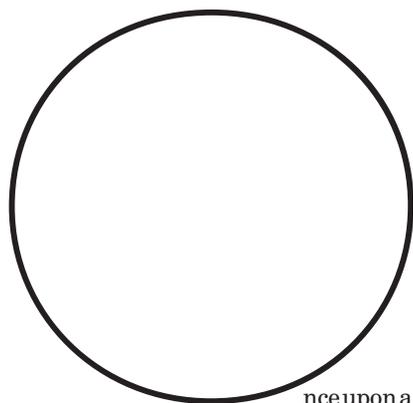


FANATIC MURFORD

His womenswear sparked a fashion revolution; his scents are bestsellers. Now, his directorial debut is winning awards. Does Tom Ford have any weaknesses at all? Absolutely, he tells Christa D'Souza. Portrait by David Bailey



nce upon a time, not so very long ago, no one knew who Tom Ford was. Today, those close-set eyes, that smooth, high forehead, that bared chest, oiled to within an inch of its life – it's all part of billboard vernacular. If he hasn't been caricatured on *Family Guy*, he surely soon will be. Indeed, such an icon, such a hero is he in the world of fashion that when he famously left Gucci six years ago, *The New Yorker* ran a spoof essay about his departure entitled, "No. Please, No." But what was he like before he became such a, well, *brand*?

"I was an assistant, I was a nobody," says Ford simply, as he sits across from me in his immaculate grey-carpeted Chelsea offices. So much so, apparently, that I have forgotten that he and I once met. What? Did

we really? He must be mistaken. There's no way I could have forgotten meeting Tom Ford. "Oh but we did," he gently insists. "Not that you would have known. Why would you? There's no reason for you to remember me at all."

They said this would happen. They all said it would. Nobody comes away from meeting this suave, handsome, affable, effortlessly self-assured Texan without getting the pants charmed off of them – nobody. Straight men. Gay men. Women. After they meet him, they all want a little more, and I am no exception. What a plonker not to have known that time who he was!

It is a grey rainy day in London and Ford is drinking Diet Coke – out of the can. "It's the one thing I just *cain't* give up," he sighs, before leaping up high on to the window ledge. "Mind if I close this thing? It's impossible for me to concentrate when there's any noise in the background."

Apologising, out of good Southern politeness, perhaps, for looking "like a total slob", he is as immaculately turned out as ever in high-waisted grey wool herringbone trousers of his own design and a white Hanes tee. (He has been known to have

white Fruit of the Loom T-shirts tailored to fit.) A good deal paler and less thrusting in the flesh than he is in all those ad campaigns, he is eager to know what I thought of *A Single Man*, a screening of which was shown last night. This is Ford's much-awaited directorial debut, starring Colin Firth and Julianne Moore, and based on the 1964 novel of the same name by Christopher Isherwood. The film received acclaim when it was shown at the Venice and Toronto film festivals, had its distribution rights immediately snapped up by Harvey Weinstein, and is now hotly tipped by insiders to win itself a couple of Oscars. In other words, to all those who not so secretly hoped he would fall flat on his face, to all those who couldn't quite cope with the idea of a fashion designer trespassing into the world of film: grrrr, he's done it again.

Set in LA against the backdrop of the Cuban missile crisis, the film ostensibly tells the tale of George, an English professor whose long-time lover, Jim, has been killed in a car crash. When Isherwood wrote it, he himself had just been temporarily abandoned by his long-term partner, the artist Don Bachardy, and so to a certain >



"I don't know how to do anything other than slightly glamorise things," says Tom Ford of his famous aesthetic.
Sittings editor:
Michael Trow

extent, it was autobiographical. Ford first read it in 1982 after being introduced to Isherwood and Bachardy through his then boyfriend, the *Olivia* children's series illustrator, Ian Falconer. Their gang, which included David Hockney and Stephen Spender, made an impression on Ford, at the time a cute Studio-54-loving 21-year-old, who fitted right into the whole gay Anglo-LA scene. As did the book. "But I didn't pick up on the spiritual element at all," he says. "It was George I picked up on and kind of fell in love with."

Ford didn't forget George. He simply put him away in his head "to be worked out later, as I do with everything". (Ford never forgets anything, you see. Like the time he first met Bachardy back in the Eighties. "That's what he claims, anyway," Bachardy says over the phone from LA. "I can't remember meeting him then at all. But when he came to the house three years ago with his script, I liked him very much indeed. He kept making L-shapes with his fingers, the way directors do. I understood that, because I'm a very visual person, too.")

In the interim, Ford worked for designers Cathy Hardwick and Perry Ellis, before he went to Gucci in 1990, turned it into a \$4 billion empire, left, had a mid-life crisis, started up his own menswear line and got himself an agent. Despite having no experience aside from a stint at acting school – despite, too, being aware that there wasn't exactly a gaping niche in the market (as Ford himself once said, LA is a town where "what I really want to do is direct" is a bumper sticker) – he was determined to fulfil his lifelong ambition to make his own film.

Thus he opened his production company, Fade to Black, in the old Geffen building in Beverly Hills, and – in between getting fancy golf clubs messengered over and thinking about designing a plane or a car (his great friend Lapo Elkann still bugs him about this last one) – he read lots of scripts. Depressingly, most of them were "rehashed 9½ Weeks", he says – the sort of thing screenwriters felt would appeal to a man who shaved the Gucci logo into a model's pubic hair and told journalists he preferred to go commando. And then came the epiphany. "I was driving down Sunset Boulevard to the office," he says, "and suddenly went [clicking his

fingers], *Boom!* 'What do I keep finding myself thinking about? Why, George, of course!' So that was it. I walked in and said to my assistant, 'Get me a copy of *A Single Man*.' I read it in a totally different light. That was the film I was going to make."

"I have to admit, I thought his idea of wanting to make a film was pretty risky," his partner of 23 years, Richard Buckley, tells me via email. "I knew the script was good, but how does anyone make a film? It wasn't until I visited the set that Karen Golden, the script supervisor – who has worked with a long list of directors including Martin Scorsese and Michael Bay – told me she'd never worked with a first-time director who had such a strong vision."

"Listen, Tom could paint a painting and it would be a masterpiece," says Ford's costume designer Arianne "*Walk the Line*"



Tom Ford directs Colin Firth in a scene from his directorial debut, *A Single Man*

Phillips. "He could make a soufflé and it would be the most delicious soufflé in the world. His talent is linear like that."

So what has emerged, then, three years later? A rather tender, rather chaste, searingly personal portrait of... Well, who do you think? Tom Ford himself, of course. A man of almost superhuman control, sophistication, neatness and perfection. An obsessive, almost pathological planner with a fetish for detail and doing the right thing. A man who, at the same time, is vulnerable, hesitant and a hopeless, hopeless romantic. Human, in other words. Humble. Fallible. Unlike the bronzed, buffed, slightly ludicrous sex god he likes to portray himself as on all those billboards.

"When you look at George, here is a man who is hanging on by his very fingernails,"

says Colin Firth, who plays the lead role. "He's a man who thinks his life will fall apart if he hasn't got his cufflinks on. Is that Tom? Well, I'm not going to attempt to psychoanalyse him here, but let's say, like George, he's an extremely passionate, intense, precise man. The temptation is to see the film as one long Tom Ford campaign, but you only have to scratch the surface to see that would be totally missing the point. The master stroke here is that the style *is* the content, and within the perfection, as Tom knows only too well, is the neurosis."

As with most apparently raging self-believers with apparently golden lives – the \$90 million in the bank, the long-term partner who is "so proud of him, I can barely hold it in", the Richard Neutra house in LA, the Georgian mansion in Mayfair, etc – Ford is not a man without complexities. "Oh, I had my first suicide thoughts when I was eight," he recounts easily. "Clinical depression, it runs in the family." Did he get nervous about directing? "Oh, but of course I got nervous! And of course I had fear. My *Gahd*, I had fear. You should have seen me when I showed it to my agent for the first time. I thought I mayn't survive, I was so scared! But what I tend to do is barrel-head through the fear. The fear doesn't stop me..."

"Look," he goes on, leaning slightly forward in his chair. "Other people will be the judge of it, obviously, but, oh God, this is the realest statement I ever made. I love fashion – fashion is how I pay the rent – but... Oh, this is going to sound corny, I know, but I put more into this than I've ever put into anything else in my entire life. Like, I don't have children. I'm at a point, finally, when I'm not afraid of dying. I get on a plane, I don't care if I crash. And all I could think about when I was making it was, 'I cannot die before I finish making this film.' Oops, though," he adds with a sly smile. "Pardon me. Diet Coke always makes me burp a little. But I like 'human', don't you?"

Ford was born in 1961 in Texas to Tom Ford and Shirley Bunton, two real-estate brokers, and was brought up first in Houston, then Santa Fe. On the surface, they were a normal, suburban, all-American family, turning up the air-conditioning, as

Ford once put it, in order to light the log fire. Ford, though, was different from other little boys. By the age of three, for example, before he could talk properly, he was rearranging furniture in the living room, and his favourite toy in the world was a “refrigerator box”, which he’d lie in for hours pretending to be a vampire. He was the type of child, as he recalls, who got punched just for existing and was always having the air taken out of his bicycle tires (“I only got cute when I was about 14 or 15”).

Ford spent a lot of his tweens giving his long-suffering mother and sister egg-yolk hair treatments and dreaming not of being a blond surfer dude but of being “50 and living in New York and smoking lots of cigarettes”. As he has always said, his parents were very supportive. They never, as it were, blunted his “decorative” edges and there were plenty of happy times. But there were less happy times, too, as six months of post-Gucci analysis uncovered. “Not that I was molested or anything melodramatic like that,” he says matter-of-factly, “but there wasn’t much hugging and kissing that went on at the Fords’ house. The first time my father hugged me, I think, was when I was 20. I think he was quite disappointed that I was so... effeminate as a child. He’s cool now – he absolutely adores Richard, too – but as I recall, he spent a lot of my childhood scowling.”

The one person who had a big influence on his life was his beloved grandmother Ruth, a marvellously Diane Arbus-style woman who wore black Courrèges trouser suits and papier-mâché earrings. “She was very Texan,” recalls Ford fondly, “and, quite honestly, her taste was a little garish. But I’ll never forget these shoes she had made for her in Vegas, with paper flowers sealed inside the heels to match her every single outfit. I can still picture this sea of Lucite in her closet, the way she’d just kick off a pair and put on another...”

It was on “Ruthie” that Ford partially based the character of Charley, George’s beautiful but blowsy British girlfriend, played in the film by Julianne Moore. In the book, Isherwood paints her as a rather dumpy, desperate, maybe slightly gamey-smelling creature. In Ford’s hands, however, Charley is “actually quite advanced, like, she listens to Serge Gainsbourg and, although she’s not quite going to wear the monokini, she may at one point have met Rudi Gernreich.” Moore’s English accent,

I interject, is quite good, too. “Oh you think?” says Ford delightedly. “Well, you know, she based it on that girl – what’s her name? – Tara Palmer-Parkinson [sic].”

Just as Ruthie has been tweaked under Ford direction, so too has Isherwood’s higgledy-piggledy hacienda (around which the novel is based). In Ford’s eyes, it’s an architectural triumph of glass and dark, panelled wood. This is firstly because Ford (who also studied architecture) imagined that was the sort of place a precise, bookish expat would have loved, and



From top, scenes from *A Single Man*: Nicholas Hoult; Matthew Goode and Colin Firth; Julianne Moore

secondly because, as he rather poignantly puts it, “I don’t know how to do anything other than slightly glamorise things. Real reality is hard for me to do. Enhanced reality, whether it’s in life or clothes, is far more familiar.”

That default button to “slightly glamorise”, it reminds me of the scene in the film in which George meticulously plans his own suicide, neatly arranging his papers, deeds, and notes to his cleaning lady, family and friends; he lays out the (Tom Ford) suit, tie and cufflinks he wants to be

buried in. And then, as he lies on the bed with the butt of the beautifully polished gun in his mouth, has second thoughts: what about the mess?

“Well?” chides Ford. “You don’t want to give a nice cleaning lady that to clear up, do you?” Styling one’s own death... It all tallies, somehow, with the plans Ford had an architect draw up over the summer for his’n’his matching sarcophagi at the zillion-acre ranch in Santa Fe that he and Richard share. It tallies too with Ford’s insistence, when his beloved Grandma Ruth died, that she looked her best before she was buried, calling in his favourite stylists for her hair and make-up, and putting her in all her favourite accessories.

The cast, they all became quite used to Ford’s ferocious attention to detail. “I saw everything slightly converging,” chuckles Firth, “when Tom walked on to the set during the suicide-planning scene and added some instructions he’d just written himself to ‘tie a Windsor knot’.” Moore emails fondly how Ford “actually took a comb to my hair at the Venice Film Festival. He handles *every* last detail himself.” Matthew Goode, who plays Jim, recalls one nude shot (not many of these, I’m afraid – not that sort of film at all) in which Ford tells him to ruffle his pubes because they looked too “Abercrombie & Fitch”.

Although the film was shot in an incredibly short time (21 days), the cast still, Goode has it, managed to party. Which is not surprising because Ford, as his friends will tell you, he does love to party, and he does love to drink. At least, he used to love to drink. Because nowadays, he reveals, it’s Diet Coke all the way.

“Oh, I could hammer the vodka tonics,” he says, shaking his head and folding his arms across those compact pecs. “And when you hammer those vodka tonics, you know what comes next.” He realised that the drink was acting like a depressant on his nervous system, and that he was spending way too much on flowers. “Oh, I sent a *lot* of flowers to people the morning after the night before,” he says. His body wanted him to stop. Six months ago, therefore, with vintage Fordian discipline, he locked himself away for three days “with six self-help books from Amazon” and came out completely sober. “I can’t promise I won’t ever again, but I don’t see why I would. All’s you do is stop seeing those people you did > 173

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that stuff with and stop going to those stupid parties. Read a book! Do the things you couldn't do while you were drinking! And, you know, I've discovered a lot of things in the process. Like that I've lost 12lb. (Well, that's an extra 1,000 calories a day, right?) Like driving home after dinner in LA at 11pm (because that's the time LA shuts down) and being able to actually see the road? What a revelation that was. And you should see how it firms up your butt... No, just kidding!"

Ford once said that he would only start womenswear again after he made his first movie. Lucky for us, he has kept his word. "It'll be in store fall 2011. We're moving into our new premises, and I'm already starting to think about my new team. I need to pay at-tintion to womenswear now," he adds in that bendy Texan drawl, "because I've been away from it for a while. See, I'm not a multitasker. I can't do 20 things at once. You saw me having to have the window closed - I can't concentrate on you and the traffic at the same time. But I am focused, and now I gotta focus on women's, which I haven't in a while."

It will, for someone as intuitive as him, be like getting back on a bicycle, right? "Well," he says hesitantly. "Being away from it, not living and breathing it - how do I articulate this? - it taught me that a lot of it is a bunch of *crap*. I mean, to be honest with you, I *loathe* the fashion world now, and I know I'm not alone in saying that. Maybe, though, that's a signal to me that I have to figure out a way to make it less loathsome. People need to realise, it's not that you can be nice and successful at the same time. It's that you can be more successful *if* you are nice."

Movie-wise, oh yes, he's got all that planned, too. Another one will be released in 2012. (He wants to make a film every three years from now on.) But, no, he explains nicely, he can't tell me anything about that one just yet. What he *will* say is that he's interested in the idea of musical film. (Interestingly, Harvey Weinstein once offered him the job of production designer on the film *Chicago* - and he turned it down.) "But not in a big, homosexual, Broadway kinda way," Ford adds, and certainly nothing that would ever be performed live. "Live performance makes me nervous," he admits. "It freaks me out that I could stand up in the middle of a performance and shout, 'Fuck!'"

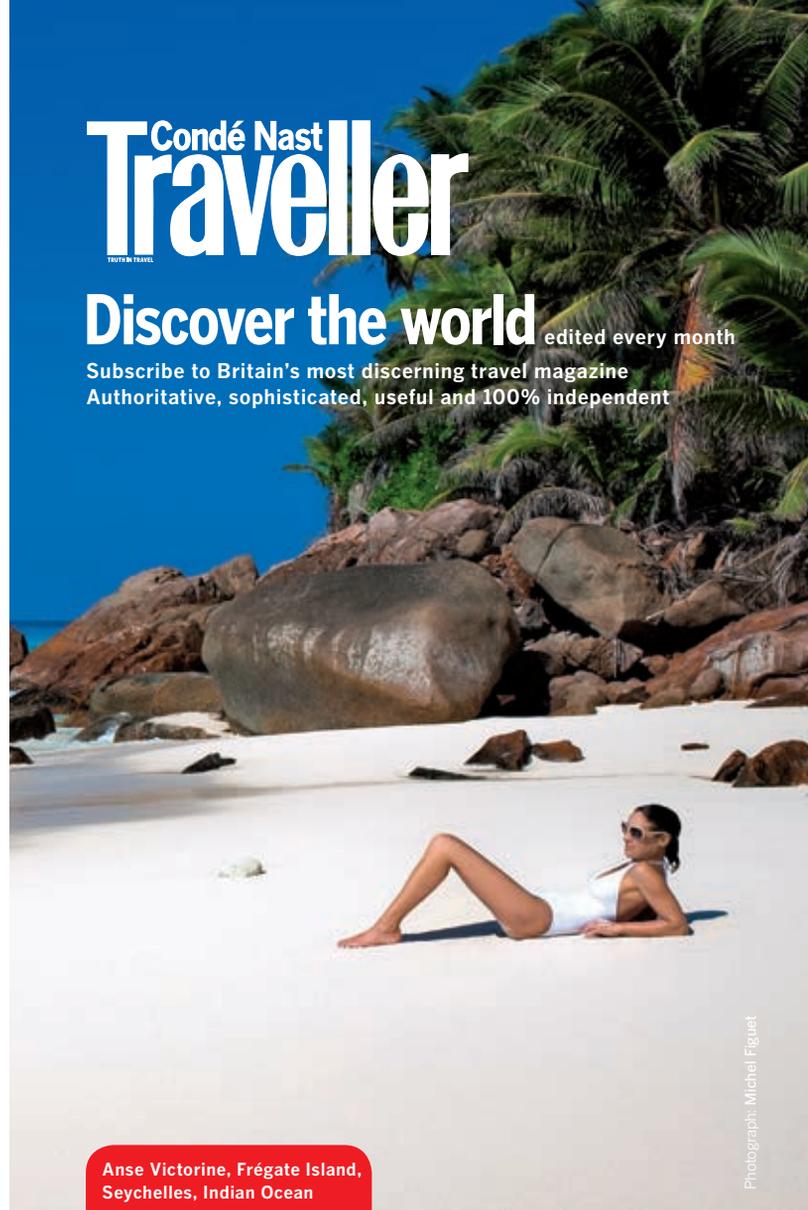
That walking-to-the-edge-of-the-Empire-State-Building feeling. The futility of life. Learning how to live in the present. The power - as Eckhart Tolle, one of Ford's favourite writers, puts it - of now. These are all subjects I feel I could discuss with Ford for at least another couple of hours, but sadly, it is time to go. He has to leave for New York tonight, a place he says he simply can't abide any more and cannot be in for more than a day without going crazy.

As we walk down the stairs, I think about the scene in the film in which George has to extricate himself from the ragingly drunk, ragingly amorous Charley. Is that how it is with a lot of his female friendships? Does he constantly find himself having to, as it were, peel us all off?

"You know," he sighs patiently, "first of all, in my current incarnation, nobody has come on to me - straight or gay - for the last 15 years. No one ever. *Ever*. A) because I'm in a relationship and everyone knows that. And B) because, well, I'm who I am, and I know it sounds weird, but when you reach a certain level of recognition, people get intimidated."

Kissing him goodbye - he does smell extremely good - I rack my brains trying to remember when it was we last met. How could this talented, complicated, courteous man have escaped my attention? How? ■

"A Single Man" is released on February 12



Photograph: Michel Figuet

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