



There's No Place Like Home

On TV's *A Place To Call Home*, David Berry plays the troubled gay son of the rich and powerful Bligh family. So troubled, in fact, he tells Matt Myers they considered giving him a lobotomy!

DNA: You play James Bligh, a troubled gay man in the 1950s on *A Place To Call Home*. What research did you do for the role?

David Berry: It may sound silly, but as an actor you tend to use life experiences and I have more than a few friends who have had trouble coming to terms with their sexuality and that influenced my characterisation of James Bligh. I've also found inspiration from films such as, and it sounds cliché, *Brokeback Mountain*. I immersed myself in as much queer film as I could. I took a couple trips to The Bookshop in Darlington and watched a bunch of films. I found a whole sub-genre of films made specifically for the gay community, which I hadn't been aware of. For instance, *Maurice* was very influential and also the book *A Boy's Own Story* [by Edmund White] was great for developing my character.

What do your gay friends think of your portrayal? I've had very positive responses and I'm really heartened by that. The show's writer, Bevan Lee, has injected a lot of his own experience into the character and the writing is so good that it is immediately identifiable.

Being the 1950s, your character is treated as sick and perverted. Has this given you

a new insight into what gay people have suffered? Oh yeah, certainly. You'd have to be quite ignorant to not be aware that gay people, even today, still suffer a stigma. I think that's something I was very aware of when growing up through high school, with boys my age who were terrified of being called gay. I think it's become easier and people have become more accepting of differences and sexual orientation. But it was not too long ago when gay people were treated as second-class citizens and that's something I also looked into with my research, the McCarthy era and the gay rights movement with Stonewall. All of that was very interesting and I can really identify with the struggle for acceptance. I think it's a very powerful idea for any actor in a story. Being gay or belonging to any minority that faces prejudice is identifiable with everyone, really, because we all have our insecurities and want to be accepted for our authentic self.

The shock treatment/aversion therapy applied to homosexuals was quite inhumane and frightening. Were you aware this had existed? Well, again, I watched every film I could get my hands on, including those with psychiatric treatment back in the fifties, which was quite brutal, not just for homosexuals but for people in general. In the '50s it was a sort of frontier science and they were doing a lot of experiments and thought they were doing the best, but they really had no idea.

One of the most influential films for me in developing my character was *Frances* with Jessica Lange. Frances Farmer had a lobotomy and that was something that was considered for my character. I also looked up old videos of the procedures and horrors they used to put people through. I really immersed myself in all of that.

Have you ever been mistaken as gay? People might mistake me as gay now that I play a gay character. I'm sure some people do think that, because some also think that I'm James Bligh [laughs]! When they see me they can't make the distinction and are surprised to see me out of 1950s clothes.

If you were gay, who would you go for? There are quite a few men I've looked up to as icons. I find them attractive in the way they styled themselves, such as James Dean who is really charismatic. He had a huge impact on me as an adolescent and I kind of shaped my identity as a man from him.

One of your first acting gigs was on *Home And Away*. What are your memories of *Summer Bay*? That was my second TV gig and I was still learning a lot. It was an interesting time and quite a positive experience in finding the ins and outs of being on set and taking directions. I found out how quickly television moves and how you have to be on your game. It really prepared me for the bigger challenge of James Bligh. A lot of Australian actors have

used *Home And Away* as good groundwork and training for greater things like movies.

You also sing opera and play the violin. I sang opera as a kid and went through school on a music scholarship. Music has always been a passion of mine and at the moment I sing with a bunch of guys called Jersey To Motown and we do corporate gigs and such. When I was growing up, doing musicals was a good way to meet girls as I went to an all-boys school. The singing does come out in *A Place To Call Home*. One of the directors, Mark Joffe, was quite keen to get me singing and so were the producers, so a scene was specifically written for me where I get to sing. It was really nice that they put that in for me.

What's the campest song on your playlist? I'm a bit of a pop tragic! I don't have any Kylie, but I've got Diana Ross, Lady Gaga and one or two tracks from Barbra Streisand.

Who is your diva? When I was a kid I had a massive crush on Mariah Carey. She's still sexy. I don't know what it is, and she has a knack for getting younger guys, so she must be doing something right.

You studied at NIDA. What advice would you give to someone wanting a career in acting? It's a difficult question to answer. I mean, you have to have a passion for it. You can't expect any rewards because it has to be a reward in itself – for the craft. And if it's not, then you're never going to enjoy yourself and there is no guarantee of success. The passion has to be its own reward.

On *A Place To Call Home* you work with some legendary TV stars, such as Noni Hazlehurst, Brett Climo and Frankie Holden. Do they offer you wisdom and advice on the business? All the time. The more experienced actors are just great and the camaraderie between us is amazing. You can see it on screen. Brett Climo is a great father figure to the cast and Noni is very nurturing and helpful. Off the page you don't really see that as the character is bitter and matriarchal, but Noni really has a nurturing quality that goes all over the set. Frankie, who plays a larrikin, really is a larrikin. He always brightens up the set in the same way he comes across in his scenes.

Who has been the biggest inspiration on your career? As an actor, I find a lot of inspiration from Daniel Day Lewis. I think he's a terrific actor and whenever I've lost the passion to work on a scene I think, what would Daniel Day Lewis do? He inspires me to do better work. He has so many great films. I think *Lincoln* would have to be my favourite.

Jocks, fitted boxers or freeball? Boxer briefs. I go with comfort.

And James Bligh? Oh, he'd be wearing boxers for sure!

more: A Place to Call Home screens 8.30PM Sunday nights on the Seven Network

