

STEPHEN FRY

ACTOR, COMEDIAN, NOVELIST AND NOW DIRECTOR OF THE NEW
FEATURE FILM, BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS.

INTERVIEW MATTHEW MYERS

Bright Young Things was adapted from Evelyn Waugh's novel Vile Bodies. What attracted you to this project?

Well, I love the idea of a 'party film' with young people crashing and burning. I love films about groups of friends. So much of our own life is defined by our group of friends. In particular, I loved the pace of it. In so many period films everything slows down, but I love the idea where everything is much faster!

The movie has an uncanny modern-day relevance to sex, drugs, nightclubbing and the tabloids. Is there a lesson in this for today's wild child?

Yes, I think there is. I didn't set out to make it a moral fable for the young partygoers of today, but I think that whole crash and burn idea is one that the film's characters discover. They were a kind of wasted generation in that sense, but on the other hand they set the terms by which we live today. I think the point, especially with the gay scene, is that the spectre of war hung over the gay party life of the 1930s and was not unlike a different war of the '70s and '80s, that being AIDS. That's what our generation had to face – not that there is anything wrong with promiscuity and partying, but in the end it's only love that matters. Love is the thing that's easy to be ashamed of. People can quite happily admit to some sort of fisting event in the backroom of a sordid pub, and tell you about it with joy, but they can't talk about love.

The gay character, Miles, has his ups and downs. Gay culture in the '30s was developing a certain social acceptance but the war and the depression turned things backwards. Do you think that could happen again, given the current state of the world?

Very much so. What astonishes me is the fuss they have made about this gay bishop in America and the church ripping itself to pieces over it. I mean, how new is that? A gay clergyman? Who ever heard of such a thing? Extraordinary! One of the things about the gay sensibility of the '30s was the influence of one character: Oscar Wilde. Oscar's guilt and embarrassment had been forgotten right to the end of the First World War. The one thing that the Bright Young Things generation did was rediscover the cult of youth and the aestheticism of art for art's sake, which Wilde had been a great proponent of. It's no accident that both genders merged to some extent after the First

World War. The War was the defining moment of the 20th century and everything that followed it was of consequence in a very dramatic way. The women cut their hair, were flat-chested, and the men started to wear make-up. You can see it in film, for example Gary Cooper and his obvious eyeliner. But with the depression, suddenly people were afraid and all the exoticism went back in the box.

The character of Agatha was a great fruit fly.

What a great character! I don't know if anyone in the history of film has had better fortune than I, when Fenella Woolgar walked through the door at the casting session. She's a magnificent actress! Agatha has eccentricity, tenderness and is sharp as well. She has that extraordinary quality where she can look at someone and simultaneously look incredibly

wise and incredibly stupid. It's a very defining look for her.

The film has an amazing cast. There's a Blues Brother (Dan Aykroyd), Lawrence Of Arabia (Peter O'Toole) and even Rizzo from Grease (Stockard Channing). Was it strange directing people you grew up watching?

Yes, I thought, "Hey, I'm working with a ghost-

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buster!" It's extraordinary, but you quickly get used to it. The fact is they are all so wonderful and they don't make you feel awkward. The day before Peter O'Toole came on set I was lying in bed thinking, "What if he says, 'I beg your pardon! Are you telling me how to act?'" But he was so easy to get along with. He was absolute-



ly charming, always word-perfect and totally committed to the work.

You even had veteran actor, 94-year-old Sir John Mills doing drugs!

Yes! He's an old friend of mine. I've known him since he was in his eighties, that's how long! He asked if there was a part for him in the film and I said, "Well there is an old man who sees someone taking snuff, has some and then taps the chap on the shoulder asking for more." And John said, "Oh goody, my first coke movie!"

Did you have favourite old movie stars?

I had an incredible soft spot for Clint Eastwood; particularly the *Dirty Harry* films. I loved James Stewart, James Cagney and, of course, all the gay icons like Judy Garland and Betty Davis.

Whatever Happened To Baby Jane...

Oh God, yeah! *Baby Jane*! It's weird that it's so popular with gay men. I don't know what the connection is.

Did you ever officially come out as an actor or was it a gradual process of acceptance?

It was about 1987 and I was doing a play and a journalist said to me, "You're not married are you?" and I said, "No". Then he said, "Do you have a girlfriend?" and I said, "No, I'm really 98 percent gay." Then there was a headline saying "98 Percent Gay!" Amazingly, I then got letters from girls asking if they could be the other two percent! Very silly!

What was it like playing an important historical figure, Oscar Wilde, in *Wilde*?

It was a hell of a step because he means so much to so many people. There's a different Wilde for almost every different style of society. There's Wilde the patron saint of Bohemians, Wilde the patron saint of gays and Wilde the patron saint of intellectuals. Then there's Wilde the great tragic victim, Wilde the socialist and so on. When you play a character like that you feel you are going to disappoint everybody and they'll think, "That's not Oscar Wilde!" I was always aware that I was never going to get the part correct, but it turned out okay. I was very excited about the idea of presenting the Oscar Wilde that I felt to be exotic with that peacocky type campness. There was also his generosity and kindness. He was gentle and that's the thing people remembered.

And you got to snog Jude Law!

And, of course, I got to snog Jude Law... and suck on his nipple.

What's your take on the theory that an openly gay actor will not be offered straight roles?

I don't think it's true. I think people are ridiculously hypocritical. The very first film I did was called *The Good Father* and I played a divorced father with about six children. Someone said to me, "How can you play that? You don't know what it's like to be a father with children!" That's so weird because you can play a cowboy who kills people and never have killed someone.

Actors are expected to play roles that they haven't experienced. It's an odd idea that gay people can't play straight.

I suppose there is an element of truth in it because audiences still have that view. If they see Ian McKellen playing the part of someone who is lusting after a woman, a little part in their head says, "that's not right". Whereas if a straight actor plays a gay character they prefer it because they know him to be straight and think, "Well, that's alright because he's not really gay." I think it's a shame. But I think it's only on film that people have this problem. McKellen recently did an absolutely blistering performance in *Dance Of Death*. He was incredible. I don't think anyone would give a second thought that he couldn't play that part because he's gay.

ity show for the Prince Of Wales. Victoria, 'Posh' as she was known, said to me, "Oh, I've read a book of yours. It was called *The Hippopotamus* and it was really good." I was so touched that a Spice Girl had read my book that I decided that she was definitely my favourite. I find her a bit hard to take now. There's something strange about the way her lips don't touch – as though she's terrified of messing up her lipstick.

Julie Andrews... you worked with her on *Relative Values*.

Oh, now there's a legend! In the first scene we did together, I was sitting on a sofa next to her and I realised that I knew every inch of her face because I had grown up with her. She was so deep in the fibre of my being: Mary Poppins and Maria von Trapp! It was a very odd experience. But a rather peculiar thing happened. At



(Above, left to right) The bright young things of Stephen Fry's movie: Stephen Campbell Moore, Fenella Woolgar, Emily Mortimer and Michael Sheen. (Opposite) Stephen Fry on set during the making of the film.

Do you ever hang out with Ian McKellen?

We bump into one another at parties. My closest friends are those I started out with in the comedy world. People like Ben Elton and Hugh Laurie.

Back in the days of Lord Snot on *The Young Ones*!

Yes, exactly. Emma Thompson and all those people I used to work with.

Have you rubbed shoulders with our Kylie?

I have met Kylie, but I can't say I have literally rubbed shoulders with her! I have a very good friend who is a close friend of Kylie's – the Australian writer Kathy Lette – and she invited me just the other week to play Scrabble with her and Kylie. Unfortunately, I was unable to do it, but one day I'll have a game of Scrabble with Kylie and I'll get to know her even better!

You played the judge in *Spice World*. Did you have a favourite spice girl?

At the time it was Victoria. When I first met the Spice Girls it was on stage when we did a char-

the time we were filming, which was on the Isle Of Man, there was a total eclipse over Britain. Everyone was excited and Julie, myself and my boyfriend all climbed up a hill to watch the eclipse. The hilarious thing was that half of the Isle Of Man turned up to watch the eclipse, but they had their backs to the sun and were staring at Julie Andrews – high on a hill – thinking that at any moment she would break into "*The hills are alive...*"

And did she?

No, but when you work with Julie Andrews you find you end up doing some sort of Mary Poppins' thing. She's really great fun.

Has there been one particular career highlight for you?

I would say two. As an actor, *Wilde* was a fantastic experience and then directing *Bright Young Things* was incredible. The experience of writing, casting, directing and following it all the way through has been the most extraordinary experience of my professional life.