

Douglas Thompson

An Interview with Anthony Hopkins

'He can play anything he wants, he's that good,' director Oliver Stone on his 'Nixon', Anthony Hopkins.

Indeed, he is Sir Everyman. Anthony Hopkins enjoys his knighthood, his status and his increasing clout as the greatest film actor of his generation. Bottles have been corked, people charmed and words and situations conjured in his single-minded quest to be the very best.

Play a game. Has he portrayed Hitler? Or was it Churchill? Maybe it was Montgomery . Or then again, it could have been Colin Powell or Saddam Hussein. Is there a Mandela script? He's been C.S. Lewis in 'Shadowlands' and won an Oscar as Hannibal Lecter in 'Silence of the Lambs'. He was the vampire vigilante in Francis Ford Coppola's 'Dracula' (arguably one of the best versions) as well as the perfect presence in a string of Merchant-Ivory outings.

This week he's 'Nixon' and for it in contention for the Best Actor Oscar on March 25. In a few tomorrows we'll see him as Picasso. Will the real Anthony Hopkins stand up?

It's unlikely. Hopkins ,58, is a man of many parts -- on screen. Away from it he also acts. The image is of the lilting, reformed -- for two decades -- alcoholic who has jettisoned the jungle juice but retained his passion.

If you have Richard Burton as a hero there is not just a voice and character but an appetite for life to match. Both from Wales . Both brooding Celts. The pressure always to look inwards. While Scots and Irish blow and cool swiftly the Welsh tend to build walls with their thoughts.

Anthony Hopkins made up his mind some long time ago what his goals were. He has kept to them. Others may have changed position but he has played his own game. Recently, his private life has been a tabloid teacup. The stormy weather said he was involved with actress Joyce Ingalls, a fellow Alcoholics Anonymous member in Hollywood . More recently, the breeze is that he will attend the 68th Academy Awards with Jennifer his wife for the past 25 years.

Hopkins has always been good at picking the right leading lady. And, as it turns, out the roles. Why? Her says he has no idea and confessed: 'I'm as baffled as anyone else. Sometimes I wonder whether they've got the right fellow and think, you know, I should be back in Port Talbot .'

But you know that he reads and thinks and plans before every project. His talent may baffle him but not the maze of opportunity afforded him. For that he needs no map, no help.

Hopkins is a selfish achiever. Nothing matters but the achievement, the success -- not in financial terms -- of making it work.

He will always find a motive: 'My father reminded me of Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman". He had a great personality but he felt he had failed. He worked hard and died of a heart disease. He'd always had great dreams. I saw my father's struggle -- I have sympathy for people who have to struggle. And I want to say to them: " Don't struggle, give it up. You don't have the talent for it." But I can't do that because it's hurtful.

'When my father died I remember standing at his death bed, my mother was crying and all she could say was " all his dreams..." I remember my father looking really exhausted, he was a tough guy. Grandfather was the same --a tough old monster, a bit of a dictator.'

Hopkins offers his memories in clipped Welsh tones so opposite to his clever celluloid mimics of history. He admits he is driven: ' Ambition and success can cover a gaping whole in one's

personality. Actors are like that. I think I'm like that. But you come to terms with it and you gradually recognise it for what it is.'

But he drives one. He stars in a directed the thriller 'August' (and wrote the music) which we'll see after 'Surviving Picasso' which once again has Hopkins plying his talents for the Merchant-Ivory film company.

It was mostly filmed on location, all Paris and the Left Bank , the Saint-Germain-des-Pres; bald, stocky -- although two stone lighter than 'Nixon' -- Hopkins once again goes through a remarkable metamorphosis and into yet another person's life.

Picasso, like Hopkins , liked to get his way. When we come in he wants to change his chief mistress Dora (Julianne Moore) with the younger Françoise (Natascha McElhone). Françoise wants assurance that the loving with Dora is permanently over. She is convinced -- over a Picasso dinner with both women.

Incredibly, the seemingly naive Françoise was able a decade later to leave Picasso becoming one of his few lovers to go on to another life without him. In 1964 she cashed-in with her book 'Life With Picasso'. Hopkins brings her man -- known as un monstre , the tyrant as a brainbox -- to life.

Hopkins pushed his 'Nixon' movie with the usual dedication as well as the bald head he had accepted for Picasso. Throughout interviews he would constantly work his hand over his scalp; the lack of hair was not natural when he was being Tony Hopkins, actor.

Mention the Picasso project and his hands never venture towards his head. He ticks on the role. His latest screen incarnation covers the decade from 1943 when Françoise Gilot first met Picasso to when she walked out on him with their two children, Claude and Paloma. We also meet some of his other women: his first wife the dancer Olga Koklova (Jane Lapotaire); Marie-Therese Walter (Susannah Harker); his second wife Jacqueline Roque (Diane Venora).

James Ivory and Ismail Merchant failed to enlist the help of Françoise Gilot who is now 74 and lives in New York . She and her son Claude plan their own film project and Claude, the administrator of the Picasso estate, was able to ban the use of any Picasso paintings or reproductions being shown in the rival film.

The locations were free -- other than Picasso's studio on Rue des Grands-Augustins which was recreated at Pinewood Studios. And there was plenty of material to help Ruth Praver Jhabvala to write her screenplay despite Gilot refusing the rights to 'Life With Picasso.' Warner Brothers who co-produced the film had the rights to Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington's 1988 biography 'Picasso: Creator and Destroyer' which includes long interviews with Gilot.

The screenplay emphasises how important women were to Picasso's art. 'Each served as his muse and was then discarded,' said Ivory adding: ' Each gradually ceased to interest him very much except in a kind of negative way. And as his love for her faded, as her influence on him became a negative one, an irritating one, his paintings reflected that. Picasso created an emotional disaster zone around himself.'

Hopkins says he thrived on playing the artist. 'It took me time to "feel" him physically. I looked at lots of photographs of him and what film there is and tried to get the spirit of the man.

'He was full of energy and life. In the photographs you see he was the maestro, the master of everyone around him.

'He was probably the classic male chauvinistic pig. He treated women abominably yet he was an incredible man. I'm sure I would have been seduced by him, taken into his aura. I think people who generate such energy and colour in their lives are seductive, like flames. You get a great sense of

power from it. What is interesting is how his life shaped his art, that it caused the art to be the kind of thing that it was.'

Hopkins could be talking about himself. His hell-raising days ('I drank to kill my self-contempt') over he established himself as a world-beating star. His Oscar for 'Silence of the Lambs' put him on Hollywood 's Most Wanted list. Now, following 'Nixon' and Picasso, he can be anybody he wants to.

It's being Anthony Hopkins that's difficult.

Copyright © by Douglas Thompson

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.