

‘When you prep for that long, it is just in your bones completely’

Christian Bale's new film *Amsterdam*, a 1930s-set drama following three friends who witness a murder, explores the treatment of war veterans, racism and the rise of fascism. The Welsh actor talks to **Rachael Davis** about the role and film, which has been years in the planning

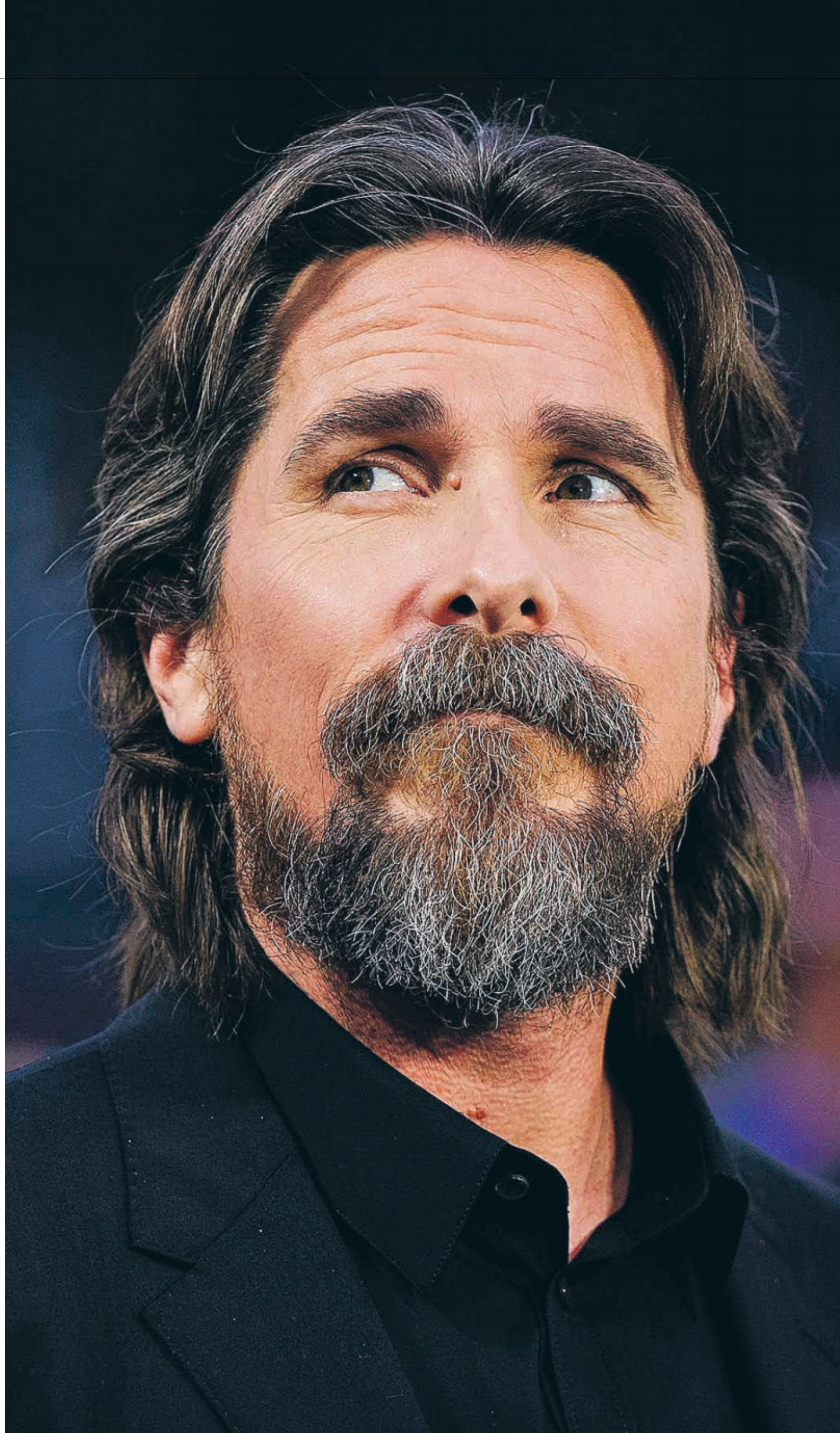


Christian Bale, main; with Amsterdam co-stars Margot Robbie, Andrea Riseborough and Rami Malek, above; a scene from the film, far right

ts 1933, and New York – like the rest of the world – is still reeling after the Great War. Soldiers have come home to find they are treated as outsiders and outcasts rather than the heroes they risked their lives to become, and there's a peculiar sense of something sinister in the air, an evil that's threatening to rear its ugly head. Two of these outsiders are Dr Burt Berendsen, played by Academy Award-winner Christian Bale, and attorney Harold Woodman Esq, played by BlackKlansman and Tenet's John David Washington. Both men bear the scars of war both physically and mentally, and are working to make the civilian world more bearable for down-on-their-luck New Yorkers. "Burt is an absolutely wonderful, hopefully charming character, but a real scrapper as well, and defiantly optimistic, and refuses to resort to hatred in spite of the fact that most people view him as a

completely broken man," Bale says of his character, who he crafted with *Amsterdam* director David O Russell. "I loved him to bits. And it sounds weird, but I really miss hanging out with him." The plot thickens when, in the process of clearing their names after being accused of committing a high-profile murder they merely witnessed, they end up uncovering a monumental ideological plot that, if successful, could have changed the course of American history forever. In the earlier of the film's two timelines, Burt meets Harold, who served in the predominantly African American 369th Regiment, or "Harlem Hellfighters", in the trenches in France. Together with Margot Robbie's Valerie, a nurse who they meet in the war hospital and bond with post-war in *Amsterdam*, they form a loving trio united by their trauma. "We really wanted to create a love that these three share, precisely

because of this crucible that their friendship has been forged under, and really been tested," says Bale of the trinity of Burt, Harold and Valerie. "They've been through hell and back, they've had so much pain, and so much suffering, they should be just broken, cynical people full of hatred, but they're not. "They're joyful. They're optimistic. David and I just loved them no end." As the film's story moves forward some 15 years later, the relationship between the trio remains a honey-sweet glow in a time of political and social turmoil. "The story has quite a serious backdrop to it," says Bale. "This was an era where there was – not that it's disappeared, sadly – but crazy racism, sterilisation clinics in America, eugenics being incredibly popular at the time and taken very seriously, the inability for these characters, Valerie and Harold, to be together in America,



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for the absolutely abysmal treatment of veterans – many of them with horrendous physical injuries – who were promised that they would be treated as returning heroes, but no such thing happened. "And also for Harold, he's 369th regiment, they saw some of the toughest fighting conditions, and then returned to an America where the Tulsa massacre was happening. "It was a fascinating, abysmal time in American history, there's a jaw dropping event that I was completely unaware of that creates the backbone of the plot, this conspiracy that these three friends get unwittingly pulled into." As a doctor, Burt works tirelessly to make life easier for his fellow

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veterans. He crafts cosmetic cover-ups for their wounds and invents medicines to help them get through the day, all while quietly suffering the lingering effects of war on his body, including an uncomfortable back brace and a glass eye. Bale is renowned for transforming his body for roles – emaciating, gluttonising, bulking, cutting – and while he has said that now, at the age of 48, he feels it's no longer healthy for him to undergo such monumental physical transformations for his performances, he hasn't stopped devoting his mind and soul to the characters he portrays. *Amsterdam* is the first time that Bale – who also produced the film – has had the opportunity to craft his character from inception to post-production, working closely with

director Russell to shape Burt into the character we see on screen. "He was one that David and I really created over years of getting together in greasy spoon diners and putting the story together," says Bale, who has worked with Russell previously on *The Fighter* and *American Hustle*. "We just wanted to create somebody who we really wanted to be friends with, someone who we wanted to hang out with, someone who was inspirational to us as well. "I've never been invited, as David did, to come and be there right at the inception when David is first formulating his ideas for the story, all the way through filming, and then he was so generous as well, he would bring me into the edit room too. "So I saw it right from the beginning to the end, and I've never had that experience. "You know the expression, baked in? Well, Burt just got baked in. "When you prep for that long, it is just in your bones completely. And it was a really, really satisfying experience; better than anything I have ever been a part of and probably never will because you do not get the luxury of that amount of time." Finally, I ask, is there a societal message to be gleaned from *Amsterdam*, a film which deals so heavily in the impact of war, the global weight of fascism, and the power of joy and optimism in the face of suffering? Bale says: "Certainly as Margot's character Valerie says: 'History repeats itself because it forgets itself.' "But I don't like, as a filmmaker, to ever say a film should be a learning session. "It shouldn't be a class. It first and foremost is entertainment. We want people to have incredible fun with this, to enjoy the characters. "But if it resonates beyond that, that's over to you."

Amsterdam is in UK cinemas now; for review, see page 16