



OCTOBER 2021

LEGEND

**ANTHONY
HOPKINS**

ALSO STARRING...

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LEGEND

SIR ANTHONY HOPKINS

From Ludlow to Lear, cannibal to cardinal, for 60 years and counting the great Welsh actor has been an inimitable presence on stage and screen. In the year he made history as the oldest actor to ever win an Academy Award (his second, no less), we're honoured to add another accolade to his collection...

Story by **Stuart McGurk** *Photographs by* **Gavin Bond** *Styling by* **Alison Edmond**

The first thing Sir Anthony Hopkins wants to know is “What is it like, Stuart, having Covid?”

I had recently come down with a case (thankfully very mild, thanks in no small part to the vaccine) and Hopkins, who didn't attend his own Oscar win for *The Father* due to the risk, was understandably interested.

I didn't have much to tell him: some shivers and aches; runny nose; a bit like the flu. And while Hopkins was bemused that England was fully reopening despite skyrocketing case numbers (“That's wacko!”), he finds anger these days slips through his fingers and what's left is a late-career, late-life joy, one far more infectious than any disease.

He spent the pandemic engaged in two of his passions – piano and painting – but is eager to get back to his first love. Next month he's set to work again with the director of *The Father*, Florian Zeller, in a project called *The Son*, and has another film lined up after that.

At 83, he's found himself in an Indian Summer, with his Bafta- and Oscar-winning turn as an ailing patriarch struggling with dementia in *The Father* coming on the back of Bafta and Oscar nominations the previous year for *The Two Popes*, costarring Jonathan Pryce.

As a young tyro at the National Theatre – despite being championed by Laurence Olivier and others – he found it hard to fit in. He clashed with directors, drank, didn't take instruction kindly, even, as he tells me, threatening to punch a director once, before fleeing to LA as soon as he could. But, as he points out, “They're all dead now anyway.”

Remarkably, it wasn't until he came back to the UK to work on a couple of prestige BBC adaptations in the last decade (*The Dresser* in 2015; *King Lear* in 2018) that he finally felt at peace, that, in his head at least, he was not an outsider looking in.

“We're not here for long,” he says. “And the last decade or so it's been a wonderful feeling of freedom.”

We start on *The Father*, the role that saw him become the oldest ever person to receive an Academy Award for acting.

‘I do speak in “bup-bup-bum”. It's an aggressive punching out of words. That's my nature, I guess’

Let's begin, naturally, with *The Father*, the role for which you won your second Oscar at 83, making you the oldest ever person to receive an acting Academy Award. You didn't attend, so what was it like to essentially sleep through it?

Well, it was a big surprise! I was with my wife and friends and we were on vacation. We were in Wales when the Bafta happened. I wasn't asked to make any prepared speech in case I won, so I took it that it would go to Chadwick Boseman. I didn't really want to watch the awards, because I have better things to do. Then suddenly, in the next room, I heard this scream. My wife and her friends said, “You won the Bafta!”

Then I went to where my father is buried, just to visit his grave and see an old friend of mine. And it was on the Sunday evening, we're staying in this hotel. The Academy had stipulated that the nominees would have to go to either London or Dublin and, at my age, the risk of Covid and all that, I had no intention of going. So I phoned my agent and he said, “Well, good luck.” I went to bed, then at about five o'clock in the morning my buzzer went off on my phone. My agent said, “Tony, you've just got the second Oscar!” I couldn't believe it. We were all up and celebrating. So then I made a little speech and a tribute to Chadwick Boseman, sadly gone so young in his life. And that was it! I had no idea. No idea at all. And I can't figure any of this stuff out. But it was wonderful.

It must have been slightly surreal to have an Oscar-celebrating breakfast...

It was. And we left that morning for Italy, because we were on a journey around Europe. And so we still went to Italy and we came back. And that's it. It's hard to believe at 83. Getting these awards is a state of constant surprise at my age, but what fun.

You always speak very practically when it comes to acting – that it's no more than reading the lines – but you did say once that you still have to know to turn on “that electricity”. What exactly do you mean by that?

Well, actually, I don't think there's any such thing, but I think acting found me. I had no plan to be an actor. And I don't make it sound so heavy that it's destiny, but I think roles choose you, in a way, and that's what happened with *The Father*. I'd heard about the play, I read the script and I phoned my agent and I said, “Yes, definitely do this!” This was one of those rare scripts: so well written, so well defined, so clear. But the power is the word. You give flesh to the word – the great Peter O'Toole said that. So there's no acting skill required, in a way. And not just vocal clarity, but clarity of thought, clarity of intention. You don't need to dress it up in anything else. I didn't have to go and visit old people's homes to meet dementia patients. And when you get the right combinations – like Jodie Foster in *The Silence Of The Lambs* or Peter O'Toole in *The Lion In Winter* or Olivia Colman and Olivia Williams in *The Father* – then life is easy. And I love the preparation. I

found my script [of *The Father*] just the other day. And I go over the scenes many, many obsessive times.

I've read you'll read a script 200 times or so...

And more! The reason I do that is to... Talking about electricity, it gives my brain – or whatever this mechanism up here is – it gives me confidence and the reassurance that I know what I'm doing. Once you know what you're doing, you can go on the set. You can relax. For example, the first morning on *The Father*, Olivia Colman comes into the flat and I say, “What are you doing?” Yeah, well, that's easy! I say, “What are you doing here?” That's the beauty. It doesn't take a genius to figure that out. And then you walk up to the script supervisor – a very kind woman is marking out all the continuity – and you say, “So what's the next line? OK, got it, thank you,” then *bup, bup, bup*. And it's like putting together a jigsaw before you know it.

Your own father didn't have dementia, but did you draw anything from him in playing that role?

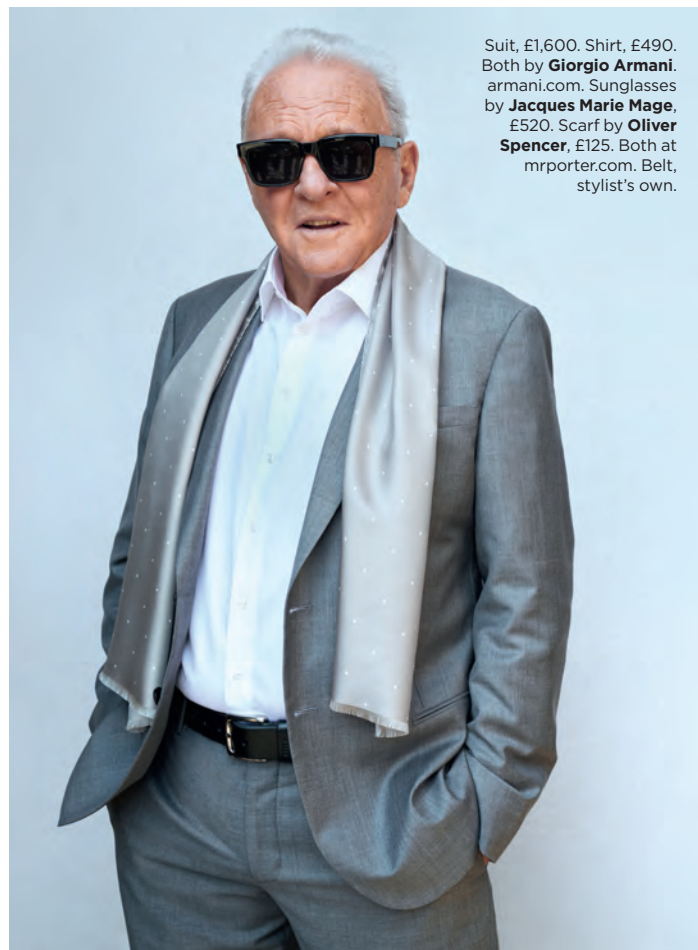
Yes, I did. My father was a practical, down-to-earth guy. He was a baker, wasn't impressed by the frills of the business I'm in, very blunt. I remember the very first day with the daughter [played by Olivia Colman] and he says, “What are you looking at? Everything's all right, Anne. The world is still turning... just like your mother.” That was my father. He'd say, “What's the matter with you? Come on. Wake up. You're like your grandfather. I don't know what's gonna happen to you. It worries me.” And he was like that up until my late adult years, you know, and then he died. I can laugh at it now because he was sometimes cantankerous. He didn't understand the wishy-washy stuff of my business at all.

Did you ever have to have that conversation when you said to him, “I want to be an actor”? What did he think about that?

It was 1955, I always remember, around Easter, and my school reports had been pretty bad; I wasn't very good at school. And I didn't say it in any forceful or bad-tempered way, but I remember saying to him, “One day I'll show you.” I was standing in the kitchen with my mother and my father and he looked at me and said, “Well, good. I hope you do.” And it was a kind of little signal to him that said: back off a bit. Within a few months, I got a scholarship to the Cardiff College Of Music & Drama, having never acted before. I left in 1957. And then I had to do two years of military service, then was fired from my job in a repertory company because I was incompetent as a stage manager.

I'd heard that! Why were you so bad at it?

Oh, I was terrible. I was impractical. I couldn't concentrate on it. My mind... I just couldn't figure things out. I'd get things wrong all the time. But I had some small parts [as an actor], though I hadn't figured out that you have to learn the lines. The director [David Scase] said, “I'm going to suggest that you go to a really good >>



**'I had to punch a
guy once and I did
it for real on stage.
He was a big hefty
guy, so it was fine'**



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>> acting school, get some training, because you've got something. I don't know what it is, but you're dangerous on stage. You have no discipline." He was right. I had to punch a guy once and I did it for real on stage.

You didn't know you had to do a stage punch? You did it for real?

Well, he was a big hefty guy, so it was fine. And then I went to the Royal Academy for two years. Within five years after leaving I was in a film with Peter O'Toole. So go figure. I don't understand how that happened.

Which was, of course, *The Lion In Winter*, which also starred Katharine Hepburn. What do you remember about that now?

I remember the first day in Ireland: we had our first shot with the three sons, John Castle, Nigel Terry and myself, with Katharine Hepburn. Here's this great, mighty American movie star. And then I had my first scene with her, on my own, and somebody said, "Are you nervous?" I said, "No. What's the point of being nervous? It's just vanity." And she was wonderful. I remember she said to me, "Don't play to the camera, because I'll steal the scene from you. Don't do that. Don't act. You don't need to act. You've got good shoulders, good head, good voice. Just do the lines." And it was the best advice. She watched Spencer Tracy and Humphrey Bogart and I watched them too. I was canny, I think, observant. I knew what was what. Narcissism is the biggest enemy of all, I think, for an actor and it's something you have to check all the time. Narcissism, too much ego, you have to watch it. And that's fun as well, to watch the old ego.

Is that something you still have to keep a check on at 83?

Of course. When people start saying good things about you – great actor and all that stuff – of course. When you start believing that, well, that's OK, there's nothing wrong in believing in yourself and self-worth, but you have to check it every so often. You're just a human being that happens to be an actor in a public sort of job, [you're] no different from anyone else. And what I am very conscious of, and I don't mean it in a self-conscious "Ah, shucks" way, is realising every day that I'm not making the movie. The camera guy, the sound engineer, lighting, DP, the props, the make-up people, the producers, director: they're making the film. The guys there at four in the morning unloading the trucks are making the movie. I'm not.

It was a pleasure to rewatch *The Lion In Winter*. That was also when you were still drinking, before you quit in the mid-1970s. Can one assume yourself and Peter O'Toole would have a drink or two after work?

Oh, yes. More than our share. He was an Irish hell-raiser. But he was a wonderful guy, a very smart, brilliant man. But the booze did something to me. I'm not an evangelist or anything, but I drank enough to get myself to a point to

think, "This is not working." And so some years ago I thought, "Better stop this." But O'Toole, in those days, the 1960s, they were the bad boys – Oliver Reed, O'Toole, Richard Harris. Wonderful actors, great personalities. All gone now, but they were fun to be with.

It was quite early on in your career that you moved to Los Angeles, wasn't it? The mid-1970s? Why did you leave?

Well, I came to New York to play and then I came over here [to LA] in 1975 to do a television play and then I just stayed. I'd felt like I was on the run. I was at the National Theatre, I had a great time and I was given great opportunities by people such as [Laurence] Olivier. But there was something in me that wasn't settled. And I regret that and I've seen people since and apologised for my past behaviour. But I was restless and I couldn't fit in somehow, so I scarpered. I did the big skedaddle. And when I left in 1973 I was told I'd never work again.

Really? Who told you that?

My agent at the time. He said, "Tony, what are you doing?" But that's my past and that's something I'm not proud of. I can't undo it.

'Narcissism is the biggest enemy of all for an actor and it's something you have to check all the time'

Why was moving to LA considered such a bad move back then?

Well, at the time I was at the National Theatre and had some great opportunities, but for some reason – and the drinking didn't help – I was a rebel, I was a fighter and I was insufferably dogmatic about certain things. And I realised that it doesn't work for me [staying in London] and so I thought maybe I ought to just quietly slide away. And that's what I did. But I did eventually go back to the National Theatre in the 1980s to do *Pravda* and *King Lear* and some other things. But nevertheless, I never really felt I could fit in. That's all. I just didn't fit in comfortably. But then I had the great opportunity to recently work with Ian McKellen for *The Dresser* [in 2015], then *King Lear* [in 2018, both BBC adaptations] with Richard Eyre and a formidable cast, such as Jim Carter, Emma Thompson, a bunch of people, and I felt that it had been worth it. Those demons were long gone.

I'm surprised at that. You were an Oscar winner at the time. Why did it take so long to feel like you finally fitted in?

Well, you know, we all have our bugaboos, our paranoia, [although] mine is less now over the years, and I realised all that stuff in the past, about running about, not fitting in, maybe there was some truth in it. Maybe I didn't fit in. Maybe I was a bit of a troubled character. But I'm old

now: I'd be stupid to walk around full of nettles and devils in me. We're not here for long. But the last decade or so it's been a wonderful feeling of freedom and just doing the job and showing up. And then *The Father* comes along and working with Jonathan Pryce in *The Two Popes* [in 2019].

I want to talk about that. But we have to talk *The Silence Of The Lambs* first, the iconic role of Hannibal Lecter, for which you got your first Oscar in 1992. In terms of what wasn't on the page, is it true you decided his voice would be close to Katharine Hepburn or that his eyes would not blink, like Charles Manson?

None of that was true. [Director] Jonathan Demme came to see me in London on the Saturday night – I was doing a play – and he said, "How do you want to play him?" I said, "Well, I think he's very still." And I did the voice from just one line. He said, [*displays shocked look*] "Oh, my God. Yes, that sounds... Yes."

We arrived in New York and we had a round table. Jodie Foster was the only other actor and the producers read other parts. I know there was some doubt with a few people, because on the Sunday before the first reading, I was taken out to dinner by Jonathan Demme, with three or four producers and their wives, and I thought there was a little bit of doubt, because I'm a British actor, not an American actor. I remember a producer called Ken Utt. He said, "It's gonna be interesting tomorrow, Tony. Let's see how you go." I know he was thinking, "Why did they cast this guy?" Anyway, next morning we started the reading and we came to the scene with Jodie Foster and I said [*adopting perfect Lecter voice that's terrifying even over Zoom*], "Good morning," you know? "You're not real FBI, are you?" and I remember Kenny uttered, "My God." I knew that I got it.

Well, yeah...

I don't know what acting is, but you know when you're right. I remember I had a bit of an argument with the wardrobe designer because he'd put me in a baggy orange jumpsuit.

I said, "No. I want a slimline suit."

"But how?" he said.

"Lecter would have paid somebody," I said.

I knew exactly the inner attitude and the externalised drive of the guy. He knows how to scare people. One rule of naturalists when they're confronting the great gorillas is don't look at them. Because that's a threat. So when Lecter doesn't take his eyes off you, that's frightening. And Charles Manson did stare like that. You think that's a disturbed person, because they have no reference point, they have no pity.

To get on to *The Two Popes*, for which you received your fifth Oscar nomination in 2020, you hadn't worked with Jonathan Pryce before, had you?

No. We've met once before and I did the production of *Under Milk Wood* with George Martin. But we had such a good time and he had a wonderful sense of humour and it was awesome. And >>

>> Jonathan's got a different approach: I don't mean he wings it, but he doesn't learn way ahead; he just knows the scenes as they come up. I wish I could do that! It would save me a lot of work.

What's the difference in doing something like that in the Vatican City and then playing Odin in the *Thor* films where it's all green screen?

It's strange, you know, big green screens all around you and they put a helmet on your head and armour and you speak the lines. And I think it was Ken's [director Kenneth Branagh] first Marvel, but he knew what he was doing. It's just about shots, like Alfred Hitchcock. So he'd say, "Do you mind just standing there? OK. Then you move up there." I remember one famous actor was doing a film with Hitchcock and he said, "Mr Hitchcock, what's my motivation?" He said, "I'll tell you when you get there."

If you've seen *Psycho*, all the great Hitchcock movies, they're all so designed. I met James Stewart once and he said he never left the set when he was doing *Rear Window* because it was so fascinating watching Hitchcock setting up the rhythm of scenes, the close shots, all meticulously edited, that can create such tremendous tension in the audience. That is genius. And I think that's what Kenneth Branagh has. He's the captain and you feel confident. Sometimes you work with directors who don't seem to have a clue and they're all over the place, take after take after take, and you think, "Come on, what are we doing?" Clint Eastwood does two takes, if you're lucky. Just shoot the damn film!

You worked with Woody Allen for *You Will Meet A Tall Dark Stranger*. He's notoriously like that, isn't he? Couple of takes, move on...

Yeah, well, he would say [*Woody Allen impression*], "Let's just do one more take and this time let's make it more real." [*Laughs*.] Then... "OK, I think we got it." The great Woody Allen. But that's the way they do it, that's the hallmark.

Are there any roles you've ever regretted missing out on?

I don't think that's ever concerned me. There's no part I can think of that I wish I'd done, that I just wanted to say I'm in. I'm just very fortunate.

I have to ask about a casting rumour that feels outlandish and I desperately want it to be true. I read that it was between yourself and Arnold Schwarzenegger to play Mr Freeze in *Batman & Robin*, which, if true, is, I imagine, the only time that you and Arnold Schwarzenegger have been vying for the same part.

Oh, I don't know. No, I must look at that. I don't know. I doubt it. I've never heard of that before. Who's Mr Freeze?

He's one of the comic book villains who, well, he freezes George Clooney's Batman.

Oh, well, I would wouldn't mind looking like Arnold Schwarzenegger! Did he play the part?

He very much did. There were a lot of freeze-based puns. Can I ask about impressions of

you, which is its own industry? Who does it best? What do you make of the Rob Brydon imitation on *The Trip*, for instance?

Oh, he does [William] Bligh from *The Bounty*, doesn't he? Gary Oldman does a good one as me, Ben Kingsley also. Gary Oldman left me a message on my answer machine in London many years ago and I thought it was my voice! I thought, "I don't remember leaving myself a message!" He just said, "It's Tony here, how are you?" When people do the impressions it's all deep, all *guughhh-raghhh*, though I do speak rather quickly, so they get the rhythm. I do speak in bup-bup-bum... It's like an aggressive punching out of words. I don't know why. That's my nature, I guess.

You mention you did study method acting briefly. Why do you think you were never drawn to it in the way that some of your peers have been?

When I was a young student, I read several books by [Konstantin] Stanislavski – *An Actor Prepares*; *Building A Character*; *Stanislavski's Legacy* – then I read *Method Or Madness?* by Robert Lewis. And it's all very interesting, but I don't like the dictatorship of thought. I'm not very good with teachers, with instructors. I'll say something that's maybe a bit inflamma-

'We have a wonderful brain but we've destroyed half the planet, so we're not that smart'

tory, but somebody will say to me that they're going to acting classes. OK, good. What are they teaching you? Don't waste your money. They're failed actors that set themselves up as gurus. That's one of the reasons I left the National Theatre – we had a particular director who was very picky. And that's one of the reasons that I would be angry, that would get my back up. This was in my days of raging paranoia and I warned one director, "You ever speak to me like that again I'll punch your face in." Obviously, I don't do that any more. Most of them, they're all dead now anyway. There's one very well-known actor with an acting class here in Los Angeles and he's the star of the show! And all these other students sitting around paying their fees and he's the star! He's on stage with them, interrupting them, being rude to them. No, you don't do that.

So that's me. I do my own thing, and I say to young actors, "Don't ever be bullied by anyone. And if you find it difficult, doesn't matter if you don't act, but don't be bullied." That's why I left years ago, because of two particular directors I really could not stand, because they were dogmatic pedants. Nasty.

And have you ever come across anything like that since, in terms of film directors?

Well, one or two maybe, but I don't listen to them, I just do my own thing. I go into silent mode, then they know not to bother me. I don't want to deal with people like that. When you go into a film set, it's not meant to be boot camp. You're not fighting a war. You make good money and it's popcorn in the end.

You've said that you feel you're more in touch with your emotions than you ever have before. Does that come with age?

Yes. I find that I've found that contact with my most emotional life easy. My father didn't give in to emotions easy. I remember the first time I ever saw him weep. It was after his own father's funeral. I was so embarrassed by it I had to walk away. Because that had been borne in me as well: men don't cry; men have to be strong. And that's bullshit! It's the men who cry who are smarter because they're more in touch with themselves.

You were recently diagnosed with Asperger's, something else people feel much more comfortable discussing now. How did that come about?

I think some doctor contacted me... I don't know. I don't, actually, I don't believe in it. I don't feel any different. I think these are dressed up. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm ignorant. They call it neurodiversity. It's a fancy label. I'm very focused in one way. I notice when I'm in restaurants, but that's my behaviour. I think we've ruined the human system by tabulating everything. There's a wonderful saying, which is that we're all screwed. We always have been and we always will be. The whole human race is screwed. Otherwise, we wouldn't have had bloodshed and wars, century after century, if we are so smart. We have a wonderful brain but we've destroyed half the planet, so we're not that smart. It's funny how a little invisible virus has zapped us, so figure that out.

Well, I guess that goes back to what you were saying before about keeping one's ego in check. Even when you win a golden statuette for acting, none of that matters really and I suppose there's actually a kind of calm serenity to be had from that realisation...

Yeah, it's fun, but finally nothing matters. And so I was asleep when the Oscar was announced. But they didn't come and arrest me! So what? So I wasn't prepared to fly to Los Angeles to sit like this [*motions applauding*], clapping while someone else won. I mean, awards are fun. They're fun. Go on the red carpet [*makes snoring noise*]. But in the end it's all meaningless. What about the nurses and the surgeons and the doctors in hospitals and the caregivers? Where are their awards? They saved lives. We know nothing, actors, all of us. We think we're smart. No. You look at people working so hard, serving in restaurants. Those are the heroes. They're working to maintain our whole grid system. Cleaning our garbage off the streets. Do we give them medals? And that's where my anger is now.

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