

Happy HOUR

One of Britain's best known and loved actors, Art Malik, has just turned 60. With a loving family, and a career that allows him to cherry pick roles, life can't get much better. Emma Burstall meets the modest man behind the star

Chatting over coffee and biscuits with actor Art Malik at his club *The Groucho* in Soho, I find myself thinking that as careers go, Malik's is to die for.

There can't be many British actors with a CV as long or distinguished as his. Ever since landing the part of Hari Kumar in the hit 1980s series *Jewel in the Crown*, he's scarcely been out of work and then, only from choice.

"Sometimes there are roles I just don't want to play, stories I don't want to be part of," he explains. (Of this, more later.)

He's been in numerous films, top TV series and plays, and worked with the best directors, writers and actors of his generation.

He played James Bond's Afghan ally in *The Living Daylights* (1987), villain Salim Abu Aziz opposite Arnold Schwarzenegger in *True Lies* (1994), and appeared alongside Sarah Jessica Parker in *Sex and the City 2* (2010).

He's also starred in the BBC's *Holby City* and *Upstairs Downstairs*, and theatre productions such as *The Seagull*, with Kristen Scott Thomas and Carey Mulligan, which originated at London's *Royal Court* and moved to Broadway.

When I meet him he's just completed a second TV series of *Borgia* and is about to film a biopic about Princess Diana's relationship with heart surgeon Dr Hasnat Khan, starring Naomi Watts as the eponymous *Diana*, to be released later in this year.

And his first Bollywood movie *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (*Run Milkha Run*), based on the life of Indian Olympic athlete Milkha Singh, will come out in July this year, too.

"I've been very fortunate," he says modestly. "The splashes I made early in my career had a ripple effect which enabled me to carry on. I set out to work as an actor because it's what I love doing and if you can do that every day as I have, it's a gift."

Despite his success, there's nothing arrogant or starry about Art. He arrived here on public transport and says he has little time for prima donnas.

"I was flown first class to America for *Sex and the City 2*, for example, but normally I'll travel second class like everyone else.

"If you go around in dark glasses with three security guards, people are going to want to know who you are. But if you mind your own business, most people don't notice and if they do, they're usually courteous."

Generally he'll take roles because he's interested in the project.

"Many theatres can't afford to ferry me back and forth in a limousine or give me a huge West End dressing room and you take that on board when you accept a



job. It's all about deciding whether you want to be part of telling a particular story and what you can bring to the piece."

Not that the need to earn hasn't been a factor, however. The father of two admits earlier in his career he did take some jobs to 'fill the fridge' as he puts it, and provide a home for his daughters, Jessica, now 31, and Keira, 29.

Now, however, he and wife Gina, whom he met at drama school, have more freedom.

"There has been a pragmatic side and we're all governed by the need to make money. But now it's more about what do I really want to do? Do I want to work with that director again and those actors and writers? The fridge has got smaller."

So has he really never been out of work? He frowns.

"I've always been offered work but there are some jobs I've decided I don't want to do."

Since 9/11 and the bombing of the *World Trade Centre*, he explains, he's been sent lots of scripts portraying people in the West as goodies and Muslims as the bad guys.

Art was born in Pakistan but moved to London when he was three. He isn't a

believer but has Muslim relations still in Pakistan who are peaceful and loving.

"Films that portray us in the West as victims, when you think how much fear we ourselves spread around the planet, are the films I don't want to be in," he says firmly.

Although Art hasn't yet performed at *The Rose*, he knows it well because he lived in Kingston for 18 years and goes there to watch performances. Keira and Jessica attended local schools and Jessica still lives nearby.

Art and Gina only recently moved to Croydon when their girls left home.

"The Kingston area has so many things going for it – fantastic parks, the river, and it's a great place for children to grow up. Once they've got to know the streets of Kingston, Central London isn't a problem."

He clearly adores his family and was delighted last summer to make his acting debut at the *Edinburgh Festival* alongside Keira in a new play, *Rose*, written by Hywel John, which Art and Keira commissioned. Jessica produced.

"Gina came too and it was a real family affair," says Art. "It was fantastic to be able to talk to Keira about stagecraft and share what we both knew. I was

incredibly impressed with what she brought to each performance. We're hoping to get the team together again and put it on somewhere in London in March."

When we meet before Christmas, he's looking forward to his 60th birthday party at the *Groucho* in a few days' time. He's expecting around 150 guests.

How does he feel about turning 60? He grins.

"Life's good. Work is still there and now the kids are older, we have a different relationship. I'll always be dad, but there was a time when all they wanted was the bank of dad. The joy now is they sometimes ring just to see how mum and dad are.

'Recently I went into *Hamleys* and saw a miniature railway set. While I was admiring it the salesman asked who it was for and I said: "a lad of ten".

"I've wanted a model railway since I was ten years old," he laughs. 'I went home and told my family about the set and now I'm 60, I'm finally getting it!'

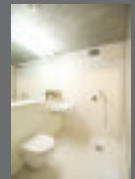
Our time has whizzed past. With another smile, Art tells me when he's finished filming *Diana* he's going to take a bit of well-earned time off to relax – and play with his train set, of course.

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