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Timothy Spall: How I became Mr Turner



Timothy Spall spent two years learning how to paint for the role of JMW Turner

Timothy Spall has won rave reviews for his portrayal of British artist JMW Turner in Mike Leigh's latest biopic, Mr Turner. The 57-year-old was crowned best actor at the Cannes Film Festival in May for his role in the film and is hotly tipped to receive an Oscar nod too.

Spall spent years with Leigh researching Turner to fully embody the artist - a man Spall describes as an "eccentric genius".

Here, the actor explains the process of how he prepared for the role and discusses his Academy Award chances.

"Mike Leigh first mentioned the project to me seven years ago. Then in 2010 I was wandering around - doing an impression of an enigmatic actor in the West End - and I sat down in a pub, looked up, and I was sitting under a sign saying it was where Turner was born.

"I rang Mike [to tell him] and he said: 'That's a coincidence, come into the office.' He said: 'That Turner thing I was telling you about is going to be my next movie, but don't get too excited because its going to be called Untitled 2013'.

"He said: 'I don't know how you feel about this, but I want you to start learning how to paint.'

"So I spent the first two years doing a painting course with a guy called [Tim Wright](#) who's a portraitist and teacher. In fact, he's got a portrait of me currently hanging in the National Portrait Gallery he painted after we finished the film.



Spall says he has now lost the painting skills he learnt for the film

"We went through a huge process - Tim took me right through a foundation course. We did speed drawing and charcoal drawing. Then we progressed to

water colours, to acrylic, then to oils. We did still life, real life and we went out and did en plein air painting.

"Tim was incredibly patient. What was difficult for me was I did have a bit of ability so it made it harder as I knew when I was being rubbish. If I was an ignoramus I could have just done what he said, but I knew when it was wrong.

"We did about 400 images and about 10-15 full size paintings, culminating in painting a full size copy of [Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth] the painting that was a result of Turner being tied to a ship's mast.

"I've got it on my wall and I look at it and I think how did I do that? I can't paint [like Turner] anymore - I've forgotten how to.

"But it became apparent during the studying of Turner's work there was going to be no way I would be able to get anywhere near his brilliance and genius. I got up to probably his painting ability at the age of nine - and if you look at some of his work then it's not bad. It would have won Watercolour Challenge!



Director Mike Leigh (centre) spent some seven years developing and working on the film

"We didn't use any CGI in the paintings. The artists mocked up half the Turner paintings, then I would then paint on them with this paint they invented that looked like oil paint but could be wiped off. It only had a shelf life of about seven goes as it was made of a kind of soap and would start to deteriorate.

"I remember the first time I had to paint on screen it was a straight line and I had to make sure my hand didn't shake. It was like asking someone to sing an aria like Caruso on the first day of filming!

"I'm ambivalent about talking about my Oscar and other award chances because I'm from that generation of actors that never talk about that kind of thing. A - it puts the heebie-jeebies on it and B - it's slightly distasteful.

"But I'm afraid it's become a reality - all the hype now goes hand-in-hand with the promotion of a film. Part of me is reluctant to even talk about it, but the other half of me says everybody else who might have been in with a chance is going to be.

"So what do I do? Do I just wander around pretending I don't want to be considered? I'd be a liar if I didn't.

"Actors are often honestly dishonest about awards. They are ridiculous on one level because you're comparing things that are incomparable - how do you compare an action movie with an art movie? You can't, but sometimes there's brilliant performances in both and therefore the notion of it is ludicrous.

"But I tell you what, when you win one you ain't half pleased!"

Mr Turner is released in UK cinemas on 31 October.