

Oscar Week: Gary Oldman is Winston Churchill in ‘Darkest Hour’

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CHICAGO – He has been cleaning up in the preliminary awards so far in 2018, and he’s an odds-on favorite to take the Oscar for Best Actor on Sunday, March 4th. Veteran actor Gary Oldman donned make-up and found the right accent to portray Winston Churchill in “Darkest Hour” (also nominated for the Best Picture).

The title refers to one of the most challenging moments of Churchill’s career. Newly minted as Britain’s prime minister in 1940, he faces the onslaught of Adolf Hitler’s attack on his homeland, including the surrounding of the British troops at Dunkirk. Gary Oldman embodies the pugnacious bulldog that characterized Churchill at the height of his power, including the soaring rhetoric that strengthened the morale of the British people.



Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill in “Darkest Hour”

Photo credit: Focus Features

Oldman was born in London, studied acting with the Young People’s Theatre and made his professional stage debut in 1979. After collecting

favorable notices on the British stage – he was a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company – Oldman made his film debut in “Remembrance” in 1982. Shortly thereafter, he made his name in films with “Sid and Nancy” (1986) and “Prick Up Your Ears” (1987). Hollywood beckoned thereafter, and Oldman had the high profile role as Oswald in “JFK” (1991) and portrayed a strange pimp in “True Romance” (1993).

Oldman did mainstream films (“Air Force One” and “Lost in Space”), gained a reputation for portraying villains and even appeared in a two part episode of the TV series “Friends.” After a short slump in the early 2000s, he came back strong as Sirius Black in the Harry Potter film series and as Commissioner Jim Gordon in the Dark Knight Batman trilogy. Recent films include roles in “Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy” (2011), Robocop (2014) and this year’s “The Hitman’s Bodyguard.”

Gary Oldman sat down with HollywoodChicago.com in October of 2017, for a comprehensive overview of how he built the Churchill character, and his whole career of portraying icons.

HollywoodChicago.com: Beyond the cigar, bowler and suit, what was the first note on your list on how to make Winston Churchill more human?

Gary Oldman: Speaking of the cigar and all of that, he did understand branding and marketing his image. He was a short, round Victorian man in dandy clothes, and while he wasn’t an actor, he certainly had a sense of the theatrical. That is evident in his writing as well.

For me, I had to think about whether my image of Churchill was influenced by other performances of him, such as Albert Finney. So I went back to the source material, the Pathé newsreel footage of him in his time. What I saw was a man who had enormous energy. In his visitations with the troops, he was always skipping around and walking ahead of other people. He walked with a fixative of purpose... cherubic, cheeky and with a sparkle in his eye.

He can be played as if he was born in a bad mood, just a constant curmudgeon. If someone was that grumpy and depressed, it would have been impossible for that person to write 50 books and paint 500 pictures, and accomplish what he did.

HollywoodChicago.com: As you looked in the mirror after getting completely made up as Churchill for the first time, what characteristic of your performance was immediately apparent?

Oldman: What was odd, when I was preparing the role in my kitchen or in the landing in my home – which had a nice echo for his speeches – I was pushing my lip forward in the Churchill way, while still just being me in my dressing gown. So much of what I was doing I didn’t need to do, to find his sensation near the end of the rehearsal period. I was looking for the feeling in his face and mouth, but it wasn’t there in practice. When it was all put together, I hoped that the numbers would click, and then I could open up the door to his entirety.



Gary Oldman as Commissioner Gordon in “The Dark Knight Rises”

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

HollywoodChicago.com: As you were growing up in England, what did you know and understand about Churchill, and did any of those childhood notions of the man permeate your performance?

Oldman: Going back to that idea of branding, it was the bulldog, and I even had a plastic bust from Woolworths. I was also model maker, and ended up painting him in that process. My Dad was in the Royal Navy, and was in the Atlantic and Okinawa on a battleship until 1948. My mother is 98 years old, and has memories of the war, and still talks about carrying a gas mask and going underground during an air raid.

HollywoodChicago.com: Living in 1940 war-time England was part of the challenge of being a British citizen. How does it still define the Brits as a people?

Oldman: Well it did define them, I don’t think it’s the same anymore. I look at the hardships that my parents went through, and the hardy stock that my mother still has, and I look at those women and think that they are in a class of their own. That stoicism, that ‘keep calm and carry on,’ was remarkable to me.

In the audio portion of the interview, Gary Oldman talks about his role as Lee Harvey Oswald, Commissioner Jim Gordon and gives a little advice on acting.

The 90th Academy Awards, hosted by Jimmy Kimmel, will take place on March 4th, 2018, at Hollywood’s Dolby Theater, and will be broadcast on ABC-TV beginning at 7pm ET/6pm CT. "Darkest Hour" features Gary Oldman, Lily James, Ben Mendelson, Kristin Scott Thomas and Ronald Pickup. Written by Anthony McCarten. Directed by Joe Wright. Rated "PG-13"



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