



Cumming, Alan (b. 1965)

by Linda Rapp

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Versatile actor Alan Cumming has performed a wide variety of roles on stage, screen, and television. He has earned numerous awards for his acting and also for his support of glbtq causes.

The younger son of a forester and a homemaker, Alan Cumming was born January 27, 1965 in Aberfeldy, Perthshire, Scotland. He spent his first year in the neighboring town of Dunkeld, where his father worked on a large estate. The family then moved to Fassfern on the west coast of the country, and three years later settled on the east coast, on another estate near Carnoustie.

As a child growing up on an isolated estate he lacked playmates--his only sibling was six years older than he--and so he amused himself by acting out stories of his own invention. His cast, he recalled, consisted of "me and my dog. And imaginary others."

After graduating from Carnoustie High School, Cumming worked for a year at a publishing company in Dundee, initially in the fiction department and then interviewing bands for a pop culture magazine called *TOPS*.

Cumming then enrolled in the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow.

While attending the academy Cumming met and married fellow student Hilary Lyon.

After graduating in 1985, Cumming and a friend, Forbes Masson, developed a stand-up comedy act that proved extremely popular. Following this success Cumming starred in a BBC sitcom, *The High Life*, which he also co-wrote.

Cumming's first love was the stage, however, and he and Lyon won the lead roles in a very well-received production of *Hamlet* in London in 1993. Cumming was nominated for the Richard Burton Award at the Shakespeare Globe Awards and received the Martini Rossi TMA Award for his work.

Cumming and Lyon appeared destined to become a theatrical star couple, but it was not to be. Near the end of the run of *Hamlet*, Cumming suffered from panic attacks and depressive episodes that led to a nervous breakdown. The marriage disintegrated, and the couple divorced.

Thereafter, Cumming was involved in several gay relationships, but while filming *Circle of Friends* (1995, directed by Pat O'Connor) he fell in love with actress Saffron Burrows. The two became engaged but broke up before there was a wedding.

Following his relationship with Burrows, Cumming had a number of romantic relationships, mainly with men, before he settled down with American illustrator Grant Shaffer. The two entered into a civil union in London in January 2007. Family and friends including Sir Ian McKellen and Rufus Wainwright attended the



Alan Cumming. Detail of a photograph by Angela Brinskele (© Angela Brinskele). Image courtesy Angela Brinskele.

joyful ceremony at the Greenwich Royal Naval College. The couple now resides in New York.

Cumming is reluctant to put a label on his sexual orientation. In a 1999 article in the *Advocate* he said, "I'm not going to say I'm one thing when I'm not just so I can fit into people's notions of how things are. I think people deny themselves by putting themselves into categories."

As an actor Cumming has certainly defied categorization. In his work on stage, in films, and on television, he has played roles in productions that range from the plays of Shakespeare to the animated adventures of Garfield the cat. He has already appeared in over fifty movies, with more in production.

Cumming's first film role was in the little-noticed *Prague* (1992, directed by Ian Sellers), in which he plays a young Scot who has returned to his ancestral home, Prague, in search of film that depicts his grandparents being taken away by the Nazis in World War II. The 1995 James Bond film *Goldeneye* (directed by Martin Campbell), in which he plays a computer programmer, brought him to public attention, and he went on to more prominent roles in *Circle of Friends* and *Emma* (1996, directed by Douglas McGrath). As the egregious Reverend Elton in *Emma* and the slimy Sean Walsh in *Circle of Friends*, Cumming brings unexpected humanity to unappealing characters.

Before becoming a film actor, he had already won acclaim for his stage work in London's West End. He was nominated for a Laurence Olivier Award as Most Promising Newcomer for his performance in Manfred Karge's *The Conquest of the South Pole* in 1989. He received an Olivier Award for his work in Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* in 1990 and was nominated for another in 1992 for David Hirson's *La Bete*. The following year he gave his award-winning performance as Hamlet.

While *Hamlet* was still in production, Cumming began rehearsals for a London revival of *Cabaret* (book by Joe Masteroff, based on Isherwood's Berlin Stories; music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb). In a 1987 production he had played a minor role. But in the 1993-1994 West End production, he had a leading role as the Emcee and earned another Olivier Award nomination for Best Actor in a Musical.

Cumming reprised his role as the Emcee in *Cabaret* on Broadway in 1998-1999. The New York production was a smash hit, and Cumming earned numerous honors for his performance, including the Tony, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, Theatre World, and New York Public Advocate's Awards.

Cumming's success in *Cabaret* led to the opportunity to star in a New York production of Sir Noël Coward's *Design for Living*, a play that he had long wanted to do. Critic Elysa Gardner praised Cumming's 2001 performance, writing that he "imbues Otto with a delightful mix of impishness and innocence."

The following year, also in New York, he appeared in *Elle*, a short play by Jean Genet. The work had never been performed in English, and so Cumming wrote an adaptation based on a translation by Terri Gordon.

The simple premise of the play is that a young photographer is trying to take a perfect picture of the Pope for worldwide distribution. As *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley noted, however, "'Elle' is a dense, ornately verbal meditation on the tyranny of fame and manufactured images of glamour and authority."

The French feminine pronoun, *elle*, actually refers to the Pope since his title, *Sa Sainteté* ("His Holiness"), is a feminine noun; thus, the Pope is called "she."

Cumming gave a flamboyant performance as the pontiff. Brantley described his entrance as one "which for audacity and spectacle is unlikely to be topped . . . even by touring rock stars" with its special effects and Cumming's designer dress "that makes the most lavish Oscar-night gowns look modest." The reviewer went on to say that Cumming brought "miraculous new variety to the premise of the actor as war-weary whore that he perfected in 'Cabaret.'"

In addition to his work on stage, Cumming has appeared in dozens of films, in which he has shown remarkable versatility as an actor. His movies include light-hearted fare such as the three *Spy Kids* films (2001, 2002, and 2003, all directed by Robert Rodriguez) and the animated feature *Garfield* (2004, directed by Peter Hewitt), for which he did voice-overs. He has also appeared in adaptations of the works of Shakespeare--*Titus* (1999, directed by Julie Taymor), Charles Dickens--*Nicholas Nickleby* (2002, directed by Douglas McGrath), and Patricia Highsmith--*Ripley Under Ground* (2005, directed by Roger Spottiswoode).

With Jennifer Jason Leigh, who played Sally Bowles to his Emcee in the New York production of *Cabaret*, Cumming has co-written and co-directed a film, *The Anniversary Party* (2001). The two co-starred with a cast that included Gwyneth Paltrow (with whom Cumming had worked in *Emma*), Phoebe Cates, and John C. Reilly. The low-budget film, which was shot on digital video in only 19 days, was not a great commercial success but received favorable reviews. Critic Eric Harrison called it a "nicely acted and appealing drama" with "sterling performances" from the "marvelous cast."

Among Cumming's recent film projects are Lorena Machado's *Bam Bam and Celeste* (2005), starring Margaret Cho, and Sara Sugarman's *Coming Out* (completed in 2008, but not yet released), in which Cumming will play a gay cabaret performer who takes charge of a hapless Welsh rugby team after the death of his father, its coach. Cumming has also appeared on television in the lesbian soap opera, *The L Word*.

In 2009, he served as host of the PBS "Masterpiece Mystery" series.

Cumming is the author of a novel, *Tommy's Tale* (2002), about a bisexual man who, as he approaches his thirtieth birthday, is both enjoying a freewheeling party scene and yearning for a more settled life as a father. The book received polite but unenthusiastic reviews.

In February 2005 Cumming introduced Cumming The Fragrance, which is called "beyond gender." *Cosmetics International Cosmetic Products Report* states that the "fusion of basic, masculine notes with adventurous ones . . . makes it original." A line of other body-care products is planned.

While pursuing his many projects, Cumming has still found time to work for worthy causes. He serves on the Board of Directors of Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS and has taken part in many events on behalf of the organization. He is also a member of the Board of Advocates of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the Ambassadors Committee of Free Arts for Abused Children NYC, and the Honorary Advisory Board of Living Beyond Belief, an organization that encourages New York City high school students to become active in the fight against AIDS.

In addition, he participates in numerous events for Bailey House, a New York organization that provides housing and other important services to people with HIV/AIDS. He has also done a comedy benefit for Beverly Hills's Trevor Project, whose goal is to promote tolerance for glbtq teens and whose national Trevor Helpline (866.4.U.TREVOR) provides round-the-clock suicide prevention services. He also served as the Celebrity Grand Marshal of the 2004 San Francisco LGBT Pride Parade.

Despite all these efforts, Cumming said that he "felt such a fraud for being publicly lauded" for his charity work. He therefore decided to take part in a project of the American Foundation for AIDS Research's TREAT Asia program by going on an eight-day fundraising walk on the Great Wall of China. The twenty-five walkers raised more than \$275,000 and also learned about the cultural issues that complicate combating the disease in China.

In a 2001 interview Cumming stated, "I get bored quite easily. I like to do different things. I'd be horrified to think I was going to be doing the same thing all the time." With his many projects, both professional and charitable, it seems unlikely that he will fall prey to ennui any time soon.

When Barack Obama announced his intention to run for the Presidency, Cumming applied for American citizenship in hopes of being able to vote for him. He was naturalized in November 2008 but unfortunately did not realize his wish to cast a ballot for Obama because the paperwork for his case did not come through until a few days after the election. Despite his immediate disappointment, he expressed his desire to take part in the American political process in the future.

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