

OUR STRAIGHT MATES

With Matthew Myers

Midsomer Man

Midsomer Murders has earned Welsh actor Jason Hughes a legion of devoted fans. He spoke to Matt Myers about trawling gay bars for inspiration, sleeping with Michael Sheen and also a bit about his show.

DNA: What's the secret to *Midsomer Murders'* success?

Jason Hughes: I think one big reason is its Englishness. It's a quintessentially English show that celebrates things like the village green, the thatched cottage and the community. But it sort of does it tongue-in-cheek. It's a weird one for me because I'm not English. I'm Welsh and there's a massive difference.

With all those murders, it's certainly not a place where anyone would want to live!

[Laughs] No, I'd highly recommend not to. I think property is fairly cheap there!

You are also known for your role as Warren on *This Life*. How did that role come about?

I hadn't been out of drama college that long when an audition was going for *This Life*. After the audition the casting director came running out asking me to do workshops with all these potential Eggs and Millys and Annas. A day or so later they called and offered me the job. At that point nobody really knew what it was going to be like. It was very low budget.

You played Warren so convincingly. What did you draw upon to build that character?

Well, I was playing a gay, Welsh, lawyer in therapy and there weren't too many people like that around that I knew. So I did a lot of research by going to gay clubs and talking to

pretended to do it but I hadn't experienced it for real. So when guys would hit on me I was actually quite shy!

If you were gay, who would do it for you?

Oh, the late Heath Ledger! What an actor and a beautiful looking guy. He was a talented boy. When you think of the body of work he did – and he was only 28! With the emotional depth that he had as an actor, he was more like a 48-year-old. I think he was superb and he's surely missed.

***Brokeback Mountain*...**

I have to say, he wiped the floor with Gyllenhaal. I really bought him as that cowboy character and I thought his performance was extraordinary. I think he should have got an Oscar nod for that role. When he later came up with that amazing character in *Batman*, I think the Academy thought, "Okay, we should have given him this years ago."

Once upon a time actors wouldn't touch a gay role. Do you feel like a pioneer in regard to that change?

That's a difficult one to answer. *This Life* changed television, certainly in the Britain, and I think that one of the characters involved in that impact was a gay character. It paved the way for gay characters to be portrayed in an honest way. So I suppose in that way, it definitely helped. Now, of course, straight

with a girl that went disastrously wrong. But there were only two beds so for about a year-and-a-half Michael and I had to sleep in the same bed together... but I won't go into that.

When you were young, you wanted to be a professional rugby player. Do you know much about Australian Rugby League and Aussie Rules?

Oh god! Your Aussie Rules is something else! I love that game, but we don't get a lot of it here. I used to love watching it, and of course the Australian Rugby Union and League is pretty awesome, too.

On *This Life*, Warren went to Australia. Has Jason Hughes ever been Down Under?

Yes, my wife Natasha is half Australian. She's a Sydney girl. In fact, we made a pilgrimage out there. We stayed in Sydney and went up to Mullumbimby, Byron Bay and also down to Melbourne. We loved it so much that I even had my agent set up some meetings with some casting directors and I actually got a job there. I had an audition for a television show and was offered the job. But unfortunately I couldn't get my Australian residency papers through in time and I was utterly gutted about it. I love Australia. I love the people, the climate and the way of life.

Are you interested in any other roles?

Well, I'm in one of the highest rating dramas on television so it'd be weird to change and do guest spots, for instance. But television is struggling a bit at the moment so eventually I'd like to focus more on feature films and I'd love to get back into theatre again. It's what I've done most of my career and I love that live experience. I'd love to do some theatre in Australia!

"For about a year-and-a-half Michael Sheen and I slept in the same bed together."

gay men. Then I realised that the whole point was to play him as a real person, not someone just defined by his sexuality. So I created Warren as a fully rounded human being. I think that's why the character got so much attention. Gay people hadn't been portrayed like that on television before. I tried to make him as real as I possibly could. When I looked at the different gay characters in the show they were all played in a camp sort of way and not taken that seriously.

Do you have close gay friends?

Yes, we live in Brighton, where a lot of gay couples in Britain come to live. There's a big gay community here and you can get married... it's a very cool city. So I know many gay couples, not just from here, but from when I lived in London also.

You're married with children. Having played Warren, do people ever mistake you as gay?

Yeah, they did for years. I wanted to portray someone as a real human being and people kind of mistook me for him. That was a compliment because I wanted people to believe in Warren.

Do guys ever hit on you?

Yeah, I've had that too, which was a new experience for me. There were a lot of intimate sex scenes in *This Life* and, as an actor, I had

actors jump at the chance to play a gay character, don't they?

You recently did the reunion movie *This Life + 10*. What was it like shifting back to Warren from Detective Sergeant Ben Jones and back again?

I have such a fondness for that character. It was a big challenge and a great character to play, and I was proud of the work that I put into him. So it was lovely to try and invent him again ten years on. I did slip back into him because of the original work and time I had put into Warren. I thought I'd have to go through the whole process again, but I re-watched the series, had a look at the script and it sort of all came back naturally. It was a really joyful experience.

When you first moved to London, you shared a house with Michael Sheen [*The Queen*, *Frost/Nixon*].

Michael and I met when we were 16 years old. We did *Godspell* at the National Youth Theatre Of Wales and we've stayed friends ever since. We both got into drama college in London and ended up living together for five years.

Was that good research for *This Life*?

Yeah! And at one point Michael and I shared a bed! [Laughs] There were three of us living together – all guys – and I moved in after living

Midsomer Murders screens on ABC1. The DVD of the series and *This Life* are available from the ABC Shop.

