

# Brian Cox Shows the Kids How It's Done

Has being an OG in real life helped Brian Cox play one on TV? On the eve of *Succession*'s new season, the Scottish actor describes the method to his madness.

BY [WILLIAM COHAN](#) AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARC HOM.  
STYLED BY MATTHEW MARDEN **PUBLISHED: FEB 21, 2023**

It's a bright, cold afternoon and I'm about 15 minutes early for my visit with Brian Cox, the Scottish actor who plays Logan Roy, the imperious family patriarch, on HBO's *Succession*. We're scheduled to meet at Cox's row house, across the street from a low-income housing project on a hip Brooklyn block. I take a lap around the neighborhood, and then at the appointed hour I ring the bell. Cox's wife, the actor Nicole Ansari, answers the door and looks at me blankly. "May I help you?"

Cox, who is standing inside, appears pained when he hears my name. They have just returned from Miami, he says, not 30 minutes earlier. Their luggage is still in the foyer. A cleaning lady is vacuuming away in the background.



Louis Vuitton men's coat (\$6,700), suit (\$3,200), and shirt (\$570); Alexander Olch tie (\$180). 1979 Mercedes-Benz 450 SEL courtesy Mercedes-Benz Classic, Long Beach, CA.

MARC HOM

Has Cox, perhaps, forgotten about my visit? It goes quiet, and suddenly it's not at all clear what will happen. On the show Logan Roy tells people to fuck off with such regularity that now, when Cox walks the streets of New York, people regularly beg him to tell them to fuck off. He is more than happy to oblige. I realize that I haven't a clue whether the real Brian Cox is anything like the character he plays on *Succession*.

The silence breaks and Cox whisks me with apologies up to the second floor and into a small bedroom, which seems to double as his private study. It is filled with an amazing assortment of items collected over a long life, well lived. There's a black-and-white photograph, circa 1954, of his father and mother behind the counter of the family's provisions shop in Dundee, Scotland, and another of his father sitting on Brian's tricycle while Brian, a toddler, stands nearby. A table is covered, in a most scatterbrained way, with pills, mints, and other objects. Books are strewn about, including copies of his 2021 memoir, *Putting the Rabbit in the Hat*. It's the opposite of a well-tended garden, but you could spend hours here sorting through treasures. Cox apologizes for the mess and takes a seat on a small couch, while I sit on a stuffed wingback chair nearby.

As soon as we begin to talk, it becomes clear that an invitation into Cox's inner sanctum has both physical and metaphorical meaning. Ansari brings tea for me (PG Tips) and coffee for her husband. Cox proceeds to dive into subjects without reserve: his childhood, his stage and film career, his newfound fame as the star of one of the most beloved dramas on television, and, somewhat unexpectedly, the state of income and wealth inequality in the world today.



111 West 57th Street is the rare work of New York architecture that marries old and new. Comprising Steinway Hall (a 1925 landmark by Warren and Wetmore) and a 1,428-foot tapered tower by Shop Architects—all with bespoke interiors by Studio Sofield—it houses 60 residences and a suite of amenities that includes a swimming pool, a spa, and a private dining room. [111W57.com](http://111W57.com). Dior Men coat (\$4,000), shirt (\$650), pants (\$850), and shoes (\$1,000); Paul Stuart tie (\$165); Albertus Swanepoel hat (\$450); Gucci glasses; Fred Leighton pin (\$1,350); David Yurman ring (\$5,800).

MARC HOM

It's no big mystery why *Succession* resonates right now. The show, which begins its fourth season on March 26, points a lens at this era's favorite obsessions: money, power, dysfunction. Is it a thinly veiled biopic about the Murdochs, the Redstones, or the Arnaults? At this point, who knows? It could be an amalgam of all three or something else entirely. The world of the Roys is one with which I am quite familiar. I worked on Wall Street as a mergers and acquisitions banker for 17 years, and since then—for the last two decades—I've been writing books and newspaper and magazine articles about the fabulously wealthy men and women (mostly men) who dominate American enterprise.

I understand the power the real Logan Roys wield and how much the average American's life—job security, ability to accumulate wealth, physical surroundings—is influenced by their whims. This is my oyster, and yet I still wonder whether *Succession* is fact or fiction.

That doesn't mean the show gets everything right. Some of the underlying tactics and deal dynamics are far-fetched if not downright implausible. But the characters' emotional reactions, their motivations, and the way they behave toward one another have more than a ring of truth about them. (Disclosure: I spent a few days in the *Succession* writing room, in London, as a paid consultant helping the team conceptualize the early episodes of the first season.) The show has garnered a passel of Emmy, Golden Globe, Critics Choice, and Screen Actors Guild awards, and Jesse Armstrong, the showrunner, has been lauded for his nearly pitch-perfect rendering of a complex and power-hungry corporate dynasty fracturing at the seams.





Tom Ford cocktail jacket (\$4,590) and shirt (\$795); Brunello Cucinelli trousers (\$995); Charvet bow tie (\$270); Fred Leighton antique pin (\$9,000)  
MARC HOM

At the center of all this is Brian Cox. And as the stories begin pouring out of him, I see why. He tells me about his father, who was one of many siblings, and his grocery shop in Dundee. “He was always helping people,” he says, “giving food ‘on tick’: credit.” But unlike Logan Roy, Cox’s father was not a great businessman. He was a socialist who gave away groceries just for the asking. He died when Cox was eight, leaving a bank account with “the princely sum” of 10 pounds in it. His mother, who worked as a spinner in Dundee’s vast jute mills, suffered a series of nervous breakdowns. “We were left destitute,” Cox says. “Being plunged into poverty affects me to this day. It’s a demon in my life.”

After his father’s death and his mother’s hospitalizations, Cox was raised mostly by his three older sisters, who are now in their nineties. He got his start in the world of acting at age 14, running errands at the Dundee Repertory Theatre, including taking the nightly receipts to the British Linen Bank. On his first day at the Rep he saw in action Nicol Williamson, who was once compared favorably to Marlon Brando and who Samuel Beckett said was “touched by genius.” Cox was smitten. After the Rep burned to the ground a few years later, Cox left formal schooling and Dundee for London. In 1963, age 17, he enrolled at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, where he received a scholarship and his expenses were paid. “When I arrived in London, it was booming,” he says. In *Putting the Rabbit in the Hat* (a title he chose after recalling what the actor Oliver Cotton told him actors do, while they were performing Christopher Marlowe’s play *Tamburlaine*) Cox documents his extraordinary acting career. He has performed so many important roles that it is almost unimaginable, from King Lear to Peer Gynt. He made his Broadway debut in 1985, as Edmund Darrell in Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*. He has played Hannibal Lecter and Winston Churchill. He has been in the *Bourne* movies and played alongside Morgan Freeman in the 1996 film *Chain Reaction*, in which he had to adlib much of his dialogue. He won an Emmy in 2001 for his portrayal of Hermann Göring in the television miniseries *Nuremberg*, alongside Christopher Plummer and Alec Baldwin.



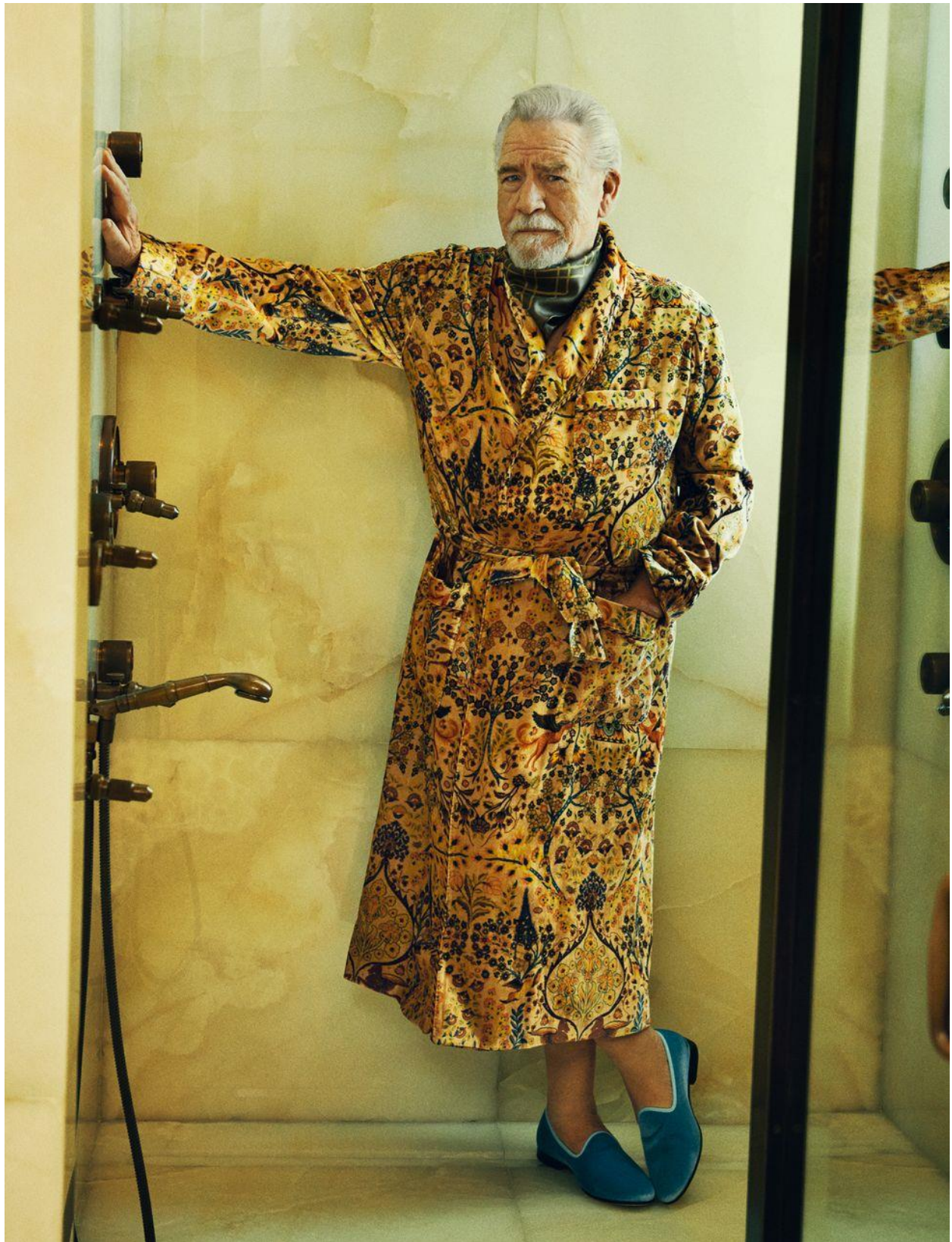


Sarah Snook, Brian Cox in *Succession* Season 1  
COLIN HUTTON/HBO

One of the things he likes most about acting, he tells me, is “you discover things you wouldn’t have known otherwise”—about kings, spies, Nazi war criminals, and now business magnates. Cox has given a lot of thought to Logan Roy and has imagined for him an elaborate backstory, which is occasionally hinted at in the series but never made explicit. “He’s not Rupert Murdoch,” Cox says. “He’s certainly not Donald Trump, and he’s not Conrad Black. He is a self-made man, but there was something in his childhood that made him decide, ‘Fuck it. It doesn’t work. None of it works.’”

Cox says he shares with Roy a sense that the human experiment has gone terribly wrong. “He does so from a nihilistic point of view,” he says. “I’m an optimist. I believe if we can attend to it, we can shift it. But we don’t attend to it enough. But Logan doesn’t give a fuck. He just says, ‘That’s the way it is.’” Sometimes, Cox admits, Roy’s anger is hard for him to fathom. “It comes from a bitter experience. It’s a mystery, because Jesse [Armstrong] hasn’t revealed it. I mean, you saw me swimming [in season one, episode seven], and you see the marks on my back. But it’s never explained.”





Etro robe (\$3,370); Charvet scarf (\$135); Del Toro slippers (\$425).  
MARC HOM



Armstrong says that Adam McKay, the director of the *Succession* pilot, suggested Cox for the role of Logan Roy and that he agreed immediately. He knew Cox had both the gravitas and the comedic touch that he wanted in Logan. “I love Brian’s work and I love him,” Armstrong tells me late one night from London. “He has the extraordinary ability to do a great deal when he’s given material to work with but also has the talent to remain still and soak up your attention.” Both Armstrong and Frank Rich, an executive producer on the show, cite as an example the final scene of the second season, when, on the family yacht, Cox’s withering expressions make clear how he feels about Kendall, the son who has just betrayed his father.

“I have a sneaking affection for Logan,” Cox says. “I think he’s a misunderstood man.” He says Armstrong insisted to him that Logan Roy loves his children, and so he is disappointed in them. Kendall has turned on him. Roman is a bit of a weirdo. Connor is off in la-la land and Shiv, who Cox says Logan was hoping would be the One, “can’t keep her mouth shut. She’s got no reserve, no tactical skill, no subtlety whatsoever, and that’s why she fell out of place.”

Much of this disdain comes to a head in the final episode of last season, when Logan decides (spoiler alert) to make a deal to sell Waystar Royco to a faster-growing technology company—a little like the ill-fated AOL/TimeWarner deal once upon a time—and cuts his children out of the merged company’s future. Out of desperation, they try to stop him, thinking they have enough votes to block his decision, only to discover that Logan has joined together with their mother—his ex-wife—to thwart their ambitions. “They are wedded to avarice,” Cox says of the Roy children. “He can see that, and he knows it’s his creation. He knows that they’re going to fuck it up. He knows that they haven’t got the stuff to do it but they’ll try anyway. And that, again, is what the show is all about: entitlement.”



Logan Roy (Cox) addresses his son-in-law Tom Wambsgans (Matthew Macfadyen).

HBO

Cox has been having an intellectual argument on set—and in the press—with Jeremy Strong, the actor who plays Kendall, his rebellious son. As described in a 2021 *New Yorker* profile, Strong, a Yale graduate, is a method actor who prefers to inhabit nearly every aspect of his character, even when the camera has stopped rolling. Cox, a classically trained actor, said then, and repeats now, that he finds Strong's devotion to method baffling. "He's a very good actor," Cox says. "And the rest of the ensemble is all okay with this. But knowing a character and what the character does is only part of the skill set."

Is it annoying being around someone who is always in character? "Oh, it's fucking annoying," Cox says. "Don't get me going on it." But Cox says his complaint isn't about inconvenience. He brings up a 2009 video (which is now on YouTube) of him teaching a toddler Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. After some coaxing by Cox—and occasional pauses and distractions—the child learns the famous speech. "There is something in the little boy that is able to convey the character," he says. "It's just there and is accessible. It's not a big fucking religious experience."



In last season's final episode, Kendall tells Shiv and Roman that he accidentally killed a man after leaving Shiv's wedding in a frantic search for drugs. He crashed a car into a pond and survived, but the caterer from the wedding, who had joined him, did not. In the confessional scene, played out on a dusty Italian cul-de-sac, Kendall is a mess. Cox says he thinks Strong played the moment extremely well, but he was, again, surprised that he wouldn't break out of character once it wrapped. "He's still that guy, because he feels if he went somewhere else he'd lose it. But he won't! Strong is talented. He's fucking gifted. When you've got the gift, celebrate the gift. Go back to your trailer and have a hit of marijuana, you know?"



Dior Men coat (\$4,000), shirt (\$650); Paul Stuart tie (\$165); Albertus Swanepoel hat (\$450); Fred Leighton pin (\$1,350).

MARC HOM

For all its business world parallels and real life family dynamics, Cox thinks *Succession* is a bit of a send-up. "It's essentially satirical," he says. He also believes the writers have written the show from a socialist perspective, although I tell him I don't think Americans see it that way. "It's a critique," he continues. "But the interesting thing is that people love it. They love the characters. They love that degree of selfishness. They think, Isn't it great how nasty they are? And that's the thing that you can't account for."

Like Logan Roy, sometimes Brian Cox can display pique, especially when he feels an injustice is being perpetrated. Sarah Snook, the Australian actress who plays Shiv, tells me a story about Cox on the set of *Succession*, early on. As the first season is ending, Snook explains by phone, Shiv and Tom Wambsgans are preparing for their wedding, in England. What had already been long days for the actors turned into 10-hour marathons with no lunch breaks. “It was quite difficult to find time for actors to stop for lunch, because we’re always on set,” Snook says. “And we’re always in the background of other shots because of the nature of the way the show is shot. There’s not a lot of downtime. And so Brian had gotten to a point where his hunger had overtaken his ability to remain calm. And he stood up in a rage and said, ‘We need to fucking eat! It’s all right for me to get angry, I’m diabetic. But the crew, the crew needs to eat!’ ” It was quintessential Brian, Snook says. “Working-class roots, a desire to be a leader,” blasted out with that Logan Roy delivery.



Louis Vuitton men’s coat (\$6,700), suit (\$3,200), and shirt (\$570); Alexander Olch tie (\$180); Valextra suitcases (\$7,950); Christian Louboutin shoes (\$945). 1979 Mercedes-Benz 450 SEL courtesy Mercedes-Benz Classic, Long Beach, CA.  
MARC HOM

What’s in store for viewers in season four? Everyone I speak to stays on script. Cox and Rich deflect. Snook allows that the Roy family “gets tested more than it ever has been” and discovers “what the meaning of family is.” Armstrong will say only that “it’s a bumpy ride” and there’s a “lot of hard rendering and conflict.” Just like always, then.



*Succession* has done surprising things for Cox, more than just recharging an already electric career. In 2023 he will play Johann Sebastian Bach in a British theater production of *The Score*, and then he'll fulfill his longtime ambition of playing James Tyrone on a London stage in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. He's also going to make his directorial debut with *Glenrothan*, a film (in which he also co-stars) about two brothers who are reunited after not seeing each other for 40 years. "It's going to be my year of apprehension," Cox says.

Not least, he says, because he will also see the reaction to a pet project that was inspired by his childhood experiences with poverty and hunger. *How the Other Half Live*, out late last year and available on Apple TV+, is a two-part cinema vérité-style documentary about the growing gulf between rich and poor in many countries around the world. In it Cox acts as narrator, interviewer, and short-tempered guide while a camera explores the homes and lives of wealthy and not wealthy residents of Miami, New York, and other cities. In one scene in London, Cox meets a telecom billionaire at his \$100 million mansion right after the man arrives in a private helicopter. In the next, Cox is in a city slum interviewing individuals who have fallen through the social safety net.

The show's title is a reference to Jacob Riis's landmark book of photographs, published in 1890, that documented life in the slums of New York City and generated public outrage that helped inspire early antipoverty movements. Cox hopes to do the same thing with his documentary. In one segment shot in Dundee, he visits a community larder, the Scottish version of a food bank, and interviews locals who tell him they are living "week to week" and "prioritizing our children," while they "go without." Cox turns to the camera and lets his temper fly. "It's shocking how Dundee has pretty much gone full circle," he says. "Getting back to the poverty I saw as a kid. And making this documentary is unsettling for me. It's extremely painful, this stuff. You know, it's painful for anybody if you've got any sensibility at all."



Trench coat, Lemaire (\$1,870) suit, (\$3,200), shirt, (\$570), Louis Vuitton men's tie, alexander och, (\$180). shoes, christian louboutin, (\$945).  
MARC HOM



It is impossible not to think about, and recognize, Logan Roy while watching Cox in *How the Other Half Live*. Both are furious and outspoken. But while Roy is obsessed with power and is most comfortable surrounded by the trappings of wealth—a yacht, a Gulfstream, a Sikorsky helicopter, a villa in Tuscany—Cox is interested in none of those things. “I have a Prius,” he says with a shrug.

He made the documentary, he says, because he fears that humans have become uncaring, “unconscious animals” and that doing “anything that kind of makes you wake up and keeps you awake is worthwhile.” But, he says, “it was painful, really painful.” In the documentary’s final scene, Cox is back in his childhood neighborhood. “We had no food,” he narrates. “We had a fish-and-chip shop across the road. I would go in there and say, ‘Have you had any batter bits on the back of the pan?’ And they would give me a bag of batter bits for myself and my mum and that would be our dinner.

“Soon I’ll be back at my day job playing a churlish billionaire,” he says. “A man who doesn’t give a toss what happens to the people he is trampling underfoot. But as I said at the start, I am not Logan Roy.” And then the camera follows Cox into a fish-and-chip shop, where he has an unusual request for the proprietor: “Does he have any batter bits and could he have a wee poke?”

Photographs by [Marc Hom](#)  
Styled by [Matthew Marden](#)

Grooming by [Benjamin Thigpen](#) at Statement Artists. Tailoring by Joel Gomez at Lars Nord Studio. Set design by [Todd Wiggins](#) at Mary Howard Studios. Production by [Area1202](#). Shot on location at [111 West 57th Street](#).

**In the top image:** Prada cardigan, shirt (\$1,020), trousers (\$1,550), and boots (\$1,790); Dita sunglasses (\$1,000).

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