



The Scottish-born star is box office gold, despite being vilified for his film roles and private life. Yet these are the secret of his success

Gerard Butler:

the cad Hollywood loves to hate

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The latest edition of *Architectural Digest* dropped through America's letter boxes last week. On its cover — barefoot, grinning and lounging in a comfy red armchair — was Hollywood's hottest leading man.

Yes, that would be Gerard Butler, the craggy handsome Scottish actor who has emerged from obscurity to star opposite the leading actresses of our time, and whose presence in Hollywood is now as ubiquitous as paparazzi and high heels.

Just how far Butler has come from his roots in the town of Paisley, near Glasgow, was revealed by the magazine's glamorous shots of his New York loft and the gushing prose that accompanied the photographs. The spread of pictures revealed a massive apartment filled with pillars, limestone lion statues and crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings.

Butler himself did not shy away from bragging about his surroundings, which were created by designer Elvis Restaino. "I wanted something elegant and gorgeous and at the same time rather masculine and raw," Butler said, before adding confusingly: "I guess I would describe the apartment as bohemian old-world rustic chateau with a taste of baroque."

Glasgow it is not. But then Butler has traveled a long way from his native land. He is currently the star of *The Bounty Hunter*, playing the role of romantic interest for Jennifer Aniston, perhaps the most bankable female star in Hollywood. Before that he was cast in *The Ugly Truth*, opposite Katherine Heigl, who is often touted as Aniston's successor. Butler movies seem to keep coming in an endless procession, including four alone last year. They are action films, romantic comedies, thrillers and even voice-overs in animated pictures.

Yet Butler is a far from conventional star. Fame has arrived for him late, at the age of 40. A Brit, he is better known in America than at home. And he is famed for his outspokenness, especially about his love life, which has led to him being vilified and teased by US gossip columnists. Many of his films have bombed, even as they have racked up millions of US dollars. It is fair to say that Butler's success has come despite the lack of critical approval, rather than because of it.

When asked once if he was dating Aniston, Butler said: "While they're accusing me of being with Jennifer, I've probably been off somewhere else doing some damage with someone else." In one infamous incident in Venice Beach — caught by paparazzi — Butler took a late-night stroll and ended up passionately kissing a pretty violinist busking on the street. "He is living every man's dream and he's enjoying it," said top Hollywood publicist and manager Eileen Koch.

Certainly the American public loves him, no matter what the American press says about him. "Butler goes out of his way to be transparent in the media spotlight. While some reporters criticize that, the public appears to appreciate it," said Ashley Dos Santos, a popular culture analyst at Crosby-Volmer International Communications. "There's no mystery or hidden scandal. With Butler, what you see is what you get and he is one of the few Hollywood personalities who fit that mold."

Perhaps that bluntness and honesty is a product of his humble roots. Butler was born in Glasgow, though his parents moved to Canada shortly thereafter. However, the strains of being struggling immigrants resulted in divorce and Butler and his mother moved back to Scotland. His childhood

was solid but poor, yet Butler's family was strictly Catholic and put a huge onus on education. He won a place at Glasgow University and graduated to become a lawyer. It was not a good match. "I never felt fulfilled. I partied a lot and abused the privileges of my firm," he once told an interviewer.

He resigned on a whim before he could get fired and, after seeing a screening of the movie *Trainspotting*, he moved to London to try his hand at acting.

That worked. His tall, brooding presence won him a series of stage and screen roles, including small parts in big budget flicks like the James Bond movie *Tomorrow Never Dies*. They landed him the lead in the *The Phantom of the Opera*, which took him to his huge breakthrough movie, *300*. Playing the chiseled hero Leonidas of Sparta was a move that saw him crack the US market wide open.

It was a role that suited Butler well. The movie was as masculine as it is possible to be. Butler, with a six-pack stomach that looked as if it were made of concrete, was a huge hit as the warrior king slicing and dicing Persians like a human meat tenderizer. The movie was a financial triumph and delighted both fans of the original comic strip and action movie addicts. It even became a cult hit among US soldiers in Iraq who loved the bloody, martial action against a vast Middle Eastern foe. "He has this masculine halo around him because of *300*. That made him the man's man," said Michelle Lee, editor of celebrity magazine *In Touch*.

That could have defined Butler. But, in a career path that is either extremely canny or extremely lucky — perhaps both — he moved into romantic comedies. His leading males are often not dreamy paragons of virtue, but rather caveman-like. In *The Ugly Truth* he was a sexist TV presenter. In *The Bounty Hunter* he chases Aniston with a gun and bundles her into the boot of his car. "He is not a dreamy lead. There is an element of being a jerk," said Lee. The take on masculinity has not been a critical success. Both films have been slammed by critics. "Formulaic, stupid, and unfunny in all the usual ways. Is there no more ingenuity in Hollywood? Can no one think of new ways for movies to be irritating and pointless?" wrote Eric Snider about *The Ugly Truth* at Film.com.

Not that it mattered. The movie racked up US\$90 million at the box office. *The Bounty Hunter* has been similarly panned, but it has only been out a week and has already brought in more cash than it cost to make. And when it comes to Hollywood success, most movie executives are not concerned with critical plaudits. They want cash at the box office and Butler is delivering, in part because of his provocative presentation of the modern male and, perhaps, the knock-on effect of his real-life romances.

The relentless marketing campaign for *The Bounty Hunter* was based around an endless supply of rumors and photographs speculating if Butler and Aniston were romantically linked in real life. Neither star did anything to shake off the rumors — especially not Butler. In an interview with *Men's Journal* last month, he said: "Over Christmas, [Aniston] had a tree-trimming party that I went to. Yeah, I trimmed her bush."

Few stars have so cleverly manipulated the media. "He knows he is playing the role of the cad," said Lee. In fact, in an age when public figures are expected to behave modestly, it is left to the resolutely single Butler to complain that he doesn't get enough casual sex. "I think I get laid less now than I used to, because

I'm way more paranoid ... I'm nowhere near as naughty as I used to be," he told *Men's Journal*. It is hard to imagine any other stars getting away with quotes like that. But Butler does. "He is single. He can do whatever he wants," said Koch. In Hollywood's complex ecosystem, Butler has found a niche for the old-fashioned lothario, a place previously occupied by George Clooney.

Perhaps Butler's success can be summed up by a quote at the end of the piece in *Architectural Digest*. There is a brief interview with Restaino, who says: "Gerry's place is a ride, man, it's a ride." That could be a description of Butler's home or his whole career to date. It is a ride that looks set to keep on going.



Jennifer Aniston and Gerard Butler pose on arrival at the UK premiere of *The Bounty Hunter* last month in London.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Defying the critics

The Phantom of the Opera
Butler plays the lead in the musical film.

"This guy's not the phantom of the opera, he's the fashionably scarred stud of the opera and that just doesn't work."

— Richard Roeper, *Ebert and Roeper*

300
Butler is Leonidas, King of Sparta.

"[Butler's] charisma is elusive. He vigorously enunciates like a summer stock player doing Shakespeare."

— Lisa Kennedy, *The Denver Post*

The Ugly Truth
Butler plays a sexist television host opposite Katherine Heigl.

"The *Ugly Truth* revels in a misogyny it claims to deplore."

— Joanne Kaufman, *Wall Street Journal*

The Bounty Hunter
His role is a bounty hunter chasing Jennifer Aniston.

"Even as an assembly line product, [this] falls well below factory standards."

— David Denby, *New Yorker*

PHOTO: AFP