

The Sinning Detective

Clive Owen talks to Peter Griffiths about playing Sharman, the new detective on the block.

THE STREETWISE, risk-taking style of Nick Sharman is proving popular in the new ITV series of 90-minute films. Viewers are warming to the character whose romantic entanglements are almost as dangerous as his professional ones. But actor Clive Owen, who brings the character to vivid life, could hardly be described as streetwise or given to peril. He appears, in fact, quite different from his on-screen role in most respects, but he's evidently got a thorough grip on the PI whose promising police career was cut short when he was discovered stealing cocaine from the evidence locker.

Seedy

"He's down at heel and a bit seedy – in some ways, he's your classic private eye. I

like the fact that he's equally irresponsible in both his personal and working life. I'm not sure how 'good' he is, but he does love his kids. You've got to give him that. To me, one of the nicest elements of the films is the failing relationship with his wife, and the fact that he doesn't see his daughter as often as he would like. When he does see her, he's constantly putting her in jeopardy and dangerous situations. His intentions are good and he tries hard, but he is definitely flawed. Then again, I think the flaws in his character make him quite attractive.

"He's always tired as well. Every job he gets involved in is hairy, and he never seems to get much out of it, and doesn't get paid properly. But I'm sure there isn't an awful lot he could do besides. A lot of the stories are driven by him getting



sucked into [the crime] world because he has this strange moral code of his own, but he's always conscious of being drawn back into it."

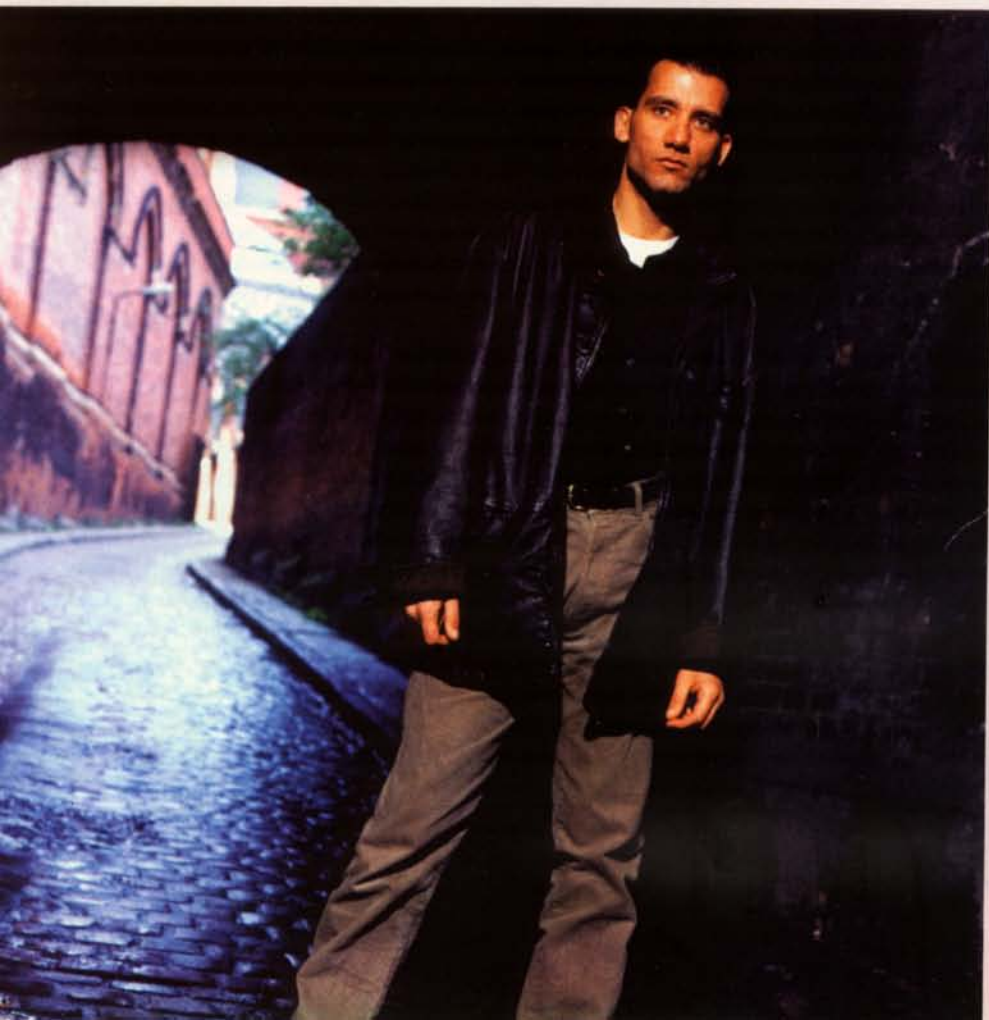
Turnaround

The **Sharman** films follow the success of **The Turnaround**, last year's hugely successful ITV pilot based on the best-selling novels of former *T Rex* and *The Who* roadie Mark Timlin. Clive explained that he was instrumental in getting the films into production.

"Originally, my agent read a review of one of Mark's books, read the book itself and thought it would be good for me. She took it to Tony Garnett, the executive producer, who in turn met me to talk about it, and we decided to do it together. The books have an original edge to them, a nice wit – classic private eye material which should be celebrated. It shows gritty south London life, but at the same time it's lifted up and has a sense of entertainment and fun about it. The first thing I thought when I read the books was that they were a modern south London version of [Raymond] Chandler. That's very attractive. I've read all of Mark Timlin's books, so a lot of my input was trying to make the TV work as close to the books as possible."

One of the key elements in imbuing the television adaptations with the flavour of the books was shooting in authentic locations. "I've always lived north of the river, but I've come to know south London pretty well. I've done a lot of filming there now, and I think that's actually one of the good things about these films: there is a conscious effort to get it out onto the streets of Brixton and Streatham, wherever the books are set. That helps the atmosphere of the project a lot.

"People are always interested [in film crews], of course, but if you're filming in



Left: Clive Owen in a South London location; Top: Always handy with a gun; Facing page: Clive Owen is Sharman.

places like Brixton market or on Streatham High Street, you've got to go in there and just wing it, basically. It's a much better way of doing it than shutting the area down and peopling it with extras, because it's impossible to recreate that atmosphere. I know I keep harping on about the books, but because they smell so much of that area, it was important to take the films out onto the street as much as possible."

In accordance with his reputation and the tradition of the books, Nick Sharman finds a love interest in each film, including the popular Samantha Janus in the first instalment. In the third film, he finds things getting a little more serious. "He gets married, and things get pretty hairy, but we're still happily together by the fourth film!"

Just prior to the four month shoot required for the **Sharman** films, Clive spent some time in Hollywood, starring in a £16 million film **Rich Man's Wife**. "There was an agent out in LA who'd seen quite a bit of my TV and film work from over here. He rang me up and basically hassled me to go out there. That hustling Hollywood scene isn't really me, but I went out for a week, and luckily the interview for this film coincided. I got back and they asked me to do it.

"The filming process wasn't any different, really. I was quite intimidated at first since it was by far the biggest budget thing I'd ever been involved with, but it literally only took two or three days and it felt the same as anything else. I get offered a lot of work in Britain that I want to do, and while it's occasionally nice to go over to LA for a job, it'll always be a visit to do a piece of work rather than basing myself there. The bottom line is always the work – standing in front of the camera and doing the job. The ambition I've got and have always had is to be in a position of choice. That's the greatest luxury an actor can have."

Choice

The luxury of choice has led to Clive turning down a number of long-running television jobs before **Sharman** because they didn't feel right. After becoming a household name in **Chancer** in 1990, he was determined to wait and not do the first thing which came along. "I wanted it to be something that was as good as **Chancer**. It's a lot of exposure, doing anything on TV that lasts longer than a one-off, and I was waiting for something I had faith in."

Clive went straight from **Sharman** into a film version of the hit stage play **Bent**, a story about two gay men in the 1930s who end up in a concentration camp. "I wanted



to do it even though I didn't have a day off between the two. **Sharman** was the most intense filming I've ever done because all the stories are told through Nick, so I'm virtually in every scene. Fortunately I had five weeks rehearsing on **Bent** which gave me time to get into the new character and leave Sharman behind. I also lost a lot of weight, because if I'd been standing there with a pot belly in a situation like that, it would have been quite ridiculous. It took an effort, but it was for something I thought was very worthy."

Clive and his wife are expecting a baby around Christmas, so the actor has made a conscious effort to put work on hold for a few months. Further **Sharman** films are not yet on the cards, but Clive maintains he would certainly be interested. "As with all of

these things, they wait and see how they do when they go out. Ratings are not a high priority of mine, but of course they are important to TV. Everybody has to be aware of them, but my priority is just to make the show good. **Sharman** has the potential and the right ingredients; the mileage is limitless, really. There are a lot of books, and the advantage of a character like that is that you can put him anywhere and see how he deals with it. Nick Sharman sits very comfortably with me, so I'm sure he's a character I could live with for a while."

Top: Clive Owen as Nick Sharman and Gina Bellman as Kiki, from this year's first **Sharman** film;
Bottom: Sharman escorts Jane (Samantha Janus) from the modelling studio