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- 3 November 2009 11:46
- Daily Male
  - Film & TV
  - Interviews
  - DVD Reviews
  - Film Reviews
  - Latest Releases
  - Film Trailers
  - Inside Hollywood
  - Television
  - Popcorn
  - Nightlife
  - Music
  - Culture
  - Books
  - My GaydarNation
  - What's New
  - Downloads
  - Competitions
  - E-Cards
  - Contact

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## Entertainment : Film & TV : Interviews

### Oliver Parker

11 Sep 2009

**"Mirror, mirror on the wall...who is the fairest of us all?" Not one of Oscar Wilde's famous quotes but nevertheless highly relevant to Oliver Parker's new version of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.**

The *St. Trinian's* director considers **Ben Barnes**, star of the *Narnia* films, to be the fairest because he's cast him as Wilde's deluded vanity hound. Parker's taste is undeniable. Barnes is undoubtedly better looking than your average movie star and the none-too-shabby supporting cast includes **Colin Firth**, as mentor Henry Wotton eager to corrupt the noble young man, and **Ben Chaplin** as Dorian's devotee Basil Hallward.

When first published in 1890, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was charged with being an immoral tale causing outrage for its scandalous content and the depiction of a homoerotic relationship. Wilde produced a revised edition a year later to counteract his critics.

In Wilde's time, the young and beautiful made deals with the devil in order to stay that way. Today, souls are sold to a Satan of a different guise – pharmaceutical companies, plastic surgeons and - most destructive of all - a self-perpetuating obsession with being famous.

The portrait of Dorian at his prime is a mirror image of his soul and, as his morals dwindle, the picture starts to decay. Parker considers the story of a young man who bargains his soul for eternal youth more relevant than ever considering the crazy celebrity infatuated culture we now live in.

Rachael Scott spoke to Parker about his handsome leading men, directing that kiss and the new *St. Trinian's* at The Cadogan Hotel in Chelsea, the place where Wilde spent his final hours of freedom before the police escorted him to Reading Jail where he served two years for gross indecency.

**This is your third adaptation of a Wilde work (*An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*). What is it about his writing that fascinates you?**

Originally it came from theatre because I've done a lot of work in theatre as an actor and director. I became interested in the challenge of getting radical pieces to a modern audience. I'd go to Wilde performances and people were just spouting their lines as if they were funny. No one was really listening and, in a way, quite outrageous pieces had become a jewel in the crown of convention. I wanted to slightly shake it up and show an audience, particularly a younger audience, this could be exciting. That covered the first ones.

This was a slightly different one. After the second one, people said I should do another, but I didn't really want to. There were lots of other movies I wanted to make. I was happy to help develop it, but I didn't want to direct it. That was about seven years ago. Then two years ago I'd done a few other films and my palate was cleansed a bit and I began to see what we could do and it suddenly felt much more cinematic.

The writer we brought in, Toby (Finlay), was a very smart, arrogant, brilliant young man who had a healthy disrespect for Wilde. So when there was a dialogue I really wanted to do it, which grew into, 'Let me at it!' I was fascinated by a lot of the themes in the earlier one, but to do a darker version - Dorian himself is such a paradox. When he's at his guiliest he looks so innocent. He is the beauty who, in the end, is the beast. So all those things suddenly became exciting.



**How do you feel that *Dorian Gray* is still relevant in the 21st century?**

There's a level on which it's always relevant because it's one of the great myths of all time, that Faustian pact that drives him right into the depths of his desires. The abuse of power, that's always going to be interesting; the question which hovers over the whole thing, which is, 'What would you do if you could get away with it?', is exciting. So that's there as an almost granted and it's fabulous.

For now, all those themes are so current. Our obsession with beauty, our obsession with youth and what we can do nowadays to try and hang on to it makes the theme even more urgent than it must have been. You walk down the street and you see all these people who are somehow hanging on to this desperate delusion that they're not getting older.

What's so interesting about it is what Dorian represents, something we're all hankering for, a great hole in ourselves. There's a darkness in ourselves, I think, where we get a sense of power if we're not that beautiful

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November  
Inside Hollywood  
DVD: Shank



#### Fun

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#### News

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show

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person, because we can somehow create beautiful people around us – celebrities – and then we destroy them. That's an interesting, dark, murky power that's on the other side of his story and you see it everywhere.

Look at Susan Boyle, Michael Jackson. I mean, what a *Dorian* story that is. In prison, whether it's his own identity or the one that's been foisted on him, but never growing old in Neverland. So it's sort of everywhere and I feel privileged to have the chance to bring that to light.

**"Our obsession with beauty, our obsession with youth and what we can do nowadays to try and hang on to it makes the theme even more urgent."**

**Apart from his good looks, what made you cast Ben Barnes?**

He has a very interesting mixture. It's a bit to do with the fact he's actually 27 and looks 20, so he has this ability to appear absolutely innocent and sweet, and he is on one hand, but he's also someone who's right on the brink of huge stardom. He's got a massive fan base, the world is falling at his feet, what's he going to do? That's an interesting frisson about a person. At the same time, he's got these dark eyes. So if you're looking for a paradox you've got a hint of it there to start with.

It's a really hard part to cast and impossible to play and I applaud him, I think he's done brilliantly because what can he succeed. The book can say he's the most beautiful person; the film has to show one. Really, the book is a series of great clashing symbols, but not a character, and we try to tease in character but inevitably he's a phenomenon. So you're restricted by what you're not allowed to show because he can't change. And I think what he does in the 25 years older stuff is just magnetic. Some of those shots when you see him in the labyrinth in the half-light, he became a rock and his soul was ancient. That's acting. It was a treat working with him because he was so keen and he knew it was a tough thing to do.



**You've worked with Colin Firth four times now if you include both *St Trinian's* films. What initially attracted you to him and how has your relationship changed over the years?**

He does keep pestering me for work and he doesn't get much work elsewhere, really, so you've got to give the guy a break sometimes. No, I adore Colin. What's so interesting about him is there's always more round the corner with Colin.

He's looking to grow and has a curiosity as an actor in the best sense, to discover more of what it's like to be like somebody else and he's really fascinated by that. I think he's superb as Henry because it's tough stuff. Putting Wilde and those epigrams, brilliant and irritating they could be, in a horror movie is Whoa! and Colin just does it with such ease. He gives you real sense of the character's darkness but also moments of vulnerability.

So I love to push him around. I didn't get as many chances to humiliate him as I do in *St. Trinian's*, which is always enormously enjoyable trying to think of new ways to try and make a fool of Firth, but in this one I think he's electric. I hope we'll find plenty more to do because he's one of those actors who isn't hanging onto his youth. As an older man (in *Dorian*) he was stunning and he didn't go for playing an old man. He had real glamour and charisma, but in the right way and I think he'll do that as an actor. He said, 'God, this is spooky. Is this me in 20 years time?' Yes, Colin.

So it's really great to do all these different things with him. The nice thing is that we have a very strong form of communicating. He's really smart, really focused and kind of knows what I'm up to and I think trusts me. So all that makes it really fun going to work.

**"I was surprised when we did test screenings for the kiss (between the two Bens) at what an extraordinary reaction it had because I find it a bit tame, if anything...I think it would have been good to have a bit more male flesh."**

**What did you take into consideration when you filmed the kiss between the two Bens? Were they nervous?**

They were nervous, definitely. It's quite a thing to do. One forgets. I was surprised when we did test screenings for the kiss at what an extraordinary reaction it had because I find it a bit tame, if anything. Nothing happens. I feel slightly guilty that I didn't have more room to take that scene further because I'd like to have done that.

**When you say 'further'...**

I mean I think it would have been good to have a bit more male flesh. But within that scene, Basil is resisting it. The point is that the chapter has passed and you have to move on. It kind of works but I was shocked at the response. You forget that it's still so shocking for an audience to see.

For the actors, they were a bit nervous but Ben Barnes was so trusting and when I watch him I think, 'God, that was good'. He's not pushing anything. He's just playing the scene and not conscious of the effect of the scene, just really good.

This film could have gone much further if I'd wanted to. In the end, I think it would have really struggled to get its release, which is infuriating, but it will help and I like the frisson it creates. I saw it even yesterday with the casting crew and a lot of people and there were a lot of gasps and I thought, 'Great. Great. You guys need to be seeing this. You really ought to be seeing this', and Oscar is obviously such a hero in those terms, the boundaries he's prepared to push and that's why he was waiting here in this hotel to be arrested.

He was picked up from here with a mate having a drink before the police came and took him. But it is shocking to think that it's still a surprise. I suppose it's only 100 years since he was put away, so in some ways there's great progress, but in other ways...



**Can you tell me about the second *St Trinian's* film? What's the storyline and how's it coming along?**  
It's filmed. It's a treasure hunt. They discover that Miss Fritton has some connection to some old treasure and Rupert's just fabulous in it. It's a journey for all the different girls and him to find it against considerable forces and antagonism.

**Are there any new additions to the cast?**

**David Tennant.** He plays the bad guy. He's extremely good. Had a lovely time with him. What a nice man, and so sharp. We've got some new younger girls come through. Tamsin (Egerton), who was in the first one, is really good in this one. She's turned out to be a superb comedienne.

**Is Russell Brand in it?**

Sadly, he's not. Partly to do with him filming in America, which is a real shame, but who knows if another one comes around... It was great working with Russell. I think he's so gifted and so typical that this country didn't really take him on. I remember reading some reviews saying, 'Why do we have to watch Russell Brand when he can't act?'

**But he can act.**

For a start he can act. Really. He trained as an actor and I would never have had him in the bloody film if I didn't think he could do it. Also it's about personality, isn't it? It's like saying why didn't they get Olivier to play the Kenneth Williams role in *Carry on Doctor*. For God's sake, so then America gets him. I'd love to do some more with him. He's just electric. You don't know what he's going to do but he's really got an instinct for it. You feel that there are some great parts for him if he wants to go that way.

**The first *St. Trinian's* is due to open in the US soon isn't it?**

In about a month.

**Why has that taken so long?**

Well, it was so successful over here all the big studios were sniffing around it but they were slightly anxious because of the proximity of girls and vodka. It was an issue, so it took us a while to get the right certificate. They wanted to give it an 'R' and no one's going to buy a film if it's an 'R'. It needed a lot of money to sell it because it's a new thing. Unfortunately, America is running scared at the moment unless a film fits an absolute slot. It will? What is it?

**I hope it does well because I really liked it. I thought it was hilarious and I came out of the cinema in a good mood.**

It is very silly, but it's got a lot of jokes. For me, it's a delight to have an anti-dote to something like *Dorian*, which I loved doing because it's meaty and dense and dark and then do something that's unapologetically good fun.

A lot of critics just wanted to kill it. Then over the years I've had so many people say, 'I love your film', like a guilty secret. Kids love the idea of being a bit naughty. They love Rupert and I find that so exhilarating because what is Rupert? A wonderful, complicated, aging gay character doing this strange thing and they love him. There's a kind of warmth and subversiveness which kids particularly get and that's so exciting.

There's a huge optimism about it and it connected to Wilde for me because Wilde would sell his soul for a good line. And there's a kind of generosity of spirit in that and a commitment to pleasing an audience.

### [Read Our Review Of \*Dorian Gray\* »](#)

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***Dorian Gray* opened in UK cinemas on 9 September 2009.**

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