



# CASTING HIS SPELL

NOW YOU  
GLIMPSE HIM,  
NOW YOU DON'T:  
THE MANIFOLD  
MANIFESTATIONS OF  
ADRIEN BRODY, AN  
ARTIST IN TOP FORM.

By Andrew Myers  
Photography by Brian Bowen Smith  
Styling by James Aguiar  
Shot on location at the Triad Theatre, NYC

Mid gray Stirling suit, \$2,695, by Burberry London at Burberry; white shirt, \$695, by Ermenegildo Zegna Couture at Ermenegildo Zegna; glen plaid wool tie with double grommets and sterling silver chain, \$300, by Title of Work at Barneys New York; casual rubber sole lace-up shoes in black leather with white sole, \$540, at Gucci; Guthrie hat from the Shantung Litestraw collection, \$95, by Bailey of Hollywood at baileyhats.com.

Presto, chango! See how the kid from Queens, an only child born to a public high school history teacher and an artist, a kid with no strong Tinseltown ties—poof!—appears at age 29 center stage at the 75th Academy Awards. After sweeping up the beautiful Halle Berry into an unscripted, swoon-inducing kiss worthy of a suave and sophisticated leading man from film's golden era, he proceeds to eloquently accept the Oscar for Best Actor, making him the youngest category winner in Hollywood history. Then, ladies and gentlemen, watch how he goes on to claim a Best Actor César (the French equivalent of an Oscar), becoming the only American *ever* to do so. With such a dramatic transformation, folks may be apt to believe that actor Adrien Brody's illustrious career trajectory was influenced by a powerful spell.

Such suspicions will only be furthered by the 40-year-old's forthcoming manifestation as Harry Houdini, the world's most legendary illusionist, in the four-hour television miniseries *Houdini*, airing later this year on History. In a conversation with the actor in Los Angeles following the 86th Academy Awards last month, Brody is clearly thrilled to have focused his powers on this particular project: "Harry Houdini is one of my heroes and has been since childhood, not only because he was the greatest magician and escape artist of all time, who escaped the confines of chains onstage, but because of his fearless, adventurous nature," Brody says. "He also escaped the chains of poverty and bigotry—and his audiences and the public understood this grand metaphor."

Brody's literal introduction to magic came early on. At about 5 years old, he was already accompanying his mother, noted photographer Sylvia Plachy, on professional assignments, capturing images of zeitgeist conjurers like Timothy Leary as well as frequently visiting the offices of employers such as *The Village Voice*. There, in the office of *Voice* journalist and documentary filmmaker Howard Smith, Brody first made magic. "[Smith] had a love of magic, and his office was filled with crazy gadgets and quirky devices. He was so patient, so generous—he showed me my first magic tricks," he says.

But the actor's exposure to magic came even earlier, and in a twofold fashion. First from his mother, who taught him

Black silk viscose fluid peak lapel single-breasted O'Connor suit, \$5,500, at Tom Ford; Bianco painted light cotton shirt, \$650, at Bottega Veneta; black patent leather lace-up derby shoes, \$910, at Dior Homme.



that observation is key, as it allows the viewer to intuit, and then see what's invisible (or, at the very least, what's subtle and nuanced). "I'm blessed that my mother's a photographer. She finds the beauty, sadness and truth around us that many miss, especially when they're not right on the surface and readily apparent," he says. The second introduction was the mean but enchanted New York City of the 1970s and '80s, a metropolis of blackouts, near bankruptcy, garbage strikes and boundless, infectious, kinetic creativity. "There's no better place to observe human nature, to study it, to be educated by it, than the street life of New York," says Brody, whose interest in urban culture was influenced by the city at large as well as by his own Woodhaven neighborhood in Queens, where lifelong interests in hip-hop, fast cars and racing gained volume and traction.

Faster than the wave of a wand, Brody took to magic, and his first performative persona, The Amazing Adrien, was born. "There's a mischievousness and symbolic quality to magic—the doing of the seemingly impossible and the inherent defiance—that makes it especially appealing to little boys," he says, adding that as his proficiency progressed, he delighted in the excitement of "making

crucial and propitious. "The beauty is, it came to me prior to adolescence, when being a man, girls, hormones and general confusion could have prevented me from being instinctual, from trusting myself, from letting it fly," he says. After attending the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts (immortalized in the film *Fame*), Brody proceeded to act in more than 20 movies—including Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* and Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam*—before his professional transformation to the Academy Award-winning role of Wladyslaw Szpilman in Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* in 2002. It was a part for which he famously lost 30 pounds in a month and a half, learned to play Chopin, and spent six days a week for six weeks working alone with Polanski and a film crew to explore the intricacies and details of his character. "It's absolutely unheard of today, that amount of time and cost, but it was so gratifying, and it's so visible in the work," he says.

Subsequently, Brody starred and acted in a wide range of projects. There was his turn in Peter Jackson's *King Kong*, an old-fashioned, big-budget studio extravaganza; a colorful taste of noir with *Hollywoodland*; an ode to a

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adults believe in something that wasn't really happening in that moment," and enjoyed the peer adulation and pocket money that came for performing at kids' parties.

Appearances, however, can be deceiving, which is, in many ways, the point for Brody. Because while he'd realized the indelibly personal mark a magician must make on his work for it to be meaningfully authentic ("You buy a trick, which is your pattern, but then you have to make it your own: Set it up, tell it, sell it; interpretation is key," he says), it was an introduction to acting—courtesy of his mother's assignment to photograph the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, combined with subsequent acting classes—that convinced him of magic in the form of artistic transformation. Becoming different characters, and even assuming various physical shapes to communicate a panoply of passions and pathos, was extremely interesting to him. "It was much deeper than fooling someone else," Brody says. "I was guiding myself to a place where I was fooling myself, letting go of inhibitions to create someone I'm not, and then sharing that."

Brody considers the timing of his realization both


favorite '80s film with the remake of *Predator*, for which he put on 25 pounds of muscle and dropped to a ripped 6 percent body fat; the lending of a voice to Rickity, an animated character in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*; a stint as Salvador Dalí in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*; and a devotion to the independent, esoteric or idiosyncratic, in films like *The Jacket*, Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* and Tony Kaye's *Detachment*. Current projects include another Anderson collaboration, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, an interwar dramedy where Brody plays the protagonist, Dmitri; and the forthcoming *American Heist*, in which he stars opposite Hayden Christensen. "My character is the Fredo character, the weak but likable guy who can't help but screw up," Brody says of his *Heist* role, adding that, while he doesn't screenwrite often, he did contribute multiple scenes and a dialogue in the film, drawing upon stories he'd heard and his own experiences. "I wrote something that made me cry, and made me cry when I reenacted it," he explains.

Nobody's ever said growth and metamorphosis are easy. But while Brody doesn't believe that acting or the

ability to artfully tap into intuition can be taught, he does believe it can be buttressed by study and from the talent within. "The ability to act was an awareness that came to me at a very young age. The craft came later, but was built on that original understanding," he says, adding that he's studied many techniques. "I've had a long career, and I've developed a whole process, my own guidebook. It boils down to getting where I want to be with a character. I know when I'm not there, and I don't like that feeling."

It's this sense of character and search for authenticity that carries over to other modes of presentation and performance. Take fashion, where Brody is known for being a peacock: He sports bold red-carpet looks, has appeared in print ad campaigns for Ermenegildo Zegna and Gillette, and sang stylishly in a Super Bowl commercial for Stella Artois. But even while walking the catwalk for Prada in 2012, wearing an attention-grabbing red overcoat and red sunglasses, he was grooving with fellow model Gary Oldman and going for something deeper. "I mean, come on, it's Gary, so of course I'm going to think power and strength, and darkness and Dracula, and of course I'm going to have some fun with it and create a narrative. With every step I thought: Off with your head."

Brody remains very close with his parents. His mother still visits him at his various filming locations with her camera in hand: "She finds treasures everywhere; she's forever providing creative inspiration," he says. And while Brody points out that his father, Elliott, often gets shortchanged in the press, "He's the most honest and straightforward person I know; he's brought me tremendous wisdom. And he's great to my mom." Speaking of romantic partnerships, Brody doesn't. And although he's been linked to Spanish actress Elsa Pataky, and most recently, model Lara Lieto, it's unclear whether he's still looking for that perfectly transformative partner.

But back to the bigger picture, the larger construction, the more meaningful conjuring. What's certain is that Brody casts a long shadow and a powerful spell, and he considers his most artful magic yet to come. "We're all leaving behind a trail, and it all comes down to responsibility," he says, "and I'm going to continue very much following the path I've been on." 

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PHOTO ASSISTANTS: JESSE HAWK, NATHAN JARVIN, AND SPENCER WICKBARR

Wool mohair boxy-cut three-button jacket in prune, \$1,900, wool mohair trousers, \$900, and black François Premier Chelsea boots, \$1,850, all at Dior Homme; extra-fine cashmere cardigan, \$1,900, at Hermès; Brody's own white tank top.

Grooming by Lisa Raquel for AVEDA at See Management

Shot on location at Stage 72 at the Triad Theatre (158 W. 72nd St., stage72.com), an Upper West Side favorite that has staged long-running off-Broadway productions such as *Forbidden Broadway* and *Nunsense*, in addition to year-round cabarets, musical reviews and their *Celebrity Autobiographies* series.