

The men of the world owe a debt of gratitude to actor James McAvoy for selflessly teaching us a valuable style lesson. For while McAvoy's *Atonement* co-star Keira Knightley was being fêted as a fashion icon for her S&M-inspired look on the front cover of American fashion magazine *W*, on the subject of Mr McAvoy's appearance alongside her, in a designer leather biker's waistcoat, the commentators of the style press fell curiously silent.

As well they might have, because he looked, to use the technical term, like a complete pillock.

I can identify with Mr McAvoy, because, as a journalist at the *New York Post*, I once talked my way onto the catwalk at a show for trendy British label Buckler at New York Fashion Week for a story about male models – and lived to regret it.

Backstage at the downtown car showroom where the event was being held, the atmosphere was electric. The place was swarming with dozens of athletically built, muscular chaps, all chiselled cheekbones and prairie-honed abdomens pulling on shirts, jeans and jackets. Then there was me: a gangling, pasty, English reporter standing in the corner wondering what he had got himself into.

Eventually a stylist found me and started throwing a flurry of clothes on my scrawny frame: oversized shades, white jeans with a western-style belt buckle, a stripy shirt with giant cuffs and collars, the size of which were last seen when Sister Sledge were topping the charts, and a woven tie.

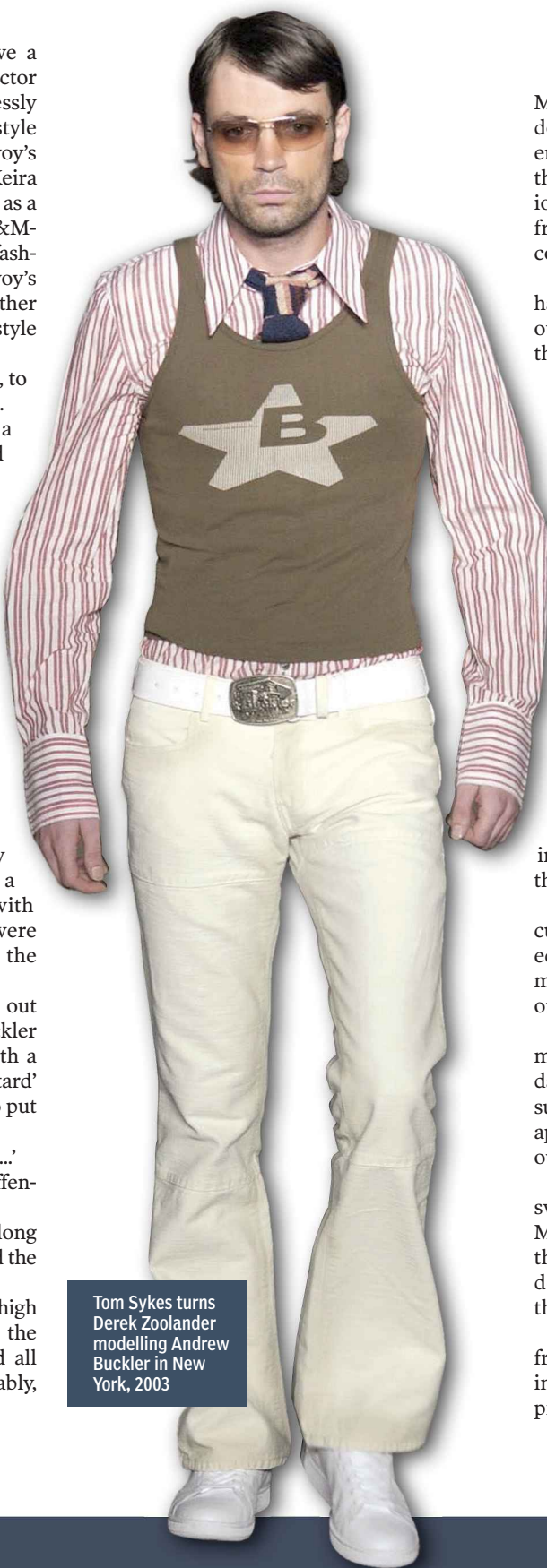
Then, literally, just as I was about to step out onto the catwalk, the designer Andrew Buckler himself lobbed a dirty-green wife-beater with a huge star on it and the words 'Sexy Bastard' emblazoned on the back at me and told me to put it on over the top of the ensemble.

'Over the top?' I asked. 'Won't that look a bit...'

I didn't even get as far as thinking up an inoffensive synonym for ridiculous.

'It'll look fabulous,' he cut in. And, swept along by the moment, on it went. And on I went. And the cameras flashed.

It was an exhilarating taste of the modelling high life. I felt ten feet tall – which only made the moment when I saw those photos splashed all over the paper even more crashingly, unbearably, embarrassingly awful.



Tom Sykes turns Derek Zoolander modelling Andrew Buckler in New York, 2003

I've never felt like a bigger pillock in my life.

The truth, as I (and presumably now James McAvoy) can attest, is that just as women who don't know anything about internal combustion engines should stay out from under the bonnet of the car, so men who have as much idea about fashion as Gordon Brown should keep their distance from any item of clothing that could be remotely construed as fashionable.

Ever since my ill-fated modelling experience I have lived by the rule that if any item of clothing other than a suit, pair of shoes or jacket costs more than £150, it's probably just too trendy for me.

Carlo Brandelli, the elegant creative director of Savile Row tailor Kilgour, whose designs reflect his vision of a pared-down male aesthetic, says that being talked into inappropriately fashionable clothes by anyone – whether it be it a stylist, girlfriend or overenthusiastic shop assistant on commission in a menswear department – is a recipe for disaster for the traditional British male.

'Men should never allow themselves to be shoehorned into something that they are not comfortable with,' he says. 'The best advice for the guy on the street is simply to go with your gut. Your instinct is usually correct.'

He advises men in need of style tips or who crave inspiration to look towards historically great dressers such as Cary Grant, and flags up Andy Warhol's signature skinny jeans and tailored jacket combo as a great example of instinctual dressing (incidentally, it's also a look that's hotter today than it's ever been).

Bill Prince, deputy editor of *GQ* magazine, concurs, saying: 'Unfortunately, men always get tempted to experiment with fashion at exactly the worst moment possible – at their wedding, at the Oscars, or when they are on the front of a magazine.'

As if to prove the point that what works best for men is what they feel most comfortable with, just days after McAvoy committed ritual sartorial suicide on the cover of *W*, a set of paparazzi shots appeared of him piling into a plain Nissan Micra outside his modest North London home.

Clad in a pair of loose-fitting combats, blue sweater and a much-washed fabric trucker hat, McAvoy looked brilliantly relaxed, every inch the modern, multitasking retro-hetero male, and definitely someone who'd know his way round the car engine when the oil needed changing.

Was it an ensemble that would get him on the front cover of the glossies? No way. But then again, in the pap shots, he doesn't look like the kind of pillock who'd care about stuff like that.

MY CATWALK CRISIS

Tom Sykes learned the hard way – in a New York fashion show – that hip menswear is a short cut to humiliation. So before you snap up that tight leather waistcoat, read his cautionary catwalk tale