

Inside Adrien Brody's Private World: How 'The Brutalist' Pushed Him to the Limit — and Just Might Win Him Another Oscar

By Tatiana Siegel



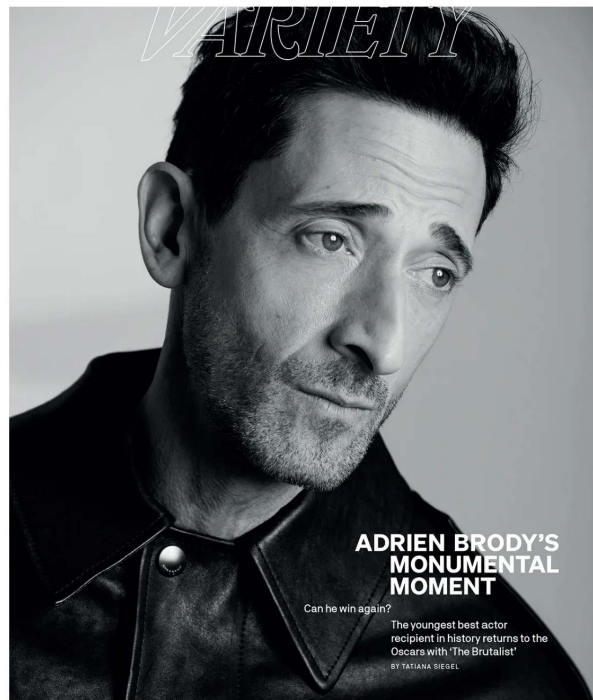
Alexi Lubomirski for Variety

[Adrien Brody](#) never looked like a leading man.

Casting agents and executives made that message clear over and over again throughout his three-plus decades as a working actor. “Overtly,” Brody, 51, says. “But, yeah, it was often told to my representatives, and my representatives would share that with me.”

Even after nabbing the best actor Oscar in 2003 at the age of 29 for “The Pianist” — making him the youngest winner ever in the category — he never quite maintained A-list status.





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While a few directors came calling with the occasional studio lead role, like Peter Jackson for his \$200 million 2005 tentpole “King Kong” and Nimród Antal for the 2010 “Predators” sequel, those were the exceptions. Yes, he’s booked five movies with Wes Anderson since joining the director’s repertory company in 2007’s “The Darjeeling Limited,” but other major roles have eluded him, even while peers such as Matt Damon, Ben Affleck and Leonardo DiCaprio never lacked access to better material. Being overlooked was a familiar scenario for Brody: As a teen, he struggled to follow up his debut as the star of the PBS movie “Home at Last,” and the repeated rejections stung.

“I’ve had to prove that the leading man can be unusual and unique and not typically handsome,” he explains. “But oftentimes, somewhat nondescript-looking choices are easier. Safer.” Brody’s

time in the spotlight post-“Pianist” was potent but fleeting — and “[The Brutalist](#)” represents his return to prominence.

It’s undeniable that Brody doesn’t conform. When I meet him at the bar at the Soho Grand Hotel in New York on a January morning, his reed-thin frame is obscured by a sweeping black cape coat, and his sharp, angular face precedes him as he enters the room. He is more Cyrano than Christian. But his looks may be a blessing. While his contemporaries landed billion-dollar franchises, Brody got to do far more compelling work. As Wladyslaw Szpilman in Roman Polanski’s “The Pianist,” he evoked the trauma and pain of a Jewish Pole living through the Holocaust. And, after decades spent somewhat in the wilderness, Brody has found his way to another career-defining part as László Tóth in Brady Corbet’s “The Brutalist,” a film whose ambitious and epic scope (clocking in at 3 hours and 35 minutes) somehow defies its impossibly low budget of \$10 million.

In “The Brutalist,” Brody once again plumbs the legacy of the Holocaust; this time, he plays a survivor who makes his way to the U.S. to kick-start his dream of building titanic structures in a bid to express his sensibility and process his grief. Never quite welcome in his adopted land, László succumbs to heroin addiction and endures sexual assault. Now, Brody is back in awards contention for the first time in 22 years and dominating the conversation (racking up a Golden Globe and a New York Film Critics Circle Award along the way). Should he take home a second best actor Academy Award, he’ll join an exclusive club that includes Fredric March, Spencer Tracy, Marlon Brando, Gary Cooper, Jack Nicholson, Tom Hanks, Anthony Hopkins, Dustin Hoffman and Sean Penn. (Daniel Day-Lewis has won three.) Not bad for a guy the industry never knew what to do with.

“Adrien has a face that is from another era,” his friend Scarlett Johansson says. “He has such pathos in his face. It’s a face that’s made for a close up. Such expressive eyes — and some of his features are so exaggerated and yet delicate.”

But then, only an actor who doesn't quite fit in could have brought László to life with his ungainly, spirited passion, vanity and self-belief intact. For his part, Brody finds solace in all the times he was passed over. "I'd much rather be known as a great actor than a great-looking actor," he says.

The first time I sit down with Brody for this profile is all the way back on May 22, 2023, in an Italian restaurant in Cannes, where he is promoting the Wes Anderson film "Asteroid City." Wearing a bone gray button-down jacket and a sweater, the actor looks ready for the chill of a Budapest winter rather than the relentless Côte d'Azur sun. Brody's head — and body — are still in Hungary.

Only days earlier, "The Brutalist" wrapped production, leaving him a sliver of time to jet back to his castle in upstate New York. ("Architectural relic," he corrects me. "A barn that looks like a castle." Nevertheless, the property was once featured in a 30-page magazine spread in "Hello!") Brody barely had time to visit his parents in Queens and whisk his girlfriend, Georgina Chapman, to the medieval French village of Èze, where he's staying with the rest of the "Asteroid City" team. This pace is wearying but welcome too; in the years after his Oscar win, Brody saw the sexy roles go to others.

"That's par for the course," he says. "I definitely can admit I'm not the typical-looking person, so that will either work in your favor sometimes and often not work in your favor."

In our first meeting, Brody tells me that he's exhausted but feeling good. His body indicates otherwise as he folds a napkin repeatedly and fidgets with a sugar packet that he never opens. His long fingers — the ones that deserved a credit of their own in "The Pianist" — shake slightly as he takes a sip of mint tea. Over our two hours, he ignores the cookies laid before us, never even takes a sip of water. He barely touches the tea. (While he quit caffeine during production, he's since fallen off that wagon; he admits to having gulped down two green teas before our conversation.)





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“I kind of experiment with my willpower, I guess,” he notes. “I’ll abstain from something that gives me comfort to kind of destabilize the norm. It’s not easy to shoot an epic movie in a relatively short period of time with night shoots and everything — and not have one sip of caffeine.”

The feat might have been like cramming in a master’s degree in a single semester without the help of a stimulant. Then again, he simply didn’t have the stomach for caffeine. On the second day of production on “The Brutalist,” Brody fell ill. Corbet and others in the cast and crew also succumbed; Corbet’s assistant had to follow him around with an IV bag hung on a clothes hanger.

“The first week for us was by far the most challenging,” Corbet recalls. “I think it really brought Adrien and I very, very close together. We were very much in a lockstep because we were immediately thrown into the thick of it. Facing those sorts of conflicts together can be very, very bonding.”

Back in Cannes, Brody has no idea what “The Brutalist” will become. Eighteen months after this first meeting, the A24 drama goes on to land 10 Oscar nominations, including best picture and best director for Corbet. All he knows is that it was hard work. Brody grows most animated when talking about the grueling, truncated 34-day shoot, stabbing the air for emphasis.

“There was just no room for error,” he says. “And it’s so hard to make magic when you’re up against it all the time, and your filmmaker’s up against it all the time. It just adds so much pressure. Just debilitatingly exhausting. It’s just really excruciating, but worth the sacrifice.”

The sacrifice included giving up personal time with his partner — but Brody grows uncomfortable when asked about Chapman, the Marchesa fashion designer. (She was married to now disgraced film producer Harvey Weinstein from 2007 until their divorce was finalized in 2021, following his rape conviction in New York.) “I’m not going to delve into it, so let’s skip it,” he says. Questions about third-rail topics — like his work with Polanski, an auteur who is a

fugitive from justice for his 1970s conviction for statutory rape — are met with an “It’s not important.”

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But it’s worth repeating the question: How does it feel that the greatest accomplishment of his acting career is inextricably linked to a director who’s been erased from Hollywood?

Brody winces.

“I’m grateful to have made a movie that speaks to the immense tragedy of a time in history,” he says. “And for it to be told with very little sentimentality, as almost a visual reference of a time that cannot be forgotten and a pervasive undercurrent that cannot be ignored.”

It’s a bit of a word salad, put forth with the seeming purpose of evading the topic. Polanski’s name doesn’t even cross Brody’s lips. But then, a question like this is a no-win situation for an actor who’s already seen how rapidly one’s reputation can take a hit. His impromptu kiss of Halle Berry on the Academy stage after she presented his best actor trophy was described at the time as “swooningly smooth” in USA Today but has since come to be seen as an inappropriate invasion.

Regarding that moment, he says: “We live in a very conscious time, which is a wonderful thing. And nothing that I ever do or have done or would’ve done is ever done with the intention of making anyone feel bad.” Two months after his Oscar win, he improvised a brief performance in dreadlocks and a faux Jamaican accent as host of “Saturday Night Live.” (He’s never been invited back.) Coincidentally or not, the clip resurfaced on social media this year with accusations of cultural appropriation as Brody’s frontrunner position solidified.





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With Chapman, Brody seems frustrated by the level of attention that accompanies their coupledness. “We got photographed leaving the plane here,” he says, his voice suddenly low and soft. “We get photographed leaving the hotel. We get photographed every minute.”

By the time we meet at the Soho Grand nearly two years later, he’s no longer keeping the relationship entirely private. The two have been spotted together all awards season, even holding hands as they wandered the canals of Venice, where “The Brutalist” premiered last September. Indeed, Brody shares with me an unexpected portrait of rural bliss — having ditched his New York City digs, he is building a bucolic life with Chapman, her two children and a fledgling Noah’s ark.

“We have a number of pets,” he says. “My girlfriend has a whole menagerie of animals. We have four cats and a dog and donkeys and miniature horses, and we have a whole lot of animals around here.” Such as? “We did have a rat for a while that didn’t make it. It was a very sweet one.”

Brody unlocks his iPhone and tries to find a picture of their domesticated rat — named “Dumbo” for her big ears. He struggles to locate the right album, cursing the way that Apple’s new operating system has made it difficult to find specific photos. Brody digs up a picture of himself lying on a couch with a luxurious ginger cat — the feline equivalent of Zsa Zsa Gabor — sprawled across his chest. The actor whose visage has, twice, had to convey the entire weight of the Holocaust looks almost unrecognizable on the tiny screen. His hair is long; his face looks kid-like, uncharacteristically serene.

“I greatly appreciate having a partner with a similar sensibility and understanding of the creative process, of creative yearnings, and not in the same field,” Brody says. “And so there’s a [shared] perspective that’s very intuitive. It’s been lovely to have a friend and a confidant, and someone with good instincts.”

Brody’s own instincts have at times seemed iffy. In the years after his Oscar win, he signed on for films like “Inappropriate Comedy” (one of Lindsay Lohan’s most critically panned movies, which is saying a lot) and “American Heist,” a \$10 million thriller that made less than \$10,000 domestically (it has an approval rating of 13% on Rotten Tomatoes). But perhaps he simply wasn’t built for the age of big-screen franchises. Now, in his early 50s, he seems

the age of big screen franchises. Now, in his early 30s, he seems finally at ease on his strange perch: a character actor who somehow — if only every couple of decades — gets to play the unforgettable leading man.

“He knows how to play the scene like he’s in a play, and he has a good sense of what I might be looking for from him,” Anderson says. “He kind of anticipates where he thinks I want to go with it. He’s so skilled. He’s so good. He has so much to work with.”

Adds Johansson: “I’m always impressed with actors who do such deep dramatic work who are able to pull themselves out. Adrien is very engaged in the moment and is able to switch over and be sociable and talkative. That’s not always the case. Sometimes actors need more space to kind of create more of a bubble for themselves.”

Brody credits his mother, acclaimed photographer Sylvia Plachy, for making him a better actor. As the only child of Plachy and history professor and painter Elliot Brody, he grew up in Queens in a middle-class home, one steeped in intellectualism and avant-garde imagery. Plachy, who captured iconic images of Tom Waits and Jean-Michel Basquiat as well as the juxtaposition of urban beauty and detritus in the 1987 photo “Graffiti Under the Williamsburg Bridge,” instilled a quiet observance in her son.

Riding four trains from Queens to LaGuardia High School, the famed performing arts institution in Manhattan, and back fostered a similar attentiveness. “I internalized and I witnessed things, and certain things stay with me indelibly. And they come out in an interpretation of a character years later,” Brody says. “I have a very interesting memory. That subway ride taught me more about acting than anything.”

He drew upon the daily kaleidoscope of faces while making 1988’s “Home at Last,” a film about 19th-century orphans transported to the Midwest to work on farms with Fagin-like supervisors. He landed the role after an actress friend of Plachy’s connected Brody with her talent agency.

He enrolled at Stony Brook University on Long Island, but soon enough began to work with directing greats like Francis Ford Coppola (“New York Stories”) and Steven Soderbergh (“King of the Hill”). Still, his real breakout role, by his own estimation, came via the 1996 crime thriller “Bullet,” starring opposite Mickey Rourke and the late Tupac Shakur.

“Working with ‘Pac was amazing. He was incredibly focused,”

Brody remembers. “We hung out a lot when we did the movie. We spent a lot of time together, and he became quite close with Mickey. And Mickey really took me under his wing at that time.”



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Just barely old enough to legally drink, Brody would hit the city’s nightclubs with Shakur.

“He had a big rap career, but he was not ‘Tupac’ yet. He didn’t even have ‘Thug Life’ tattooed on his chest yet,” Brody adds. “We were writing graffiti together, and he was writing ‘Thug Life.’ I didn’t know what he was referencing.”

Though the major studios took little notice of him, Brody continued to work throughout his 20s with top-tier auteurs, from Spike Lee (“Summer of Sam”) to Terrence Malick (“The Thin Red Line”), even if his role in the latter was reduced from emotional heart of the narrative to two lines. (Rourke was removed altogether.) Then came the lead in the ultimate auteur project, Polanski’s “The Pianist,” playing real-life Polish Jewish composer and Holocaust survivor Szpilman. Polanski, who had himself escaped from the Kraków Ghetto as a child, obsessed over every detail during the six-month shoot. Brody – still mostly unknown in Hollywood – got sick at the beginning of production, lost 30 pounds and poured himself into the haunting role of the virtuoso.

The career high of “The Pianist” was nearly impossible to top for

an actor whose look, and whose intensity defined him. Brody eventually moved to TV, recently playing hoops legend Pat Riley in HBO's "Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty," douchey billionaire Josh Aaronson on HBO's "Succession" and villainous casino manager Sterling Frost Jr. on Peacock's "Poker Face." These were meaty parts. But they weren't the kind of roles other best actor winners of Brody's generation were taking.

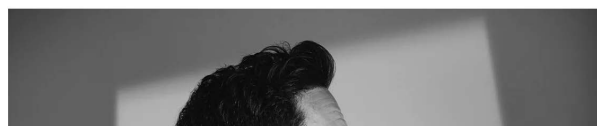
Throughout, though, Brody gave it his all. Kevin Messick, an executive producer on "Winning Time," was blown away by Brody's hustle, even when it wasn't required. "The way that we shot it, sometimes we're capturing sideline action, sometimes we're capturing court action, and he's *in* it. It's a rare kind of a commitment."

"Poker Face" star Natasha Lyonne, who played opposite Brody in his two episodes, was equally gob-smacked. "He can play any scene 3,000 fucking ways," she says. "We would do those scenes upside down and backwards, and you would feel the air in between the spaces in different ways."

Looking back on his 75 movies and TV credits, Brody is humbled to be back at the pinnacle and grateful for the outpouring of support from friends like Gary Oldman and Barry Levinson, who directed him in 1999's "Liberty Heights." It's a turn of fortune for an actor largely written off by the studios. And maybe even written off by himself.

"I don't know. Something's really reignited my love of acting," he says. "I think COVID was a reminder of how precarious things really can be and how much hardship exists in the world, and how so much of what I look back on from my experience of making 'The Pianist' was an earth-shattering awareness of what not to take for granted and how I had taken a lot for granted in my youth. Getting older, for that matter, reminds you of how valuable your time is and how you choose to spend that time and who you spend it with."

As the Oscars amp up, Brody is once again forced to prove himself — thanks to a controversy that old-school, sharp-elbowed awards campaigners couldn't have imagined. In an interview with online video tech outlet RedShark News, "The Brutalist" editor Dávid Jancsó said that AI was used to enhance the Hungarian dialogue of Brody and his co-star Felicity Jones. (A sign of how "The Brutalist" has taken pole position in the race, perhaps: There has been far less discourse about the use of AI to adjust best actress nominee Karla Sofía Gascón's vocals in best picture nominee "Emilia Pérez.")





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“There’s, unfortunately, a lot of misinformation and disinformation that’s got out there, but this was actually incredibly meticulous work that was done by hand. And I really understand why people are so sensitive on this issue, but this was all frankly blown way out of proportion,” Corbet says. “The idea that this diminishes their performance in any way is quite silly – because that’s like saying that using a body double or a stunt double in a wide shot diminishes an actor’s performance because they didn’t actually do the stunt. They still had to do all the work, and [the AI] was only ever used with the Hungarian voice-over. Specifically, there is zero dialogue in English where we use the technology, period.”

The AI tinkering represents about less than five minutes of the movie.

Days after our second meeting, the AI controversy surfaces. When asked about the matter, he responds in an email, “I appreciate and understand Brady’s intentions and what an incredible feat of filmmaking he pulled off.”

Considering that the Brody microscope is relentless, it should come as no surprise that he steers clear of hot-button subjects during our time together. When I see him in January, shortly after his Globe win, Donald Trump is 12 days away from being sworn in as the 47th president, thanks in part to campaign promises to deport all immigrants living in the United States. “The Brutalist” chronicles the tragedy and perseverance of the immigrant experience, but Brody sidesteps a discussion of Trump’s policies.

“I knew you were going to say that,” he says with a weary smile. “I have, of course, my own personal views, but I don’t feel it’s my position to speak up just because I’m an actor. I’m just an actor, and it’s OK.”

Instead, he shares some broad, didactic thoughts. “It’s obviously a very complex, topical issue, but I’m the son of an immigrant family, and my mother’s and my grandparents’ hardships were significant,” he says. “And their sacrifice has given me the firm footing that I have and the privilege that I feel of being born and raised here as an American, to have had this enormous career. Coming from a working-class neighborhood in Queens is miraculous.”

Brody would rather talk about his not-quite-a-castle. Renovating the structure has taken 17 years (and counting). This is his Monticello. He shipped in pallets of a precise tan mortar from Atlanta. He scoured the globe to locate a specific type of teakwood and a turn-of-the-century church window. He traveled to India to find a sculptural element to integrate into the exterior. He hired local blacksmiths and tracked down art nouveau elements to incorporate into the bronze and iron work.

“I need a studio movie now, because I’ve poured it all into this,” he quips. (Brody was paid just \$250,000 for “The Brutalist.”)

The renovation isn’t done. Unlike a film, it may never be done. But Brody sees the labor as a joy rather than a Sisyphean task. Most importantly, he now has a proper studio in which to paint and create his art, something he does when he’s not acting or “feeding animals,” he says with a rare laugh. “Yeah. There isn’t a lot of downtime.”

He hasn’t shown his recent artwork to the world — just his friends.

“I had no idea that he was such a prolific painter,” Johansson says. “I was just blown away. He’s such a talented painter. I mean if I could paint like *that*, I would be a professional painter.”

During our first talk, I notice that the screen saver on Brody’s phone is one of Andy Warhol’s famous silkscreens of Marilyn Monroe. In 2022, his Netflix film “Blonde” debuted. (Brody played Arthur Miller opposite Ana de Armas’ Marilyn.) I figure it is an homage to the film or maybe a nod to his mother, who once photographed Warhol at Studio 54 for *The Village Voice*. The meaning is much deeper. Brody unlocks his phone and shows the full image. It’s a giant collage that he painted with Monroe’s luminous face in the center. The actress’s pain is infused in the work, which also references graffiti culture that Brody grew up with in New York City. The work is titled “My Marilyn.”

“A lot of the things I try to show are the unseen elements,” Brody says of his paintings. “If you go beyond all the glamour of everything that Hollywood perpetuates in her movie-star image, she had a very hard life of suffering and longing and artistic yearning and judgment based on her physical beauty.” He pauses, then continues, “She wanted to be perceived as a great actress, not a great-looking actress.”

Like Brody – though in a very different way – Monroe’s looks limited her opportunities. And yet she endured.

“She wasn’t given the roles that she felt she deserved and was capable of sharing with people,” he says softly as he closes the image on his screen in a protective gesture. “That’s very relatable.”

Styling: Jason Rembert; Grooming: Natalia Bruschi; look 1 (cover): coat: Burberry; look 2 (long pea coat with buttons): full look: Tom Ford; look 3 (profile leather jacket): full look: Tom Ford; look 4 (white coat): full look: Loewe