



RIOT BOY!

HE'S BEEN A SOLDIER, A VAMPIRE, AN EARL AND SHARK BAIT! BUT, AS MATT MYERS DISCOVERS, XAVIER SAMUEL'S NEW ROLE IN *RIOT* IS ONE CLOSE TO OUR HEARTS.

DNA: During the production of *Riot*, did you and the cast have the sense that you were telling an important story from the history of the Australian LGBTI rights movement?

Xavier Samuel: Absolutely. It's something we talked about a lot. We knew we were involved in an important part of Australian history concerning equality, and we were telling a story that hadn't been told before. The film focuses on only a few of the people who were around at that time, but there were so many more who played a part, standing up for what they believed in. We actually got to meet some of the '78ers and hear their perspectives and find out whether it was close to what we were portraying.

You play gay activist, Jim Walker. How did you research the role?

I read as much as I could about the political climate at the time and the years leading up to that first Mardi Gras. There are a few documentaries that provide some insight but unfortunately there's not a lot of information about Jim Walker. He died in 1993 at the age of 45 [of an HIV-related illness]. I talked to as many people as I could about him. He was a founding member of the Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP) and played an important part in his community as a doctor. He was fascinated by Ancient Egypt, helped fundraise for the East Timor Independence movement, and was a founding member of Mardi Gras. He was a busy man. I got the impression that Jim was very kind and insightful.

It must be challenging portraying a real person, especially when there are people still around who knew him?

It's quite an intimidating prospect playing a real person because you can never really give a true depiction. It can only ever be an idea of who that person might have been. I tried to portray a version of Jim that was passionate and thoughtful, who stood up for what he believed in. It was important for me to talk to people who were there at the time; to listen to their perspective. I certainly heard some amazing stories. I had the pleasure of meeting '78er Peter Murphy who, Jim, as a doctor, was able to give medical attention to when Peter was being held at the Darlinghurst Police Station. There were so many incredible people during that time who risked a lot. *Riot* only focuses on a few of those remarkable individuals.

Did you talk to your gay mates about playing the *Riot* role?

Well, I've played a gay character before in the movie *Newcastle* (2008), but with Jim, he wasn't really defined by his sexuality. It was more about playing a complicated human being rather than basing it on his sexuality. His sexuality was certainly something I was aware of but I can't sit down with my gay

friends and say how do you be gay? However, I did learn about what that community was like at the time, which was one of the most helpful aspects.

Are you attending this year's 40th Mardi Gras?

I really hope so, but I'm about to fly to Los Angeles. I hope I'm back in time. It would be so great to hang out with all the people we met on set.

As an actor, you've come a long way since McLeod's Daughters, you've had the lead in several films.

Was there a particular sliding door moment?

I couldn't put my finger on it exactly. It was a gradual thing. I did the film *September* (2007), which kicked things off and I bounced around for a while doing other projects. I suppose working in America for the first time was the big deal that opened up doors that otherwise may have been closed.

You played Riley in *The Twilight Saga*. What was that experience like?

It was unbelievable. I knew *Twilight* was wildly popular, with every man and his dog going in for it. I auditioned in Sydney, threw my hat into the ring, and discovered it was down to me and a few others. So I flew to Los Angeles, met the director, and it all happened quickly from there. I was obviously in the midst of something crazy, but they were all really cool to work with.

How does one prepare to play a vampire?

[Laughs] You talk to all your vampire friends! No, as with any role, you try and figure out what makes the character tick rather than what it's like to put in fake teeth and wear pale make-up. It's about the motivation.

You were in *Spin Out* with DNA Straight Mate, Travis Jeffery. Given the crazy content of that film, was it fun or difficult to make?

It was really fun because it was with a great bunch of people. Travis is such a funny guy, and we were shooting in Shepparton, Victoria, so I got to know that area. That was a slapstick screwball comedy like an Australian version of *His Girl Friday* (1940) and I got to work with comic legends Marc Gracie and Tim Ferguson who both directed it. That was an amazing opportunity as I'd watched all their stuff growing up. Plus, we got to drive cars around in circles!

Another of our Straight Mates, Richie Brancatisano was eaten in the first five minutes of the shark thriller *Bait*, but you made it all the way through! What was that experience like?

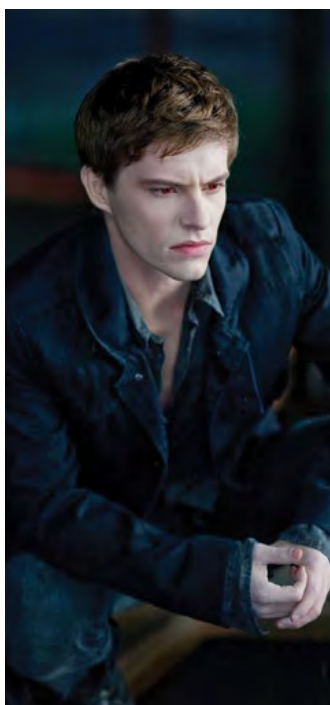
Maybe I would've been better off being eaten in the beginning... all the things that those characters went through! We were stuck on the top of flooded supermarket shelves trying to work out how it was possible that a shark could be in there. It was an absurd film to be a part of, but I enjoyed it.

You've worked with big Hollywood names: Eddie Murphy in *Mr Church*, Vanessa Redgrave in *Anonymous*, Kate Beckinsale in *Love And Friendship*, Brad Pitt in *Fury*. Were they pinch-yourself moments?

Yes! To find myself standing opposite someone like Brad Pitt is not something that happens every day. I grew up watching his movies and I'm a great admirer of his. He was such a professional, very down-to-earth and a pleasure to work with. These actors work at such a sophisticated level, and



(ABOVE) XAVIER WITH BRAD PITT IN *FURY* AND AS A VAMPIRE IN *THE TWILIGHT SAGA*.



(ABOVE) XAVIER AS JIM WALKER WITH HIS *RIOT* PARTNER LANCE GOWLAND PLAYED BY DAMON HERRIMAN.

there's a reason why they have such longevity. They have a kind of insight that you hope rubs off a little. It's always about raising the bar, I guess.

Has any one particular actor given you great insight into your craft?

You learn a lot from everyone you work with, but working with Robin Wright and Naomi Watts on *Adore* (2013) was pretty special. Naomi encouraged me to always trust my gut instinct. I think that's good advice.

There's a lot of great Australian television at the moment. Do you watch any?

Sometimes it's hard to see when I'm in the US but I catch them on Netflix. *Glitch* and *Wentworth* are great and I was part of *Seven Types Of Ambiguity*, which I'm quite proud of. Australian productions are just getting better and better. On a plane recently I was watching *True Story* with Hamish And Andy. What a fun show that is!

Who is your music diva?

Patti Smith. I just finished reading her books *Just Kids* and *M Train*. She's led an amazing life and is a brilliant lyricist and musician. *Because The Night* is probably my favourite song of hers.

This is our Travel issue. What's your favourite holiday destination?

I've been lucky to travel a lot for work. I did a film in Berlin, and spent time in Dublin shooting *Love And Friendship*. I enjoyed and Guinness and just walking around as it's a relatively small city with so much history; just wandering the same streets as Beckett and Joyce and Wilde. I also recently went on a family road trip to New Zealand and drove around the North Island. We went to the Waitomo Caves where there are glow-worms and did the zip line through a forest near Rotorua. We also went to the Hot Beach natural springs where they give you a spade at the campsite to dig your own hot tub in the sand, while you look up at the stars! The whole North Island is really green, lush and kind of like the English countryside.

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

Use the advice I got from Naomi Watts, which is to trust your instincts, and keep at it.

Are you a briefs, boxers or free-balling guy?

I'm a briefs man. They're the most comfortable.

MORE: *Riot* screens on ABC1 this month.