



FAR AND AWAY

...

AS WE EAGERLY AWAIT HIS TURN IN
THE DARK TOWER AND THE FIFTH SEASON OF
LUTHER, IDRIS ELBA STOPS HIS WHIRLWIND
TRAVEL SCHEDULE JUST LONG ENOUGH TO TALK
WITH ESSENCE'S **CORI MURRAY** IN THAILAND

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Idris Elba is a hard man to pin down. For nearly a year, his publicist and I were like two parents planning a playdate for the most popular kid in class. Everybody wants him. But Elba wants us (more on that later), so we're combing through his jam-packed calendar looking for an opening. In one breath, she tells me that after Elba finishes shooting *Thor: Ragnarok* in Australia—and leaves Vancouver, where he's been filming *The Mountain Between Us* with Kate Winslet—he goes back to London for John Ridley's Showtime limited series, *Guerrilla*. Then he will be in Los Angeles for two nights and in New York City for one day promoting his partnership with retailer Superdry. After that he's not back in the States for months. His publicist sighs, exasperated by the Golden Globe winner's busyness, then says half-jokingly, "Well, could you shoot him in Thailand?"

One 21-hour flight later, the ESSENCE team meets with Elba in the lobby of Anantara Bophut Koh Samui Resort in Thailand. (Koh Samui is one of the largest islands off the coast of the Southeast Asian country.) He's been training intensively in Muay Thai fighting there and in Bangkok for the Discovery UK series *Idris Elba: Fighter*. But this past October, after weeks of preparation for his first professional fight in kickboxing, the unthinkable happens: Thailand's adored Royal Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej dies and the country's outpouring of grief consumes the island. The first 30 days require "civic acknowledgment" of the king's death, and although we are in paradise, things must come to a halt: music, drinking, socializing in public and, yes, Elba's much-anticipated match. As a show of respect for the yearlong national mourning period that begins the day after we arrive, Elba graciously requests that we condense the multiday photo shoot and interview into ten hours. His only stipulation: He must complete an early-morning workout and then he's ours until nightfall.

Deal.

INTO THE JUNGLE

Stepping out of a sleek black SUV, Elba takes his time as he enters the massive, doorless building. He's visibly exhausted, but that doesn't stop him from warmly greeting everyone, including the resort staff members, who are wearing black in honor of their king.

As we walk with him through Anantara's idyllic setting, he's clearly taken by the lush surroundings of overgrown palms and philodendrons. Paradise will do that to you. Still, his occasional wincing, courtesy of some earlier roundhouse kicks, raise the question: Why would someone who's been named one of the sexiest men in the world risk injuring that handsome face and physique? But that's the thing about Elba. While he appreciates your Man Crush Monday posts—and, yes, he does see all the social media chatter suggesting he should be the next James Bond—his heart is truly in the work. "I am an actor for hire," he says sheepishly.

Elba emerged from 2016 with two Screen Actors Guild awards for his BBC series, *Luther*, and the Netflix original film *Beasts of No Nation*. He also picked up an Independent Spirit Award for Best Supporting Actor for *Beasts* and a Critics' Choice Award for *Luther*. On top of the trophies, Elba's performances helped *Star Trek Beyond*, *Zootopia*, *Finding Dory* and *The Jungle Book* rake in a collective \$1.3 billion at the box office.

This year those projects Elba has been busy filming are finally hitting the screen. *Guerrilla* premiered April 16, and August 4 is the long-awaited release of *The Dark Tower*, an adaptation of Stephen King's popular novels. In the dual-world dystopian film, Elba plays broken man turned renegade gunslinger Roland Deschain opposite Matthew McConaughey's Man in Black, who is evil personified.

"Let me tell you, these are very complicated books. They're not easy reads," says Elba, shaking his head for emphasis. Still he plays The Gunslinger as if he woke up one morning and decided he'd live the rest of his life wearing a weathered leather trench and a belt of bullets instead of his usual uniform of white tees and jeans. The role just fits. "My character is definitely an homage to the literature," he says. "But it's completely different. It's me, the way I have interpreted The Gunslinger. And not just by way of race." Director Nikolaj Arcel agrees. In an e-mail he writes, "Idris was the best I could possibly imagine, because he has that strength, depth and mystery required to play Roland. Also I was just a fan, simple as that."

Not one to stay inactive for long, Elba's already focused on the next item on his 2017 to-do list. In May he began directing his first feature film, *Yardie*, bouncing back and forth between Jamaica and his London

MY CHARACTER IN *THE DARK TOWER* IS DEFINITELY **AN HOMAGE TO THE LITERATURE**. BUT IT'S COMPLETELY DIFFERENT. IT'S ME.

hometown. "Yardie is quite a semifamous bit of English literature about a small-time pastor who comes from Jamaica and ends up embroiled in [avenging his brother's death]," Elba explains. "It's set in the late seventies, early eighties, a hotbed of Jamaican culture in London, but then »



ON PUSHING BEYOND HIS LIMITS: “I’m all about testing myself. I’m 44 and professional kickboxing is a young man’s sport, but I’ve proved that dedication and hard work get you there. It’s been a good journey. Every part of my physicality was tested.”



crack cocaine arrives.” Of the protagonist, Elba adds, “He’s a fish out of water and finds himself becoming a gangster really quickly. It’s not really his life. For me, I’m making that story because A, it’s part of the reason I became a man. I was born in 1972, and that’s just my era. And B, there’s a big, big music component. I love music and I love film. This is my chance to marry the two.”

Actor Aml Ameen, who Elba cast as D, *Yardie*’s lead, felt the love working with him on the seven-week shoot. “Idris is a benevolent, gracious gentleman; he really is. He’s kind to everyone—the fact that he’s an icon and a movie star is never a feeling that is imposed on you,” says Ameen. “He’s just one of the lads.”

A ZEN LIFE

To so many women the world over, Elba is considered perfection. But at the moment, photographer Dennis Leupold’s attempts at channeling his bravado for the camera are falling flat.

Leupold: “You look great!”

Elba: “What do you say to Rihanna?”

BECAUSE I’M 44 YEARS OLD
WITH A TWO-AND-A-HALF-
YEAR-OLD BOY, I’M ROLLING
AROUND PLAYING AND THEN
I’M AT A DRAKE CONCERT
WITH MY TEENAGE DAUGHTER.

Tell me that sh-t.”

Elba teases the photographer, who frequently travels with and shoots the hot and unbothered pics Rihanna regularly shares on Instagram. Leupold blushes and then confesses the icon’s sexiness is au

naturel. Says Elba with a smirk, “Oh, I see.” Within seconds, his undeniable swagger fills up the frame, upping the heat on an already steamy day in the tropics. But the North London born and bred star isn’t done showing he knows something about making an impression on camera. To no one in particular, he announces, “It’s time this came off,” as he unbuttons his shirt to his navel. And like Rihanna sings (our take on it, anyway), “Baby, this is what we came for.”

As we finish the last few frames of our photo shoot at Big Buddha market, the upstanding Englishman thanks our crew before he succumbs to total exhaustion. He’s clearly ready to relax. But then he spies my notepad and recorder and suggests our interview take place somewhere that doesn’t feel like work. He quickly consults his small band of brothers—his barber, his personal security and a *Fighter* producer—who unanimously suggest heading to the island’s only beacon of nightlife: Ark Bar on Chaweng Beach.

Known for its full moon-party turn-ups, Ark Bar has just enough buzz for Elba. “Because I’m 44 years old with a two-and-a-half-year-old boy, I’m rolling around playing and then I’m at a Drake concert with my teenage daughter,” he says. “Having a young child now keeps me young, without a doubt.”

The mention of his family stirs up a protectiveness that’s become more important to him since his Hollywood days in the early aughts. “I talk about parenting all the time, but I’m just a bit more wary now,” he explains. “As my celebrity sort of rises, there are certain things you can never take back.” Still Elba’s more than grateful for the ESSENCE readers who have buoyed his career from *The Wire* until now. “The Black women [who make up] my audience have been solid and uncompromising. I know my ESSENCE readers haven’t seen me for a while, so I told my publicist, ‘Let’s do something special [with them]. I’m in Thailand....’ Even if you guys said, ‘We don’t have the budget.’ I would have made that budget work. I would have done that!”

No interview with the global heartthrob would be complete without, of course, asking Elba about his relationship status and if he will ever marry again. “Am I ever gonna get remarried? I don’t think so. Yeah, I don’t think so,” he says. “Marriage is an institution of sorts. And I’ve done it. It’s not for everybody. It’s not my life’s calling.”

So what is calling him these days? The need for some downtime, says Elba, which means in 2018 we should expect to see less of the man we love to watch. He says he’s slowing down, recalibrating from the last few years of back-to-back projects. He will, however, still make room for his first love: deejaying. “I’ve been taking my time over the past five years to really be taken seriously. Releasing music, deejaying in certain clubs, in certain places. I don’t make any money from it. I love it. I absolutely love it,” he says, exhaling as the last of his vodka tonic goes down smoothly. “The plan is to tour the world, see the world, relax, deejay, have fun.” ■

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Tracey Woods (@traceysees) is ESSENCE’s photo editor. The Brooklynite, who hails from Providence, holds an M.F.A. from New York City’s Pratt Institute and is a sci-fi aficionado.



Dennis Leupold (@dennisleupold) is an international fashion photographer who splits his time between L.A. and New York City capturing images of such artists as Rihanna, Mary J. Blige and Jennifer Lopez.

WOODS, MICHAEL ROWE; LEUPOLD, COURTESY OF SUBJECT.



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