Robert Pattinson: 'Twilight's the hardest part I've done'

He made his name as teenage vampire heart-throb Edward Cullen in Twilight. Then his turbulent romance with co‑star Kristen Stewart dominated the world's gossip columns. Now Robert Pattinson is older, wiser and shedding his Hollywood pretty-boy image. He talks about his new role in David Michôd's dystopian outback western The Rover

There is a moment in The Rover, David Michôd's futuristic western set in the Australian outback, in which Robert Pattinson's character sits in the cab of a truck at night listening to the radio play Keri Hilson's hit Pretty Girl Rock. The night is black and the radio tinny, and softly Pattinson begins to sing along. "Don't hate me 'cause I'm beautiful," he sings, his voice high and whiny, the lyrics muffled by lips that cling to dirty teeth. "Don't hate me 'cause I'm beautiful."

It's a pivotal moment for Rey, the slow, needy, uncertain young man Pattinson plays, but it also feels like something of a reference point in the career of the actor himself; a small reminder for the audience of just how far he has run from his days as the pretty-boy Hollywood pin-up.

The Pattinson who walks into our interview this morning seems to play a similar trick, pointing out, two steps into the room, that the hotel carpet "looks like a Magic Eye picture". And indeed it does – a bold, blurry pattern in stripes of cream and black. But Pattinson's remark also serves to shifts attention neatly away from himself, as if he is weary of being the centre of it, the face that everyone stares at.

Pattinson was 22 when he was first cast as Edward Cullen in the Twilight Saga, the five-part movie adaptation of Stephanie Meyer's best-selling teen vampire novels. Overnight he became one of Hollywood's most adored young stars, pursued wherever he went by paparazzi and screaming fans. He was named "the most handsome man in the world" by Vanity Fair, and one of the 100 Most Influential People by Time. Amid all the fuss and the madness he embarked upon a tortuous relationship with his co-star, Kristen Stewart, that meant the young couple were rarely out of the gossip pages.

He is 28 now. The final Twilight instalment done, the Stewart romance finished, he is finally cutting a dash as a serious actor.

Early leading-man roles (Remember Me; Water for Elephants) have given way to more challenging characters – he earned impressive reviews for his portrayal of a young billionaire in David Cronenberg's adaptation of Don DeLillo's Cosmopolis, and will soon be seen in another Cronenberg project, Maps to the Stars – as well as starring alongside Nicole Kidman in the Gertrude Bell biopic Queen of the Desert.

But for now he is rooted in Michôd's The Rover, a brilliantly dark story of a loner (Guy Pearce) in pursuit of a gang of ramshackle crooks who have stolen his car. En route, he acquires Rey (Pattinson), the brother of one of the thieves, whom they had left for dead at the scene of a botched robbery, and together they chug through the Australian desert, now a glowering, lawless land 10 years after a global economic collapse.

"I just thought it was strikingly original," Pattinson says of first reading Michôd's script. "Even in the way it looked on the page.

"David's got a very specific way of writing dialogue. It's very functional, the writing's very harsh, it's savage, but it didn't feel just stylised writing – it was emotional as well. It just seemed so natural compared to something like No Country for Old Men. I always felt that was more like film writing. And this didn't really feel like a film script – it felt like a dream."

Pattinson has a very particular way of speaking: he will talk softly, intently about subjects you sense mean a great deal to him – Michôd's writing, for instance, or the craft of acting – only to then sweep it to one side with a flourishing "It was crazy!" or a burst of wheezy, slightly wild laughter. It gives the impression of someone who has not quite yet settled into his skin.

He had to audition for The Rover – a process he loathes. "I'm quite good at doing meetings," he says. "If I'm just meeting someone about a job I'm like a dog, especially if my agent's said to me: 'A lot of people want this job.' Then I'm like: 'Oh yeah? Then I will do anything to get it!'" What's his technique? "I don't know, I just become a bullshit artist!" he laughs. "That's when I start acting! I'm really much better at doing it when the cameras aren't rolling ..."

But auditions petrify him. He has spoken of the good 45 minutes of "neuroses" he has to suffer before any audition can ever really begin. "I just can't ... I literally can't do it," he tries to explain. "It's just me looking uncomfortable, trying to put on an American accent ... or sitting in the corner, making myself throw up and punching myself in the face." What helps get him past the neuroses, what happens after those excruciating 45 minutes that helps him perform. "Just that you think that someone actually believes you can do something," he says. "That makes me sound like such an idiot. It's crazy."

But the joys of acting still outweigh these moments.

"For whatever reason, I think there's something profoundly satisfying about being able to watch something you've done afterwards, or to just do a scene and feel like: 'Oh, I just had an out-of-body experience for a second!'"

He pauses. "Just for one second," he says gently. "And generally people don't even notice. It feels literally like you've been asleep for a second." He recalls such a moment while shooting this film. "It's not the biggest scene, it's not even in the movie, it was the rehearsal. And me and Guy had just been going so nuts – we'd been out in the desert and we'd become like crazy homeless people. And I turned around and looked at him and just realised actually, we're not acting any more." He laughs. "And why did that feel so good? It's so weird."

It's easy to assume that being tethered to the long-running Twilight Saga held him back from experiencing such moments, from growing as an actor, but he argues that the role required more resources than most. "I think Twilight's probably the hardest part I've done," he says, "because to do it for five movies, it's really hard to think of stuff that's maybe not boring. Especially if you don't die. Because what's the drama? You're not scared of anything! And that's the whole essence of drama: life and death."

Pattinson was born and raised in London, but many of his film roles have required an US accent. In The Rover, Rey is from the American South, and like many has relocated to Australia in search of work in the mines. It was the voice, he says, that led him into the character.

He recalls "losing my mind" during his first day on set. "It just didn't feel right for ages," he says. "And then there was this one little thing – I had this makeup on my teeth, and it kept rubbing off all the time. It was really putting me off – it meant I had to keep redoing scenes. So I started trying to do this thing where I covered my teeth with my lips. And it changes your voice a little bit, but I thought: 'Oh, that's really cool!' And after that I started speaking like that 'ouhhggghhh ...'" he replicates the style, and then laughs. "It's so silly, it's so stupid! I was just kind of making the accent up, I don't even know what state it is really."

But for Pattinson, having the opportunity to play a grubby-toothed mumbler from an unidentified corner of the American South proved liberating, as did the fact that his character plays second fiddle to that of Pearce. "There's something about Rey, and there's something about not having to drive the story forward," he explains. "You can just be the condiment. It's really kind of freeing just being the sidekick weirdo."

He is full of praise for Pearce, for his physicality and his ability to transform himself for the role. He speaks of how, for much of their time on set, he thought Pearce to be physically bigger, and of his strange surprise when filming ended to find him not only clean-shaven but also somehow reduced in stature.

"And I liked seeing that Guy, even after having done tons and tons of movies is still scared," he adds. "I've worked with some actors who, having done so many movies, they just know what they're gonna do. No matter what I would be doing in a scene they would have practised their part in a mirror already and that was it, whereas Guy is really trying to find it still. So that was why it was more fun – because neither of us really knew what the movie was about when we started. But he's not afraid to let it happen. And there's very few actors who've been doing it as long as he has that still approach it like that, that still have that element of danger."

How did they find out what the movie was about? "I think it's about the feel," Pattinson says. "I think after I did Cosmopolis I realised that trying to psychoanalyse parts and trying to be all clever about it ... well, it only really started with actors in the 50s, and for thousands of years before that it was just about voice and using your body as a performance instrument ..." he gives a faintly embarrassed laugh. "So I generally think whatever feels nice, it's probably right."

What felt nice in this role was the language, he says. "It was all the little speech patterns. It was like a song - if you're singing a song in a certain way you're not trying to make it sound sad or something, it just is." He frowns. "I keep trying to do that in movies, but it's really difficult trying to find scripts that allow for it, that mean you don't have to hit specific thematic beats."

Occasionally he tries to write something himself. "I was trying to write a play the other day and I showed it to my assistant and didn't quite realise how bad it was." He laughs and laughs. "I was writing it totally by myself in the middle of the night thinking: 'This is how you do it! You just stay up all night and keep writing!' She came in the next morning, and I'd been up all night writing. I said to her: 'You have to read this! It's amazing!'" He could tell it was perhaps not, he says, from her facial expressions as she read. "And then she said: 'It's not in English ... and half the time you haven't even put the character names in so it's just a stream of consciousness ...'"

But he would like to be in a play, he says. "Something in a really small theatre. I don't think I could do something on Broadway ... But I'd quite like to do something kind of shocking."

He likes being shocking, he says, and his next role is satisfyingly so. Starring alongside Robert De Niro in Olivier Assayas's Idol's Eye, he will play a small-time criminal caught up with the Chicago mafia. "My character is this slightly delusional lost child," he says. "Everyone always glamorises criminals – it feels inevitable in movies – but in this it's really not glamorised. It is quite dense. It's really serious. Very political."

I think of something he told me earlier, about the ways in which he believes Twilight has influenced his career, and of how he wagers that most cinema audiences have judged him before he has uttered a single line on the screen. I pictured his frustration, the effort of forever trying to shake off that famous role, but on the contrary, he explained, he enjoys the possibilities that tension brings.

"It's kind of fun," he said. "Because people have preconceived ideas about you, and sometimes it affords you the opportunity to shock people more."