

WORKS LIKE A *charm*

STORY TIFFANY BAKKER

HE'S CARVED A NICHE AS ACTION MOVIES' COOL GO-TO MAN, BUT CLIVE OWEN IS STRAYING CLOSER TO MATTERS OF THE HEART AND HOME IN HIS LATEST ROLE AS A SINGLE FATHER

Clive Owen recently found himself in the audience of his 12-year-old daughter Hannah's school play. As he watched the child actors onstage, he was reminded of his own theatrical beginnings – when he starred in a school production of *Oliver!* – and started feeling a bit teary.

"I was moved by it," says the 45-year-old. "The kids were the same age I was then, and I thought, wow, that's exactly where it started for me. You could pick out the ones who had an appetite for it, and it was quite something for me to watch."

These days, of course, Owen commands millions of dollars per film, is an Academy Award nominee (for his role as the deceived husband in *Closer*) and has appeared alongside such Hollywood stars as Matt Damon, Cate Blanchett and Jennifer Aniston. In person, he's also one of the nicest blokes you could ever meet. It's a cliché, but he's utterly charming, with an easy way about him and a laugh that would make any woman swoon.

Tall, broad and effortlessly stylish in a beautifully cut navy suit, he looks every inch the 'sexiest man alive' he's so regularly labelled. But mention this fact and he cringes. Instead, the Englishman is understated, serious about his work and has no interest in celebrity. In his words, he just wants to "do the work and go home".

"People have said I'm boring. I don't know, you'd have to ask my wife about that," he laughs.

Owen is self-deprecating, has a dry sense of humour and is partial to a bit of British sarcasm (check out his turn with Madonna in the hilarious BMW commercial directed by her then-husband Guy Ritchie on YouTube). He's just not overly interested in talking about himself. But talk about himself he must ahead of the release of his latest movie, *The Boys Are Back*, an Australian drama directed by Scott Hicks (who hasn't made a film in his native country since *Shine* took him to Hollywood).

Owen says he relished the opportunity to film in South Australia for close to three months, especially as he was joined by his wife and

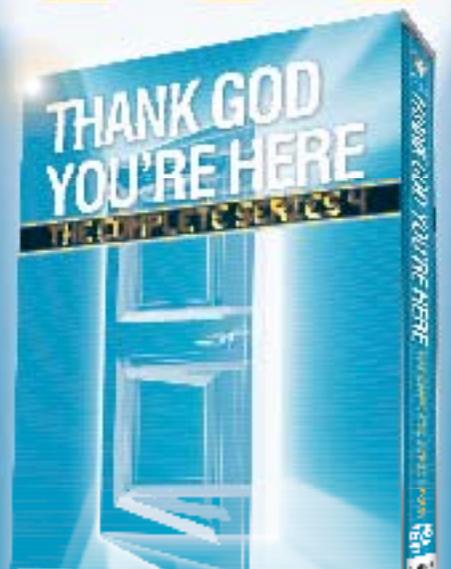
daughters (he's also dad to 10-year-old Eve). "Where we shot was stunning; it took my breath away. My girls think Australia is the best place they've been in the world. They loved the beaches, the outdoor lifestyle and the wildlife. It was a wonderful time for us as a family."

The film's poignant tale isn't the actor's usual cinematic fare. In recent times, he's starred in big-budget flicks such as *King Arthur*, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, *Duplicity* and *The International*, but this small indie film is a subtle, character-driven piece and the star is far from his usual suave self. In fact, you'd almost say he's a bit messy. Owen plays Joe Warr, a sports writer who loses his wife to cancer and is left to pick up the pieces with his two boys – six-year-old Artie (played by star-in-the-making Nicholas McAnulty) and teenager Harry (George MacKay).

The story resonated with the Brit. His own father – a country singer – left when he was three, and Owen and his four brothers were raised by their mother and, later, stepfather. ➤

A BLUE DOOR,
A LIVE AUDIENCE,
NO SCRIPT...

THE FUNNIEST SERIES YET



HOT BUY 39⁸⁴

LIMITED EDITION PACKAGING

NEW ON DVD

AVAILABLE AT



WWW.TGYH.COM.AU



© 2009 Thank God You're Here Pty Ltd.

The leading man admits the movie brought back memories of his past. "There are huge elements of this film that will resonate with everybody – anyone who's lost somebody or grieved, or anyone whose parents separated."

What's refreshing about the *The Boys Are Back* is that it doesn't trip into sentimentality. It portrays grief as it is: rough, brutal and unpredictable. There may be a flickering sense of hope, but it isn't packaged as nicely as it might be in your standard cookie-cutter Hollywood film.

"It was a great opportunity to explore something I felt I knew something about," Owen says. "It's a very honest depiction as well. It isn't overwrought or over-dramatised."

After his father left, Owen didn't have an easy childhood. Growing up in Coventry, a working-class city in England's Midlands, he went to an "ordinary" school, and says options were limited: you either worked in one of the local factories or were unemployed, hanging around street corners with your mates.

But Owen wanted something different. When he made his way onstage for that school production of *Oliver!*, everything changed.

"NOBODY IN MY FAMILY TOOK MY ACTING SERIOUSLY FOR A LONG TIME. THEY THOUGHT I'D GROW OUT OF IT AND GO OFF TO WORK IN A FACTORY"

"It was like, 'Oh my God, this is what I want to do – this is it.' From then on, there was nothing else I could contemplate doing. I was hooked."

The youngster may have found his calling, but his family wasn't so thrilled. "There's no acting gene," he says. "Nobody in my family really took [my acting] seriously for a long time. They thought I'd grow out of it and go off to work in a factory or something."

After school, Owen found himself unemployed ("Things could have gone in a completely different direction," he admits). As the years slipped by, his acting dreams began to fade.

Then, at the urging of a former teacher, he auditioned for a local drama school and was accepted. But he didn't go. Instead, he reset his sights on London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (even though his teacher had told him that would be "aiming a bit high").

"When I got into the other school, everyone thought it was my opportunity and I blew it by not going. I was beginning to think the same until I organised an audition for RADA."

Winning a place at the academy changed his life. He found himself among "people like me, from small towns, who were passionate about acting". After graduating, he also found love when he was cast in the title role in *Romeo and Juliet* and fell for his co-star, Sarah-Jane Fenton, to whom he's now been married for 14 years.

"Schmaltzy, but true – that did actually happen," he laughs. "We did a European tour together for seven months, and that's where it all started."

The actor cut his teeth in theatre before doing a lot of TV work, but film proved harder to infiltrate. By the time he landed his breakout role in the 1998 film *Croupier*, he was already 35 and a father.

Owen finally gained attention with the Robert Altman-directed *Gosford Park* and then came *Closer*, in which he had previously starred – as the other male lead – onstage. The Mike Nichols-directed film put him alongside Julia Roberts ("I'd do every film with her if I could"), Jude Law and Natalie Portman. It also earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor in 2005. "I was very relaxed on the day – I was there to have a good time," he recalls. "Everyone asked if I was nervous, but I wasn't, because I didn't expect to win. I was just glad to be there."

But his greatest accomplishment doesn't involve accolades – it's fatherhood. "It's the biggest thing that's ever happened to me," he says. "In really simplistic terms, it stops being about you and suddenly everything opens up, and it kind of makes sense."

Isn't it interesting, I say, that everything stops being about you post-children – given that when you're an actor, everything is about you. "That's why I say I have it all," he smiles. "I can go off and have all these journeys through my work, and I have this fantastic family to go home to at the end of it all. Without that, I'm not sure where I'd be."

Owen has lived in the same North London neighbourhood for 20 years, and locals don't bat an eyelid when he walks down the street. "Everybody knows me in the shops; I go to the local cafe and have a coffee; I do all the normal things. Now, if I were to go to the cafe in a blacked-out SUV with a couple of guys with me, it might draw a bit of attention. But if I just roll up quietly and sit in the back, nobody gives a toss."

What Owen does give a toss about is soccer (he supports Liverpool FC) and we have to end our chat because he's off to meet with FIFA to discuss an education initiative that's planned to tie in with next year's World Cup.

As he reaches the door, a big, black SUV pulls up. Men in suits mill around, ready to protect him from pesky paparazzi, swooning women or mere mortals. With an apologetic grin, Owen gets in and it drives off. Every once in a while, you just have to accept you're a movie star. **SM**

The Boys Are Back is in cinemas November 12.