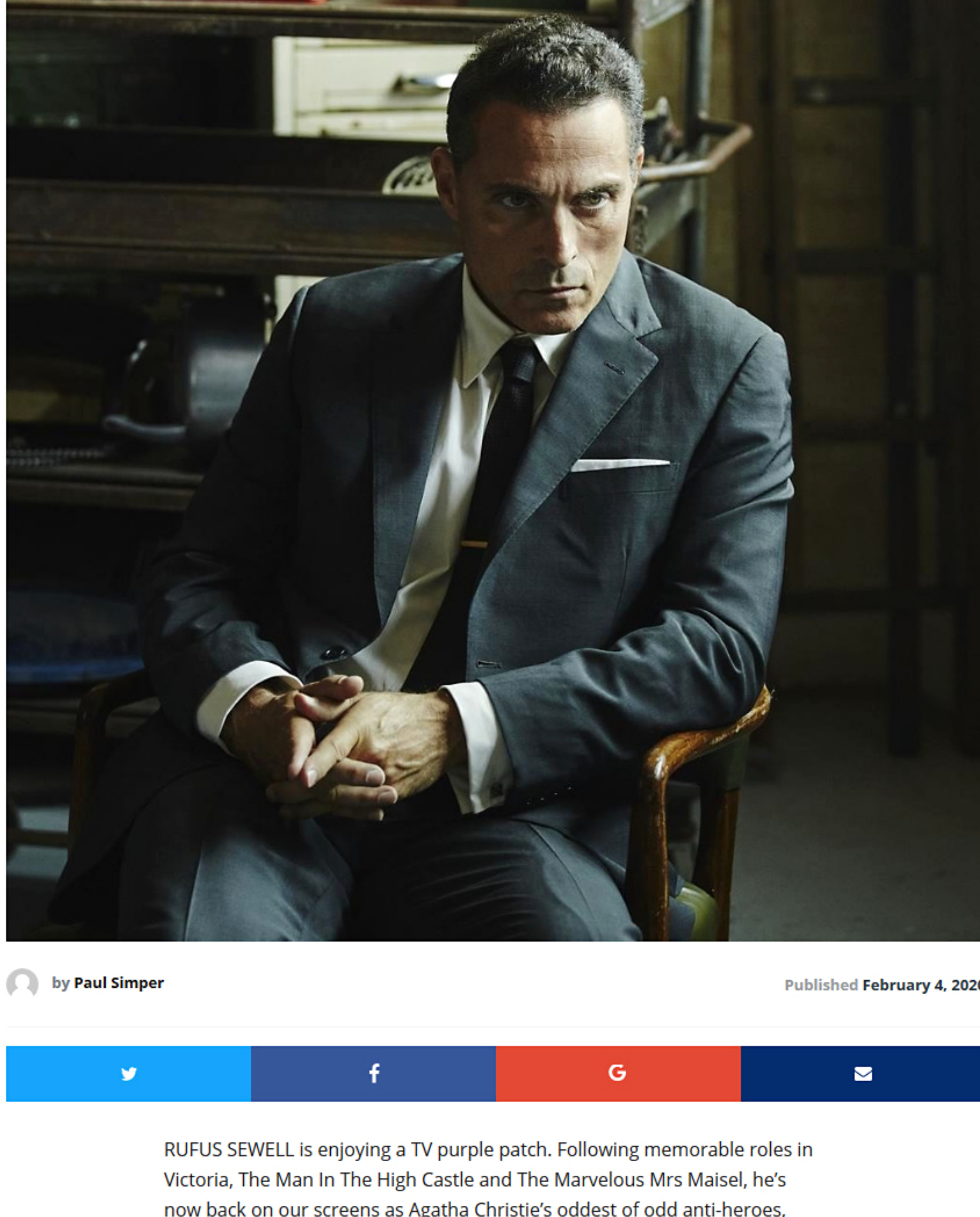


TV To Go: Rufus Sewell takes on a 'nice nasty' Agatha Christie drama

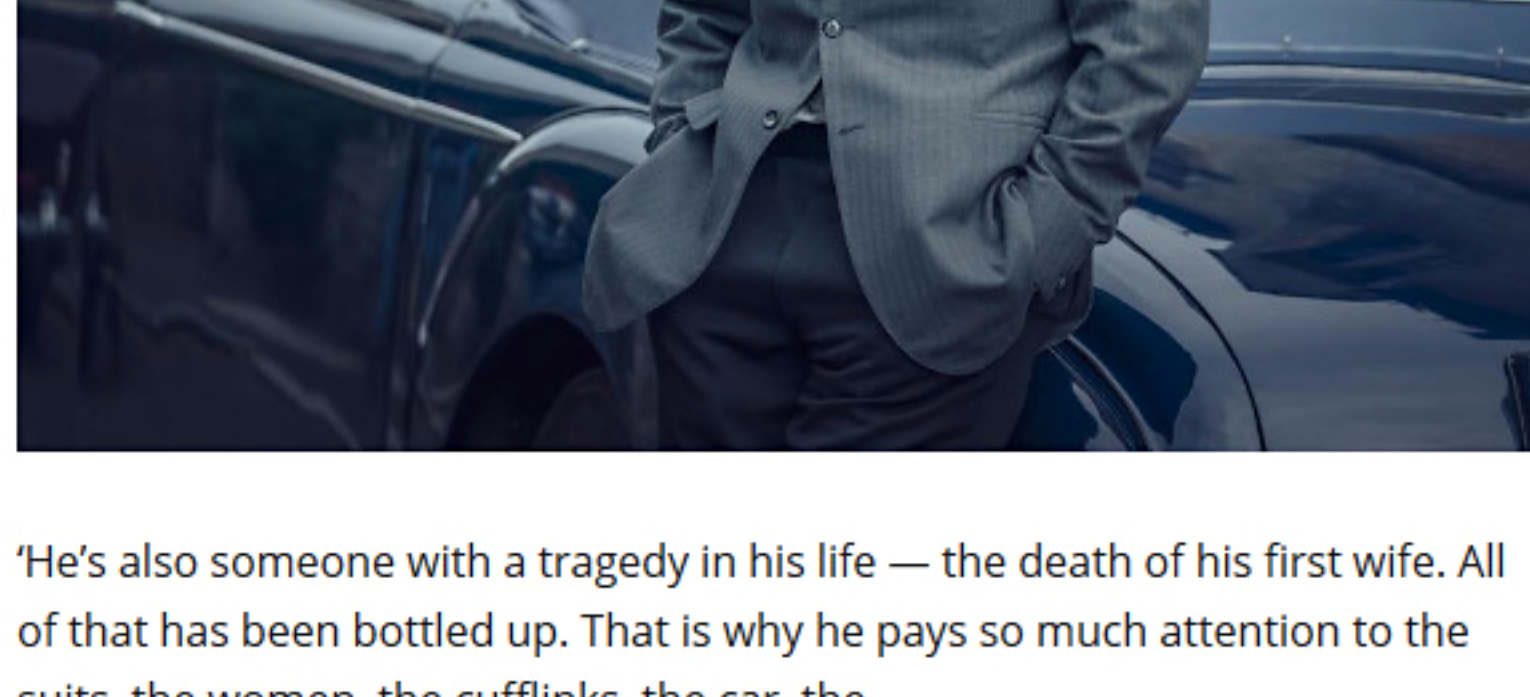


by Paul Simper

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RUFUS SEWELL is enjoying a TV purple patch. Following memorable roles in *Victoria*, *The Man In The High Castle* and *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel*, he's now back on our screens as Agatha Christie's oddest of odd anti-heroes, Mark Easterbrook, central figure in *The Pale Horse*, a two-part adaptation of one of the crime heroine's more peculiar tales. He winds up playing sleuth in a mystery he's inadvertently caught up in.

'When I read the script it reminded me of a quote from Alfred Hitchcock — "it's a nice nasty little piece," says Sewell, 52. 'Mark is interesting. The fact that he's an antiques dealer is symbolic because he deals with beautiful objects that may have come from theft and murder.



'He's also someone with a tragedy in his life — the death of his first wife. All of that has been bottled up. That is why he pays so much attention to the suits, the women, the cufflinks, the car, the

art. It's all about creating this veneer because there's something malignant.'

One of the most notable aspects of writer Sarah Phelps' bold quintet of Agatha Christie TV adaptations, of which this is the latest, is the way they fasten on to tiny, unexpected, often bizarre details that the legendary crime writer, mistakenly celebrated for the apparent cosiness of her murder mysteries, smuggles into her text. In *The Pale Horse*, published in 1961, it was a seemingly throwaway line describing widowed antique dealer Easterbrook that caught Phelps' eye.

'It was Mark Easterbrook being interested in heiresses with dirty hair,' remembers Phelps. 'You've got to get close to people to sniff their scalp? You odd man. It's what makes Christie so subversive, I think. This flinty-eyed, unerring, remorseless, unblinking examination of human failure.



Creepy case: Rufus Sewell as Mark Easterbrook and Sean Pertwee as Inspector Lejeune

'Everyone thinks she's cosy. She's the least cosy but it's always very cloaked. Here's the book that will sell fortunes and here's the stealth book she actually wants to write where there are some really unpleasant little details.'

The Pale Horse is one of Agatha Christie's most macabre and creepy tales. A list of names is found in a dead woman's shoe, including bon viveur (and adulterer) Easterbrook. Some are already dead from supposedly natural causes but as more begin to perish, could it be the work of witchcraft? The production has the feel of horror films like *The Wicker Man* and *Peeping Tom*, mixing West Country paganism and 1960s Soho sleaze.

'When I read the scripts it did remind me of *The Wicker Man*,' says Sewell. 'That and *A Single Man*, *Jacob's Ladder* and *Macbeth*. I know they are grand-sounding references but it's much more meaty than you would expect. In terms of it being interesting for me there was a lot to work towards.'

The self-identified witches, who live in a cottage in the fictional village of Much Deeping, are a formidable trio: *Derry Girls*' Kathy Kiera Clarke, *Harlots*' Sheila Atim and kitchen-sink-drama legend Rita Tushingham. But just as engrossing are the excruciating scenes between Sewell and Kaya Scodelario, who plays Easterbrook's second wife. As the marriage begins to unravel, the cat-and-mouse between Sewell and old pal Sean Pertwee as dogged investigating officer Detective Inspector Lejeune comes to the fore.

'I loved my scenes with Kaya,' says Sewell. 'I love their relationship because there's so much hurt and anger there. This couple who really concentrate on how it looks but there's all this nasty friction underneath. I love the silent, violent politeness between them. It's a battle. I also loved working with Sean Pertwee. He's an old friend but we'd never done scenes before.'



Hurt and anger: Kaya Scodelario as Easterbrook's wife

Based in LA with his girlfriend and six-year-old daughter, Sewell is happy with the way his career is rolling. Along with the Christie there is movie *The Father* with Anthony Hopkins and Olivia Colman, which is being shown at the Sundance festival.

'You can waste a lot of time worrying about what you're not doing,' he says. 'I'm lucky to be playing parts like this. I don't feel the need to prove to other people what kind of actor I am now.'

The Pale Horse, part one, is on BBC1 on Sunday at 9pm

Shedunnit – Sarah Phelps' Agatha adaptations



SCREENWRITER Sarah Phelps (above) cut her teeth on *EastEnders*, penning 94 episodes. Other credits include *Being Human*, *Dickensian* and *Dublin Murders*. But it's her interpretations of Agatha Christie that have propelled her to the forefront of TV writers. A far cry from the old-school gentility of *Poirot* and *Marple*, Phelps takes no prisoners.

And Then There Were None (2015)



This Christmas ratings smash introduced the sinister swirling undertones that are the Phelps trademark. And putting Aidan Turner in a towel, a cheeky *Poldark* nod, didn't do the ratings any harm.

The Witness For The Prosecution (2016)



Billy Howle led this take on a short story that proved visceral fare for a Christmas audience anticipating a whodunit. This was more a human study, driven by dark passions, which stayed true to the original ending.

Ordeal By Innocence (2018)



Starring Bill Nighy, Anna Chancellor and Christian Cooke, Phelps drew flak from Christie traditionalists for taking liberties with the original plot — ironic given it was Phelps's most traditional Christie in feel.

The ABC Murders (2018)



John Malkovich split opinion with his downbeat take on celebrated detective Hercule Poirot but Phelps captured the spirit of one of Christie's most popular tales even if, typically, she didn't stick to it by the letter.

