

It can't be easy having played a character once described as "the most barking British presence in the movies ever", but Richard E Grant has nothing but fondness for Withnail, of *Withnail And I* fame: the manic, alcoholic, permanently resting actor with a penchant for lighter fuel, who first pill popped his way across film screens in 1986, launching Grant's career in the process. Ten years on Bruce Robinson's *Withnail And I* is deemed a classic cult film, with a re-release earlier this year entering the national film charts as number 13.

I first came across Richard E Grant browsing in the Royal National Theatre bookshop, which seems apt as he confesses to reading a lot and gives a favourable mention to Rose Tremain, author of *Restoration*. "I have read everything that she has written."

A soon to be published author in his own right, his forthcoming film diaries *With Nails*, published in May by Picador, chronicles his film work, including time spent hanging out in Hollywood with a multitude of celebrities, and promises to be a very gossipy, witty read. How did the idea for the book come about?



EAGLETON'S ANGLE

RICHARD E GRANT TALKS TO JULIE EAGLETON

"When I was working on the Robert Altman film *Pret A Porter* two years ago, the Arts Editor from *The Observer* contacted me and asked if I could write a diary of the film, not knowing that I kept diaries anyway. Because of the successful way they were received, I got a literary agent who asked me to write about the making of *Withnail And I*."

Grant has been keeping diaries ever since *Withnail* and views it as a form of psychotherapy, especially when working in Los Angeles. "Writing a diary forces you to take on board what is happening and try and sort it out. It's overwhelming when you go there because of the amount of money, in conjunction with the amount of stars per square mile in Beverly Hills. As strong as you think you are going to resist temptations, I don't know how, who or what you have to be to really resist it and say I wouldn't do this or I wouldn't do that."

The last decade has seen Grant work with the biggest Hollywood film directors including Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese: roles as diverse as an ultra camp fashion designer sporting a large kisscurl on his forehead in *Pret A Porter* to a loopy filmmaker in *The Player*, the satirical view of filmmakers in Hollywood. Was it scary working with such renowned directors?

"It was scary and exciting but everybody felt that way. Working on the film *The Age Of Innocence*, Michelle Pfeiffer and Daniel Day Lewis would come into the makeup caravan in the morning and say 'Oh my God, I'm going to work for Martin Scorsese today'. So even if you have been 'Oscared', the buzz of that still doesn't go away."

Bruce Willis, Demi Moore and Sharon Stone are all referred to in the diaries. I ask if he is worried that they will take offence? "God, I don't know. I have been as honest as I am libelous (sic) allowed about who I have worked with and about myself. Steve Martin was the first person I gave it to, to read, and he can't see that people would take offence. *Vanity Fair* has printed the chapter on *Hudson Hawk* and nobody has sent around any bodyguards yet!" *Hudson Hawk* saw Grant play the role of Darwin Mayflower alongside a cast including Bruce Willis and Andie Macdowell. The film bombed at the box office, being voted Turkey of the Year by the Alternative Academy.

Even though Grant is on first name terms with the Hollywood elite, he is clearly not affected and keeps his feet planted on the ground. "I've just been offered a five year contract to do a television series for the American version of *Men Behaving Badly* but the idea of spending seven months of the year there, playing the same character for five years would drive me completely insane. Plus the fact that my wife has a successful career in London as a dialect coach, my daughter is still at school and all my friends are here."

PLAYS & PLAYERS WERE PRACTICALLY THE LIFELINE INTO THE AFRICAN COUNTRYSIDE WHERE I LIVED. I LEARNT OFF BY HEART CASTLISTS OF EVERYTHING WHICH WAS ON IN LONDON

Born in 1957, Grant grew up in Swaziland and

attended Cape Town University. He credits one of his mentors as a local architect who directed plays in his local theatre club and also possessed a huge collection of plays as well as being a subscriber to *Plays & Players!*

"*Plays & Players* were practically the lifeline into the African countryside where I lived. I learnt off by heart castlists of everything which was on in London, not realising that by the time the magazine reached me the play was probably off already. I remember seeing the Glasgow Citizens Theatre adverts which were full pages in the seventies and they were so visually arresting that I made it my mission to get into the Glasgow Citizens." Coming to England in 1982, he auditioned for the theatre the very first week of his arrival. "A five am morning call at the Roundhouse went on for three weeks and after several rounds of auditions there were 12 of us left but, in the end, I didn't make it and got a letter saying come back next year." His face drops as he remembers the disappointment. "I couldn't get out of bed for two days." He then followed the traditional route that actors follow whilst awaiting a break. He tried his hand at painting and decorating and waiting on tables whilst working in fringe and rep. Grant made his debut in 1985 in Les Blair's *Honest, Decent And True*, a made-for-TV film about advertising. Then came the life changing role of Withnail. Set in 1969, Bruce Robinson's semi-autobiographical account of his life saw Grant and Paul McGann immortalise the two desperate dropouts floating through life in a haze of drugs and booze accompanied by the majestic strains of Jimi Hendrix.

What were the influences for creating Withnail? "I had lived in student digs at University. I couldn't cook (still the case today!) and there was much raging about being unemployed and feeding the world so it wasn't something entirely foreign for me."

Considering that Withnail is drunk for practically the entirety of the film, how difficult was it to play such a convincing drunk? "Blow your eyes," he says laughing. "I've just been around enough drunks and so it's easy to take on the characteristics - almost drunk by osmosis really." Grant doesn't drink or smoke. Does he get cross when people continually drew parallels with him and the character? "I've been in situations where people have offered me drinks assuming that a public face of saying I don't drink is bullshit. They are then surprised when they learn that I actually don't drink." He takes it all in his stride but the articulate Grant has even been asked to speak at Oxford and Eton as the film has become such a student cult. Earlier this year, the wine merchants Oddbins started a promotion linked to the film by using the line "The finest wines available to humanity."

Does he prefer working in film and TV to treading the boards? "I got very badly burnt being in *The Importance Of Being Earnest* three years ago and the experience of that was such an unhappy one that I'm loathe to do it again. There's always an inbuilt suspicion of people who are in films and TV and then go into the theatre. There's always an element of 'well can you really do it?'"

The film work is more than enough to keep him busy at the moment. He recently appeared in Dennis Potter's *Karaoke* on TV. In September, he will be seen in *Portrait Of A Lady* by Jane Campion whom he describes as a genius and he has just completed the filming of *Twelfth Night* by Trevor Nunn which is due out later in the year.

He is about to start working on a film entitled *One Golden Afternoon*, based on a true story about children who took photographs of fairies at the turn of the century and 70 years later they were revealed as fakes. His eyes light up at the prospect of this absolutely wonderful story".

With such a busy schedule, I ask if he finds any time at all for hobbies and learn that he is a keen photographer, scuba diver and likes to spend time with his daughter, building dolls' houses! For an actor who has played such an oddity of roles, what type of role would he like to see next on the horizon? "Hopefully something that wouldn't be a repetition of what I have done before. That's the criteria. I don't honestly have a hit list of what I would like to play. Life doesn't work like that in my experience, so whatever comes really."

With that remark still hanging in the air he breaks into a beaming smile, wishes me luck and dashes off for his next appointment. Judging on the originality and eccentricity of roles offered so far in his career, Richard E Grant is right to keep an open mind. □

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