

Interview: Matthew Lewis Reflects on Neville Longbottom, 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2'

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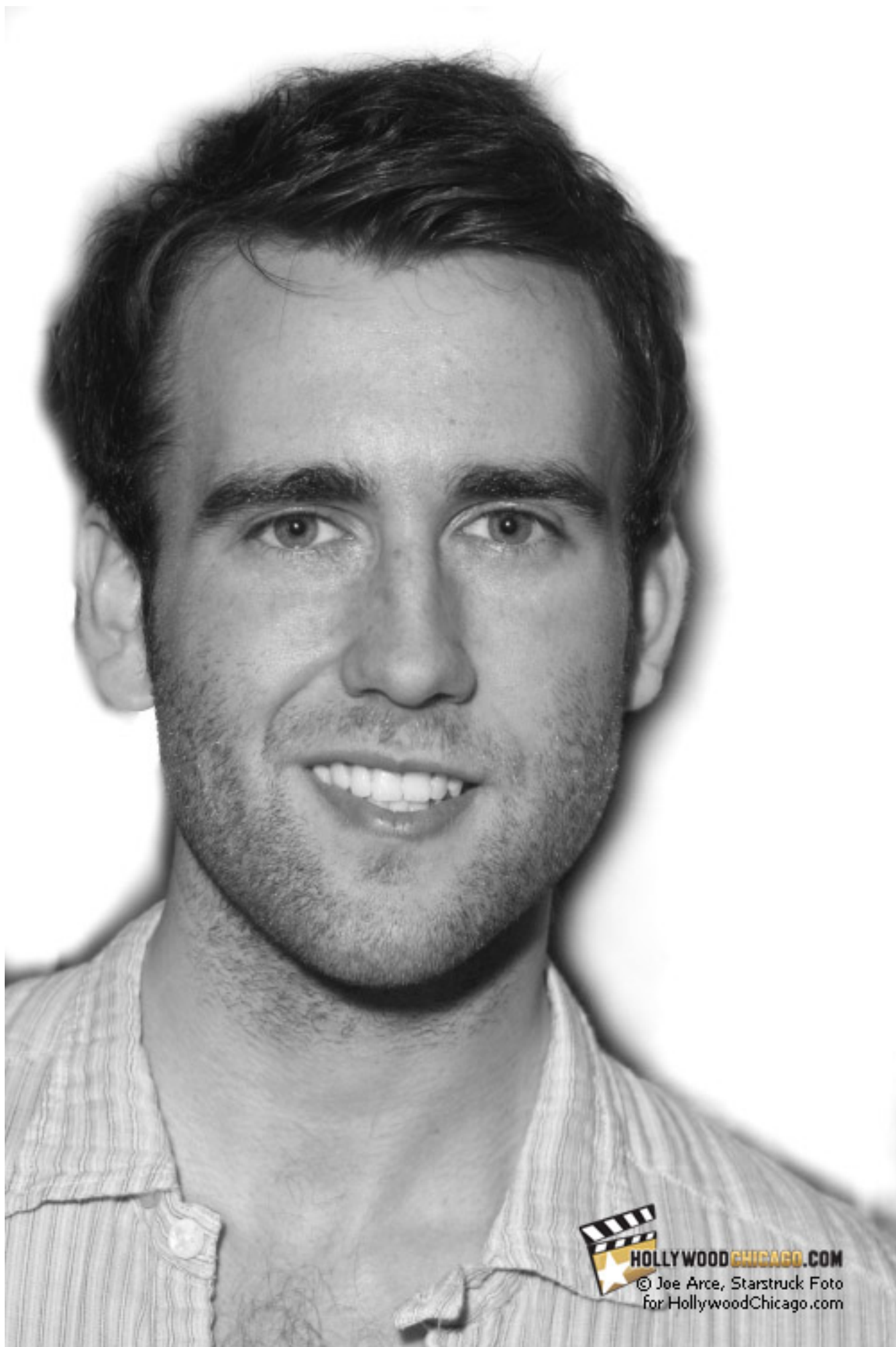
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CHICAGO – Late in 2001's "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," Albus Dumbledore reads off the House points earned by four heroic students. Three of them are easy to guess (Harry, Ron and Hermione), but the fourth comes as a shock: Neville Longbottom. The mousy, roly-poly boy had undergone the difficult task of standing up to his friends, not realizing that he would be rewarded for it.

In this moment, the camera rests on the face of Neville, whose eyes convey a mixture of disbelief and awe. It's perhaps the most tearjerking moment of the picture, and its impact is largely due to the performance by 11-year-old TV veteran Matthew Lewis. Who could have guessed that Lewis would still be playing the character a decade later, and that author J.K. Rowling would transform Neville into a fierce warrior in her final "Potter" installment? "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2" gives Lewis a smashing showcase, allowing the startlingly slim actor to prove himself as a credible action star while still retaining the self-deprecating humor and vulnerability that has made Neville such a crowd-pleaser. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Lewis about the evolution of his character, the inspiration he gleans from co-star Daniel Radcliffe, and the experience of acting in a recent stage production of Agatha Christie's "Verdict."

HollywoodChicago.com: Had you initially entered the franchise thinking of yourself as the comic relief?

Matthew Lewis: Very much so. That was Neville. I never saw him going on to become this inspirational person. His journey from a mumbling, shy character to the unlikeliest of heroes is brilliant, but I never saw that in the earlier days. I had only read the first four books. There was very little indication of that in "Sorcerer's Stone" when he says, "I'll fight you" and ends up earning the ten points. I really felt that was his day [to shine] and the point of his character was to be the comic relief. That's how we approached it. Little did I know what Neville was going to go on to become.



Matthew Lewis

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Was it a departure for you to be the comical character in the room?

Lewis: Well, to be honest, during the first few films, I wasn't too different from Neville in real life. I was eleven years old—quite shy, clumsy, forgetful and chubby-cheeked. There wasn't that much acting going on in the early days. It was very much me and I did enjoy the humorous side of it. I enjoy making people laugh and comedy's definitely something I've always been very interested in. There was even a lot of comedy in film three ["Prisoner of Azkaban"] with the book attacking us. It was different from what I had done before. Approaching a comedy character is fun because you get to sit down with the director and ask, "What makes you laugh?" Then you end up bouncing ideas off each other. Obviously in the books, Neville slowly evolves into something a lot more serious, but in this last film, we turned him into this hardened warrior—this guy who's been there, done that. He's a veteran, beaten and bloodied, yet he's not Rambo. He's still Neville. He still makes mistakes and still has got the lighthearted, humorous side of him. That's where we needed to strike that balance and find Neville within this hero.

HollywoodChicago.com: What film or filmmaker enabled you to grow the most as an actor?

Lewis: Number five ["Order of the Phoenix"]. I owe a lot to the previous directors—they were brilliant, all three of them. But I worked so closely with David Yates. He was the first director that took me into his office prior to shooting and asked, "So, how are we going to approach this film?" He gave me a lot of things to research and that was the first time I started to approach [the work] as a serious, professional actor. Previously, it was just something I did and had done since I was five. I turned up, did my lines and went away. Then on number five, I started

to take it a lot more seriously, and that was due to David Yates. That was the beginning of my acting lessons, if you like. I started to see different ways I could approach characters and different schools of acting that were fascinating. I tried to study it all. If there's someone I would say is responsible for my growth as an actor, it would absolutely be David Yates, as well as your Al Pacinos and Robert De Niros. People like Alan Rickman and Ralph Fiennes who I grew up watching in person—those guys taught me more than anything else just by being around me. The professionalism, the way they hold themselves onset—and they're genuinely good people. But David Yates really gave me that boost and that belief and kickstarted me on this voyage of discovery.

HollywoodChicago.com: In "Phoenix," you do learn more about Neville's backstory.

Lewis: Yeah, it adds a little more depth to explore.



Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2 opened in local theaters July 15.

Photo credit: Warner Brothers

HollywoodChicago.com: A great deal of Neville's transition between "Deathly Hallows Part 1" and "Part 2" takes place offscreen. How did you go about developing the narrative for your character that allows you to get from A to B?

Lewis: You're right because we've obviously got that brief moment in "Deathly Hallows Part 1" where he stands up to the Death Eaters. He's a bit of an idiot at that point. He's just reckless. He hates Death Eaters so much that he stood up to them in "Order of the Phoenix," and in the book of "Half-Blood Prince," he stands up to them again at Hogwarts. He got hurt in "Half-Blood Prince," but he came through it and that's made him so strong. He thinks, 'These guys aren't scary at all, I could fight these guys. I will fight them because of what they've done to my family and friends.' When he comes back to Hogwarts for book seven, Harry's not there. And he decides that if Harry's not going to be

there, then somebody else has to lead these people. 'I fought them twice before, I can do it.' So he stands up and he does. It's reckless and stupid, and we see in "Part 2" that he's paid the price for that. I think it's made him a lot more world weary. He's not just throwing himself crazily into battles anymore. There's a couple moments where he gets a bit too adrenalized, starting spats with the wrong people, but he's got much more up here this time [motioning to his head].

Like I said earlier, we didn't want him to be Rambo. He still had to be Neville and in my collaboration with David Yates we tried to make that character right. The other thing that's helpful as an actor is the fact that we get to cheat because we've got J.K. Rowling's books. If I ever had to think, 'How would Neville behave here, what's his angle here?' all I have to do is go back and read the books. It's all there and as soon as you start reading them, even if it doesn't describe the particular action [you're looking for], you're in the mind of the character. That's how she writes, and it was brilliant for us. David would do the same thing. Every time he wondered what he was trying to get out of a scene, he would read Jo's books. And Steve Kloves's writing is brilliant as well. When you've got a script like that to work with, it makes things a lot easier.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there any pressure from the studio to transform the physicality of Neville over time, or did you simply just grow up?

Lewis: I just grew up. After film two ["Chamber of Secrets"], I got taller and thinner. It wasn't something I had planned or something they were expecting, it just happened. But they still wanted to keep me essentially Neville. In the early days, I think somebody high up knew that Neville was going to have this transformation later on, so they were very keen to keep me as Neville. They put me in a fat suit and gave me false teeth and it's important because Neville has to be an underdog. He had to be an everyman that people could relate to and so it was great to have all that stuff. I enjoyed it. But honestly, I thought they were going to recast me because I thought there were a thousand children who would take my place there. But they kept me on, so I owe 'em for that. Later on, [for "Deathly Hallows"], they decided that Neville's been living underground for a while and needed to become a hero. So we dumped the fat suit, but we still kept him Neville. He's still wearing that cardigan. He's not James Bond.

HollywoodChicago.com: You can still see the hesitation beneath his self-assurance...

Lewis: Exactly, he has to be the underdog that just happens to come through. He never set out to be a hero. He's not doing this for glory. He's doing it because it's the right thing to do and if he doesn't, his friends are going to get hurt.



Co-stars Tom Felton, Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint and Matthew Lewis strike a pose at the New York premiere of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2.
Photo credit: AP

HollywoodChicago.com: Now that school's out, are there certain aspects of your screen persona that you'd like to explore in different roles?

Lewis: I'm very much open to the possibilities. I've been doing stage back in the U.K. for six months. Nothing massive at all. It was so different and difficult but I loved it. Actually Alan Rickman suggested I do it and now I can see why he did. It allowed me to grow in confidence as an actor.

HollywoodChicago.com: How so?

Lewis: What I've found is that stage is very much a foundation of acting. It's where it all began and you're working with that repetition. You're doing eight shows a week to different audiences and you get immediate feedback. You get to think on your feet, and if something goes wrong, you have to ad lib and work around it while staying in character. It's tough and a trial by fire, but I loved it. What I'd really like to do is

take what I learned there into more television and film roles. There’s nothing in particular that I’m looking for. I got the taste for action on this film, and like I said before, I’ve always been partial to comedy. I love the idea of working on a comedic scene. As an actor you really want to push yourself, and there’s no better way than to do an intense drama. As long as I’m acting and doing what I love, I’ll be happy.

HollywoodChicago.com: Even though you’ve been playing the same character for a decade, it’s allowed you to explore many different facets of your acting.

Lewis: Yeah, one of the reasons why I’ve loved it so much is that although I’m playing the same character every year, there has always been something new that we’ve found out about him and a new dimension to add to it. It’s just kept it fresh for me every year.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there any advice that Daniel Radcliffe gave you in regards to your work onstage?

Lewis: There was no advice that he gave me, but there was definitely stuff that I took from him. Daniel inspires me a great deal, and not with the stage so much but just in the way he is as a person, to be honest. Obviously, he’s a tremendous actor and I do watch his work, but the thing that inspires me about Daniel Radcliffe and the thing that I admire the most about him is that he’s had a level of fame thrust upon him that’s relatively unheard of. There’s not many people on the face of the earth that don’t know Harry Potter is Daniel Radcliffe. He’s had that since he was eleven years old, yet he hasn’t changed since the day I met him. He’s still the same guy, and he still has this amazing work ethic. He’s always trying to improve himself as a person and an actor. He’s done plays and musicals and he’s gone back to doing British television. That’s what I mean about how I’m happy to do anything in my own career. He’s got this passion to just work. He’s so famous, but he has no interest in making sure he’s only doing blockbuster films. He just wants to work and wants to act and add new strings to his bow. If he thinks it’s going to be a challenge, he’ll do it, and I think that’s inspiring. I think he’s a tremendous person and I don’t know how he’s coped with it all of these years, but he has and he’s taken it in stride and that’s very admirable.

‘Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2’ stars Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, Ralph Fiennes, Alan Rickman and Matthew Lewis. It was written by Steve Kloves and directed by David Yates. It opened July 15 in local theaters.



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