

MOST WANTED

He has been 'snubbed' by the Academy and those Bond rumours persist, but Idris Elba, returning to TV as Luther, is unfazed. **Jane Cornwell** meets screen's hottest property



Acting. Music. Extreme sports. Nice threads. London. Idris Elba could, if he felt like it, count off his favourite things on the fingers of one large, tattooed hand. There are his kids, of course, but today he'd rather not talk about his personal life. Just like he won't be answering questions about those 007 rumours — "I'm probably the most famous Bond actor in the world," he has said, "and I've not even played the role" — as I'm under strict instructions not to ask any.

Nor, weeks later, will Elba comment on the Oscar snub for his critically acclaimed role as an African warlord in *Beasts of No Nation*, an oversight that fuelled the #OscarsSoWhite controversy trending on social media.

But when it comes to DCI John Luther, the obsessive British murder detective who is making an action-packed return to our screens next month, Elba is effusive. Series four of *Luther*, which plays as a compact two-part special, finds our antihero living in a seaside cottage on the edge of a crumbling cliff top, rethinking his life away from the dangerous violence that follows him around. The peace doesn't last long.

"Luther's been miserable, poor guy," says Elba, 43, stretched out in an armchair in a plush London hotel, wearing a black sweatshirt and jeans from his debut clothing range, shoeless in a pair of black socks. "He needs a break so he's taken himself out of society and is living like a recluse. We're saying that nobody's superhuman, you know? From this reflective place he makes a big return."

With a cannibal killer on the loose, a gangster-imposed fatwa on his head and the death of seductive psychopath Alice Morgan (Ruth Wilson) to avenge, what's a roguish copper to do?

Luther dons his famous tweed overcoat and charges back to the beat, where he's soon fighting off assassins with bin lids, striding slo-mo through council estates to a gritty urban soundtrack and muttering sarcastically that "Yeah, everything's tickety-boo, totally disco" in a gruff Cockney accent.

"Luther has the same tone as a graphic novel, which lets us be a bit larger-than-life." Elba's voice is as street, as "Loofah", as that of his character. "London is this noirish, Gotham-esque city. The music we use reflects this" —



Idris Elba as John Luther, main; as the commandant in *Beasts of No Nation*, above; as Nelson Mandela in *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, top right; and with Charlize Theron in *Prometheus*, right

one of the series' producers, he's also released a Luther-themed album, *Murdah Loves John*, which features left-field London singers, MCs and musicians — "and we always shoot in areas that feel iconic". Most of these locales aren't too far from where Elba grew up in the working class borough of Newham, east London, the only child born to a Sierra Leonean autoworker and a Ghanaian mother who had a job as a clerk. His addiction to adrenalin started early; he remembers tearing down hills in homemade go-carts (there's a scar on his elbow from a prang). As a teenager he practised Muay Thai boxing in between working as a tyre fitter, salesman, bouncer and DJ at African weddings and on pirate radio stations.

He still goes by the DJ name Big Driis, a moniker he used in Berlin a few nights before we meet, playing house music as the opening act for Madonna on her Rebel Heart tour. "It was a really nice experience to work with Madge," he twinkles. "They asked me, and how could I say no? She's a legend. And she's still so on it."

Aged 14, he decided to give acting a shot after attending open auditions for a play he saw advertised in *The Stage* newspaper, landing a part and, soon after, an agent. He got a place at the

National Youth Music Theatre in Westminster with the help of a £1500 grant from the Prince's Trust. His first professional roles included stints on soaps, a cameo as a gigolo in the *Sex* episode of *Absolutely Fabulous* and murder reconstructions on the BBC TV program *Crimewatch*.

"My old man wanted me to do something else, told me actors don't make any money," says Elba, who made his international mark in 2002 as drug kingpin Stringer Bell in the acclaimed American police drama *The Wire*. "He didn't want me to struggle, to have to live in a van. He used to say that a fool at 40 is a fool for life." He pauses, smiles. "But trust me, there are aspects of my life where I go, 'You haven't done that right'."

Before *The Wire* catapulted his career into megadrive, on to roles including Rwandan army captain Augustin Muganza in the TV film *Sometimes in April*, deity cum sentry Heimdell in Kenneth Branagh's *Thor*, a starship captain in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* and the frightening leader of an African child army in Cary Fukunaga's aforementioned *Beasts of No Nation*, Elba lived in a van and struggled. Having established himself as an actor in Britain, he'd grown tired of clichéd supporting roles and decided to try his luck in New York.

On January 18, a week after the Oscars controversy broke, the star addressed British parliament about the lack of diversity in the British entertainment industry: "I knew I wasn't going to land a lead role [in Britain]," said Elba, who received an OBE in the Queen's New Year's Honours List for services to drama. "I knew there wasn't enough imagination in the industry for me to be seen as a lead. In other words, if I wanted to star in a British drama like *Luther*, then I'd have to go to America."

For a while, however, the acting work didn't materialise. For several months he scraped a living as a DJ. "It was tough." A broad-shouldered shrug. "I'd DJ 'til late then jump in the Grizzly, my Astro Van, sleep wherever I parked and wash at different friends' places. So you know, ultimately all of this is a gift."

He gestures around, taking in the glitz of the hotel and by association, his own success story, before unfolding to his full 1.9m height, padding over to the mini-bar and grabbing a packet of lollies.

"Waking up in the morning is paramount,"