

'I can't hide beneath my top hat this time'

Tom Hughes is stepping into the modern day in his new drama, but he won't be leaving behind the frock coats for ever...

OVER THE YEARS, viewers have become used to seeing Tom Hughes decked out in frock coats, Balmoral boots and periwigs. From *Victoria*, in which he starred as Prince Albert, to *The English*, to *Franklin* and *Those about to Die*, he has become the go-to actor for all things period – which is why, he says, his latest role in ITV medical drama *Malpractice* provides a welcome change of scene.

"It's very refreshing," says the actor who recently turned 40. "With it being a present-day thing, there's no veneer there – you can't hide beneath a top hat. Me and [my character] James are incredibly different people, but there's a rhythm that's not radically far from mine."

In 2023, the first series of *Malpractice* (created by writer and former NHS doctor Grace Ofori-Attah) was gripping, edge-of-your-seat telly, becoming ITV1's most-watched new drama debut that year. Imagine *Holby City* meets *Line of Duty*, with a doctor accused of wrongdoing coming under investigation and the truth about their actions left ambiguous until the end. In



PRIVATE GUY
Tom Hughes (pictured in character as Dr James Ford in *Malpractice*) isn't an actor who craves public adulation

series one it was Niamh Algar's Dr Lucinda Edwards in the frame, but this time it's Hughes's psychiatric registrar Dr James Ford who is accused of negligence, with medical investigators Dr Norma Callahan and Dr George Adjei (played by Helen Behan and Jordan Kouamé) returning to put him under the microscope.

Exactly what they find is still a mystery. "It's the kind of show where, broadly speaking, you don't want to give too much away," Hughes says, warily. "You just hope that people go along on the rollercoaster, cat-and-mouse ride that it is."

What he does share is that the series takes time to fully unmask Ford and his – let's say – complicated private life. On the face of it, he's a good person who, in the opening episode, possibly does a bad thing. But, like Hughes, there are many more sides to the character.

"There are no archetypes in this show," he says. "All the characters feel very relatable and tangible because they're so multifaceted. There are a million layers to James. I knew Grace's writing was fantastic, but then you see the twists and turns, things that I didn't see coming and I just thought, 'This is it, I'm in – where do I sign?'"

MALPRACTICE COULD BE a game-changer for Hughes. Though he headlined alongside his former girlfriend Jenna Coleman in three series of *Victoria*, he says he's rarely recognised either for that role, or indeed his more recent turns. Maybe it's because, when viewers see Hughes gussied up as Prince Albert, or Titus Flavianus in *Those about to Die*, or poet Robert Graves in *The Laureate*, they don't expect to see him shopping in Tesco?

"I like that, though," he says, "because it means you can just crack on with your day. But, you know, I don't think about any of that stuff. Maybe that's a bit naive, because it's an industry where you're supposed to go on the telly when you're putting a film out, or whatever. I understand that, but it's just not my focus."

While some actors talk up their dreams of anonymity while privately craving the spotlight, Hughes seems to mean it. He's not on social media –

no X, Instagram or Facebook accounts ("It's not for me"). He swerves personal questions – including those about his one-time status as a TV heart-throb – and, while friendly enough, it's clear he's not entirely comfortable talking about himself in interviews. There's an argument that he might have found a more comfortable fit in another creative profession – music, which he suggests is his real passion.

"I know this is shocking, but I'm not the biggest TV watcher," he admits. "I didn't really grow up watching a ton of films and TV. I abso-

'In my 20s, I'd have knocked on any door to play John Lennon'

lutely love my job, but when I'm not doing it, I lean more into music. That's the thing that allows me to step off the world a bit."

Though he has managed to combine his day job and his paramount passion in one of his films, playing the Blockheads' Chaz Jankel in 2010's *Ian Dury biopic Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll*, there's one part he would have loved to have tried out for.

At the time of our interview, the cast for Sam Mendes's four separate Beatles movies was being announced, with Paul Mescal, Harris Dickinson, Barry Keoghan and Joseph Quinn set to play the celebrated quartet. Hughes, who grew up in and around Liverpool in the 90s, says it would have been his dream gig.

"I'm definitely too old now," he winces. "But if I was in my 20s, I would have been finding any

door that I could knock on to try and be involved in it. I'm a massive Beatles fan." Which of the Fab Four would he be auditioning to play? "If it's about bringing to life very complex characters, it's John Lennon every day of the week," he grins.

Hughes has also talked before about his love of Oasis – so will he be in the mosh pit for the Gallagher brothers' hotly anticipated reunion this summer? "Actually, we were on the set of *Malpractice*, shooting this really important scene on the Saturday when the tickets were released," he recalls of that internet-breaking day in August 2024.

"It was unbelievable. It was like a little window into what was happening nationally. People on set were setting up lights with their phone in their hands, trying to get a ticket. It felt like it was the dominant thought in everyone's minds, and quite rightly. I'm a big Oasis fan, so in terms of the tickets, I mean, it would be remiss not to, wouldn't it?"

BEYOND THE GIG tickets, there are no future plans for Hughes after this role. He admits he finds it hard to think ahead. "I let other people do that for me," he laughs.

But could we at least say this is a new era for present-day Tom Hughes? Are the days of seeing him brood beneath a top hat truly behind us? Don't be so sure.

"I've never chosen a job because of the time it's set in," he stresses. "To me, it's always about the script, the people that I'll be fortunate to work with and, most importantly, character – that's what guides me. And if that happens to be set in 1329 or 2025, that's a secondary thought."

STEVE O'BRIEN



LEADING MAN
Left: Tom Hughes with Jenna Coleman in *Victoria*. Right: in the second series of *Malpractice*