



BRIAN COX



JOHN LITHGOW



SIMON WARD



RICHARD BURTON

by York
Membership

B RITAIN'S wartime Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill has been portrayed in more than 200 mainstream movies and TV dramas, and dozens of times on stage.

The latest film — *Darkest Hour* in which he's played by Gary Oldman — has already won its lead three Best Actor awards, including a Golden Globe, and is now being tipped for Oscars success.

Richard Burton, Albert Finney, and Sir Michael Gambon are just some of the legends who have played the great man, but the record for being Churchill the most times is held by Robert Hardy, who was cast as him in nine different productions.

In his final interview before his death, aged 91 last year, which has not been published until now, Hardy pulled no punches when we spoke about the performances of his fellow actors — and accurately predicted that Oldman's portrayal would be one of the finest.

Darkest Hour focuses on the early days of World War II — it's 1940 and the newly appointed Prime Minister must decide whether to negotiate with Hitler or fight on. Could Oldman become Hardy's successor as the greatest Churchill actor?

Hardy died before the film's release but had taken a keen interest in it and told me he liked what he saw.

'From everything I've seen and heard, Oldman's portrayal of Churchill is far more convincing than some other recent portrayals,' he said.

'He certainly looks the part, he's undergone a remarkable transformation. But it's not just his appearance — he's managed to catch the essence of the man.'

Oldman has revealed that he initially turned down the role, as he was daunted by the prospect of living up to the performances of actors such as Hardy.

He said: 'I thought, "What could I do with it that was new?" Who ever took the part was not only being asked to step into the shoes of arguably the greatest Briton who ever lived, but he was also walking in the shoes of all those other actors who have played him so well, like Albert Finney and Robert Hardy.'

Oldman spent more than 200 hours in make-up and carried half his body weight in padding to fill out his figure. But first, he'd spent a year studying Churchill and his mannerisms — and Hardy agreed it had paid off.

It was, he said, dangerous for an actor to simply rely on Churchill's famous props such as his cigar.

'It's important to get the little details right. It's not just the look, but stance, style and speech, too.'

'It took me nine months of preparation to get Churchill right the first time I played him, back in 1981 in the drama series *The Wilderness Years* for ITV.' So what did

Gary Oldman's portrayal won him a Golden Globe. But in his last interview, Robert Hardy — who played Winston NINE times — gave his often caustic verdicts on his rivals

So who WAS the FINEST Churchill?

Robert think of some of the other Churchills on our screens?

BRIAN COX

Churchill (2017)

THE Scot starred alongside Miranda Richardson as Churchill's wife Clementine in last year's biopic, which covered the 96 hours before D-Day in 1944, but it was hardly a victory according to Hardy.

'I'm afraid I found it rather disappointing,' he said.

'He did look uncannily like Winston, the cosmetics people did a fantastic job, but I don't think he got much right.'

'I found his Churchill a little bit Scottish, and by that I mean there was Scottish in his voice, which is totally wrong.'

Was there anything he liked about Cox's Churchill?

'He went at it,' conceded Hardy, 'he certainly went at it.'

JOHN LITHGOW

The Crown (2016)

THE American actor was nominated for a BAFTA and a Golden Globe for his depiction in the first series of the lavish Netflix TV drama.

But Hardy was not impressed. Lithgow stuffed cotton wool up his nose to replicate Churchill's speech impediment and padded his cheeks to give him jowls.

But that wasn't enough to give him complete authenticity, said Hardy. 'It's not his fault, but he's 6ft 3in, which is too tall to play Winston convincingly. He loomed over everyone, which the real Winston never did.'

Some actors — including Lithgow — have said they toned down aspects of Churchill's overpowering personality for fear of appearing over the top. But Hardy said: 'Well, that's very silly — if you're going to play somebody, you've got

to try to capture that person. If Churchill was a bit much to our modern eye, well, so be it — let's have an over-the-top Churchill!'

'If you're asked to play a dog, it's no use being a pussycat!'

SIMON WARD

Young Winston (1972)

ONE of the first big-screen dramas about the great man, this film covered Churchill's schooldays, his time as a cavalry officer and his capture and celebrated escape while a war correspondent in South Africa during the Boer War.

'I played a nasty schoolmaster at his prep school — Winston was severely beaten by this odious man — although back then I never dreamt I'd one day play Churchill myself,' said Hardy.

'It's a very exciting, brilliantly directed and pretty accurate film that has largely stood the test of time — and Simon Ward was

among the very best Churchills I've seen. It was a very brave performance — I really enjoyed it — and I was thrilled when at the end he attempted an "older Churchill" voiceover.'

RICHARD BURTON

The Gathering Storm (1974)

IRONICALLY, Hardy played Nazi diplomat Joachim von Ribbentrop opposite his friend Burton when the latter starred as Churchill in this U.S. TV biopic.

'I loved Richard like a brother, but he didn't much look like Winston in the drama — he refused to even shave his hair off because, of course, Winston had little hair on top,' said Hardy.

'What's more, afterwards, he told an American reporter that he didn't really care how he came across in the drama because he "hated the man" [Churchill]. It nearly broke Churchill's daughter Mary's heart,

**ALBERT FINNEY****BRENDAN GLEESON****TIMOTHY SPALL****MICHAEL GAMBON****TIMOTHY WEST****Measuring up: Gary Oldman as Churchill in Darkest Hour**

and I felt it was a treacherous betrayal of her because she'd actually helped advise Richard on how to play her father.'

He added: 'I think Richard's jaundiced view of Churchill was the result of hearing the rumour, false as it happens, that when Winston was Home Secretary he ordered the troops onto the streets to control the miners during the Tonypandy Riots of 1910 in South Wales.'

Welshman Burton's condemnation of Churchill was all the more bizarre because they had met in happier circumstances.

Hardy recalled: 'In the 1950s I was appearing in Hamlet at the Old Vic with Richard. Churchill was sitting in the front row and, afterwards, Richard and I were in his dressing room when Winston

burst in, cigar in hand. He addressed Richard as if he was still in character as the Prince of Denmark. "Your Highness, I am in great need", he said. "Do you have a lavatory?"

'Needless to say, Richard and I dined out on that story for weeks afterwards.'

ALBERT FINNEY

The Gathering Storm (2002)

THE great actor won a BAFTA and an Emmy in the acclaimed BBC-HBO re-make, which covered 1934-1939, when Churchill was a lone voice in the wilderness warning of Nazi rearmament.

'Funnily enough, I bumped into Finney, who I knew pretty well, a few months before he was due to start work on the production and said to him jokily: "I hear you're

taking over my role. You're going to play Churchill." He insisted he wasn't and demanded to know who told me. And it was a direct lie!' laughed Hardy.

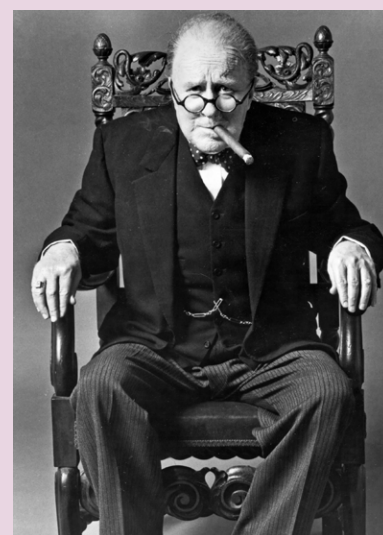
But he gave Finney's Churchill a thumbs up. 'He's a thorough actor and he did a fine job.'

BRENDAN GLEESON

Into The Storm (2009)

THE Irishman won an Emmy for his portrayal of Churchill, in which he recalls, through a series of flashbacks, some of his most glorious moments during the war, and the effect it had on his marriage to Clemmie.

Hardy was impressed. 'He clearly worked very hard at it, looked the part and pretty well got the voice, even if he hadn't quite got the tune. There was a very musical

*Stern: Hardy as Churchill in The Wilderness Years in 1981**Best picture: As the great man in 1988's The Woman He Loved*

HIS OWN FINEST HOURS

*Statesman: Hardy in 2015's 100 Days That Saved Britain*

OF HIS own numerous 'attempts', as he called them, to portray Churchill, Hardy was happiest with his performance in ITV's *The Wilderness Years*. In the closest he came to praising himself, he said wryly: 'I gave it my all, but at the time really didn't know if I'd got it right — but seeing it again now, I realise that I'm not nearly as bad as I thought was!'

Much to his delight, Churchill's youngest daughter Mary Soames — who died in 2014, aged 91 — wrote to him after watching the first couple of episodes, thanking him for working so hard on getting her father right.

'It was a marvellous letter — the best review I've ever had,' he said.

element in Churchill's speaking, and the danger of trying to get the voice, and making it simply repetitive, is a very real risk. 'You must listen, listen, listen to the music.'

TIMOTHY SPALL

The King's Speech (2010)

HARDY was less fulsome in his praise of this rather clichéd Churchill in the Oscar-winning movie about George VI and his attempts to cope with his stammer.

'I very much enjoyed the film... but I'm afraid Churchill was not with him,' he said. 'Really, the only possible way anyone can play Churchill is by steeping themselves in the man and his history.'

MICHAEL GAMBON

Churchill's Secret (2016)

HARDY also had reservations about this ITV drama, which told the story of Churchill's hush-hush stroke during his second premiership in the Fifties, and Gambon's portrayal of the weary titan. 'There

were a lot of mistakes in the film,' said Hardy.

'Such as the fact that one nurse supposedly looked after him 24 hours a day, which was impossible.

'And Michael Gambon seemed to me to be playing Michael Gambon with a stroke — I don't really think he captured Winston.'

TIMOTHY WEST

Churchill And The Generals (1979)

NEITHER did Hardy particularly rate this BBC drama starring Timothy West in the title role about the wartime leader's sometimes difficult relationship with Allied top brass. 'I watched it again recently and I think it's evident I tried far harder than West to get Churchill right,' said Hardy.

■ **ROBERT HARDY** supported *The Murray Parish Trust* (themurrayparishtrust.com), which raises funds for paediatric facilities in the south of England. *The Darkest Hour* is in cinemas now.

Picture: SCOPE / NETFLIX / GETTY / REX / ALAMY / ITV / SPORTSPHOTO / WENN.COM