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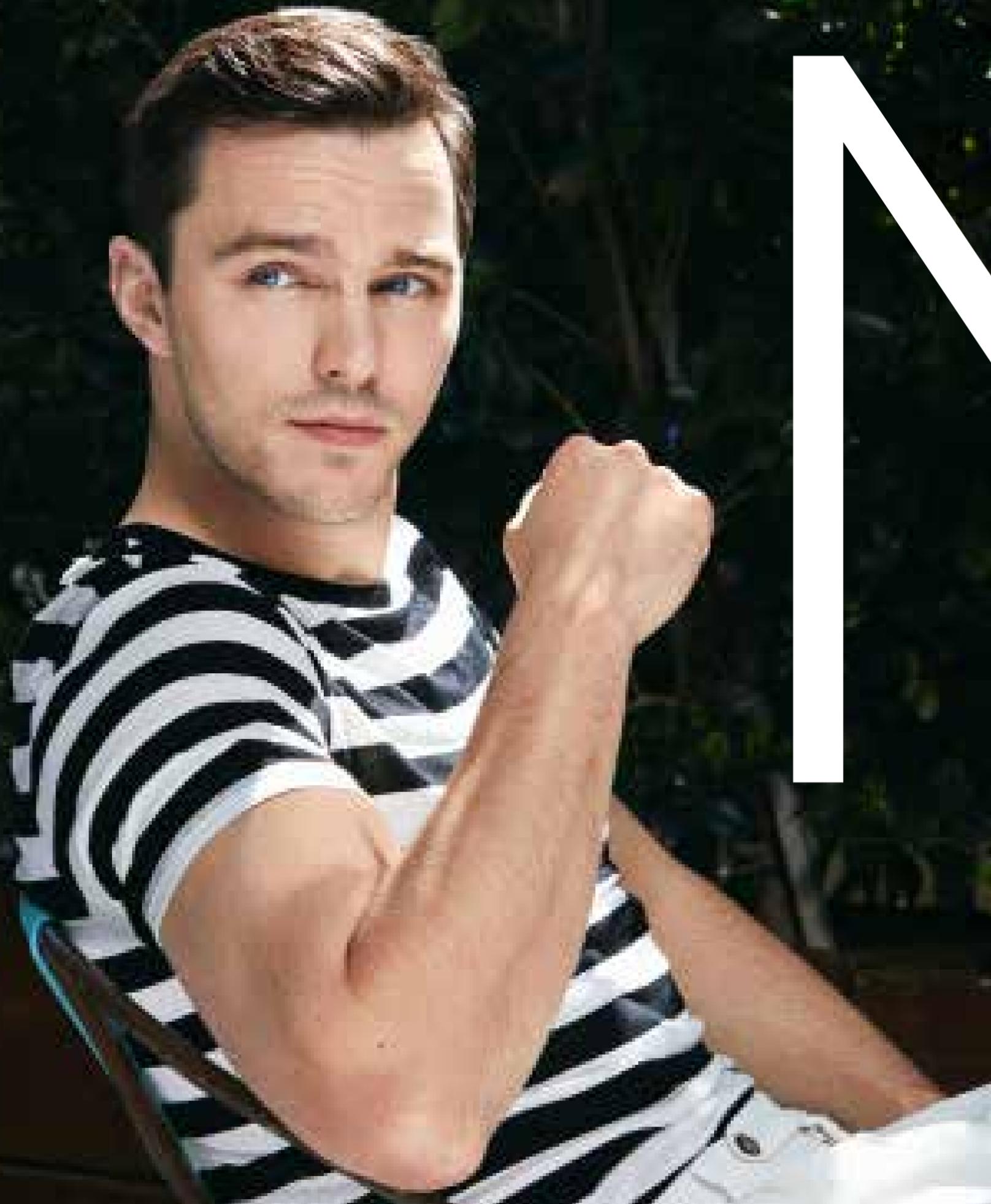
Having tested the waters in *The Favourite*, Nicholas Hoult is immersing himself in historical drama for Tolkien. But will he sink or swim?

DEEP END

 MATT GLASBY  EMILY SHUR

Shirt by
Officine Generale.
Trousers by
Brunello Cucinelli

Previous suit
by Daks. Shirt by
COS. Shoes
by Loriblu



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Normally, child actors grow up to be bitter, broke and – whisper it – a little bit weird. But clearly no one gave Nicholas Hoult the memo. Handsome, successful and remarkably grounded, the 29-year-old Brit has described himself as the “lovechild of Hugh Grant and Colin Firth”, and is as self-deprecating as his two “dads”. Speaking down the phone from Canada where he’s visiting family, he apologises profusely when we tell him that we’ve read a lot of his recent – reasonably

“Dry British costume dramas aren’t my cup of tea”

awkward – newspaper profiles. And every time the questions threaten to get too personal he offers more erms and ahs than a *Four Weddings and a Funeral* cut scene. “I wouldn’t say that doing an interview’s my favourite thing...” he explains, before adding, “No offence.” None taken.

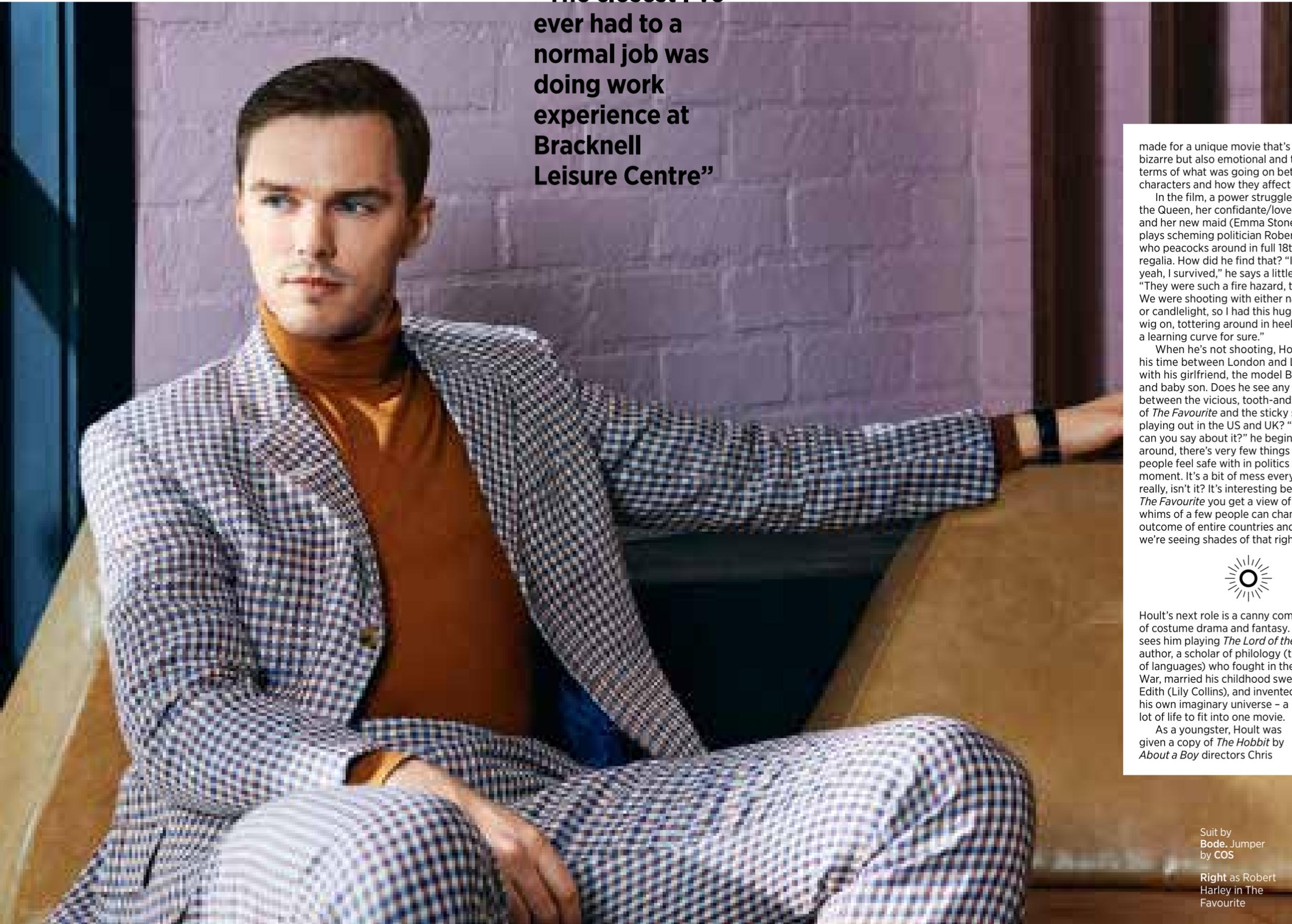
An actor since the tender age of three, Hoult was talent-spotted while watching a play with his mother. Although he’s worked solidly ever since, in the likes of *Skins*, the *X-Men* franchise and *A Single Man*, he first came to popular attention in the charming 2002 Nick Hornby adaptation *About a Boy*, starring Grant, Toni Collette and Rachel Weisz, who he calls his “acting parents”.

His actual parents are a piano teacher (mum) and a pilot (dad), so becoming a creative high-flyer was always on the cards. Has he ever – no offence – had a proper job? He laughs: “I mean technically, I suppose, no. Because I’ve been doing it since I was a kid, the closest I’ve ever had to a normal job was doing work experience at Bracknell Leisure Centre.” It’s fair to say the leisure industry’s loss has been Hollywood’s gain.

Unlike Firth and Grant, Hoult has avoided the usual British actor’s apprenticeship in fusty period pieces, choosing primary-hued fantasies such as *Clash of the Titans*, *Jack the Giant Slayer* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* instead. Until, that is, he got his mitts on the script for *The Favourite*, a cock-eyed black comedy directed by Yorgos Lanthimos and set in the intrigue-ridden court of Queen Anne (Oscar winner Olivia Colman) in 1708.

“I think that audiences are hungry for original, slightly different angles and new takes on things,” he says. “I’m not normally a fan of dry British costume dramas, they aren’t really my cup of tea, but reading the script had me giggling and laughing, and I was like, ‘Wow, this is incredible!’ Then putting Yorgos’s directorial eye and tone into that world, it just >

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made for a unique movie that’s funny and bizarre but also emotional and twisted in terms of what was going on between these characters and how they affect each other.”

In the film, a power struggle between the Queen, her confidante/lover (Weisz) and her new maid (Emma Stone), Hoult plays scheming politician Robert Harley, who peacocks around in full 18th-century regalia. How did he find that? “I mean, yeah, I survived,” he says a little ruefully. “They were such a fire hazard, the big wigs. We were shooting with either natural light or candlelight, so I had this huge flammable wig on, tottering around in heels. It was a learning curve for sure.”

When he’s not shooting, Hoult splits his time between London and LA, living with his girlfriend, the model Bryana Holly, and baby son. Does he see any parallels between the vicious, tooth-and-claw politics of *The Favourite* and the sticky situations playing out in the US and UK? “I mean what can you say about it?” he begins. “Look around, there’s very few things that I think people feel safe with in politics at the moment. It’s a bit of mess everywhere, really, isn’t it? It’s interesting because with *The Favourite* you get a view of how the whims of a few people can change the outcome of entire countries and I think we’re seeing shades of that right now.”



Hoult’s next role is a canny combination of costume drama and fantasy. *Tolkien* sees him playing *The Lord of the Rings* author, a scholar of philology (the study of languages) who fought in the Great War, married his childhood sweetheart, Edith (Lily Collins), and invented his own imaginary universe – a lot of life to fit into one movie.

As a youngster, Hoult was given a copy of *The Hobbit* by *About a Boy* directors Chris

and Paul Weitz. “I loved it, of course, it’s a classic, isn’t it?” he says now. “I mean fantasy films and stories have always been something that I’ve loved, that transporative effect of them, of being somewhere completely different and using your imagination to go along with these worlds and help create them in your mind’s eye.”

But reading the books was just the beginning. “I knew Tolkien’s work but very little about him going into this,” he says. “To be honest with you, I was mispronouncing his name, which I think maybe a lot of people do. It’s easy to look at it and think ‘Tol-kin’, but it’s pronounced ‘Tol-keen.’” That must have made for an awkward first day on set, we suggest. “No, I’d done some research before then,” he says evenly, the nearest he gets to sounding peeved. “I’d have been pretty rattled if on the first day I realised I couldn’t pronounce it.”

The film’s most striking scenes show Tolkien in the trenches, feverish and shell-shocked, imagining fire-breathing dragons and wraith-like riders amid the smoky chaos of battle. They’re gorgeously evocative, but crawling through acres of mud doesn’t look much fun. “I really thrive in those sorts of environments,” counters Hoult. “I quite enjoy them as a balance to being in smart collars and nice tea rooms. But yeah, it was December in a field outside Manchester, so it was freezing. The bomb craters would freeze overnight when there was water in them, so we’d crack the ice, pull the ice out, then I’d go and lay in them. The sets were incredible, but pretty cold.”

Ironically, these scenes bring to mind the staggering First World War documentary *They Shall Not Grow Old* (also available onboard) directed by none other than Peter Jackson, the cinematic custodian of Tolkien’s legacy. With his English accent >

Suit by
Bode. Jumper
by COS

Right as Robert
Harley in *The
Favourite*



and elfin features, was Hoult ever asked to be in Jackson's *Hobbit* films – or, at 6ft 2in, was he too tall? “To play a Hobbit perhaps, but there are other characters,” he says tantalisingly. “And now Amazon is doing its version of that world as well...” So would he consider taking a part in that? “Obviously I’m a fan of Tolkien’s work, and the worlds that he’s created and the characters that live in them, the depth they go to, so I mean yeah, in the right circumstances, of course.” You read it here first.



By just about any metric, Hoult’s doing pretty well for himself. And while nobody’s suggesting that scraping a 2:2 from Plebsville Polytechnic is more fun than being a famous actor, does he ever feel that he’s missed out on some of life’s more ordinary adventures? “I don’t know,” he says, clearly meaning the opposite but not wanting to sound conceited. “The fact that I missed university or whatever, you miss out on some stuff, but in my job I’m very fortunate because I’m always finding new elements of life, or history, all these sorts of things. There’s always an element of learning – you get quite a broad overview of general knowledge, I think, because you’re always telling a story from a different era, or a different world. So you’re learning about new people and characters, and you end up in odd places, chatting to interesting people: it’s education through experience.”

With someone less well-adjusted, the idea of a “repressed British man” (his words) taking refuge in such fantasy worlds might suggest he wants to escape from reality. But for Hoult it feels more like a way of avoiding boredom. “In this line of work you’re always shooting somewhere different or on the road,” he says. “It’s quite a nomadic lifestyle, which I’ve got very used to and enjoy. I love the excitement of it, that thing where you can receive a phone call at any minute saying, ‘Right, this is happening, you need to be on a plane tonight, going here for this.’ That sense of adventure that it gives you, it stops you from feeling stagnant.”

With *Tolkien* and *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* set to rule the summer, plus a supporting role in Aussie Western *The True History of the Kelly Gang* up next, there’s little chance of that.

But the times they are a-changing in other ways. In *Tolkien*, Harry Gilby plays a younger version of Hoult’s character. Did he find that unsettling? “I’ve never been asked that before,” he laughs. “But yeah it is kind of weird actually. I grew up playing the younger versions of people, so it made me realise I’m no spring chicken anymore.” There’s life in the old boy yet. ■

Watch **The Favourite** onboard now

Is he too tall for Tolkien? “To play a Hobbit perhaps, but there are other characters...”

T-shirt and trousers as before. Coat by **Ports**

Stylist **Wendi and Nicole**
Grooming **Stacey Panepinto**
Location **The Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel**



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES



With Lily Collins in *Tolkien*