

# TV Sunday

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**A**CTOR Christian Bale doesn't want to be typecast, so he followed his role as a serial killer in "American Psycho" (due out this spring) by playing the nicest guy he could find — Jesus.

Bale co-stars as the Son of God in NBC's "Mary, Mother of Jesus," airing next Sunday at 9 p.m.

"I couldn't resist," says Bale. "After making 'American Psycho,' I was getting a lot of [offers to play] killers and someone even suggested Satan. So when Jesus came up, I thought I had to."

The TV film was produced by Eunice Kennedy Shriver and Bobby Shriver, though naturally they weren't around for most of the shoot. "Eunice showed up for the Crucifixion," laughs Bale. "I felt a little bad when she saw me having a ciggie break."

Perhaps that was appropriate, since his Jesus is not the deep-voiced, other-worldly vision of goodness so common in the past. "I had to look at Jesus from the human point of view," says Bale.

"It was the only way I could begin to approach it. He's a remarkable man, but a man, you know? He's a social revolutionary with a calling who is incredibly unusual but does have doubt and confusion."

Bale read Norman Mailer's "The Gospel According to the Son" to prepare for the role. "And I've read the Bible, of course. Well, I didn't read every section. Whenever I got bored, I just dove into Revelations and had a good time with that."

And thanks to a workout regimen left over from his last role, Bale was fit enough not to worry about wearing a loincloth. "I didn't want to be flabby; I just can't picture a flabby Jesus."

**B**ALE is a film veteran, starring in about 15 movies since his brilliant debut in Steven Spielberg's "Empire of the Sun," most notably in "Little Women" with Winona Ryder and the glam-rock drama "Velvet Goldmine" with Ewan McGregor.

But singing in the Disney musical bomb "Newsies" or playing a young Nazi in the video hit "Swing Kids" can't really prepare you for playing the Savior.

"It's verging on the ridiculous," admits the 25-year-old, who says he was raised in a Christian household that was also skeptical

# FROM PSYCHO TO SAVIOR

Christian Bale burst onto the screen in Steven Spielberg's 'Empire of the Sun,' fought off Leonardo DiCaprio for the lead role in 'American Psycho' and now plays the Son of God in NBC's 'Mary, Mother of Jesus.'

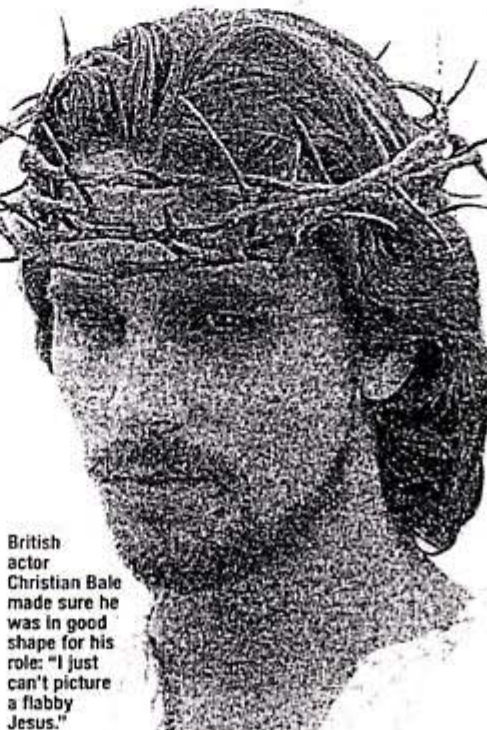
about organized religion.

"I'm playing Christ? How did that happen? Then you're actually being crucified on the set in Budapest, and it was on the day of a total eclipse, which was sort of uncanny."

"I was dying for some sort of spiritual epiphany. My God, it's the eclipse and I'm being crucified and it's coming up to the millennium — something's gonna happen! This is gonna change me forever!"

"I wanted it so bloody badly that absolutely nothing happened."

Bale is chatting from the set of "Shaft," which has just begun about 12 weeks of filming in New York City. A contemporary sequel to the classic action flick, "Shaft" is directed by John Singleton and stars Samuel L. Jackson as the private eye's nephew. "While it is, I guess, an action picture, it is one we hope to do with class and smarts," says the Welsh-



British actor Christian Bale made sure he was in good shape for his role: "I just can't picture a flabby Jesus."

born Bale, who was raised in England.

"No, I'm not delving into this character with incredible intensity," he says. "I'm having fun playing it."

He plays another killer in the film, but "Shaft" — the biggest-budget movie he's worked on in years — is a canny choice for the actor who made headlines for the role he almost didn't get.

**B**ALE was cast as the lead in "American Psycho," a \$10-million black comedy based on the bestseller by Bret Easton Ellis. Famously, that novel was set for publication, nervously rejected by its publisher, picked up by another house and published to strong sales as a trade paperback — all this despite protests from women's groups and others that the book's depiction of a Wall Street yuppie who gruesomely kills his victims was too dangerous to see the light of day.

The film version was to be

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directed by Mary Harron of "I Shot Andy Warhol." But they were both booted off the project when Leonardo DiCaprio became interested in the role.

DiCaprio's flirtation ended, and Bale and Harron finally made their movie, despite the annoyance of some protesters on the set in Canada. "You become a tight-knit family on a film set, and we became a very sick, twisted, tight-knit family on that one," says Bale.

"I learned about the whole business side from 'American Psycho.' I was aware of it before, but I thought I could ignore it. But I realized the business side was limiting my chances creatively, so I had to change."

And change he did.

Bale did more press interviews for "Velvet Goldmine" than ever before, giving himself a higher profile. He still won't make movies that don't appeal to him — and indeed, most of his films are indie projects like "Metroland" (1997) and "All the Little Animals" (1998).

But Bale knows he needs to become more of a name to get the roles he wants.

Perhaps his complacency came about because Bale is such a superstar on the Internet. He was one of the first movie actors to have his own web page ([www.christianbale.org](http://www.christianbale.org)), a smartly designed site whose profits go to pet charities like the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund.

**T**HAT led to Bale-heads, online fanatics who send e-mails and letters to studios begging them to give their favorite star plum roles.

Indeed, when Lions Gate tried to turn the DiCaprio fiasco to its advantage by conducting an online poll to see who fans wanted to play the title role in "American Psycho," they were chagrined to see Bale — the very actor they'd initially rejected — garner the vast majority of votes.

His change of heart toward the media has paid off in unexpected ways: Bale is enough of a celebrity now to make The Post's Page Six after a little fender bender.

"I couldn't stop laughing when I saw that," says Bale. "I couldn't believe that was in there. I arrived on the set of 'Shaft,' and everybody was saying: 'You



SOB begets son of God: Christian Bale got offers to play more unsavory characters — even Satan — after appearing in "American Psycho" (below). Instead, he chose the role of Jesus, co-starring with Pernilla August as Mary (above).



look okay, so how was the accident?"

He'll have to get used to the attention.

Bale broke into acting quickly, landing in the West End with "The Nerd," a comedy starring Rowan Atkinson of "Mr. Bean." But nothing prepared him for the attention of being in a Steven Spielberg film.

"Thank God the film didn't do very well," says Bale.

"But regardless it still changed my life, and I didn't like the way it changed it."

Only 13 years old, Bale found himself being taunted by other boys in the town where he lived. When he quite naturally found the idea of presiding over the opening of a girls' school strange and politely turned the offer down, local papers wrote that he was

"forgetting his roots."

That led to his many years of indifference to the media and a strong desire to keep a low profile. Now living in Los Angeles with one of his sisters and her husband, Bale is ready for the spotlight and — perhaps inspired by his role in "Mary, Mother of Jesus" — has created a personal philosophy for his diet.

"I've had a lot of people laugh at me about this, but to me it's entirely logical. I will not have somebody do something for me that I won't do myself. I won't kill a cow, so I won't go and buy beef.

"I will kill a fish, and I will kill a chicken on a daily basis. Now if I had to survive (in the wild), you better watch out," laughs Bale.

"I'm still trying to formulate an idea I can live by. It's a work in progress."