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Everything's coming up roses for actor Dominic Cooper. The 29-year-old star of The History Boys has ditched the

awze

photography Toyin

no

classroom for jailbreaks with Brian Cox, Abba tunes with Meryl Streep and sex scenes with Keira Knightley. If only he could forget about his upcoming birthday, he tells Matt Mueller



Black tuxedo and white shirt by Dolce & Gabbana, Bow tie by Tom Ford



"In the final number of *Mama Mia!*, we're all wearing outrageous spandex suits – mine's pink and opened down to there," he says, motioning to his waistline. "It could be the end of my career but, you know, anything goes."

Any way you slice it, this will be a year to remember for Dominic Cooper. Turning 30; buying a flat away from the southeast London neighbourhood where he's laid tracks his entire life; and starring in three couldn't-be-more-dissimilar films, any one of which could propel him to the big league of Brit stars currently occupied by James McAvoy and Jude Law. "The things that are coming out are exciting and I keep being told they'll make a difference," he hedges. "But who knows?"

Thus far, Cooper has displayed a two-pronged appeal: a brash sexuality he exploited as the ferally manipulative Dakin in *The History Boys*, and a puppyish demeanour that makes audiences want to shield him. This second quality is on show in spades in UK prison drama *The Escapist*, in which Cooper suffers plenty as Lacey, the naïve, new-boy convict let in on an escape plot because his wizened cellmate (Brian Cox) feels sorry for him. "He just gets beaten up, raped and generally shat on," says Cooper of his character, who makes a striking entrance into prison stripped to his briefs, smeared in white delousing powder and taunted by a cellblock's worth of randy inmates. "That was one of the first scenes I shot and Rupert Wyatt, the director, made sure it was the first time I saw the prison. It was scary."

There's no doubt this vulnerability caught the eye of Nicholas Hytner, the National Theatre svengali who Cooper can thank for his career. Plucking the actor straight from drama school, Hytner cast him in swift succession in *Mother Clap's Molly House*, as Will in *His Dark Materials* and, of course, *The History Boys*. Before Hytner got his hands on him, Cooper had stumbled into acting haphazardly, following a brief detour in the employ of hip commercials outfit Academy. "It was exciting for a while but then I got a bit perturbed by people sat there talking about the colour and crispiness of a cornflake," he grins.

Sitting in the photographer's north London flat, Cooper is engaging, self-deprecating and sporting the aftermath of a head shaved for a BBC Two film with Stephen Dillane called *God On Trial*, about Auschwitz prisoners awaiting selection for the gas chamber. "Being in Glasgow, in January, that subject matter – it was kind of..." Depressing? "That might be the word... It was more intense than sitting on a jet ski, oiled up and singing Abba."

That would be Cooper's next film, an adaptation of insanely popular stage musical *Mamma Mia!*, which he didn't want to audition for but "people forced me to do it". He may have cringed while belting out Abba's *Lay All Your Love On Me* at the meeting, but still convinced them he was the right heartthrob and spent what sounds suspiciously like a seven-week paid holiday hanging out on Greek islands with Colin Firth and Meryl Streep. "In the final number, we're all wearing outrageous spandex suits – mine's pink and opened down to there," he says, motioning to his waistline. "It could be the end of my career but, you know, anything goes."

His other major role comes opposite Keira Knightley in Saul Dibb's *The Duchess*, playing aristocratic MP Earl Grey, who conducted a passionate affair with 18th-century scandal magnet the Duchess of Devonshire. According to Cooper, his sex scenes with Knightley were "damn good fun" but his behaviour during the shoot was "completely moronic... I just made a fool of myself the whole time. I was pretending to be more academic than I was, seeing as I was playing a politician, and came out with garbage that I knew nothing about. I just acted like a naughty schoolkid the whole time."

Naughty boy or not, Cooper's doe-eyed charisma has already seen him touted as the next Jude Law. Turning 30 this June, however, is one breakthrough he's not looking forward to. "I'm dreading it," he demurs. "I should be planning a big party but I might just pretend I'm not 30... Although isn't 30 supposed to be good? Isn't 30 me learning who I am and what I want to do with my life?"

Perhaps it's about exerting more control over your own destiny... Cooper had been planning to head off after the shoot to the NME Awards with some of his *History Boys* cast-mates, but he has a big audition in the morning and "if I go, I won't get to bed before 6am." Instead he heads off, clutching his annotated script and iPod, to catch the Tube home and prepare for a role that might change his life all over again. *The Escapist* is released on June 20, *Mama Mia!* on July 11 and *The Duchess* on August 29



White shirt and black trousers by D&G, Belt by Margaret Howell

Black tuxedo and white shirt
by Dolce & Gabbana, Bow
tie by Tom Ford, Two-tone
shoes by Church's, Black hat
by Bailey of Hollywood



White vest by D&G, Black
jeans by Diesel, Black fedora
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