

‘I drank and I used drugs. I fancied myself as Oliver Reed’

Today Samuel L Jackson is a well adjusted, universally adored box office superhero. But his life could so easily have gone off course, he tells Elaine Lipworth



Samuel L Jackson has just finished dinner at a local restaurant in New Orleans, where the maximum tip permitted by the owner is set at \$500. Of course, Samuel L Jackson left his delighted waitress the full amount. Hollywood's highest-grossing actor is here filming Quentin Tarantino's slave-revenge epic, *Django Unchained*, and this is just the latest example of how Jackson has endeared himself to this tightly knit community – not with grand philanthropy (although he has made plenty of Post-Katrina donations) – but with spontaneous generosity. It seems Jackson's famously laid-back, twinkling charm has gone down well, too; one evening in the French Quarter, I'm told by residents who have met him that Jackson is "very cool".

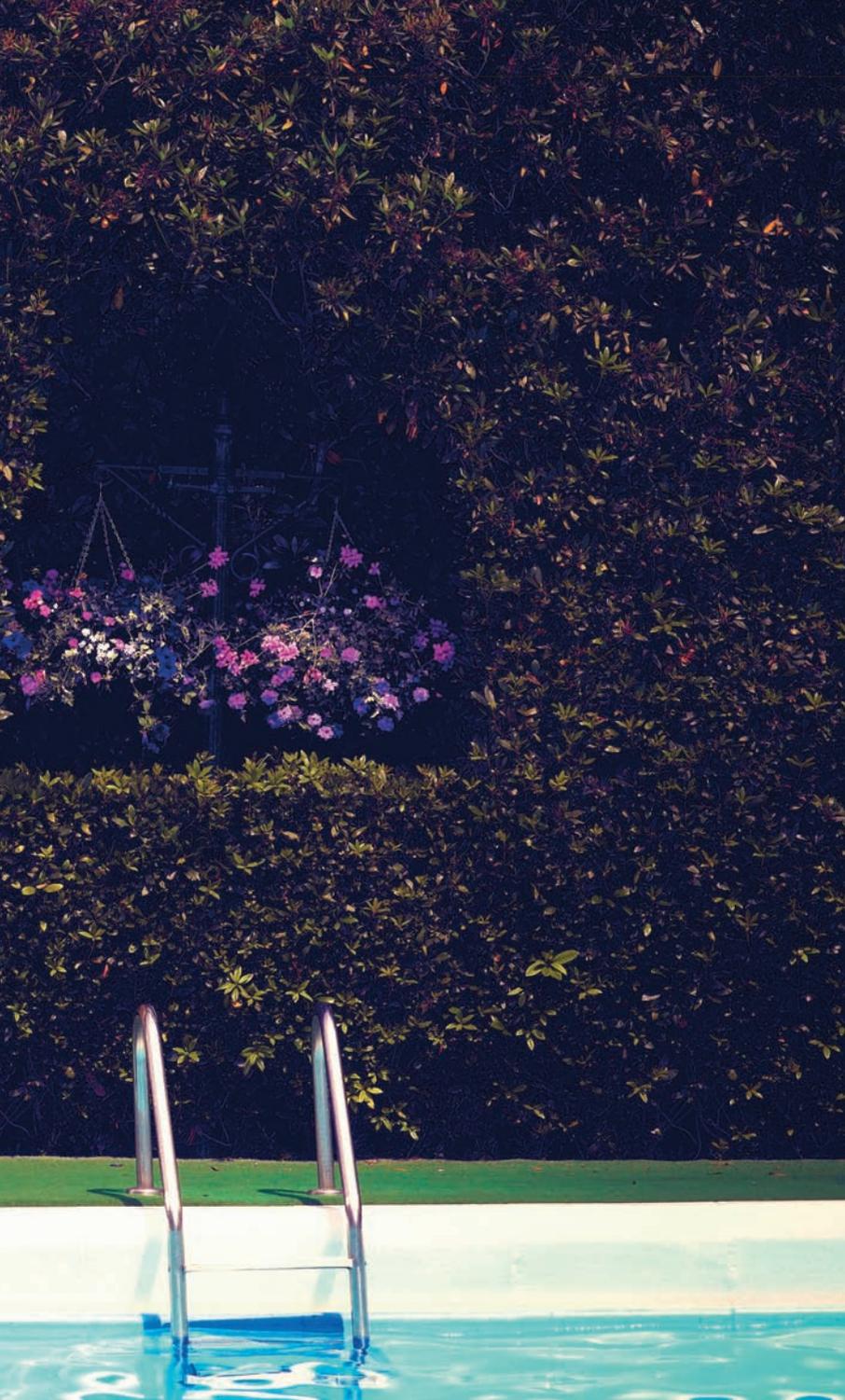
In person he doesn't disappoint. Big man, big, baritone voice, low-level ego. We are meeting for lunch at the Windsor Court Hotel, all swirling patterned carpets and quiet sophistication, in contrast to the colourful cacophony outside, where bands play on every street corner. "It's always good being in New Orleans. Great city, wonderful people, great music. I mostly like Cajun, blues, I'm not a huge jazz fan,"

Photograph by Hamish Brown

says Jackson, an accomplished musician himself who played the French horn and flute as a child, and has since added the piano, cello and guitar to his repertoire.

Jackson is 63 but looks younger; muscular, handsome and bald, with unlined skin, he wears round glasses and a black adidas tracksuit and trainers. Sitting straight-backed on a green velvet sofa, his presence dominates the subdued hotel suite. He ushers his assistant (just one, no entourage) out of the room – "I don't need to pay somebody to watch my back" – and orders a turkey club sandwich and cranberry juice. He quit drinking over two decades ago.

Jackson (his middle name is Leroy) has appeared in 140 films to date. His global box office, that includes monster hits like *Jurassic Park* and the Star Wars trilogy, as well as Tarantino thrillers *Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown*, amounts to \$8 billion (£5 billion). No wonder he can afford to tip generously. Do these sort of statistics give him plenty of clout in the industry? "Hell no," he thunders, "it just means that I've been in a bunch of movies like Star Wars that made a bunch of money and they would've made that money without me in them. I was just fortunate enough to be in movies that people wanted to see." His latest project, which I am here to



discuss with him, is no exception: the \$220 million Disney blockbuster and latest offering from the Marvel comic franchise, *Avengers Assemble*. Jackson is back with the eye patch and bad-ass attitude as Nick Fury, director of SHIELD, the international intelligence agency charged with maintaining global peace.

Written and directed by Joss Whedon (creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), the film is certainly generating excitement: just check out the online fansites. “Joss is a comic book person. He has a respect for comic books, what their law is in terms of the history of the characters,” says Jackson, who has a nine-picture Marvel deal and has appeared as Nick Fury in the Iron Man films, *Captain America* and Kenneth Branagh’s *Thor*. This time Thor’s evil brother Loki (a menacing Tom Hiddleston) is planning to take over the Earth and Fury must persuade superheroes Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr) and The Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), among others, to join forces. Though Fury is central to the story, Jackson admits that supporting roles in blockbusters fail to stretch him these days.

“It’s getting sort of tedious because I’m on the other side of my career,” he says, removing his glasses to clear them.

VERY CLUBBABLE

Samuel L Jackson has appeared in 140 films to date and is showing no signs of slowing down; and the actor with his wife, LaTanya Richardson, and daughter, Zoe, below



“I’ve never been the love interest but I like being the engine that drives the story. I liken myself to Michael Caine; Michael works all the time. He’s not the star of the films any more but he’s always an interesting character.” Caine, a friend of Jackson’s, is, as it happens, also in New Orleans filming a crime drama, *Now You See Me*. “But my choices are shrinking. I guess because I’m getting older, whatever. They are looking for new people to drive the films. One of the things that has served me well in terms of being able to cross lines of age and race is that I can’t be put in a box.” Nevertheless, the actor has commented on the huge disparity in fees for black and white performers, most famously following his Oscar-nominated turn as fast-talking, bible-quoting hitman, Jules Winnfield, in *Pulp Fiction*.

“I get paid like B-list white actors,” he said at the time. Have things improved? “Sure and for Hispanic and Asian actors, it’s got better for everybody.” He pauses and grins. “But nobody’s getting paid much now. The five to 10 million dollar co-starring roles are gone; they’re doing event films they can put anybody in.”

We move from Hollywood to American politics, a subject on which Jackson, a staunch Democrat who campaigned for Barack Obama in 2008, is equally blunt. “The problem with our government is that there are too many voices and if they’re not in your political party then they’re not going to let you get anything accomplished because they want you to look bad.” His opinion of Mitt Romney and his Republican peers? “God only knows what this country would be if those people had free reign – the one per cent [of the wealthiest Americans] would be reigning.” He also shares his country’s outrage at the killing of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in February, by armed vigilante George Zimmerman.

Thanks to America’s “stand your ground” law (which allows citizens to use deadly force in self-defence) Zimmerman avoided arrest for 46 days by claiming that he followed Martin for “looking suspicious” and only shot when the teenager attacked him. Zimmerman has since been charged with second-degree murder. “Who are these people running around the community with guns, pretending to be cops, who have a right to shoot somebody because of this bulls--- law?” vents Jackson. “What’s untenable is that nobody put the guy who shot this kid in custody.” Not that he disagrees with America’s gun laws altogether. Far from it. “I don’t mind people having guns, I grew up with guns in Tennessee.” You own one? “Hell yeah.” He laughs at my surprised expression. “I’m not going to be the one without the gun when the people who *have* guns show up.” It’s uncensored comments like this that distinguish lunch with Jackson from the ubiquitous pedestrian celebrity interview. In fact, he’s happy to discuss everything from his childhood in segregated Tennessee, to drug addiction, to his relationships. He’s been married to actress LaTanya Richardson, with whom he has a 30-year-old daughter, Zoe, for 42 years, and doesn’t deny they had difficulties during his drug-fuelled twenties and thirties.

“We’re both very tolerant. We’ve had big fights and those moments when it would have just been easy to walk away, but fortunately I went on location or she went on the road doing a play or something and then we forgot about it.” Jackson was raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee, by his grandparents and aunt. His mother, Elizabeth, moved to Washington DC for work but visited regularly.

His father left when he was a baby. “It was fine,” he shrugs his shoulders and pauses for thought. “One of the things that disturbs people about me is that I don’t have separation anxiety. I don’t miss my wife. LaTanya’s in New York, we talk once a day and we’re fine. At the end of a movie people go ‘I’m so sad’. [I say] ‘Is this the last movie you ever going to do?’”

He admits, however, that his father's absence has made his relationship with Zoe a priority. "One of the reasons LaTanya and I stayed together was that we felt that Zoe deserved two parents in the same place, because my wife was also the product of a broken home." Even so, Jackson has mainly positive memories of an upbringing he describes as "great and loving. We were never hungry, I was never ragged". It was also strict. "I had to be home at a certain time. People ask me 'why do you work so much?' People in my house got up to go to work every day. My grandmother was a domestic, like the women in *The Help* and my grandfather was a doorman/elevator operator/furnace maintainer. My aunt was a schoolteacher and I was reading by the time I was three." Indeed, Jackson was a model student. "[I was] extremely well read and different from my friends in that respect. For every four or five comic books, I had to read a classic. My teachers [at his all-black school] knew

I'm not going to be the one without the gun when the people with guns show up'



that my family wanted me to go to college so they held me to a high standard. They talked to my mother, my grandmother, my aunt and my church about how I was doing at school. The 'it takes a village to raise a child' syndrome was in operation," he smiles.

Jackson developed an interest in theatre after winning a place at the esteemed black men's college, Morehouse, in Atlanta, at the height of the civil rights movement. He was one of the ushers at Martin Luther King Jr's funeral in 1968 – and recently spent six "amazing" months on Broadway portraying King in *The Mountaintop* – and became heavily involved in radical black politics. After being suspended for two years for leading a protest demanding the college offer a black studies course (and taking several members of the board of trustees hostage) he finally graduated with a drama degree.

Jackson's dabbling in drugs began in New York in the late Seventies when he joined the acclaimed Negro Ensemble Company. "It was the life. I was in the theatre, the revolution. I fancied myself as Oliver Reed. Part of it is hereditary: my father died of alcoholism," says Jackson with measured detachment. "I took it a step further, I drank and I used drugs. I liked the feeling of not being cognisant of what was going on around me." Despite the addiction he never spiralled into utter dissipation.

"I didn't rob people, I was working the whole time. I rehearsed and performed on drugs. I went on stage and watched people's eyes roll across stage and I'd go 'oh I have a line, OK got to focus on the play now.'" He admits it was hard for his wife and daughter to deal with his behaviour. "I was not affectionate, I was not associative and I was kind of crazy – in a way that I regret and I've apologised to both."



DID I BREAK YOUR CONCENTRATION?

Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta in 'Pulp Fiction', top; Jackson as Nick Fury in 'Avengers Assemble', top left; on the campaign trail for Barack Obama, middle; and the actor and Ruby Dee in 'Jungle Fever', above

The turning point came when his family discovered him "passed out on the kitchen floor. I guess I wanted to get caught. I ended up going to a party, drinking too much tequila and decided on the way home I needed to get cocaine and level myself out because I was drunk. I got home and cooked it.

"When I looked up, LaTanya and Zoe were standing there. The cocaine was cooked but I'd never smoked it. That was the first time LaTanya realised I was doing something that was greater than just smoking weed and drinking." Jackson checked into rehab. "I didn't resist because I was ready." Ironically, two weeks after rehab he began shooting what

would become his breakout film performance, as a crack addict in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991). "It was the first thing I did without a substance in my body," says Jackson, who is now a "great friend" of Lee's. Offers flooded in and career-defining performances followed. Sobriety, he says, enabled him "to get inside a character" in a deeper way.

There have been no relapses. But there's been no shortage of temptations either. "I hang out with people who smoke weed on the golf course, I've been in rooms with big plates of cocaine." He scratches his head and smiles. "When I was drinking nobody offered me f----- Cristal, now I've got bottles of it in my house that people keep giving me. But my wife doesn't worry about me opening those bottles." Since rehab, Jackson, who was raised Christian, has become a spiritual (rather than religious) man. Is acting a god-given gift? "No, because I work at it. I still learn, I read."

He's clearly excited to be working with Tarantino again. *Django Unchained* tells the story of a freed slave (Jamie Foxx) on a quest to rescue his still enslaved wife from a cotton plantation. Jackson plays the loyal houseboy of the plantation's owner (Leonardo DiCaprio). I ask Jackson if it is emotional playing a slave. "It's an eerie sort of thing. When I went to the set for the first time we pulled up to this huge cotton field and there were extras picking cotton and white guys sitting on horses. It was such a stark picture." He won't go into details about the plot but it's reportedly violent and shocking. "Hopefully people will see past [that] and understand they're watching a movie about heroism and redemption." How, I wonder, will Jackson's friend Spike Lee view the movie? The director has criticised white film-makers in the past for interpreting the black experience. "I'm sure he'll have some outcry," he laughs.

Away from the film set, Jackson is an avid golfer and has homes in LA and New York, but describes his lifestyle as simple. "I've made plenty of money [but] I've been frugal. I was pretty much grown when all this stuff happened to me so I didn't go through that period of 'wow, an 800 dollar watch, let me have it.' Hell no. I go on maybe one vacation a year. I love travelling around Europe because I like looking at old stuff.

"There's nothing old here," says Jackson, a self-confessed Anglophile. "The first time I went to London was 1980 when I was doing *Ragtime*. I know the tube system, there are places I like to hang out and eat, but you guys [he means the paparazzi] bug the s--- out of me." Not enough, though, to deter him from fulfilling a long-held ambition: "I've always wanted to do a play on the West End," he says, adding that he has no plans to retire. "Never. I'll be like Michael [Caine], keep on working."

'Avengers Assemble' is on general release from Thursday