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Actor Hugh Dancy teetering on the edge of fame

Fairy-tale prince in 'Ella Enchanted' is low-key guy

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

If you've never heard of Hugh Dancy, it's OK, he doesn't mind.

He's balancing blissfully on the tightrope between obscurity and celebrity, and, despite accomplishments on stage and screen, he's managed to keep a relatively low profile in his native United Kingdom and across the pond in the United States.



(AP photo)

But times are changing for this baby-faced Brit who appears opposite Anne Hathaway in *Ella Enchanted*, a whimsical fairy tale that opened last week. He was seen hamming it up on Ellen DeGeneres' talk show April 9 and receives fanfare in current issues of *Vogue* and *Details* magazines.

He and Hathaway, star of 2001's *The Princess Diaries*, have generated quite a buzz for their somewhat fractured fairy tale.

The adventure begins when Ella of Frell (Hathaway), is cursed with the "gift" of perfect obedience. Her new wicked stepmother Dame Olga (Joanna Lumley of *Absolutely Fabulous*) and stepsisters Hattie and Olive (Lucy Punch and Jennifer Higham) take full advantage.

A frustrated Ella sets off on a quest to find the fairy (Vivica Fox) who hexed her, along the way encountering ogres, elves, giants and the dashing Prince Char (Dancy). She helps the ho-hum heartthrob learn how to be more princely, and Char rescues the spellbound damsel with a shot at true love.

While Prince Char often graces the cover of *Medieval Teen* magazine, Dancy is surprisingly lukewarm about becoming a pop idol in real life. "That kind of hysteria is really only what rock stars get," he says. "Personally, I'm not sure I'd handle it very well."

Nevertheless, his presence is the sort that makes teen-age girls swoon - shaggy light brown locks, a shy grin and that fetching accent.

The sweet, petite Hathaway was cast for the lead role in *Ella Enchanted* right away, and the filmmakers then muddled through a slew of auditions in London to find her beau.

"We saw a lot of amazing young British actors, but when Hugh Dancy arrived, he just stood out. ... When he and Anne read together, it was pure chemistry," producer Jane Startz recalls. Dancy affirms that he and "Annie" got along swimmingly.

The actor, born in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, to a philosopher father and academic publisher mother, jumped at the opportunity to try out for the role. Director Tommy O'Haver says he was bowled over by Dancy's royal qualities - "charisma, looks and intelligence to be the believable heir to a kingdom."

Dancy, who appeared in Ridley Scott's war drama *Black Hawk Down* (2001), says Prince Char's buffoonery appealed to him. "He's a comic character who has all the qualities of a perfect prince, but has to discover them. ... He isn't just a cartoon cut-out character, he's a real young man who makes mistakes, takes crazy risks and has to learn to face up to his future."

Taking on diverse characters is one of the best parts about his career, he says. In the UK, Dancy starred in the television series *Trial & Retribution II* (1998), *Cold Feet* (1998) and BBC's *Madam Bovary* (2000). In the United States, he landed a lead role alongside Melanie Griffith and Rachel Lee Cook in *Tempo* (2003) and starred in *The Sleeping Dictionary* (2003).

"It was great to do [*Ella Enchanted*] because it was very different for me. I want to carry on trying things I haven't tried before," he says.

One of Dancy's favorite parts about making *Ella* was the breathtaking countryside outside Dublin, Ireland, where the picture was filmed. "The landscape is as much a character in the movie as any of the actors," Dancy says. "The costumes and the scenery are a reflection that the movie itself is larger than life. It's a very extravagant film."

Next up, Dancy plays Galahad in this summer's *King Arthur*, promising "it's not the myth you might be familiar with." He says the remake is an attempt to tell the story of how the well-known tale came to be. "It's about who these people really were - if they really were, what they did in their life that caused people to embellish on it."

In addition to filming more movies, Dancy says he wants to maintain his stage presence.

"You get much more immediate gratification from the theater," he says. "You have more control as an actor, plus the adrenaline is running and you can mess it up at any minute."

He adds, "As long as I can mix the two [movies and theater], I'll be more than happy."