

VOGUE

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WORK ETHIC

Brady Corbet's film *The Brutalist* is a three hour epic about a midcentury Hungarian architect, played by Brody, who has been nominated for a Golden Globe. Gucci trench coat. Photographed by Anton Corbijn. Styled by Edward Bowleg III. *Vogue*, Winter 2025.

Adrien Brody was just 29 when he won the best-actor Oscar for *The Pianist*, Roman Polanski's haunting film set in the Warsaw Ghetto. He was the youngest ever recipient, a record that still stands. The immersive effort of preparing for the role, moving out of his New York apartment, avoiding friends, and starving himself to understand loss and isolation, left him depressed and exhausted. He did not work for a year afterward. The next role he took was a developmentally disabled murderous boy in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village*, a gothic tale of monsters in the woods; hardly leading-man material.

"I accepted that role without my agents even reading the script," Brody told me with a wry expression. "Night didn't want anyone to read it, so I honored his request." Brody had come up working with directors like Spike Lee, Ken Loach, Barry Levinson, Steven Soderbergh, and Terrence Malick, and he wanted more of the same: interesting roles, collaborations with great artists. "I didn't want to say: Okay, now I'm only looking for an overtly heroic character. I wanted to have a creative journey. But that is the problem."

It's a choice that has led to a career that can look, at superficial glance, like a slide after an early peak. But the optics are misleading. To date, Brody has made almost 60 movies playing a multiverse of characters, from punk rocker to ventriloquist to bull fighter to Roman general; he's played Arthur Miller, Houdini, and a wonderfully

whimsical Salvador Dalí in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*. He has defied genre and typecasting, headlining big action movies like Peter Jackson's *King Kong* and the *Predators* reboot; done sci-fi, thrillers, and horror; and become a recurring member of Wes Anderson's film troupe. Some of his movies are critically acclaimed; plenty have bombed, but his performances are never less than wholly committed.

Brody is sanguine about the business of show business. In conversation he was open about the strange alchemy of moviemaking, and about the interplay of fame, publicity, and marketability. He told me that before winning an Academy Award, actors tend to be judged on their performance; afterward they are more likely to be held responsible on how well the movie did as a whole, critically and commercially.

"That is an actor's dilemma," he said. "But an actor's journey should be a much more creative process, full of experimentation, full of risk."

This year Brody, now 51, finds himself again at the center of awards attention for his performance as László Tóth, a fictional Jewish Hungarian architect trying to rebuild his life in America after the Second World War, in Brady Corbet's monumental masterpiece *The Brutalist*. It's a very different movie from *The Pianist*, but in some ways, with its postwar setting and themes of art and loss, an inadvertent sequel, and for Brody, perhaps, an expiation. "It's taken me two decades to find something of this caliber, and for that I'm grateful."

I met Brody last October in London, where he was starring in *The Fear of 13*, a play by Lindsey Ferrentino that portrays the real-life Nick Yarris, who spent 22 years on death row in Pennsylvania before being exonerated through DNA evidence. It was the first time Brody had done theater since he was a teenager; the reviews were glowing, and he was enjoying the freedom of reinterpreting his performance night to night.

The play was staged at the Donmar Warehouse, a famously intimate venue for new and experimental productions, only 250 seats, and it ran an hour and 45 minutes without an intermission. Brody held the stage as magnetically as he holds the screen, deftly rendering Yarris's different phases and facets: wisecracking street-tough, philosophical inmate, man in love, abused child. He told me that Yarris himself comes often to see the performance and that he has wept in catharsis. "He shared with me how I have personally lifted away so much pain and suffering by helping to tell his story."





LEADING MAN

Brody is constantly acting, painting, making music; "it all connects," he says. Tom Ford turtleneck and coat.

Brody and I sat in a small room in the Donmar's offices. His face, with its great scimitar nose, eyebrows drawn upward like an opening bridge, and watercolor eyes, is a particularly distinctive canvas on which he projects his chameleon craft. "The way he looks is like nobody else," Wes Anderson told me in a voice note. "There's something of the old movie star from another time in him." Brody has walked the runway for Prada and has a debonair penchant for wearing large glittering brooches on his tuxedo lapel on red carpets. But on the rainy Tuesday afternoon we met, the man in front of me, leaning forward in earnest good cheer, friendly, articulate, laughing at his digressions, looked comfortably ordinary. He wore nondescript sneakers, jeans, a checked flannel shirt, and he took off a black New York Yankees cap as he sat down.

"I'm not really sleeping," he admitted. "I wake up with dialogue from the play constantly in my thoughts."

Brody was born in Queens, the only child of Elliot Brody, a public school history teacher who taught himself to paint like an Old Master ("he would make an amazing art forger," Brody told one interviewer), and Sylvia Plachy, a renowned photographer whose classic black and white images have appeared in *The Village Voice*.

factly, a renowned photographer, whose elegant black-and-white images have appeared in *The Village Voice* and *The New Yorker*, and are in the permanent collection at MoMA. He grew up with a mixed Catholic-Jewish Mitteleuropa ancestry and in an intellectual milieu; as a child he loved magic, performing as the Amazing Adrien, got seriously into hip-hop, and attended LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, applying to study fine art and then switching to drama.

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“He was a kid from Queens who really embraced the culture of the streets,” his partner of five years, Marchesa designer Georgina Chapman, told me, when I met her in her atelier in the West Village in Manhattan. “Yet he also carries a very European elegance, which gives this wonderful complexity.”

Brody credits his parents with imbuing him with the values that have underpinned his artistic choices. “Being raised the son of a photographer, in New York City, seeing all these complex and beautiful aspects of the city, being with wonderful writers and around all these great creative people,” he said. “So much of my ability to be tenacious and to believe in myself came from my parents respecting my uniqueness and creative pursuits as something valid.”

One of the movies he is most proud of, for example, is *Detachment*, which he made in 2011 with the director Tony Kaye (best known for *American History X* with Edward Norton), over his agents’ objections. He played a substitute teacher in a Queens public school—almost a paean to his father. “A tiny little movie about the failings of the education system,” he said, “but it spoke to me.”

His dedication to the integrity of his craft runs like a plumb line through his career.

“I like a challenge,” Brody told me. “I’m very open to pushing myself past things that feel a bit intimidating and require a deep dive. You really have no option once you’re in it, but to just work hard.” No matter the material, “I have the same level of commitment and immersion. I’m eating worms and being thrown down glacial rivers and putting on real braces and living in solitude and eating less or hiding.” Anderson concurred: “Adrien doesn’t always like the part, but when he settles in and this is what he’s going to do, he gives it everything.”

Brody’s characters teem with contradictions and inner hinterlands; patience gives way to explosive anger, smiles curve inward; his brow furrows articulately as any monologue. He can change his voice—language, accent, cadence, modulation—as easily as his hairstyle for a role. There’s often a tension between a movie star and the character they play; Brody obliterates the distinction.

“He’s incredibly raw emotionally, but he’s not pretentious,” Chapman says. “He doesn’t bring his ego into play, and I think this is what allows him to inhabit a role in such a pure way.”

Brody has admitted that he is, at heart, an introvert, an observer. “Anything that comes into his life gets held,” Chapman told me. “It’s painful, good and bad; but he’s able to draw on this enormous universe inside him.” It is not easy to work at that kind of level of fierce concentration. “It does exhaust him,” says Chapman, “because he gives so much. He’s very sensitive, he has a very thin veil emotionally with the world.”

At one point, about 10 years ago, Brody put his acting on pause. “To be honest, I wasn’t finding material that spoke to me.” Disillusioned, he rediscovered painting.

“Painting reemerged as something that gave me a creative autonomy that I don’t have making a movie. It gave me fulfillment.”

“His new work is getting better and better,” said Chapman, who admits there are many Brody canvases on their walls. “It’s something he loves.” He has an art studio at the house in upstate New York where he lives with Chapman, her two children, her ailing mother, four cats, two donkeys, three horses, and a small white shaggy-haired dog called Ziggy. Chapman and Brody met on a trip to Puerto Rico, invited by mutual friends; it turned out they shared the same birthday, April 14. “So the first evening we had a joint birthday party,” said Chapman, “blowing out candles together, and weirdly we even had almost matching outfits, we were wearing the same print.” Life at home is low-key: hiking, cooking. “If he’s in the midst of inhabiting a role, he’s up in the office, reading, covered in cats,” said Chapman. In between working, Brody will disappear into his studio, totally absorbed, “into the wee hours.”

He paints large, vibrant canvases, often social commentary shot through with humor. His first collection, “Hot dogs, Hamburgers and Handguns,” skewering big food and the culture of violence, debuted at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2015. He also makes music.

“It all connects,” Brody said. “I’ve discovered that they’re all collage-like interpretations. Acting, painting, even the style in which I produce music, is by layering dissonant and various elements. Some clash and some work.”

A string of lauded TV roles—as a trilby-wearing mafioso in *Peaky Blinders*, a shrewd venture capitalist in *Succession*, and, most recently, the legendary basketball coach Pat Riley in *Winning Time*—restored his profile and his confidence. In 2021 he starred in the movie *Clean*, which he cowrote and produced, a gritty revenge drama set in the wintry, run-down outskirts of a nameless town. He also scored the film, writing its musical themes and working on the sound design, “breaking glass and laughter, the guy coughing and the siren.” He loved being involved in the whole process. “So crazy and rewarding and wonderful, it’s like—” he smacked his hands together, “you’re doing a sketch and all of a sudden you’ve got this oil painting.”



THE MAVERICK

Brody's character László Tóth is human and complicated, stubborn, closed, addicted. Gucci trench coat. CDLP T-shirt.

In the role of László Tóth in *The Brutalist*, Brody has arrived at the apotheosis of his career, drawing together threads of autobiography, professional experience, and persistence. He understood the backstory from his research interviewing holocaust survivors for *The Pianist*; Brody's mother fled the 1956 Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising with her family, an immigrant journey echoing Tóth's in *The Brutalist*. In Corbet, Brody knew he'd met a filmmaker of obsessive vision. “It's one of these things when subject matter, performer, character were so incredibly aligned,” Corbet told me, “that it's sort of self-evident.”

Corbet, a former actor, won the best-director award in 2015 at the Venice Film Festival with his debut feature, *The Childhood of a Leader*, and the respect of independent filmmaking peers with his commentary on fame and its emotional manipulation and costs in *Vox Lux*, starring Natalie Portman as a damaged and damaging pop star. “Very rarely you meet someone like Brady,” said Brody, “who presents something that is not only so compelling and relevant but who knows how to lift up the entire state of independent filmmaking.”

Corbet shot *The Brutalist* in VistaVision, a large-format process, not much used since the 1950s, and it has a run time of over three hours with an intermission. “I want to keep pushing the medium as far forward as I possibly can,” he told me. He wrote the script with his wife and screenwriting partner, Mona Fastvold, and makes it a point to work with people he both likes and admires. He told me that Brody, like most of the cast—notably Felicity Jones and Guy Pearce and Joe Alwyn—had remained committed through several years of COVID and financing delays. Having Brody’s participation was crucial. “Just straight up, the movie would not have gotten made without Adrien,” Corbet said.

The Brutalist is cathedral grand and as delicately emotionally sprung as a watch mechanism. It is a Fitzcarraldo fable of artistic endeavor, a universal immigrant tale and a searing indictment of capitalism. Tóth is human and complicated, stubborn, closed, addicted; he suffers the devastation of war and the promise and betrayal of the American dream. Brody’s performance is a mesmerizing kaleidoscope that conveys all of this.

The Brutalist is a Fitzcarraldo fable of artistic endeavor, a universal immigrant tale and a searing indictment of capitalism

Jones plays opposite Brody as Tóth’s wife, Erzsébet, in an indelible portrait of a woman physically broken by war who remains resolutely unbroken in spirit. They had to act scenes in Hungarian, a feat Jones likened to patting your head and rubbing your tummy at the same time. “We never left character when we were doing those scenes,” she said. “We completely immersed ourselves in those moments and for the duration we were filming we really became those people.”

The movie was shot, ironically, in Budapest, with the surrounding countryside standing in for Pennsylvania, on a tight budget of under \$10 million. Brody’s mother, Sylvia Plachy, visited, took pictures, and imbued the set with her past. “I think we both felt an obligation to make Sylvia quite proud,” Corbet told me. For Brody it was a way to honor the experience and sacrifice of his mother and grandparents. “The foundation, before I was even born, of coming to America and my ancestral struggle and loss,” he said. “That has afforded me opportunities that are not taken for granted.”

The *Brutalist* premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September. Brody had seen a rough cut; Chapman was viewing it for the first time. “We were both blown away,” she told me. “I was genuinely lost for words.” The film received a standing ovation, and Corbet was awarded the Silver Lion for his directing.

It’s clear from talking to Corbet and Brody that the sheer relief of having achieved what they had set out to do outweighed the accolades. “I don’t feel particularly affected by opinions,” Corbet told me. “I am definitely not going to always be making movies that everyone connects with.”

Similarly, accepting that the highs and lows of a movie career don’t often correlate with commercial success has afforded Brody equanimity, and even grace. He’s not overly excited by the coming awards season. “I’ve been down the road,” he told me, as he headed out to prepare for that evening’s theater performance. “If you’re lucky you can still find yourself loving what you do and finding ways to grow and learn and collaborate and strive. I’m not worried if I am going to have another great role. Sometimes work comes and sometimes work may not come. I’ll find ways to stay creative, and that is very comforting. And the rest: You take the good and the bad.”

In this story: Hair, Rudi Lewis; grooming, Aoibhin Killeen; tailor, Nafisa Tösh.