



he says, chewing, as he sits back down. "So is having a sense of your health. Money isn't the thing; even now, though I earn a decent living, I'm not a wealthy man. I don't have this and that going on. Part of that ideology is from my parents keeping me grounded." He offers the box of sweets. "Skittle?"

Elba's father died in 2013. The actor says he is grateful for the fact his dad got to see him play Nelson Mandela in the lauded film *Mandela: Long Walk To Freedom*: "Playing Mandela was when my family said, 'Wow, well done'. Doing *Thor*," he adds wryly, "didn't quite get the same reaction."

Today Elba is one of the most sought-after actors in the world. Men want to be him. Women want to be with him (he may or may not have broken up with the mother of his 18-month-old son; he has a daughter, 14, from his first marriage). Directors are desperate to cast him: he appears as a villain in the new *Star Trek* reboot, is voicing the tiger Shere Khan in Disney's *Jungle Book* animation and has been booked to play the lead in Laurence Fishburne's adaptation of *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho's much-loved fable.

Plans for a *Luther* movie are in the works: "I'm far from done. He's one of the characters I love and have some say in where he goes." As for *Bond*, he's not telling (though he's previously accused the rumour mill of wrecking his chance to be the first black actor ever to play the superspy). For many long-time fans, however, Elba will always be Stringer Bell, a character he invested with formidable menace and swagger.

"Sometimes I'll meet *Wire* fans in the States, real hard guys, and talk in my normal voice and they'll be like, 'Come on man! Where's Stringer, bro?'" He flashes a grin. "There are only so many ways to dissect what it was like to play that character. Stringer was a bit of a dickhead, though he had a certain heroic quality. And he made me fearless, like I could take on anything, you know? He's one of the characters that strengthened my trajectory. Muganza is another of those. *Mandela*. *Luther*."

Last year Elba released his first "character album", *Mi Mandela*, a recording inspired by the biopic and drawing from the music of South Africa. *Murdah Loves John*, then, is his second stab at an alternative soundtrack: "I wanted anyone

MY BRAIN'S TOO HYPERACTIVE TO JUST SIT STILL AND DO ACTING

IDRIS ELBA



to play the album and watch an episode of *Luther* in the dark and think, 'Yep, that feels like the same family'," says Elba, who doesn't actually appear on either album despite having form as a rapper and soul singer.

"It's not chart music but it's imaginative because we reference the show and London and the character. The words come from Idris's point of view. It's a way of getting out some of my creative thoughts," he continues.

"My brain's too hyperactive to just sit still and do acting."

Which is why, in Britain at least, Elba often seems to be everywhere.

Fronting Sky TV's latest advertising campaign on billboards, cinema screens and the box. Breaking the land speed record in a Bentley Continental on his TV series *Idris Elba: No Limits*, for which he's about to record season two. Presenting a series of programs on African music for BBC Radio 2 ("I was raised listening to everything from Franco from the Congo to Charlie Pride"). Promoting the extensive autumn-winter menswear range he's created

in collaboration with British streetwear brand Superdry.

If all this flirting with Middle England means he's in danger of losing his urban edge, Elba isn't bothered. He shows me the lightweight black peacoat he picked out of his wardrobe this morning.

"I've always paid attention to what I wear, which I got from my dad, who loved his threads, and from being an actor and being vain sometimes," he adds smoothly.

"But I'm not a fashion designer; I'm more of an influence. I chose this coat today because it's not too hot or cold outside, and it's well made and, you know, a bit like me."

Like him? "It's versatile. It can go from working all day in an office to dinner in the evening and not feel out of place. It's 24-hour clothing." He flashes a grin. "And I'm a 24-hour sort of guy."

The first of two feature-length episodes of Luther will air on BBC First at 8.30pm on Monday, February 22; Beasts of No Nation is available on Netflix.

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