

WINNER BY A CLEAR HEAD; RICHARD BURTON, KENNETH TYNAN, JOHN OSBORNE: AWFUL LUSHES, THE LOT OF

BYLINE: HERMIONE EYRE Spies, kings and camp icons, clockwise from top left: Hollander in *Cambridge Spies*, 2003; *The Lost Prince*, 2003; and as Darren, in *Bedrooms and Hallways*, 1998

Tom Hollander? Ooh, watch out." I've only told a few people that I'm interviewing the actor, yet two of them claim to have been given "the eye" by him. "He's the kind of man who looks you right up and down," says one with ominous glee.

Moreover, Hollander's resume is a rogue's gallery, with his latest role - Laurie in John Osborne's *The Hotel in Amsterdam* - another seductive monster. Previous interviewers have dubbed him a "hot young buck" and a "fallen angel"; he is supposedly the most "tousled" actor alive. But I find him combed, tidy and decorous. In fact, until his spirit begins to show through, meeting him is curiously like being granted an audience with George V.

"My beard," he says gravely, "makes me feel older. I rather enjoyed being George V, so I've kept it since then." His chops are as whiskery as they were when he appeared as the king in Stephen Poliakoff's acclaimed television drama *The Lost Prince*, and his style as quaintly ponderous. "I found it consoling playing somebody who had the humility to just want to keep his clocks running at the right time," he says, fastidiously dividing a tendril of smoked salmon on our shared plate into two fair halves.

Hollander could so easily be flash. The man is cresting a wave. He is recently back from filming Mel Gibson's new project, *Paparazzi*, and about to open in the lead at the Donmar; his girlfriend is the exquisite socialite heiress Daphne Guinness, the late Diana Mosely's granddaughter. But he underplays their jet-set life - getting him to admit that his tan comes from Portofino is painful. He speaks slowly and softly, tugging on his safety blanket of face fuzz. And all strands in our conversation lead inexorably back to one theme: his self-doubt.

Even though he has perfect Britpack leader potential - childhood friends with Sam Mendes, a stint in the *Footlights Revue* at Cambridge, an Ian Charleson Award - he makes a big deal of his professional angst: "Rehearsals are anxiety management for me. I start palpitating as soon as I read the script." Perhaps this is linked to a sense of anxiety that, as a short man (officially, he's an optimistic 5ft 5in) he shouldn't be playing straight romantic leads.

He played Osborne Hamley, the dashing hero in Andrew Davies's BBC adaptation of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, but gave up reading the book "soon after he'd entered. I thought, I don't look anything like this," so I stopped. It's upsetting to discover that you're meant to be tall, thin, dark." And, like many famous people wishing to appear humble, he claims to be burdened by success: "It's becoming less fun, because when you have any kind of reputation, you have fulfilled it. People have expectations, and that's very frightening." One co-star from the television mini-series *Cambridge Spies* remembers Hollander as a quiet, serious figure, forbiddingly focused on his work.

"I just want to keep myself tidy and learn my lines," he says. But what about the days when he was regularly spotted out drinking with Kate Moss? "I went to the Met Bar in 1998. But that's what young people do, isn't it?" he sighs, as if now that he is all of 33, that was a lifetime ago. Perhaps his three-year relationship with Guinness has matured him - "She's a mum," he says, "with three children" - although he'd like to think of himself as a friend to them, rather than a stepfather figure. With the air of a reformed character, Hollander is actually trying to come across as square: "To just keep quiet, keep your garden tidy, help people across the road and give some money to Oxfam - that's the secret for a decent life."

So he's been living cleanly, without the booze marathons of his dipsomaniac character, Laurie? "None of those," he smiles. "Not even for research purposes." (And indeed, throughout the interview, he treats his glass of wine with suspicion, keeping it at the other end of our table, like something poisonous.)

The Hotel in Amsterdam is a rarely performed, bitter, gin-drenched late Osborne play (1968). Laurie, a misanthropic screenwriter nauseated by his own success, is Osborne's self-portrait, and a middle-aged version of Jimmy Porter. Hollander has been watching footage of Osborne to help him get into character - including his role as the arch villain in the Michael Caine version of *Get Carter*. "Osborne plays the villain, the languid one playing poker, with the beard," Hollander says, and, suddenly in character, throws himself into a horizontal pose, and drawls in an epicene, vermouth flavoured voice, "Hi, y'know, hi there Carter."

Snapping back into his own sensible mid-middle-class vowels, he starts to condemn the Coach & Horses triple-gins-for-breakfast culture. "They were all such big drinkers - Robert Shaw, Peter Cook, Richard Burton, Tynan, Osborne... But as you get older and wiser you realise that you don't have to live some appalling, hard-living, heavy drinking life to be a proper actor. The greats, they're all a leetle bit crazy - it's machismo, a myth. Tony Hopkins's career has probably become a lot better since he stopped drinking.

"I'd rather keep my head clear. I'd rather be the kind of actor who's a craftsman person. Like a silversmith calmly tapping away, turning a precious metal into a swan, or making a rather beautiful shoe." He really, seriously means this, you can tell; but at the same time he

manages to satirise his own pretentiousness by giving his voice a little fruity flourish. He's a luvvie, but at least he has a sense of humour about it.

So how does he cope with some of those foul Osborne lines? In the very first scene he has to say, "I'd love to rape an air-hostess." "It's kinda bracing. I've got some great lines." Does he ever balk, though - perhaps the moment in *Cambridge Spies* when, suspicious that Sam West's character has penetrated the Queen Mother, he roars, "Blunt, you've been up a Windsor." "Actually," he replies, "the one I balked atin that was, Babies are dying in this country, and I want to feed them. I'm going to become a commie." That stuck in my throat. It's my job to inhabit the text but I still said to the director aghast stage whisper, 'I can't say this!' He was brilliant and said 'Come on, let's do it, believe it, believe it, so I did believe it - for two and a half minutes. And I was lit from behind, which helped.'

The clanking script of *Cambridge Spies* didn't win many plaudits, but Hollander's performance did. "He was absolutely real and brilliant as Guy Burgess," says theatre producer Thelma Holt, who predicts he may grow into a great in the mould of Alan Bates: "Alan as a young man had a very similar quality. They share a truthfulness." Holt, who produced *The Clandestine Marriage*, in which Hollander starred with Sir Nigel Hawthorne, adds, "Not many actors would want to share the stage with Tom. The temperature drops when he exits."

You can sense this quicksilver charisma in the flesh. He is constantly impersonating different people: once he has relaxed, he lets his George V drop and re-enacts a conversation he overheard between two vapid American gym buddies, his dorky nasal twang pitch perfect: "What are you benching at the moment?' About 350.' That's cool. What were you benching in November?'" He also does a great "little boy lost" persona, all big eyes and husky voice. I feel a bit like asking the real Tom Hollander to please stand up. Actors are often chameleons, but he is an extreme. As he says himself: "I change my colours to suit my surroundings."

A glint of the flirtatious Hollander I have been warned about comes when he spontaneously invites me to "tug on his beard". But he retracts it double-quick, saying, "No, I'm not going to let you, it might come off." It's a crack about all the false beards he's worn in his time, but it also works on a different level - he's not about to let his protective face-guard fall away. And perhaps, given all the different roles he plays on and off stage, there is no stable self behind it to reveal. Or maybe it was just a gag.

Another Hollander is a babyish clown. He dives for my handbag, having spotted my mobile phone - "It's one of those bouncy ones!" he says with delight. "You can do anything to it!" Hollander then vigorously throws my mobile at the restaurant's wall. It breaks in half. But he jumps after it like a happy Tigger. "See? It's fine!" And, to be fair, it is. But I take it away before he can try the waterproof test on it. It's a flash of the childish side to him that often comes across on stage: he was "an overgrown infant" in Gogol's *Government Inspector* and, as Bosie in David Hare's *The Judas Kiss*, one reviewer described him as doing "his over-familiar petulant toddler routine".

When I ask him about bad reviews, it sets him off. "However upset you are, it's no good going, Aw, the critics are all bastards', because, you know, sometimes they are actually right. Other times a friend will say, Oh, so and so has written you a love letter in the *Evening Standard*. But then you read it and it says, Hollander's sterling performance...' and you'll say, Sterling? Sterling?' Boring, solid, respectable? I want dazzling, I want incredible..."

This is said not out of hard-nosed ambition, but out of the spy insecurity. Regarding his role as Saffy's snooty fiancé in *Absolutely Fabulous*, all he can remember is the tension of filming. (Plus the fact that Joanna Lumley gave him a packet of Rothman's - "top bird".) He took his first (and last) beta-blocker to cope with the nerves and the live studio audience. "They all went Waaaa' when Patsy and Edina came on. And when I came on? Silence. I really needed to stop exhibiting physiological symptoms of anxiety, which in my case are chewing the side of my mouth and twitching. Not right for my character. So there I was, hyperventilating in my BBC dressing-room..." Yet on the telly, Hollander just looked funny, odious and smooth as a rolling-pin.

Hollander has bagged some of the best gay characters going, which must be putting genuine queens into hissy fits. He's played both Bosie and Burgess, after all. "Sometimes I call myself a professional homosexual impersonator. But then you could say that Serena Sir Ian McKellen and Rock Hudson do straight actors." Did he ever really question his sexuality? "Yes, I wondered at the age you're supposed to find out, at public school. But no, I'm as gay as I want to be." This is somewhat undermined when, minutes later, he tries on his new "distressed-velvet" jacket and asks worriedly, "Does it make me look gay? Does it? Or does it just make me look like a Turkish-nightclub owner?"

And to finish, here's a useful guide for anyone invited to "come round" to Hollander's dressing-room: "I propose this rule of thumb for anyone visiting me after a performance: talk hyperbolic nonsense. Say, 'You were absolutely fantastic.' And if you're a good enough actor, try this - pretend you are unable to speak, because the experience was so moving. When I say, 'I hope you enjoyed it,' then put out your hand as if you can't speak because the power of the performance is still coursing through your body... Someone did that to me once, and only after they'd gone did I think, 'That was bullshit.'" n

The Hotel in Amsterdam previews at the Donmar Warehouse, 41 Earlham Street, London WC2, tel: 0870 060 6624, from Thursday

The ups and downs of a Britpack actor

Highs Cambridge undergraduate performance of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, directed by young Sam Mendes (1988)

Won Ian Charleson Award for role of Witwoud in Peter Gill's *The Way of the World* (1992)

"Tom Hollander can teach me how to act" - Sir Nigel Hawthorne, *the Times* (1999)

Plays Daniel in *Martha, Meet Frank, Daniel and Lawrence*. "Hollander is the undisputed hit of the pic," says *Variety* (1998)

Time Out Best Actor award for *Tartuffe* at the Almeida (2002)

Hand-picked by legendary film director Robert Altman to play Anthony Meredith in *Gosford Park* (2001)

Title role in *Don Juan* rated Best Comic Turn of the Year by the *IoS* (2001)

Lows 2:2 degree ("I still have nightmares about going into exams knowing nothing")

Failed to get into drama school - "I was too cocky". Wilderness time working in a toyshop

Created the role of the gangster Baby in Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* at the Royal Court (1995), but was then then passed over in 1997 film adaptation. The part went to Aidan Gillen

Review for *The Lost Prince*: "Hollander did Mr Angry, presumably because his beard glue itched"

Existential angst after break-up from long term girlfriend, 1999. "There's something ultimately futile about it acting . Your sense of who you are changes when you play a part. If you play a less interesting part, that's when you go, What am I living for, then? It can't be this'

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