

The Robson Green Transcript

You played Dr Tony Hill for six series of Wire in the Blood, what was it that drew you to that character?

Like anything really, you read a script and do you see yourself in it. Do you see yourself working within that visual grammar that the books gave you? If you read a novel, you escape into it and sometimes put yourself into the story.

It's the same with an actor, you read a story and you're asked to play a character in that story, and sometimes you read a script and you see yourself in it. With this one, especially Wire in the Blood the book, which is what the whole series is based on, by Val McDiamid, I clearly saw myself as Tony Hill.

What really attracted me to the role was that he was a very unusual leading character. He wasn't slick, one with the ladies, wasn't a charismatic, out there leading character. He was a socially inept, bumbling, clumsy buffoon, but had this insight into the destructive nature, and the depravity of human beings, which I found fascinating. It was a really fascinating lead.

I guess what I'm trying to articulate, is that the books and the script celebrated the loser, which was unlike anything that I'd played before. It had incredible depth, unlike a lot of the scripts that I was receiving at the time.

It had so many layers to it. It was a very complex narrative, which was a good muscle to exercise, the challenge of it all.

What did you like about him at the end of the sixth series?

I think that you become confident with something you're playing. I think the secret of acting is that once you're relaxed, you can start acting. If you're not relaxed it's very difficult, you become very self-conscious, and you become constrained, and you can see the wheels turning.

What I started to enjoy with Tony towards the end was that I was stepping off the cliff much more with Tony. What I mean by that is, is I was taking a lot more risks. I was enjoying playing him in front of the lens. It was one of those roles where I looked forward to confronting the lens. When you're asked to play a lead, you captain a ship, and it was one of the few occasions where I felt I was a very good captain.

I sank a few ships in my time, Trudi.

Surely not?

Oh my god, Trudi, you don't want to know.

You say you have to relax to get into the acting. That doesn't sound that easy?

It's about being confident. It's being confident with what you're part of. I'm a stickler for structure, I'm obsessed by narrative, and I love words and good writing is very easy to learn. The majority of the scripts I was getting for Wire in the Blood were very well constructed and the syntax was beautiful. A lot of the time I really enjoyed those 6-minute, 8-minute speeches that Tony has. That psychological diatribe arc that he usually had within the series, I really enjoyed it.

I can only equate it with, I used to watch a lot of Spencer Tracey, and there's this one film, Inherit the Wind. There is this take that lasts about nine minutes. And I love watching the actors, in one take, telling a story in one take, and you are compelled to watch them and compelled to listen to what they have to say.

That's what we were trying to achieve with Wire in the Blood. We were trying to push the envelope in saying I dare you to watch and care about this man, in one take. Which was a very brave decision, but by the end, our heads of department, everyone was singing from the same hymn sheet.

I think that's why we did so very well in America, and got a lot of awards in America. We were up against the big ones like the Sopranos and The West Wing, but the writing was good, and the risks from the directors were very brave, and the shooting was cinematic, and we were brave with what we took on board.

Did you have any say in the story construction?

In the end I was the lead actor, and it's my responsibility to convince people that I was a clinical psychologist. People ask if I convinced anyone that I was a clinical psychologist, I can't answer that. But that was my responsibility.

You have to trust the writers you employ.

There was one story, which I loved, that I had a bit of input with. It was the synchronicity story, in series four. It was about a sniper, there was no rhyme or reason as to why this killer was doing what he was doing. It was a random killer, he had no motive, he just liked to destroy. Those people are very difficult to profile. Tony has this wonderful line: "There are some killers you can't profile. The random killer and cancer."

I loved that story and I loved the production value of that episode.

I have a lot of input onset in terms of how we're going to shoot the scene with the director. I like economy of the visual, rather than fast cut, sometimes. I like the economy of just following the actor and being interested and being compelled to listen to what they say. If you get bored, just cut away.

You were talking about different psychological topics. Did you have to look into it before you began?

It was one of the few jobs I've ever done where I thought I'm going to have to meet a clinical psychologist. And I met a wonderful human being called Julian Boone. He said 'Hello my name is Julian, clinical psychologist with a capital C'. He turned up with this very befuddled look.

He turned up and it was immediately – and he won't mind me saying this, because he's the most wonderful man, and a revered Clinical Psychologist, and I mean a well read, gorgeous human being, and a good man – but there was just something clumsy about him.

He travelled to the restaurant on the bus, and I thought that was marvelous, I really liked that. He was carrying his life in a polythene bag, and that was where the blue bag came from, it was Julian. He never took his coat off, he was never comfortable about staying in one place and he always wanted to leave.

There was something very isolationary about the man. Yet I could have listened to him 24/7, what he had to say about human behaviour. He had this lovely thing, he said. "I'm not a genius, I'm not going to baffle you with science. Never underestimate it when your grandmother says 'I always knew he'd grow up to be a bad 'un', because your grandmother was probably right", he'd say.

And he's right. When you think about it, the grandmother, with time on her hands observing the socialisation process of a young child living in a destructive world, the predictions would usually come true.

I liked that simple observation, and I thought that's a nice layman's way in. He also said there's no such thing as evil. Evil is not something that is external to us. Evil is not something that derives itself from Satan. The destructive act is a human choice, a choice made by human beings not anyone else.

I quite like those simple philosophies. That was a template for Tony, the look of Julian and what he had to say, which I found fascinating.

Did you have Julian on tap for the whole series?

Not the whole time. Sometimes. If we had a storyline we were slightly concerned about. There was one called the Colour of Amber, which was about an abduction of a child.

I don't know if you've heard of the Amber Alert, but when a child is abducted in the US, there's a thing that goes on the road signs and the mobile phones and it's called the Amber Alert, and it's named after this young girl Amber Hagerman, who was abducted and sadly killed. There was an old lady who rang the radio station and said why are you warning us about severe weather coming to the area when Amber Hagerman has just been abducted? The Amber Alert was created from that.

It was Julian who told us about the Amber Alert. There were some technical points and Tony Hill storylines that he would oversee, but other than that, he's a fan of the show.

Would you want to study psychology?

I couldn't think of anything worse than being a clinical psychologist. Bury that idea deep!

I'm not a clinical psychologist, I have no idea. I'm an actor, and I suspend disbelief. I fake sincerity. If you can fake sincerity you've got it cracked. That's what I do in my career. I've been surviving for the last 25 years doing it.

I'm not a method actor. I couldn't think of anything worse. We had a lot of method actors on the show, and I used to want to put up a sign saying 'Danger, Actor at Work'. I'm not a clinical psychologist, I wouldn't know the first thing about it.

That's why I loved West Wing so much. They weren't politicians, they were brilliant actors. You didn't really care about what they were saying, you cared about how they related the information to the audience, and related the relationships to the audience.

The majority of episodes, I think were just really good work. I look back fondly and I'm very proud of some of my performances in that, and quite rightly, we got a lot of accolades in America.

Actors still have to be able to put emotion across, express yourself. So you do need to know something about that.

I know it was quite cynical what I was saying about faking sincerity. But basically you have to put yourself in the position of that person.

I'm not Tony Hill, it's an expression of Robson Green. I'm just Robson. But I'm playing Robson better than anyone else can play Robson. It's like when you see Clint Eastwood, it's still Clint Eastwood. When you see Kenneth Branagh, or Derek Jacobi, who I'm working with at the moment, they're still Kenneth Branagh and Derek Jacobi, they're just brilliant at being who they are. Do you get what I mean?

I just try to be the best I can, and try and do something different to show the audience another facet of Robson Green.

I'm not one of these actors who becomes Tony Hill, and when the director yells cut, I'm still Tony Hill and I take Tony Hill home. That just does not happen.

But what I'm able to do is to put myself into the emotional journey that the writer has intended in the script. In every scene there is an intention. I ask what is the emotional intention in this scene? I have an idea after about my tenth read, things start to happen with the text, and I start to get myself into the storyline. And I really enjoy that process.

I'm doing a film at the moment called Joe Maddison's War, and there is this scene with Derek Jacobi. He has lied about being on the Western Front - I've been on the Western Front, but he's a major and I'm still a private, but he's never been there. It's just the way you play the scene. You could do the obvious, with hatred, and you could shout at him, but there's a lovely more complex way you can work at it.

And the way you do that is by sitting down with a script for hours a day and working at it. Some actors can look at a character and say I know how I'm going to play this. With me I sit down and say how can I make this different, how can I make this a unique performance that probably no one's ever seen before? That's what I aspire to. A lot of the time I don't get it, sometimes I do.

That seems like a pretty intense way to do it?

Yeah it is. Why my wife is interested in me, I've no idea. In this film as well, I have to play the harmonica, while marching. So I've spent the last week, in our back garden marching up and down playing the wedding march on the harmonica. My wife's just looking out the window, this ex-glamour model, ex-Bond girl wife, looking out the window at this lunatic marching up and down playing the harmonica. The sun is setting, and it's getting dark, and she's thinking 'What the hell, what's this lunatic doing? What was I thinking?'

She was Simon Cowell's PA for ten years. She could have had Simon instead of me? What was she thinking?

But I can't see myself doing anything else. There's a saying, 'If acting wasn't around, I'd probably do something stupid'. I think that's great. I don't know what else I could do.

I worked in the shipyards as a draftsman for five years. But I realised that if British Shipbuilding and I were to survive, we'd have to part. I lived in horror of the launch of the ship. I was never sure they would float.

Did you meet the writer, Val MacDiarmid?

Oh yes. I think I was the only one of the team representing the company I owned that made it, I was one of the few who had read the books. I read the books in detail, I had to.

She said the loveliest thing, when she met me, she said, "You're Tony. You're how I picture him. Your blue eyes, and the build and the make up". She said "You're Tony." We didn't even talk about it.

The first time I met Val, she was a very heavy smoker, and by the end of our meeting, it was like we were electing a new pope, there was so much smoke in the room that I couldn't see a bloody thing.

But a lovely discussion took place, and the one thing that came out of this meeting with Val was: let's make him clumsy, let's celebrate the loser, let's not go flash, let's go socially inept.

Let's go with a man who cannot be at ease with the sane mind, let him be at ease with the insane mind. Let's lead with a guy who knows that there is good in people.

There's a thing, I've written it here, I read it in a book years ago. (He reads out): "Although mankind is the author of monstrous cruelty, conflict and greed, it is also the author of much that is good in the world".

Tony is not a believer that you are born destructive. Something in the socialisation process, the upbringing of this person has caused them to create this destructive act, and what triggered that.

That's Tony. I really like the view that he sympathises with the killer. He wants to find the reasons. It's not really a whodunit, it's a whydunnit.

The show brought the North East of England onto TV, and I'm sure you're proud of that. What other projects have you got lined up in the area?

I'm filming in the North East at the moment. It's called Joe Maddison's War. It's about two best friends who are unfit to fight for king and country, during World War Two. They fought in the Somme together, but they've been sent to the Home Guard, which has a stigma attached to it. Defending the country from an inevitable invasion by submarines on the north east coast, it wasn't a reality. The guys were going over there by the shipload to France and Holland to fight the Germans, and these guys were pretending to be soldiers. There was something publicly humiliating about it. Their partners leave them, and they're trying to find their worth. It's about the stupidity of man, and men in general and how men relate to each other, but it's a beautifully romantic piece as well. And Derek Jacobi plays the major, who happens to be the chemist. If you've seen Dad's Army, it's like a serious version of that.

And it's written by Alan Playter, who in 1985, was the writer of the very first play I ever did as a professional. It's a beautiful script.

After that, hopefully I'll be doing a script written by Gavin Scott, called The Rocket, which celebrates the life and times of George Stevenson. He was one of the greatest pioneers of engineering in the world. The man and his son changed the world. They invented the steam train and the railway lines, and he sold that idea to the world. And he's from North East of England. And he's the reason we're called Geordies, because he invented a lamp that was called the Geordie, and only miners in the North East coalfields used these lamps. So that's a real honour to be playing him.

Then I'll be going over to America to do some meet and greets with some directors who seem interested in employing me. And then, who knows. I've got the year planned out.

I've got some very nice scripts coming my way. Which is nice, I'm 46 and still surviving. It's essentially what I say to people who are coming into this industry, who say 'how do you do it, how did you get into this industry'? It's all about surviving, I guess, in what is one of the most insecure professions in the world.

But I love the North East, I can't get away from it. Its home, its where I belong. It's my identity, that sense of family and worth. They're all important things in this life. If you have a root, then you know where you're from. It's a community that is real, and living, and has this sense of integrity and worth. It's a very nice environment to be part of and alongside. I love the North East very much with all my heart really.

My wife is from Indonesia. She comes off the plane and says what the bloody hell is this place. It's drizzling! My wife's got this lovely curly black hair, and when we go to the North East, and it straightens. It goes into shock.

And the accent. The accent is very strong. The Geordie accent is very strong. Go on the Internet, and download a North East song from iTunes. Something like Keep your feet still

Geordie Hinny. Listen to that song, you wouldn't understand a word of it, and that's how they speak up there, and I love it!

It's the most gorgeous place, steeped in history, a great culture and a place I just can't stay away from. I'm drawn to it.

I heard you did a show called Robson Green Extreme Fishing? Can you tell me about that?

That's been an extraordinary gig. There are a few things that I do as de-stresses really, my Robson time. Some things in my life are normal. And one of those things is fishing, and I just love it. It makes complete sense to me. I love every aspect of it, the location, the sense of being surrounded by nature, being able to eat what you catch, the fish always taste better, it's wild, and you get a real connection with nature. I love every aspect of fishing.

This producer Hamish Barber, saw an interview I did during series six of Wire in the Blood in America. The interviewer asked me what I did to relax. And I said 'I like fishing', 'Oh my god, really?' 'Yeah, I love it.' So this producer from Scotland saw the interview and rang and asked me if I'd like to travel around the world, catching fish, meeting extraordinary people, in extraordinary locations, using extraordinary methods of fishing.

So I've just got back from a world tour really. I've been to Cuba, Brazil, Panama, China, Japan, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, Senegal, and finished up in Florida and California.

Cuba was extraordinary. I've just had this experience that was so unexpected. What a lovely way to earn a living, getting paid for something you really, really love.

What was your favourite place?

Cuba. It's not changed since the revolution in '59. It's not exactly a great advert for a place. But every cliché you can imagine about Cuba, the singing, the dancing, the colour, the vibe, the beautiful buildings in Old Havana, it is utterly true, it is there.

But it's not naff, and it's not tack, it's not there for the tourists, it is alive. The culture there is so attractive. As are the people, as are the locations. It's the most stunning country I have ever visited. It also has an extraordinary history. It's a beautiful, colourful, lyrical place to visit, and I fell in love with it.

It has incredible spirit, but it's utterly unique. I'd go again tomorrow. I'm going to take Varnie and Taylor there. They'd love it too.

If you get the chance, go there. Go to old Havana, if you ever get the chance. Seeing Cuba is better than being told about it.

The fishing is amazing, because Castro is still in power and no one can go fishing because they think they're all going to escape to the US. So there's no pressure on the fishing. Visiting Europeans are allowed to go over there and fish. We went over there and had a blast.

We went to a place called Trinidad in Cuba, and a place called Brazil in Cuba. Places where if felt like no one had ever cast a line. And it was just idyllic.

There is a thing that I refer to as the 'Alchemy of Fishing'. When all those components are right. When the location is extraordinary, the methods you are using are extreme, the fishes you are after are stunning, and the person you are with is right. When all those components are healthy, when all those components are met, and you have a great vibe to it, then you have fishing alchemy.

It's the most viewed fishing show in the history of Britain. I think I'm a terrible presenter, don't get me wrong, but there are times when you just say, "Will you look at that. Just look at that. Look at the location, look at the person he's with."

As an example, I was with a guy up in the Amazon in Brazil. This man stood for two hours with a harpoon on a river, after a fish called an Alapina, which is one of the biggest freshwater fishes in the world. He launched this harpoon 40 meters. This guy was sixty-eight years old. He put me to shame. I nearly killed the camera crew with my harpoon. I couldn't hit a thing. It was a very sharp stick. The beauty of this man going out to provide food for his family and his village, was extraordinary to behold.

How I define the show is, "Don't tell me about the size of the fish, tell me who you were with, where you were, and what it was like. Tell me about the experience." That's what the show celebrated.

We did come to New Zealand for the second series. Rotorua, Bay of Islands and Ohakune.

Did it have a second series?

It started off as a one off, then there were so many people who were watching it, it was so entertaining.

The new series that we just finished filming, it's gone through the roof. People love it. It's not your usual fishing show; women and children watch it. It's not tying knots. It's not about the migratory habits of a salmon. People don't want that. I could talk about knots and technique, but people want the abridged version, you know, they want it to be entertaining and fast paced and exciting. It's emotional as well. It's very moving. People cry in the latest series.

It's been an extraordinary experience. Who'd have thought, a fishing show? It's got more viewers than a lot of the dramas that we've done.

Do you take your son Taylor out fishing?

I took Taylor out fishing last year, and believe it or not, he broke the record for the biggest rainbow trout in the area we live in, last season.

I was teaching him to fly fish and on his second cast, he caught a ten and a half pound rainbow trout. That in fishing terms is mammoth.

He was eight years old, but the thing is many fishermen spend their LIVES trying to catch themselves a trout like that, and his second cast he got it, I couldn't believe it.

You did another documentary style show, Wild Swimming. Is that a new direction for you?

No, not really. I was asked to do this one as well. I love swimming, but that was more about... I'd just lost my dad.

It was supposed to be a documentary about discovering the idyllic and the beautiful and the undiscovered of England via this self-propelled mode of transport called Wild Swimming. We were going to go around the coastline, inland lakes, and rivers and lochs and cold water, discovering these incredible characters along the way. And suddenly this story turned into something about reclaiming ones identity.

It was funny, the first location we went to, I said, "Oh my god, this is where my dad taught me to swim". I use the words 'taught me to swim' very loosely, because my dad hurled me into the water as a seven year old, into freezing water, it was either sink or swim, so I turned blue and swam back to the coastline.

My dad was a marvellous swimmer. He was a miner. If you could imagine this guy who spent 42 years down a black hole, like a lot of his comrades. A lot of miners were excellent swimmers, it was their cleansing, their release. My father could swim for miles in cold water. So it brought all these memories back.

And then it became a journey of self doubt, because I was asked to swim the Corryvreckan whirlpool, the third largest whirlpool in the world, and I was asked to swim in 7 degree water.

It became about overcoming adversity. It became about lots and lots of themes. In a really strange irony, I stepped so far outside of my hinterland, my comfort zone, but at the end I came back to the comfort of home, if that makes sense.

Of the 350 hours of British Television that I've been part of, I'm really, really proud of those two hours. It's really, really interesting.

And back to the fishing show, a lot of actors wanted to do that fishing gig. I'm hated by a lot of actors who love fishing. I'm hated by expert fishermen. They hate me. There are websites, 'We hate Robson Green'.

They're made by fishermen who hate my guts, because I'm making fishing entertaining and they don't like it. They say horrible things about me. That's the impact the show has had.

Do you enjoy the travel?

It's an education. I've spent my life travelling around, really. I've lived out of a bag most of my professional life, and continue to do so. I don't know anything else. I'm very comfortable doing that, and so is my family. If they can, with health and safety, if it's cool, my family comes to some of the locations, it's brilliant.

Travel is an education. I love meeting people. Irrespective of the language barrier, I seem to get on. I love people. Imagine a presenter who dislikes people.

Who was the most interesting person you met in the course of your travels?

It has to be a lovely 72-year-old lady called Isabella I met on Mfangano, which is an island on Lake Victoria. This woman spends most of her life looking after orphans, because AIDS is a huge killer over there. I'll not upset you with the statistics, but it's massive. And there are a lot of children without parents and she looked after these children.

When I walk up to Isabella, in the distance there's this singing, and she's singing. But she's catching flies. These people on Mfangano they eat flies. It's got more protein than steak. And they have this amazing method of catching flies: they sing to them. Their voices attract the flies by the millions. No word of a lie. She sings, and they come to her. If you hit the wrong note, they bugger off. I saw this. I saw this, I swear, and it's on film.

She was the most delightful, kind, generous, beautiful-looking person I've ever come across, and she had a heart of gold. There we were all one. It wasn't pretentious in any way. There the world really was a melting pot and we were all the same and we just had to find a way to get along.

She was just the most gorgeous woman, we held each other when we had to say goodbye. She told us these stories about her life, and she was a brilliant fisherwoman as well.

Do you want to know the most ridiculous person I met?

Sure. Tell us.

It was a man called Isanka in Sri Lanka. Isanka decided to take me into a bat cave, because there were fish there. What he didn't tell me was that there were a million bats in that bat cave, and that they had all been in for the night, eating, and needed to go to the toilet. I went in very clean, and came out very brown, I'll leave it at that.

And there were no fish in there. The air was blue. The man was a conman, it was dreadful.

What are some of your goals for 2010?

Like most of the people who have my career, I'm looking for some good scripts. I think just starting to work my way into America. I've done a lot here now, and it's time to change gear. So I'll be venturing into America and committing myself to TV and film a lot more.

I'll be distancing myself from pitching ideas with Coastal Productions, there are a lot of good people there now, so I'll leave the commissioning process in their capable hands and commit myself solely to acting. Leading into the American market. Still doing work here, but getting into the market.

There are some British actors doing really well in the US.

Yes, there are, and I hate them all. (He laughs) Hugh Laurie, Dominic West. They're all terrific.

I was offered a career in America about ten years ago, and I had to decide very early on whether I was going to commit to America or choose a family life, and I chose my family, and I'm really pleased I did.

But Taylor's at an age now where he's secure with Dad, he's secure with family life, and we're solid, you know.

He wouldn't have liked at the age of three or four to see dad go away for nine months; that would have been a disaster. But I think the time is right, now, to get going and change gear. I'm excited, and I'm feeling really good about it. It's life changing, really, the commitment, and I like it a lot.

END OF INTERVIEW