



YOU WON'T FIND JOSHUA JACKSON SHORT ON OPINIONS. Overcaffeinated and overscheduled, he's squeezing in lunch between New York press meetings for his new movie, *The Skulls*—a college-campus conspiracy thriller—before he hops a flight back to North Carolina to wrap an episode of *Dawson's Creek*. Still, he has the time—and interest—to weigh in on just about any topic you throw at him. Like presidential candidate George W. Bush: “People say, ‘He doesn’t have much to say, but he’s really charismatic.’ So? Are you that f---ing stupid? If looks mattered, Brad Pitt would be President. Drives me nuts!” Or

his favorite literary villain, *David Copperfield*'s Uriah Heep: “He’s such an evil prick, the worst kind of evil. I’d love to play that character.” Or the upcoming *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy, which he can’t wait to see: “It’s not another science-fiction geek thing, it’s *the* science-fiction geek thing.... Now I’ve just revealed the fact that I’m an absolute geek. Josh Jackson: dork.”

Inner nerd aside, Jackson’s displaying all sorts of new personas of late. Leading man, for one: *The Skulls* marks Jackson’s first feature starring role—a shot at swapping supporting parts in films like *Cruel Intentions* and *Urban Legend* for headlining fare. “If the movie’s successful, people will start offering me a more diverse range of roles,” says the actor, still best known as *Dawson's Creek*'s caustic Pacey. “If it’s not, do I step back, step forward, go sideways? I don’t know.”

Jackson’s direction will be clearer once audiences see the Universal flick, in which the actor plays Luke McNamara, a working-class scholarship student at an Ivy League college, who joins the university’s elite secret society. Membership in *The Skulls* means

easy access to money, power, and sex. Downside: blackmail, bribery—and the cover-up of a killing. In short, steep dues. “It’s a morality tale—hopefully there’s that layer,” Jackson says. “But all bulls--- aside? You’re just supposed to enjoy yourself.”

The cast—which includes Leslie Bibb (The WB’s *Popular*), Paul Walker (*Varsity Blues*) as a fifth-generation Skull, and Hill Harper (*In Too Deep*) as Jackson’s outsider roomie—certainly had a fine time during the shoot in and around the University of Toronto. “Josh and Hill and I were like the Musketees,” says Bibb, 26, who plays Jackson’s love interest, Chloe. “If I’m lucky enough to get another movie this summer, I think I’m screwed because that was the best summer of my life. Great people to work with. Great food, great drinks.”

One challenge for director Rob Cohen (HBO’s *The Rat Pack*): creating a

chummy campus atmosphere among people who’ve just met—or, like Jackson, 21, have never attended college. For authenticity, Cohen ordered Jackson and Harper to get up at 5 a.m. for some weekend rowing lessons—their characters are on the college team. “All

I had to do was hire a Nazi crew coach. He worked Josh and Hill until they were drooping and dropping,” Cohen laughs. “That put them close together very quickly.” Bibb took dart lessons—then played Jackson and Harper for money. And Cohen hosted rap sessions “about life and sex and college,” he says.

“It was the microwave version of how to cook a friendship.” Walker seconds: “There weren’t any a--holes. Josh is smart and funny as s---. Leslie is sweet as can be—fun to flirt with—Hill is cool.”

Bibb—the only woman with a substantial role—also got a fast lesson in how to be one of the guys. The testos-



STARRING ROLL *Skulls*
Jackson (with Bibb)