

Details

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For Men

Inside the
Pentagon's
Closet

Armani
on Affordable
Style

Stephen Saban's
Moscow
Nights

+ PM Dawn
Lisa Stansfield
The Cult

Go
Oldm
JFK's Secret V



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Killer instincts

Punks. Psychos. Outcasts. Gary Oldman has played them all. Now the British actor gets under the skin of Lee Harvey Oswald and Count Dracula. Chris Heath investigates.

gARY OLDMAN HAD A dream last night. He killed a seven-year-old boy. The boy was wearing a gray school sweater and shorts. Gary shot him through the head. Twice. He fell to the ground and Gary shot him once more through the top of his skull . . .

LUNCHTIME. THE CAST OF FRANCIS FORD Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* are enjoying lunch. Around the table are Cary Elwes, Keanu Reeves, Richard E. Grant, Anthony Hopkins, Winona Ryder, Gary Oldman. Maybe you imagine these actors engaged in high-minded discourse.

Wrong.

"Snyerrrrr Byuuuppp!" quips Cary, pushing his hands away from his body in a from-the-chest basketball pass.

"Wnnggggg Omolllll," counters Richard, catching and passing on.

"Wyooooop RaHHHH!!!" says Gary, breaking off from our discussion of his latest film, Oliver Stone's *JFK*.

"Ting Byattt!" Keanu utters, lobbing his issue toward Anthony Hopkins.

Hopkins looks up quizzically, gamely proffers a nonsense grunt in response, then sighs, in a stage whisper, "Drugs."

It's actually an acting exercise called "sound bouncing," where you pass unlikely sounds around the room as though they had a physical manifestation.

Gary and I continue our conversation. Winona has been chipping in, and only belatedly notices my tape recorder. Unnecessarily, but rather sweetly, she apologizes for interrupting.

"We're talking about the canon," Gary tells her. "The work."

She smiles and nods. She knows the story. "Gary Oldman," she says, as if it were a headline. "Intense Actor."

GARY OLDMAN: INTENSE ACTOR. YOU KNOW what Winona means. It is the reputation he has carved for himself. And when Gary Oldman takes on a role it's as though he has to distort the fabric of reality around him to allow it to happen. "Maybe there's a dark place I have to go," he says. "I've been there before. A lot of my roles are incredibly depressing."

Almost exclusively depressing. Look at them. A fucked-up punk rocker who ODs (*Sid and Nancy*). A homosexual playwright, Joe Orton, twisted by his success, his promiscuity, and the lover he no longer needs (*Prick Up Your Ears*). A demented man-child who mixes lascivious desire and baby talk (*Track 29*). A Korean-war veteran who has failed suicide and is abandoned in a horrific mental prison (*Chattahoochee*). An imprisoned London youth balancing the demands of his wife and his businessman lover (*We Think the World of You*). A befuddled messenger at sea between the lines of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*). A psychotic Irish New York gangster (*State of Grace*). And, out right now, Lee Harvey Oswald, the traumatized assassin of the American dream, in *JFK*. Presumably Oldman is listed in some casting directory with the notation "plays twisted outsiders."

"I sometimes feel like a fuckin' freak show," he says. "I never get a call saying, 'Here's a light romantic comedy.'" Pushed, he'll admit he doesn't want those other calls. "I don't know if I want to be a poncey Englishman walking around in a linen suit. I like playing evil bastards."

But not just evil bastards. Anguished misfits. Outcasts. He wants to be those people. More than that, the longer I spend with Gary Oldman, the more I believe he *needs* to be those people.

GARY LEONARD OLDMAN WAS BORN ON March 21, 1958, in New Cross, London. New Cross is a poor, shabby, inner-city neighborhood. For most people, it's just somewhere you sometimes go through to get someplace else. The Oldmans lived in a house half below street level. Until Gary was twelve he had to use an outside toilet. "Kids here can't imagine," he says, waving his hand through the Los Angeles →

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ozone. "They drive to fuckin' school."

His father was a welder. He'd been in the navy. He called Gary "Treachle." He left when Gary was seven. Gary had always been a sensitive boy, but he wasn't expecting that. And he didn't understand why. "You don't, do you?" he asks. "You just think that your dad doesn't love you anymore, that it's all your fault." So Gary wouldn't take his friends home after school. Or he'd say his dad had died. You do, don't you?

He's still working that stuff out. He says it's going to be difficult. His dad died a while back: drink. Gary saw him once as a grown-up. After that they wrote for a while. "Wonderful letters," he sighs. Gary says he would have liked to go out and get shit-faced drunk with him.

I say to Gary: It's a classic cliché, isn't it? Someone from an unhappy childhood became an actor because . . . he still wants to be loved.

"Is that why I did it?" Gary Oldman ponders. "I always see it as running away from something. Escape. To be someone else." He says it's like after a death or a divorce, when people don't want to live in the house where it happened because there's too much memory and grief and pain there. So they move. The implication is clear: if all that memory and grief and pain is inside you, you move away. You become someone else.

Gary can still remember his mother reading the letter: "Dear Kay, this is a letter I never thought I'd have to write . . ." He is miles away, telling me this, his voice barely louder than a whisper. "I've never forgotten it."



HERE IT IS," SAYS GARY AS WE pass a squat rectangular building. "My home away from home." It's the West Hollywood Sheriff's Station.

Oldman plans to do a film version of Martin Amis's *Money*. He will play the main character, John Self, a pumped-up Englishman living, and being torn apart by, the American high life. John Self has this to say about Los Angeles: "In L.A., you can't do anything unless you drive. Now I can't do anything unless I drink. And the drink-drive combination, it really isn't possible out there. If you so much as loosen your seat belt or drop your ash or pick your nose, then it's an Alcatraz autopsy with the ques-

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tions asked later."

Prophetic words. The night Gary Oldman went to jail he had been out drinking with Kiefer Sutherland. It was the first time they'd met. What did they have in common? Gary, with an eye for a funny line, deadpans: "Bourbon."

Later, when they were installed in the chic Bar One, Oldman asked Kiefer when he had come off the wagon. "The moment I shook your hand," he replied.

Earlier Kiefer had showed off the new sound system in his car. Oldman was impressed. What did Kiefer play? I ask.

"'Crying in the Chapel,'" he says. We roar. Actually, it was something by Rod. "Maggie May," maybe.

When Gary Oldman tried to drive away, the police arrested him for drunk driving. They handcuffed him in front of the paparazzi. He spent the night behind bars, trying to sleep on the cell's rubber-coated floor. Real jail wasn't nice at all.

YOUNG GARY WANTED TO BE AN ASTRO-NAUT. Or a postman. Or a sailor, like his dad. Then he wanted to be a cameraman, until he discovered you needed math.

Sometimes young Gary would pretend he was Batman. Sometimes he'd pretend he was one of the giants from *Land of the Giants* and walk around in his pointy-toed Hush Puppies (James Bond wore them, so he did, too), picking up the little people. But most often he'd be his favorite, long-forgotten TV hero Adam Adamant. After each episode, Gary carried on, acting out new situations to the other characters he imagined were in the empty room.

A lonely child?

"I felt very loved, but strangely alone." His two sisters were much older. "Effectively I was an only child." Then he says, as though it were the most natural sentence to follow his last one, "I feel a certain peace when I act. It's the only time when I feel really complete."

GARY OLDMAN WAS SID VICIOUS. BEFORE HE got the part, all he knew about the Sex Pistols was that they were a bunch of scruffy punks. He had to play a heroin addict, but taking drugs was never how you got your kicks in New Cross. Stealing cars, shoplifting—that was the kind of thing Gary's friends did. Gary, too, sometimes. Most drugs were too expensive anyway.

So for *Sid and Nancy* he tried a few substances to get the idea. But he didn't want to take heroin, so he asked questions. The best advice came from a friend who had lingered on those back roads. He told

Gary to imagine his spine was wrapped in cotton wool. That was useful.

He also starved himself to get that wasted look. If he ate, it'd be a piece of lettuce and some steamed fish. Mostly he didn't. One day he was trying to turn his car and didn't have the strength to twist the wheel. He broke down. The doctor told him he could have had a heart attack. Ironically, to even be able to play Sid Vicious, he had to fatten up.

When he saw the final cut of *Sid and Nancy* he thought he was awful. Truly awful. He had no idea it was his big break. He hasn't seen it since.

IT'S A HIRED CAR, A MAROON BMW. HE HAS been trying a different car each week to figure out what he wants to buy. Everything is hired at the moment. His house in the Hollywood Hills is rented. Only the books are his. Lots of them: essays on Brecht, Roger McGough poems, a Montgomery Clift biography, a book on jokes, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Shakespeare, Jane Austen . . .

And in the car it's his music. Frank Sinatra. The other weekend he drove to San Francisco and back in a Jag. "Just me and Frank." He loves Frank.

The punks who made him a hero in Sid's memory will be upset, I say.

"They can fuck off."

It's sing-along with Frank: "We're drinking my friend . . . to the end . . . of a brief episode . . . make it one for my baby . . . and one more for the road."

It's your out-with-Kiefer song, I say.

"Yeah," he murmurs, and drives on.

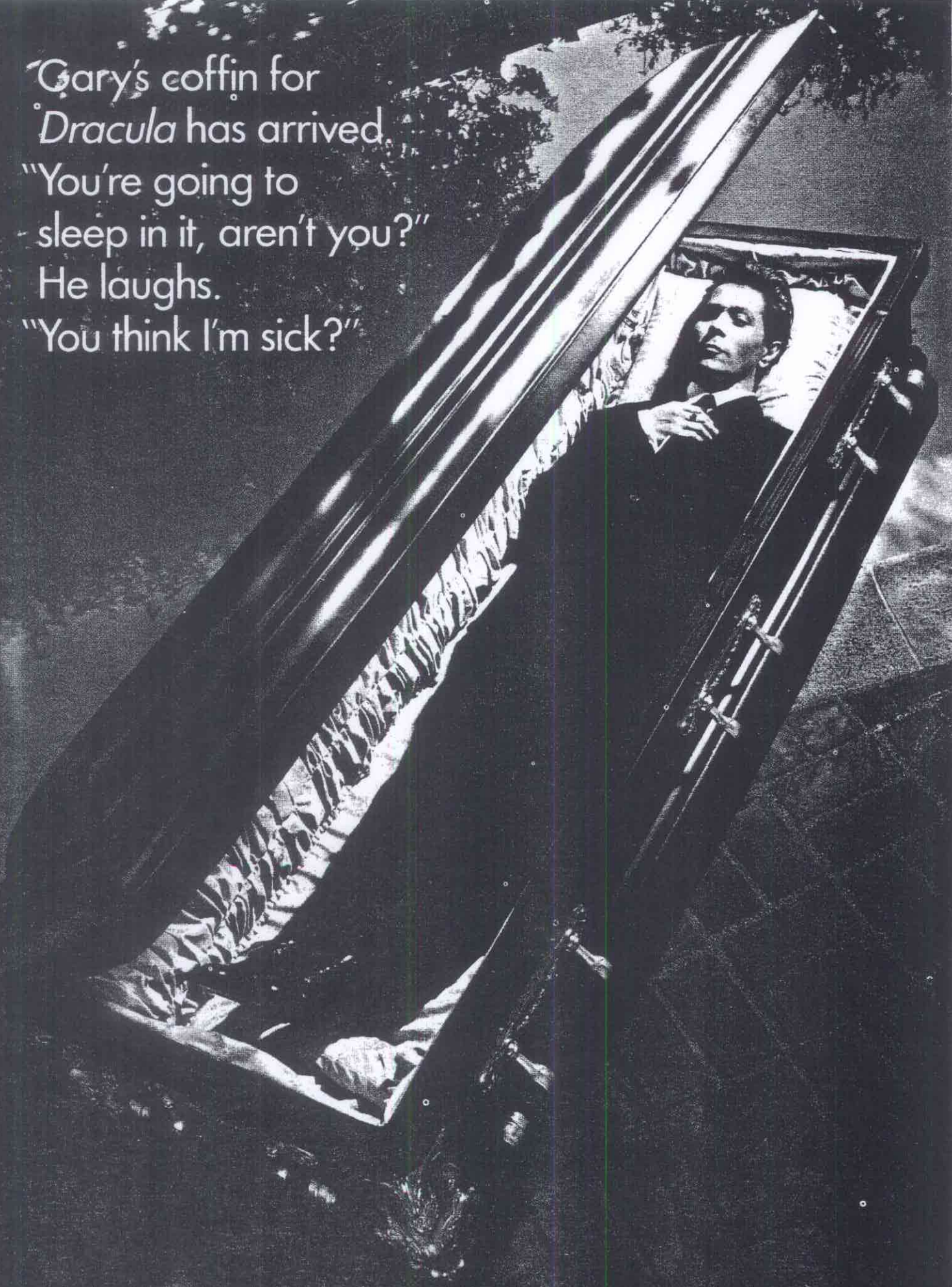
ONE WEEKEND EVENING, WHEN HE WAS about fifteen, Gary Oldman's life changed. He saw a trailer on TV for a film, *The Ragging Moon*. Malcolm McDowell was trying to get the rail off his wheelchair so he could get closer to the woman in the wheelchair next to his, and he says—Gary has never forgotten the line—"Excuse the familiarity, but how's it done?"

It seemed so bizarre, two people in wheelchairs doing a love scene. He said to his mum, "Look at this! God, we've got to watch this." And they did. And something about it completely arrested him. On TV shortly afterward was *If . . .*, a troubling fable of armed pupil rebellion at an English public school, also starring McDowell. Gary would look in the mirror and try to practice McDowell's smile. He saw McDowell again in *O Lucky Man!* It all clicked: "I'd like to do this."

When he first went to drama school he had to lose his pronounced southeast-London accent; at home people accused him →

ALBERT WATSON; FIVE-BUTTON WOOL SUIT, \$665; AND COTTON SHIRT, TIE BY YOHJI YAMAMOTO; SHOES BY SUSAN BENNIS WARREN EDWARDS

Gary's coffin for
Dracula has arrived.
"You're going to
sleep in it, aren't you?"
He laughs.
"You think I'm sick?"



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of "talking all posh." They said he'd "gone arty-farty." It took a little while to become an actor. He'd hated school—his teachers told him he was dense—and he had to leave at sixteen to earn money for the family. He got a job at DJM, Elton John's record company, first as a tea boy, then in the art department. He helped do the sleeve for Elton's single "Island Girl."

Meanwhile, he took youth-theater roles, went to drama college and got a B.A. in theater arts. His career progressed steadily, and soon he was one of the British theater's bright young talents. Between his first few film roles he clung to the idea that he was really a theater actor. He now says that's something they breed into you: don't show off, this is your real home, dahling, it's such a good leveler. His response: "Oh, fuck off."

In his theater days he lived with, then married, a British stage actress named Lesley Manville. They had a son, Alfie, now three, but split up soon afterward. Gary sees Alfie when he can. It's difficult. He tells me a story about how he knows Alfie's a sensitive child, because he cried during a *Sesame Street* sketch where Bert removed Ernie's nose from his face. Is he disturbed at the symmetry between his childhood and Alfie's?

"Sometimes. Oh, yeah. Yes."

DOWN SANTA MONICA Boulevard we cruise. As we pass the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute, dedicated to the man who created the madness for the Method, Gary Oldman takes his hands off the wheel, puts his palms together, and prays to the building. Then he giggles. It's a joke. He's never even been there. He's never studied *that*.

Nevertheless, I heard a story that while filming *Prick Up Your Ears* both he and his co-star Alfred Molina had completely withdrawn from sex with their respective wives, so possessed were they by their roles. "I think I lied about that," he now says. "I was just being provocative."

Shame, I say. It was a good story.

"Oh, well," he says. "Keep it." And he obligingly launches into a story of off-screen homosexual passion. When I try to draw him back into the issue—if you inhabit a homosexual character all day, how can you be a heterosexual all night?—his reply is all the more scathing for the politeness with which it's put.

"That side of it is a bit like acting."



The punk and the playwright: Oldman as Sid Vicious and Joe Orton.

JUST AS HE HAD FOR SID VICIOUS, TO BECOME Lee Harvey Oswald, Oldman lost a lot of weight very quickly before shooting. The final scenes, where Oswald was to look lean and haggard and paranoid, were shot first, and Oliver Stone wanted a haunted look. Oldman thinks he has a haunted look for free, but he slimmed down anyway. When I ask how, he says, "I find that not eating helps."

Lee Harvey Oswald. "A very dark, lonely figure," says Oldman. "Who was innocent . . . He was the patsy, the fall guy. Exactly what he said he was."

Gary Oldman can talk forever about why Oswald is innocent: about gun sights and bullet trajectories and firing times, about faked autopsies and substituted bodies, about planes brought down over Russia. He has spent time with Oswald's wife, Marina, and with his daughters. He has been in the same places. "Where he died, I died. Right on the spot. The corridor was the real corridor. The elevator was the real elevator. The landlady's house was the real landlady's house. We even found his furniture. His bed and his wardrobe."

But I don't think it's really any of this that convinces him Oswald is innocent. Oldman is convinced of Oswald's innocence because Oldman has *been* Oswald. He knows what he was thinking. He *knows*. Not through any intellectual deduction, but because those thoughts were just *there*, inside Gary's head. This is what acting is for Gary. It takes time and requires solitude. There is a certain process he can do only in private. Things work themselves out just as he is falling asleep. Or in his car. He talks to himself as he drives along, going over stuff.

What he is waiting for is what he calls The Cloak: the cloak of inspiration. It's

when the process kicks in. One moment you are looking for the character, the next you *are* the character. You know what they're thinking because you know what *you're* thinking. The Cloak. Sometimes it can fall early, sometimes it can fall late. You always wonder whether next time it'll fall at all.

"IT DIDN'T TAKE MUCH IMAGINATION TO see Gary as Oswald," says Oliver Stone. "He became totally immersed. The big problem was that it was such a long production that he had to come back to New Orleans several times. He had to carry Oswald around for months, which I must say was not very easy for him."

In those days, off-camera, Stone remembers him as "pretty wild. He was a prowler on the edge of the set, in his T-shirt with a bruise over his eye, unwanted, unloved. He got into a few fights."

I mention this to Gary and he refers to scenes where he is manhandled by cops. I tell him I mean off the set. Maybe it's my imagination, but if I had to pluck a sentence out of the air to add words to the look he gives me, it would be somewhere between "Please, I don't really want to pursue this" and "How much do you know?"

What he actually says, after a while, is "I can't remember. Which probably means I did." He says that during filming he stayed in his hotel room at night, sitting, watching TV, drinking, thinking. He wanted to be alone because, he says, pointing at his chest, "I was alone in here."

I ask Stone how he thinks Gary finds access to those dark, troubled characters. He answers as though it's something he's already thought about: "I think Gary's had a tough life. Acting is his deepest urge. He has an inbuilt desire

to be loved and watched and act out some sort of epiphany."

It may be the curse of the tired, distracted filmmaker, or something more significant, but as we talk, Oliver Stone keeps getting Gary's name wrong and, with a wry chuckle, he has to correct himself. He keeps calling him Gary Oswald.



ODAY WE GO OUT FOR lunch. Gary produces a tape of early-'80s English goth-rockers Bauhaus. He wants to play their vampire classic, "Bela Lugosi's Dead."

You bought that in Tower Records, shopping with Winona, I tell him.

He looks at me, dumbstruck, quite horrified, as though reality is slipping away. How could I know that?

I tell him. I read it in the *Star*.

It takes him a moment to compose himself. "I'm very frightened by that," he mutters. Later, we go record shopping ourselves. Gary clowns around with a cardboard cutout of Rod Stewart ("He looks like he's had an encounter with Edward Scissorhands!") and buys Ennio Morricone's soundtrack to *State of Grace*. Maybe that'll be in the *Star* next week, I say. He doesn't think it's funny.

Gary Oldman seems apprehensive about the fame that seems to be coming his way. I ask about fan mail and he says he doesn't get much, though he did get a letter from a man after *Prick Up Your Ears*. There was line after line of sweet compliments. "Then I got to the end of it, and he basically wanted me to send him a pair of my soiled underwear."

And?

"That was a couple of years ago, and I'm still wearing them. I'm going to give him something really special."

The best reaction Gary's ever had in the street was in New Orleans while filming *JFK*. This woman bounded up to him. She wanted to know just one thing.

"Do you know Kevin Costner?"

WHENEVER GARY OLDMAN DREAMS, THE landscape is always the same. It's always a run-down area slightly on the edge of a futuristic city. In his dreams he is always being pursued. He's guilty of something, and he doesn't know what.

Except that last dream, when he shot the seven-year-old boy, the boy who looks like his son, Alfie, and also looks like Gary himself. In the dream the whole community was in shock and Gary tried to blend in with them and hide his guilt.

He knew he was the last person they would suspect.

When he tells me about this dream, there is another of those sudden disjunctions in the conversation that he appears not to notice, and he suddenly says, "I know I'm still incredibly affected by my parents' divorce," he says. "Seven is a very seminal age."

GARY OLDMAN IS MARRIED TO UMA THURMAN. But there are rumors that all is not well. And it's strange. I have been talking to him for hours, and though he has mentioned practically everyone else—his mother, father, sisters, first wife, son, friends, co-stars, idols, pop favorites, agents—he has never once mentioned his wife. Odd. In a moment I'd better ask him. Not yet.

Why do actors marry actresses?

"Because we're fuckin' stupid." Said with a laugh. Of sorts. "It's like an occupational hazard. You know, you have to spend twelve weeks together, sort of falling in love. Sometimes it's like a holiday romance, because the person that you actually fell in love with was the character they were playing and you realize after

"Lee Harvey Oswald was innocent... He was the patsy, the fall guy. Exactly what he said he was."

the gig is finished that you didn't have that much in common. I'm not saying that that applies to me."

And so I finally ask about Uma. He looks... pained.

"Why do you ask?" he inquires. "It's not something I want to go into. You hear things... like someone said to me they heard I was having an affair with Winona. I'm working with her!" A long sigh. "My relationship is ongoing. But you don't ever see anyone. That's the thing about marrying an actress. If they're successful they're off doing their thing." Right now Uma's in Chicago, filming *Mad Dog and Glory* with Robert De Niro.

It's funny, but after this conversation it's like a dam has been broken. When he talks about his life, Uma's name drops into the conversation quite naturally, as though it had always been there. Whether or not the marriage is working, there is no doubt that he desperately wants it to be.

A few days later he says to me, "I've been thinking about that question: why do actors marry actresses?" He has a new answer: "It's so we don't have to talk to one another in the evening."

You just coexist in restful silence?

He shakes his head. "I can't sit for very long. I pace the house, or so I'm told. Stalking the house. Gary Oldman: Intense Actor."

The next morning he telephones me.

"Did you see the *L.A. Times*?"

No, I say.

"Well," he says, "don't believe what you read in the paper about me."

We arrange to meet later, and naturally the first thing I do is buy the *L.A. Times*. Liz Smith's lead story says that his "wild and crazy carrying on" has finished his marriage. At rehearsals he is being consoled by Anthony Hopkins, who tells him about press mistreatment he's endured in the past.

Over lunch he brings up the "why do actors marry actresses" question again. He's wondering how his answer will sound. "Sometimes journalists don't capture the humor," he reasons, "so something can sound incredibly cruel or insensitive."

Then he offers the correct stage directions to what he'd said: "Because they're fuckin' idiots. He laughs hysterically; then his face, like Fu Manchu, creases into a frown."

GARY OLDMAN HAS THERAPY. ONGOING. "It's very helpful. You get to understand what's going on and it's relatively cheap. And it's a great way to avoid boring your friends. It's like a perfect relationship."

Maybe, I say, it's like the perfect relationship (you get total, enrapt attention), but it's also like prostitution (you pay, and you know you get the attention only because you pay).

He muses on this; for some reason it reminds him of something: "When I was researching *JFK*, Uma said to me, jokingly, 'You love your books more than me.' I told this to a friend and he said, 'Well, that's absolutely right: the Kennedy assassination is better than a relationship.'"

(Continued on page 114)