

STRAIGHT MATE | *with Matthew Myers*



BENEATH THE SURFACE

IT'S NOT ALL SUNSHINE AND SOFT SAND IN *DROWN*, A FILM SET IN AN AUSSIE SURF-LIFESAVING CLUB. REPRESSED DESIRES BUBBLE TO THE SURFACE AND A HATE CRIME IS HATCHED... MATT LEVETT PLAYS THE TERRIFYINGLY DERANGED LENNY. BUT, HE TELLS MATT MYERS, HE'S A NICE BOY REALLY!

DNA: The character you play in *Drown*, Lenny, is very complicated and driven by fear, sexuality, jealousy, all manifesting in violence. How did you prepare for the role?

Matt Levett: Given the circumstances that people are brought up in, such as with school or parents, anyone can develop these sorts of attitudes. So I think the potential is in everyone. It just depends on the values that are instilled in you at a young age. Unfortunately for Lenny, he was surrounded by homophobia and the idea of what it is to be a man.

And what of his sexuality? Dealing with his sexuality brought about a lot of self-hate. If you're brought up to hate something that you actually are, then you're only going to hate yourself. So I had to find a way into the character, and he does some pretty horrific things. I also had to be non-judgmental. I don't really subscribe to method acting but I take little pieces, as such.

He's a man who defines himself and expresses himself physically, isn't he? Yeah. I went to the gym quite a bit to pump up and feel the physicality of Len's character. I also trained up in ocean swimming, doing the Bondi to Bronte swim and I hung out with volunteer lifesavers at Whale Beach.

Did you find some of the scenes involving the sex and violence troubling to film? Absolutely. Dean Francis, the director, really wanted to push the boundaries, and his vision was to examine the brutality, and filming those scenes was really tough. There had to be a great deal of trust established between myself and, in particular, Jack Matthews who played Phil. I wanted to make sure he felt safe the entire time, because he goes through hell. We didn't want to come out too traumatised and a lot of the time we needed group hugs!

Along with Jack Matthews and Harry Cook, who play your lifesaver counterparts, you made a great acting threesome. Did you bond off set? Yes, we did. It was a long period of shooting so we spent a lot of



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time together. It's important on a film like this to build that bond. We were there for each other.

The film depicts locker room homophobia. Do you remember that kind of stuff at school?

Absolutely. I remember the terms gay and fag being thrown around in a really derogatory way, and as a school kid you accepted that dialogue because it was the way school life was. It was only later that I realised just how wrong that was. I think it's important to educate kids earlier to not accept that behaviour. I saw it going on all the time and I guess in a way, as an actor dealing with this in a movie, I've had to process it further.

How did you react to the Orlando shooting?

Such an extraordinary number of people were killed... it's just so hard to fathom. But what's really important is that there is a constant reminder that this was an act of homophobia.

Yes, there's a similarity between what we suspect the gunman's motives were and the hate-crime aspect of *Drown*, right?

For sure. Let's not forget who was targeted, and the reasons behind it. The whole thing is quite numbing and it makes you realise the importance in telling stories about this sort of thing. History has a way of repeating itself and we need to be reminded of that.

Are you ever mistaken as being gay? Yes, I'd say 90 percent of my friends are gay and people do sometimes assume I'm gay, I guess because I've done a number of gay projects, but I don't really care about that. My brother is gay and part of me is so incredibly thankful that he is because it's opened up my entire world.

What does your brother think of *Drown*? He hasn't seen it. It's a tough one to deal with. I haven't exactly said, "Hey mum and dad, come along and see my new film!" I think for him to see his brother playing that role would be a bit hard to take. But he's certainly been very supportive of me doing it.

If you were gay, who would you go for? Tom Hardy! I've got a man-crush on him.

You were the likeable bad boy in *A Place To Call Home*; any chance of returning to the show? I'm not too sure because the shooting schedule would clash with my work on *The Secret Daughter*, but there is certainly room for that character to return. But also, the Heath Ledger Scholarship took me overseas, and that took up a lot of time.

Now, that's a pretty special award! It's such a beautiful legacy to celebrate, and that's what it's really about – Heath's legacy. For me, the opportunities that



"Those speedos have gone missing!" Matt LeVett as Lenny in the Australian independent feature, *Drown*.

have come from it have been extraordinary. When I accepted the award, Heath's mum and sister were there and to see how far this guy had come... the roles he had played and what he had achieved was simply amazing, and something to aspire to.

The Devil's Playground also gave you a great role.

How did you find that experience? It was interesting, as that role was so much about examining sexuality. I played Brendon, a street kid who was prostituting himself at the Kings Cross Wall, which was pretty infamous back in the day. Brendon was a very lost kid trying to find some justice because of the things that had happened to him. He had taken up hustling, and whether it was a guy or girl that he slept with, it didn't really matter. I think when that sort of abuse happens it can really screw with your idea of what sex is. Like what it's meant to be and what you perceive it to be.

Tell us about The Secret Daughter. Jamie Norton is the youngest son in a family who own a Sydney hotel. He's come home after three years of travel and is a bit lost. He's a free spirit who plays around, but just doesn't know his place. Then he meets Billy (Jessica Mauboy) and brings her into the family where she breathes new life through her music. Jamie does everything in his power to welcome her into the fold. For me it's a good change from the other darker roles and the character is probably a little closer to myself.

Who is your diva? Oh, mate, that's a bit difficult, but I wouldn't say no to a Madonna or Lady Gaga concert,



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just for the spectacle of it!

Even if Madonna kept you waiting four hours? Oh yeah! Well, my brother went.

Who has been the biggest influence on your career? Actors like Joel Edgerton who have created a name for themselves, not just through the work they get, but through the work they create. I really respect that as I also love to create. I love collaborating with my colleagues and friends and I'm constantly making short films. I think it's very important to develop your own stuff and express your voice.

What advice would you give to people wanting to enter the entertainment industry?

If you really feel you want to do it and need to do it, then you have to keep at it and if there is any

opportunity to be on stage or in front of the camera then you have to take it. Do it as much as you can. Like any craft, the more you do it, the better you'll get. The more I'm in front of the camera, the more comfortable I become. Just find a way to do it and train with people who are better than you.

You cut your teeth on a number of Australian shows such as Home And Away, Bed Of Roses and Winners And Losers. What's been your favourite so far?

The Devil's Playground was a huge learning experience for me because I was surrounded by some real giants of Australian TV and cinema, and I learned a lot from them. Also, it was a really important subject matter that was close to my heart and I wanted to be a part of it. I felt really honoured to be involved.

In Drown we see you in a striking pair of zebra-print slippers! Do you think the old Budgie Smugglers get a bad rap?

Oh mate, Tony Abbott's fucked that up for everyone! [Laughing] I'm more of a boardies man myself. Interestingly, those zebra speedos have disappeared. I don't know where they've gone!

Perhaps they're getting auctioned off on eBay!

They may indeed!

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