

## Interview: Sir Ben Kingsley Always Steering in ‘Learning to Drive’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 2, 2015 - 12:15pm

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CHICAGO – The presence of Sir Ben Kingsley – yes, he was knighted in his native Britain – is the first thing that commands a room. The regal and precise actor, who was awarded an Best Actor Oscar for his definitive performance in “Gandhi,” is back portraying a native of India in his latest film, “Learning to Drive.”

The film is a transition story for the two main characters. Darwan (Kingsley) is a Indian Sikh who gained political asylum in America shortly before September 11th. He is a driving instructor, and encounters a new student in Wendy (Patricia Clarkson). The woman is going through a bitter divorce, and is using the potential of learning to drive to gain more freedom. The two disparate souls help each other in essential ways, and at the same time weather the storm of some extreme life changes.



Sir Ben Kingsley as Darwan in ‘Learning to Drive’

*Photo credit: Broad Green Pictures*

Ben Kingsley has roots in India, as his grandfather and father were natives, and he was born in Britain as Krishna Pandit Bhanji in 1943. He studied at Pendleton College during the 1960s, and joined the Royal Shakespeare Company later that decade. He mostly worked on stage throughout the 1970s, while taking on small TV roles. His major film debut was stunning, as he became the famed Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi in 1982’s “Gandhi.” That epic beginning to his film career led to many other memorable character roles in films that include “Turtle Diary” (1985), “Bugsy” (1991), “Schindler’s List” (1993), “Sexy Beast” (2000), “House of Sand and Fog” (2003), “Shutter Island” (2010), “Iron Man 3” (2013) and this year’s “Self/Less.”

The consummate nature of Sir Ben is evident in his interview with HollywoodChicago.com. How often can a give-and-take become an emotional mentorship and philosophical experience?



**HollywoodChicago.com:** What did you like about the character of Darwan, that you wanted to make sure most came out of him?

**Ben Kingsley:** He went through some terrible losses in the Punjab [state in India], his brother was killed by the police and members of his family were tortured. Therefore, he is an exile from his homeland. It's a very painful place to be, as I imagined. There is a balance in Darwan of extreme moral fiber and an astute moral compass, based in faith, that allows him to sustain the losses and migrate thousands of miles away.

He also has the wisdom to realize that patterns of human behavior are similar no matter where you are in the world. He applies that knowledge – remember, he was a university professor in India – because it is in his DNA to teach. He translates that into his role as a driving instructor, but he is still the same university professor – he will treat people as equals and as if they were his favorite pupil. There is an earnestness in his desire to teach that has nothing to do with power over the pupil, but a shared space that he can impart to them as if it were a gift.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Where do you think that expresses itself best in the film?

**Kingsley:** There is that part in the beginning, when he has successfully taught a young man how to drive. He congratulates him, and having opened his heart with those congratulations, he moves in with his advice. So he's a very loving teacher, he will inspire confidence, he will open the heart of listener, and he will pop something in – which I think is brilliant. He actually translates that genius to behind the wheel as a driving instructor.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What do you admire about the elements of Darwan's Sikh religion that gives him a sense of survival and peace, over and above any other religion you have studied?

**Kingsley:** I must be candid with you. I didn't study Sikhism directly, it was mostly through osmosis. When I filmed 'Gandhi,' I had a Sikh bodyguard and driver. He would greet me each day by standing at attention. The Sikhs are soldiers, and no matter what they always look like they're in uniform, I wanted to express that bearing. Traditionally, a Sikh always carries a sword, and even if it's a tiny reduction of that, it is on their person. They will never use it violently, they will always use it in protection.

So I had a Sikh driver, I saw the back of his head every morning. And in his duties as a bodyguard, he would never take his eyes off me all day. If there were things that threatened me in the making of the film, he certainly never told me. But he was just there. He'd never say, 'I just saved your life four times today,' because he was a profoundly non-needy man. So through osmosis I learned of him – his bearing, dignity, losses and nostalgia for the Punjab – especially his amazing moral fiber.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How was that best remembered on that famous movie set?

**Kingsley:** When I was working with the make-up in the film, I would close my eyes, and I would only open them at the very end when I went on set. So I opened my eyes, and there was my driver/bodyguard, there he was in the mirror. It was wonderful to see him again after that process, if you get my depth. Everyday for five months he was there, and then years later I get to thank him through the character of Darwan.



Movie Poster Image of Patricia Clarkson and Ben Kingsley in 'Learning to Drive'

*Photo credit: Broad Green Pictures*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The relationship that Darwan had with Wendy cracked a bit of his shell, and subsequently led to him asking her for advice. As an actor, how do you best want to communicate such a subtle shift, and where in the story do you think it best comes out?

**Kingsley:** I have to cite the great Meryl Streep on this one. She once said the actor never knows how a scene is going to go, until they are

face-to-face. You can know your dialogue backwards and forwards, but there is no point rehearsing the scene in front of a mirror. The point is to be sensitive and open to the other actor, and especially listen to the other actor.

As Darwan says, 'read the signs.' And the signs coming off your fellow actor are such a rich gift to me, I love to react to what is there. He eventually gets a proper perspective on the character of Wendy, and her journey. As she opens up, I responded to that in the performance. Darwan shifts when he begins his arranged marriage, and his new wife is terrified, He asked Wendy what he should give her when he meets her for the first time, and later how can he talk to her. Those were the barrier breakers, and it was wonderful for a warrior to be vulnerable with a liberated Western woman and say, 'I haven't got a clue.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What characteristics from your father do you feel you carry with you in your profession, as he carried them in his work as a physician?

**Kingsley:** It's difficult to answer that honestly, because unfortunately my father was emotionally absent, and through his alcoholism was unreachable. So I'm very sorry to say that is very little that I derived from him, except in negative values. I had to live in a bubble as a child, and had to raise myself up and make my own choices.

But, in the sense of that question – Babu is the word in India for Dad – look at the fathers I have portrayed in my career. I've portrayed Simon Wiesenthal [writer, Holocaust survivor], an amazing patriarch. Otto Frank, Anne Frank's father was another, and Itzhak Stern in 'Schindler's List.' I even portrayed Moses. All these men are great patriarchs and father figures.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Can you give an example of what a father means to you in one of those performances?

**Kingsley:** I knew Simon Wiesenthal, who would put his arm around me and tell others I was like a son to him. I felt at that moment that I had many Dads, and that I could successfully portray a father. In the case of Otto Frank, who I portrayed in a miniseries, I had a secret to his character in my pocket. I would envision Anne Frank, waiting to be picked up from school, and she sees Otto at the gate. She turns to her friend and says, 'you see that man over there. That's my Dad.' I carried that characteristic note inside me when I interpreted him.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you are a veteran Shakespearian actor, what clues did the Bard leave in his text and dialogue as to how to access the characters he created?

**Kingsley:** Having worked with [Shakespearian actors] Peter Brook, John Barton, Cicely Barry and Trevor Nunn, their beautiful script analysis was a great guide to me. I know that Shakespeare is almost the inventor of the human being. He put within his plays perfect patterns of human behavior, that withstand audience scrutiny through the now millions of performances, just as they did 400 years ago. He was the perfect writer.

And he's spoiled me a bit, because when I read screenplays now, I've got to see that Shakespearian pattern of human behavior. If it's not there, I will do the film for my accountant. If I is there, I will do it for love. When I analyze a screenplay today, I still can connect to that beautiful cause-and-effect in his work, that perfect symmetry.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What are some favorite examples of characterization that you've taken from your Shakespeare experience?



Sir Ben Kingsley as 'Gandhi'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

**Kingsley:** The worst person you can make jealous in the world is a North African general – that would be Othello. And the character of Iago just keeps poking him. If Othello were a British colonel, nothing would happen, that character would just have a whiskey. [laughs] But it's Othello, the worst buttons you can press on him is the jealousy button, and Shakespeare pushes him right in there. The way these characters come together is absolute beauty.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Peter Sellers once said that he had done so many accents he didn't know what his real voice sounded like any more. Do you think, since you also tackle a broad range of characters, that there is a danger that your psyche can get away from who you really are?

**Kingsley:** No. I learned physics at school and I have a forensic approach to my work. I look for clues in my reading of the screenplay, and I analyze the text to the nth degree. In physics, there is a law having to do with the point of elasticity. Physics says that if you stretch something beyond its point of elasticity, it will not shrink back to its original shape. And I've never stretched myself beyond that point. Something in the cells within my body say, 'that's it, stop right there.' Even in something as intense as 'Schindler's List,' I was just telling the story, I didn't



have to go mad.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** And Peter Sellers always went past that point.

**Kingsley:** Always. He did not die a happy man.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally, what transition or crossroads in your life became that path that defined everything that came after it? And what gratitude can you express about that occurrence?

**Kingsley:** I was nine years old, and I was taken to the cinema by my parents – I grew to love the cinema, because it was an escape. I was taken to a film called ‘Never Take No for an Answer’ [1952]. The boy on the screen was around my age, and he was an orphan, and the only thing left with him in Italy was his donkey. The donkey became very ill, and the boy went on a quest to have a wall at his village’s Chapel of St. Frances demolished, so he could lead the donkey into the crypt to be blessed by the saint. Everyone he encountered said no, until he smuggled himself into the Vatican – and the Pope said yes, I will do it. He took the order with the Papal Seal back to the village, the wall was demolished, and he got his donkey in.

I was in a flood of tears as I watched the film. There was an amazing empathetic flow between him on the screen and me in the audience. It was at that point that I decided I would get inside my bubble. I didn’t know what it was at that point, and I didn’t know how it would translate, but I was getting inside that bubble. Eventually, it turned into a craft.

*“Learning to Drive” continues its nationwide release in Chicago. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Ben Kingsley, Patricia Clarkson, Grace Gummer, John Hodgman, Samantha Bee and Jake Weber. Written by Sarah Kernochan. Directed by Isabel Coixet. Rated “R”*



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [18]

Writer, Editorial Coordinator

HollywoodChicago.com

[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [17]

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