

## THE EVOLUTION OF DEV



Now a Hollywood-dwelling, Oscar-nominated A-listers, Dev Patel cuts a different figure than he used to. But as **Sophy Grimshaw** discovers, the newest Fan of Mandarin Oriental retains the easy charm that made him everyone's favourite underdog. Portraits by **Mary McCartney**

“I was in a film called *Slumdog Millionaire*, which was the first film I did,” says Dev Patel, somewhere midway into our conversation, over the phone from his home in Los Angeles. It's a strange thing to say, given how unlikely it is that anyone interviewing him would not know this, but the warm and scrupulously polite Patel doesn't want to make any assumptions. If you only knew one thing about Dev Patel, though, that would be it: that he made his name in Danny Boyle's clever, feel-good 2009 film about a Mumbai slum kid beating the odds, which won eight Oscars including Best Picture. Dev's relationship with co-star Freida Pinto – they were together for six years and remain friends – made almost as many headlines, often to his evident discomfort.

“For that film, we did a dance sequence, set in Chatrapati Shivaji in Mumbai,” he continues. “It's one of the busiest train stations in the world. And I was so nervous about doing it. I remember Danny [Boyle] passionately explaining to me the reasons he felt we had to do a dance, to pay a tribute to Bollywood and India.” The sequence, seen during the film's end credits, was a huge hit with audiences and its soundtrack *Jai Ho* won the Oscar for Best Original Song. “So that station is close to my heart. And when I saw terror attacks [there] on the news, it broke me. My parents were watching the TV in tears.”

It's these recent historical events that form the backdrop to Dev's forthcoming film, *Hotel Mumbai*. So despite the name, it's not to be confused with his jolly *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* movie franchise? “Ha, no! Very different. This is a harrowing story, about the 2008 terror attacks. I had some reservations about taking the role actually, because I really didn't want my presence on screen to be a distraction for the audience. Why was I in it? I had to make sure it made sense to be in it.”

How did he do that? “I helped to develop my character, as a self-educated Sikh guy from the slums who isn't what you'd expect. It was great to have the chance to have that input. The film has real nuance.”

Dev's last big film was 2016's *Lion*, for which he was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar. It tells the true story of Saroo Brierley's adoption from India to Australia as a five-year-old. Brierley in fact had a loving family but – having accidentally boarded a train that took him miles from home – no way of finding them. In adulthood, armed with nothing more than childhood memories and Google Earth, he traced his home village.

“*Lion* allowed me to dig into something with soul and go deeply into a character,” says Dev. “Garth Davis, the director, had me travelling on Indian trains and keeping diaries beforehand, to create those kinds of memories. I also got to spend some time with Saroo; his is an incredible story.”

So, in some ways, is Patel's. In 2007, while still a pupil at a state comprehensive school in northwest London, he won the part of Anwar, a hard-partying yet socially awkward Muslim teen, in the British TV series *Skins* (Patel's own family are Hindu). Occupying the gawky end of geeky, but with a winning charisma and vulnerability, the sapling-limbed Patel also turned out to be just what *Trainspotting* director Danny Boyle was looking for in his next underdog hero.

The films with which he followed *Slumdog Millionaire*'s extraordinary success – including *The Last Airbender* and *Chappie* – brought Dev mixed fortunes critically and commercially. He also added more TV to his CV with a choice role in Aaron Sorkin's acclaimed US TV series, *The Newsroom*, before the pitch-perfect performance in *Lion* led to his first Oscar nod in his own right. Rather like Leonardo DiCaprio, he's an actor who's also grown up physically on screen, unexpectedly shaking off what had seemed like a perpetual adolescence.

Of the Best Supporting Actor nomination, Dev says: “I don't want to sound cheesy, but to me, the whole Oscars evening was about making my mum feel like a superstar. It's because of her that I can be there at the Oscars. She wanted to wear a sari, so I coordinated my outfit with hers.” What was that evening like? “It was mainly me trying to >>

keep her under control around the world's biggest celebrities," he laughs. "Samuel L Jackson was right there and Ryan Gosling walked past, and she kept wanting to take out her phone and take pictures of them. It was mainly me pinching her that we were there."

"Without making it sound like it's all about me or putting the attention on myself," he adds, cautiously, "I also really hoped that my being nominated would inspire other people, someone who might be a British Indian kid in Rayners Lane [London], to think 'I could do that'. To feel that it's possible. I had actually told my mum, when I was quite young, 'One day, I will take you to the Oscars.' I don't mean that to sound egocentric."

I tell him it doesn't at all, that clearly he just wants people to feel inspired to act, whatever their background. He seems relieved. "Yeah, exactly. I didn't go to RADA or LAMDA. Those are great institutions, but I don't come from that route. But I was nominated – pigs can fly."

Does he feel at home in Hollywood now, both as a place to live and to work? He has spoken of feeling uncomfortable in the past, yet has more earned his place.

"Look," he says, "there's this thing that a lot of actors will tell you they have... where you do feel like an imposter all the time. You always do." Maybe that can be healthy? "Yeah, I think it is. It's OK to never let it go to your head. The other thing about red carpets is they are a great leveller. One minute everyone is taking your picture and the next Emma Stone appears and every single camera swings towards her and everyone shouts, 'Emma, Emma!'. That's fine

of course. I've met her, she's lovely."

Most of the time, Dev's not at home at all, but travelling. Hotels have certainly been a theme of his film career as well as his working life, so it makes sense that he would become a Fan of Mandarin Oriental ("an ambassador", is how he puts it), having stayed first at Mandarin Oriental, Prague. "I don't want to sound over-the-top," he says, "but the place was just magical. I went to sign the guestbook and I flipped back a few pages and the Dalai Lama had signed it. Whoa!"

More recently, he went to Japan with his partner, actor Tilda Cobham-Hervey, and stayed at Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo. "Our room was incredible – the whole hotel is. It's in the Nihonbashi area of the city and it's a quiet, serene space right in the heart of Tokyo, a haven. I felt I

had some time to experience the city and get a feel for it, which is unusual for me. I'm obsessed with Japan right now."

As for the future, Dev has recently tried his hand at directing a short film (called *Home Shopper*, it stars Armie Hammer), and has imminent filming commitments – "I can't say too much because they haven't written the press release yet..." – and is keen to move forward creatively.



"I've honestly never really felt like I ever had a firm grip on what I'm doing," he says, laughing. "When I look back at my past work, all I see is the flaws. It helps me improve I guess. I just want to keep moving, working, creating and trying new things. I've got ants in my pants."

> *Hotel Mumbai* will be released in 2018

## 'WHEN I LOOK BACK AT MY WORK ALL I SEE IS FLAWS, BUT THAT HELPS ME IMPROVE'



### SLUMDOG TO TOP DOG: CRITIC ELLEN E JONES ON DEV'S CV

<p><b>2007-2008</b> <i>Skins</i> A 16-year-old Patel got his big break in the Channel 4 series,</p> 	<p>playing Anwar: a teenager who struggles to reconcile his Muslim faith with his hard partying.</p>	<p><b>2009</b> <i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> It's lucky that director Danny Boyle's daughter was a <i>Skins</i> fan: she suggested Patel for the role of a Mumbai street-kid turned quiz champion in this multiple Academy Award-winner.</p>	<p><b>2010</b> <i>The Last Airbender</i> Patel's first experience of big-budget Hollywood filmmaking involved playing the ambitious young 'firebender' Prince Zuko, in the M Night Shyamalan anime-influenced fantasy film.</p> 	<p><b>2011</b> <i>The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel</i> Sonny Kapoor (Patel; left) is the indefatigable hotelier who helps a motley group of British pensioners settle into their retirement, in this sun-soaked and heartwarming hit.</p>		<p><b>2012-2014</b> <i>The Newsroom</i> No one writes rapid-fire dialogue quite like TV series <i>The Newsroom's</i> creator Aaron Sorkin, and as the bright blogger Neal Sampat, Patel proved himself more than up to the task of delivering it.</p>	<p><b>2015</b> <i>The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel</i> This sequel reunited Patel with Judi Dench, Maggie Smith and Bill Nighy, as his character planned both a business expansion and a wedding. What could go wrong?</p>	<p><b>2015</b> <i>Chappie</i> In a crime-ridden, near-future Johannesburg, super-smart techie Deon (Patel) has developed a robot with a childlike, enquiring mind. Again... what could go wrong?</p>	<p><b>2015</b> <i>The Man Who Knew Infinity</i> If you missed this one, seek it out. Patel is perfectly cast as the humble but brilliant mathematician, Srinivasa Ramanujan, in this must-watch WWI-era true story.</p>	 <p><b>2016</b> <i>Lion</i> Patel's heart-rending performance (pictured above), as an adopted Australian who uses</p> <p>Google Maps to track down his Indian birth family, bagged him a BAFTA, and a nomination for an Academy Award.</p>
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