

'BEING MY FATHER'S SON DIDN'T HELP ME GET WORK'

Max Minghella was 22 and just starting out as an actor when his father, the Oscar-winning director Anthony Minghella, died of a brain haemorrhage. He became famous as an enigmatic commander in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Now 40, he's a sociopathic finance bro in the hit TV drama *Industry*. Helena de Bertodano meets him



Max Minghella photographed at the Line hotel in Los Angeles by Leigh Keily. Opposite: with his father, Anthony Minghella, in 2005

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Max Minghella used to bridle at the suggestion that his father, the late Oscar-winning director Anthony Minghella, had facilitated his son's career. "My dad would not have picked up a phone even if I had asked him to," he says, laughing.

But he is comfortable enough – and now established enough – to realise that being the son of the man who directed *The English Patient* and *The Talented Mr Ripley* has brought him some benefits. "It's given me a tremendous amount of perspective and experience that other people don't have. But the idea that you can get a job because of your family is a fiction.

"So I think when people talk about nepotism, there is only nepotism in the experience that you gain. I don't think being my father's son helped me get an agent. I don't think it helped me get work. But I do think it helped me navigate a career in a massive way.

"It would be naive to suggest that [it does not help] your understanding of the business; of how a film set works; of which film-maker you should work with; of how to read a screenplay. I have these skill sets exclusively because of having grown up in that environment.

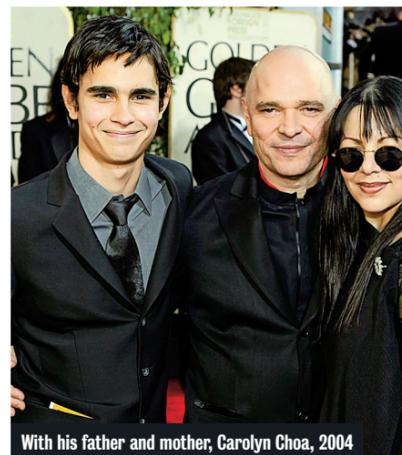
"Was my name a hindrance? I don't think it was. And who cares? You've got to prove yourself anyway."

In recent years Minghella, 40, has done just that. He earned a Primetime Emmy nomination for his role as the morally conflicted Nick Blaine in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Now he is playing the deliciously evil Whitney Halberstram in the hit banking drama *Industry*. Among a glittering cast, he all but steals the show – "a disgusting f***ing mooch", as one character calls him. In a series full of snakes slithering around the world of finance, the fact that Minghella's character out-mooches them all is quite an achievement.

Something of an enigma, he shimmies into the series as the CFO of Tender, a payment processing app. At first the other characters struggle to get the measure of him. "He's a pathological liar, not some hobbyist sociopath," one character warns another. Is he modelled on anyone – Elon Musk perhaps? Minghella looks surprised. "I don't see Elon Musk in him at all. But even having played him, I don't know to what degree he is a sociopath. Or to what degree his 'feelings' are authentic or a manipulation."

He only had one note for the writers. "I wanted [Halberstram] not to be po-faced... Yes, he's a bully, but that doesn't mean he can't be a funny bully.

"Whitney possesses qualities I wish I possessed," Minghella says, when we meet for breakfast at the Line hotel in



With his father and mother, Carolyn Choa, 2004

Koreatown, Los Angeles, which has an edgy dynamic vibe entirely in keeping with Halberstram's character. It is the sort of place where *Industry* fans stay – nearby is a billboard advertising the show – and people shoot him sideways glances as he tucks into a hearty breakfast of eggs, avocado and chicken sausage. He seems oblivious to the attention.

"Qualities" seems an odd choice of word for an odious character like Halberstram, but Minghella means it. "He's so well read and articulate. He's hyperconfident and hyperambitious. I would say he's the furthest away from me of anybody I've played. I'm very stunted and inarticulate."

'I was deeply involved in my father's work. It defined who I am'

This doesn't come across as false modesty: Minghella seems to have more of an impostor syndrome than most. He is clearly articulate, but what does he mean by stunted? "I started working when I was 16, which probably freezes you in time. Being an actor is not a job that I find breeds maturity.

"I'm just quite a childlike person," he says, warming to the theme. "If you met me at 22, I'm not different. And that's scary. You want to develop as an adult. I'm not a traditional 40-year-old man."

Certainly he looks much younger than 40. And he dresses younger too. Today he is wearing a baseball cap, sweatshirt, jeans and scuffed trainers. "Until very recently I would only wear sweatpants. So this is a big step up for me. I'm trying to dress more like an adult."

Growing up in Hampstead, northwest London, with his father and mother, the film producer and choreographer Carolyn Choa, he says he was a "tough kid to

parent". He dropped out of school before A-levels. Much later he enrolled at Columbia University in New York, mostly to appease his parents, but dropped out of there too.

"My parents were fiercely academic. My father was a university lecturer, so the idea that his son was so uninterested in academia was concerning. They were very supportive of me, but I think they hoped I would have a more expansive education and worldview. They were frustrated with my single-mindedness."

His one passion was movies – and it remains so. "Movies are all I think about. I'll go home and I'll watch movies, or I'll be reading a book about them or watching a documentary about them, or I'll be talking to somebody on the phone about movies." He has a vast collection – "thousands" – of VHS tapes at his home in LA.

Even as a child, he says, "I was deeply involved in and connected to my father's work and deeply proud of it. I read every draft of everything. It defined who I am. I recognise now the privileges of how involved I was allowed to be. It wasn't as if I was just visiting my dad on set, sitting on his lap. I was giving notes... From nine or ten years old I would be in a room with him and Walter Murch [the Oscar-winning film editor]. I was expected to have a very strong opinion." Did they make changes based on his opinion? "Yes, I could list a lot of things. [But] that would sound gross, to say, 'I'm the reason this scene is in the movie.'"

There is an essential modesty to Minghella, but he is the first to admit that it wasn't always thus. In the early days, he says, "I had a huge amount of attention. There were too many doors opening and too many yes men. It didn't breed a ton of humility or self-discipline. It didn't ground me as a person."

His friends helped keep him in check. "They were pretty direct with me when they saw behaviour they didn't think was correct. I remember one of my closest school friends picking me up from somewhere. I was on the phone the whole journey to my agent, talking about myself. We got to wherever we were going and I was still on the phone. I got off the phone and I said, 'Hey, man.' He was like, 'Dude, that phone call was disgusting. Be present. Be a person.' I always had people around me like that. I was never allowed to get too big for my boots."

Not everything went his way. He was only nine years old when he was cast in Ang Lee's screen adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*. "It was my first professional job," Minghella says. "I was a homeless kid begging Alan Rickman for money."

But when the film came out, his scene had been cut. "I clearly did a terrible job,"

he says, chuckling. Another audition for a major role in a *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie was so "catastrophic" that the casting director sent back his tape with no note attached. "It was a very polite way of saying, 'If you see this, you'll understand.'"

Does he still have the tape? "I don't think so. Nobody can see that."

He wasn't discouraged. "I'm a resilient person. I don't have a lot of strengths – I've got a lot of weaknesses – but people always said I was a difficult kid to fight in the playground because I always got back up again. And if you look at my career, I would say the same is true. I've taken a lot of hits. And I usually get back up."

The acclaimed screenwriter Hossein Amini, who has worked with both father and son, says Minghella takes after his father. "I see lots of Anthony's qualities in Max," says Amini, who wrote and directed *The Two Faces of January*, a film that Anthony was scheduled to produce but was taken over by Max after his father's death. "Max does something that his father always did: he puts his arm around your shoulder and squeezes it gently."

Max was 22 when his father died from a brain haemorrhage aged just 54. Minghella Sr – who grew up on the Isle of Wight where his family ran a business making ice cream – had undergone surgery several days earlier for tonsil cancer, which had reportedly gone well, but he then suffered a fatal bleed and died at Charing Cross Hospital.

Max Minghella first wanted to become a film writer himself, and it was only after seeing a production of the play *This Is Our Youth* that he decided he wanted to act too. He auditioned for the National Youth Theatre under the pseudonym Warren Straub (a character from *This Is Our Youth*). "It was a control test," he says. "I thought that would be a good way to find out if I had any juice. I definitely felt at that time, in England, it would probably have an influence if they saw the name [Minghella] in that environment."

He won a place and later started securing roles in major movies – as George Clooney's son in *Syriana*, a Harvard student in *The Social Network*, an elitist intern in *The Internship*. In 2018, he directed his own screenplay, *Teen Spirit*, starring Elle Fanning, and in 2024 directed a horror film, *Shell*, starring Elisabeth Moss.

For a few years he and Fanning were a couple. But they split in 2023 and he now lives with his girlfriend, whom he doesn't name. "She works in this world [Hollywood], below the line," he says. Is it easier to be with someone in the same industry? "In my experience, it doesn't make any difference." Character, he says, is what really matters. "I think kindness is a lovely quality to have." Does he have it? "I aspire to it."



In *The Handmaid's Tale* with Elisabeth Moss



With Kit Harington in *Industry*

He's not an LA type. 'I would rather shoot myself than meditate'

There is not much kindness in *Industry*. Certainly not in his character. "I think Whitney finds kindness irrelevant." Was it depressing to be channelling so much depravity? "Not at all. Art is much more interesting if it reflects truth. I think most people's moral interior is probably much less noble than they'd like to think."

He doesn't feel that any of his characters' attributes rub off on him; more that he brings something of himself to each role. "In the case of Nick [in *The Handmaid's Tale*], he's a hopeless romantic. I'm a bit of a hopeless romantic. [With] Whitney, I'm bringing my impatience. That maybe wasn't so ingrained in the page."

His lack of patience means he has no truck with classic LA pursuits like meditation. "F***. no. I would rather shoot myself in the face than meditate.

"There's a TV show called *The Girlfriend Experience* that I really like. A character in it says, 'I have a tough time spending time with people unless I'm doing something

productive.' I could not relate to a statement more. I hate chit-chat. I don't like to sit around. I hate board games."

In many ways, he is like a fish out of water in LA. "I don't like the isolation of it or how sterile it is. LA is the opposite of my personality. I'm a basic London boy."

So why does he live here? He hesitates, perhaps wondering whether to reveal the true reason. "My dog is very comfortable here." He is devoted to his five-year-old Belgian shepherd rescue, Rhye. "He changed my life. I was a very self-involved person. Now everything's built around him. I don't really care where I am; I care where he is. I love him way more than me."

There are tears in his eyes. "I get very emotional when I talk about him. I used to find it difficult to cry on camera. He's completely changed my emotional make-up. Now I could cry in three seconds."

Being Minghella, though, this isn't just some beloved pet; the relationship has a more intellectual basis. A few years ago, his uncle was reading a book about the bond between men and dogs. "My uncle was explaining that the relationship between man and dog preceded even the discovery of fire. I started watching videos about wild dogs and wolves and then it occurred to me – I could have one of these f***ers walking around my house..."

Of course, it is also useful to be in California for work. At present he is directing *The Shards*, a television adaptation of the Bret Easton Ellis novel, which is set in LA.

As he works, he often remembers snippets of his father's advice, especially his aphorisms. For example, he shot his last movie with a very delayed credit title sequence. "And I liked it. But every single person who watched it would ask why it was so late. My father would say, 'If nine Russians tell you you're drunk, you should lie down.' So I changed it." ■

Industry continues on Mondays at 10.40pm on BBC1 and on BBC iPlayer

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