

# Lunch with Paul Bettany

The British actor has made New York his home. At his favourite Italian in Tribeca with [Ariel Leve](#) he reflects on the lost years after his brother's early death and why he has rekindled his love for film

I'm seated at the table when the phone rings. "Paul asked me to call," a voice says, "he's very sorry for being late and he's on his way." I glance at my watch. It's six minutes past the time we're supposed to meet. How late will he be? Twenty minutes? Thirty minutes?

Seconds later, he appears. Winded and apologising profusely. Despite the freezing temperature outside, he's wearing a tweed blazer with a scarf, jeans and his tinted blue glasses are light enough so that I can see his eyes. He is as tall in person as he is on screen and is instantly likable. Confident but self-effacing and fanatically polite. As he takes his seat he is still apologising.

Don't worry, I say, it's only 10 minutes. He looks horrified and corrects me. "I was exactly seven minutes late." He laughs and takes off the glasses. Then he puts them back on. "My poor wife," he says sympathetically referring to the actress, Jennifer Connelly. They've been together since 2003. "She moves at her own pace – she's sort of slightly in slow motion, it's mesmerising and very beautiful – and I'm," he snaps his fingers. "C'mon, c'mon, we're going to be late!"

We've met at his favourite restaurant, Stuzzicheria, a local place in his Tribeca neighbourhood which serves small plates. He knows the owner and is clearly at home – so much so that he jumps up and disappears into the kitchen for a few seconds to order. Some assorted plates arrive, and they're not so small. A sizeable heaping of fresh Pecorino cheese, polpetta – beef meatballs in tomato sauce, mozzarella-risotto croquettes and we each have a fennel salad which has radish, celery and bagna cauda.

For his latest role, Bettany didn't have to go far from home. *Margin Call*, a thriller that takes place over 24 hours in an investment bank right before the crisis in 2008, was shot in just 17 days here in New York. His character, Will Emerson, is a highly competitive economic predator, and for those of



us who need a translator to interpret financial dialogue, a great deal of it is thankfully explained in layman's terms.

"The film changed my life more than the actual event," Bettany explains. He tells of how after having children, acting had become a source of income – something that wasn't inspiring. He had taken some time off but doing the film he had a reawakening of all the reasons he got into it in the first place.

He chews emphatically. "This is insanely good bread, by the way."

Choosing projects now has changed. If he didn't have children he would have made different choices. "But I don't want to sound like it's been a sacrifice for me. Sometimes you make decisions to not work and be with your family." Now career

**'There's a period from the age of 16 to 26 where I'm not very clear on time'**

**ILLUSTRATION**  
Lyndon Hayes

decisions involve others because he is a husband and father. "I have children – they need to know Dad's going to come home." He bites into the rice balls that have arrived. "Can you try these? They're brilliant."

He and his wife and children make sure they are never apart for more than two weeks. They have an apartment in lower Manhattan and a house in Vermont. New York began to feel like home five years ago although Bettany moved here a decade ago and fell in love with it immediately. During a recent visit to London he realised how long he'd been away when he "got out of Leicester Square tube station and couldn't remember how to get to Dean Street. I thought, 'Wow, I'm a tourist.'"

There's been a lot written about >>

## Dining out

Bettany's early life when supposedly, he was living on the streets of the capital. It's a subject he has avoided discussing in the past. "I wasn't living on the streets. I was busking on the streets to make money."

How old was he? "I'm not sure. I'm not very good with time around that period. I think about 17, 18 or 19. There's a 10-year period from 16 to 26 where I'm not very clear on time."

Sometimes he busked in Leicester Square, sometimes at Westminster Pier. It was a bleak period. "I had no thought of the future at all. No plan. I suppose now, when I think back to it, I was in a depressed state. But it didn't seem like depression because I didn't feel much."

"I was living in a bunch of different places. I'd sneak into a boarding house where my sister was staying – she let me sleep on her floor. I slept on a lot of people's floors."

Towards the end, he got very sick and the people he was living with skipped out on the rent. "The landlord came up and took my guitar – which was really fucking stupid because I had no way of earning the rent money."

"My dad came and picked me up and paid off my rent. I went home and got myself well. And then I started working in an old people's home. And then I applied for drama school and got in."

**There is a distanced manner when** he talks about this time, as though he has been describing someone else's experience. "It was a period of mourning. My brother had died. I was very merged with my brother. It was a mixture of the loss of someone you love deeply coupled with a time when you're sort of – 16, 17 – narcissistically confident about yourself, thinking life is eternal, and the fragility of it being revealed was awful. Quite apart from my own loss. I loved him so much. The awareness of how precarious our position is. And an alienation of how I felt with other people my age. I felt I was harbouring a huge secret about what actually happens. Up until then life had seemed exciting and endless."

He is suddenly reflective for a moment and seems taken aback by having been so candid.

"It's funny we're talking about this. I've shut this question down every time in interviews. But if I do shut it down, people just print the last thing I said from the internet anyway. And the last thing I said about it was coming out of the mouth of a 24-year-old."

### They shared

Arancini \$7, pecorino \$7, daily salume \$8, polpette \$9, fennel salad \$9.

### They drank

Bottled water \$3.50, double espresso \$4, (Paul), tap water, black coffee, \$3 (Ariel).



### The Table

Stuzzicheria, 305 Church St, New York, NY 10013; 212 209 4037

### 'You can fudge a lot as an actor – but you can't fudge being a parent'

That was a child speaking about it."

He is 40 now, and time and age have given him perspective.

"But yes," he says quietly, "that period of mourning feels very separate. I totally secluded myself. I didn't have friends. I fell off the radar. I completely disappeared from everything for a year or two years."

He orders a double espresso. We begin to speak about his family and his manner changes entirely. One of his most salient qualities – being fully engaged – has returned.

"I have three children. A 14-year-old from my wife's previous relationship, but he might as well be mine. I met him when he was three and I've been around since he was four. We also have an eight-year-old son and a seven-month-old daughter."

The commitment to family has taken hold so strongly that he says he can tell when an actor is faking it. "You can fudge a lot as an actor but you can't fudge being a parent."

He and his wife cook a lot at home. They had around 30 people staying over the Christmas holidays at their house in Vermont. "My wife was not a cook, nor was I, when we met. Now she cooks beautifully." He leaves it at that.

When they have dinner parties, which they do occasionally, the guests are not actors. "No one I know works in the industry." He pauses. "No, that's not true – Liv Tyler."

The building they live in used to be home to artists but now it's mostly people in the financial world who can afford it. "I'm lucky enough to have this beautiful apartment and I've never had to fire anybody or walk over anybody – I haven't had to fuck anybody over for a buck ever."

Just then, he looks at his watch and reaches for his scarf. "Oh! I have to pick up the kids – I'm going to have to run in a minute." We say our goodbyes and I suggest he take off immediately.

I don't want him to be late. **OFM** *Margin Call* is in cinemas now