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A NASTY PIECE OF WORK?

RUFUS SEWELL TAKES ON A 'NICE NASTY' AGATHA CHRISTIE DRAMA

RUFUS Sewell is enjoying a TV purple patch. Following memorable roles in Victoria, The Man In The High Castle and The Marvelous Mrs Maisel, he's now back on our screens as Agatha Christie's oddest of odd anti-heroes, Mark Easterbrook, central figure in The Pale Horse, a two-part adaptation of one of the crime heroine's more peculiar tales. He winds up playing sleuth in a mystery he's inadvertently caught up in.

'When I read the script it reminded me of a quote from Alfred Hitchcock – "it's a nice nasty little piece,"' says Sewell, 52. 'Mark is interesting. The fact that he's an antiques dealer is symbolic because he deals with beautiful objects that may have come from theft and murder.

'He's also someone with a tragedy in his life – the death of his first wife. All of that has been bottled up. That is why he pays so much attention to the suits, the women, the cufflinks, the car, the

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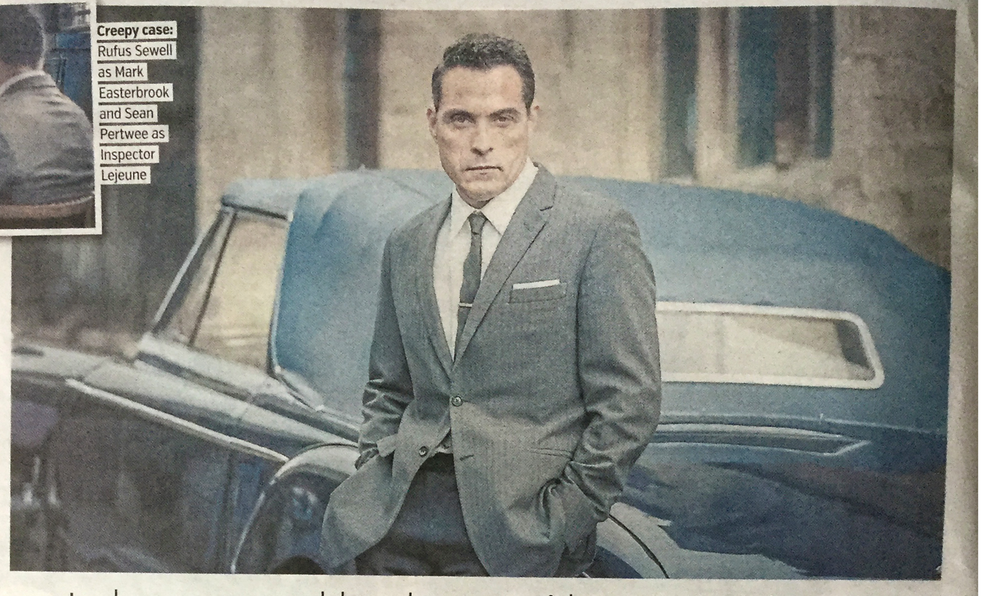
Creepy case: Rufus Sewell as Mark Easterbrook and Sean Pertwee as Inspector Lejeune



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art. It's all about creating this veneer because there's something malignant.'

One of the most notable aspects of writer Sarah Phelps' bold quintet of Agatha Christie TV adaptations, of which this is the latest, is the way they fasten on to tiny, unexpected, often bizarre details that the legendary crime writer, mistakenly celebrated for the apparent cosiness of her murder mysteries, smuggles into her text. In The Pale Horse, published in 1961, it was a seemingly throwaway line describing widowed antique dealer Easterbrook that caught Phelps' eye.

'It was Mark Easterbrook being interested in heiresses with dirty hair,' remembers Phelps. 'You've got to get close to people to sniff their scalp? You odd man. It's what makes Christie so subversive, I think. This flinty-eyed, unerring, remorseless, unblinking examination of human failure.

'Everyone thinks she's cosy. She's the least cosy but it's always very cloaked. Here's the book that will sell fortunes and here's the stealth book she actually wants to write where there are some really unpleasant little details.'

The Pale Horse is one of Agatha Christie's most macabre and creepy tales. A list of names is found in a dead woman's shoe, including bon viveur (and adulterer) Easterbrook. Some are already dead from supposedly natural causes but as more begin to perish, could it be the work of witchcraft? The production has the feel of horror films like The Wicker Man and Peeping Tom, mixing West Country paganism and 1960s Soho sleaze.

Hurt and anger: Kaya Scodelario as Easterbrook's wife

I love all the silent, violent politeness

RUFUS SEWELL FEELS LUCKY TO PLAY HIS COMPLEX CHARACTER IN THE PALE HORSE, SAYS PAUL SIMPER

'When I read the scripts it did remind me of The Wicker Man,' says Sewell. 'That and A Single Man, Jacob's Ladder and Macbeth. I know they are grand-sounding references but it's much more meaty than you would expect. In terms of it being interesting for me there was a lot to work towards.'

The self-identified witches, who live in a cottage in the fictional village of Much Deeping, are a formidable trio: Derry Girls' Kathy Kiera Clarke, Harlots' Sheila Atim and kitchen-sink-drama legend Rita Tushingham. But just as engrossing are the excruciating scenes between Sewell and Kaya Scodelario, who plays Easterbrook's second wife. As the marriage begins to unravel, the cat-and-mouse between Sewell and old pal Sean Pertwee as dogged investigating officer Detective Inspector Lejeune comes to the fore.

'I loved my scenes with Kaya,' says Sewell. 'I love their relationship because there's so much hurt and anger there. This couple who really concentrate on how it looks but there's all this nasty friction underneath. I love the silent, violent politeness between them. It's a battle. I also loved working with Sean Pertwee. He's an old friend but we'd never done scenes before.'

Based in LA with his girlfriend and six-year-old daughter, Sewell is happy with the way his career is rolling. Along with the Christie there is movie The Father with Anthony Hopkins and Olivia Colman, which is being shown at the Sundance festival.

'You can waste a lot of time worrying about what you're not doing,' he says. 'I'm lucky to be playing parts like this. I don't feel the need to prove to other people what kind of actor I am now.'

The Pale Horse, part one, is on BBC1 on Sunday at 9pm