

DIRTY BOOTS

From 'Amistad' to drag, Chiwetel Ejiofor works it

By MICHAEL GILTZ

BRITISH actor Chiwetel Ejiofor — “Chewey” to his friends, and to journalists afraid of mispronouncing his name — is a quiet, commanding presence, whether he’s playing a

Nigerian doctor in the tense thriller “Dirty Pretty Things” (2002), the calmly menacing villain in last year’s sci-fi adventure “Serenity” or a classical pianist in Woody Allen’s “Melinda and Melinda” (2004).

But put him in knee-high red leather boots, with a towering wig and a microphone, and Ejiofor becomes a commanding presence that is anything but quiet. In drag, he becomes Lola, the star of “Kinky Boots,” opening Friday. The based-on-a-true-story British comedy is about a tiny family shoe factory about to be closed for good that pins its hopes on designing a line of durable-but-fabulous boots for drag queens, and Lola helps to inspire — and market — said boots.

In “Dirty Pretty Things,” the international hit that turned Ejiofor into a rising star, the then-28-year-old actor echoed his Nigerian-born father’s medical profession. But surely Lola — who strides the stage with aplomb and belts out numbers like “These Boots Are Made for Walking” without lip-synching — has nothing in common with Ejiofor’s dad.

But she actually does, since his father, who died in a car accident when Ejiofor was 11, was also a pop star.

“That’s right,” says the actor,

who went clubbing to places like Too Too Much in London’s Soho to get pointers on drag queens. “He recorded albums in Nigeria and in London. It was a group that included my mother and his mother on backing vocals.”

So even though he’d never sung

professionally before, Ejiofor came by it naturally. The shoes and the makeup? That was something entirely different.

“Those 4 1/2-inch heels were the great challenge of the part,” says Ejiofor with a laugh. “They were very difficult to get used to. I had my eyebrows plucked, and my nails were soldered on so I couldn’t actually break them off at the end of the day. So they were with me the entire time.”

When he walked the streets or even ducked into his local pub for a drink, Ejiofor felt self-conscious, something he welcomed since Lola faced that, as well, and had to overcome it.

“I did look for all intents and purposes, especially if I was wearing a polo neck, like I was an off-duty drag queen,” he says.

Plucked out of acting class for a small role in Steven Spielberg’s “Amistad,” Ejiofor has since worked with top directors like Allen, Spike Lee (twice, including the current hit “Inside Man”) and Stephen Frears. He’s got two more films due out this year, including a drama with Alfonso Cuarón (director of “Y Tu Mama También”), and a strong desire to get back onstage.

After “Amistad,” Ejiofor resisted Hollywood’s call and returned to London because he felt he needed more training and he hadn’t worked with major theatrical companies like the National. That move led to acclaimed roles as Romeo and his breakthrough turn in “Blue/Orange,” which led him to “Dirty Pretty Things.”

Now he feels the pull of the theater again.

“I’ve been looking to get back onstage for a while,” says Ejiofor. “There comes a time when you’ve just been off-stage too long.”



HER NAME WAS LOLA... Ejiofor, in drag, hits the runway.



BOOT-Y CALL: Ejiofor inspects the thigh-high patent-leather goods in “Kinky Boots.”

Laurie Spahrham



OH, MAN: Out of drag, Chiwetel also appeared recently in “Inside Man.”