

W

Keep it Cumming

**FROM SUPERHERO MOVIES, TO RED-CARPET AWARDS
AND ALL THE WAY BACK TO HIS ROOTS SINGING ON
STAGE, PROUD SCOTSMAN ALAN CUMMING CHATS
CARNEGIE HALL, HIS DIFFICULT CHILDHOOD AND
FINDING PEACE ON LONG-HAUL FLIGHTS**

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Born in Scotland, but now a bona-fide American living in New York, the instantly-recognisable Alan Cumming seems to have done a little bit of everything we love most. First, there were his early television appearances like his breakthrough role in the 1991 BBC comedy *Bernard and the Genie*. Then there were early successes on stage, with roles including an Olivier Award nomination for *Conquest of the South Pole*, before a win the following year for *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

Ian Seller's film *Prague* introduced Cumming to feature films and from there the big-screen roles just kept coming. The 1990s and 2000s delivered parts in *GoldenEye*, *Emma*, *Get Carter* and *X-Men 2*, where he stole the show as the blue-skinned and misunderstood mutant, Nightcrawler. He also flexed his directorial muscles for *The Anniversary Party*, an underrated comedy-drama which he co-wrote, co-directed, co-produced, and co-starred in, alongside Jennifer Jason Leigh in 2001.

But, of course, true Cumming fans came on board much earlier than that. It was his iconic role – and dance moves – in the 1997 cult film *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* that had everyone, the popular kids included, rooting for the slick geek Sandy Frink. Perhaps that one word – iconic – best sums up the Alan Cumming touch. When he played Niles' yoga instructor in *Frasier* or when he popped up in *Sex and The City* as a designer called 'O', his brief appearances were always electric, often outshining the more established cast members.

Cumming can also steal the show as a leading man, too. His turn playing every character in *Macbeth* in a solo (and often naked) production is a case in point. Its transfer to Broadway brought the Scot rave reviews a few years ago (and a clutch of awards). He also dazzled not once, but thrice, in Sam Mendes' three revivals of *Cabaret*. First in

1993, then again in 1998 when he won a Tony Award, and once more in 2014, alongside an interesting array of rotating co-stars including Michelle Williams and Emma Stone, cementing Cumming's New York City stamp of authenticity and cool.

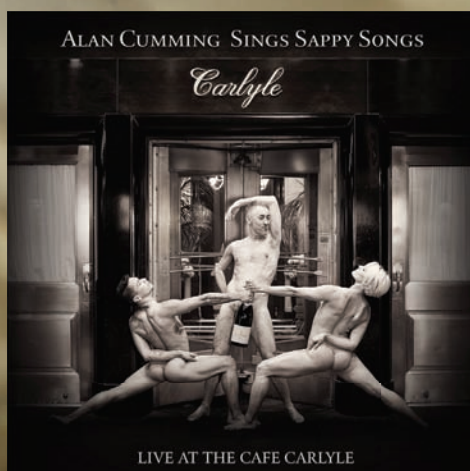
Cumming has also worked hard for LGBT rights. He's associated himself with organisations like GLAAD and the Human Rights Campaign, and supported AIDS charities like Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, where he rallied his Broadway *Cabaret* cast to rake in the donations. He was also – perhaps a little controversially given his extended absence – a fervent supporter of the Scottish 'Yes' campaign in the run-up to Scotland's referendum on independence in 2014. And yes, the cheeky Cumming is well aware of his surname's potential for titillation and he's having the last laugh with his award-winning fragrances 'Cumming' and '2nd Cumming'. They are simultaneously excellent scents made with renowned perfumer Christopher Brosius, and a two-finger salute to the glut of generic celebrity perfumes out there.

These days, he is instantly recognisable to the millions of viewers who tune in to catch hit television series *The Good Wife* every week. He plays dashing master-puppeteer, Eli Gold, a conniving Chief of Staff who cracks the whip but occasionally reveals a softer side. Cumming revealed another side of his own personality recently when the man we're normally used to making us laugh, released *Not My Father's Son*, an emotionally-fraught and revealing autobiography, set around his 2010 appearance on the television show *Who Do You Think You Are?* The book delves deeper into the family revelations revealed by the show and details Cumming's heartbreaking ordeal at the hands of his abusive father. What has almost always been well known about him, however, is the fact that he's openly bisexual. His first marriage was to actress Hilary Lyon in 1985, and since 2012 he has been married to illustrator, Grant Shaffer. Actor-cum-author-cum-activist (sorry!) – Alan Cumming seems to do it all. One thing's for sure: he certainly holds the key to the boudoir of fun.





“WELL, THE SHOW *ALAN CUMMING SINGS SAPPY SONGS* WAS BORN DURING MY RUN OF *CABARET*, AT THE PARTIES I HAD EVERY NIGHT IN MY DRESSING ROOM, WHICH BECAME KNOWN AS CLUB CUMMING



First of all, share with me just how you are feeling right now?

I'm feeling pretty great. I'm leaving for Australia in the morning to do some concerts there, so looking forward to being on a plane for a long, long time. It's my favourite thing. Well, almost. But I think my mind is in a pretty healthy place. Last night I finished a whole load of writing I had to finish, so I feel clear and good. I'm happy and enjoying life.

Tell me about your show at Carnegie Hall in New York and how it found its name, *Sappy Songs*?

Well, the show *Alan Cumming Sings Sappy Songs* was born during my run of *Cabaret*, at the parties I had every night in my dressing room, which became known as Club Cumming. I was DJ, so I played songs that I loved and was intrigued by and I didn't let fads or self-consciousness affect my choices. I realised that a lot of people ask what a song is first before they decide if they like it. And if you don't do that, and listen with an open heart, you have a much better time. So a lot of the songs I sing in the show came from that time and that experience. And as for Carnegie Hall, it was really Daniel Nardicio, my friend and the producer, who suggested we take it there.

So in that case, what does the famed Carnegie Hall represent to you?

There's a rite of passage element to it. I think playing that space means you are perceived in a different way. And for me, as a concert artist or cabaret performer or whatever it is I am, when I do shows like this, it feels very much like I have got to a certain level to be taken seriously in this way. It's also, of course, fucking terrifying!

You're still working on the hit television series *The Good Wife*. How's that going after so many seasons and awards?

This season, the seventh, has been amazing for me. I have had so much more to do, and my character has been asked to enter circumstances and emotional situations that he never has before. That's partly my doing as I said I wanted to leave and was frankly a little bored unless they gave my part a kick in the pants. Don't get me wrong, I have loved playing Eli, but he was in a bit of a rut. He has his schtick. It's great, incredibly-well-written schtick, but nonetheless I was ready for a change and the writers listened and gave me amazing things to do and I have had the best season ever. I feel so lucky to be able to do all the other things in my life and have that as my day job. It's pretty sweet.

So what is the most fun you've had at work recently?

Well, I should qualify this answer by saying "I always have fun at work." I just do. It's not brain surgery, it's not difficult, and everyone looks after you and wants you to do your best. Obviously, now and



then you have to deal with people who are dicks, but they are rarer than you'd think. Recently, Margo Martindale has been on the show and she just cracks me up. She and I are rivals and we laugh like drains all the time. Elsewhere, I have been really enjoying finishing my new book. It's a book of photos I have taken and stories that are inspired by or connected to them. I like writing about my life but in more obtuse ways than the conventional 'I was born in blah blah.' And I've been having such fun touring *Sappy Songs*. Lance, my musical director and pianist, and Eleanor, my cellist, are just the best work-trip companions. We all love doing the show and we all love going out and partying after. And it's such fun to be in a strange city and to go out and just float and let the night take you wherever.

How are you preparing for the Carnegie version of *Sappy Songs*?

Well, I'm touring the show so hopefully I will be in tiptop form by the time I get to Carnegie. Also I am working on what I am going to sing with my guests, Chita Rivera and Darren Criss. Ricki Lake and I are going to sing a duet we recorded for a condom commercial. Yes, you heard that correctly!

You have quite the array of amazing people working with you, how did you choose these special guests?

They are chums and I just thought of people who had a connection to some of the songs I do, or because we have connected musically in the past. I sing a song that Chita did in *The Visit*, and Darren and I once drunkenly did a duet of the song 'I Don't Care Much' from *Cabaret* and we will be revisiting that at Carnegie. Hopefully I will remember the words this time!

You also have the New York City Gay Men's Chorus coming on stage during the show, how are you feeling about that element?

I am so looking forward to it. I wanted this show to be really special. Normally I don't have any guests, and it's just me for 80 minutes, but as it's Carnegie Hall we've pulled out all the stops, and I just thought it would be great to end the show with a huge sound after the simplicity of the four musicians on stage for most of the night. And the fact that 250 homos will march onstage behind me and belt out a song I wrote is pretty exhilarating!

DEALING WITH A VIOLENT FATHER WITH HUGE AND SUDDEN IRRATIONAL RAGES MEANT I HAD TO BE REALLY AWARE OF HIS MOODS, OF THE ENERGY IN A ROOM, OF HIS BODY LANGUAGE, AND ALSO TO BE ABLE TO SUPPRESS MY OWN FEELINGS OR ELSE FAKE THEM

When did all this singing start out in your life?

I think we all start to sing as kids. I sang a bit in a comedy act I did just out of drama school, but I didn't sing in a serious way until *Cabaret*. And I only sang as myself, in concert like this, when I did the American Songbook series at Lincoln Center in 2009. So I am pretty new to it all. It's been a meteoric rise! Actually, it kind of has been. My two first gigs with my first show, *I Bought A Blue Car Today*, were at Lincoln Center and the Sydney Opera House. Start small, I say!

In your recent autobiography you write about retracing your childhood and how it

somewhat helped you understand why you became a performer. Tell me a little more about that.

Well, that's not exactly what I said. I said that dealing with a violent father with huge and sudden irrational rages meant I had to be really aware of his moods, of the energy in a room, of his body language, and also to be able to suppress my own feelings or else fake them, just to be able to survive. And so, I later realised that was, in a way, the beginnings of my studies of acting.

Let's chat about 2016 and a whole new year, what else is on the cards?

My live album *Alan Cumming Sings Sappy Songs* that I recorded at the Café Carlyle is released the same day as the Carnegie show. I finish season seven of *The Good Wife* in April, then have a couple of movies lined up, a new book to write, more concerts, maybe taking the show to the Edinburgh International Festival, and a few very exciting projects in development. There is much fun ahead.

What would you love to achieve, let's say personally, in the very near future?

I'd like to have some more time off. I'd like to finally move into the house we have been renovating for what feels like 20 years. I'd like to keep on going as I have been. I am not a yearner. I think it stops you enjoying the possibilities of the present if you keep thinking about the future too much. ■

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