

**matt jones**

## Interview – The Actor, Anthony Hopkins

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### Happy Hopkins

*Matt Jones heads off to Welsh Wales and discovers our greatest actor getting back to his roots.*

Britain's newest film director, and arguably its finest actor, arrives at the hotel unannounced and only slightly late.

Bearded, with shoulder length white hair and dressed in an open collar shirt, blue blazer and slacks, Sir Anthony Hopkins looks like an old sea captain. Relaxed and cheerful, it's as if he has just stepped off one of the many yachts moored in the shimmering harbour below, and not the bustling set of his latest film.

The eyes that chilled the millions around the world who saw *The Silence of the Lambs* are the same translucent blue as the waters that lap the pretty north Wales town of Abersoch. But today they are the smiling eyes of Anthony Hopkins the contented film-maker, not Hannibal Lecter the flesh-eating monster.

“The last 10 years have been great for me as an actor but this is the happiest experience I've had in a long, long time,” he says of making *August*, the film of the Theatr Clwyd play that arrives in Cardiff's New Theatre in November.

“This feels like the richest time in my life. As you get older you are faced with a choice. You can get gloomier and gloomier or you can enjoy life. I'm enjoying it.”

*August*, set on the Llyn Peninsula, near Hopkins' beloved Snowdonia National Park during the last decade of the 19th century, was adapted from Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* by Julian Mitchell, the writer of *Another Country*.

As well as starring as Ieuan Davies, a country estate manager who starts drinking heavily when his love for the owner's pretty American wife goes unrequited, Hopkins is directing both the film and the play.

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Veteran English actor Leslie Phillips plays Prof Alexander Blathwaite, the tyrannical owner of the estate, and Richard Burton's daughter, Kate, is Helen, his young American wife.

"It's wonderful to be back in Wales," says Port Talbot-born Hopkins, now 56. "Something has happened to me over the past three weeks. All my Welsh roots have come out. I'm having a choir from Blaenau Ffestiniog sing at the end of the film as a little tribute, a doffing of the cap to the country. I'd love to work here again and be part and parcel of the development of the Welsh film industry."

As if to affirm his recently rediscovered Welshness, Hopkins, who has had his own battles with the demon drink, reaches for a bottle of Prysog mineral water, and then explains how *August* evolved.

"It came from Theatr Clwyd. I'd been asked to do a play but had no idea what to do. Then last February I met Julian Mitchell, who decided to set *Uncle Vanya* in Wales, in the same period, with the same characters but different names.

"Turning it into Welsh added to it and I told Theatr Clwyd I wanted to appear in it and direct it. There was stunned silence and they said, 'You're on.' Then, for some God-knows-what reason, I said I'd like to direct it as a film as well. And one bright morning I thought, let's catch the weather and make the film first.

"When I saw the caravans on the hill here in Abersoch I thought, 'My God, what have I started? Kate Burton had come all the way from New York, there were all these people laying cables and we'd taken over someone's house, all because I had this crazy idea to do a film. But it's been a ball from the beginning.'"

After working with some of the greatest directors in the business, Richard Attenborough and James Ivory among them, the Oscar-winning actor is clearly relishing his first time behind the camera.

"It's gone uncannily smoothly," he says, pulling at his grey beard. "I'm surprised I didn't have any dread. Being an actor and a director is not easy but the trick is not to worry about it. It sounds like conceit but you have to have confidence in yourself. Doubts are another form of ego and fear of failure is a killer. I'll just give *August* my best shot and enjoy it.

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“I haven’t got bored with acting, I just wanted to use more of my faculties. I’ve always suspected a director has to think more than an actor. Actors only think about their own performances but a director has to know it all.

“I enjoy it behind the camera. I’m surprised at my own pictorial sense, but I think in images. I’ve got a storehouse in my brain of childhood impressions, of summer afternoons in Wales.

“So when I was working on the script I saw all these dappled sunlit fields and woods and gardens and blazing summers that I remember as a child. And lo and behold, it’s being put onto film in front of me!

“I looked at some of the rushes and I was astounded: I thought, my God, you hand over your vision to the skills of a cameraman and to the sound and art and costume departments and everyone, the actors particularly – you give it to the experts – and it all comes to life. It’s astonishing to see it.”

After several famous run-ins with less than compromising directors over the years, Hopkins has bent over backwards to make *August* an enjoyable experience for his small, hand-picked cast.

“We’re always fooling around doing Tommy Cooper jokes and what have you, so that everyone is relaxed,” he says. “You can work harmoniously by keeping a sense of humour and by treating people with respect, affection, courtesy and concern.”

Leslie Phillips, who has appeared in countless plays and more than 100 films, including Steven Spielberg’s *Empire of the Sun*, says *August* is a unique experience for him. “You get producers and directors who are tyrants but we’re like a glorious happy family. Tony has enormous energy which he gets us to use.”

Kate Burton, whose famous father was a role-model for a young Tony Hopkins, says Hopkins’ special gift for mimicry has the cast and crew in stitches between takes. “Yesterday he was Burt Lancaster and George C Scott, the day before he was Marlon Brando and he does my father all the time. He creates a wonderful atmosphere on set.

“There is so much laughter. At one point I had to stop it and say, ‘Guys, I really need a close-up here!’”

(ends)