

'Self-loathing is self-indulgent. Get a grip' - At 43, and despite gashes and bruises from his current role, Tom Hollander is finally starting to enjoy his career, he tells Andrew Billen

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In a pretty dramatic demonstration of how life mocks our plans, Tom Hollander took on the twin lead parts in Georges Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear* intending it to be respite from playing the tortured Anglican vicar in the BBC's divine comedy, *Rev*. "You know, frothy and fun," he says when we meet for breakfast in a West London patisserie, two months into the farce's run at the Old Vic. He hardly needs to explain that fun and frothy is not how it worked out - his scars tell the story.

Hollander's rather magnificently large forehead bears clear evidence of the gash inflicted when a door - they open and close 247 times in the play - flew into his face during the second preview, resulting in his first visit to an A&E. A few weeks later another collision-he can not even remember with what - burst a blood vessel in his right arm. On his BlackBerry, he shows me alarming pictures of the haematoma, his forearm purple to the elbow, at which point it swells into a fist-sized reservoir of blood. He was out of the show for three weeks, which meant that Nick Clegg, his old friend from the Marlowe Dramatic Society at the University of Cambridge, returned his tickets. "Nick," he says into my recorder, "if you have time to read *The Times*, we are on until the fifth of March."

Thus the sins of Hollander's characters, the pompous insurance executive Chandebise and his double, the boozy hotel porter Poche, have literally fallen on the actor's head. As if the play were not cruel enough, I say. "Is it ultimately cruel?" Hollander asks. "I suppose it is. People are ridiculous. We are all ultimately ridiculous. But watching it should not make you frightened. It should offer you a release from the burden of taking yourself seriously."

I wonder to myself if this is a fault that he detects in himself. "There is something in the nature of comedy," he goes on, "that means you have to be ridiculous."

And he sometimes finds it hard? "I find it harder in life. I am sometimes not that good at being laughed at in life." A week ago he instigated a "long, intense and involved conversation" in which he asked an actor to avoid clipping one of his lines. "Two days later I then crashed into one of his speeches so spectacularly that it made my arguments completely preposterous. The irony was not lost on anyone at all."

The Rev Adam Smallbone, the beleaguered inner-city vicar he plays and co-created in *Rev*, is, he says, more or less him in a dog collar (Hollander describes himself as agnostic with spiritual leanings). But Smallbone is saddled with a double burden of seriousness. Surrounded by media priests, opportunist charismatics, a snide, socialite archdeacon, and a small but troubling congregation, Smallbone struggles to preserve not only his dignity, but God's.

"Our only intention was not to mock faith. That is all. When you met these people [while visiting churches to research the series], you saw they were doing really difficult things, going to all the places that most of us are relieved not to have to go to. And that is tough. So why mock that? Those basic Christian ideals, whether you believe in God or not, are extremely useful and helpful and, having lived in the showbiz world full of hedonistic, self-gratification for 15 years, I find these ideas, as I get older, more and more interesting."

Rev was so loved that it is hard to find a dissenting voice. Richard Ingrams in *The Oldie*, however, saw only the final episode in which, gripped by crises of doubt, career and sexual frustration, Smallbone went on a binge of drink and pornography, rediscovering his vocation only when attending a dying parishioner. Ingrams hated its crudity and mawkishness. Had the finale gone over the top? "Well, that is not my opinion. I know Episode 6 was good. Episode 6 got to the nub of something in a way James Woods [his co-writer] and I felt quite proud of. I met a vicar who crossed the road to say, 'I was having a breakdown and I saw Episode 6 and it restored my conviction in what I dedicated my life to'. And another crossed the road to say, 'Thank you so much for Episode 6. It confirmed all the reasons why I gave up'."

Given his ownership, Rev may be the highlight of Hollander's career so far, but it is full of excellent work. He says if at 17, by which time he had already starred in a BBC children's serial, he had been told that he would achieve so much by 43, he would have been "open-mouthed and thrilled".

But his success is no surprise to the rest of us, whose hearts lift whenever he appears on screen. In the film *In the Loop* two years ago, for instance, he joined the established cast of *The Thick of It* and looked as if he should have been part of it from the off (and later did an episode). As Ruskin, he stole *Desperate Romantics* from Aidan Turner's Rossetti. This winter's Channel 4 serial *Any Human Heart* was dead in the water until he stirred it up as the Duke of Windsor. It is hard to think of a supporting role he has taken, from Gracie Fields' Italian husband in BBC Four's *Gracie* to Lord Cutler Beckett in two *Pirates of the Caribbean* sequels, that could have been more wisely cast.

"If that is true, and of course I would love it to be, and thank you very much, then maybe something has happened with the age I have reached. As a younger person I was not comfortable in front of the cameras."

Three years ago he wrote a funny, self deprecating account in *The Spectator* of his early days. After Cambridge he had signed to an aggressive agent, Michael Foster, who promised to make him a star and then failed to find him work for 18 months, during which time he worked as a toy demonstrator in Hamleys. Yet what struck me was his self-belief. Every day Hollander would ring this frightening man to ask if he had an audition, only to be shouted at.

The self-confidence can be sourced to his childhood in north Oxford, where he was the son of teachers, one of them the leader of the city council's Lib Dem group. Tom and his older sister, Julia, the English National Opera's youngest woman director, were, he says, his parents' focus. He attended the Dragon School and then Abingdon, both academically ambitious private schools, and then followed Julia to Cambridge, where he read English and met the now Deputy Prime Minister in a production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. (Of Clegg, with whom he shares a godchild, he says: "I dare say he will be corrupted by power at some stage. How can you not be? But he is fundamentally a nice person.") Yet fluctuating with the self-confidence is a current of insecurity and almost comical pessimism. In a more recent *Spectator* he wrote of cancelling his 40th birthday party in the belief that he had contracted herpes, only to find that the rash on his inner thigh had been caused by the "chafing Nazi jodhpurs I was wearing in *Valkyrie*". In our conversation he tentatively compares himself with Hugh Laurie, another Dragon alumnus, "never good enough for his own sense of himself" and to the Cambridge spy Guy Burgess, whom he has played as "a study in unfulfilled potential".

Is he saying he feels similar self-loathing? "I have previously enjoyed saying I do.

I have now decided it is self-indulgent.

Everyone can be full of self-loathing, and you need to get a grip." As for much of our conversation, he looks down and tackles another patch of his scrambled egg.

Explanations for these insecurities occur, the easy one being that he is 5ft 5in. I ask how different things might have been were he 5in taller? "It is something I don't think about until someone asks, or until I read 'the diminutive Tom Hollander' and I think, 'Oh yes, right, that seems to be my defining characteristic'. The question leads to an answer that goes 'There would have been parts I would have been able to play'. But it never hurt Dustin Hoffman." And he has played Don Juan on stage. "Quite. So I think anything is possible."

An alternative root of his anxiety might be his childhood. "We were encouraged to do our artistic stuff," he says, "but there was also a kind of nervous energy around the house. So we were confident but we went to these competitive schools and were encouraged to 'go on, have a go', but we were not that thick-skinned so when we go wrong we run for the darkened room."

His successful upbringing casts another shadow, as he castigates himself for not having a wife and children. "I have aspired to it for ages without doing one thing that is likely to make it happen. My own parents' marriage I admire and I don't know if I would be able to do it as well. The problem is, if you are career-bound you can become self-obsessed, and loving somebody else involves not putting yourself first." He is single but has had no trouble finding girlfriends, and glamorous ones: the casting director Dixie Chassay; the "socialite" Daphne Guinness; and the architect Fran Hickman. "No, that is not the issue. The disease of show business is the possibility of anything happening at any moment. That is the worm in the head that stops you: the possibility that a casting director could ring up and change your life. As a young person the possibility that Steven Spielberg might ring means that in your twenties and thirties you are still vulnerable to going. 'No, I want to keep my options open'. I have definitely been guilty of that."

But his attitude is changing. He seems genuinely relieved that a pilot he made in Hollywood for a David E. Kelley TV series has come to nothing. He says he wants to live in Britain, preferably in Oxford, with a wife and children. But what then of the adulterous temptations that come with working with beautiful people? "That is absolutely about making moral choices," he says, sterner than Smallbone would be. "And bear in mind most of the parts I have played have been gay anyway. It has not been much of a danger to me."

This year he features in a second series of *Rev* and *Hanna*, his third feature film collaboration with the director Joe Wright, in which he is a "nasty psychopath". Twice when we talk he reverently recalls a small movie, *The Lawless Heart* in 2001, in which he played a bereaved gay man. He wants, of course, to play more non-comedic roles. Sadly, life finds inventive ways to mock us and his extraordinary current success in two great comedies, *Rev* and *Flea*, may be among them. His literally farcical injuries may be forgotten quicker, even by him.