



Words Matt Glasby
Photography Charlie Gray

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Man about town Bill Nighy on winning
at Christmas, writing the Great British
novel – or not – and why you’ll never,
ever catch him on a beach

he first glimpse we get of Bill Nighy is almost too perfect. Reclining in a barber's chair, the actor looks completely in his element: the very picture of an urbane London gent. For reasons best left under the heading "whoops", Vera is watching through the window, afraid to come in and break the spell. In person, the star of *Love Actually* and *Shaun of the Dead* gives off a forbidding, headmaster-ish aura and besides, it seems unfair - uncouth, even - to disturb him.

When we finally summon up the courage to enter, the spell isn't broken at all. Dressed in a bespoke suit, the 67-year-old is what dapper would

look like on a *really* good day. And when he speaks in those measured, mahogany tones, a caddish twinkle appearing behind his stern designer specs, we could listen to him for hours. Sadly, 45 minutes will have to suffice.

Ostensibly we're here to talk about his soon-to-be-released film, *The Bookshop*, a 1950s-set drama based on Penelope Fitzgerald's bestseller and starring Emily Mortimer and Patricia Clarkson. But the conversation proves as rangy as the man himself, and we're quickly discussing the merits of retro fashion, a topic one of us knows slightly more about than the other (clue: it's him). "I love that era largely because of the clothes," he says. "The late 1940s is when clothes got really good for men and women. Those styles were very attractive and very flattering, and there was proper tailoring going on. Personally I think everything's been downhill ever since."

In truth, this kind of comment befits a man who seems, in the nicest possible way, a little out of time, combining progressive attitudes with a certain courtly charm. On the subject of his recent hit, *Their Finest*, about the British film industry's attempts to boost morale during World War II, he's careful to point out its feminist credentials. "One day we will not have to have this conversation," he says, "but while we still do, it's directed by a woman [Lone Scherfig], written by a woman [Gaby Chiappe], produced by women [Finola Dwyer, Elizabeth Karlsen and Amanda Posey among others] and with a great role for a leading lady [Gemma Arterton]."

The Limehouse Golem peers even further into the past. A Hammer-ish tale of murder most foul in Victorian London, it features Nighy as a Sherlock Holmes-alike policeman dashing about in a top hat and cravat. "I've always wanted to be a detective," he muses. We can't quite believe he hasn't been. "I know, neither can I!"



Bill Nighy's suits by Edward Powers of Mayfair, London. edward-powers.com

Below: Playing detective in *The Limehouse Golem*, with Olivia Cooke

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I've recently been a spy [in TV's *The Worricker Trilogy*], and I've waited all my life to be a spy, but I've waited just as long to be a detective. I get a bang out of saying, 'I am Detective Superintendent John Kildare of Scotland Yard.' And it was very nice to have, as I like to call him, my constable Danny Mays as George Flood, because he's great company. The idea of he and I going around London looking for clues is very satisfying. I suggested doing a spin-off, but I would like it if they brought it into the 1940s or 1950s." Vera would definitely watch Nighy and Mays travelling through time solving crimes. "We could go through time! Yes!" he exclaims. "As long as we don't go back to ancient Rome because I'm not going to wear a toga."

Although happy playing about in the past, Nighy is all too aware of the dangers of romanticising it. "Everybody talks up their youth like it was better than yours," he says. "It's one of my least favourite phenomena; you see people of a certain age telling young people, 'Well, sorry, you just weren't there.' And it's always nonsense. That's the one great trick that politicians have with which to manipulate us. They're always promising to take us back to a time when everything was OK, and it's always mythical, there was never such a time."

Growing up in Croydon, South London, the young Nighy wanted to be a writer. So what went wrong? "Well, what went wrong was, I flunked school," he admits. Without the right qualifications for a job on the *Croydon Advertiser*, he trudged down to the National Youth Employment Centre, aged 15, with his mother. "The bloke had a big book of jobs, and he said, 'What do you want to do?' and I said, 'I want to be an author.' And my mother put her foot on mine under the table and pressed down hard, as if to say, 'Don't be so bloody stupid!'" >

Photo: Alamy



“ If you walked into our house in the middle of an average game of charades, you’d think you’d walked into a nuthouse ”

Instead, he started running messages around town for *Field* magazine. “I did the tea, and I replaced all the magazines in the big hotels, it was quite glamorous,” he recalls. But when he was offered a position in the sub-editors’ department, “I chose to run away to Paris to not write the great British novel. Which was a pretty typical response of mine at that time of life.”

So why not write that great British novel now? “It’s the challenge problem,” he says. “If you want to get rid of me say ‘challenge’. Generally speaking, I know challenge is supposed to be a good thing; people say, ‘Oh, I like to be challenged.’ But I couldn’t be further from that. The word challenge makes me want to call a cab, no disrespect to you.”

None taken. Instead the theatre beckoned, then TV and, finally, cinema, with Nighy notching up more than his fair share of great British classics – most notably a certain seasonal rom-com. “People talk to me about *Love Actually* every day, which is fine, and thank the lord they do,” he says. “It had a wonderful effect on my life and I owe a very large debt to Richard Curtis. It’s entered the language in a way that nobody could have anticipated: half the planet has seen it at some point or other.”

While we’re on the subject, what does Christmas look like chez Nighy? “It looks pretty much like 95 per cent of the country,” he says. “My family gathers together. We eat enormous amounts, then we play games where everybody gets very, very, very over-exercised. If you walked into our house in the middle of an average game of charades, you’d think you’d walked into a nuthouse, because everyone would be screaming at each other. But it’s good fun. I have a very nice extended family and we’re pretty good at Christmas.” >





Aside from *Love Actually*, the other thing people always talk to Nighy about is his enviable sense of style, which has seen him grace best-dressed lists in *GQ* and *Esquire*, among others. "I can't remember which magazine it was, but I came third and Ronnie Corbett came second, then Prince Charles came first," he says. "And I'd never met Ronnie Corbett before, but a couple of days later I was walking down the street and Ronnie Corbett was coming towards me and he said, 'Number 3, I presume!' And I said, 'Oh, Number 2!' And we shook hands. It's the only time I met Ronnie Corbett, which was great because I loved him."

Perhaps fashion might be the sort of challenge he'd be willing to take on? "I do want to reach out to Marks & Spencer and suggest that they do a line of suits, which I will design, which will come in a very limited range of colours," he says. Would *Vera* be entitled to a finder's fee if, say, we were to mention this proposition in print? "You can have a suit," he says magnanimously. "I was once asked if I someone could name a pair of shoes after me and it didn't happen, but I did like the idea of someone going into a shop and saying, 'Can I have a pair of size 9 Nighys?' That would have been very satisfying."

In terms of his own style icons, he gravitates towards those who, as he puts it, "move beautifully" – think Cary Grant, Christopher Walken and Michael Jackson. How would he feel to walk into a tailor's that offered four different looks: the Grant, the Walken, the Jackson and the Nighy? "Well, then I would die with a smile on my face," he says.

Before he reaches that point, he'd like to do more travelling – cities mainly. "You're never going to see me on a beach," he warns. "I just don't understand it, it bewilders me, I just don't know what people are doing, I really don't. I'm quite sincere about it. You're going to lie there? How long are you going to lie there? And collectively? What's *that* about?"

"But there's not anything I'm really burning to do. I haven't got any kind of bucket list or anything, I'm very, very fortunate, I'm conspicuously fortunate. There is nothing lacking in my life. There isn't. So everything is gravy, everything is a bonus." Which is, on reflection, exactly what you'd want Bill Nighy to say. ■

Thanks to Drakes of London. drakesoflondon.com

Bill's best looks

Style highs and lows from our man's cine CV

Watch *The Limehouse Golem* and *Their Finest* onboard now

