeToo movement. 'Playing Fred and then reading the news about another abhorrent character, it all felt very close,' he says.

Fiennes refused to shoot one scene for season two – in which Fred was meant to rape his wife, played by Yvonne Strahovski. And he found the scenes in which Fred forces him-

self on his handmaid, played by Elisabeth Moss, especially gruelling. 'Those ritualistic rape scenes – for want of a better word...' He tries to find another phrase but gives up: 'Oh, let's not dress it up, that's what Gilead is really about. I found those very difficult in season one when we barely knew each other. And even if we did know each other, it just all felt so wrong and so ugly, [although] handled in a brilliant way by the director.'

He, Moss and Strahovski have become very close as friends. 'I adore Lizzie, she's been such an enormous support. Her work ethic is extraordinary and her sense of calm exemplary. And Yvonne is a blast. We are often in hysterics and thank God for that. It's really about learning to hang on to the joy and the fun, even when the narrative is as dark and complex as *The Handmaid's*.'

When people catch sight of Fiennes in the street, the response is cautious. 'I get lingering puzzled looks,' he explains. 'They're not quite sure whether I'm in reality or from fiction but they know, either way, there's something odd and disturbing [about me]...'

Those who do recognise him greet him with mock respect. 'It's, "Under his eye, commander," or, "Blessed be the fruit." It's all



With María Dolores Diéguez and their daughters, 2016

allusions to [*The Handmaid's Tale*],' he says.

Even after playing Fred for four years, Fiennes finds little to like about him. 'He's always been cognisant of the horror but he will never give up his double-breasted suits and mahogany desks. Atwood describes him as this pathetic limb that lives inside a military boot... He's like a lot of powerful people who get drunk on their positions and feel untouchable.'

'I remember reading about a patient of Freud's who was a serial molester. He would always iron his banknotes, crisply, and fold them wonderfully into his wallet. There was something about being clean and precise that allowed you then to be abhorrent and awful. There's a bit of Fred in that – not only in how he preens himself, but also the way he likes to say sorry. It's rather like finding absolution in the church – saying sorry so you can go back and do it again. That's the sort of man he is...'



Fiennes with Yvonne Strahovski, his on-screen wife, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and (below) at the Emmys in 2017

Before *The Handmaid's Tale*, Fiennes was best known for *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), in which he portrayed the playwright as a likable rogue, opposite Gwyneth Paltrow; and *Elizabeth* (1998), in which he played Robert Dudley opposite Cate Blanchett as the queen. The former earned him a Bafta nomination for best actor in a leading role.

Yet Fiennes first made his name in theatre, appearing in *The Woman in Black* in 1993 and then in *A Month in the Country* the following year, opposite Helen Mirren. He was a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company for two seasons. 'I feel hugely grateful I've come from theatre. *Handmaid's* and *Shakespeare* is by virtue of a 17-year-old kid in Lambeth wishing to do

theatre and being a dresser, then ushering. I'm aching to get back to [theatre].'

He comes from a creative background: his father, Mark Fiennes, was a freelance photographer; his mother, Jennifer Lash, a writer and painter. The actor Ralph Fiennes, Oscar-nominated for both *Schindler's List* (1993) and *The English Patient* (1996), is one of his elder brothers. His two sisters, Martha and Sophie, are directors, his brother Magnus is a composer and his twin Jake is a conservationist. He has an older adopted brother, Michael Emery, who is an archaeologist. And the explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes is a cousin.

Fiennes' childhood was nomadic. The family moved house often and he attended some 14



schools, as his parents were constantly renovating homes and moving on. The worst was a school in Kilkenny, Ireland, run by nuns. 'I was caned pretty relentlessly: rapped on the knuckles or across the bottom and left with huge raised red skin. And threatened by the authority because I was probably just overly energetic. It's interesting, we talk about the patriarchy but I remember the fear of the nuns being the most terrifying thing to me.'

The idea that his childhood was gilded is a frequent misconception. 'I'm aware of a name [the full family surname is Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes] and I am aware of a kind of life which is completely different to anyone's understanding of what they feel that name should mean. It's a name that really robs you of the truth... Not just poverty but nothing handed to you. Every one of my brothers and sisters have done [what they've done] by virtue of love, sweat, passion and discipline. [My parents] were always penniless, always in debt, always having to move house.'

'I'm really proud that I inherited nothing. I bought my own trainers at 16 and my own clothes. Everything [else] was handed down to me: nothing fitted and nothing was mine. I don't regret that but I do regret ending up



Cast and producers at the Golden Globes, 2018

in a south London comprehensive in Harris tweed – handed down by a cousin to the poor relatives, as we were. That didn't go down very well. That's a sort of metaphor: the clothes or apparel belying the truth.'

Still, his memories of childhood are mostly happy ones, with very supportive parents. 'I had such freedom, I could bicycle anywhere. I was a bit of a tearaway. I remember in Kilkenny coming across a lovely sports car with a group of friends. I must have been about eight and we'd just seen *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. We tore it to bits. The police came and all the mothers came out to defend their children.'

Fiennes and his twin Jake remain close: 'We're poles apart on so many levels, but when you share a womb, bunk beds and birthdays, you're invariably close.' He talks enthusiastically about Jake's work as a conservationist, describing the Holkham

estate in Norfolk, where he is based, as 'an extraordinary Palladian idyll'. As a child, he says, Jake was obsessed with wildlife. 'I remember at the age of 12 opening up the freezer to find a taxidermied fox in there...'

He adored his mother, who died of breast cancer when he was in his early 20s. 'I'm just a year or two away now from the age she was when she sadly departed. I just can't quite fathom that.'

Did she live to see any of his success? 'She saw the first show I did in the West End, a Gothic horror play called *The Woman in Black*. The conceit is the actor has to come through the audience...' He pauses, looking at the ceiling and blinking back tears, then quickly rises to his feet and vanishes from the screen. He returns a minute later, recomposed. 'It was just tough walking past her.'

There was a time in the past when Fiennes found himself irked by comparisons with Ralph. 'I left that behind long ago,' he says today. 'Ralph, I have to say, was just so helpful in both helping me prepare speeches for drama school or getting me a job at the National Theatre as a dresser... Forget drama school. Go and be a dresser: be humiliated picking up smelly pants and socks, and see the mechanics behind the curtain.'

People used to mistake him for his brother. 'That still happens on occasion,' says Fiennes. 'My wife says I'm looking more and more like Ralph.'

He met Diéguez at a film festival in Taormina, Sicily, in 2004, when he was 34 and she was 22. Although her family is originally from Galicia, Spain, she grew up in Bern, Switzerland. For a while they tried a long-distance relationship, then they moved in together, living first in the States, then Switzerland, then London, where Diéguez attended the Chelsea College of Arts. 'We couldn't find the right middle ground. Then she suggested Mallorca... We came here and the magnificence of Mallorca and the Balearics really took my breath away. It felt like the right place to raise our daughters.'

They married in 2009, the year they moved into their mountain home – which was quite an adjustment after life in the city. 'I remember about one o'clock in the morning hearing the shrill scream of a child that sounded like it was being murdered. My wife and I got up and went racing around the house trying to find where this noise was coming from. It was a baby goat [outside].'

While his wife and daughters are fully bilingual, Fiennes says his Spanish is limited: 'I can get by.' As for the culture, he has relaxed into it. 'When I first came here, I resisted the siesta, I thought it was for the weak of constitution – and now I'm so addicted to the 20-minute power nap, which invariably becomes an hour. That's probably



From top Fiennes with elder brother Ralph in 2005; with Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998)

why I feel so good at 50: it must be the siestas.'

Fiennes says he feels more attracted to comedy and character acting than leading-man roles: 'Brian Cox [the Scottish actor] remarked that I was a character actor trapped in a leading man's body.' In an interview in 1999, he cringed about a poster advertising *Elizabeth* with the word 'lover' written above his image. 'Naff marketing,' he said at the time. 'Roll on the beer gut and bald head, I say. The character parts.' When I remind him of this quote he laughs and runs his hands through his hair, checking how much is left. 'Well I could always shave a patch and put on a paunch. The beer, I tell you, that will come quite naturally, sitting on the terraces of Mallorca with the *cervezas*.'

Hmm, it seems unlikely. Fiennes sounds very disciplined. 'I climb the mountains and take our dogs for long walks,' he says. 'And in Canada I would swim in the Great Lake of Ontario, even in March when I had to break through the ice.'

He waxes lyrical about the benefits of cold

'[My parents] were always penniless... I'm really proud that I inherited nothing'

exposure, which he is exploring as part of his preparation for *The Iceman*. In the upcoming film, Fiennes plays Dutch extreme athlete Wim Hof, known for his ability to withstand freezing temperatures. He has several other pending projects, including a version of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and an adaptation of a revenge thriller, *The Sett*, by Sir Ranulph Fiennes.

He helps his wife with her photography when he is back home. 'I'm her assistant. She does tintype photography and for the last few months she's been going down to the port and taking photographs of the fishermen that go out at three in the morning, and sometimes she goes out with them...'

With a predominantly female household, he cannot help but reflect on the way that the world has been designed by men. 'Men have even invented for women the particular positions in which to give birth: stirrups and laying flat on the table. My wife felt that was wholly unnatural to her urge and did her own thing with these incredible doulas: 1,000 different positions and she owned the moment.'

Fiennes has never participated in social media. 'I don't have a strong stance [against it] but I feel like it ran away before I could understand it. I'd rather be with my children than swiping and doing thumbs up and being obsessed about photos of food that I took. I much prefer the social dining table with the family. So phones are banned at the table.'

If his daughters wanted to follow him into acting, he says he would not deter them. 'I would support them in anything that they felt passionate about. Absolutely anything. One-hundred per cent support.' He hesitates: 'Maybe not motorcycle racing...'

At first they didn't know their father was an actor. 'They thought I was a pilot because I was always flying. I loved that. I tried to stay with that narrative for as long as possible.'

He explains that although *The Handmaid's Tale* has not changed the way he parents, it has made him more conscious 'of their road ahead'. 'Ensuring that they understand what to fight for and how to voice their opinions – to challenge the patriarchy every day, even if that means me as a dad. Challenge. Challenge. Challenge.'

And do they challenge him? 'They do! I'm outnumbered here. And rather relieved to be, frankly.'

Although he has left the role behind, Fiennes realises that Commander Fred Waterford will cast a long shadow over his career. 'It's a poisoned chalice. After *Elizabeth* and *Shakespeare* it was 20 years of lovers in flouncy shirts, jumping off horses. Now it's probably going to be 20 years of villainy.'

The Handmaid's Tale season four continues at 9pm, Sundays on Channel 4. Catch up on all previous episodes on All 4