



Dev Patel

Interviewed for *Oryx Premium* by Heba Hashem

"I feel a great responsibility in breathing life into great Indian characters."

Dev Patel has played Indian characters in multiple movies since *Slumdog Millionaire*, including in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and its sequel. And it's hard for him not to; the 26-year-old British actor whose parents were born in Nairobi is of Indian descent.

But it was his 'boy-next-door' looks that landed him the role of Jamal Malik in Danny Boyle's ever-popular *Slumdog* film, which went on to win eight Oscars. At the time, Patel was only 18 and merely testing the waters as an artist. Little did he know it would be a life-transforming experience.

"*Slumdog* opened a lot of doors. It was a film with no real movie stars, totally set in India... the first half of it subtitled, but it broke all the clichés you need to tick off to finance a

movie," Patel told *Oryx Premium*. "Most of my earlier years I spent shunning my cultural heritage in a way. I was always embarrassed, afraid of being bullied, of being minority and not being cool.

"Then a profound thing happened when Boyle cast me in *Slumdog*; I got to experience India for the first time with this wonderful director. I fell in love with the city, the story, the humanity, and I felt like part of my personality had been nourished. That really ignited a passion in wanting to tell more stories from my culture and trying to internationalise them."

His latest feature, *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, perfectly encapsulates this. Set in 1931 and based on the 1991 book of the same name by Robert Kanigel, the biographical drama stars Patel as the real-life Srinivasa Ramanujan, a genius



mathematician who after growing up poor in southern India earns admittance to Cambridge University. There, he becomes a pioneer in mathematical theories with the guidance of his eccentric professor, G. H. Hardy, played by Academy Award-winner Jeremy Irons.

"Jeremy is incredible. He's got this wonderful sense of humour; he's very generous in his spirit. My character is almost enamoured by this human being, and it was natural and easy to play that emotion looking at Jeremy every day. I call it a mathematical bromance," Patel said ahead of the film's premiere at the 2015 Dubai International Film Festival.

AS A YOUNG BOY

Dev Patel was so inspired by Bruce Lee that he trained at a taekwondo school and ended up competing in national and international championships. His first glimpse of the action film-star was when he snuck down the staircase of his house one night, looked through and saw his father watching *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*. Infatuated by the martial artist's heroics, he has been a fan ever since.





One of the challenges director Matthew Brown had to deal with at the early stages was to convey Ramanujan's incredibly complex mathematical ideas in a way that would make sense to those who haven't read the book. Kanigel himself acknowledges this: "It's an impossible task to convey the depth of the mathematics that Ramanujan did."

As for Patel, he admits that most of it went over his head. "It's very complex, and I think it would be wrong to say we can master what these guys spent their lives trying to achieve. We had this really cool guy called Keno Ono, who's one of the best mathematicians there is today, and he taught us the symmetry in the visuals of some equations. So, even if we couldn't master what they meant, we looked like we knew what we were doing."

Scheduled to go on general release this month, *The Man Who Knew Infinity* has been described by critics as 'the true story of friendship that forever changed mathematics'.

There's no pausing for Patel though. The energetic actor has just finished voicing a Japanese anime character in *Only Yesterday* and is now engaged in *Lion*, co-starring Nicole Kidman and Rooney Mara.

The story follows a five-year-old Indian boy who gets lost on the streets of Calcutta, thousands of kilometres from home, before being adopted by a couple in Australia. Then, 25 years later, he sets out to find his lost family.

It doesn't come as a surprise that Patel rarely gets a chance to be a tourist when travelling, although he did eventually make it to the old souqs of Dubai on a recent visit to the Middle East. "This is my first time here, as I've been stuck on double duty at the hotel... I have so many things to do and can't get away." 🙄