

“The past is sealed.
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go back there”

Sir Anthony Hopkins

*The actor reflects on life and his film *The Father**

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From his home tucked between the Santa Monica mountains and the Pacific Ocean, Sir Anthony Hopkins likes to open up Google Maps and tour the streets of Margam, the steel town in south Wales where he was born on New Year’s Eve, 83 years ago. “I’ll start at my grandfather’s house, go up Caernarfon Road, then I’ll travel all over Port Talbot. It’s just a game.”

As a child he liked to hang on to the pole at the back of the buses that took him into Port Talbot, impatient for things to happen. And he’s still impatient, both with life — “Just get on with it. We’re all going to die” — and with himself. “I’ve had a couple of minor injuries from moving too fast, doing too much,” he says. “My wife tells me to slow down, and I do listen.”

When he arrived in America four decades ago he was a restless young man with an inferiority complex who felt as though he fitted in nowhere. Now one of the most revered and celebrated actors in Hollywood, he is tipped to win a Golden Globe tonight, and an Oscar in April, for his latest film, *The Father*.

The film chronicles a father’s descent into dementia, while his daughter, played with bone-weary stoicism by Olivia Colman, frets and fusses over him. The script by Christopher Hampton is based on the award-winning play by the French writer Florian Zeller, who makes his directorial debut. From the outset *The Father* knocks its audience sideways by subtly subverting all the things we think we know. Inside the suffocating confines of an elegant apartment, a single afternoon stretches on in an endless cycle of bewilderment. No matter how hard Anthony — Zeller has given Hopkins’s character not only his name but his notable birthday — tries to hang on to what’s real, the ground constantly shifts beneath his feet. And it’s the same for the viewer. Just when you feel you’ve been given some reliable signposting, the timeline loops away again, forcing you to inhabit

Anthony’s disorientation and confusion as he lurches from furious defiance to frailty.

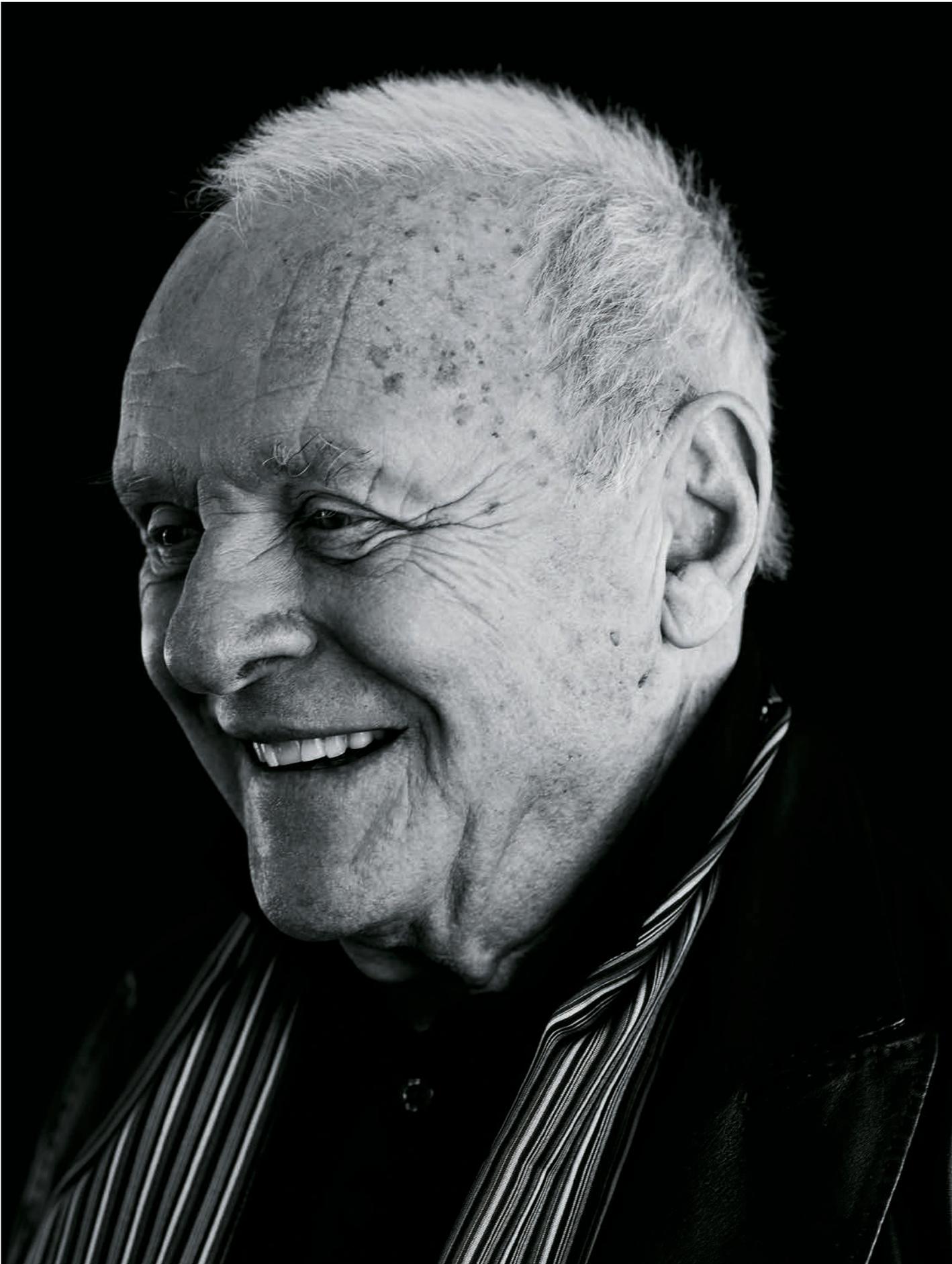
The result leaves you stretching every synapse and sinew to piece the narrative together — which is exactly as Zeller intended. Raised by his grandmother, who started to show signs of dementia when he was 15, the idea was never just to tell a story about the condition — it was to have the audience actively experience it from the inside.

There’s no redemptive note here, and precious little sentimentality. Dementia makes Anthony disinhibited: one minute charming and erudite, the next unbearably cruel. It’s a film not just about the limits of love as the parent-child relationship is flipped over, but the horrible truth that suffering and forbearance is not endless either.

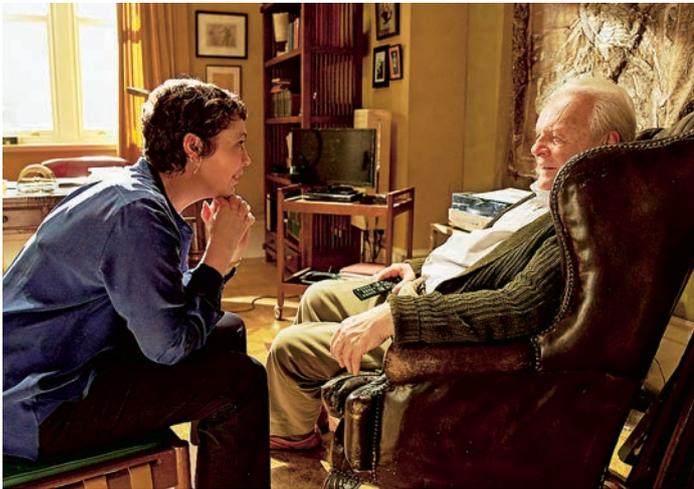
Hopkins is mesmerising in the role — you don’t doubt all his feelings are real — but he says it was an easy one for him to play. “It was no big deal to act old, because I am old,” he says. “There’s a trick to it, you see. When you arrive on set you have to have total confidence in yourself. In my tiny little kingdom I have to be king.” But he does concede that while he leaves most roles at the door when filming ends, this one has stayed with him. “It’s made me more aware of mortality and the fragility of life, and it’s made me judge people less. We’re all fragile, we’re all broken. We can point fingers and condemn other people — it’s so easy because the world is a madhouse — I try to keep my mouth shut and enjoy life as best as I can.”

As he filmed the final scenes he suddenly had a crystal-clear memory of his own father, who was a baker, in hospital, dying. “I remember this once strong, robust man, declining and depressed — and fearful. He was irritable and irascible, he didn’t want fuss, and I’m a bit like that. I looked at the photograph of me with my two daughters on the bedside table on the [film]set and the radio and the little notepad and I knew what he ➤➤➤

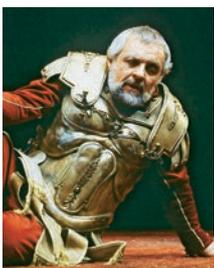
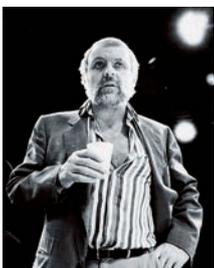
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Left: in *The Father* with Olivia Colman. Right: in *The Silence of the Lambs* with Anthony Heald. Below: in 1969; at the National Theatre c1987; in *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1987



felt at the end. The fear. The unutterable bleakness and sadness and loneliness. We all pretend not to be, but we're all lonely. Success is all fine, it's a way to survive, but at the end, we're all desperately, desperately alone. And that is the most painful and eloquent thing for me."

The mention of the photograph of his on-screen daughters prompts me to ask him about his own experiences of being a father — he has an only daughter, born in 1968 to his first wife, Petronella Barker, who he is reportedly estranged from. "Taboo!" he growls. "I want no word of that." We move on, though I wonder if his reluctance to reflect on that relationship is indicative of a broader outlook. Later, while discussing XXX, he tells me: "The past is sealed. I have regrets. I wouldn't want to go back there, but you can't undo things. You have to get on with life — live it and don't look back."

Hopkins grew up a solitary, mistrustful only child who found it difficult to make friends. "I was slow academically, bad at sports. I couldn't figure out what anyone was talking about. A couple of years ago, my wife asked an old teacher, now in his nineties, 'What was Tony like at school?' And he said, 'Hopeless!'" My heart breaks for this little boy who used to stand at the top of the street, chewing his sleeve while all the other kids played down the other end. His parents seemed at a loss to help. "I had no confidence in myself at all. I was absolutely convinced I was stupid."

His mother sent him to art classes with a young woman called Bernice Evans in her studio above Port Talbot post office. "One day I was drawing a pirate when her boyfriend came up the stairs. He looked over my shoulder and said, 'I like his boots.'" It was Richard Burton, then an aspiring actor. Years later, Hopkins trudged to Burton's home on Caradog Street to ask for his autograph; Burton was by now a huge movie star. "As he drove away in his grey Jag, I thought, that's what I want to be one day."

He's sure the encounter planted the seed of ambition in his brain — after several years in repertory he was invited to join the National Theatre by Sir Laurence Olivier, who became his mentor. "I suppose he took a shine to me because I was physically strong and I was daring and pushy and I worked hard," Hopkins says. He still works incredibly hard — he'll go over each scene exactly 250 times, training his brain like an athlete until the script feels completely natural. "I have that kind of mind, I'm obsessive. I learnt the foundation of any discipline I have in the theatre, but I was never a team player. I wasn't a good company member because I didn't fit in. I didn't belong anywhere. In those days I couldn't wait to get out of the dressing room to the pub next door."

Olivier also saw his destructive streak and worried about his heavy drinking, so paid for him to have a session with a psychiatrist. In the not-so-distant past, Hopkins called his alcoholism "a great gift" — "because wherever I go, the abyss follows me", he told an interviewer in 2018. I suspect it feels less like a gift now, but he still describes that void as a motivator.

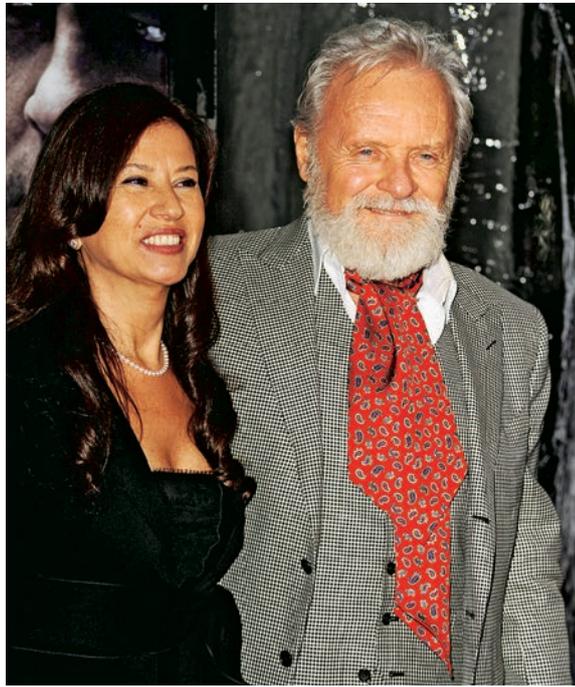
"Looking back, I have no pride in myself because I caused a lot of damage," he tells me. "It's lethal to be around drunks and I was one of those. But while I wouldn't want to repeat those years, because I hurt people, the restlessness and anger was a driving force in my life. It moved me places. I made some crazy decisions, which turned out to be beneficial."

He played Dr Martin Dysart in Peter Shaffer's psychological thriller *Equus* on Broadway in 1974 and loved the energy of New York and the bars that never closed. "Terrible, wonderful places. I'd be in the bar, swigging away before anyone else had left the theatre. I thought it was fun. And it was, in a strange way." But he has also said he was a menace to work with because he was always hungover and at parties he could empty an entire room by insulting everyone there. He doesn't remember much about it now. "Except that it causes hell on earth if you're around someone like me."

"Booze is a wonderful way of checking out," he says. "It has an instant effect — that's why we do it. In my case I had these peculiar conflicts — I didn't feel I fitted into my own skin. I felt deeply guilty and ashamed and not worthy of the luck I'd had as an actor."

It's only after we've ended the call I remember that Burton, who practically drank himself to death, had similarly ambivalent feelings about his own talent. Towards the end of his life he admitted feeling

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From left: receiving his knighthood at Buckingham Palace in 1993; with his wife, Stella, 2010

ashamed of being an actor. Hopkins, however, got sober on December 29, 1975, after waking up in a hotel room in Arizona with no clue how he’d got there. He went to an AA meeting and hasn’t touched a drop since “nor have I felt the urge to. When I asked for help and I realised I wasn’t alone, that there were thousands of people like me, all my fears began to dissolve.”

When I ask him how he managed to stop drinking and stay sober, an extraordinary achievement, he suddenly stops again. “The boozing is over and done with. I’m not a goody-goody. It’s a boring subject.”

On December 29 he sent a message to his 750,000 Twitter followers celebrating 45 years of sobriety. The video quickly went viral. We circle back to the subject of booze often — lockdown has pushed large numbers of people down the slippery slope towards problem drinking.

“It’s a compulsion that eases the discomfort of living and there are so many millions of people at this moment in great discomfort,” he sympathises. “People are stuck in high-rise apartments with children, with nothing to do. The pressure is beyond belief, so of course they are going to seek relief. The hallmark of anyone who is hooked on cigarettes or booze or food, whatever the addiction is, is the stubbornness. You think, ‘I can do it.’ Well, you can’t really. Phone services. Do anything you can to get a connection with someone because it’s a form of suicide. Having given up, I found my life only improved.”

The past few decades have been “a ball”. The success of *The Silence of the Lambs* — he won an Oscar in 1992 for his portrayal of the homicidal psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter — allowed him to let go of some of the voices in

his head that said: “You’re stupid, you’re no good, you don’t deserve it.”

“As soon as I read the script I understood how to make him adorable and cruel,” he says. Somehow while telling me how he “stripped Clarice of her masks”, he becomes Lecter and I can feel my heart rate quicken. No actor on earth does enigmatic malevolence like Hopkins. There have been numerous accolades since, including a Bafta fellowship, the Cecil B DeMille award and a knighthood — surely the ultimate symbol of acceptance. Does all this make him feel he finally belongs? “No!” He booms. “Once you think you’re a little bit special you’ve had it, because you’re not. Enjoy what gifts you’ve been given, don’t get above yourself.”

He married his third wife, Columbian-born Stella Arroyave, in 2003. Stella, 64, “is fanatical about masks and handwash — she really looks after me and she doesn’t allow negativity. If I say something self-defeating like, ‘I’m stupid,’ she says, ‘Cancel out. You’re not stupid, you’re different.’”

Thinking about that lonely little boy who couldn’t piece anything together, I ask if he has been assessed for ADHD or autism spectrum disorder, but he waves the notion away. “They’re just labels, aren’t they?” Time has taught him to self-deprecate less, but it was Stella who gave him the confidence to paint. His large landscapes, surreal portraits and abstract works fetch thousands of dollars. She acts, directs, runs their company, Margam Fine Art, and oversees his social media accounts. “She has the most extraordinary business mind. I don’t have the desire to do half the things she does.”

He doesn’t hang out with other actors. “I like to have a laugh but I’m not overly gregarious. In the old days I’d be at parties and in bars, getting smashed and blacking out. Now I’m quite happy being on my own. When the producer says at the beginning of a film, ‘We’re going to have dinner tonight to get to know one another,’ I think, uh-oh. But I go along with it. Then you look around the room and you think, no one else wants to be here either. We’re all pretending. It’s normal and human.”

He has had his Covid job and is looking forward to getting away, but lockdown with Stella and their rescue cats and dogs hasn’t felt like hardship. “I get up every morning, I eat my oatmeal, I go to the gym, my wife goes for a swim. I paint, I read, I play complicated pieces on the piano because I want to keep my brain active. I play with my cat. I’m not interested in what’s going on outside.” Would it have been possible to explain to his younger, troubled self that he would find such contentment? “Ah, no, that comes with age,” he smiles. “It’s only really settled into the granules of my DNA in the last ten years.”

He thinks about death “but not morbidly — I just hope I’m at peace with everything when the time comes”. Paradoxically, he finds enormous comfort in his own insignificance. “On my first day free of booze, a friend asked, ‘How do you feel?’ I said, inadequate. And then it hit me that of course we all are. None of us is of any importance at all. In this vast multi-universe where we all exist, we are nothing. It goes back to Socrates — I know that I know nothing. That was the single greatest moment of freedom I have ever felt.” ■

The Father is in cinemas from June 11