

*My characters
are not the blokes
you're supposed to desire:
an ageing rock star,
a civil servant who can't
breathe around women...
or a squid'*

He doesn't believe women find him attractive.

He's constantly surprised by his acting success.

And he hides behind self-deprecating humour.

But Ariel Leve finds a crack in the armour of Bill Nighy.

Portraits by Nadav Kander

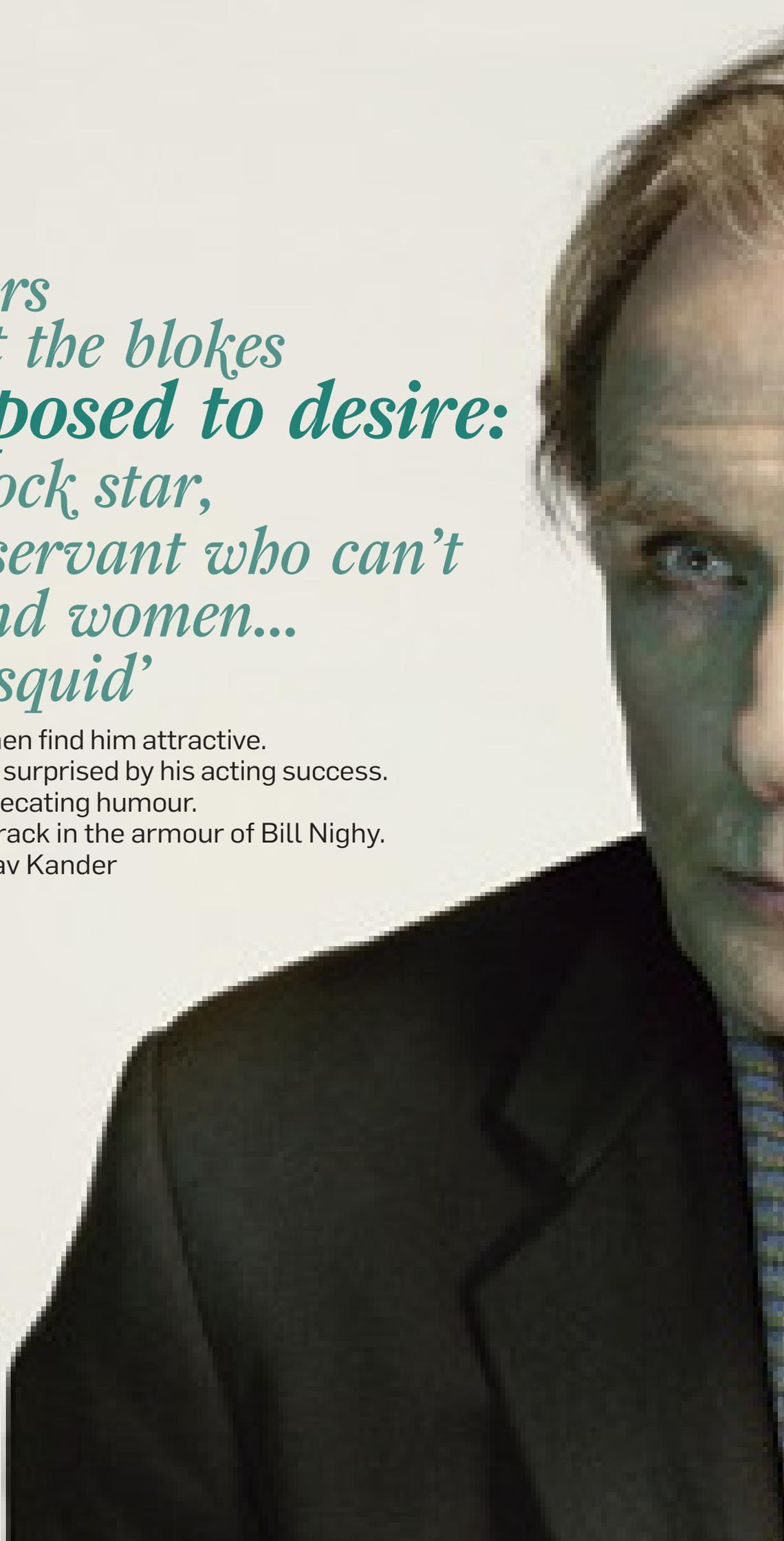
If you want to know what gets Bill Nighy really excited, put him in a room on a chair in front of a window at night. It would be dark and raining and the window

would need to overlook a square. There would be a tree. And from time to time, the windblown branches of the tree would hit the pane.

"Oh, baby!" he exclaims, throwing his head back as he describes this scene of atmospheric ecstasy. "Don't get me going."

There are two things that Nighy, 59, is insane about. Football and the weather. Bob Dylan too, but that's about intense dedication. A day without Dylan is a day unlived. Football and the weather are in totally different categories.

"When I was young, the weather used to drive me mental. I used to have to contain myself in a better-than-any-drug-you-ever-took way. I used to scream and leap if the winds got high —>>>>





and if there was rain attached to it, I'd become deranged. I used to run and jump in it, open my mouth, open my eyes, open my face to it. I dig it."

He pauses with instinctive comic timing. "Imagine me in Los Angeles. You open the curtains and you know nothing's going to happen. It's going to be precisely how it was yesterday and the day before that. So after a while it gets to be deeply unsettling. They don't got no weather."

Seated in a west London gastropub on a Friday, it is nearly noon. Today is a day off, but Nighy is still dressed in a suit. He woke up at 4am, lay awake in bed and then got up, made a cup of Yorkshire tea and listened to Dylan's *Never Say Goodbye*. He sat at the table with his cup of tea. Just listening? Yes, he says. Just listening. Like meditation.

He is worried about the headline of this article, which he suspects might arise from a conversation we had a few days earlier. "I can see it now," he says playfully, "*I'm not a weirdo.*"

It is the simple pleasures in life that give him a "bang" and he considers these pleasures the rewards of his success. For instance, being able to go to a cafe every morning and have breakfast. And dry cleaning. He's a fetishist when it comes to this. "If it stands still long enough, dry-clean it," he says.

He likes his shirts folded, because they're easy to pack, and bespoke suits are a reward he gives himself. He enjoys the ritual: talking about buttons and raised seams.

"Maybe here's my headline," he says: "I can only really operate in a decent lounge suit."

He wants to look his best. Shorts, for instance, are repellent. "Shorts? Shorts? It's not going to happen. It's like toga parts. You're never going to see me in a toga. I would starve rather than do the toga parts. Nobody except Brad Pitt can dignify a toga. Yes, it rules out Julius Caesar — but I've retired from Shakespeare."

But why would the weather be such a source of delight? His blue eyes have lit up, his voice is voluminous; his steak sits untouched.

"I dig the weather more than anything else. The only weather I don't like is, I'm not mad about the heat. I don't understand the impulse to rush out. I mean, I am *never* going to take my shirt off. That's never going to happen."

He says this with absolute conviction.

"And no, I don't go to the beach. I haven't been to the beach in a long time. I have no need to go to the beach. I've been working." He smiles. "That's my excuse. 'I was working — I couldn't make it to the beach.'"

He's not a great swimmer either, he says, and puts on a mocking accent. "We didn't 'ave a lot of swimmin' round our way. I don't remember anyone goin' swimmin'. I did think about learning to swim — but then I put the kettle on and had a double espresso."

And if I was drowning? "You'd die," he



declares. But not wanting to seem rude, he adds: “Well, no, I’d have a go.”

Who is this man whose sharp intellect is focused on keeping the conversation entertaining and amusing and would let it coast exclusively in this realm if he could? He is able to take the perennial British themes of weather and football — the two subjects least likely to hold my attention — and make them seem endlessly interesting and vibrant.

He will speak openly about his insecurities but then worry he’s said too much. Walking the line between pleasing himself and pleasing others is something he continues to work at.

He is good at being very, very funny, because he uses humour to deflect pain. He is careful too. There is a deep interior life there, but it is kept on another shelf. There is another Bill Nighy, not on display and just out of reach.

A few days earlier we had met in one of the restaurants at Fortnum & Mason, where Nighy ordered iced sparkling water. He discovered some time ago that, in terms of alcohol, he had not been issued with anything resembling brakes. It took him a while to acquire some, and this remains the central fact of his life. He now lives with the handbrake on.

He is explaining his “retirement” from Shakespeare. There are those who would point out that, for an actor, performing Shakespeare is a challenge, but that holds no appeal. “I’ve never been one for challenges. I’ve

hungry he doesn’t dream of roast lamb or Chilean sea bass, he dreams of beans on toast. Not that he thinks of it as comfort food. “Comfort food? I don’t understand that. Is there such a thing as discomfort food?”

He likes cafes. If he’s going to a new place for work, his first thought is: where is the good cafe? Coffee, too, is a big feature in his life. He remains “in caffeine management”.

He can cook — make a Sunday roast, for instance — but he never does. He has a dishwasher, but it’s never been used. He relies on work to structure his life and provide him with a routine. If he has a day off, it’s breakfast at a cafe with two sports sections. Crystal Palace is his team, but he tries to avoid tribalism. “I don’t really mind who’s playing. What you do is, you sit and wait for passages of great beauty. You wait for someone — the rare individual — who will do something in a billionth of a moment. It’s over before anyone can do the maths. You have to see it in slow motion to get the physics. There are players able to achieve something that very few people can. It involves great elegance and intelligence and grace — that’s when I get seriously interested. Zola, Beckham, Berbatov. These are people who can achieve incredible things but make it beautiful as they do it.”

He asks if I can take any more of the football talk. But before I can answer he is leaning over and talking directly into the tape recorder: “Can I please include Teddy Sheringham and Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes?” There is a separate

He is an affable man and generous with his time.

Yet he is complicated too.

The suit he wears every day is a suit of armour

been challenged enough. Just getting up in the morning is a challenge,” he says, and laughs.

“I quietly retired from Shakespeare in my bathroom once so that I don’t have to think about it any more. That way, when they come on the phone and say, ‘Would you like to play...?’, I’ve already made my decision.” He doesn’t like the obstacles of Shakespeare, feeling they’re out of his range. “But,” he adds, “that’s because, according to me, it’s all out of my range.”

The self-deprecation is charming and seems to come from a place of genuine disbelief. Nighy is continually surprising himself with his success, which must be exhausting. No wonder it’s easier to keep the subject above ground.

He holds up a bottle of Worcestershire sauce. “This is a vital ingredient.” Then he shakes it over the welsh rarebit and rhapsodises about the tang when it hits the cheesy toast and how it’s sublime. His granny used to make this dish for him and he has always adored it. When he’s

monologue for Wayne Rooney. Football gives Nighy pure, uncomplicated joy.

Back to his day off. After the cafe in the morning he’ll stroll to the bookshop. He will walk everywhere and then it’s the music shop. Those are the three things he will do. Mostly he’s browsing. And wondering ‘Where do you go after Marvin Gaye?’ He goes to the soul section. He’s looking for something new that will move him like Otis Redding.

Without question, Bob Dylan is the most important artist in his life. He dreams to Bob Dylan. Meditates to Bob Dylan. And listens every day. But other questions, deeper questions, remain unanswered.

Nighy is an affable man who is generous with his time and has an inclination to please. Yet he is complicated too, reluctant to open himself up and fiercely self-protective. The suit that he wears every day is a suit of armour.

When I tell him I’ve seen him strolling around west London on his own, he confirms that he ➤➤➤ 17

Top: as the tenacled villain Davy Jones in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*

Centre: as an ageing rock star in *Love Actually*

Bottom: in his latest film, *Valkyrie*, with Tom Cruise. (Nighy is third from left)



spends a lot of time alone. It began when he was young and “on tour”. It was circumstantial and part of his profession. But it’s in his nature too. He likes reading in public places and he can’t eat without a book. He is, in spite of often being in the company of many people, a solitary man.

If you are in Bill Nighy’s life, it’s unlikely you will get a call from him to make a plan. Even though he considers you his friend, he doesn’t phone people. “It’s a bad habit and I regret it. I’m am always grateful when people call me — I have some sort of resistance to making arrangements.”

Is this about avoiding connections? Or commitments? He doesn’t know. “I’ve just never been good at making those calls myself.”

Perhaps this is the residual effect of spending a large portion of his life in character and a large part of those characters — such as Lawrence in *Girl in the Café* — are pathologically isolated.

He loves to wander. And treasures his periods of solitude. He is not an extrovert, and in social situations “always feels slightly disarmed”. He is the sort of solitary person who is working hard not to seem solitary and is envious of those who can interact. “I have difficulty persuading myself that I’m on a guest list.”

Will it ever change? “Probably not. It’s getting late in the day.”

One of the reasons that Bill Nighy became an actor is that he knew what he didn’t want. He didn’t want to go to the same workplace every day. He didn’t want to know how much he would be making in 25 years’ time. And be in the same town and the same country. He was born in Surrey in 1949 and left school at 16. Hitchhiking, riding trains, reading — books and music are his true companions.

It would be easy to assume that with success comes a feeling of security. It doesn’t. This leads us to a discussion of achievement and whether he ever feels proud of what he has accomplished. He finds it difficult to answer and becomes more subdued. He takes his glasses off, then immediately puts them back on: he is trying to navigate between being private and wanting to be honest and accessible.

“One of the first things that occurs to me when I think of any success that I have had is: I wish my dad was alive. My mother got an opportunity to see some of the good things that happened to me professionally, but my father never did. I

‘I’ve never been able to take myself seriously as an object of desire or love. That’s the area where I have conceded’

would have liked it — it would have been the one thing he could have enjoyed. He deserved it. It would have given him enormous pride.”

His father, Alfred, died of a heart attack when Nighy was in his twenties.

“The reason I’m struggling is because I don’t necessarily want to involve readers of this paper over their Sunday breakfast in the aimless, anxious meanderings of my mind. Perspective doesn’t come easy to me. I tend to have — no, I have — a tendency to accentuate the negative.” His fear of appearing self-absorbed and negative

is, I suspect, a concern that he might appear ungrateful. There is also the problem of how this affects others who are close to him.

“You have to be discreet about it, otherwise it alarms people. I try not to feature it in conversation too much. It’s like being undercover.”

What he means is that being negative is less taxing on those around you if you develop a way to be funny and charming about it.

Nighy is aware of how he is perceived by others and has learnt to live with the disparity between how he experiences things and the reality. This is especially useful when it comes to his performances. He now accepts compliments.

To illustrate his point about how he views himself versus how others view him, he tells me a story about something that happens at least once a day: his phone will ring in the afternoon and someone will say: “Oh, my God, I’m so sorry — I’ve woken you up.”

They haven’t. He’ll be standing on a street corner or in his kitchen with a suit on making a cup of tea or learning lines in his trailer. There is something about his manner, the tone of his voice, that sounds as though he has just woken up. He’s bemused by this because he thinks he sounds strident.

For someone so self-critical to be an actor is trying, but he didn’t have any other ideas as to what to do. Nighy credits his longtime agent, Pippa Markham, for spotting early on that

he’d be more successfully employed in character roles than in ones where he’d have to take himself too seriously. “I’ve never been able to take myself seriously as an object of desire or love. If I have difficulty in any area, that’s the area where I have conceded.”

What seems to have escaped him is that he is considered by many women to be a sexy man not in spite of, but because of, his indifference to his appeal. When it’s pointed out that the roles he plays are often sexy men — indeed his role in *The Men’s Room* for the BBC almost 20 years ago pushed back the barriers of sexuality — he thanks me and suggests I get out more.

“They’re not the blokes you’re supposed to desire. They’re an old rock star or a civil servant who can’t breathe around women... or a squid.”

When I first met Nighy two years ago, he was acting on Broadway in *The Vertical Hour*, winning unanimous raves. But he wasn’t sure how he was doing, since he never reads reviews. Whatever the role — an ageing rock star in *Still Crazy* or *Love* —

With Diana Quick. After 27 years and a daughter together, they have gone their separate ways



Actually, or Davy Jones in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies — there is a sense that he is fearful it might be the last job. There still is. In his latest film, *Valkyrie*, about the plot to assassinate Hitler, he co-stars with Tom Cruise. But Nighy will avoid seeing himself on screen. “What’s in it for me?” he asks.

So what is he confident about, if not his talent or his sex appeal? He is thoughtful before explaining: “I’m very confident about... beauty. I’m confident about what I think is beautiful. I don’t bother people about it much, but I do think I probably have unerring taste.”

He laughs, a bit surprised by the bravado of his answer.

I’ve noticed that often Nighy will begin with “Like everybody” when answering a question. It’s a judicious approach, as it universalises the scenario and allows him to hide from the question in the crowd.

When he is asked how he is doing personally, he responds: “I’m pretty okay. Like everyone. It’s a funny old world.” Then he admits he is avoiding the question.

It is clear that, despite wanting to please in the interview, his personal life is off limits. He is no longer living with his companion of 27 years, the actress Diana Quick, with whom he has a daughter. There is zero enthusiasm for discussing this, other than to say that they remain great friends. “I think it would be bad form to trouble your readers with the ups and downs of my personal life.”

When I mention that they might not be troubled, he asks me to turn the tape recorder off and during this time explains further. His reasons are less about being difficult or even an issue of privacy. They are about not wanting to be vulgar. He thinks of it as bad taste. Discussing the details of his personal life would be a bit like wearing shorts in public. It’s never going to happen.

Later, when he speaks more about his father, his dignity and his decency, it will become clear where this comes from.

Nighy lives alone now and doesn’t mind it, possibly because he is never around. He says this appeals to him. Knowing there is nowhere that he belongs can bring a sense of freedom.

When he was young he often didn’t have anywhere to live — he’d sleep on sofas and on floors and wait for someone to give him a job. It was mostly because he had no money and was disorganised. But he also liked not owning anything and he hated carrying things. Whatever he owned he would leave behind. He would hitchhike and carry a book, and that would be it. He still doesn’t own things. He doesn’t own a

home, doesn’t own a car, and doesn’t own furniture. He rents the flat he is in, which presumably came furnished.

He becomes, he says, institutionalised in a hotel room almost immediately. And he will keep the curtains closed at all times. He has drawn the curtains on some of the most beautiful views in the world.

Like Howard Hughes? “Oh, come on!” he winces. “I bite my nails. I can’t be Howard Hughes!”

He then becomes serious. “I like the shapes on the drapes more than I like the horizon. I dig the horizon if I’m walking and out and about, but if I’m in a room I like it to be lamp-lit.” He keeps the shutters closed in his rented home. “I can never think of a good reason to open them.”

Since we are seated next to a large window

It’s bad taste. Discussing his personal life would be a bit like wearing shorts in public. It’s never going to happen

with a vast amount of daylight, I ask if it’s bothering him. “No,” he says, “This is all right because we’re in a cafe. And I’m not a weirdo.”

We leave the restaurant and head upstairs, past the wall of Fortnum & Mason jams and the stacks of hampers. We are standing in front of the espresso machines on the second floor and he has chosen an Italian model — stainless steel, clean lines and shiny. It could be an art object on his stove top and I get the impression it will go unused. He has offered to buy me one and expresses mock outrage when I decline. “Oh, why not? What will happen? It’s not illegal. You won’t go to jail.”

We are parting soon and his mood is buoyant. Being around the Christmas lights, the

jams, the chocolate — he is in his element.

Someone once told Nighy that he has to reinvent himself every day, and that stuck with him. It’s a lot of work. Old habits die hard and therapy doesn’t help some of the patterns that are hard-wired in the brain. “It can’t touch that shit,” he says. “You learn to be amused by it.”

There is a part of him that can’t be reassured. When asked if he is a hypochondriac, he says “No,” then smiles. “But I could be...”

Two days have passed and I’m thinking about some of the things Bill Nighy said about his father. How he was principled to an extent that cost him. He behaved decently and honestly and he believed that was beautiful for its own sake. He was a romantic.

Texts arrive. Nighy is on location in Norfolk for a movie he is filming with Emily Blunt in which he plays a lonely middle-aged hitman. He is in his trailer with the rain on the roof. It is dark and the wind is strong. He is loving it.

In one of the texts he writes: “Bob Dylan is like Marmite. He divides the world.”

In another he wishes to add to his remarks about this father. What he writes, in a text message from his mobile phone, is as follows:

“He incorporated into his general style an enthusiasm for manners and courtesy which went beyond their usefulness in terms of social strategy. A quiet elegant man not famous for his dancing still claimed my mother’s heart above all others and she by all accounts could really move. The parish priest would shadow them as they courted to discourage their ‘outside the faith’ romance. It did not deter him, and they sought and were given a special dispensation from Rome. Which is what was required then. He was apprenticed into the

motor trade when it was a pioneering affair with many colourful and devoted men. He had two long-playing records, one of which was *White Christmas* by Bing Crosby, naturally. The other was the start of the *Le Mans*, which he would play me, counting through the sound of the gears. Not my mother’s favourite record. She couldn’t dance to that.”

He ends by saying that his father was an original man, “a rare and remarkable man who remains the major influence in my life”.

Does it ever feel as though success matters if the person who matters most doesn’t get to witness your life at its best? Perhaps without his father to enjoy the success he has earned, something will always be missing. That he is ➤ 21

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unable to share it with him is a lingering sorrow, but paying homage to him and emulating his father's standards of dignity and integrity is an opportunity for Nighy to show his gratitude.

There are some actors who require constant attention. Even when they are off screen or offstage, they are still performing. Nighy doesn't need to reveal himself — interviews aren't easy for him, because the craving to be known isn't there.

"I don't know how other people perceive me. We all have slightly the wrong idea about each other, and that's fine. I used to concern myself that people would go away with the wrong idea about me — but I know they already have the wrong idea to some degree."

He's back from Norfolk and we are lingering over coffee, having returned to the subject of where a sense of accomplishment comes from. "I'm in a profession that couldn't be more uncertain. To make a living as an actor — I am clearly appreciative. I never expected to be on TV or in a film. It's all gravy to me. I'm never unaware of what's happened, and it means a lot to me that people like the stuff I've done. It's extraordinary. I don't take it lightly. I spent lots of years trying to retire from being an actor because I found it so difficult and alarming and because I was so self-conscious that I was disabled in professional terms.

"I used to stand around looking moody and hope that it would be mistaken for some type of interior landscape, and it was tough. And therefore any degree of acceptance is a tremendous thing for me. It is a big, big deal. I have to stop and take a second and draw attention to the fact that I'm a lucky man. In certain areas of my life, things have worked out. I mean, they *are* working out."

The switching of tense is intentional. There is a fear he'll jinx things and there is the sense that, without work, he would be lost.

"The good news — and the bad news — is my progress so far has seriously exceeded any expectations I might have had. My expectations were exceeded

a decade ago. And it got better. And then it got even better. It's breathtaking. There was a moment where I thought, I have everything I could ever want. What do I need? Double it? Triple it? Well, no, I don't need to. The celebrations can begin."

He is pleased with his level of recognition, because it is manageable and he's in a position where he is identifiable but it's not oppressive. "I'm not a film star — I'm that guy. It's just as it should be and it's just as I like it. It's a nice level of notoriety. People think, 'Oh, is that Bill *Nighy*?' " he says, highlighting the mistake.

He tells a story. When the film studios send top-secret scripts to actors, they put the actor's name diagonally across every page.

"So I got this script for a film the other day," he says, "and these people wanted me to be in the film. And it had the word NIGHTY written on every single page. That kind of puts it in perspective."

He has no plans to stop working but he doesn't have goals. He never has. In the early days he was in crisis management all the time. The goal was to get through the day. Get through the job, the mortgage payment and the school fees. "It was month to month. Goals are a luxury."

When he worries, which he does often, it's not about anything specific. "I pretty much worry about everything. But lately I'm working on swinging on down the avenue and seeing what gives."

How's that going? "Well, I have good days and bad days."

On many levels, and in many ways, Nighy is not wanting to disappoint. And he doesn't. Like the footballers he idolises, you have to see him in slow motion to appreciate him. He is an explorer — inside and out; an emotional nomad who is still on the journey, dressed in his suit of armour, which is cracked but still useful.

In the end, he is unable to come up with his headline and he exhales. "I'm afraid I haven't got one. I'd love not to have a headline. Not having a headline is better than having one, don't you think? Unless you've got a really great headline — and I haven't." He pauses. "Not yet." ■

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