

# 'People doubted I could do it'

Bradley Cooper talks exclusively about the perils of playing The Elephant Man on stage



## HOW TO BEAT THE TOUTS

Big bands fight back against websites that resell tickets

Bradley Cooper talks to Tom Shone

# TWIST IN THE TALE

The Hollywood star has been obsessed with the Elephant Man since he was 12. It's driven him to appear in a loincloth, body contorted, on the West End stage

Photograph by Sara Krulwich  
/NYT/Redux/Byevine



for coffee at Manhattan's Greenwich hotel a few weeks later. He is dressed in sweatpants and a woollen skiing hat stitched with the words No Sleep Until London — a gift from a cast member, referring to the show's West End debut this week — and accompanied by the show's director, Scott Ellis, whom the actor first met back when he was in the television show *Alias*. The two men ply the fond, quick-witted banter of old friends who have just had their friendship strengthened by a huge hit on

**Getting physical** Bradley Cooper, left, and Anthony Heald on stage in *The Elephant Man*. Right, Cooper in rehearsal

Broadway: the first production in the history of the Booth to gross more than \$1m in a week, their *Elephant Man* recouped its \$3.1m investment in a mere 6½ weeks.

"Quite a few people said, 'Wait a second. You're at this stage in your career where you have some options.

You're going to take, basically, a year out of your life right now to do a play? And then not only are you going to do it once, but you're going to do it again?" says Cooper, referring to an earlier version of the production they tried out in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Why the trial run in Williamstown?

"Oh, but it wasn't a trial run," says Cooper. "We never in a million years would have thought any of this would have happened."

"Yeah, no trial run," says Ellis, equally adamant. "I remember being on the phone and going, 'You know what? This is probably going to be a really big bomb here, but you know what? It's three weeks. We'll be out of there really quick.'"

"So many people thought it was a bad idea," Cooper says.

"Honestly, our friends were, like..." "Our friends were, like, 'Why would you do that?'" says Ellis, completing his sentence for him.

"Guys, don't..." "Don't do that." Why, I ask?

"I guess people, quite honestly, had doubts about whether I could do it," says Cooper, downshifting into more serious mode. "I mean, what had they seen me do? Maybe *The Hangover*? I get it. I wouldn't fault anyone for saying, 'You're going to play the *Elephant Man*?' His voice rises incredulously, breaking into laughter.

He gets points for honesty. He's a smart guy, with an agile, monkeyish mind, capable of switching between sincerity and flippancy in a nanosecond, somewhat bewitched by his own dexterity. You want funny? He can do funny. You want serious? He can do serious. You want both? With thesee on top?

It certainly explains his career, which has flipped ambidextrously from comedies to dramas and back at will. Meeting him, the performances of his that come most immediately to mind are his fast-talking Energizer Bunnies for David O Russell, in *Silver Linings Playbook* and *American Hustle*.

# W

ho knew

The *Elephant Man* was so good for a laugh? As is traditional for stage actors playing Joseph Merrick, the circus freak briefly feted by Victorian high society before his death, at 27, in 1890, the movie actor Bradley Cooper uses no prostheses to play the part, instead employing his body's putty-like powers — gait, posture, diction — to suggest Merrick's monstrous deformity. Standing on the stage of the Booth Theatre on Manhattan's 45th Street in no more than a loincloth, the star most famous for his roles in *Silver Linings Playbook* and *American Sniper* twists his body like a gnarled old branch, one arm entirely dead, one hip dropping, leaning most of his weight on a cane. His mouth crunches up on one side of his face, so that his words slurp out of a corner, like water around a plughole.

And what emerges? Unlikely as it may sound: jokes. Not funny ha-ha jokes. Not thigh-slappers. Not rib-ticklers. But oblique, wispish observations on the hypocrisies of the Victorian society that has so embraced him. "If your mercy is so cruel," asks Merrick of an orderly's firing, "what do you have for justice?"

There are many actors in attendance on the night I see the show — including Michael Sheen, Sarah Paulson and Billy Crudup, who last played the role on Broadway, here presumably to see how the new boy fares. Mark Hamill and David Bowie have taken on the part, too.

In the 1980 David Lynch film version, John Hurt played Merrick as a naïf, almost childlike in his eagerness to be patronised, grateful for the human contact it brought him, but Cooper locates an element of irony in his rasping diction and offers a glancing rebuke to the bishops, aristocrats and assorted dignitaries gathered around him. He makes Merrick a wit.

"Oddly enough, the play is actually very funny," says Cooper when we meet



The performance that is most unlike him, on the other hand, is his terse, shutdown killer in Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*, the film that turned into a box-office juggernaut as rehearsals were starting for *The Elephant Man*. The play was originally slated for the spring of 2014, until the murder of Chris Kyle, whom Cooper played in Eastwood's film, put *American Sniper* on a fast track at Warner Bros. The two productions remained curiously entwined, with Cooper cancelling two shows at the beginning of the year to fly back to Los Angeles and attend the Directors Guild of America awards, in support of Eastwood, and later to attend the Oscars.

"Just two nights," says Cooper, anxious to contain any hint of A-list prerogative. He caught the subway to the theatre every night, he says, and was "incredibly moved" when his *Elephant Man* cast showed up for the *Sniper* premiere. "The entire cast is going to London," Ellis says. "Bradley said, 'I will only go if everyone goes.'"

Few theatrical actors, even leads, could ever wield such power, of course, but if Cooper's fame feels a little like the elephant in the room, so to speak, this isn't entirely irrelevant to any discussion of *The Elephant Man*. Bernard Pomerance's original play is, in part, about celebrity. Merrick is hoisted aloft by a society eager to see, in his twisted visage, a flattering reflection of its own benevolence. He is the first cause célèbre of the Victorian liberal class, and it's no accident that he is rehabilitated through his contact with another famous person, an actress, Mrs Kendal (played in the new production by a delightful Patricia Clarkson), who understands more than anyone what it is like to be gawped at. Merrick has come a long way, from circus freak to Victorian gent to post-Birdman Broadway spectacle: roll up! Roll up! Come see *People* magazine's "sexiest man alive" in a loincloth!

Did self-consciousness about his own celebrity intrude upon the performance or layer into it, I ask Cooper.

"I did think about it, especially in the beginning. I thought, 'Well, if I'm standing there in this makeshift diaper in front of people, there is a chance that people are going to start laughing.' Then I thought, 'Well, if they start laughing, that's actually fuel, because how many times has Merrick been laughed at?' I used to tell myself that all the time. I thought, 'No matter what they do, even if they throw something at you, that is all perfect.' To be honest with you, my whole life I've never been somewhere where it was, like, 'Yeah, of course you could do that.' It's always been challenging. *Elia Kazan* used to say, 'If you're going to

There is nothing to hide behind. It's happening right now

audition to play a cowboy, show up with the horse."

This is agreeably workmanlike. His physical transformation in *The Elephant Man* notwithstanding, Cooper has never given off much of an actor-boy, crash-dieting-for-his-craft vibe. Like many who came to their fame late, he still has something of an outsider's perspective on the Hollywood funhouse — a dose of Clooneyesque humility. When he talks about being "blown away" by the Lynch film *The Elephant Man*, aged 12, the acting figures relatively low down the list ("It was everything: the fact that it was in black-and-white, the subject matter, the performances, the music — the *Adagio for Strings*"). He was late to acting, discovering it only at graduate school aged 23, and, like

» Clooney, found success first on television, in the series *Alias*. By the time *Wedding Crashers* put him on the map, he was 30, and 34 by *The Hangover*.

"In some ways, it's late in the game, but it just felt natural to me," he says. "I was there when Ben Stiller came to our school and talked about how sometimes you're thinking, 'Why aren't things happening? I want to do this. I feel this inside', but that really *this* only happens when you're ready. And then once he realised he was ready, it's much easier — as long as certain things have to happen. You have a work ethic and love for what you do. And then it's just a matter of luck."

He has a strange, if endearing, propensity for giggling fits on television, most recently on Jimmy Fallon's late-night chat show, where he and Fallon, discussing *The Elephant Man* in funny hats, corpsed for more than 10 minutes, unable to get a single question-and-answer through their tears. ("We have to get through this," Fallon whimpers at one point, staring off into space to regain his composure.) It's a fun YouTube clip, but did he worry he had...

"Made a mistake?" says Cooper, finishing the question for me. "No, I never did, because I know that what motivated me — and, still to this day, why we're actually doing it, crazily enough — is a pure love for this guy."

His sincerity is not in doubt. He keeps a photograph of Merrick, dressed in a suit, which he kisses each night before he goes on stage. I wonder, though, if the giggling fits aren't a kind of celebrity bends — a weird consequence of his almost vertical ascent. From his supporting role in *Wedding Crashers* to his leads for Russell and his Oscar-nominated turn for Eastwood, Cooper has achieved in 10 years what most actors take 20 to do, leveraging each opportunity into a platform to reach the next pear on the tree.

Like all aspiring Hollywood hyphe-nates, he now wants to direct. When I interviewed Ben Affleck a few years back, he told me that Cooper's notes on

early cuts of *The Town* and *Argo* were among the best he had ever received — "really smart, really insightful". A few days after I meet Cooper, it is announced that he is in negotiations with Warner Bros to direct a remake of *A Star Is Born*, starring Beyoncé, a clear sign that the studio is grooming him much the way it groomed Affleck.

Right now, he's overseeing post-production on *Adam Jones*, in which he is reunited with Sienna Miller as a Marco Pierre White-inspired chef, for which he met White, Marcus Wareing and Gordon Ramsay by way of research. "Oh man, he and Marcus were invaluable for this movie, really just wonderful," he says. "That world is just unbelievable. It really opened up your country to me."

So he will know where to eat when he's in London. He will also be shipping over the inversion table he used every night during the Broadway run of *The Elephant Man*: hanging upside down like a bat for 10 minutes every evening in his hotel to straighten out his spine. (Pomerance's published script warns: "No one with any history of back trouble should attempt the part of Merrick as contorted.")

He has thought a lot about bringing the play to London, and what that will mean to the performance, emotionally. "My intuition, my gut feeling, is that London is going to be very influential," he says. "You're in the place that it's set. Not only that, but we're American going over there, like Merrick, almost, in a way — 'the other'. I think all of that is going to impact us in an enormous way."

He pauses. "The great thing about theatre is that no matter what someone thinks of you, when you're on stage you're starting at zero. There is nothing to hide behind. It's happening right now, in front of them. Every day it's 'no. Show up now. Be available.' That's what theatre does.

"You can't hide behind the movie you did that they can go see in the multiplex on 14th Street, you know?" **E**

*The Elephant Man is at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, London SW1, from Tuesday*



**Shutdown killer** Bradley Cooper as Chris Kyle in *American Sniper*

**ST DIGITAL**

**Watch the best, worst and weirdest of Bradley Cooper**

On tablet, or at [thesundaytimes.co.uk/culture](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/culture)