

Star turns

Nothing beats a classic car for seeing and being seen in New York. Felicity Glover allows herself to be taken for a ride.

It takes a lot to stop a New Yorker in their tracks. In the city that never sleeps, where celebrity spotting is part and parcel of life, getting even a second glance from its notoriously fickle inhabitants is a tough ask.

But recently, the unthinkable happened: New Yorkers stopped and stared, and traffic came to a standstill. The object of their attention was not a supermodel doing a photo shoot in the street, nor was it New York's favourite billionaire, Donald Trump, taking a stroll down Fifth Avenue, where his over-the-top Trump Tower is located. This was something far more beautiful and classy: a 1956 Cadillac; black, no less.

Lovingly restored by native New Yorker Peter Yannello and partner Joseph Chulengarian, the co-owners of FilmCars, an agency that supplies period automobiles to the film and television industries, this particular Cadillac is a star in its own right, having been used in movies such as *Batman Forever* (starring Val Kilmer and Nicole Kidman), *The Talented Mr Ripley* (Matt Damon, Jude Law and Gwyneth Paltrow), *Quiz Show* (Ralph Fiennes and John Turturro) and *Mona Lisa Smile* (Julia Roberts and Kirsten Dunst). British actress Lynn Redgrave was chauffeured around in this car shortly after winning a Golden Globe award for her role as Hanna in the 1998 film *Gods and Monsters*, so we're in stellar company.

Tonight, however, feels as though we are on the set of a television reality show and the people of New York are the supporting cast, as they often are these days. We are on a tour of the city, but rather than take a bus, the subway or explore the tourist traps under our own steam, we are seeing the sites from the comfort of the Cadillac. Yannello is the perfect guide; he's a font of information and has dozens of anecdotes about the city in which he grew up.

Heading towards Broadway, we stop at a set of lights and a motorist actually gets out of his SUV and offers Yannello the keys to his car in exchange for the Caddy, which features power windows, a signal-seeking radio (apparently a remarkable piece of technology in the late 1950s) and 24-carat gold electro-plated hubcaps. "This happens all the time," Yannello says before declining the offer.

We pass the Ed Sullivan Theatre, home of David Letterman's *Late Show*, and cruise past the elegant Warwick Hotel, which was built by William Randolph Hearst in 1926 as an oasis for his celebrity friends. According to Yannello, this is where the Beatles really stayed on their first trip to the city in the early 60s, despite the common belief they were dossing down at the landmark Plaza Hotel. The late Cary Grant made the Warwick, on West 54th Street, his Manhattan home for 12 years, while even the King himself, Elvis Presley, stayed here when he was in town.

Traffic forces us to stop outside a theatre just off Broadway. It is intermission time and the audience is spilling out onto the street for a breath of fresh air or,



The gleaming 1956 Cadillac glides along Broadway, where it distracts audiences from their intermission cigarettes.

because of the city's strict smoking laws, to sneak a surreptitious cigarette. They spot the Cadillac and, before you know it, there's a knock on the window. The crowd wants to talk. "Don't tell me; it's a '56, right?" Suddenly, the show's forgotten and everyone's an expert on cars from the 50s.

Yannello's passion for collecting classic motors started, perhaps fittingly, after he saw a movie: *Empire of the Sun*, about a young British boy whose family lived in Shanghai before the second world war. "They had a car in it, a 1938 Packard, which figured prominently throughout the film," he says. "That started it. I wanted a '38 Packard."

FilmCars has a large selection of vintage automobiles on its books, ranging from a 1910 black Open Touring Ford to a 1935 Cadillac, a 1936 Chevrolet, a 1937 Studebaker and a 1942 Buick Roadmaster convertible. There's even a 1960 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud II, a chequered cab from 1965 and a 1966 Ford Mustang convertible. They have

featured in movies such as *When Harry Met Sally*, *Private Parts*, *Home Alone 2*, *Almost Famous* and *200 Cigarettes*. The company's most recent call came for a remake of Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, starring Matthew Broderick and Uma Thurman.

The company doesn't advertise these city tours, preferring instead to focus on films, television, advertisements, photographic shoots and weddings. But with more than 65 cars on its books, chances are there will be a few to spare for a unique, show-stopping jaunt through New York. Cars from the 30s are hired at US\$155 an hour, newer cars at US\$135 an hour. A minimum two-hour booking is required. For more information, or to contact Yannello, visit www.filmcars.com.

Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) flies non-stop from Hong Kong to New York daily.