

# Internal Combustion

Timothy Spall paints his masterpiece in Mike Leigh's *Mr. Turner*



NOTHING IN TIMOTHY SPALL'S 60-PLUS FILMS, INCLUDING five with Mike Leigh the Lionheart, captures his essence so perfectly as when, playing J.M.W. Turner in Leigh's *Mr. Turner*, amid a fury of slashing strokes he repeatedly spits on the canvas to achieve the effect he wants. Couple it with a scene in which Turner cackles while spying on aristocratic patrons and John Ruskin, a champion of Turner's work (and here dismissed as a pontificating tool), as they're confronted with paintings that burn their carefully landscaped world down, and you have a perfect picture of the moment when working-class blokes began to wrest beauty and truth and the economy from the swells.

In *Mr. Turner*, the 57-year-old Spall carries the lead while continuing to adhere to the Alec Guinness school of everyman character acting. He's the visible strand linking Leigh's comedy-dramas of family life and his historical works—a division that overlooks their basic theme: the little man labors as the true king. Spall won Best Actor in Cannes, where Jane Campion's jury parceled out awards to acknowledge the Competition's top-tier films. I'd have given everything to *Mr. Turner* on that first full day of the festival and gone home, albeit missing some great films. Spall is the face of *Mr. Turner* assuredly—and of Leigh's enterprises when we are so lucky, of his countrymen in the 21st century, and of the rest of us everymen everywhere.

>> IN FOCUS: *Mr. Turner* opens December 19.

**You're the son of a hairdresser and a postal worker, and on the last day of the last millennium you were named an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). A remarkable statement about the century we come from. Is this what your parents wanted for you?**

It wasn't something they were expecting. My mother was working in a fish-and-chip shop when I was born, and my father was a scaffolder. My mother taught herself hairdressing and had a salon in our house next to my bedroom. She used to sing in pubs [the way] good ol' South London people used to get around what we called the "Joanna," which was the piano. No one ever expected anybody in the family to become a professional.

I was in a quandary when I was about 16. My school was shit. They didn't mean it to be, but they were training people for manual work and skilled labor. There were a few Chelsea-ite bohemian teachers that came across the river—the art, English, and drama teachers. I was thinking about going to art school. The other part of me wanted to join the Army Royal Tank Regiment. So I was mildly schizophrenic, to say the least.

Then my English teacher asked if I'd play the lion in *The Wizard of Oz*. I said the first line, people laughed. I said it again. People laughed again. We only did three performances. At the end of the second, my teacher who had put my lion nose on took it off and said: "I have never said this to any of my pupils before, because it's a stinking rotten business, but I think you should be an actor. And I will guide you to the route to do so." She told me

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about the National Youth Theatre—the government is doing its best to kill it now by not funding it. I played Falstaff when I was 17, had only ever read one piece of Shakespeare in my life. I then applied to drama schools with my parents' help, £10 each. I auditioned for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art at 18, got in, and went when I was 19. And I left at 21 with the Bancroft Gold Medal.

I had a good start. Having not really listened in school and being the laziest boy in the class, I went more or less straight to the Royal Shakespeare Company with Ben Kingsley doing Shakespeare, Chekhov, Brecht. Drama school, the first two years of the Royal Shakespeare, and the National Youth Theatre gave me my education. From being vacant of much knowledge of any of the classics, I had a classical education by the time I was 22.

**What are the benefits of being a character actor?**

The great benefit is that there is no pressure for people to find you attractive. I hate looking at myself. I don't like my face. So when I see it in the cinema, there is a certain amount of agony. At least Turner is supposed to be an unprepossessing, simian, bear-like man with a strange gait and a terrible, rough-hewn, almost gargoyle-like character.

**Why did you say yes to the role?**

I very rarely say no to Mike Leigh. Not only is he one of the world's great filmmakers, he's also the man that has given me the best parts of my career. My association with Mike has given me a film career. Particularly when *Secrets & Lies* won the Palme d'Or in 1996. I couldn't be there, because I had the audacity to be diagnosed with leukemia the day before I was supposed to leave. The day I watched Brenda Blethyn and Marianne Jean-Baptiste and Mike walk down that red carpet on TV, I was having a plate put into my heart and chemotherapy pumped into it.

**How did leukemia have an impact on you personally and professionally?**

I don't want to be too profound about illness. As you get better, you stop being profound—otherwise you exhaust yourself. Frivolity is a cure for illness. Having had a peek over the precipice, at the suffering and pain and the thought of what your family would do and how they would feel—that was a killer. There's nothing like a little dose of agony to make you understand what suffering is about. When you come to play

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people who suffer, you're drawing from something that happened, not something you are imagining. I wouldn't recommend it as a tool of Method acting, nor as a way to lose weight. Which I did. All the same, like Turner, I like to turn every negative into a positive.

**Turner spitting on canvas is a unique and funny metaphor for the making of art. Where did that come from?**

There is evidence that there is saliva on the paint. Turner used everything he had at hand. God knows what other bodily fluids he used. If he needed 'em, he'd have used 'em to get the right effect. Considering he wanted to be remembered for all the work together, he was neglectful of the material. He didn't know that they would crumble and crack. He used a lot of gilt—he was transferring the fluidity of watercolor, its lightness of touch, the way the paint fuses into the paper, into oil painting. That's what made him revolutionary.

**Was the grunting anywhere in the research?**

That grew organically out of the things we discussed about a character who isn't in the film, his mother, who would have been diagnosed as a violent paranoid schizophrenic now. In them days, she'd have been called a dangerous raving lunatic. She destroyed her family's lives, actually. It created a flame inside him. Because he pushed everything into that, he internalized every feeling he ever had, and that became a nuclear fission inside him and grew into the engine of his creativity. That's my take. That's how I got the key to him.

What makes him a one-off is this tension between his brutish physique and demeanor and the beauty of what comes out at the end of his arm. Genius never comes in the package you imagine it to. If most geniuses turned up [at an audition to play themselves], they wouldn't be cast, because they don't look like geniuses.

Turner is a very different man to me, but I know lots of people who are in pain because of what has happened to them in their childhood. I know lots of people who never get over it. Many people who have gone through what Turner had as a child—if he hadn't been taken away from that woman and saved by his father, he'd have been a potential suicide, or a murderer. But instead he transferred that pain into creativity.

[With] my illness, I saw the pain in my children's eyes. I know what pain feels like. If you can't express that pain, which I can because I am an actor—if I didn't have a way to put that shit into my acting, I'd probably go round the bend. □



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