

# The importance of being

## Hugh Grant

Once just another Merchant Ivory poppet, Hugh Grant is now surpassing his matinée idol potential. Christa D'Souza, like Madonna, is quite smitten. Photographed by Kevin Davies

**A**t a few minutes past one and a gangly young man with trendy specs lollops into Aubergine, a new foodie French restaurant where the best-selling hors d'oeuvre is a 'capuccino aux haricots blancs'. But this isn't Hugh Grant, this is Kris, Hugh Grant's suspiciously callow-looking PR, who is making sure his precious new client arrives safely for the interview. A few seconds later, Grant walks in. At first glance, the pair of them look like students, in London for a slap-up lunch on someone's father's expense account before hopping on a train back to university.

Much younger looking than his 33 years and dressed just as you would expect a Merchant Ivory poppet to look off-screen, in a tweedy, grey, Portobello market overcoat and fringed scarf worn almost like a yashmak, Hugh is slight of figure with tousled yet somehow ruly hair which he is growing for his next part and which, rather conveniently, is just springy enough on the top not to fall into his eyes.

Sitting down at the table, Grant, as pukka-sounding in real-life as he is on screen, apologises profusely for being three minutes late and explains that Kris will only be staying for a quick drink, not for lunch, and that it wasn't he who hired a PR but the people in charge of his latest film, in which he stars opposite Andie MacDowell: *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, a black comedy about a bunch of twentysomethings paranoid about the fact they aren't married yet.

On the other hand there is something rather helpless and school-boyish about Grant and, even though he lives just down the road, I can see how he might have needed someone to ensure he arrived safe and sound. Perhaps it is because he is so good-looking. A curious combination of Tigger and Byron, Grant is extremely handsome; handsome enough, in fact, to take your breath away, with a dolphin-like smile, choirboy complexion ('I'm still trying to grow a proper beard') and chiselled cheekbones, flushed slightly with the onset of a cold.



GETTING TO KNOW HUGH Grant, a curious combination of Tigger and Lord Byron, has almost graduated from the English brat pack



**TO KNOW HUGH:**  
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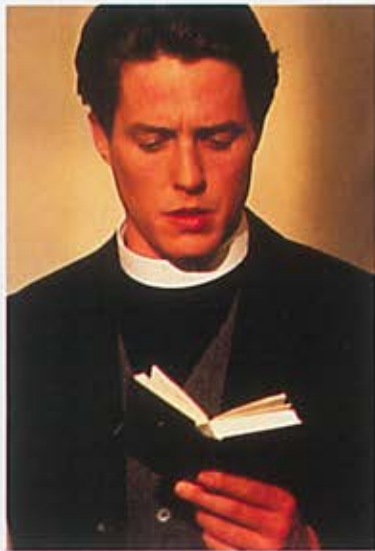
Perhaps to offset all this perfection, Grant keeps covering his mouth with his hand. 'Is my breath foul?' he wonders. 'I can almost smell it myself. I'm so sensitive to breath. I spoke for a long time to someone last night whose breath was like milk that had gone off.' Of course Hugh Grant doesn't have bad breath; on the other hand he does have a thing about Indian food, and if his diligent PR hadn't picked this spot, I'm sure we would be getting a take-away from the Earl's Court Tandoori. 'I used to go to the Star of India,' says Grant, 'but some chap practically bugged me every time I went in, so I had to stop going there for a while.'

Lucky, lucky Elizabeth Hurley, his longtime actress girlfriend who currently lives in LA and to whom he speaks on the phone at least twice a day. Poor, poor Madonna, who supposedly developed a crush on Grant after seeing him in *Maurice* but never got further than a phone call and a brief appearance he made at one of her post-concert bashes. No wonder he's considered something of a latterday David Cassidy in Japan. 'It was all because of *Maurice*,' explains Grant. 'Now they've got a book out called *Hugh Grant*.' Once, to his parents' surprise, he made the cover of *Gay News*.

'I like attention of any kind,' shrugs Grant. 'You've got to be grateful for what you can get. When I'm in LA I deliberately go to this hardware store on Santa Monica Boulevard. They go wild over me in there. I might get a vest... they like vests.'

Still at the endearing stage of Saying Shocking Things to Journalists, Grant may have to become more reticent in front of the press, given how fast he is becoming famous. With *Four Weddings and a Funeral* out this month and his next film, *Sirens* – a gritty Australian film also starring Sam Neill, Tara Fitzgerald and Elle Macpherson – out soon after, Grant has almost graduated from that English bratpacky set, that young, achingly aristocratic-looking gang which includes Rupert Graves, Julian Sands and Cary Elwes, forever doomed to flop about in cricket sweaters and greased-back hair against cucumber-sandwich-and-golden-labrador backdrops.

**B**rilliantly plausible as Kristin Scott Thomas's geeky husband in Polanski's otherwise completely implausible *Bitter Moon* and not bad as a sophisticated, squiffy young journalist in Merchant Ivory's astonishing *The Remains of the Day*, no doubt Grant is headed for fully-fledged stardom. One day he will live high in the Hollywood hills, be a teetotaler, dine frequently at restaurants which call soup cappuccino and be horrid to journalists. But for now, thank God, Grant is a lunch date, interesting and interested, so much so this hardly feels like work. Not only genuinely candid, with tons of neuroses just waiting to be shared, he is also rather fascinated by journalists, and likes to play with them the way interviewees used to play with their interviewers before the era of the hatchet job. And by the time we have gone through how badly he has screwed up on first dates, how he feels his life slipping inexorably through his fingers, how he can't bear aristo ex-junkies and how Indian food sometimes has an adverse effect on his stomach, I begin to feel – as I'm sure a million journalists, film producers and Hollywood bigwigs will soon feel, too – as though I've found a kindred spirit.



**GRANT CHECK:** clockwise from above, in the forthcoming *Sirens*; with Sir Anthony Hopkins in *The Remains of the Day*; and with girlfriend Elizabeth Hurley

Hugh and his brother Jamie, now a banker in New York, were brought up in Chiswick and sent to Latymer Comprehensive in Hammersmith where 'everyone's father was in United Biscuits or Carpets International, as was my dad'. Though popular, Grant suffered a slight identity crisis at school. 'I didn't know quite how to be,' he says, wincing. 'I had a split personality. I remember once my parents came to speech day and I recited: "Afternoon, smashin' you could come. We're 'avin' tea" and they couldn't believe that was how I spoke at school. Then I discovered if I was just me people liked me better. Now I can't bear people who were brought up speaking relatively posh and then went all Notting Hill, so I've tended to go the other way.' This he has, liberally sprinkling his conversation with 'Did you by jiminy's', 'Crikey O'Reilly's' and 'By jingo's, and describing anything not too mediocre as 'absolute heaven'.

In 1978 Grant went up to New College, Oxford to read English and friends fondly remember him striding around with a dog under his arm,



Sebastian Flyte-style, helplessly terrorising all the girls in college with his startling good looks. In fact, Grant claims he was not nearly as entranced with Evelyn Waugh as he was with Martin Amis. 'His novels are absolute heaven. Elizabeth is in love with Rupert Campbell-Black from *Riders*; I'm in love with Selina Street from *Money*. I love mean women.'



After Oxford, Grant planned to go to the Courtauld Institute. But at the last hour he was spotted by an American talent scout at the premiere of *Privileged*: 'A silly film we'd done at Oxford. I assumed I'd be whisked off to Hollywood in a second. In fact, I had to go off to Nottingham Playhouse and

be a peasant or a tree.' While appearing in some self-written revues in Edinburgh and scriptwriting commercials for Red Stripe lager, Mighty White bread and Brylcreem, Grant, believing his acting career a failure, landed the part of Clive in *Maurice*. Apart from the odd Barbara Cartland mini-series and a couple of Euro-puddings ('You know, films that are made in Spain, not released anywhere but Spain and win silver seashells at the San Sebastian film festival'), he didn't look back.

Since 1988 Grant has lived in South Kensington in a flat filled with swags of Colefax & Fowler ('It used to belong to an interior designer. I thought it was great when I bought it, now I can't let anyone in') and lots of kitchen equipment: 'I go to Divertimenti almost everyday to buy things like thermometers for jam.' Ideally, Grant and Hurley, neither of whom can speak a word of French, would like to buy a flat in Paris so that Elizabeth can bring her ferocious bull mastiff over from LA (France has less strict rabies rules than the UK). Meanwhile, Hugh Grant, despite the constant flurry of transatlantic faxes and phone calls, remains not quite on the brink of children and marriage.

'My mother says I ought to be thinking about that sort of thing. If I were tremendously rich and had a big house, I could have children who would come down the stairs like the von Trapps and then I could whistle them away immediately. But I have a real horror of finding myself living in Wandsworth with a baby in a papoose and toys all over the floor. My brother Jamie is marvellous at being a gorilla, whereas with me all that comes out is a pathetic little roar. Children have no qualms about saying: "I don't like you." I have to have everyone adore me.'

I do, Hugh, I do, I think you are absolute heaven. □