RUSSELL TOVEY

The British heartthrob on returning to the West End, dating in 2018, and why he’s welcoming the #daddy tag with open arms. Well, kinda.

“I want someone to call me daddy,” says Russell Tovey, cuter than your average button, as he sits ch自ling water in the artfully dilapidated surroundings of east London’s Bethnal Green Working Men’s Club on one of the hottest days of the year. He’s just finished the Gay Times shoot, even going down to shirtless without anyone having to beg too hard, and has been happy to change down to some navy boxer briefs in a corner with the unsselfconsciousness that comes with being an experienced actor... and with looking that good in just navy boxer briefs.

“We’re here to talk about his part in Pinter at the Pinter, a season of one-act plays to mark the tenth anniversary of playwright Harold Pinter’s death that has roped in everyone from Danny Dyer to Celia Imrie, but the conversation has quickly skidded off track into areas of love and fame and Doctor Who and sex and sexuality and, yep, daddies.

“Oh, I don’t mean I want someone to call me daddy in a sexual way,” he adds with a chuckle when I remark on the salt and pepper dusting of grey he’s developing over those famous sticky-outy ears. “I know that on Instagram people are starting to say, ‘Oh daddy!’ and I’m a bit like, ‘What the fuck?’ I still look very boyish to me. I’m 36 now but I still feel like I’m 17.”

We talk about the famous mid-30’s flip-over where gay men change from fancying older to fancying younger. “I haven’t got there yet,” he laughs. “I like people my own age and older... I think I still feel like a kid myself so I’m not into chickens or twinks or whatever you call it. It’s always been my peers.”

No, when he says he wants someone to call him daddy, he’s being literal. He’s talking about real fatherhood, something that’s playing on his mind more and more these days in a biological clock kind of way. “Having kids is something that is becoming fundamentally important to me,” he says.

“We’ve seen this trademark blokey sweetness he’s displaying today in US series like Looking and Quantico, films like The History Boys and Pride and our own TV shows like The Job Lot, Being Human, Doctor Who and Him & Her, where his performance as a straight lad who barely gets out of bed is so believable that if you didn’t know he was gay, you’d never guess. It’s called acting.

“I remember being at school, junior school, and already wanting to be a dad,” he recalls, his feet sticking to the ancient carpets of this room where many aSink the Pink event has spun out of control. “I wanted to be an actor, a history teacher and a dad. Now I’m 36, I’m giving myself three years. If I haven’t met someone that wants kids, I’m going to do it by myself.”

He reckons he’ll go the surrogate route, whether it’s him on his own or with a partner. “All the options haven’t been completely explored but whatever way I’m going to do it, I’m going to do it.”

For the time being he’s got his work cut out jumping between jobs like Quantico, an ongoing American series about FBI recruits, which means he has to live in New York for periods of time (“I take my dog with me ‘cause he comes everywhere I go”) and this pair of Harold Pinter one-act plays, something of a dream come true for him.

“I’ve been acting since I was 11,” he says, “and got into theatre around 18 and was obsessed with Harold Pinter. I’ve always said that I wanted to do Pinter.”

Both the characters he plays in The Lover and The Collection are sexual and sexually ambivalent. As far as being an openly gay actor (he came out to himself when he was 15 or 16 and to his parents a couple of years later) he reckons it actually works in his favour.

“It’s like a bonus in some ways,” he explains. “I navigate a career where being openly gay and out there has kind of brought a spotlight on me. I’m incredibly proud of the position I’m in and who I am. I’ve never shied away from it and for me it’s not an issue. People are coming to me with these incredible roles and a lot of the parts I play happen to be kind of ‘Is he gay? Isn’t he gay?’ I love it.”

Russell T. Davies, the man behind the modern incarnation of Doctor Who, reportedly wanted Russell to play the Doctor, which Mr. Tovey would have jumped at. “Well, he’s kind of fluid, isn’t he?” he says on the subject of a gay Doctor Who. “He can do anything. Whatever you want him to be, he is.”

But gay actors have not always been as ready to actually play gay... “Back in the day people were worried about being stereotyped or typecast but it’s not like there’s just one gay guy to play. There are billions of fucking gay people and their stories haven’t been told.”

It’s refreshing to hear in a world where the only real gay Hollywood superstar was drafted out of the closet kicking and screaming among accusations of sexual misconduct and actors like Rupert Everett talk about how they think they might have done much better in Hollywood if they had kept their mouths shut.

“I think that’s his experience and I respect that,” says Russell of Rupert, who, let’s face it, hasn’t done that badly out of being one of the world’s foremost gay thesp’s. “I’m not saying I’m right and he’s wrong I just know my personal experience and my journey through being gay and being an actor and this is what it is. I’m having a great time and all I would ever say to anyone is just come out. If you’re an actor and you’re doing theatre, there’s nothing
to worry about. If you're an actor anyway, there's nothing to worry about."

Sir Ian McKellen's name obviously crops up at this stage and Russell has nothing but the greatest respect for the way that acting legend steered his career, coming out at the precise moment—with the HIV and AIDS crisis and governments cracking down on gay rights—when it would have been the easiest and most understandable thing in the world to shuffle further back into the closet.

"He was trailblazing when it was really difficult and when it was probably going to have a massive effect on his career," says Russell. "But it was more important to him to come out. And it's now a reference point, he's in a position where people can look up to him and say, 'Well, he's doing it.' That was so incredibly brave. I don't know if he would say that he was brave. He was just like, 'That's what it is.' Your real life is as important as what we do as actors and when you're in the public eye, what you do is going to affect other people. So for me now, I'm just putting it out there the whole time."

As far as the lack of a huge gay Hollywood star is concerned (Sir Ian is more of a revered elder statesman and real actor than a star), Russell reckons it's just a matter of time. "We had Kevin Spacey come out but that was some f*cked up way of doing it and really frustrating because that opportunity could have been taken years ago and made a difference and it just wasn't. It was taken in a time of crisis, at a point where it was just to cover his back, to take the spotlight off what it was actually about."

It also lifted a rock on the fact that the atmosphere of sexual abuse in showbusiness could apply to men as well as women.

"I haven't really had that much," he says. "I mean, things have happened but nothing that I can handle. Nothing I want to report. You get cheeky grabs and that but I've always been very cocksure and for me it just seemed like a bit of flirty flirting at the time. Looking back it was probably a bit problematic."

Another effect of the lifting of the rock is that Russell looked at his own behaviour, like most of us did. "When it all comes out you start really going, 'Oh my God, have I done something?' I think everyone in every business around the world took a moment to consider their own actions. The world changes and we've got to keep up with it. I guess the only advice is don't be a d*ck."

As for cracking America as an openly gay actor, he's taking it slowly. There was Looking, the HBO series about gay men rocking around San Francisco and now Quantico but it's not something he's after at all costs. His part in last year's critically acclaimed production of Angels in America could have taken him back to Broadway (he was there with The History Boys with James Corden back in the day and in the play Beautiful Bridge), but the role was taking such a toll on him emotionally that he stepped away and never mind the good it would have done his career.

"I loved the acting," he says of the part of Joe Pitt, a married gay Mormon struggling with his sexuality, "but when the curtain went down all I felt was sadness. I loved being on Broadway but when this came up it just filled me with anxiety rather than excitement. I think you have to trust your instincts and it was best to step away. I was like, 'I don't want to let anyone down and if this is going to fuck up the transfer, let me know.' But it was quite a commitment to go and do it in New York for that long."

It was an incredible position to be in for someone who always considered himself not quite posh enough or trained enough or something enough to fit into the acting establishment. A real Essex boy from a working class background whose parents own a business running people to the airport, he was never one of the stage-school set.

"I've always felt like kind of an outsider," he says, "even though I've been in the business for years and years. I never went to drama school and I've always felt slightly like I'm here through a cheeky back door. It's not until probably the last two or three years that I feel like I'm pretty legit and doing good work and people like what I do. For so many years, being around actors, I just felt I never knew enough. What I love is acting. The art of acting. Speaking a character's lines. All the other stuff, doing a cover shoot for Gay Times, is all really lovely but the reality is I just want to do the acting."

As for the fame, he's cool with it. "When people recognise me or want to have a picture with me, they genuinely like the projects I've done, they're not coming at me from a 'who the f*ck do you think you are?' angle," he says, adding that he'd love to do a huge part like Spider-Man, as long as he could still go down the pub with his mates.

"People come to me complimentary so my experience has always been lovely, welcoming and respectful," he goes, "I don't think I'm the sort of guy who walks around like, 'Don't you know who I am?' Every now and then I might like to jump to the front of a queue at a gay bar," he laughs, "but that's just a cheeky thing... You'll notice the word 'cheeky' comes up quite a lot.

And yes he does go out on the gay scene though he does feel the atmosphere is changing and he's not quite sure what he thinks about it. On the one hand, nowadays, when you go out with someone as a gay man you're getting asked, 'When are you going to get married? Are you having kids?' and that's something that's only happened since the laws have changed and suddenly you're like, 'I can do this. That's now a consideration...'. But the flipside of that acceptance is that we now live in a world where traditionally gay spaces are open to everyone...

"I went out in Soho on Saturday night and ended up in Freedom, which I've always loved and it felt like the gay people there were in the majority suddenly," he explains, "not that he minded, just that he noticed. "And walking up Wardour Street, it felt like everyone was in their 20s, boys and girls noshing against walls. Not gay men or lesbians but straight young teenage couples."

The solution? For gay men to get out there more. "I just hope everyone comes off the apps and gets back out there in the bars. It's the only way it's going to change."

And he talks about the thrill of putting yourself out there and eyeing up the talent in the good old-fashioned way. "It's so much more exciting when you're in a bar and you catch someone's eye and you smile and go over and shake someone's hand. That's far sexier than being sent someone's cock pic." But then Russell is, by his own admission, "very, very, very vanilla."

"I'm a one-man guy. I just want to be with that person whoever that person is." Nice to hear from someone who could be playing the field as pretty much everyone seems to fancy him: men, women, dogs..."

"Dogs?" he laughs, getting ready to go. "Yeah, dogs definitely fancy me."

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