**BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH,**

**Or acting with brains /Esquire Latin America** (English translation from the Spanish extended version original)

**If this magnetic name is not yet well recognized in Latin America, this will change this month with the premiere of *Star Trek into Darkness*. We introduce the powerfully versatile actor at a time when his career is about to explode worldwide.**

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Photos: Paramount Pictures, BBC

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With my eyes closed I listen to one of Benedict Cumberbatch’s performances. Something in his baritone voice fraught with husky, velvety nuances makes me think of cognac and chocolate by the fire. The 36-year old British actor, a superstar in his country –especially for his leading role in the BBC series *Sherlock* and HBO’s *Parade’s End,* and an interesting part in Steven Spielberg’s *War Horse–* speaks swiftly, effortlessly going from staccatos to repressed passion, to salvos of murmurs in an almost inconsequential tone. The effect it produces in the listener is one of shared complicity. This voice, I think, is thespian. Radial. It commands attention. It is a link to connect and harmonize the brutal extremes of emotions that Mr. Cumberbatch has been displaying for more than a decade in theatre, radio, television and film.

When a smart interview gives him the opportunity, he answers with precise, exacting vocabulary, following ideas by threading long and intelligent -though sometimes chaotic- chains of conversation. He frequently cites literature and artistic sources, and has shared his opinion of what it means to embody somebody. “As an actor, you can do weight loss, weight gain, put on silly noses, crazy accents, move like a dragon, inviting people to look at the fireworks and admire how different you’re being. But with acting like that, it’s all about look-at-me, when what you should be doing is helping the audience care about the person they’re watching.”

That level of care is what the artist hopes to generate towards the villain in *Star Trek into Darkness,* directed by J.J. Abrams (*Lost*), opening on May 17. And if that gloriously old-fashioned name ‘Benedict Cumberbatch’ is not yet well recognized in Latin America and the rest of the world, that will all change after *Star Trek*.

“He’s a terrorist”, explains the actor during an interview with Paramount Pictures. “He’s not the usual villain and there’s a real calculation and intelligence to his actions. But also he is a ferocious warrior, for example in hand-to-hand combat and with weapons.” It also happens to be a former member of Star Fleet Command, becoming the archenemy of a young James Tiberius Kirk, a kind of Hannibal Lecter capable of bringing the legendary Captain to his knees; here is a stupendous character with multiple emotional layers and a powerful reason for his evil, played by Mr. Cumberbatch in a disturbing and cerebral fashion.

“Benedict has his own gravity as a person,” says Damon Lindleof, one of the writers of *Star Trek*, who suggested J.J. Abrams to check him out in *Sherlock*. “He attracts you to him and it is impossible to escape his influence.”

For J.J. Abrams “he is one the best actors alive.” Watching him in *Sherlock* “was almost like watching an Olympic gymnast go from incredible position to incredible position. I imagined he was going to be good in anything, but he surpassed all my expectations. He elevated everything and gave his scenes the intelligence and respect they demanded.”

Perhaps the only such scene not as respectful was the audition tape he was asked to send.

“Because I had to shoot it on an iPhone”, he has recalled, always laughing. “It was Christmas 2011 but you know, work goes on and in Hollywood they wanted to see this audition. Since all the casting directors I knew were away on holiday, I decided to do it on my own. But technology failed me, the batteries weren’t working and the camcorder kept going off and I was sort of stuck. So I called up my best friend, drove back to London, and we did it for about an hour, three scenes with two takes. I was in their kitchen using a table lamp as an arc lamp to arc at the right level, which meant I had to crouch down on the back wall doing these scenes…a few days later J.J. called me and asked ‘do you want to come out and play?’ I didn’t even have to think about the answer.”

Abrams was so impressed he told the *New York Times* this was “one of the best auditioning readings he had ever seen.”

As a science journalist, what drew my attention to this actor was his deep and uncommon interest in science and in portraying notably difficult scientists, such as British cosmologist Stephen Hawking at a moment in his life when motor neuron disease was beginning to affect his muscles (*Hawking*, 2004); German nuclear physicist Werner Heisenberg at the threshold of the atom bomb (*Copenhaguen*, BBC Radio 3, 2013); Sherlock Holmes, who is a chemistry and materials science expert -a superb scientist before anything else; Australian Internet activist and computer programmer Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks (*WikiLeaks*, in postproduction); Dr. Victor Frankenstein, alternating the role with that of the monster (*Frankenstein*, Royal National Theathre, 2012); and in the near future, the turbulent life of British mathematician and cryptographer Alan Turing, father of the computer, a role that had initially been offered to Leonardo di Caprio.

“Sometimes fiction and art can marry with science and that’s a great thing”, Mr. Cumberbatch told *The Naked Scientists* website. “For *Star Trek* we were filming at a laboratory called the National Ignition Facility, outside San Francisco. It’s a place where Ed Moses and his team of extraordinary scientists are trying to create fusion, not fission, but fusion; they’re using lasers fired at the most extraordinary speeds through various lenses that reflect the rays and change them [from infrared, to ultraviolet, to x-rays]. Then they hit a target of hydrogen fuel, which is half the breadth of human hair, inside this huge cell… to hopefully, one day, and I think it is a question of when not if, create this alternative energy supply. It’s terribly exciting.”

**Exotic creature**

To discover Benedict Cumberbatch in a dark theatre or movie auditorium is like running into a panther in one’s living room. Not just because his professional magnetism permeates the ecosystem in which he works, but because physically he looks like an exotic creature. The asymmetric face is fascinating, almost hailing to another era. It is all angles and edges set on a luminous skin, and owns the most twitted pair of cheekbones online. He might think of ensuring that asset, the same way that Marlene Dietrich did with her legs.

He has slightly slanted, sometimes strangely alien eyes, that change from blue to green depending on how light and emotions impinge on them. With notable transformational skill he happily plays at becoming the most devoid-of-affection, calculating human –or reptile, switching in seconds to the complete opposite. Like a shapeshifter, one minute he is very handsome, and the next, by just twitching some hidden muscle in his face –or mind– he is not. “I know I do not fall under any archetype and it doesn’t bother me,” he has said repeatedly. “Just the same, I have always known that my face is too long and my head too large.”

That may be, but he has a legion of feminine fans that never cease to surprise him with the growing number of websites devoted to him. And even though he does not participate in any social network (“I speak so much that is impossible to limit myself to a 140-chacater tweet”) his name is associated to thousands of postings every day, some more disturbing than others.

My first encounter with Mr. Cumberbatch’s acting is through the six, 90-minute episodes of *Sherlock* aired on cable in the United States, based on the novels of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, described by Spielberg as “the best Sherlock Holmes onscreen [out of the 72 interpretations of the detective]”, and that are not to be confused with the series *Elementary* also currently airing in America.

“Benedict will go on and do lots of magnificent things but people will always remember ‘Sherlock Holmes’’’ said famously Steven Moffat, one of the writers and creators of the acclaimed series, which continues to be filmed in London and surroundings. “It was a glorious casting, one of those irreplaceable moments –like when Sean Connery played James Bond for the first time. Sherlock is Benedict’s hero role. It’s the part that made him sexy.”

This detective is young, clay-white and emaciated, sporting an alarmingly thick head of dark hair in curls. He moves with imperious bearing and elegant actions, is ridiculously bright, extremely cynical and at the same time deeply human, with a touch of Asperger’s Syndrome and good aptitude for violin.

Even though the actor shows sometimes Sherlock’s perfectionism and impatience towards mediocrity, unlike the character, “Benedict is bumbly, sweet, affable; the nicest man you've met," said Mark Gatiss, writer and actor in the series. “He is a fine chap, with impeccable modals, who cares about treating people well”, says someone online.

His Sherlock lives in the modern-day London, depends heavily on the mobile phone, takes the cab, uses the latest technology in terms of Chemistry lab, and dresses elegantly well. To the point that his already famous coat, designed by the Belstaff house, has become a British best-seller (£1,350).

“I love that coat,” Mr. Cumberbatch told the British press. “The sad thing is that I had a coat very similar to Sherlock's before I got the role - it was a present from someone - but I can't wear it out in public now. The gloves and scarf were my idea, as was the red buttonhole.” Mr. Cumberbatch is keen on style and has become kind of a fashion icon on his own, participating in fashion shows that support British designers, even though he also favors the minimalistic suits of German designer Jil Sander, dubbed ‘the Queen of Less’. “There's just a clean, linear, functional beauty about Sherlock. There’s nothing showy or flamboyant about him. And I get to wear very well-cut, good-looking suits [from Spencer Hart], although there’s so little waist that sometimes I can’t breathe or digest properly.”

Harder than breathing properly, however, is learning and delivering the famous Holmes deductions, monologues that go on and on for several pages of the brilliant script, and that he must shoot non-interrupt at lightning speeds, as though he (Sherlock) were giddy with the realization that he is smarter than the rest of the planet –which he is.

“They are hellishly difficult. I start learning my lines two or three days before, at the very least, because they're always a very painful birth, as anyone who’s been on set with me will testify”, he has commented before. “The trick, I've found, is to deliver a sentence while you're already thinking about the next one. The speed of it has to come from thinking, "What's next? What's next? What's next?" You just have to work very, very hard at it, and on the day try to find pockets of time to completely shut off and be quite kind of meditative about it.”

That meditation he learned during the adventurous year he spent teaching English to Buddhist monks in India, before starting drama studies at Manchester University and then the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. When he graduated (after penning a thesis on director Stanley Kubrick) he already had an agent, and has been working literally non-stop since. His parents, former actors as well, wanted to give him a high-octane education in an elite school called Harrow, whose pupils include eight Prime Ministers.

The parents’ objective, after years of saving and sacrifices, was to guide their son down another path different from the difficult job of acting. But this backfired spectacularly, as acting –and signing on to the rugby team– were the first things the young student did. One can almost recall a scene from the *Dead Poet’s Society* film, where one of his first presentations was *Midnight Summer’s Dream* -of course with a completely different outcome that that of the film.

**Disorganized and smoker**

Benedict Cumberbatch has described himself as moody, impatient, somewhat old fashioned, disorganized with his schedule (making Spielberg wait during their first encounter to discuss War Horse), smoker, old before his time, with a sweet tooth and a fondness for black coffee. He loves human hands and forgets everybody’s birthdays. He wants to paint, to dive, to write, to do it all now. He is totally ambiguous with his religious beliefs, likes poetry, adores children; wants to form a family soon but hasn’t had the time to meet anybody special after the 12 years he spent with actress Olivia Poulet.

Having won 18 awards as best actor in *Hawking*, *Sherlock*, *Parade’s End* and *Frankenstein*, among others (a record, since he is only 36) and 16 nominations that include a Golden Globe for *Sherlock,* Mr. Cumberbatch says that the weight of responsibility makes him happy. However, there is something that does make him particularly happy: “I have very sensitive follicles” he confessed once. “Pull my hair the wrong way and you will see me on my knees begging for mercy.”

What wouldn’t Kirk and Spock have given to have that information from the beginning…

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