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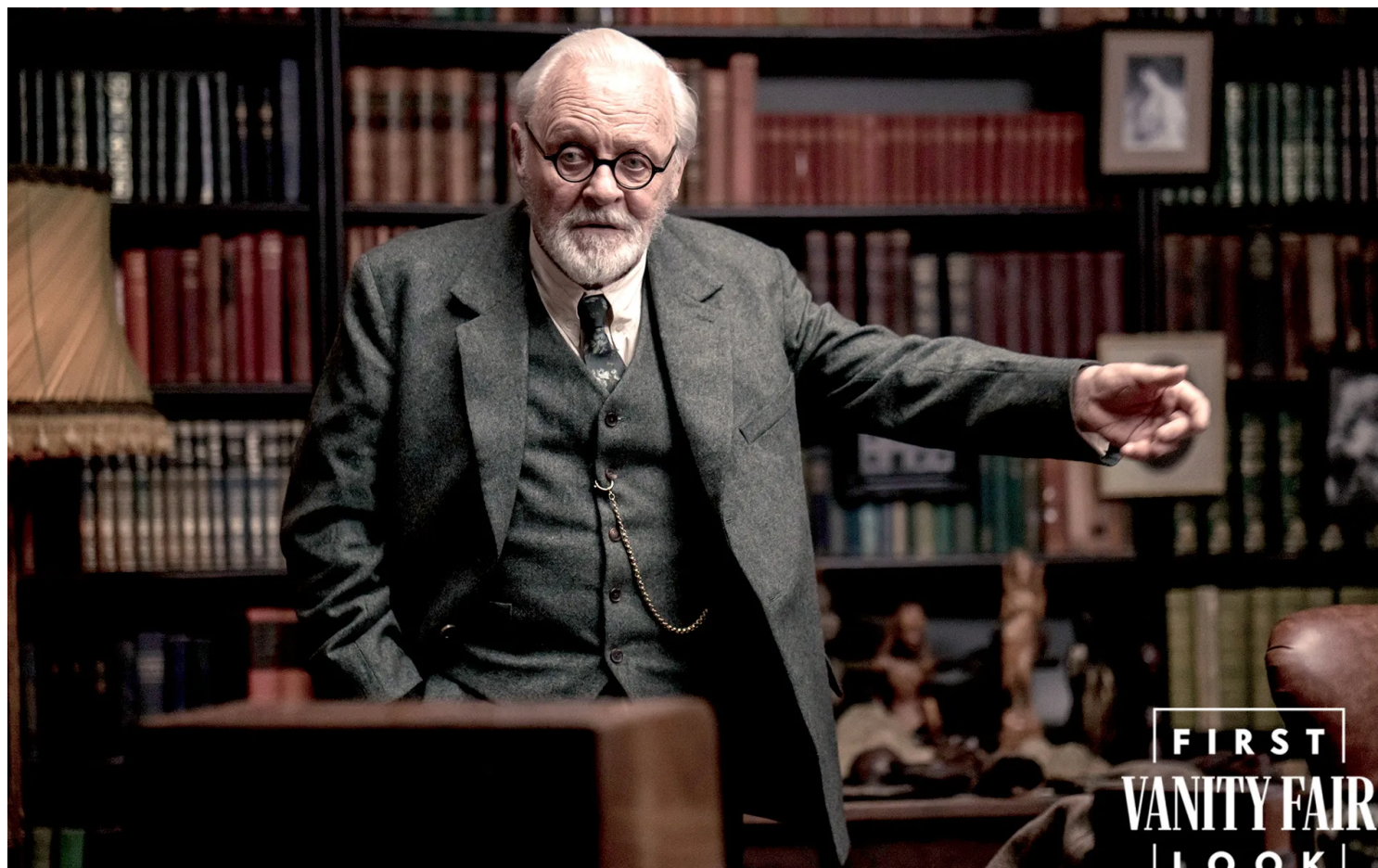
Why Anthony Hopkins's Whole Career Led Him to *Freud's Last Session*

Hopkins plays a Sigmund Freud in deep reflection over his extraordinary life and impending death—an experience that compelled the actor to look inward himself.



BY DAVID CANFIELD

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Since turning 80 a little more than five years ago, **Anthony Hopkins** has gone on perhaps the most remarkable run of his remarkable career, from towering lead performances in *The Two Popes* and *The Father* to wrenching scene-stealers in *Armageddon Time* and *The Son*. Inevitably, these elder roles have provoked head-on confrontations with mortality, and Hopkins hasn't shied away from the theme in his work. Yet none of those dramas can quite prepare viewers for what he brings to *Freud's Last Session*, a film explicitly about preparing for the end of one's life—and reflecting on all that came before it. Portraying the iconic psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, Hopkins shines in another rich, witty, heartbreaking turn—one buoyed by a deep engagement with the material, bubbling to the surface.

Director **Matthew Brown** spoke with Hopkins for almost a year before filming *Freud's Last Session*, gearing up for the stimulating and challenging project. “Hopkins is looking back on things, and he was drawing from a lifetime of experience for this role,” Brown says in his first interview about the movie. “We went back and forth about his seeing this in more personal terms.... It was more of a larger encompassing personal journey that was remarkable to watch.”

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If that sounds a bit like a therapy session, you're on the right track. Adapted by Brown and **Mark St. Germain** from the latter's 2009 play, *Freud's Last Session* imagines the heavy daylong conversation that took place between Freud and author C.S. Lewis (**Matthew Goode**) in the former's London home office, at the dawn of the Second World War. Freud calls in the devoutly religious thinker for reasons not immediately clear to either of them. But he is ill, sees the end approaching, and—as ever—finds himself asking big questions. What if there is an afterlife? What do we owe one another in our final days? For Freud, it proves best to bring in a man with a truly distinctive worldview to unpack such inquiries with as much rigor as possible.

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And *rigor* may be the most apt word to use when describing *Freud's Last Session*. The film embraces the imagined hefty intellectual debates between the two historical giants. It dives headfirst into the tough emotional territory opened up by Freud's persistent curiosity. And it relies on committed embodiments from two great actors to find its cinematic spark.

Brown and I are speaking on a Wednesday. On Tuesday—that is, yesterday—he finished postproduction on *Freud's Last Session*, which shot in the spring. On Friday—that is, two days from our interview—he'll jet to the movie's world premiere at the AFI Festival in Los Angeles. "It's been a lot," Brown says with a smile. The whirlwind week marks the climax of a

fairly long development process for the director, who received the script seven years ago. He reluctantly signed on. For one thing, *Last Session* felt too similar to his previous feature, 2016's *The Man Who Knew Infinity*—another exchange of ideas between two great actors, in its case **Dev Patel** and **Jeremy Irons**. For another, Brown grew up with a father who practiced as a psychiatrist. “I was like, I don't want to touch this with a 10-foot pole,” Brown says. “But there was something about it—probably Freudian—that I couldn't let go.”

His main challenge was to find the big-screen scope for a stage-originated story. “It was about trying to lean into the subconscious of these characters, and visually try to find a way to not only break the confines of the office—where most of the conversation takes place—but to understand where they're both coming from,” Brown says. And so the two-hander between Lewis and Freud is interspersed with flashbacks to pivotal moments in their lives, surreal sequences intended to capture their deeper selves, and glimpses of the budding war happening just outside the home's walls. Says Brown, “Hopkins and I talked a lot about that during the development period—leaning into the dream aspects of it.”

Accordingly, given the limited budget, Brown used his time wisely, essentially fitting two mini movies into the schedule. The flashbacks and exteriors—which also include scenes focused on Freud's equally brilliant daughter Anna (**Liv Lisa Fries**)—were set aside until after weeks of intensive filming inside Freud's office. All involved arrived fully prepared. Brown went to Freud's home in Vienna as well as the museum in London; Hopkins spent a great deal of time on voice work, to capture the man's accent as accurately as possible. Goode came in with what Brown cites as “an astounding ability to listen,” telling Lewis's story through a quiet, almost seismic absorption of everything Freud presents before him.

The crux of the discussion, indeed, is Freud's contemplation of mortality. “He's looking at his life, and he's gasping those last breaths—but Freud was intellectually curious, always second-guessing, always questioning his own theories,” Brown says. “I think if he was alive today, he would just pick up where he left off and say, ‘All those ideas were wrong that I came up with, and now I'm onto new ideas.’ He comes into this being open to whatever Lewis presents.” This doesn't necessarily make for neat agreement, and it's in that enduring, almost painful tension that *Freud's Last Session* finds its dramatic power. Lewis's faith pushes up against Freud's logic; crumbling romantic and familial relationships go under the microscope. “You have the arc of the intellectual ideas, but then you also have the arc of the human emotional ideas,” Brown says. “Both characters

wind up in their own therapy sessions, and by the end, they're both having to confront their own demons."

The film also resonates amid multiple, escalating international real-world conflicts—an "inflection point," as Brown puts it, that resembles the one depicted in *Last Session's* 1939. "The war is omnipresent in that we feel the urgency of what's happening and that somehow that, in all these ideas, this discussion between the two of them could be what actually saves us—yet at the same time, we know it's not going to save us," he says. "But you hope that it could. You hope that meaningful dialogue could."



Hopkins and Goode.

While capturing those long, complex dialogue scenes between Hopkins and Goode, Brown tried to keep the set feeling spontaneous and comfortable. "This wasn't Method acting," the director says with a laugh. "They were able to really turn it off and be who they are, then come right back in and focus. But we were so *in* it." The close dynamic between the trio offered a level of collaboration far beyond what Brown had anticipated. This went

especially for Hopkins's immersion into the project, from the way he brought out Freud's droll humor to the philosophical questions he'd ask Brown all through production.

"We were doing six, seven pages a day, and that's a lot for any actor—I don't know how he was able to do it," Brown says. "I don't know what other director's experiences are like with Hopkins, but this was substantive." Together, they settled on a story of what Brown calls "human frailty," a portrait of a man bringing to bear "the gamut of everything you're going through when you're about to leave this world."

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Freud's Last Session filmed partly at Ardmore Studios in Ireland—the same place where Hopkins shot one of his very first movies, *The Lion in Winter*, in 1968. "We were on the exact same stage that he shot that on, 50 years later," Brown reveals. Understandably, some reflection came with that full-circle experience, according to Brown. In the five decades between his first and most recent films, Hopkins has won two Oscars, two Emmys, and four BAFTAs. He's established himself as one of the finest screen actors of any generation. To see him grapple with that legacy throughout *Freud's Last Session* is moving, tender—and fittingly, psychologically spellbinding.

Freud's Last Session premieres Friday at the AFI Festival in Los Angeles, before hitting theaters on December 22 via Sony Pictures Classics. This feature is part of **Awards Insider's exclusive fall-festival coverage**, featuring first looks and in-depth interviews with some of this coming season's biggest contenders.

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