In the Company of Men is the anti-date movie of the year, and Aaron Eckhart is

BAD BOY IN A GOOD WAY

By Suzan Colón

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"Are you afraid of me?" Aaron Eckhart asks when I meet him for breakfast at Bubby's, a greasy spoon for celebrities and the terminally hip in downtown New York. "A lot of people seem to be afraid to talk to me." Not terribly surprising, considering the twisted, mind-wrecking villain he portrays in his first major film, *In the Company of Men*. But beyond playing the kind of guy audiences love to hate, Aaron, who's a handsome man—tall, blond, and just *listen* to those shoulders—has inspired a weird love/hate pull in female viewers. "Ooh, I despised that guy," a friend of mine said. "He was gorgeous."

In the Company of Men begins with Aaron's character, Chad, a mid-level corporate type who, along with his mousy comrade Howard, grouses about the out-of-town work project they're embarking on, the company rat race and being dumped by their respective girlfriends. Worked up and on a roll, Chad hatches a plot for revenge: The two should find a woman, simultaneously woo her and then dump her. "One day, out goes the rug from under her, and us pulling it hard," Chad smirks. "She'll be reaching for the sleeping pills in a week, and we'll be laughing about this until we are very old men." Their victim? A beautiful deaf woman from the company typing pool.

"A lot of people say it's a feminist film more than anything else," says Aaron, referring to just one of the many strong opinions flying around about the movie. Still, Aaron insists he's playing it safe: "I've forbidden my mother to see it."

Watching him order a big boy's breakfast of sunny-side-up eggs, home fries, bacon and coffee, I wonder if women would go through the drool cups the way they do if they knew that Aaron was not exactly dipping into personal experience to bring the character of Chad to life. He's got the charm part down, but as far as being the purveyor of carnal ruthlessness that he plays in the film, well . . . from what I can tell he's probably the best actor in the U.S. today. "I researched anti-social behavior and sociopathy for this part," Aaron says, "and then I went down to Buddha Bar and hung around with Wall Street guys. I think Chad is definitely a mélange of both."

Nothing in Aaron's background suggests anything like sociopathic behavior, just a lot of traveling. He's originally from North-

ern California, but his businessman father dragged the family to England and Australia; eventually, Aaron moved to Hawaii and became a beach bum. "I had a $200 car that was crawling with cockroaches," he says, laughing. "We'd open the car door and the seats would be alive. So we put lizards that feed on roaches in the car—it became like a little ecosystem."

After touching down in France and Switzerland, Aaron attended Utah's Brigham Young University, where he met future writer/director Neil LaBute. "Neil's stuff was, like, very edgy—not commercial—but I loved it, and I started doing all his plays. We'd put a play up at 9 in the morning after we tricked the theater into opening. It was real guerrilla theater," he says, grinning at the memory. "And after we graduated, nobody would touch us. Neil was a husband and father living in Indiana, and I did commercials and small parts on TV. Nobody wanted to take a chance on us."

The solution was to make *In the Company of Men* independently, and although it doesn't look like it, the movie was shot for $23,000—a budget comparable to getting a highly creamy designer dress for $20. "Neil has two friends who were in a car wreck," Aaron says, waving away the offer of a coffee refill, "and they both received $25,000 settlements. So they each gave Neil half." There was no room in the budget to get Aaron from New York to the set in Indiana, so he called a friend who owns a trucking company. "He said, 'Meet this guy in New Jersey at 4 o'clock at the truck stop.' I did, and the guy got me there in two days."

Soon Aaron will start filming Neil's next film, *Lepers*, a claustrophobic tale of six couples who realize that sex and love are diseases. But for now he's just chewing the fingernails on those manly hands of his in the New York loft space he shares with his girlfriend, Emily Cline (who plays his girlfriend in *Men*), and a yellow Labrador, as he wonders what will happen when *In the Company of Men* becomes the anti-chick flick of the century.

"Should I change my number?" he asks. "I don't know if that's necessary. . . ." Aaron pauses. "Then again, a woman came up to me recently and said, 'I remember you from the film, and I just got this pit of ugliness in my stomach. I just wanted to slap you.' "

His reaction was very un-Chad-like. "I said, 'Please don't, but thank you very much.' " ●

the cruelest womanizer ever. You'll want to kill him. Or love him to death.