

beauty

RICHARD E. GRANT

Jack of All Trades

LONDON — Richard E. Grant, the British-Swazi actor, is famous for his roles in “Withnail and I,” Bram Stoker’s “Dracula” and, most recently, “Dom Hemingway” alongside Jude Law. He is also now filming the fifth season of “Downton Abbey,” where he plays an art historian.

In his latest role, Grant has embraced the world of fragrance in a most unusual way — for a celebrity, at least.

His first effort, a unisex scent called Jack, will launch exclusively on Liberty counters Wednesday. “I met a distributor who said: ‘You don’t have a chance in hell. Stick to your day job,’” said Grant during an exclusive interview with WWD. “Actors get used to hearing ‘no’ from a very early age. We hear it all the time and we have to learn to push through that.”

That’s just what he’s doing.

Grant has paid for everything out of pocket, developed the juice with



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International Flavors & Fragrances and done all the p.r. which has partly entailed traipsing around London and dropping off samples to often bewildered magazine editors.

The fragrance, which launched in February on jackperfume.co.uk, comes in one size — 100 ml. — and retails for 95 pounds, or \$157 at current exchange. Here, Grant talks about his childhood in Africa, top notes of lime and marijuana and hitting the streets with a sack full of bottles.

—SAMANTHA CONTI

WWD: What made you break into the fragrance business?

Richard E. Grant: I’ve been obsessed with smelling everything since...well, as long as I can remember. I don’t understand why everybody doesn’t. You look, you touch, and smelling is how I remember the world and understand everything. That has applied to everything, from furniture to

Jack by Richard E. Grant.



PHOTOS BY TIM JENKINS

fabrics, from fruit to flesh. When I was a boy, I tried to make perfume out of boiled sugar water with gardenia leaves and rose petals. But they just turned into stink bombs. Fast-forward half a century and I was in the Caribbean as a houseguest. Anya Hindmarch was there as well, and she saw me with my head in a gardenia bush, and she said, “Are you ever going to do something about that? Have you ever thought about making a perfume?”

WWD: How did you learn about creating a fragrance?

R.E.G.: Marigay McKee introduced me to [the British perfumer] Roja Dove, who became my mentor. He said: “You’ve never drunk or smoked, and you have an exceptionally sharp nose.” So he guided me, and then he put me in touch with Catherine Mitchell at IFF. She said to me: “The fact that you’ve turned up on time, in person, and wasn’t set on having your name or face on the box, meant that I wouldn’t throw you out the door. Liberty is looking for a bespoke quintessential unisex perfume — this may fit their remit.” [After the Liberty exclusive deal was signed] IFF took it on, and I was introduced to a nose based in Paris.

WWD: How did the fragrance originally smell in your head?

R.E.G.: Lime, mandarin, marijuana, pepper, clove, vetiver, gardenia, and nutmeg. It has a citrus strong marijuana leaf top note and a bottom note of tobacco that would give it some kind of heft. Alienor Massenet, the nose I was working with, suggested oud would be good as well. So then we worked together backwards and forwards for about eight months.

WWD: What were some of the initial reactions to the juice?

R.E.G.: I shamelessly had my friends ‘round for dinner and tested them. They were ruthless — the Liberty team and my friends. When people are having wine — and it’s not their money — they’ll say things like: “This smells like an old nightclub. This smells like dog breath. This one is like a toilet cleaner.” The final edit was something I had to decide on my own.

WWD: How far away is Jack from the original ingredients you picked?

R.E.G.: The top notes are lime, marijuana and mandarin. Marijuana has been used in three other fragrances that I know of. There’s an earthy, sexy smell that it has. The middle is nutmeg, pepper and clove. And the base is oud, vetiver, tobacco, white musk and frankincense. The ingredients all trigger great sensory feeling. I just had something in my head that was likable, more-ish and addictive.

WWD: What’s behind the name and the packaging?

R.E.G.: I originally wanted to design some variation or abstraction of the

Union Jack, because I’ve collected flags and bunting all my life. And red is my favorite color. On the back [of the box], I have my mantra in very small lettering: “I’ve been led by my nose all my life. Jack is my signature in scent.”

WWD: Fragrance is expensive business. Are you financing this yourself?

R.E.G.: Everything. I have no partners. I do it all myself, so I know every single thing about this perfume and what it costs. I’ve taken a gamble in that the minimum order from Swallowfield bottling and packaging company in Somerset [England] is 3,000 bottles. Liberty has ordered sale, but no return, which is merciful. They ordered 500. I’ve now been Instagramming and Tweeting. I have a fulfillment company who will be able to ship it everywhere around the world. It only comes in one size. I also have a Web site with e-commerce where you can order and buy. It’s a tiny niche brand that is unisex, and I have road-tested it on some famous names from Jude Law to Annie Lennox to Jessica Chastain to Cate Blanchett. The response has been really good. I just hope that people buy it.

WWD: How have you been marketing it?

R.E.G.: I’ve literally done everything myself, from the e-mails to walking around the streets with a bag of goods like a January Santa Claus, saying “Please, can you take my product?” I went to all the beauty editors of all the magazines with samples and my press release, without an appointment. For the most part, they weren’t sure if it was me, or they thought it was some p.r. bulls--t. They asked, “Why have you come? Why haven’t you sent someone?” And I replied, “Well it’s mine, and I feel completely passionate about it, and if I have to pay some p.r. person, it could just end up being left in the mail room or whatever. I have no money for advertising.”

WWD: Are there any other fragrances in the pipeline?

R.E.G.: I’m launching a candle and room diffuser at Christmas. I have more perfumes in my head that I’m already working on. So if this sells, I want more.

WWD: You haven’t given up your day job yet. How did you like appearing with Lena Dunham in “Girls,” and what other acting projects do you have planned?

R.E.G.: I did enjoy working with “Girls.” They asked me for one episode, and I ended up being in four! Lena is the multihyphenate talent of our age, and wears her power and authority with such lightness. [My next film] “Queen and Country” is coming out later this year. It’s about a young soldier going to the Korean War in 1951. I play a suitably cross major called Major Cross.”

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