

FIX UP, LOOK SHARP

No one can model vintage slacks as well as the unwittingly dapper Bill Nighy. **Hannah Lemon** talks to the actor about the 1940s wardrobe for his new film *Their Finest* and where to buy the best undershorts

“**T**hey were looking for someone to play a chronically self-absorbed, pompous actor in his declining years, and they thought of me.” It’s a line Bill Nighy has been delivering with aplomb on the press circuit for *Their Finest* over the last few months, and I ruin the punch line by saying half the joke.

But Nighy doesn’t seem to mind as he chatters about his latest flick. *Their Finest* is a period drama following Catrin Cole (Gemma Arterton), a mild Welsh woman making it as a career girl during the Second World War. As a budding scriptwriter, she is employed to make a piece of positive propaganda during The Blitz about the miracle of Dunkirk. The film showcases the best of British: Sam Claflin plays the love interest, while Jeremy Irons, Richard E. Grant, Henry Goodman and Helen McCrory all make brief appearances.

Yet, it is Nighy’s Ambrose Hilliard – a haughty veteran actor enlisted to play drunk Uncle Frank

in the short film – who steals the show. His commanding attitude, twinkling eye and endearing self-importance bring the script to life.

Plus, Nighy looks glamorously at home in an array of 1940s finely tailored suits. “That’s when trousers were trousers,” he jokes. “I sort of think that everything has been downhill since then.” Pocket squares, three-piece suits, classic striped shirts, and silks scarves – the character’s vintage accessories seem to be something Nighy wouldn’t mind donning off set.

Filmed in East London, the scenes provide a brief snapshot of life in a war-torn capital, and the few houses and streets that survived the bombing were used for filming. It heightens the nostalgia for the period – a time that brought a new wave of feminism and an intense sense of unity for those left at home.

“People think of it as quite a sexy time,” remarks Nighy in his familiar droll tone. “Because nobody knew who was going to be alive. I think people made the most of that.”





IMAGE © FEATURELASH PHOTO AGENCY / SHUTTERSTOCK, INC.

“Especially Ambrose Hilliard,” I chuckle, thinking of the character’s soft spot for the ladies. “Well, Ambrose did his best,” agrees Nighy.

The 67 year old is famed for his comic timing, whether it’s for the old rocker Billy Mack in *Love Actually*, the time-travelling dad in *About Time*, or a tentacled sea captain in the second instalment of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. When I ask if this quick-witted, dry delivery has always come so naturally to him, he reminds me that he didn’t get offered these roles until quite late in his career.

After a stint at Guildford School of Acting, he started in theatre, performing plays at Liverpool’s Everyman and the National Theatre.

“I’ve worked with some of the best joke writers in the world,” he says, “including David Hare, Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter. The phenomenon of being able to stand on stage and just play with time a little bit, and arrange for a thousand people to laugh at the same time becomes endlessly fascinating. It gets to be addictive.”

Looking back, Nighy says there was a moment when he would have jacked his career in to buy a VW van

However, the difficult and lengthy process to ‘making it’ took its toll on Nighy and it led to what he has previously dubbed an “unhealthy relationship” with alcohol. Sobriety found him around 25 years ago and he has stayed that way ever since.

Then in 2003, at the age of 53, he became an almost overnight star when he won two Baftas: one for a newspaper editor in the TV drama *State of Play*, and the other for his part in *Love Actually*.

Looking back, Nighy says there was a moment when he would have jacked it all in to buy a VW camper van, paint it funny colours and drive to Nepal. Because that’s what people did then, Nighy explains, when you ran out of ideas – “and I ran out of ideas quite regularly”. Fortunately, his father stepped in and persuaded him to continue.

Nighy recalls a wonderful story when he was interviewed by David Frost on a show that he and his father used to watch together before he passed ▶

► away when Nighy was 26. “At the end of the interview, [Frost] said, ‘I understand we have someone to thank for you continuing to be an actor.’ I didn’t quite know what he meant. And he said, ‘Didn’t your father...?’ And I said, ‘Oh, yes.’ And he said: ‘What was your father’s name?’ And I said, ‘Alfred.’ Then he looked down the barrel of the camera and said, ‘Alfred Nighy, thank you.’”

Previous articles have painted Nighy as a bit of a loner, spending any free time strolling around London on his own, often through Mayfair. After separating from Diana Quick (with whom he has a daughter, Mary Nighy, also an actor) back in 2008 after 27 years together, his home must be a quiet one. But when he is averaging four or five films a year, plus voiceovers and theatre performances on top of that, it’s not surprising one would seek solace from the chaos of it all.

When I speak to him these preconceptions seem irreverent. Charming and polite, he effuses elements of the characters he plays. It may just be for my benefit, but I enjoy it nonetheless.

I tell him that I went to see his West End performance of *Skylight*, which later transferred to Broadway and in which he starred alongside Carey Mulligan. I ask if, after all this time (he apparently used to suffer from terrible stage fright), he still gets nervous before a show?

“Man, oh man, oh man. Yeah. Opening a play, when all the critics write your report in the national newspapers the next day – or these days on social media or whatever it might be – it’s as nerve racking as anything that ever happens to me. Any actor will tell you it doesn’t get any better.”



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: BILL NIGHY ON SET FOR *THEIR FINEST*; WITH GEMMA ARTERTON; WITH HELEN MCCRORY; AS UNCLE FRANK WITH SAM CLAFLIN AND GEMMA ARTERTON; ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF LIONSGATE

Does he still read reviews? “No. Never. You read reviews when you are young because you crave praise so badly and then you get burned. Then, if you’ve got sense, you never read a review again. They’re of no use to me. They’re not going to instruct me or anything. They’re either going to damage me, or if they tell me I’m particularly remarkable at that bit in the second act, it means that every time I get to that bit in the second act I’m supposed to be remarkable. I don’t want to isolate moments.”

Recent photos and footage online show that a ten-minute short film of *Love Actually* is underway for Comic Relief, masterminded by Nick Curtis. “I think everyone’s done their bit now,” Nighy tells me. “It was very nice to see everybody. We had a reunion dinner where everybody came – except people who physically couldn’t be there.” I take the latter comment to refer to the sad departure of the late Alan Rickman.





What was it like reprising the role of Billy Mack? “It was a bit daunting at first, because I had to get into those trousers,” he jokes. “I had to put a few chains on, silk scarves, a bit of leather and all that sort of malarkey. I haven’t done that for a while. And you think – I must be too old for this now – but it was fun. It was nice and we had a few laughs.”

He begins to tell me about the extraordinary pair of shoes he wears in the film that will be put up for auction in aid of the charity. “I don’t know whether I’m even supposed to tell you that,” he adds. “They’re deeply, what you’d call, ‘rock’ and they’re electric coloured. And they’re huge.”

Aside from late-life-crisis footwear, Nighy’s actual wardrobe is more sartorially aligned. He names Martin Nicholls at Alfred Dunhill for tailored suits as well as Anderson & Sheppard on Savile Row: “I’m partial to their house style”; while he never wears anything but Margaret Howell shirts: “I love the fact that they’re classically English. They’re soft and relaxed”; and he heads to Church’s on the corner of Conduit Street for shoes.

“And this is a scoop,” Nighy pauses for dramatic effect, “I get my undershorts from J. Crew.” I laugh. “You are the only person who knows that Hannah.” Sorry, Bill. The cat’s out of the bag. ■

Their Finest is in cinemas from 21 April