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GQ Hype

Adrien Brody has waited for this

22 years after winning his Oscar for *The Pianist*, the chameleonic actor is once again an awards-season favourite for his role in Brady Corbet's unorthodox masterpiece, *The Brutalist*. It's made him reflect on the path that got him here

By Douglas Greenwood

Photography by Elliot Morgan

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In his dressing room at the Donmar Warehouse, a small 251-seat theatre in London's West End, Adrien Brody has enough herbal tinctures to set up his own traditional medicine shop. "What would you like?" the actor asks, picking up tiny dropper bottles, surveying the labels like he's never seen some of them before. "Ashwagandha?" Sure. I tip my head back and he spurts a pipette full of earthy liquid under my tongue before giving himself the same treatment, swirling it about his gums a little like some kind of muddy mouthwash.

Herbal remedies – these supposedly de-stressing elixirs (effects unverified), along with some lion's mane mushroom supplements – have been helping Brody stay sharp lately. "I know 70 to 90 per cent of them are going to be psychosomatic," he says, "but I enjoy the routine." It's a Sunday, and Brody – propped up sharply in a desk chair (he's conscious of his posture) wearing a white T-shirt, cargo trousers and Dior trainers – is seeking refuge from his thoughts. Eight times already this week, he has performed on stage in Lindsey Ferrentino's play *The Fear of 13* – based on a true story – in which he plays a Pennsylvania man wrongfully put on death row. It's the 51-year-old's first time doing theatre in at least 30 years, and the monologues have been rolling around in his brain, stirring him from sleep.

There's that, and the lingering feeling that there is a machine in motion that he's going to have to jump onto as soon as the run is over: awards season. While Brody's been holed up in his dressing room, a mattress laid out on the floor for between-show snoozes, his latest film, *The Brutalist*, has steadily become a frontrunner for this year's Academy Awards, and Brody himself (at least if you believe the pundits) a shoo-in for best actor.



Suit by Dior Men. Shirt by Mfpen. Tie by NN07. Socks by Falke. Shoes by Dune.

Some time – over two decades, in fact – has passed since he was last in this situation. In 2003, a then-29-year-old Brody won for his role as Władysław Szpilman, a Jewish musician who skirted capture in Second World War Poland, in Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*. He is still the youngest person to win the prize.

For some, an **Oscar** win is a certification of Movie Star status, opening the door to becoming a household name. Yet if you mention Adrien Brody to an average cinemagoer, they might shrug. Show them his face, though – angular, emotional, like a wounded soldier from a Robert Capa photograph – and they'll know him in an instant. If not *The Pianist*, they've almost certainly seen him as part of Wes Anderson's troupe (appearing in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *The Darjeeling Limited*, among others). Or as Jack Driscoll in Peter Jackson's epic mid-noughties take on *King Kong*. More recently, he's followed Hollywood's prestige pivot to television, playing a philanthropic billionaire in *Succession* and a mobster in *Peaky Blinders*. Throughout his career, Brody has bolstered talented ensembles, or injected clout into projects at risk of being dismissed as popcorn fodder. He is an actor whose work you seek out because you know his taste is good.

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All the while, he's been searching for a project that swallowed him whole, one where the toil of its creation results in something truly singular. Since *The Pianist*, he says, “it's been hard to find something of that magnitude.”

He's finally found it. *The Brutalist*, the third film from director Brady Corbet, debuted at the Venice Film Festival last September. It's a grandiose statement piece – three and a half hours long with an interval, and shot in VistaVision, a format last used in the early 1960s – that has electrified audiences at a time when we're told cinema's death sentence has already been delivered.

The Brutalist tells the story of László Tóth (Brody), a Hungarian Jewish architect who has survived the Buchenwald concentration camp and set sail for the US, chasing the American dream. From Tóth's arrival on the rocking deck of a boat pulling into a New York harbour in 1947 through more than three decades, we're shown what that dream means in practice; America is framed as a nation that pillages the labour of the people to whom it's made a false promise. The film is also, of particular interest to Brody, about a brilliant artist under the boot heel of capitalism, unwilling to bend to its rules.

When he first read the script, written by Corbet and his partner Mona Fastvold, a few years ago, Brody saw its "great potential", and "felt so well-suited to honour this character," he says. Part of it was personal: Brody's grandmother lived in Nazi-occupied Budapest during World War One; his mother, the photographer Sylvia Plachy, fled persecution during the Hungarian revolution of 1956, arriving, like László, in New York. As an artist, Brody says, the experience gave her a "sensitivity to the suffering of others" – influencing her work in the same way László's traumas are infused into his architecture. Everywhere Brody looked, tendrils were tying him to the character. But at first, he lost the part to Joel Edgerton. "That's the nature of the business," he says. Thankfully, nothing happens quickly in Hollywood, and by the time the film was ready to shoot after years of waiting, Edgerton had a scheduling conflict. And so, Corbet called Brody.



MOTY 2024

Adrien Brody is rebuilding

By Douglas Greenwood

After an arduous and near decade-long route to fruition, Corbet and his crew shot the film in 2023 over just 33 intensive days in Budapest and Italy. Guy Pearce, who plays the film's wealthy, narcissistic antagonist, remembers how Brody "arrived with this wealth of, not just knowledge, but understanding," he says. "He was extremely invested."

It wasn't an easy shoot, but Corbet and Brody laughed somewhat deliriously through the exhaustion of it all, sharing the burden of pushing the film, like a gargantuan rock, up its steep final hill. "Many performers as well-established [as Brody] can sort of coast by, because they've been doing it for so long," Corbet told me. "But he does the hard work."

On rare films like *The Brutalist*, Brody says, you encounter what he calls "the spirit": the profound feeling that beautiful things are fusing together into something almost alchemical. Something worth breaking your back for. "If [you feel] no spirit, you know that spirit will not be present," he says.

It's common for Brody to watch a project and feel like it's not lived up to his expectations. "Most movies [are like that]," he admits. "It's very hard to catch magic in a bottle. You can have really wonderfully talented people, and some things just don't happen, or it doesn't come alive in the edit, or the camera broke on the best two takes. Numerous things." His lips unfurl into a smile. "But sometimes, sometimes you prevail."





Shirt and trousers by Yves Saint Laurent. Tie by Mfpen. Watch by Cartier.

Brody has been chasing the spirit for over two decades. By the time he filmed *The Pianist*, then just 27 years old, he had appeared in a number of modestly sized parts in modestly sized films and television shows, one day working on short-lived sitcoms (*Annie McGuire*), the next with an early-career Steven Soderbergh (*King of the Hill*). Before he was even out of the gate, he had been hired at 23 by director Terrence Malick, who cast him as the lead Corporal Fife in his now-legendary war drama *The Thin Red Line*. Brody was prepared for the world to know his name. His publicist had booked him a slot on the 1999 cover of *Vanity Fair*'s Hollywood issue, positioning him for that year's Oscars. Then he saw the film, and realised Malick had totally reconfigured it in post-production, reducing his screen time to just five minutes of the near-three-hour feature.

"I was always kind of grateful that *The Thin Red Line* was such a harrowing experience for me, and full of personal loss," Brody says. "There was public embarrassment and potential career disaster affiliated with all of that – I didn't know that the role had been eviscerated. Then I looked back and I thought, How lucky I am that I averted acclaim and praise at that age."

The Thin Red Line earned the kind of critical love that could have, in different circumstances, changed Brody's life. Instead, he laid low, playing smaller roles in films by Spike Lee (*Summer of Sam*) and Ken Loach (*Bread and Roses*). In the years afterwards, he skirted projects that would have felt like cash grabs, instead chasing roles he could connect with. Shortly before he landed *The Pianist*, he says, he passed up two other opportunities, including a role in a "massive studio movie" and an unnamed independent film. The latter came at a time when he had already committed to playing a war photographer in Élie Chouraqui's *Harrison's Flowers*, a romantic drama opposite Brendan Gleeson and Andie MacDowell. "I wanted to play a photographer [for] my mom," he says. "I grew up knowing [the photographer] Gilles Peress. It was a great role." The other movie, his agents suggested, would have had a bigger impact on his career, "but I was more interested in honouring my commitment," says Brody.

He followed *Harrison's Flowers* with *The Affair of the Necklace*, a lush American take on Marie Antoinette's downfall, shot in France. That film's first assistant director Mishka Cheyko recommended Brody to Roman Polanski, with whom Cheyko had worked on 1999's *The Ninth Gate*. So Brody invited Polanski and the producers of *The Pianist* to a private screening of *Harrison's Flowers* in Paris, eventually earning the part of Szpilman without auditioning. "Had I not done that supporting role in *The Affair of the Necklace* and not

worked with Mishka, who sang my praises, then who knows what that path would be?" he says.

“To enter this phase of life where I am visible is like a spiritual passageway. I’ll make someone’s day buying toilet paper.”

I tell him I’m intrigued by what the splashy studio film is – the one he turned down, prompting a domino effect that practically made his career. “I understand your position, that it’s exciting,” he says gently, “but it’s not the point.”

Instead, he says, this is: “In retrospect, it’s often easy to see that you could have done better here, or you shouldn’t have done that, but sometimes you have to look back and say, ‘It’s kind of amazing how that happened.’”

Something spectral was with Brody on that journey, Pearce thinks. A cosmic alignment, or payback, for what happened on *The Thin Red Line*. “The Oscar, in a way,” he says, “was the spirit world’s way of saying, ‘We’re going to make it up to you.’”



Shirt by Tiger of Sweden. Jumper by Mfpen. Trousers by Versace. Shoes by Church's. Necklaces (both) by Serge DeNimes.

A week later, Brody and I are tucked into the corner of a hotel tea room in central London, hours before he’s due to go on stage. We order a pot of rooibos to share and, when it arrives, Brody removes the biscuit from his plate to place it on mine instead. It’s a Monday; yesterday he was enjoying a roast at the home of one of his castmates. (He’ll spend the following Sunday at awards Q&As for *The Brutalist*, working on his one day off.)

Outside, as he was saying goodbye to a friend, a young man on holiday with his parents had approached him: “He said, ‘You are famous,’ and I said, ‘I guess so.’” Brody grins as he recounts the moment. The boy asked for a picture. “Oh, it’s gonna take more than that for a photo,” Brody told him. “Who am I?” He watched, amused, as the somewhat-fan tried to figure out where he’d seen him before. The boy’s blind panic was endearing – so in the end he got the photo anyway.

“To enter this phase of life where I am visible, to love people and to feel the love of strangers day in and day out, is like a spiritual passageway,” Brody says, taking the seat facing the wall. “I am on the other side of the world and I’ll make someone’s day buying toilet paper.”

He has long struggled with the idea of fame for fame’s sake. “The veil of celebrity that unfortunately comes with success,” he says, “prevents clarity in seeing the artist.” Brody won his Oscar at an age when he was “under this misconception that I was a full adult,” he says. “My understanding of life was vastly inadequate for all that I was exposed to.” Afterwards, his personal life changed. Suddenly, he was Hollywood’s new leading man: his 30th birthday, held just weeks after the Oscars ceremony, was an event in LA at which his friends from high school mixed with A-list actors. A gossip column in the *New York Times* from 2004 tells of Brody’s birthday party the following year, at an artist’s apartment in New York, which was supposedly so raucous that the cowboy from the Village People, who lived in the same building, allegedly tried to shut it down. (Brody doesn’t remember it.)



Suit by Dior Men. Shirt by Mfpen. Tie by NN07. Socks by Falke. Shoes by Dune.

Although Brody has never quite been a tabloid fixture, his life has prompted intrigue when he invited it: his one-time relationship with actor Elsa Pataky is eternalised in a 2008 issue of *Hello!* magazine, which featured a spread of the duo in front of the castle in Cleveland, New York, that Brody bought in 2007. (The pair split not long after: today, he’s in a relationship with English designer Georgina Chapman.) Brody has since spoken

longer, today, not in a relationship with English designer Georgina Chapman, Brody has since spoken solemnly about what the castle – which he spent years renovating, and about which he made a documentary in 2015 – came to symbolise, in some ways the same thing that he’s been striving for as an actor: a kind of emotional perfection, as well as a willingness to commit through almost any hardship, if what it leads to is something to be proud of.

Just as Brody struggled with fame, Hollywood struggled to find the right place for him, putting him in a liminal space between character actor and leading man. For years Brody found himself caught between the sway of movie-stardom in blockbusters like *King Kong* and the kind of creative collaboration and control he’d experienced working with auteurs on smaller films.

Corbet told me he felt that Brody was “a performer outside of this time” who “evoked Gregory Peck or De Niro earlier in his career. He’s iconic, handsome – and such a soulful expression. I can’t think of anyone working today with eyes more soulful.” Pearce, unprompted, mentioned this too. “He’s a man of great intelligence and great intensity, but when you stand to look at him, you just kind of go, ‘Wow, you’re so beautiful.’”

Over the years, Brody has found himself fighting against the image that casting directors had of him, willing his own opportunities into being. In 2009, he was offered a role as a scientist in *Predators*, a reboot of the sci-fi franchise under producer Robert Rodriguez. The casting felt obvious, “a safe bet”, but Brody knew what he wanted, and so wrote Rodriguez a letter. “I’m appreciative of the offer, but it doesn’t speak to me,” he remembers writing. As a teenager, he and his friends bunked off school to see *Predator 2* at the cinema, and would revisit the [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) original. They meant a lot to him, and he had long fantasised about playing the hero.

“The way Schwarzenegger outwitted the Predator was by concealing his mass under mud and using his intellect,” Brody points out. “It wasn’t his brawn that defeated the enemy. I said, ‘I promise you, I have the ability to portray the emotional and intellectual hardness and military strength that is necessary for this role.’” In Brody’s eyes, the American men in combat, the ones plastered on the pages of *Time* magazine, didn’t look dissimilar to him. “I said, ‘You’d be doing yourself a disservice to just regurgitate the tropes of another era.’” Rodriguez took his letter to Fox studio head Tom Rothman, and Brody had his way, leading the film as an ex-military man, albeit 11kg heavier.





Jumpers (both) by Barrie. Vest by CDLP. Trousers by Ferragamo. Socks by Falke. Shoes by Dior (his own).

“It was a big win for me personally, but it wasn’t motivated by what [it] superficially may have looked like,” he says, insisting he wasn’t motivated by money. Instead, the project was driven by his desire to “keep branching out and explore different characters that I have not been given an opportunity to.”

The Grand Budapest Hotel aside, Brody’s filmography during the 2010s looks like that of a man searching for something eluding him: mostly mid-budget action flicks with names you might not recognise (*Bullet Head*), and a couple of projects – *Dragon Blade* and *Air Strike* – made in a strange period of Chinese-American filmmaking crossover. It’s a rut lots of actors can find themselves in: of unmatched spirits and uninspiring offers. “Until I found painting and music and other avenues of creative fulfilment, I only found that fulfilment by taking a job,” says Brody.

Many actors facing a dry spell would give up; resign themselves to parts of Hollywood they find unfulfilling, chasing any job to experience the rush of creating something – for a sense of purpose or a paycheck. But Brody couldn’t let himself give up on that feeling that his *Pianist* character was reaching out to shake hands with another in his future.

In recent years, he has undergone a kind of creative reset, working on *Succession* and reuniting with Anderson on *The French Dispatch*. In 2021, he made his feature debut as a screenwriter, producer and composer with *Clean*, about a grieving refuse worker caught up in organised crime. He worked with Anderson again on *Asteroid City*. Whenever a project was not well-received or didn’t quite fulfil its potential, he’d counterbalance it with something beautiful, or creatively brave, like Andrew Dominik’s dangerous meta Marilyn Monroe biopic *Blonde*, in which Brody played a stand-in for Arthur Miller. The disparate parts of his career started to make more sense creatively; that “spirit” he spoke of feeling more tangible than ever. Then, one day, Corbet called him.

The hotel tea room has emptied out and there’s only the dregs left of our pot of tea. “I feel like I’ve been bidding my time, to some extent,” Brody says. His phone buzzes momentarily, but he mutes the call and returns to me. “I’ve also been very fulfilled. I mean, it’s not like I’ve not had very interesting opportunities, travelling the world with Wes, and doing [other] things. But they’re different.”

What he wanted, what was always missing, was the immensity of experience *The Brutalist* has now given him. Something to learn from and cherish. “I know and knew in my heart that it was inevitable,” he says, “that that film was out there.” That it came along is a miracle, but also a vindication – of not giving in and lowering his standards. Of believing in himself, and trusting that the work would come. “The key,” Brody says, “is to keep the faith.”





Suit by Dior Men. Shirt by Mpen. Tie by NN07. Socks by Falke. Shoes by Dune.

Styled by Kit Swann

Grooming by Emma White Turle at The Wall Group Using R+Co.

Tailoring by Faye Oakenfull

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