

WES BENTLEY

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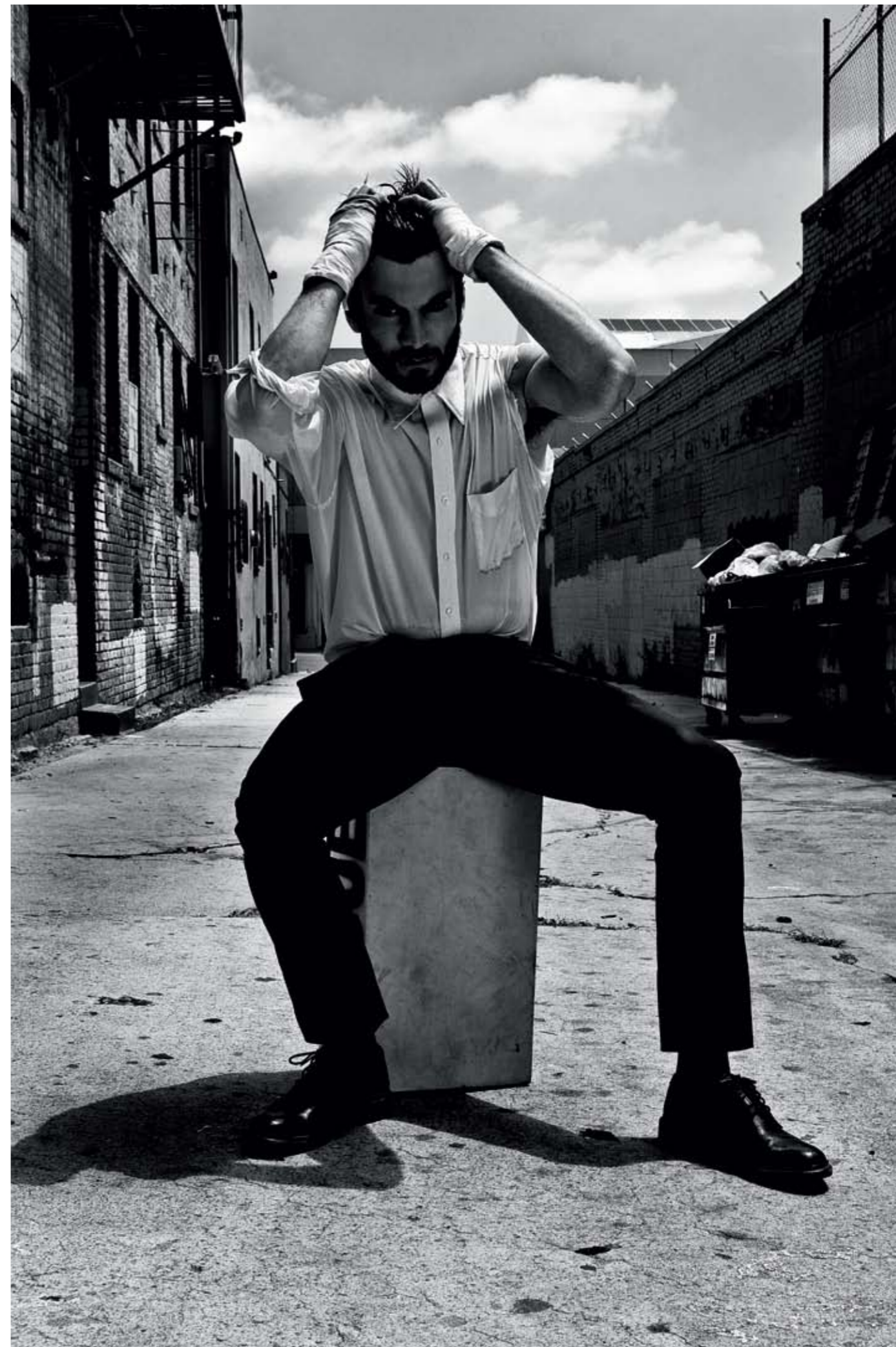
PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
MIGUEL STARCEVICH

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FASHION/ MOSES MORENO.....  
MAKEUP/ NIKO.....  
HAIR/ LARRY MCDANIELS.....  
FASHION ASSISTANT/ SAMANTHA BALDWIN.....  
INTERVIEW/ SARAH ILLINGWORTH.....

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WES WEARS VINTAGE SHIRT BY CK, TROUSERS BY CK, HAND WRAPS BY EVERLAST





WES WEARS POLO BY DAVIDELFIN.  
SUNGLASSES BY RAYBANS



WES WEARS JEANS BY LEVIS, SHOES BY FRYE, POLO BY DAVIDELFIN, SUNGLASSES BY RAYBANS

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“ I HAD TO PUT MY SOUL BACK TOGETHER,”

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WES BENTLEY GREW UP IN JONESBORO, ARKANSAS, 82 DEGREES WEST OF LA CORUNA, SPAIN, WHERE GALA GONZALEZ USED TO LIVE

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Wes Bentley hadn't been in Hollywood long when he landed the starring role in *American Beauty* (1999) that shot him to sudden, unexpected fame. Then 21, he played the ostensibly creepy Ricky Fitts, a voyeur whose intentions turned out to be oddly honourable. When the film won five Oscars in 2000, including Best Picture, the media were waiting to pounce. Bentley was fresh blood, hot talent, and industry chatter was loud.

"When *American Beauty* came out, hardly anyone in the business really knew who I really was," he remembers. "At the time, when they kind of threw me at the top of the heap of actors, I still hadn't sat down with well over half the town. I hadn't sat down with great directors, I hadn't even read for a lot of great casting directors – that's the first time studios had even heard my name. And I didn't go and meet with them or sit down with them or read for them when it came out, so I never really had that foundation [in LA]."

Regardless, Bentley's phone started ringing hot. His first film to be released post-*American Beauty* was *The White River Kid* (though it had been filmed prior). Then came *The Claim*, the 19th century war drama *The Four Feathers* – in which he starred alongside his good friend Heath Ledger – *P2* and *The Last Word*, in which he played Evan, a man who makes a living ghostwriting other people's suicide notes. He also starred alongside Nicolas Cage in *Ghost Rider* as the son of a devil, and in the quirky black comedy *Weirdsville* with Scott Speedman and Taryn Manning.

Though he worked consistently throughout the decade following *American Beauty*, behind the scenes Bentley was struggling with addictions that made him feel disconnected from his work. After a series of catalysts – including Ledger's death by accidental overdose – in mid 2009 he made the decision to get sober. "I was killing myself and not knowing it," he says now. "In that moment, you realise what you're thankful for, and part of it was what God gave me the natural ability to do, which was act." It wasn't easy, but Bentley gave it everything he had. "I had to put my soul back together, I had to put my mind back together. I mean, I felt like a newborn, relearning stuff."

Bentley's return to form came with a lead role in Roland Joffe's new film *There Be Dragons*, then an 'I'm okay' interview in the *New York Times*, and a role in the two-person, one-act off-Broadway play *Venus in Fur* in early 2010. He'd trained at Juilliard for a year for stage work before moving from New York to LA in 1998, and done dinner theatre in Arkansas prior to that, but considers *Venus* his first professional theatre job.

Based on Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novel *Venus in Furs*, Bentley describes the show as a tale "about relationships and about what S&M really is, really began as. It was just a two-character, one-act play, and I think that was great. 'Cause there was a lot on your shoulders, and a lot to learn." How did he find acting for theatre compared to acting for film? "The rehearsal process is definitely a big difference," Bentley explains. "We had a couple of months to prepare [for *Venus*]. In a film you get, maybe, if you're lucky, a week of real rehearsal time, not including, you know, wardrobe fittings and technical stuff like that. That's a huge difference. And in that time you're not only preparing what goes on the stage, you're more preparing the character. As an actor, you love that."

*Venus* was lauded by critics at the time, and there's been talk of it getting a Broadway run, although Bentley says he doesn't know if he'll rejoin the cast if that goes ahead. "I'm not sure if I'm going to go if it does. I've been picking up my film career again, and have this HBO pilot that I really loved working on; it was a great cast. We're still waiting to hear if that's a go. It's a pilot called *Tilda*, that I shot with Diane Keaton, Ellen Page and Jason Patric. Bill Condon, who is a great writer and director, directed it. I'm just sort of aiming myself that way."

As well as focussing on projects he loves, what other steps is he taking to direct his career now? "[During the last 10 years] I ignored people in the business, so I've been meeting with those directors, I've been calling to sit down with those studios and casting directors, and talk about great projects now. And I'm really focussed on having that foundation and having those relationships in this business now. I didn't get how important that was before, I didn't get that with my love for acting needed to come a love for the business side of it too, that



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BY CK, TROUSERS BY CK,  
HAND WRAPS BY EVERLAST

# “I THINK BEING MATURE HAS A LOT TO DO WITH IT TOO, BEING OLDER & WISER.”

now I've found. Obviously being sober helps the clarity of that, but I don't know... I think being mature has a lot to do with it too, being older and wiser."

So far, it seems, so good. As well as *Tilda*, Bentley is currently filming the Peter Iliff-directed *Rites of Passage*, in which he stars alongside Christian Slater and Stephen Dorff, and has several other films set for release in 2011.

Has it been scary, 'coming to' as it were, and rejoining the acting world? "No, no, it's been awesome!" Bentley exclaims. "Like you said, I worked through it all, [but] I don't even really know what I was doing. I've always prided myself on quickly learning lines, and having a great memory – of course that went, with all the use. And it made acting difficult," he adds, laughing. "The first thing you need is to know your lines, so you can then play with them. That's a basic, but one I had lost. I feel like now I've got that back and more, 'cause I've got everything I had before, but now I've got some wisdom and experience, and, because I so closely lost it all, a love for it that, you know, drives me to be better every day."

When he's on form, Bentley brings a depth to his characters that's at times unsettling, at others chilling – yet often offset by comedy. Though many of his roles to date have been firmly left of centre (voyeur neighbour, melancholy suicide note author, son of the devil), he somehow taps into every character's humanity, meaning you can't help, on some level, but find them endearing – even if they are despicable, or do despicable things. Aside from knowing his lines, how does he acquaint himself with the characters he plays?

"It's an awesome process, it's different for each character, of course," he says. "But the one thing I do that's the same, is I just – well, I'm always thinking of myself as a blank canvas. I know that's a bit clichéd, but it really works. It's a great way to go about it, because it allows [me] to be open and easily influenced and, you know, something the character can easily paint upon, and really that's the key to

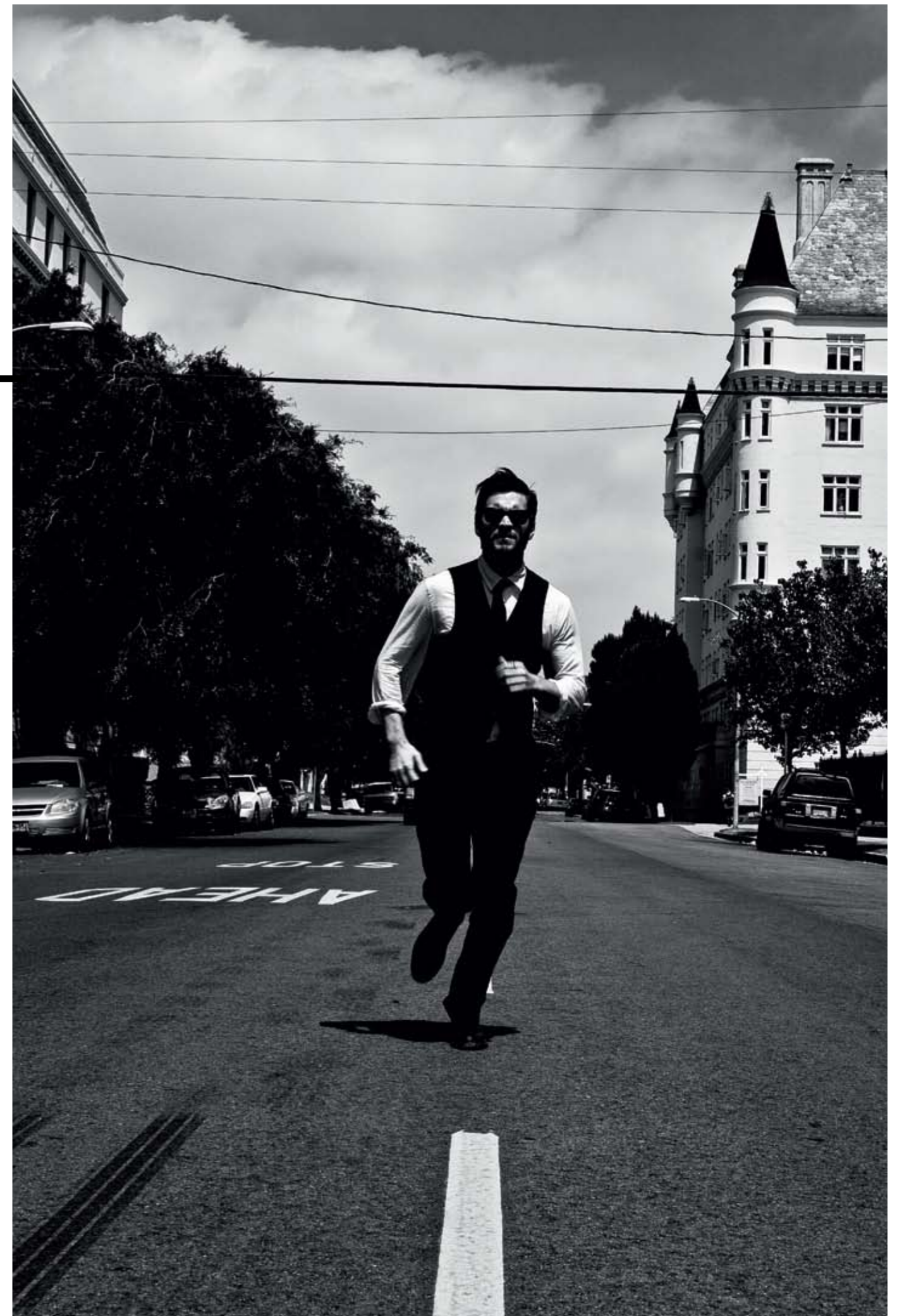
me. It's just entirely being open, and easily influenced in that sense. And then from that I kind of discover things I might need to read. I voice the character, I find his voice early on – even the first time I read a script, the voice tends to come out, and I find a lot of the beginning there. And then the physical stuff starts to happen later on, closer to shooting. How he walks, what I might want him to look like, or [I] talk to the director about what he might want him to look like."

Bentley says when he first moved to LA to pursue a career in film, he expected to travel between there and New York a lot more, "but I really just ended up staying in LA, and I don't know why." Does he have a favourite of the two? "I like them both, for different reasons," he answers. "I think New York a little bit more, because it's a more diverse group of people, as far as what they do for a living. As an actor, I definitely want to be around that, you know – more inspiring."

What other places inspire him creatively? "A few places – Morocco, definitely. I mean, it's from the ground, it's in the ground and you feel it coursing through you. The history and the – I don't know, culture's not the word, it's beyond that. Just the soul. It feels like the earth's soul is right there, in Africa – or that part of Africa that I've been in. I'm sure even the deeper you go in, it's even stronger. I also love Australia, and Canada, Alberta... really, all of Canada I've enjoyed. But I think mountains, I'm just kind of a mountain person."

Having detoured away from his career and found his way back, Bentley now finds himself faced with the blank canvas of his own person, on which he can paint himself afresh, as he allows each of his characters to do. The excitement, gratitude and happiness he feels about this is evident when asked what he's looking forward to about the future. "Everything! I'm just looking forward to being... here. I look forward to being here, and aware, of what's going on."

Interview Sarah Illingworth Images Miguel Starcevic



WES WEARS SUIT, SHIRT & SHOES BY JOHN VARVATOS