

**[Transcript] The Diary Of A CEO with Steven Bartlett / Ashley Walters (Top Boy): "Me & Kano Didn't Have The Greatest Time!". The Unheard TRUTH About Top Boy, Career Rejection & Personal Grief!**

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I was obsessed with the fact that I was going to die young.

I wanted to hurt people the way I was hurt.

Some of the things that go through my head scare me.

That's the one!

Nice.

I've got 21 seconds to go.

Actor.

Here we go.

Top boys in the building.

Growing up had a lot of trauma and it made me angry with the world.

My dad was in prison most of my childhood.

The local bad boys, they became dads to me.

And I started to follow in their footsteps.

I'm still paying the price for those years now.

But once I get in front of a camera, it's not that Ashley anymore.

Top boy.

Top boy.

Top boy.

The greatest show that's ever come out of the UK.

Like Timon.

It's crazy.

You know, it changed my life.

But filming the last season, me and Kane, we don't have the greatest time.

People don't understand we go hard for that show.

We go hard to make sure characters are being represented in the way they should be.

And we face a lot of resistance.

Now.

The truth is...

2005.

You had rekindled your relationship with your father.

Yeah.

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And then he died, man.

I never realised it would affect me that much.

It took me to some dark places.

Making decisions that were going to come back to haunt me, you know?

Yeah, man.

I want to break down now.

Just talking about it.

Ashley, I've got an interesting observation that I wanted to start with.

The way you speak, the way you've been chatting to me before we started rolling, it almost reminds me of someone who has had a bit of therapy or has done some work on understanding the unobvious subconscious forces that are at play in their life and what you've had to delve into. Because I think, as is often the case in this podcast, I think our earliest context shapes us in a profound way.

And it's something that's quite hard to unshape ourselves with, undo as we become adults.

So what is that early context that you've had to reflect on to understand yourself?

Yeah, man.

So where do I start?

So much.

I mean, look, first of all, I've had a lot of therapy, right?

So I've been in a lot of situations where I've been counselled, you know?

I've sought help because I needed it, right?

I've had a lot of trauma, I guess that has kind of stuck with me over my life.

And I think one of the biggest things for me was my dad, really.

That's what I stand back to, like growing up, just not having a father figure around and the places that push me to.

And don't get me wrong, like a lot of people have gone through that and come out the other side and not been like me.

But I dealt with it in like a really crazy sort of way.

You know, it made me angry, made me angry with the world.

So all throughout my, you know, my soul solid years and my early kind of acting years, my attitude towards life and towards other people was very, I mean, it was wrong, you know, it was quite negative.

And I wanted to hurt people the way I was hurt.

And sometimes I did, you know, sometimes I did, it came out in a lot of different ways.

Some of the people I cared about, some of the people were close to me and some people I didn't know, random people,

but got me into a lot of trouble with the police.

Yeah, you know, I just didn't care about myself as a teen growing up.

And look, I had some amazing supportive people around me, like my mum is amazing.

I've got an amazing family.

But that one niggling thing of kind of being slightly lost about what a man is,

not feeling like I fit in rooms with other men, you know, in groups of people and stuff like that.

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Having this niggling doubt about myself all the time made me quite a difficult person to be around growing up and trying to explore that.

So yeah, when I, and I didn't know it was, that's why at the time I didn't know I had anything to do with, you know,

not having my dad around like my dad when he was around, you know, he was in prison, most of my childhood growing up.

That was like France. He used to say he was in France.

So to me and my younger brothers, like anytime, you know, my mum would be like he's in France or someone would say he's in France or whatever.

That was like code for prison. Didn't know at the time, something I learned later on, but he was in France a lot of times.

So, you know what I mean? It was like, so there was a few phone conversations and stuff like that with him,

but never had him there. And then when he would turn up, he would just turn up randomly at my house and stuff.

And one thing I always remember is that I always wanted to go with him, right? Because he was a superhero to me.

You know, I didn't care as much as the other adults cared about the fact that he was, you know, in and out of my life

and what damage that was doing to me and stuff like that. I was just like, I want to see my dad.

Everyone else has got a dad. Why haven't I got a dad? You know, I want to know my dad.

So my mum would, I got to give my mum a little credit because she would never badmouth him in front of me,

even though I know that she wanted to. And she would always give me the option.

So anytime he would come, she was like, would you like to go? And I would obviously go and then I'd come back crying

because something had happened, you know, like one of the, you know, my dad drank a lot.

I remember one time he took me to a party. It was like a family party. It was like after a christening or something like that.

And he was, he got so drunk and they threw him out. He had a fight with someone in the party and he was, he got thrown out.

And I remember having to like, you know, maybe like 10, 11 tops having to carry him home.

Literally down the street, like carry this guy home to my grandstays, mums.

You know, being chased by the police in the car, you know, in pushing my head down in the back.

I just remember that image of him going like, look, keep your head down and stuff like that.

And he was getting chased by police and I laugh about it now. It's more an uneasy laugh that's happening.

This is not me being like proud of any of this. It's just those were my images.

Those are my images and memories of like being with my dad.

But without fail, my mum said, you want to go back and go back. You know, I wanted a dad.

He weren't the best dad, you know, but I wanted someone there.

And kind of eventually when I realized when I got a bit older and I was kind of angry with him for

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how he treated me.

It became, I'm going to find other figures, other dad figures, other role models in my community. So the, you know, the local bad boys, the local dealers, they became dads to me.

And I started to follow in their footsteps a bit, you know what I mean?

And adopt the same attitude, adopt the same swagger.

And, you know, I think even joining Soul Solid was never about music for me in the beginning.

It was about belonging. It was about like, it was the first time, you know, I was part of the gang.

And there was a lot of older men in there in that group that looked after me, you know, took care of me and seemingly at the time, loved me.

Do you know what I'm saying? As much as, you know, as far as I was concerned.

So I spent a lot of years bouncing around like that. The funny thing is about it is I was having success throughout this, you know, throughout this process.

Like making films and successful TV shows and music and stuff like that.

Like, so I guess that I had talent, you know, I had a gift that was shining through.

But learning how to be a man, I didn't, I didn't get, I didn't know.

You know, I thought that was aggression. I thought that was don't take no shit from anyone.

Do you know what I mean? Don't cry. Don't take no shit. Be hard. You know, try and stand up for yourself.

But emotionally, I was incapable of the other stuff that really builds a real picture of what a man is. Where does the anger come from in that situation of like abandonment, needing a father, the father not meeting the expectation that you want him to be?

I often hear it with kids like you're desperate for your father to like be a father.

And you repeatedly give them another chance to be that person and they continue to let you down over and over and over again.

And it's funny because I've sat here with like child psychologists and Gabel Maté and all of these geniuses that study children at your young age.

And it's funny how the one thing that Gabel said to me, who's maybe like the number one child psychologist in the world said to me,

like children in any context think everything's about them. They're narcissists.

So if the parents are arguing, they interpret that as something about them.

And if they, so even in the context of what you've described, your father's behavior there, you almost, he's got his own problem clearly,

but you interpret it as meaning something about you.

Of course, yeah.

And do you understand, have you been able to understand what the interpretation was? How you interpreted that situation?

I think not in that much detail, but I guess, you know, surface wise that I wasn't good enough.

You know, I can only say that because of how I've treated myself.

Because I never, generally, I never think I'm good enough to be doing anything that I'm doing.

You know, I always feel like there's always like a slight little bit of me and it's like, they're going to catch me out next week.

Like I'm, I shouldn't have this opportunity. You know, I always play, I'm always going to make the

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most of it.

I'm always going to prove to people that I'm good enough to be here, but I'm always, there's always that niggling doubt of what the other person's thinking about me.

You know, and that's something that I'm still working on today.

I'm still working on the whole process of understanding like, you know, someone else's opinion of me is none of my business.

Do you know what I'm saying?

Like, and just accepting that, you know, going into a room and if I see people talking in the corner wondering, are they talking about me?

You know, having those like that sort of thought process is tough, but I think it stems from rejection.

I think it stems from, you know, being abandoned slightly.

I mean, I hate to use that word, but because, you know, my mum, my mum will be upset about me using that terminology.

Because she never understood and bless her, you know, my mum's a very intelligent woman, but one thing she couldn't understand emotionally was the fact that I still wanted him.

You know, and even, you know, up until he died and after he died, there was loads of moments where I was broken and she would, she was just like, what is wrong with you?

Like, why, you know, you didn't really know him like that.

Like, why are you, you know, she just didn't get that.

Yeah, I just wanted him to be proud.

You know, if anything, you know, I just love him to see me now.

I'd love him to understand, like, who I've become, what I've achieved.

I think in the beginning, that was more about, that was like a sticky finger up sort of thing.

Like, even without you, I did great, you know.

But the reality is, like, the last encounter I had with him was the most beautiful encounter ever, you know, maybe that I've ever had with any person that I love.

Like, and he said some things to me that really have stuck with me, you know, really, I had changed my life going forward, but, you know, he didn't care.

He was like, I mean, he cared about me, but he didn't care about the stuff that I was doing.

He was like, that's meaningless.

It's like, you know, all of that can be taken away at any time.

You know, I'm glad you've got talent.

I'm glad you feel fulfilled in, like, what you're trying to achieve in life and your life goals and that, but I wouldn't care if you did that or you didn't.

It'd still be my son, and I'd still love you as much as I do.

And he was always concerned about my fight, my fight for perfection, because I spend a lot of time, like, trying to dig deep to make things perfect, right.

And it's only now I know that nothing, nothing can be perfect.

There's no such thing, you know.

And I think I eventually understood, like, you know, it's not always going to go my way, right.

But I have to be slightly more willing to, to adapt, to accept that.

And when I have been more willing to accept it, good things have happened, you know, I've got to be

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open to it.

He passed away in 2005, right?

Yeah, yeah.

And by that time, you had sort of rekindled your relationship to some degree.

I, when I was reading through, I think it's so solid.

Page 12, you referred to him at that time as a waste of space, which I guess was a reflection of how you were feeling about him at that time.

Yeah, I mean, it's so funny you bring that book up because I don't even, I won't even read that book. Really?

I don't even think I've ever read it, if I'm honest with you.

And I mean, I mean, there's not that much to read, if I'm honest, it's a lot of pictures.

But, but yeah, probably that's how, I mean, that's how I felt for a lot of the time.

I think those last two weeks, when I was in, I was shooting Get Rich or Die Trying, I was in Canada. He forced his way out to come and see me because, you know, he knew how I felt about him and he knew he only had weeks left to live.

And he was like, look, I have to, I have to come and see you.

And he came and he lived with me for those like two weeks.

And I was already in the process of like, so I had this thing back then that I was going to die when I was like 33.

I'd been, it'd been something that I said to my mum from a young age and she was like randomly one day at like six, seven, you was like, you're going to die at 33 or whatever.

And she was like, I don't know where you got that from, but you've been obsessed with that.

And as an adult, I was obsessed with the fact that I was going to die young, right?

I wasn't going to survive past that age.

So I got someone to start filming me every day.

I got a friend to just start documenting my daily life on camera.

And when I went to Canada to shoot, I took the camera with me and just said, look, I'll get some like some footage myself when you're not, why you're not here.

My dad came and I just decided to turn the camera on.

So I did.

So every night, you know, while he was there, he was like, you know, go and get me some weed.

This guy had lung cancer and could hardly breathe.

He was like, I'm going to be some weed and, you know, I'll get him some drink and stuff like that.

And we'll be sitting there for hours, like for hours and hours.

And I just put the camera down on the table and that and just film him and just ask him the most random questions just about life.

Like, you know, where was you?

Where was you at this time?

Where was you that time?

Whatever.

And the guy was like, for context, when I was in prison, I was in prison like 2001, right?

And he wrote to me a few times.

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And it was the first time I understood that my dad was ill, like he couldn't read or write.  
So these letters were so like, it's just fucked up, man.  
It was just like, I was like, I had no idea that he had that issue.  
And I read these letters.  
I was like, wow.  
So that gave me another level to my hate for him.  
It was like, now you're dumb as well.  
Like, yeah, do you know what I mean?  
It was like, yeah, I really don't like it.  
Like, I don't know.  
So it was evil, but it was just another excuse for me not to like him.  
Right.  
So cut back to being in Canada.  
He, I sat down with him and filmed him.  
And found out that he was one of the most intelligent people I know,  
just from being street wise, just from life experience, do you get what I'm saying?  
Like it actually burnt me because I didn't want him to know anything.  
I didn't want him to have anything to really offer me in the end when I delved deeper into who he  
was as a person.  
But all the things I was going through with women, with life, you know what I mean?  
It was like, he had a wealth of knowledge that he could speak to me about.  
He couldn't write it down, couldn't really articulate it in the greatest way.  
But just listening to his kind of anecdotal sort of stories and whatever,  
I got what I needed to get from it.  
And I filmed him kind of going through it.  
But there was also like a huge fear as well.  
You know, I realized in that moment that he had genuine excuses for being the person he was.  
I mean, he grew up, didn't have the greatest upbringing.  
You know, he was in care.  
He was slightly neglected by his own parents, you know?  
And, you know, he was the bad kid of the bunch and he just kind of got pushed out.  
And that kind of led to his life and things happened, et cetera, et cetera.  
But I understood it from his point of view when I heard him talk about it.  
And I was like, actually, okay, I can see why you would be the person that you are.  
And actually, maybe you did me a favor by not being there too much.  
Because who would I be?  
You know, would I be the person I am today?  
But then, you know, after realizing I love this guy and I'm enjoying spending time with him  
and we were like good friends and we went to clubs together out there.  
This guy's like, you know, thin, like wafer thin, like on death's doorstep.  
And he was making the effort to come out with me and, you know, rave and do all this stuff.  
But at night, at bedtime, I was laying in my bed awake every night, just staring at the scene



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and thinking he's going to die here because he was just coughing all through the night, man. It was like, you know, like he was coughing up his lungs. Like, I was like, boy, I was praying that it didn't happen. You know, there. And then he died, man. He'd like, you know, left, literally got off the plane. They rushed him to hospital because he was going on the plane, rushed him to hospital. He died whilst I was filming. And, you know, I wasn't the best way that I found out. I was filming at the time I was doing a scene with 50. It was like a really emotional scene outside on location. And the vibe just changed on set. Like, you know, in between takes everyone stopped talking. It was quiet. It was like this. And, like, the producers were just, like, looking at me. And I was like, nah, I knew. Do you know what I mean? Something had happened. I knew something was wrong. And they was like, look, we're going to take a break. Just go and call home. You need to call home, actually. So I went to my trailer and called my partner at the time and she was like, I'm sorry, man. I mean, he's gone. It's tough. It was tough. It's a tough moment. It's a tough moment. Yeah, and I was, I was broken. I was broken. I never realised it would affect me that much. It broke me. And I'm crazy. But the one thing I remember from that moment is I went to my trailer. I broke down. Some of the actors came like Joy Bryant. She came in and she was just like, just hugged me and I was just crying and stuff. And 50 came in and was, he won't remember this. And I know it wasn't malice or is any bad intentions, but he was like, I'm sorry to hear about your dad. And it just started talking about a scene to someone, you know, when someone was like, sorry to hear about your dad, man. Anyway, whatever. And I was like, you know, talking to him after it was like, he's been through some, some shit. You know, that's made him really like, I hadn't been through anything like that. At that point, that was my first real kind of close encounter with death.



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Like having someone that meant so much to me pass away.  
But my first instinct was to work, to continue working.  
I continued working.  
I flew back for the funeral for literally one day to the funeral.  
And then I left, I went back to work.  
I just plowed through him and I didn't grieve.  
And I haven't.  
You haven't?  
I don't think I have.  
I don't know what you call it.  
Because even like now, I want to break down now, just talking about it.  
I don't know.  
This is like 2005, right?  
It's like 18 years or whatever.  
I mean, is that an indication that I haven't dealt with it enough?  
I don't know.  
The feelings you have towards his loss, are they complicated?  
Because are there unanswered conversations?  
Is there any regrets in there?  
What were those feelings?  
Because your mother, as you said, was surprised by your reaction to his loss?  
From him dying, I lost.  
I went off the rails a bit.  
And I went off the rails a bit, in the sense of my ego took over.  
And I lost any sort of spiritual connection that I had with life  
or the universe up until that point.  
I've never been the most religious person.  
But I've always been a believer in universal law, right?  
And if I give, I will get.  
In the way that things are meant to be.  
My only thing that's happened in my life has been manifested in some sort of way.  
When I wanted to be so solid, I knew who so solid were before they knew who I was.  
I looked in the mirror one day and said, I'm going to be in that group.  
I was a little boy on the streets, working out ways to be and the universe  
and constantly bringing people around my situation that was connected to that situation  
that was bridging the gap for me.  
So I only had to be.  
I only had to focus and believe or whatever.  
So I believe in all that stuff.  
But when my dad passed, I lost a lot of those beliefs.  
I lost a lot of that understanding.  
And I became slightly like, yeah, just lost, you know, lost.

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I was, you know, I drank more, you know, I did.

I cared less about myself, about where I was going and about, you know, what I wanted in life and stuff.

And yeah, that led me on a different, different sort of journey, you know, took me to some dark places, if I'm honest.

Dark places.

Yeah, man.

I'm just like, like, definitely not making decisions, purposely making decisions in life that we're going to come back to haunt me, you know.

I mean, a big thing for me was like my relationship at the time I gave up on, you know, I gave up on it.

I became quite like promiscuous.

You know, I abused the celebrity that I had, you know, like I gave into the temptation that was around me a lot more.

It really hurt my first partner by being that person.

And actually that resulted in me having two kids out of my relationship.

You know, so two of my children, who I love dearly, you know, came from that situation.

But I think that was like a big part of my like, you know, my reckless sort of rebellious sort of attitude.

And I mean, the only way I can put it is that I became, I came before everyone at that point, you know, me and my ego and like the world revolved around me.

And I think before that point, even though I did have moments of being quite wayward and whatever, I was still caring, loving Ashley, you know.

That's how I, that's how I grew up.

But yeah, I definitely came out of my box from that point on.

And I guess to me at the time it was like, you only live once.

You know, I don't fear anyone, whatever happens happens.

It was that whole thing that was going on, but I'm still still paying the price for those, those years now.

I find it incredibly fascinating that when we look at the back end of Spotify and Apple and our audio channels, the majority of people that watch this podcast haven't yet hit the follow button or the subscribe button wherever you're listening to this.

I would like to make a deal with you.

If you could do me a huge favor and hit that subscribe button, I will work tirelessly from now until forever to make the show better and better and better and better.

I can't tell you how much it helps when you hit that subscribe button.

The show gets bigger, which means we can expand the production, bring in all the guests you want to see and continue to do in this thing we love.

If you could do me that small favor and hit the follow button, wherever you're listening to this, that would mean the world to me.

That is the only favor I will ever ask you.

Thank you so much for your time. Back to this episode.

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Those tapes. Have you still got them?

It's another upsetting story, man.

So I set up a production company, me and a good friend of mine at the time, but I was a nightmare to deal with.

The demons were there and I didn't give a hundred percent into this company at all.

So a lot of the weight was left on them to kind of hold it up.

And I think this person, this guy was going through his own troubles as well at the time with his dad and his family and stuff.

So, you know, it was a disaster in the end, but either way, you know, we had an archive of footage that we created from filming that we never knew what was going to use it for.

But all the stuff I filmed, my dad went into this archive and when the company actually was dissolved and, you know, we kind of fell out at that point.

He took all the tapes and the footage.

And for how many years now, I've been asking to get it back because we don't speak, you know, but for maybe 10 years now, I've been trying to send messages through people I know, know him and stuff like that.

And I've just had no response, you know.

And the last thing I want to do is go into some legal sort of battle for it or whatever.

But it's the last, you know, the other stuff I can let go.

But the stuff with my dad, like it's the last things I've got.

I don't have pictures of him, you know, and I don't have like family portraits and anything like that.

All I really have is those those tapes and they're like, they're like my.

Do you know that movie and things to do in Denver when you're dead?

They're like, you know, it's like that to me.

It's like gold dust.

It's like I can, I could probably watch those tapes and it could probably help me through a lot of tough times that I face now.

Or maybe even my kids, you know, maybe even help the boys somehow.

So it'd be nice to get them back.

It's really sad.

It's like, it's hurtful, man.

You know, and I hope one day I can resolve that situation.

Do you even know if that person still has them?

Do you know what?

I mean, I could be sitting there with, you know, thinking that he has them, but he might not.

I'm pretty sure he does.

I'm pretty sure.

That last two weeks with your father before he passed away.

My first question is, did you, did you know he was going to pass away soon?

And what did you take from that?

Those two weeks of sitting with him and asking, what is the, what did you walk away with that you didn't have in that moment?

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You knew he was much more intelligent than you ever knew.

But the lessons you speak of that you've, that have stayed with you ever since and that have seemingly guided you.

What were those lessons?

I knew he was going to pass away.

I hadn't accepted it.

Yeah.

You know, but it was obvious that he was going to die.

Right.

It was obvious.

I got from it one of the key things I needed.

I think one of the key things you need from knowing your dad is knowing where you come from.

I think that's such a, it's just such a key point in being a dad.

Like if my son can look at me, I can look at my son and kind of, he knows who I am.

He knows where I came from.

He knows what my values are, you know, what I expect of him and stuff like that.

Then I think it makes him easier for him going out there to be just a person, to be just a human being.

When you're, when you're constantly looking for that reference point, right, you're lost, you know.

And when I spent those two weeks with him, I kind of got a better understanding of, oh, okay.

This is why I do that funny thing with my eye when, you know what I mean?

I'm lying or this is why I feel this way at this point.

And, you know, he was powerful as a man.

He didn't have anything.

He didn't have anything, but he oozed some sort of confidence and charm, right?

That you can't buy, like, you know what I mean?

And I felt that and I saw that in him and it made me understand about, I should feel more like that by myself.

Do you know what I mean?

I should feel more powerful.

Look, you don't have to be a dickhead, you know, when you're, you know, when you're confident, doesn't have to come across that way.

But he had, he had that level of confidence with, like, some beautiful sort of humility that went with it.

But, you know, and that was my dad.

That was my dad's.

So it made me know that I can be that person, you know, that I don't need to doubt myself as much as I do.

And he stripped away from me.

He constantly, in that little time I spent with me, stripped away all the, because I was, like, hiding myself in success.

I've got this, I've got this watch, I've got this car, this coat and staying in this apartment and this and

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that or whatever.

And he didn't give a shit about any of that.

And I don't know whether he was doing it on purpose, but he genuinely was like, well, I mean, it's good.

I mean, but, and he, he, he, he knew a lot more about me than I thought he did.

So he'd paid attention somehow.

But I walked away from that meeting, that encounter, knowing that he loved me and knowing that he was proud of me, you know, he was proud.

And that was good enough.

What would you say to him if he was listening now?

I think I didn't tell him, thank you.

I hope he didn't get on that plane, feeling like, you know, feeling like I was still unhappy with him.

Because I treated him quite bad, you know, especially when, I mean, when he was going through his cancer, when he told me he had cancer, I was just like, whatever.

Like, I don't even believe you.

You're probably just saying it for me because you want me to talk to you.

That's how I, that was my attitude towards, towards him in that period of time.

That's how much anger I was holding.

So, you know, I let go of a lot of that whilst we was together.

But I do wonder if there was any doubt in his mind when he left, you know, because I couldn't, you know, it's not like I was like, you know, all over him and touchy feeling and kissing him and, you know, rubbing him and stroking him and stuff.

I still kept a bit of a, you know, a toughness about it.

Like, I'm not going to let you in like that, you know, but I do, I do hope that he could read between the lines and know that I'd soften slightly and let him in a bit.

If you could see all the success you've had now, what do you reckon you think all that you've done?

It'd probably try and tell me like, you know, it'd be like, you're not doing this right.

You're not doing that right.

You could improve in this area and that area and whatever, but probably butt heads about it.

But, you know, that'd be all good.

I'd take that now in hindsight.

You know what I mean?

I'd take it.

You try and be your dad.

That's what dads do, right?

I mean, that's it.

Yeah, yeah.

Moms do the same.

Yeah.

I do envy some of my friends that I know, like I've got really good relationships with their dads and, you know, their dads have looked over their contracts and stuff like that.

You know what I mean?

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I've been a major part of their life.

You know, I'm determined to do that for my kids if they ever need it.

In hindsight, though, we look at some of the most difficult things we've been through and overcome and we understand the correlation that has with the better things about us, all the things that we're proud of.

Like there's often a surprising link between the worst thing that's happened to us or the worst trauma we've had and the best thing that's happened to us.

And as I was listening to all of that, you know, you use this word talent at the very beginning.

You said I must have had just had a talent, but I'm not necessarily sure what you mean by talent because you grew up with an ability to have that talent in multiple areas.

You had it in music, you had it acting in a very young age.

And there's part of me that wonders that, you know, about the link of the things that you went through in the circumstances you were in and how that left you with this trait you described as not quite everything in your work or you were good enough.

How that actually all played into your drive and ambition to go that extra mile, to work that extra hour, to spend an extra hour in the editing studio.

And I often see in people that when they have that feeling of like some call it imposter syndrome, I don't like the term that they actually produce better work because they end up becoming the perfectionist that you, your father told you not to be.

So it's interesting that there's a correlation there.

And if I asked you, you know, because I was looking at this and you started acting super young, I'm wondering how it's possible that at 15 years old, you are not only joining one of the most successful groups at the time in sociology.

But you're also acting on the BBC 15, 16, 17 years old.

You're doing two things that most people never, I mean, if one person had just been in so solid crew, that would be a success.

They would be a success.

But for you to be doing both things at the same time, what have I missed here?

Like, what is it about you that your character traits, your philosophy, your mindset that you think has really guided you through that process?

I'm going to, I'm going to struggle to really answer this, Steven, if in all honesty, because it kind of involves like,

it kind of involves bigging myself up a bit more than I'm comfortable with, if I'm honest.

But since we're here.

No, I think it's more, look, I don't, I don't, I believe there's that some of that charm that we spoke about that I saw in my dad.

I know I have in me.

Right.

So I have the, I have that ability.

I know how to talk to people.

I know if I kind of, if I get into a situation like this with me and you, like I can make people like me, do you know what I mean?

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It's a little thing that I've got.  
And I try and bring that out in the characters that I play on the screen.  
I think I always bring a bit of myself to the roles I play.  
So as much as I'm hiding behind these characters or whatever, the engine room is Ashley.  
And if I can find ways to use my trauma to portray this, I do.  
I think outside of the ring, when I say ring, I'm in the acting space.  
I'm humble.  
You know, I don't brag.  
I keep it simple.  
I treat people as good as I can.  
Do you know what I mean?  
And I give back a lot.  
You know, I'm always about like trying to help other people.  
It's always been a part of me.  
So I think that's helped move me forward.  
And I think especially in, in like within the black community, you know, where I was one of the first to kind of break through when there was only a few black faces on screens.  
And a lot of black people that are, you know, maybe in their 40s now have grown up watching me.  
That's the Ashley that they know.  
You know, I think I've never, I've always been quite accessible.  
I've never like turned my back on where I came from, you know.  
For some reason, in some way, I've managed to stay in that place where it's like, oh, it's Ash.  
Yeah.  
You know what I mean?  
I'm like.  
You haven't lost sight of yourself.  
Yeah.  
It's like people are comfortable around me.  
This is why like still to this day, you know, a lot of people are like, bro, why are you just walking down the street?  
Or why are you just on the train?  
Or why are you just sitting in this like, because I can.  
Because people don't really, you know, they don't really want to like, I don't have the, do you know what I mean?  
The Justin Bieber effect on people like, you don't have to shut down stores or whatever when I come in.  
Like people look and stuff like that.  
But it's like, I just feel like they've got, they used to me.  
Yeah.  
You know what I mean?  
And I think like, I mean, I'm straight off point a bit, but I think like all of this as part of my character as part of my personality ties into why I've been working for



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so long.

You know, why I've managed to maintain relationships in the industry and why I have a solid like fan base, you know, solid base of supporters that will show up to my shows to watch my films or watch.

Do you know what I mean?

Why make sense?

Invest in me.

Yeah.

And we often don't think about the role that people's skills will play over a long period of time.

But it's like a force that's either it's like an invisible force.

Like your reputation in terms of how you've turned up for people that will when you zoom out will catch up with you either way for better or for worse.

You know what I mean?

Yeah, that's it.

You call it like invisible PR.

It's like what how you've treated people along the way.

Well, and people don't often focus on that because there's other things they might try and focus on. But that force that's kind of just making sure people call you when there's the opportunity or they recommend you in a room you're not in.

And that all comes down to everything you've just said there.

If I'm honest with you, it's helped me so much in the sense of I've made mistakes along the way.

You know, I've made mistakes that have not necessarily been public mistakes.

I've never say that I'm a perfect person.

But when I have made those mistakes, people that have known me have supported me.

You know what I mean?

So because, you know, I've been good.

I've been good to people.

So, you know, we live in a world today where, you know, any minute people can turn it back on you. Any minute people can, you know, cancel you or whatever they want to call it.

And that happens day in and day out.

So, you know, I feel like I feel really proud of the fact that I've been as genuine as I can be coming up.

If I was one of your kids then and I come to say, Dad, listen, I want to be an actor.

No.

Well, I couldn't, I couldn't, I mean, I couldn't tell them no, but I would be worried.

Why?

Because it's just hard.

It's a hard industry to crack.

Yeah, but you did it, Dad.

Yeah, I did it.

I don't know how.

I'm yet to know what the blueprint is.

It's tough.

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You know, my students at Kingdom ask me this all the time.  
And I'm like, all I can teach you is like how to prepare.  
How it's going to happen, when it's going to happen or whatever.  
That is like an anomaly, man.  
That's like, it comes when it comes, right?  
And you just got to be kind of ready for it at the time.  
Yeah, I mean, my kids.  
And the worst thing about it is like most of them probably are going to do something in entertainment.  
I can see that.  
So it's going to be tough.  
It's going to be tough for them.  
It's going to be tough for me.  
But it is a rocky road.  
And it's a tough life.  
But I will support them all the way.  
What is that?  
So if I was like, Dad, what do you mean rocky road?  
Rocky road meaning, you know, for years, I'd say only in the last 10 years I've been financially stable.  
But I've been acting all of my life.  
So not knowing sometimes how I was going to feed my children, you know, what was going to happen next.  
You know, just whether I was coming or going, it was just unstable.  
It's just unstable.  
And the rejection is immense, man.  
Like, you have to be really tough in places when it comes to 80% of it is people just telling you, no, this ain't going to happen.  
You're not going to be able to do it.  
That's probably not going to work.  
Sorry, we don't want you.  
Not this time.  
You were great.  
But you know what I'm saying?  
It's like that.  
A lot of the time what people get to see is that little 10% that works.  
Why didn't you listen to them?  
Because I spoke to someone close to you and they told me they said, it's funny because earlier on you and I'm not good at, you weren't good at saying no to people.  
Right.  
Because you said you have these people, please attendancies.  
When I spoke to people close to you, they said, you're not good at hearing.

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No, either.

As in, if someone says no to you, it turns into driving motivation.

Yeah, well.

So why don't you listen to them?

When all these people rejected you and said, no, it's not going to work.

You're not going to be in this movie or this thing.

It's kind of thrown me a bit.

Now I'm thinking about who you spoke to.

Yeah, but people in your team, they say that, you know, you're, when you, when someone says no to you, like, you can't direct Ashley.

Yeah.

You go, you know.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I mean, I have that, but I'm not like, I don't have it in a way of like, not in a rude way, but it's a motivation.

It does.

It does.

Yeah.

It does.

You know, I stay, when I'm silent, that's when people should worry about me.

Because you know, that's when I'm, that's when I'm thinking how to get around you or how to do that thing that you, you said I can't do, but.

Someone says you can't do something.

Ashley, you can't do that.

How does that feel?

I don't like to, I mean, it doesn't feel good.

It doesn't feel good.

Especially when I know there's a way, especially when I know that I can, you know, or I believe that I can.

I just prefer people to let me try.

And if it fails, then we can both agree.

Maybe it wasn't going to work the way I said it was.

And we'd try a different way or we don't revisit it.

But I need the opportunity to bring how I feel to the table.

And yeah, there have been times where I have accepted like it's not going to work or whatever.

And I've regretted it after because someone else has come and done it.

So I think I've become, I've got tougher with that over the years.

And like the directing thing was one of those things because I was told like, you know, you can't direct.

It was my own show that I created.

It was like, no, you haven't got enough experience.

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Like, yeah, I've watched some of the directors you put on here.  
I've got more experience than them.  
I've been, I've been filming since I was like seven.  
And to hear that is like, you know, it's a kick in the teeth.  
But I went to, you know, I went to my business partner after that.  
I was like, how do we change this?  
And he was like, well, if you're serious about it, let's make a short film.  
We're making a short film.  
We went and made a short film.  
Got some money from Sky, made this short film.  
None of that came out.  
But I think actually what happened in that process was I liked it.  
I wasn't expecting to like directing so much.  
At that point, it was about you want experience.  
I'm going to get your experience, the best experience that you could possibly have.  
But actually throughout the process, I was like, no, I like this man.  
I enjoy this process.  
And that's spiralled into me.  
Doing more.  
You said you talked about Kingdom there.  
Those students that come to you that you mentor that ask you, you know, you said, okay, you can't help them figure out how and when it's going to happen, but you can get them prepared.  
What is preparation for the life you've lived?  
Boy, well, I make a point of always saying to them that if you've come here trying to have my journey, you're going to have to go to prison, you know, lose your dad, this, that, I told them all the negative things that's happened because that's what's made me.  
So I was speaking to Laura about this.  
I was like, look, I can't sit there and regret things that have gone wrong because the truth is if they hadn't, if those series of events hadn't happened in the way they happened on the days they happened, I wouldn't be sitting here now.  
And I wouldn't have all the great things that I have the kids and this and that.  
Any little thing that was different might have changed the whole course of my life.  
So I have to accept that.  
Would you erase it?  
Would you erase your dad passing going to prison if there was a button in front of you now?  
No, I couldn't.  
Really?  
I couldn't.  
Well, if I erase that, then I might have, you know, you know, like that picture in Back to the Future where he's like,

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when he's not getting home or something like,  
and his brother starts to fade away, his sister starts to fade.  
It's like, if I raised that and bought my dad back,  
I might erase like four of my children.  
Do you know what I mean?  
Actually, six degrees of separation, you might not be.  
You never know, right?  
So, no, I couldn't.  
I couldn't.  
You have to live with it.  
And I say this to students.  
It's like, so it's not about the journey.  
It's about how you use your journey.  
And more importantly, enjoying the journey.  
Because I tell you now, Stephen, it's not that enjoyable where I am.  
The best parts of what I've achieved has been along the way.  
Do you know what I mean?  
The people I've met, the fun I've had doing things,  
the filming, the memories, this and that or whatever.  
Actually, the looking back, the challenges, the people saying no.  
So what I had to do to get around that, to get there and whatever.  
Actually, like, I think when you clock the game, it's like,  
I'm not saying I've clocked it, but I'm saying I can see with the people  
that I know that are like in that space where they've kind of like,  
there's not much more to do.  
I think it's pretty boring.  
Like, I don't envy them, you know?  
I don't envy them.  
I may want that Lambo, but I don't envy...  
Whether or not, yeah.  
Yeah, like, you know, that space that they're in,  
because there's nothing much more to achieve, it feels like.  
And I'm always like, I have to have a fix.  
Like, I have to...  
There has to be something else.  
Like, I'm very...  
I can be very fickle.  
Like, I can be very focused and determined and whatever.  
And now, like, I'm doing this Disney show and it's like,  
I've shot the Disney show and, you know, I'm editing,  
but I want it to end now because I want to do another show.  
So let me play out the scenario then, Ashley.

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Oh, it's funny, because as you were saying that,  
I was imagining someone coming into your life and saying,  
Ashley, you can't work for another two years.  
You just got to sit at home.  
But then I remembered we had that.  
Oh, yeah.  
The pandemic.  
Yeah.  
How did you respond to that?  
Not well.  
Sitting down is not good for me.  
You know what I mean?  
My wife and I, we can rarely go on holiday together  
because what she wants to do is read books.  
She didn't get to read and lie on sun lounges and stuff.  
And I'm like, I can't live like that.  
You know, I need to be doing something.  
Something's got to happen or be happening.  
What if it doesn't?  
It's tough for me.  
It's uncomfortable.  
It's uncomfortable.  
What was the pandemic like in the first couple of weeks,  
sat at home alone?  
Nothing can't go to the gym.  
Can't move.  
That was tough, man.  
That was tough.  
Like taking away my work from me and, you know,  
all of those, all of that talk of me being like,  
I'd love to be there more with the kids  
and love to speak with my wife a lot more and whatever.  
I realised that I didn't.  
I, I weren't ready for it.  
I worked ready for 24 hours with my family.  
I wasn't used to it.  
I was always used to having a, a release or knowing that,  
all right, I'm going to have this week full on at home.  
But then next week I'm going there.  
I'm doing this.  
I'm doing that.  
So there was always something coming.

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But yeah, it was a, it was a struggle.

It, it opened up a lot of, um, a lot of things in our relationship.  
Definitely.

I mean, me and the Mrs, you know, um, we dealt with a lot.

Now we argued a lot throughout that period of time.

It was like, it was tough.

It was a lot of things.

I didn't realise, irritated me.

You know, maybe about vice versa.

You know, she realises a lot of things that irritated her about me.

Um, I guess because we've spent so much time together.

If I was to fly on the wall in your household at that time,  
what would I, what actually would I have seen?

Um, in that first couple of weeks?

Yeah.

I mean, the depressed, you know, the sad.

Depressed?

Yeah, slightly.

Yeah.

Not worried about, I mean, worried about the state of the game,  
worried about where we was.

I mean, I was one of those people that was worried as if I,  
am I going to die?

Do you know what I mean?

I mean, that was like one of my first thoughts.

Like, did you have a breakdown?

No, I don't think I had a breakdown.

I don't think I had a breakdown.

I kind of know where you're, you know, I mean, there was,  
I had a moment.

I did have a moment because I think,

I think the pressure, the pressure of not,

like it was, it was hard for me not to,

not to have the choice to work.

Like it was hard for me not to have the choice to do certain  
things with my life.

Um, you know, and, um, yeah, it took, it took its toll on me.

I think, I don't know, I don't know if I would go as far as saying

I had a breakdown, but I was very depressed.

I was very, I was very low.

I was very low.

The reason I asked the question is because someone who,



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I think you remind me of myself in many ways where I think at some level I'm getting some of my self esteem and some of my self worth from my work.

Like by, by being successful in my work,

I think I feel like I'm good in myself to some degree.

It's probably an illusion, but it makes me feel that way.

It's probably the same reason people buy Lamborghinis.

Like it is an illusion.

It's not going to fill the void, but it keeps me stable.

The chaos keeps me stable.

Um, and that's why I asked the questions because it's one of those moments in our lives where for someone like you,

where your work is, requires you to be on sets.

Mine I could still do for my laptop, right?

But for you, you have, you have to be on sets and all that stuff shut down.

We locked down.

Um, so how does one, cause I'm guessing here that you have the same relationship with your work on some level where it makes you feel like you're, you're good.

Yeah.

Like you're enough.

Yeah.

Yeah.

You're right.

You're hitting on the head.

I mean, I can't, I can't articulate it any better.

I guess that's what happened.

It stripped a bit of me away and I became a civilian.

Do you know what I mean?

It was like the little part of me that made me slightly different to, to the people around me had been taken away.

And I just had to be Ashley and just,

to actually sit with my thoughts and deal with my flaws, you know, you'd spent a long time distracting yourself.

Yeah.

A hundred percent, but it became evident.

You know, I was drinking a little bit too much.

I smoked a lot.

Um, you know, I was back in my nails and other things sound stupid, but to me they were like things I'd never been able to conquer.

Um, and became more apparent and evident where I had nothing else to do.

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Sitting with yourself and sitting with your thoughts.  
How's that for you?  
It wasn't great.  
It wasn't great at the time.  
Um, it's not, I mean, it's not always great now.  
I'm a strong believer in that.  
Um, that voice in my head is a mug.  
He's not the right person for me to be listening to.  
Really?  
I don't believe anyone should listen to voices in their head,  
if I'm honest with you.  
Your head is, it's an extension of you, right?  
It's going to be trying to like, it's bias.  
It's going to be telling you majority of the time,  
telling you the shit you want to hear.  
You know, telling you stuff that's not really happening,  
but you know, trying to justify.  
I just think, you know.  
Why is he a mug?  
That voice in your head?  
Because he's made me make some terrible decisions, in my opinion.  
Um, nowadays I try to, I try to quieten the voice as much as possible.  
Um, and connect.  
I think that's the most important thing to do.  
Like if I can, if I'm sitting there thinking something,  
and I'm, no, I don't know the art.  
So something maybe emotion or something.  
It's like, it makes more sense to call my mom or to call someone else.  
You know, I mean, or to speak, to open up to my wife about it.  
And go, what do you think about this?  
And get someone else's perspective and then make decisions.  
But I feel like, you know, as emotional creatures, as we are as humans,  
and we, you know, a lot of, a lot of our, the moves that we made,  
make our based on, you know, emotion, anger, fear, jealousy, this, that, whatever.  
I just think you don't, you should never be making decisions in that,  
in that frame of mind.  
You know, you should always have someone to bounce something off.  
But I just don't feel the voice in your head.  
I mean, look, in my, in my opinion, um, in my life,  
the voice in my head has never been the best voices.  
I've done some, some of the most stupid things because I said to myself,  
it's the right thing to do.

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The personality of that voice, angry, you said?

Yeah.

At times.

Look, there's a, there's, there's a, there's a very vengeful person somewhere inside of me.

I believe we've all got that part of us, you know.

Um, some of the things that go through my head sometimes scare me.

Um, because I've been hurt, you know, I've been hurt.

And sometimes it feels like the easiest thing to do is hurt other people,

but I'm just glad that I have the ability to control those feelings and to,

and to think about things and to kind of always in, in any,

how I can do it, move forward with, with love.

And I have a clear understanding that, you know, hurt people, hurt people.

So if you can, if you can, if you can forgive, you know, you're not,

you're doing yourself a great favor, first and foremost, if you can forgive.

If I can forgive the people that hurt me, right?

Do you forgive everybody in your life?

I don't think I've got round to forgiving everyone.

I think I do carry a lot of, a lot of baggage, but I'm working on it.

You know, I'm working on it.

And I'm working on making amends with other people as well,

that maybe don't forgive me, you know.

But what I do know is the people that maybe I don't forgive,

they probably forgotten who I am.

You know, but I'm sitting there thinking about them all the time.

And it's like, so who's really hurt?

You're hurting yourself.

Yeah, that's the nature, isn't it, of holding the grudges, which we will do.

But it just does no damage to the other person, does it?

I remember reading that quote one day and it was like,

forgiving someone is like letting a prisoner go

and realizing and doing so that you were the prisoner the whole time.

Like you can imagine opening the gates to the jail and seeing yourself run out.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Me going, fuck, yeah, I was only hurting myself.

You said something quite curious there, which gave me a train of thought,

which is sometimes I just want to speak to my wife, Danielle, about it.

Now speaking to your wife about it,

when I think about the other points you've given me about not being,

like growing up the way you did, your emotion not coming naturally to you.

I'm guessing you're like me in some respects where,

because I have in the kind of conversations that you need to have

to have to keep a woman in your life.

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Don't come naturally to me, though.  
I still don't even call my parents by it.  
I'd never called my parents mum or dad.  
I just don't, I didn't have that affection growing up.  
So if you don't build the ability to communicate in a certain way  
and to listen in a certain way and show emotion in a certain way,  
you have no chance of being in a loving, committed relationship  
and getting all the benefits of that.  
What journey have you been on with, like,  
because it's funny because I was thinking about that moment  
where you're locked down together and the war.  
And much of the war is like either one person or two people  
that don't know how to communicate properly.  
Yeah, that was the war.  
The war was because Dan is like,  
she's the most loving, caring, tactile sort of person  
I've ever met in my life.  
Like, to the point that when I first met her,  
when I first met her, no, when we first started dating,  
I met her a long time before we started dating, right?  
When we first started dating.  
And I met her family.  
And I saw how her family are together, like,  
it made me sick.  
And I know now that was, it was jealousy  
because I just never, I love my mum  
and I know my mum loves me,  
but we can go without talking for two weeks.  
We're not all over each other, hugging.  
Do you know what I mean?  
We have that really clean relationship, right?  
Yeah, yeah, yeah.  
It's like that.  
Whereas Dan's family was completely different.  
I'd come home, you know, to the flat  
and they'd all be lying on the sofa together,  
like, lying in each other's lap to her,  
her brothers, her mum or whatever,  
and her dad would come out the kitchen,  
you were right, Ash.  
Whatever, it's just like this whole,  
and in the beginning I was like,

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oh, this is great, you know what I mean?  
Like, I can't, I can't deal with this.  
This is weird.  
You know, that was my first reaction.  
This is weird.  
But I've learned to love it.  
I've become a part of that family  
and I've learned to realise that I want some of that.  
I wanted some of that, you know?  
I wanted some of that.  
It doesn't make me love my family any less,  
but it's nice to get some of that loving,  
like some of that, you know, physical stuff.  
So yeah, that's where Dan comes from.  
So her side of the street is always like,  
I'm like, strap your boots up,  
something's gone wrong, how do we solve it?  
It's getting cracking.  
And she wants to be like,  
I want to talk about what went wrong.  
And not do anything about it.  
And I just can't understand,  
like sometimes we're like chalk and cheese.  
I'm just like, you want to sit here for an hour  
telling me how you feel, how you feel.  
And I don't get that.  
And I do have to, like, I need to understand  
that more slowly, but surely,  
like I'm getting there slowly, but surely I will.  
I'll come a step closer, but I'm quite,  
you know, I can be quite cold as a husband.  
And it doesn't, that doesn't work with her.  
And she's a feisty woman as well.  
So she is not scared to tell you.  
It reminds me of myself and my relationship,  
but at the same time, I know that that's exactly what I need.  
Because imagine if I was in a relationship with someone like me,  
it would be all too one way.  
So it's almost like the other person is a counterbalance  
and they're pulling a side out of me  
that's actually beneficial for me.  
And I've seen it's beneficial for me,

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but I've given it willingly.  
Yeah, yeah, yeah.  
Yeah, I'm kicking and screaming.  
I'm kicking and screaming.  
She's going to be cracking up at this  
because I don't even know whether she understands that I know.  
That's how I am.  
And so, you know, but I do, I get it.  
And I struggle, I struggle with it.  
But it's something that I like, you know,  
on a daily basis, I'm just trying to give it more.  
And you're right.  
You're completely right.  
It's like, it helps me in everything else that I'm doing,  
kind of bringing that side of me out.  
Do you have any ideas why, where that came from?  
I guess in one respect, I think about it in my own context.  
I go, I never learned that.  
No one ever told me that.  
So it's like alien behavior.  
But there is a part of me that at a deep level,  
I feel uncomfortable with it.  
Like there's something about when my girlfriend wants to sit down  
for an hour and talk about how she's feeling  
and the situation we're in and stuff.  
Well, I kind of get a bit of an allergic reaction to it.  
And I kind of want to run and I kind of just want to like,  
what can I do to fix it now?  
Like, do you know what I mean?  
What can I press by say, just to end it, to fix it?  
Because something about me feels uncomfortable  
sharing my emotions.  
Is it a defense thing in me?  
You know what I'm saying?  
Like, is it, oh, did I just not learn how to do it?  
Or is it both?  
I think it's a combination of both.  
Like, I know for me, I definitely haven't learned how to do that.  
I don't know how to, I was saying it to a friend yesterday.  
I was like, he was talking about his wife and stuff.  
And like, she, she's working now and he's not working.  
And her job finishes at like two in the morning.

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She gets home about three and then she wants to tell him about her day whilst they're in bed.  
And he's like, he doesn't want to hear it because it makes him feel like he wants to go and beat up her boss. Because you know, the stuff that she's telling him is like, so he gets angry about it and he's like, starts to hold resentments or whatever. But he keeps his mouth shut.  
And I said, I can't do that. Because what happens with me is I, I, I cannot just listen. Do you know what I mean?  
I've worked that out now. Like, it burns me to keep my mouth shut because I want to solve it for you. You're a fixer.  
Yeah, I'm a fixer. I feel like that's what I need to do. There's no world where I feel like you're telling me something just for me to listen to it. Like, that's crazy to me. So I feel like when you're telling me something, it's like, all right, so you want me to, you know, you could be just saying, I walked down the street, I fell over or whatever. And you know, that happened like last week or whatever. I'm like, so should we book an appointment? Do you need to, should we X-ray off? Like, I need to do something. And I think the, the key to, you know, but that's, my mum was, has been like that. You know, my mum was shut up. How are you going to fix it? So you, be quiet. What do you mean? What's your next steps? How are you going to make this? You want to go there, write me a business plan. That's what I went through. So communication was for the precursor to take some action. Yeah. It wasn't as a way to connect. Yeah. It went back to let's sit down and just talk about each other's days.



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God, that must be difficult for, in terms of like, if I'm Danny, your partner, and she comes from that background, she must have taken her a lot of work to understand you that it's not that you don't love her. It's none of that because that's how that must feel that coldness. Shall I be honest with you? Yeah, please. She's, it feels like that to her now. I don't think she understands. Yeah. I mean, I'm hoping somewhere deep down she does because she's still rocking with me. Have you told her though, have you told her this? Because I feel like you probably find it easier to talk to me than to say it to her. About the sort of person that I am. Yeah. What's the stuff you said, like you said today? Yeah. I mean, we've done a lot of, we do a lot of work on it. We're in counseling. You know, we're in counseling every week and we discuss it. You know, we talk about it. I don't think, I think the issue has been up until that point being in a room where someone's slightly mediating and helping to pull things out of you. I haven't felt comfortable enough to be honest with her, you know, personally. But I think that's happening more now. And there's ways, you know, we're learning ways to kind of talk about issues that we have with each other. And you're a dad now. So you've got kids. So you must think about how that sort of generational cycle you talked about with your father, then you is then going to play out in the next generation. 100%. Yeah. I mean, you know, I carry a lot of fear for that because it hasn't gone great with all of my children. I don't have the greatest relationship with all of my kids, especially my older ones. You had those when you were 17, those kids at 17, 18 years old. Yeah. You went to jail at 19 years old. So you were absent for much of that period. Yeah.

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A lot of the first bits of their life.

And then when I wasn't, I was out, you know, I was touring.

I was doing music and then I was acting.

And then, I mean, if I'm honest with you a lot of the other times, like I didn't care enough.

I didn't.

And I cared about them.

I loved my children, but I didn't want the adult responsibilities that came with it.

And I didn't want to sacrifice, you know, what I needed to do

in order to give to them.

So for a long period of time, I was like,

I was not, I was not there in the way that I should be.

And I know that I feel I'm paying, I'm slightly paying the price for that now.

What is the price for that?

Is I feel like there's a slight distance between me and my older kids.

You know, there's a lack of trust there

in feeling sometimes like, you know, why don't they come to me about that?

Yeah, yeah.

You know?

Yeah.

That's for me to, that's a dad thing to, it's a dad conversation to have.

And it's what I think I passed on my, my distant kind of ways to them.

Yeah.

So, you know, as much as like when we're together, we have an amazing time and whatever, but you don't call me that much, you know?

I think it's the same with me and my dad.

I think we never really had a close relationship.

And I think he probably had the same with his father and I have the same with him.

And my fear is how that translates downwards to the next generation.

But me and my father, I wouldn't say we're like, he knows what's going on in my life, other than him listening to this.

There isn't like the phone call to update him or anything.

So, I can relate.

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episodes.

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And let me know how you get on that shopify.com slash Bartlett.

Let me know how you get on.

Top boy.

Yeah.

Crazy.

Crazy how that all played out.

Yeah.

Yeah, it's, it's been an amazing journey, you know,

never, never thought it would actually,

when we're shooting the first season,

I remember Kane looking at me and going,

are they going to put this?

Are they going to put this on TV?

Because the subject matter, you know, some of the things we were,

we was in the process.

It was in, we're shooting that scene where we cut off Sway's finger in the market in summer house.

And we was literally looking at each other like,

Channel 4 going to put this on TV.

We've never seen anything on TV like it at the time.

But, you know, cut from that to, to where we are today,

one of the biggest shows on Netflix,

one of our biggest kind of exports from the UK globally.

And, and, you know, people walking down the street and people just,

just hearing the shame from every angle of London.

It's crazy.

You know, it changed my life.

Changed my life.

In hindsight, you see how big of an opportunity it was,

but when someone approached you with that and that you saw the script

and you saw the role you'd be playing in it,

you must not have had an idea that it was going to.

What did you think?

I didn't.

Do you know, do you want to know why I did it?

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Why?

Because, because like, literally months before I'd said to my agent, I said, look, I'm sick of just being a bad boy all the time.

I can't keep on playing these same roles.

Like, all I'm getting is after I'd done Bullet Boy,

I was just getting the same scripts over and over again.

You've been typecasted?

Yeah.

And I was like, I'm not, you know, I've done a bit of research.

I'd watched like videos of other actors, like American actors,

have been in the same position and other people that,

and I just said, look, I have to be willing not to work,

but I want to be seen for other roles like I want to be.

And she, she, she made me know.

She was like, look, you may not get any work for a while.

That means like no money, no this and that.

And I was like, so be it.

So that kind of, that situation came about,

but then the Top Boy script came, I remember,

not too long after having that conversation.

And for the first time for me reading that script,

I was like, wow, it felt like, like Goodfellas, Scarface,

like all of those shows, those films that are grown up on,

that were very violent.

Don't get me wrong, but behind it all,

there was some structure and hierarchy.

It was the first time that I'd seen black organized crime,

not looking like a bunch of crazy kids with hoodies,

just doing crazy shit and not having no, you know, with no sense.

It was like, I read characters that were human,

that I finally was like, I saw the people behind the hood.

I understood why they was doing what they was doing

or what their motivation was for, whether I agreed with it or not.

And I saw a character in The Chain that was like,

aspired for greater, like he wanted,

he wanted to change the face of the game.

You know, his initial intention was that I can do this,

I'm going to be the best at it, right?

But along the way, I'm not going to hurt people

and I'm going to feed everyone, you know?

It was like, you know, that entrepreneurial kind of,

it was like there within the script and within the character

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and that was like, it turned me.  
So like literally months after that,  
I ain't doing no more of these roles or whatever,  
that script coming, I was like, yeah, I'm doing this one though.  
And that's what made me do it.  
And there was no hesitation?  
Once I've read it, no.  
I never read anything like it.  
And you've got to imagine, I was reading loads of,  
like when I say everything I read was about a black boy  
from inner city London that was a drug dealer  
or was stabbing someone or was shooting someone  
or whatever, it was like loads of different,  
like it's ratios of the same character, right?  
And when I read that, it just stood out for me.  
It was something different.  
I knew that there was something different about it,  
but I'd had no idea that it would cut through the way it did.  
Channel 4 didn't do a third series, right?  
They stopped at two series.  
Why was that?  
I couldn't figure that out from rummaging and reading.  
Yeah, I mean, you're not the only one who can't figure it out.  
I mean, I think over the years,  
because I've been asked that so much, right?  
I've learned or created scenarios that could have happened.  
Oh, okay.  
So I don't know, but I do think there was a change of God  
around the time that it was,  
the third season should have been commissioned.  
And I feel like when that happens,  
ideas need to change in order for the new person  
to feel like they're not living off the coattails  
of what the last person created that was successful.  
And usually it's the most successful thing that gets the axe then,  
because there's nothing that, you know,  
I can't take the credit for this success.  
So I feel like that might have been a reason why  
or maybe there just wasn't the space there  
at the time for them to take it where it needed to go to the next level.  
But either way, like we discussed before,  
it's so good that it happened that way, right?

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And it had that space to just not be around  
and for people to want it back for so many years  
before we got into the new situation.

Why did it come back in your view?

I think timing-wise, when it was on Channel 4,  
it landed at such a pivotal time just in London and for culture  
and coincided with the real kind of social media kind of push  
and all of that stuff.

So I think it was kind of cemented in people's minds  
and I think it was like the first of its kind really to do what it did.

So I think that having that fan base,  
that key kind of niche sort of fan base, cult fan base,  
kept it alive and then I think...

It translated as well, didn't it? Really interestingly  
because a lot of the work at that time  
that was one on the surface might think was similar,  
those stories of London and young black men  
and crime and all of that stuff,  
they didn't translate well globally.

They didn't cross over to different audiences  
and in the same way that for some reason

Top Boy just crossed over  
and maybe it's because of that complexity  
and how thought through the plots and storylines and characters are  
and it wasn't just surface level shit.

A lot of the other stuff was stereotypical surface level.

Yeah, there were humans on the page and what happened  
you walk away from the route for these characters  
no matter what they're doing and that's because they're 3D.

So you understand kind of what's going on in their heads.

I think from the beginning we've always incorporated  
what's going on outside of that world.

I think in Season 1 on Channel 4 it was like mental health.  
There was a lot of other issues that we were throwing in there  
like with the little kid Gemsoul  
just kind of his family structure and neglect from his parents  
and stuff like that.

There was other things that we talked about  
that you just didn't get in the other shows  
and then we had a big, big, big part of this puzzle was Yan.  
Because he's a filmmaker.

He's a very cinematic, well-versed kind of filmmaker

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that knows how to get brilliant performances out of people and remember maybe 90% of our cast in that first season had never acted before.

So you needed someone at the helm driving that had a clear understanding of how to get great performances out of people that hadn't had that much experience and also shoot a beautiful TV show.

What do you have to do to get the best performance out of yourself?

Do you have any rituals or anything when you know you're going on set?

Is there anything that you do to embody the character and to also just get yourself in the right frame of mind?

I have no set of rules

but I'm open to being willing to do what it takes for any given.

It's different every time.

I've had characters where I've gone into play that I'm like,

I don't even know if I can do this so I'm shit scared

so I would do everything.

Like I'm not eating.

Don't speak to people that I love.

For a role where I played an alcoholic, crack-addicted character,

I stopped eating food.

I needed to lose the weight.

I needed to feel homeless

so I kind of put myself in a situation where I left my household

and I slept on a mattress in a one bedroom kind of apartment thing

and really pushed myself to the limits

because sometimes I don't know how else I'm going to do something.

Just being able to act isn't enough.

I need to feel it.

And then there's other times where I'm like,

actually I don't need to do that much.

I know this person quite well.

I need to be well versed on who that character is,

what their backstory is so I can be free when I'm in the moment.

I'm not one of these guys that have a set of rules

and a lot of the time I believe less is more.

I don't want to be over prepared because then I feel like there's no vulnerability.

So it gets picked up by Netflix and it becomes a mega mega show,

one of their biggest shows of all time.

Life changes for you hugely.

You go on this journey for another two seasons on Netflix

and then you have one final season on its way.



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How do you feel about that?

It's a bittersweet.

What's the bitter in what's the sweet?

It's bitter that some of the people on that show that I've worked with the whole time and been doing it, I like my family.

And actually I know we've discussed this the type of person that I am.

I'm not going to see them that much after.

It was our reason for connection.

So what happens in this world, you move on, you make other families, you develop other relationships.

I worry about losing those connections a bit.

You look sad as you say it.

I can see the emotion in your face.

That's a bit of a thing for me.

Remember you spend more time with these people than you do with your actual family.

You invest so much into them and it's tough.

If I'm honest with you, the last film in the last season brought me and Kane probably even closer than we've ever been doing that show because we don't have the greatest time fighting for what we believed in and making it the best show that we could make it be the best last season for the fans. People don't understand we go hard for that show.

We go hard to make sure the scripts are right.

We go hard to make sure other characters are being represented in the way they should be and storylines make sense and whatever.

The truth is we faced a lot of resistance this time round.

We wasn't given the creative input all the time that we desired.

And this is like a common thing.

This happens behind the scenes.

This is not me being in a grass or anything.

It's the reality sometimes.

When there's seven execs, eight execs, not everyone agrees.

You have to do business. You've been there, right?

It was tough. We went through a tough experience.

We haven't been through before and that brought us closer together.

It's even harder knowing that this is the last time because we developed another level to our relationship where I was like, ah, as businessmen, we're a team as well, you know what I mean?

But the sweet thing about it, if you want to end on a positive, is that I've got my life back.

I mean, to a certain extent.

The Shane is a very popular character.

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But when I say life back meaning that I can pursue other avenues, you know, contractually, I was tied down to that show for a long time. That's how it works.

And it'd be nice to see what else is out there, what else I can do where I can take my career.

You scared a little bit?

I was just going to say that, yeah.

It was scary because that was...

To get that stability in the acting game is very rare.

You know, usually if you want that sort of stability with a show or whatever, then you have to go and do a soap, you know?

Don't really get it from like drama like that.

So, yeah, it's been nice.

It's been good for the family.

It's been good for me to focus on just being an artist

and enjoying what I do rather than worrying about mortgages and, you know, other stuff.

But yeah, it's been a brilliant time.

Did you win the fight?

When I say the fight, you two were fighting to have the show be the way you want it to be.

Are you happy with how it's ended up this final season?

Yeah, yeah.

I mean, look,

I wouldn't say necessarily that we won.

But I think the process of pushing back and fighting for what you're believing always,

without doing that, I don't think we would have got to where we got to.

I think that the push and pull that happens within that process is what makes the show as good as it is.

You'll never be able to see the impact it's had on young people's lives all around the world and perceptions shifting and all of these things.

But if you were to try and define that,

what is the impact you think the show has had on culture, on the world?

Exactly that, I think.

If I can define it, it will be...

I had a meeting today with a Nigerian man

that owns a very famous record label and production company.

We sat down today and we was talking and he was like, thank you because it's made his job a lot easier.

I had the same conversation with Giggs who spends a lot of time in the States and he was like,

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I don't have to explain myself anymore when I go out there.  
Around the world, now because of the show, they kind of know where I come from.  
When it comes to marketing or whatever,  
announcing yourself when you go somewhere into a new territory or whatever,  
there is an association for them to have.  
I think that's what the show has done.  
It's taken us from cups of tea and biscuits and period drama  
and maybe not in Hill or whatever, stuff like that to  
the rest of the world kind of understanding that there's another side to what we have.  
I think as a foundation, as a way of opening the door into the international market,  
accepting what we export, I think is really good.  
I think now from here we should push on into telling black stories  
that don't necessarily have to be from the same world as Top Boy.  
There should be black detectives, there should be black superheroes,  
the boundaries are endless,  
but I think that it's open, it's really opened the door internationally  
for people trusting in what we give them.  
We have a closing tradition on this podcast where the last guest leaves a question  
in my diary for the next guest, not knowing who they're going to leave it for.  
The question in the diary left for you is,  
you've got one phone call left to your children.  
What do you say to them?  
Probably.  
Oh shit.  
What I always say to my kids when I leave the house,  
don't eat my chicken wings.  
Oh my god.  
No, on a real note, it would be, I know it's cliché, but it would be that I love you.  
I think that's, I didn't tell my dad that before he left.  
And yeah, we didn't, you know, we didn't have those conversations  
and he didn't tell me that, not in, not using those words.  
And I'm assuming that this last conversation would probably be the last time that I see them.  
So I'd want them to know that.  
Yeah.  
Ashley.  
Yes, sir.  
I can't wait.  
I can't wait to see this last season.  
I share that excitement with everybody else that's listening right now.  
And thank you for creating a piece of art over the years and fighting for that piece of art  
with to hope to keep its integrity and to keep the resonance that it's had with everybody that's  
consumed it,

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even when it's easier not to.

And I can, understanding you, I understand why that fight was so important for you.

And I'm exceptionally excited because of your experiences and because of that, that take on your art form that you've developed over the last two, three decades to watch your directing career continue to play out.

I know you're working on some incredible things at the moment.

I know you've been working very, very hard on those things.

That's a conversation for another time.

But if it's anything like a lot of the art you've created in your life, and it has that perspective, that integrity and that personality,

I think it's going to have equal impact on the world that top boy and all of the other projects you've been involved in over the last two and a half decades have had on people.

That is a really, really special thing.

And as I say, it couldn't have happened to a more deserving individual in my opinion.

I think it's weird to have this feeling that I'm so happy that you've had this in your life.

And I'm so excited to see what plays out for you.

I know it's going to be something special because although you talk about talent,

I'm not quite convinced that it's just a God-given talent alone.

I think there's a ton of hard work, dedication, perfectionism, love, craft, dedication, kindness, people, skills.

I think there's a lot of perspective.

I think there's a lot of hardship.

There's a lot of rebounding.

There's a lot of rejection that you've had to overcome to get here.

And that's a very admirable thing that we can all be inspired by and that we are.

So thank you, Ashley.

Thank you for taking the time and thank you for your generosity.

Thank you, man.

Thank you for having me.

It's been so good to be here.

Quick one.

You guys know that for years now, my office has quite literally been everywhere, on a plane, in the back of my car, in a terminal, in an airport, or on a train.

You name it, I've probably worked there.

Ever since I started my first business at 19 years old, I've been working on the move.

All I need is Wi-Fi, a desk, and my headphones, and I'm set.

And one of the places that has always had my back when I'm struggling to find an office is WeWork.

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Thanks for watching!