

The Interview

# Growing up in the 80s, I believed I would die in a nuclear holocaust

UPON witnessing the detonation of the world's first nuclear bomb on July 16 1945, J Robert Oppenheimer, the "father of the atomic bomb", reportedly displayed an expression of "tremendous relief".

Having worked tirelessly on this weapon of mass destruction as head of the Manhattan Project, fearful that Nazi Germany could develop a nuclear arsenal first, it's no surprise that the world-leading physicist was glad that the Trinity test was successful.

However, this relief carried with it an enormous weight: Oppenheimer and his team had irrevocably changed the world forever.

Man now held colossal destruction in the palm of its hand, setting the stage for large-scale attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and for the Cold War that would follow.

Oppenheimer and his deadly victory are the focus of Inception director Christopher Nolan's latest venture, the eponymous biographical epic.

By telling the story through the eyes of the man himself, it poses the question: what does creating the deadliest weapon ever known do to a person, and how do they cope with the aftermath?

Portraying the physicist in Nolan's three-hour feature is Peaky Blinders star Cillian Murphy, who says that the immense moral quandary explored in the film sat heavy in his mind, too.

"It does affect you, for sure," says Cillian, 47, of the existential weight of the intense role.

"You don't know it on a conscious

J Robert Oppenheimer's atomic bomb changed the world forever. Christopher Nolan, Cillian Murphy and more tell **RACHAEL DAVIS** about telling his story on film

level, but on an emotional, kind of atomic level, it really, really affects you.

"And in this movie, the moral dilemmas and the paradoxes that the character was grappling with, emotionally and morally and psychologically, were huge.

"So it does take a toll, but in a brilliant way... It was the biggest, most exhilarating challenge."

Oppenheimer's story, fraught with moral quandary and existentialism, is perfect fodder for writer-director Christopher Nolan.

His movie back catalogue, which includes the likes of 2000's Memento, 2014's Interstellar and 2017's Dunkirk, as well as the Christian Bale-fronted Batman trilogy, shows he is no stranger to philosophical filmmaking.

"It's hard to know exactly when I first got interested in Oppenheimer's story," says Christopher, 52.

"As a kid growing up in England (in) the early 80s, the concern with nuclear weapons in pop culture was enormous. My friends and I, we were 12 or 13 at the time, we all discussed and believed that we would probably die in a nuclear holocaust at some point.

"At some point, I chanced upon this fact that Oppenheimer and his colleagues, during the Manhattan Project, had been unable to completely eliminate the possibility that the chain reaction would destroy the

entire world when they triggered the first test of the atomic device - and yet, they went ahead and they pushed that button."

"I think Oppenheimer's story is the most dramatic I've ever encountered," he adds.

"There's nobody working who does movies at this scale where the acting is so good, and he really understands the intimacy and the humanity of people, but also understands story and wants to ask big questions," says Matt Damon, 52, who plays Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project.

"His films are very ambitious, but they're very human, too, and that's why people relate to them."

Matt joins a star-studded cast list which, alongside Cillian Murphy, includes Robert Downey Jr and Brits Florence Pugh, and Emily Blunt.

Florence and Emily portray the two central women in Oppenheimer's life - Jean Tatlock, who has been called the 'love of his life' and his wife Kitty Oppenheimer - and Christopher's portrayal doesn't underestimate the influence the women in the scientist's life had on his trajectory.

Emily, known for starring in The Girl On The Train and A Quiet Place, says Kitty - a biologist-turned-



**GOING NUCLEAR:** Director Christopher Nolan and Cillian Murphy. Inset: Robert Oppenheimer and General Leslie Groves (centre) examine the twisted wreckage of the first atomic weapon test site

which was written in the first person - to Cillian, who he says is "one of the great actors of his generation", and invited him to go on this journey with him.

"He has this incredible ability, the ability of a great actor to be empathetic with the audience, to allow them access to his feelings, to his thoughts," says Christopher.

"The first thing I told him is: I'm not looking for any kind of impersonation of the real-life Oppenheimer. Use what works for you, use what helps you, gives you something to grab hold of in the preparation. But really, it's an interpretation.

"The film is not a documentary. It's his, it's Cillian's and my, everybody else's, interpretation of what it would have been to be this man at this incredible time."

"There's no-one really making films like Chris, and the way he presents them," echoes Cillian, who has worked with the director several times including on his Batman films, as well as Inception and Dunkirk.

"He's an incredible writer, amazing with actors, an incredible visual filmmaker, and then the way he presupposes a level of intelligence in his audience. He never patronises his audience. So it was a gift, really. It's always been a gift for me, every time I've worked with him."

housewife - was "unusual for the time because there was a kind of unwillingness to conform to the 1950s ideal housewife - she certainly wasn't reading Good Housekeeping!"

"She was like: 'When can I have a martini? And when can I pass my children off to someone else?'" adds the 40-year-old.

"I think that she was such an exhilarating person to play. She's super-complicated, and not without her demons."

For Midsommar and Little Women star Florence, 27, playing the psychiatrist and Communist Party member Jean Tatlock meant plenty of "unique, quiet moments" as she explored the couple's relationship with Cillian.

"I think the most exciting thing for me was: it's a completely unique world," Florence says of Tatlock and Oppenheimer's relationship.

"Despite them meeting in these places, she really has nothing to do with the second chapter of what he decides to do."

While the epic includes commendable portrayals of those closest to Oppenheimer, it is, at its heart, a first-person narrative centred around the man himself.

Christopher presented the script -

■ **Oppenheimer is in cinemas now**

“Oppenheimer’s story is the most dramatic I’ve ever encountered..”

Christopher Nolan



**Co-stars** Matt Damon, Emily Blunt, Cillian Murphy and Florence Pugh



**Cillian as Oppenheimer**