



## WIRED

With the sort of good looks that blend Bob Dylan with Richard Gere, Aidan Gillen has travelled from Dublin's Northside to Hollywood via 'Queer as Folk' and 'The Wire' without compromising his cool or his conscience. In an uncharacteristically open interview, the normally guarded actor tells **Britt Collins** about growing up in Drumcondra, learning his craft on North Great George's Street, finding love in Parnell Square and why he will never sell out to showbiz. Photography by **Tiziano Niero**

**I**f you mention Aidan Gillen to people, everyone seems to have a vague idea of who he is: Didn't he play Bobby Sands? Isn't he that Irish actor in *The Wire*? This quality of eye-catching intensity and elusiveness has served him well over the years, but he remains relatively uncelebrated.

A maverick, largely known for his gritty, hard-hitting but unglamorous roles, Gillen constantly treads the fine balance between obscurity and reinvention. After flashing like a shooting star across our screens as the sexual predator Stuart Alan Jones in the British TV series *Queer as Folk*, he has become most famous for his role as the small-time politician Tommy Carcetti in the last two seasons of the riveting American crime drama *The Wire*. And in between, there were glimmers on the stage and in a handful of well-received indie movies.

Waiting for Gillen amid the white and chrome slickness of the Electric, London's hip art-house cinema, I wonder why we chose to meet in this den of pretentiousness, heart attack-inducing prices and a place so hot you can grow orchids. He slips in, unnoticed, as swiftly and silently as a cat, wearing a battered, vintage leather jacket, dark jumper, jeans and converse trainers.

A sort of cross between Richard Gere and Bob Dylan, Gillen, now 41, has aged beautifully — his grey-streaked hair is softly mussed, his face finely lined — you can almost imagine that, somewhere later in life, a craggy Bukowski-esque level of decay would suit his slight, fox-like features. He only settles long enough to finish his mineral water, distracted and uneasy in the swish surroundings, he's poised to leave.

On the way out, he looks amused when I mention that, apart from *The Wire*, I don't know anything about him or his work. "It's funny," he says, "I still find that I'm not an insider — I don't even get invited to anything. But that's fine. I'm not a film star. I've never been desperate for the fame or any of the trappings. I like living low and not being typecast. I enjoy film, TV and theatre in equal amounts and fortunately I have worked equally in all three and in different places. Recently I did a play in London, the TV series in Baltimore and then a film in New York."

He has spent the last year living in Maryland making *The Wire*, which has just aired its fifth and final series and is widely

considered the greatest show on television for its realism and rawness.

"It's one of the only shows I've seen that has something complex and meaningful to say about American society in general, and about the plight of urban black Americans in particular," he says thoughtfully. "It's nothing like the glossy sheen of something like *CSI*. One of the things I liked about it was that there were no stars. Although you were looked after, there was none of the usual politics of billing, who gets the biggest fucking trailer or pondering to eggs. But, then again, I don't like working with directors who tell you're great all the time. Obviously it's never happened to me," he adds with dry wit.

"I've been lucky to be a part of something so brilliant, but I think it ended at the right time. Although it was a pretty perfect job, at least for me. In an episode you might only shoot for two days, so you devote yourself to that and then when it's over, you might have a week where you can just drive off to New York or the mountains in Virginia, or fly back to London to see the kids — all of which I used to do a lot as my family hadn't moved to America. My wife works occasionally in script, editing or reading, but primarily looks after the kids. When I'm working in the States, I come back every couple of weeks to see them or they'll come over to see me. I miss the feeling of being rooted, but I've always gone where the decent role is."

Gillen doesn't hang out with the showbiz folks, but leads a modest existence, now splitting his time between New York and Dublin with his wife, Olivia O'Flanagan, and their two children, 10-year-old daughter, Berry, and eight-year-old son, Joe. He met O'Flanagan, his childhood sweetheart, in a Dublin pub on Halloween night. "I've known Olivia since I was 10," he says. "We weren't a couple then, but would frequent the same haunts, teenage discos in Parnell Square, lounge bars with lenient policies on younger folk. And, over the years, we'd see each other on and off, but not properly until the mid-Nineties. She was still in college, just about to her finals in philosophy at Milltown in Dublin, when we had Berry."

"Like everything else in his life — family, relationships — Gillen takes acting very seriously and likes to dive deep. Before he was whisked off to the States to be in *The Wire*, he had a first taste of American success when he was singled out in *The Wire* *Times* as "the show-stopping wildcard" for his scene-stealing performance in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* on Broadway. "It was a real adventure doing a brilliant, complicated three-hander where they'll crucify you if you fuck it up or if they don't like you. Through that, I ended up getting *The Wire*," he explains.

As we wander around the buzzy Parnell Road, seeking a quiet place to talk, he admits he's tired and has been here since film shooting *Identity*, a six-part ITV crime drama. In an alleyway, preparing for the photo shoot, there is a sudden shyness about him. "Don't you hate it when actors say, 'I don't like having my picture taken'?" he says, half in jest, dividing his gaze between me and the photographer. "Yeah, fucking right, which is why they spend their lives in front of a bloody camera," he goes on.

As it happens, Gillen, standing against a blue and green swirl of graffiti, is visibly uncomfortable having his taken. During a siege of silence, he starts talking about working on *Identity*.

"I play a former undercover cop," he explains. "He's accustomed to assuming multiple identities and has quite an understanding of people slipping into and maintaining other identities. I guess it's why a lot of people are actors in the first place, to live all these other lives, tell all those other stories, and to do all the things you wouldn't dare do in life. It's an intriguing thing to do for a living."

Gillen, who grew up in the Dublin suburb of Drumcondra, fell into acting in his early teens. He remembers stumbling across his local youth theatre after "we were chasing this boy, even though he was one of our gang, and he sought refuge in the door of 23 Upper Gardiner Street and I thought, 'What's this place?'" He admits he never had a burning desire to be an actor but joined as a way "to meet girls, get invited to parties and to use the pool table there". But, before long, he became absorbed in this thrilling, forlorn world and went along with his sister, Fionnuala Murphy, who is also an actress, to the Shakespeare Studio, a crumbling, basement on North Great George's Street.

"I loved everything about it," Gillen recalls. "The black paint, the rickety old thunder machine and those kind of shabby, alluring, attractive people, leaning towards decadent, if not actually depraved."

His architect father, who died recently, and his mother, now a retired nurse, were liberal and easy-going. "My mum had given up

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nursing to raise the kids, going back to it when I was 13. It's nice for a kid to have a parent around when they come in from school," he says fondly. "Dad worked at home and drew up plans for houses for 30 years or so. Sometimes, he'd let us kids work on the drawings too, colouring in the windows black, which was a nice touch, at 2p a window."

His parents met in London in the fifties while studying, before settling back in Dublin. As the youngest of six children, Gillen says that by the time he came along not much was expected of him. He grew up in a rambling old house filled with books, cats and dogs, and the freedom of a typical Seventies childhood, "running wild, hanging out on the railway tracks, smoking illicit fags and making make-believe movies in the back garden. And we had holidays in Koolah, and trips to Koserow Joint in Sligo, the village my mother grew up in."

Similarly, his school days were happy and uneventful. As they drew to a close, however, his heart was already elsewhere: he was often skipping class and squandering whole afternoons on the canal or "wandering up to the roof of the hall to lay back and stare at the sky, thinking about the future."

He longed to be a part of the fantasy and glamour of cinema especially after he saw Mickey Rourke in *Copland*, *Rainy Days* and *"On My 16th Birthday, on my own, at the Cameo on Abbey Street,"* Gillen remembers. "The film was full of great things, beautiful cinematography, but what stood out was Mickey Rourke, who was playing this dreamy, wasted, damaged older brother to Matt Dillon. Whatever he was doing, it was hard to take your eyes off him."

In 1987, when he was 19, the shy, skinny pretty boy left home, took his mother's maiden name and moved to London to pursue an acting career.

"I had a girlfriend when I left Ireland and that ended, for reasons that were obvious to her, but not to me at the time." Living alone in London, Gillen endured the vast frustrations of youth — feeling lost, homesick and being single on the dole. "I wasn't starving... well, I wasn't far off," he continues with his rambling charm.

"I remember going to the supermarket to buy one egg and a Cup-a-Soup or living on cream crackers and instant soup for a week. But you learn to get on with what you have. Coming from a large family you learn to look after yourself early on. We weren't picky, not wanting for anything, but we certainly weren't given handouts. But it's good that I ended up down here penniless and had to make my own way in the world."

"My parents came to see all the plays and were generally tolerant. They weren't disapproving with my career. I mean, I was out of the house and out of working in London while still a teenager. I remember coming back home once, days after *Sgt. P.*, a BBC film I was in, and, and I was in the newspapers up the road and the guy who owned it said: 'We saw you on the telly. We had a good laugh, and we thought about your poor mother, she must be very embarrassed.'"

Later, sitting in a tiny pavement cafe with the sun beating down and waiting to be interviewed for an espresso that seems to be coming via India, Gillen reflects on the hard-

scrabbling days of his early adult life. "I was then thinking about this stuff recently because being back in London on my own doing this TV series kind of feels like when I first came here," he says, somehow looking both casual and intense.

"Since we only moved back to Dublin recently, my wife and kids have always been here with me and now they're not. When I arrived as a teenager 22 years ago, I used to spend days and weeks walking around London just looking at stuff and absorbing everything, and developing in a way that I wouldn't have done if I had been around a family or friends," he says.

Wherever Gillen lived or travelled, he had a habit of roaming the streets. "I started when I was about 12, I was an altar boy for a bit in my parish church and after having a run-in with the priest, I got kicked out, which was fine, except I couldn't tell my parents. So when I was supposed to be there, I'd wander around the streets. I've spent a lot of my waking hours over the years, walking on the streets in Dublin, New York, LA, night or day, watching the goings-on and absorbing the feel of a place."

Gillen's first significant role was *A Handful of Stars* by Billy Roche, the rocker-turned-playwright and daddy of rainy realism, at the Bush Theatre in London, which, as he says, throughout the Eighties and Nineties "was the place to work."

His unflinching, laser-like ambition led him to pursue directors and to getstrash sets. He even recalls stalking Roche and the director in the street in Dublin, and "demanding they see me."

"I never sat around waiting for things to happen, I was very proactive from the start," Gillen explains. "I was always the smallest boy in class and I think sometimes being underestimated gives you a good amount of energy. You only have to think of Napoleon, Madonna, Hitler."

Through shameless persistence, he's not only engaged the part, but also a good agent and moved into the flat of the director of the Bush Theatre, Jenny Topper, who, describing the play as being "very dear to her heart," remains a close friend. At the end-of-the-run party, Topper recalls, "Aidan said he was thinking of staying on in London, so I offered him a room in my flat. He stayed for the next two years and then moved across town with me when I bought a new place. When he left, the thing I missed most, apart from his witty company, was his recounting to me over breakfast his extraordinary dreams — vivid imagination doesn't begin to tell the half of it."

"The set-up in London was intriguing because, even though I'd been around the professional acting scene in Dublin for a year

or so, I came to know everybody. Showing up for auditions as a complete unknown, you need to be more daring about choosing what you want to reveal or not reveal about yourself. I liked the idea of being in a huge, wide pool. From then on, I became more adept at slipping into different lives," he says, before severing his intense, looking away and cringing. "I sound like a dick."

What is he so nervous about? "I was sound genuine all the time? No, I am being honest," he protests. "Maybe that's the trouble; you come out sounding like an idiot."

Despite his reputation — bottled-up, moody, dislikes journalists — Gillen is very sweet and easy to get along with. "Can I tell you about this BBC film?" he asks politely, referring to his new film *Freefall*, out later this summer, which is a timely take on the financial crisis and its catastrophic human consequences by the Rafta-winning writer and director Dominic Savage.

*Freefall*, like most of Savage's films, including the award-winning *Out of Control* and *Love + Hate*, is improvised rather than written, its characters based on interviews with real people. "If you haven't seen his work, that has a particular way of working in that he doesn't write any dialogue. It's not a total free-for-all, like a Mike Leigh film," Gillen explains. "Of course, you meet the other characters until you're acting the scene with them. It's quite liberating not having to think about repetition — like, when the hand goes when I had the cigarette. But as the story itself might take a turn and change, it's obviously harder. You have to be fearless and not be scared about looking like an idiot."

Starring alongside Rosamund Pike and Dominic Cooper, Gillen's character, Gus, is a cold-blooded, dysfunctional City "banker" who, along with the financial market itself, crashes and burns. "The subject of this drama is quite potent, about how we get ourselves in trouble or lose ourselves in a pursuit of material things that we may not need," he goes on, warming to the theme. "It's the tragedy about the way we live in the great West and how the people who get you through times of crisis we tend to take for granted. It's set in the late 2000s to early 2007 just when the first shock began to hit. It has become a global recession bit."

"I think as a society we have lost our way," he says. "Our culture as a whole is much sadder. We've become too obsessed with grasping and acquiring things but, in doing so, potentially lose our souls, and that is exactly what *Freefall* is about."

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"Well, that's always a fear." He shrugs. "I'm sure, though, I'd find something else. I'd have to be these kids."

For all his sweetness and sincerity, there is something of the outlaw about Gillen. He cites West Coast rebels and iconoclasts such as Charles Bukowski, Cormac McCarthy and Sean Penn as enduring influences and he, too, has always skirted around the mainstream and consistently found the line between being a success and self-out.

"I've certainly tried to keep my integrity. I would never do an ad or a voice-over for anything, even if I was completely broke. I don't really see that it's a job for an actor. But I don't hold it against anyone. I know some actors have to do it to scrape out a living but I managed to avoid it."

"Very early on, when I was about 17, I decided that I don't want to sell stuff and I've stuck to that. But the successful actors who are doing commercials and campaigns for everything going, I don't really understand it," Gillen says warily. "I guess they only do it for money."

And the topic of sell-out rock stars, too, is inevitable. When we talk about die-hard Sixties radicals like Bob Dylan selling out to the dole, that is Starbucks — "it's the first time that he smiles."

"I'm much more interested in people like that, musically as well. Once that fucking car and mobile-phone adverts come on, I can't take them seriously any longer."

"I like to maintain my anonymity and I think you have to for your characters to be believable. You have to do interviews and a little press, but I tend to stay out of the light as much as I could apart from," he stumbles, "the necessary moments."

Surely it's not all bad? "Oh, I know it isn't. But there are a lot of things I wouldn't do. I've tried to pick wisely along the way and not get involved with something I wouldn't agree with politically. I may not seem like an overtly political creature, but I would hope there's a certain amount of control that you have in your career and you should use it. I'm mean, I'm not going to go on television and tell people to join the army or go to Iraq. I need want to do things that I don't believe in. I choose scripts that I care about or that have something meaning for me."

He has an insatiable curiosity about what gravitates toward these darker roles, whether plotting greedily capitalist bastards such as Gus or the murderous Irish arms dealer and diamond thief Miles Jackson in *28 Rounds*, fascinated by the menace, mystery and broken lives, he "likes those kinds of parts because I'm more interested in someone that I don't know about and really can't find out about."

"Getting into the psyche of sharks and sociopaths is something of a Gillen signature. So how does he prep for it?"

"I can't tell you," he says, flashing a rare, slight smile. "Sometimes it's best not to try to explain everything because if I did, then it would lose its magic." ■

*'Freefall' will be on BBC2 later this summer and RTE during the autumn*

Make-up by Susannah Saltman

