

Tom Hardy is incredibly tired. His fatigue is the sort that makes him stop mid-sentence and wonder what he's saying. He's got good reason. He was up all night in A&E with his girlfriend, the actress Charlotte Riley, whom he met when he was Heathcliff to her Cathy in last year's TV adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. She's in bed now, "very unwell." He's also just finished producing, co-directing and acting in a micro-budget film called *Mytles Dynamo*, which he describes bewilderingly as "a thriller about suburbia — one of those old-school, black-comic Hungarian films, a bit like *Man Bites Dog*." He's also worried about his own dog, Max, who had a heart attack this week and is now on beta blockers. "I call Max 'Lives-in-Hope,'" he says, "because he does — 'Can I have a biscuit?' Max asks. 'Can I go for a walk?'"

"Inevitably the answer is no, but even if it's a rainy day he lives in hope."

Hardy's looks may be remarkable, but his brain is astounding. Talking to him is extraordinary. Though his exhaustion means that his sentences — delivered in a voice that's all gravel and cigarettes — occasionally fail, his imagination and his vocabulary never do. He seems to have a unique way of processing the world around him. Although the 32-year-old has worked consistently for the past eight years, he made his name with two performances that showcased his remarkable physical versatility and skill as an actor. First he shrank to nothing to portray Stuart Shorter — a homeless man who suffered from muscular dystrophy and a desperate drug habit — in the TV adaptation of the award-winning book *Stuart: A Life Backwards* in 2007. He then gained 16kg in five weeks to play Britain's most notorious prisoner, Charles Bronson, for last year's art-house film *Bronson*, which sparked a tabloid outrage for glorifying a violent criminal. At the time it seemed unbelievable that one man could inhabit such different roles so completely. After talking to him, it somehow makes sense.

His next role is more straightforward. He's in *Dark Knight* director Christopher Nolan's new film *Inception*, a stonkingly twisted and dark summer blockbuster. Hardy plays Eames, a member of a team of specialists who invade people's dreams to tinker in their subconscious, stealing information or trying to plant ideas. He says that the chance to work with Nolan drew him to the project, and starring alongside Leonardo DiCaprio and Juno's Ellen Page was "the bonus ball."

"In many ways I felt the work was done around me. I just drank lots of tea. I'd ask if there was anything I could do and they'd say: 'Not really.' So there was lots of tea for Tommy. Then they'd call me over and say: 'Can you jump off this?' I'd say: 'Absolutely!', then I'd just loiter in the corner looking fab. As is my wont. I like to flatter myself into believing that the character I played was actually Chris Nolan. I felt he was key to Eames and I latched on to him and his mannerisms. I think Leonardo DiCaprio looks like Chris and Chris looks like Leo — not to upset anyone. I think they're related, actually. In fact, you start to think: Are all of these people in the film actually Chris?"

Nolan says he cast Hardy because he's a chameleon. "He can inhabit a role. He saw the potential of the character right away and brought a wonderful cheeky quality to his performance." Eames certainly gets all the best lines in *Inception*. Hardy plays him as "my nod to the linen-suited Havana brigade, a faded luvvie who still has a really good fist fight," and the character is the comic turn in the dark film. Hardy is best known for his intense performances and devotion to preparation and immersion in his roles — after playing two soldiers at the start of his career in *Band of Brothers* and *Black Hawk Down* he actually joined the Parachute Regiment for "about five minutes"; he's learned to cage fight for his next film, *Warrior*, which is released this September. But it's the comic touch that he brings to roles which makes them so memorable. Both Bronson and Shorter only became truly touching when Hardy found the humor in their lives. "I do like to find comedy — not boom boom, but circumstance, an incongruous character juxtaposed with a certain situation. My old man is a comedy writer — he wrote for Dave Allen and he writes adverts, and I grew up around that. I have an acute awareness that I'm selling something — lying and keeping a straight face. I was incredibly boring as a child, but I had a sense of humor."

Boring is not the word most people would use for Hardy's formative years. He's the only child of Cambridge-educated writer Edward "Chips" Hardy and artist mother Anne, and grew up in East Sheen, London. He was expelled from Reeds public school (for stealing), arrested for joyriding in a stolen Mercedes while in possession of a gun when he was 15, and soon after became an alcoholic and drug addict. Rather incongruously, at 19 he entered and won a *Find Me A Supermodel* competition on TV and briefly had a contract with Models 1.

"I grew up in the desk," he says. "The

From misfit to Mad Max

In his personal life, he has battled alcoholism and crack addiction. In his work, he has specialized in misfits and criminals. Tom Hardy's approach may not be conventional, but he is well on the way to becoming one of the UK's great actors

BY ALICE FISHER
THE OBSERVER, LONDON



Actors Juliet Oldfield and Tom Hardy arrive at a cinema in central London for a screening of the film *Bronson* in March last year.

suburbs are not the action; they are the desk. I grew up around people carriers and cardigans and the deer in Richmond Park, but behind those Laura Ashley curtains there are a lot of demons. East Sheen is a middle-class area, Trumpton or Sesame Street, but there's trouble if you want it."

He continued to find trouble when he studied at the Drama Center in central London — he was expelled from there, too, for being, he's said, "a little shit" — and after early promise with those roles in *Band of Brothers* and *Black Hawk Down*, his drug addiction got the better of him. In 2003 he collapsed on Soho's Old Compton Street after a crack binge and headed for rehab. "I was a very adrenal kid," he says. "I ran on my feelings, and there was a lot of fear. When I found drinking at 13 — a bit of beer — I felt calm. I thought this must be how everyone else feels, and I wanted more of it. But then I became a drunk, a fucking drunk, man!"

He's seven years sober now and loves it, growing his self-esteem and enjoying life. Doing things he's never done before that everyone else has. "I didn't start driving until I was 30. I thought I'd better be able to drive my ex [Rachael Speed, an assistant director] to hospital when she was having our son Louis. I couldn't be trusted with a car when I was a youngster, so I got used to traveling by tube, using my 'Rolls-Royster card.' I have only been driving for two years and I love it because it's new to me. I've got years of driving to catch up on."

He says he doesn't mind talking about his drug problem because it's part of his story, and he's sensible enough to be grateful for how his life has turned out. "People don't know me yet, so I know they want to hear this stuff. They can hear it once, then let's talk about something else. I'll be done with it. When I'm 40 I'll be cantankerous and badgering about it. When I'm 50 I'll slap young interviewers and swear. When I'm 70 I'll be incorrigible."

Hardy's right to plan that far into the future, because his next role is going to make him a superstar. Next month he sets out for the Australian outback to become Mad Max. The original 1979 film, which made US\$100 million from A\$400,000, held the record for the highest profit-to-cost-ratio film right up until last year, when *Paranormal Activity* nudged it off top spot. There's great anticipation about the reboot of the much-loved franchise, particularly as original director George Miller will be at the helm. The shoot's slated to last a whole year and it's going to be a big, big production. Hardy says he's surprisingly calm about the forthcoming attention.

"I've got this secure feeling in my tummy. Obviously there'll be exposure, but disappearing from the public eye can be done. I'm trying not to buy into any of it. The amount of time away is daunting — I'm just getting settled as a responsible man — but if you split the elephant into little mouthfuls it will be fine. I can use the time in the desert to paint or meditate."

He's also got a lot of physical training to do. "If you look round Hollywood there's no end of white smiles and six packs. Long lines of beautiful people lining up to be incredible on film. Lots of people who want this part. I have a responsibility to those who didn't make it to the pitch." So he's going to build settlements and obstacle courses in the outback for two months, use them to train, and then dismantle them. "Max is a loner in a desolate landscape," he explains. "I've got to create the body of someone broken who survives from meal to meal. I want the muscles of a manual laborer who builds camps then disbands them." He doesn't know what's going to be inside Max yet, though. He's waiting to find that out from George Miller, because Max is George's man. "George will be the font of my wisdom because I'm not playing someone real — it's not Adolf Hitler or [the television presenter] Graham Norton. I can practice being Graham Norton in my bedroom for hours; I've got nothing with Mad Max."

There's a moment's pause. I'm trying to imagine him being Graham Norton in his bedroom, but his mind's returned to sadder and more pressing issues. "My dog's named after Mad Max — the people who gave him to me when I was 17 said he was Mad Max. I thought: 'I don't like that name — and he's not mad, he's a puppy.' Poor Max — the vet says he'll last a year, but I'm away for that year — being Mad Max. It's weird, isn't it?"

Hardy says it's OK, though. It's all good, shrugging off his sadness. "The sun's out today and I'm in my shorts and I'm going to play Xbox 360 and drink lots of coffee and stop smoking." He pauses again and then says apropos of nothing in particular: "My hair is awful at the moment, like Steven Seagal's. I've got to grow it long for *Mad Max*, but unfortunately I dyed it for a role in a play I did in Chicago in May. Now I've got orange hair and brown roots and I look like a total social misfit. I don't care. Well, part of me cares. But if I really cared I wouldn't be able to do my job." He's chortling now, a throaty rumble: "I look like a knob, but that's because I'm preparing ... probably preparing to make an absolute knob of myself." Now he can't stop laughing. "I'm making a knob of myself searching for humanity in the sacred cause of art."

PHOTO: AP