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Jared Harris

Piques Our Curiosity

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Los Angeles can be magical – even for those of us who live here.

It is a glorious, balmy summer's day – and it's January. Unfortunately, days like these make parking a bitch – and make me late for my interview with actor Jared Harris. I dash into the West Hollywood restaurant where we're supposed to meet – only ten minutes late, thank God. Harris is waiting for me patiently; he's not fiddling with a Blackberry or texting furiously to pass the time. "Hello, Darling," he exclaims, with a husky lilt. "I'm Jared. Shall we sit?" Freckle faced and ginger haired, the Englishman is rather boyish at first glance. There are a few lines, giving subtle nods to his age – but they look more like they've come from years of laughter, as opposed to life. His is an existence overflowing with wondrous characters, all worthy of a listen. This is quickly confirmed by the tales he begins to spin right out of the gate, one more amusing than the next. "There's a story I love about my stepfather, actor Rex Harrison. The great search of his life wasn't for true love...it was for the perfect butler. He could never find one who would stay, because he was so appalling. He used to send the wine back from his own cellar and then rip into the butler for serving it to him."

Harris currently stars in David Fincher's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, where we watch Brad Pitt grow from old man to child. During this journey of life in retrograde, the teenage Button meets Captain Mike (played by Harris) – a raucous, drunken tugboat captain. Food is not the captain's sustenance; he survives on a diet of whiskey and salt water. He is gruff, but there's a reason for it. He shoves with strict encouragement – he guides toward the wondrous experiences of life - but it's up to Button to discover it. He is like that beloved uncle we've all known – the one who makes parents wince, and children scream with delight. "You don't want your kid to hang out with him too much," says Harris. "He's going to encourage them to drink and smoke and whore." It is Captain Mike who introduces Benjamin to the outside world; and it is also



he who facilitates the popping of Benjamin's proverbial button. Harris relished his time with Fincher not to mention his incredible work ethic. "There was a lot of down time on sets between scenes. He and Brad were always working though – going over the story, prepping for the next scene. They were just going nonstop. David would say to us, 'This is the only time we're going to do this; we're never coming back. So why not give it the time to get it right and you're happy?'" Harris grew up in a thespian household, the child of Elizabeth Rees-Williams and Richard Harris. His parents divorced when he was quite young, yet his father – a highly respected actor and noted hell-raiser – always played a role in his life. "Living with mum, it was strict and predictable. With him - no routine whatsoever. We would play football and break windows, and he would break them right along with us. He was massively larger than life." Harris describes the majority of his early days as spent 'hermetically sealed in English boarding schools.' Upon graduating, he decided the best thing he could for himself was leave the country. "Everyone knew my parents – so they reacted to me through that connection. You're always struggling with who and what you are." Originally, there were no plans to be an actor; instead he contemplated the role of lawyer. "I like to argue – and I always win." He enrolled at Duke University, and on the first day he saw a flyer that said "Free keg of beer, Branson Theatre". "I got drunk,

I needed someone to keep an eye on the accents."

During his nearly 20-year career, Jared Harris has played a royal womanizer (Henry VIII), a master of the avant-garde (Andy Warhol), and a fetish photographer (John Willie). "You get to live a lot of different lives; that's the fun part. What's scary is being out of work." In the film *I Shot Andy Warhol*, Harris plays the pop artist at the onset of his burgeoning popularity. Based on a true story, the film revolves around Valerie Solanas, a

"He's going to encourage them to drink and smoke and whore." – Jared Harris on his character, Captain Mike

fervent radical who hopes Warhol will produce her play entitled "Up Your Ass", a lovely little ditty about her raging hatred of men. Enamored with his celebrity and what it has to offer, Warhol quickly becomes Valerie's obsession – her very own Madonna-Whore complex; she loves and detests him with equal vigor. But in her frustration, Solanas pulls out a gun and shoots him. He seemed unlikely to play the porcelain skinned artist, but director Mary Harron (*American Psycho*, *The Notorious Bettie Page*) felt his looks were right on. "Despite his Irish roots, Jared has a very Slavic face which was perfect for Warhol." Harris deftly encapsulated Warhol's voyeuristic approach to life, presiding over his court of jesters and superstars. He did a copious amount of research, and worked with Billy Name (one of the original Factory members)

and auditioned for a play." Years later, at the premiere of one of his films, he brought along that first drama teacher to show off. On the red carpet, his professor was asked what he had seen in the young actor at the time, to which he responded: "Nothing much. I was casting an English play and

to perfect his Andy. "Jared can create a tremendous amount of depth beneath his characters," says Harron. "I wanted to showcase the vulnerability and the underlying sadness of Warhol - and that's what I got from him."

Research is something Harris has always been fond of; perhaps it is his subconscious mind placating the inner guilt he must hold for shunning a traditional college education. On *Warhol*, he used photos, films, and individuals to glean information. *The Other Boleyn Girl*, where he played the infamous King of England, was a bit different. "A lot of the film was improvised, but you had to know some basic intrinsic facts. If the other person in the scene hadn't done their research, it wouldn't work. We found the only thing we could reliably talk about to get us into the scene that was the same now as it was then, was girls. Guys spend a lot of time talking about girls and when you're with a girl, you're telling her how beautiful she is and trying to seduce her." Harris' Henry is replete with regality, but doesn't overwhelm the pomposity of the title - so we get to see the man behind it. He is a true romantic (at least in the moment), but his indefatigable

skulduggery is eventually too much and takes control of head over heart... and we all know what happened next.

Harris has spent his career delivering to audiences the world of fantasy, but it's also something he likes to experience himself. "When people say Los Angeles is culturally deficient, you can't argue with them. But there are these places that are just *heavenly kitsch*. I love the *Magic Castle*. Nowhere in the world will you see something like that; the place is filled with magicians just *dying* to pull out their cards and do a trick for you while you sit at the bar having a drink." That visual sounds kind of depressing – all those lonely, magic men trying to turn tricks – so to speak. "Sorry darling, I thought I would end it on a wrist-slitting note," he says with a laugh. "That's just the kind of guy I am." ■