

'You know my politics': Benedict Cumberbatch reflects on

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Benedict Cumberbatch on societal collapse, humanitarian responsibilities, a post-Covid world and why his new Cold War thriller drama *The Courier* has a 'weird relevance' to these times of everyday heroism

ADRIAN LOBB | 12 Aug 2021SHARE      

"Are you serious? God, what is this? Am I out of date? When did this happen?"

Benedict Cumberbatch is dumbfounded. Flabbergasted. Staggered. Flummoxed.

"Fucking hell."

Midway through a conversation that will veer from the joys of parenthood to the perils of mutually assured nuclear destruction via the cruelty of the upcoming cut to Universal Credit payments, I mention the recent attacks on the RNLI for rescuing people from boats crossing the channel, with Nigel Farage and certain newspapers fanning the flames then watching the furore unfold on social media.

Cumberbatch has not seen the news yet today so has missed the latest skirmishes in the culture wars.

"Wait, you mean the lifeboat men and women? Come on!" he shouts. "It's their job. They're volunteer seamen. They would do that for anybody – it's to save lives. I find it extraordinary. They are being attacked for helping drowning people? I find it abhorrent. People who are literally in a position of saving lives – because that's what the RNLI are... Is this real? Extraordinary.

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"God forbid that the people calling them out should ever end up in a situation where they need to be rescued at sea or have a child swimming that they can't save. I mean, that is unthinkable, please put yourself in the position of these people."

He continues, barely pausing for breath, his busy brain considering the background to this latest controversy in real time.

People say it's not our problem, but it really is. We created it.

"It's the reason why people are mass migrating – whether it's the environmental or societal collapse – that we need to deal with, not the people rescuing the people doing it. It frightens me how blind people are to the fact that we went to war in countries that destabilised an entire area of our world and that's where these people are coming from.

"I mean, it's a very simple equation. People say it's not our problem, but it really is. We created it. And also, part of **being global citizens means it should be our humanitarian problem anyway**. It's not good enough to think, 'let's hope they die on the way'. And that's really the logic of what people are saying."

On any given subject, Cumberbatch can usually be relied on to take a position with some stridency. He has strong form for this. And long may it continue.

Yes, **Benedict Cumberbatch** is back. And he is right back in the world of work, he says, after some lovely time off. His lockdown has been spent between the contrasting worlds of the big, bold, brash and blockbusting Marvel Universe and family life – initially on a remote island community in New Zealand where he suddenly found himself hunkering down in the bosom of his family back in March 2020.

"I did a lot of Dr Strange-ing over multiple winter lockdowns, but before that I had done [Jane Campion's upcoming western] *The Power of the Dog* in New Zealand when the first lockdown occurred," he says.

"I was fortunate enough to have my entire family cradled next to me, which was just wonderful. So my mum and my dad were sheltering with us. They came for a set visit and ended up, poor things, staying for four months. It was actually a wonderful, happy accident to be able to spend that much time with their grandsons. It was magic, something we'll never get back and wouldn't have had otherwise. So it was a weird blessing in disguise."

With a backlog of cinema releases due to the pandemic, **Cumberbatch** is not just back, he is back with a bang. We will soon have a range of options to get our fix of him on the big screen.

And we can banish any worries that he might be so seduced by the marvels of the Marvel Universe – the ultimate rebellion for a classically trained English actor – that he would forego the rich character studies and intense true-life dramas which made his name.

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Instead, he is producing work of greater variety than ever before – starring as outsider artist Louis Wain (of cat portraits fame) and in the Jane Campion western, as well as reviving **Doctor Strange** in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, before the year is out.

"I often get pigeon-holed as the sort of the oddball outsider hero – the headstrong and intelligent character," he says. "But actually, these guys are very, very, very different."

"We've seen some amazing resilience and amazing bravery and sacrifice and community-led volunteerism"

First up, Cumberbatch produces an outstanding performance in *The Courier* – a high-quality true-life Cold War thriller with a nice throwback feel. It is a welcome reminder that before he was loved as *Sherlock* and became superstar via the Marvel movies, he was renowned and admired purely for his prodigious acting skill – winning his first Bafta nomination for Best Actor back in 2005 for *Hawking*. And it is all on show here.

This is Cumberbatch going back to his roots. There are no bells or whistles, other than the kind of weight loss – more than 20lbs shed ahead of scenes in which his cheekbones appear set to pierce his skin – that historically impresses Oscar voters.



"Happily for my wife and other people who were worried about me, I bulked back up for Doctor Strange," he says. "It was a horrible thing to do, but that was his reality. It is part of his story."

Cumberbatch plays Greville Wynne, a businessman comfortable and complacent in his early middle age. But when he gets "the tap" from MI5 and the CIA, he becomes a reluctant espionage operative – carrying hundreds of secrets from Russian Oleg Penkovsky (Merab Ninidze) to the CIA's London-based operative (played by *The Marvellous Mrs Maisel*'s *Rachel Brosnahan*).

"It's the idea that someone ordinary can do something extraordinary and unexpected – which we're seeing left, right and centre, in the midst of all of the ineptitude and carnage, for want of a better word, of this pandemic," says Cumberbatch.

"We've seen some amazing resilience and amazing bravery and sacrifice and community-led volunteerism, and the idea of what community can be at its best, to rally around people."

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"Whether it's WhatsApp groups in a village checking the elderly and other vulnerable people are being taken care of during lockdown or whether it's care workers on the frontline and everybody who was and should forever remain in our thoughts as frontline workers, albeit in the kind of jobs that are invisible usually, which are the delivery men and women, the people who clean the wards of hospitals,

the people who are doing orderly work, people who drive the tubes and the buses. The kind of people who have to keep on keeping on in order to avoid whole societal collapse.

"So in a weird way, this guy that we're talking about, *The Courier*, Mr Greville Wynne, there's a weird relevance to him at this juncture."

It's a story of the Cold War, says Cumberbatch, that his parents know well. But, like The Dave Clark Five and dance craze The Frug, by the 1980s, when Cumberbatch was at school, its resonance had faded.

Yet it is a story that merits reviving. Before his everyday heroism, Wynne was not someone to go out of his way to get involved. "Tell them I'm in my chair," he barks to his wife when the initial phone call comes through. She doesn't.

"Ha – that should be on his T-shirt. That tells you everything about who he is at the start of the film," says Cumberbatch. "It's like, 'I'm done with my day. I don't want to engage'. And just by dint of his wife throwing him under the bus a little bit, he goes on this ridiculous adventure.

"Suddenly, he gets embroiled in the very forefront of a moment where the entire world held its breath over the possibility of mutually assured destruction."

Wynne's heroics was not the only aspect of this true story to have faded from the public consciousness by the time of the 1980s. Cumberbatch recalls the nuclear threat in his childhood, but not with the intensity of the period depicted in *The Courier*.

"It was definitely something that was present culturally – in the form of Atari games and a Raymond Briggs story or a history lesson," he says.

"I don't remember doing duck and cover drills. But I remember nuclear hazard signs and CND protests. So I remember being fascinated by it but it wasn't like everybody suddenly stopped talking, went to church and held their breath for three days – which they really did over the Cuban Missile Crisis. There was a weekend where it could have gone either way."

Cumberbatch warms to the theme.

"So I remember being in the nuclear age, but not so much about the proliferation of nuclear weapons and mutually assured destruction, which, of course, we are still very much in.

"When we were filming, Kim Jong-un was throwing his toys around the South China Sea. And we were going, 'Oh, my god, it's still happening'. People are still having a big dick contest with nuclear missiles around the world.

"And, get this for a fact – there's more proliferation of nuclear weapons now than there was at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which I find really terrifying considering how many unstable regimes or geopolitical landscapes there are out there, and the nutbags in charge of the codes. Even the now-defunct-but-god-knows-what-will-happen-in-a-few-years'-time Trump.

"These toys in the wrong hands could end it all far sooner than our slow attempt at ruining it all with the climate catastrophe that we're bringing about all around our ears. Gosh, this is a jolly interview!"

It is, though. It really is. Because Cumberbatch is a joy to be in the presence of when he is relaxed and on form like this. Talk keeps returning to this moment in history we are living through – to its impacts, the personal, societal and political, the global and local.

Cumberbatch worries, as so many of us do, about the economics of the pandemic.

"With younger generations, what will the effects of the restrictions be, that pause in their development and withholding of opportunity, that altered landscape for school leavers and university students?

"There's a lot of anger boiling away and no focus for it. The funding is being reduced so there is no space for gathering at youth clubs or focal points in communities for reaching people who might see violence as a way out and are fed up with a system they see as being against them."

He is, he says, especially mindful of the impact on the people living on, or close to, or beyond the headline, particularly young people – as a consequence of the **imminent reduction in Universal Credit** and lifting of the eviction ban. We talk about The Big Issue's current **campaign, to prevent mass homelessness being the next crisis**, in the wake of the pandemic.

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"It's like we've suspended the real impact of this until now. I mean, it's terrifying," he says.

"I think the aftershock is going to be absolutely cataclysmic from these actions. It's going to be massive. Huge. I'm not an economist. I don't know what the answer is. And I'm not saying the solution is going to be simple," he pauses. "But you know my politics..."

If we didn't before, readers, we probably do now.

The Courier is in cinemas from August 13

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