



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Gary Oldman in Conversation

Since making his film debut in the early 1980s, Gary Oldman has established himself as one of the most successful movie stars of the modern era. Renowned for the range, power and subtlety of his performances, he has created numerous vividly memorable characters, both fictional and based on real people; he also wrote and directed the acclaimed *Nil by Mouth*, now remastered and re-released by the BFI. As the highlight of our retrospective of his work, we are delighted to welcome him back to discuss his remarkable career with season programmer Geoff Andrew.

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Though Gary Oldman has long been commended for his elastic range as an actor, few could have foreseen that the man who once played Sex Pistol Sid Vicious would give one of the screen's most persuasive impersonations of Britain's wartime prime minister Winston Churchill. From the self-destructive Sid – a surprisingly gentle, domesticated performance – to the saviour of the nation in the crisis month of May 1940 is an astounding stretch, notwithstanding the three decades between Alex Cox's *Sid and Nancy* (1986) and Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour*. Even allowing for Oldman's maturation as an artist and as a man, his ability to inhabit Churchill so accurately and with such emotional resonance was a reach beyond reasonable limits, and it raises the question: could Laurence Olivier, Alec Guinness, or Daniel Day-Lewis have pulled it off?

It might be said that Sid to Winston is no more of an extension than Oldman metamorphosing from the bullying (but craven) skinhead Coxy in Mike Leigh's *Meantime* (1983), the cocksure Joe Orton in Stephen Frears's *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987), or the hangdog Lee Harvey Oswald in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) into the impassive George Smiley of Tomas Alfredson's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011) – a role drily originated by Guinness. Oldman is one of only a few actors who warrant being called 'chameleon-like', in most cases a description glibly used as a synonym for 'versatile'. But his Smiley demonstrated something more unusual than his ability to play several kinds of characters. Oldman created the MI6 man with a different approach to acting than that he had used before.

In the past he had relied upon two main styles. He had either channelled his own opaque, often neuroticised persona, in films as diverse as *Honest, Decent and True* (1986), *The Firm* (1989), *Chattahoochee* (1989), *Heading Home* (1991), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1993), as James Gordon in three Batman films, and even as Sirius Black in four Harry Potter outings. Or he had opted for flamboyant mimicry, sometimes aided by elaborate makeup, in, for example, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), *True Romance* (1993), *Immortal Beloved* (1994), *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Hannibal* (2001) – and *Tiptoes* (2002), in which he was credible as a dwarf. In *Tinker Tailor*, he stripped away all artifice to portray Smiley as a man who is at once repressed, disappointed, world-weary and so professionally disciplined that he has taught himself to

bite back all emotion lest he betray himself. It was an extraordinary minimalistic performance, a virtuosic display of near expressionlessness – though Oldman’s George was a degree less hardened than Guinness’s. In Alfredson’s film, greater play is given to Ann Smiley’s adultery than in the seven-part series directed by John Irvin, and its disillusioning effect on George is subtly palpable in Oldman’s performance.

Assessing Oldman in *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, David Thomson writes, ‘After a dozen or so films, did the public have a better idea of Gary Oldman’s own personality than before he began? That is not ingratitude, merely a way of observing that Oldman seems like a blank, anonymous passerby... who waits to be occupied by demons.’ Thomson’s rhetorical question raises the matter of whether we want to feel we know stars, or are content to be wowed by performances that have nothing much to do with them as individuals. Probably the former is true for most of us and we may delude ourselves we’re on virtual nodding terms with actors who project their own personalities into their roles time and again – Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant, Robert De Niro, George Clooney, Cate Blanchett, Emma Stone. Even something of Day-Lewis’s charm and elegance and Tim Roth’s feralness and street grit – to name Oldman’s closest peers – come through more than occasionally.

With Oldman, you’re never quite sure if you’re going to get passivity or dynamism, or characters who show vestiges of the sometimes shy, sometimes bold working-class boy born in New Cross, south-east London, in 1958 and raised in a broken home, or characters who are outrageous escapist entertainments, such as *True Romance*’s frightening (and very funny) dreadlocked drug dealer Drexel Spivey, a brief Tarantino-scripted acting masterclass, or Dracula, incarnated by Oldman as a medieval warrior in lobster-shell armour, as the insectoid ancient, and as the dreamy undead count who stalks Winona Ryder’s Mina in 1897 London. Harry Potter’s Sirius Black, anguished but more ‘street’ than one might have expected, and the seething Bex, whose addiction to the buzz of football hooliganism destroys his middle-class existence in Alan Clarke’s *The Firm*, both smell of the unforgiving London Oldman grew up in. It is the dank world, too, of the powerfully grim *Nil by Mouth* (1997), Oldman’s sole film as writer-director, a semi-autobiographical memoir about a dysfunctional family cursed by addiction and domestic violence that was influenced by Clarke and to a lesser extent Mike Leigh.

The actor’s strange mix of shyness and cockiness is apparent in the likes of Les Blair’s *Honest, Decent and True*, in which he is a sexually immature working-class artist betrayed by his ad copy-writer flatmate; Colin Gregg’s *We Think the World of You* (1988), as the sailor lover of the J.P. Ackerley character (Alan Bates); Nicolas Roeg and writer Dennis Potter’s *Track 29* (1988), as the mother-loving boy-man dreamed up by a lonely housewife; and *Prick Up Your Ears*. In the last, his mercurial Joe Orton, whose meekness as a RADA student and aspiring writer seduced and mentored by Kenneth Halliwell – ‘I’ll never catch up,’ Orton complains – is replaced by overwhelming confidence, the fruit of his becoming a famous playwright and promiscuous cottager. Unlike Orton, Oldman has never been comfortable with fame.

Another comparison: whereas Day-Lewis clearly has no overwhelming desire to act, or has denied the impulse, in Oldman, acting is a chronic need. He is constantly working, with more than 70 film credits on IMDb, as well as voiceovers for video games and television work, including bit parts in *Knots*

Landing (1989) and *Friends* (2001). Not all of his films are worthy of his talent, but no film can be completely dull when Oldman is involved. That need may be driven by restless energy or his tough early life, or the same demons – to use Thomson’s word – that meant Oldman had to overcome alcoholism. His career was frontloaded with exceptional performances, a benefit, perhaps, of working with British directors like Leigh, Clarke, Cox, Blair, Frears, Roeg, Martin Campbell (*Criminal Law*, 1988), Mick Jackson (*Chattahoochee*), Tom Stoppard (*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, 1990) and David Hare (*Heading Home*).

Moving to America, he worked with Oliver Stone on *JFK* and Francis Ford Coppola on *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, but could not expect to work with directors of that calibre throughout his Hollywood career. It says much for his reputation and peculiar genius, however, that he became a necessary staple in the Harry Potter and Batman films. Sometimes – as in *True Romance* and *Lawless* (2011), in which he was larger than life dispensing death as a version of the Prohibition-era gangster Pretty Boy Floyd – he has unbalanced entire films with his brilliance.

Graham Fuller, *Sight & Sound*

GARY OLDMAN

Meantime

Mon 17 Oct 20:40; Fri 28 Oct 17:50

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead

Tue 18 Oct 18:05; Sun 6 Nov 18:20

Bram Stoker’s Dracula

Wed 19 Oct 20:25 (+ intro by Christopher Frayling);

Sat 29 Oct 20:30; Wed 23 Nov 18:00

Prick Up Your Ears

Fri 21 Oct 20:30; Sun 13 Nov 18:20; Fri 25 Nov 20:40

JFK – Director’s Cut

Sun 23 Oct 16:00; Sat 19 Nov 16:30

True Romance

Mon 24 Oct 20:40; Tue 22 Nov 20:30; Tue 29 Nov 18:00

The Firm – Director’s Cut

Wed 2 Nov 21:00; Thu 10 Nov 18:15

The Contender

Fri 4 Nov 18:00; Mon 14 Nov 18:00

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Sat 5 Nov 20:20; Thu 24 Nov 17:55

Mank

Tue 8 Nov 20:15; Sat 26 Nov 17:20; Tue 29 Nov 20:20

Darkest Hour

Sat 12 Nov 12:20; Sat 19 Nov 20:30; Mon 21 Nov 14:30

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BFI Expanded presents: World Premiere:

Haunted Hotel – A Melodrama in Augmented Reality

Mon 17 – Sun 30 Oct 14:00-21:00 BFI Southbank

Global Premiere: Straight 8 2022

Sat 22 Oct 18:00

TV Preview: SAS Rogue Heroes + panel and Q&A with writer

Steven Knight and guests (TBA)

Mon 24 Oct 18:15

Preview: Barbarian

Thu 27 Oct 20:30

Doctor Who: The Time Meddler

Sat 29 Oct 12:00

Hellraiser: 35th Anniversary + intro by actors Nicholas Vince and

Simon Bamford, with Phil Stokes, BFI Governor/Curator of the

Clive Barker Archive

Sun 30 Oct 18:30

Preview: A Bunch of Amateurs + Q&A with Director Kim Hopkins and

Special Guests (TBA)

Wed 2 Nov 18:15

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 7 Nov 18:30

Preview: Living + Q&A with director Oliver Hermanus, producer

Stephen Woolley and further guests TBA

Mon 7 Nov 20:40

Life Moves Pretty Fast – The John Hughes Mixtapes Launch:

Ferris Bueller’s Day Off + panel

Fri 11 Nov 20:20

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