

Dolly Alderton

Writer and podcaster

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined by the journalist, podcaster and director Dolly Alderton. Dolly has written for numerous publications including The Telegraph, Vogue and the Evening Standard. Her irreverent take on dating in the Sunday Times Style magazine was widely acclaimed, and she launched her popular newsletter, The Dolly Mail in 2016. In addition to writing, she co-hosts news and pop culture podcast The High Low. She was the story producer for the award winning reality show Made in Chelsea, and in 2015 called co-wrote and co-directed her short film, Anna, Island. Her first book, Everything I Know About Love is coming out in 2018.

Dolly, thank you for joining me.

Thank you very much for having me.

So Dolly, you're a writer, film director, a television story producer... how would you describe your career?

I don't really know, to be honest. I mean, if I am going to be really cringey and earnest I think I would say I'm a storyteller.

Do you remember Nathan Barley once said he was a self-facilitating media node? I'd love that. I think that's me!

Yes, I don't know. It's been a bit of a mishmash. It doesn't really make much sense when you look back on it. I don't know. I don't know what I would really call myself. I think my bread and butter work will always be journalism, and then writing as and when it comes and directing kind of as and when it comes.

Well, let's start at the beginning then. Because before we started this podcast, we're recording here at a studio in Camden, and you said that you did work experience...

Oh, I knew you were going to mention that!

Yes, and it went horrendously. Shall we start there?

It was horrible! I had PTSD walking into this building.

I can imagine – I apologise for that.

So, yes. I was in the year – I mean, this is probably quite a Millennial, snowflakey thing to say, I was in a year where it was particularly crap to graduate, the year I graduated, in 2009, for jobs. So I was kind of told that the way that you get a job is by just doing as much work experience as you can at different magazines. And I really... it was just like 'come one, come all' for me with my magazine work experience, and I just did it... I think I worked at like 30 titles as a kind of rotating professional tea-maker.

Wow – so you were keen, then.

Well, yes – but none of them offered me a job. But I did work experience at Take a Break magazine in this very building, and it was like my big work experience disaster, which I think everyone has one, where I was asked to call in a load of takeaway, like microwave, at home microwave meals, and then write up the reviews in a pseudonym, a family, a made up family called The Grumbles.

I already know how this ends as you told me earlier, but please carry on.

Oh, it was awful. So I had to eat all this kind of disgusting microwaveable prawn toast, and then I stuffed a load of it into the fridge. I left the door open on a Friday and then when I came in on Monday I was immediately ushered into the editor's office and told I'd really messed up and it cost him a load of money.

What, just because you left the fridge door open?

Yes. I think they had to get loads of people into kind of professionally clean the kitchen, it was really awful.

Mistakes do happen. Did you tell him to get a grip, punch him in the face and storm out?

Do you know what, I actually ended up leaving that placement earlier than I was going to, not just because of fridgegate...

I was about to say fridgegate and you beat me to it!

No, but yes, I really did the rounds of all the work experience placements.

On a serious note then, did you always want to be a journalist at the start of your career? Obviously you did these 30 placements, so you must have been keen.

Yes. I think when I was very young I always wanted to write. I thought I was a very earnest teenager who took myself incredibly seriously. I always had great dreams of being like, a playwright, or being the next Bard. So that was... and then I think I remember googling and it said that on average a playwright earns £10,000 pounds a year. I think even in my 15-year-old head I was like, "That ain't gonna work for me." So I think I always... yes, I did kind of always know, at school I was an editor, a tabloid, like a school tabloid, kind of like a school Private Eye called The Full Bladder – appropriately named – and then I was trying to kind of write for local papers while I was at school. And then all throughout, when I was at university I did drama, so I still kind of harboured these small dreams of being Pinter. I did a drama degree that I was terrible at, and then switched to English.

So you wanted to be a journalist and playwright.

Yes, which I suppose I still kind of do now. I always liked the idea of straddling the kind of storytelling of real life and storytelling of fiction and creating a world. And then when I was at university I edited some spectacularly bad magazines there one of which was called The Shag Mag.

So you've got The Full Bladder, The Shag Mag... these titles are awesome!

I know... The Shag Mag.

I want to read these titles!

Oh they're under my bed somewhere, Paul! The Shag Mag, I was at Exeter University, for which I had a dating column unsurprisingly called Ex in the City. So yes, that always really interested me. And then I heard about the journalism masters at City University and told it was very good, and to be honest as I said, it was just so difficult to get a job the year that I graduated, I thought it's kind of good to just stay out of the job market for a year and kind of hone a new skill.

And obviously having a Masters means you're better qualified than some of the other applicants for the job you are going to apply for.

Yes, I don't know if that's true, though. It's funny. I'm often asked by young people whether it's worth doing that Masters course and what I always say to them is that it definitely taught me... it gave me industrial tools in that it gave me lingo, it gave me language, it gave me an understanding of publishing. It gave me an understanding of how style and the legalities of things, and grammar and style, you know, all that kind of basic stuff, but I don't think it... I never got a job where they were interested in the Masters I did.

But it kept you out of the job market for a year.

It did keep me out, yes. Exactly.

A very expensive way of staying out of the job market. So what came after that then?

So I finished my Masters in the summer of 2010 and had a complete freak out about being an adult...

Crap, innit?

It's completely crap! And so understandably my next move, I remember talking to everyone in my year and they were like, "What are you all going to do next?" and people were doing these broadsheet placements, these graduate schemes. I went to the Edinburgh festival to star in a musical about a suburban tennis club. So that's what I did after I did a very expensive journalism Masters.

Jeremy Vine sat in that chair a year or two ago and he said that you've either got the show off gene or you don't have it. You clearly have it.

Yes, I think I'm an exhibitionist.

Extrovert, exhibitionist. It's good!

I think show me a journalist who hasn't got a large ego. I would be very surprised. I think most journalists are kind of introverted extroverts, if that makes sense.

Yes, absolutely.

That might sound a bit grandiose. But yes, so I did that and then I came back, and then I just... I was very lucky because my parents at this point still lived in the suburbs of London so I could live at home and carry on doing these kind of endless work experience placements, and you know this is where it's like, it's so criminal that this is how the magazine industry works, because if I hadn't had parents that lived in London, I don't know how I would afford it. But I was very lucky. So I just stayed at home and then had nine months of just endless back and forth to these magazines where, as I said, I was just passed around as the professional team maker.

So these were unpaid internships?

Yes, unpaid. I had one paid internship which was Country Life magazine, they gave me £50, which I've always been grateful for. Yes, so that's what I was doing then. And I just... my self-esteem was just at rock bottom because I just couldn't see a world in which I was ever going to be paid to write.

There's just so few writing and journalism jobs around.

Yes. Yes. And you know, I was I was applying for so many jobs. I remember applying for an unpaid internship at Tatler, which I didn't get, and then ironically – this is going to sound very boastful, I don't think this is something to show off about, it must caveat – ironically about a year later I got a job working on Made in Chelsea and they put me in their little black book of their like, 500 most important people in

the world, Paul. Not just London, the world. At one point I was above Nelson Mandela, which my friends are very amused by.

There's some sitcom-esque things... you need to write a memoir.

It was so funny, it was just like, I wonder why I wasn't qualified enough to make your tea. I don't know why it was. I think perhaps they had someone already lined up and they were doing interviews for lip service, I don't know, but I really, really struggled. And then I started doing unpaid work, unpaid writing, and I got to write about whatever I wanted for an online website called kingsroad.co.uk, and the editor said, "There's this new series called Made in Chelsea. We think our readers will be interested in this. Do you want to watch it and write weekly reviews about it?" So I did, and I did the whole first series and then completely out of nowhere I got a call from someone at the production company that makes that show and they said, "We think your reviews are funny and we think you have an understanding of the show. Would you be interested in coming in to talk about essentially being a story producer?" And then that's when my life changed really. I was just... that was my first job and it was such a great big job to get.

It's a huge job, isn't it?

Yes. A lot of that was... I'm very lucky.

So what is a story producer on a reality show?

Oh, ye of little faith! It's quite difficult to – I'm going to sound like a politician saying this – it's quite difficult to explain. So the producers would get... would have relationships with the cast, and the researchers as well, have relationships with the cast where they would kind of have this ongoing, while we were in production, have this ongoing stream of what was happening in their lives – and that can be conversations with the cast members, but they also kind of had ears everywhere – and then that would be fed to the story producers. There were two of us on my first two series and then my second two series there were three of us. And we would shape that reality into a four-part comedy drama.

So I've seen the Matrix and I've seen Inception. How do you how do you shape a reality?

Basically I'm Ed Harris in The Truman Show.

I sound like my dad! Genuinely, I don't watch Made in Chelsea, forgive me. But I am interested in terms of what the process is involved in that, because clearly you want it to be the essence of what these people are, but on the other hand you've got a TV show to make.

The fundamental thing is that we could never make them do or say anything that they wouldn't do or say. So it's basically... making a reality show is just basically about having a really good understanding of the star's kind of psychology, and almost being one step ahead of how they're going to act before they know what

they're going to do, which sounds manipulative and it's not. It's more, you know, a nightmare for a reality TV producer would be for a cast member to be doing something on camera that they think would be good on camera. That's unusable footage. You know, I find it slightly galling how often people would tell me when I worked on that show that it was made up, because if it was made up I would have written a script every week and handed it in and I would have had a really easy life. You know, working on that show was almost a 24-hour job because we were constantly... we would put together a kind of how we thought their lives would be for a week. Normally it's shot over about 10 days, I think, each episode. And we kind of do a prediction of a running order, and then that would change 100 times.

Within an hour of the cameras rolling.

Yes. Yes. It would be literally me getting calls, out for dinner with my boyfriend, getting a call saying, "Someone's done this." Someone's cheated on this person. Someone's lost their job, whatever. Get home, reorder everything. It was like an intense job. And the reason I'm kind of being worthy about its intensity is not to show any sort of graft that I exhibited, but more just to explain how much it was a hamster wheel to try and catch up with reality. And it was a really valuable job because basically from every kind of... every episode began with like a narrative kernel, like a seed. So something would be planted like, maybe this is the episode where big character A and big character B finally...

A narrative kernel! I'm going to use that, it's great. I like it.

Actually that was just off the top of my head! We should have used that back in the day. You know, where that would grow. You know, maybe these two characters that have been playing cat and mouse with each other, maybe they would finally snog this episode, you know, maybe that would be our end of part too. And then we follow the fall out, you know, in the second half.

Wow, it really is like Christof from The Truman Show, isn't it?

But then we had to be very aware. You couldn't be precious about your story because, you know, the number of times where me and the other story producers, who were all frustrated sitcom or drama writers, had to be reminded that we weren't writing a sitcom or a drama, we were following reality, where I would go, "Oooh, maybe we can do a kind of When Harry Met Sally vibe and he can run through the street," and they're like, "No, it doesn't work like that," you know, has to come from them.

In a sense it's more difficult than traditional writing or just pointing a camera at someone.

Yes, it was really difficult, because the other thing is that from all those kind of initial narrative seeds that you plant, you have to be aware that it can grow in 30 directions and you can't be married to one direction that you think will work best. You have to follow reality. That was our number one thing was it had to be real. And then, you

know, our job was within that reality trying to make it as funny and dramatic as possible.

I don't know whether anyone I have accepted quantum physics at you, but they have a thing called the observation problem, which is looking at something can sometimes change the result. You know, I'm me on this podcast but with fewer swear words. If I was a certain celebrity chef, I imagine once the cameras are on he start to swear a bit more.

Yes.

How does it work in terms of their interaction with the camera? Because they must be aware that the camera's on them and do they do they ham it up a bit. How does it work?

I think the thing that people forget about those kind of shows is you have to be a very particular type of person to do a show like that, and I don't think you should judge those people because I think they're being very honest about the fact that first of all, you know, I remember Binky saying to me who, I don't know if you're au fait with the show, has just been pregnant on the show with a guy she was with from the show, and has just given birth to her daughter, and I remember her saying to me how amazing is it that I get this memento from my youth. You know, she's been on it since she was a kid, and she has that entire period of her life documented. So I think it's a very valid point. And also they're exhibitionists. I'm talking... I mean, I called myself an exhibitionist earlier because I went to the Edinburgh Fringe show and did many musicals, one of which was called Kiddie Fiddler on the Roof, this is a different kind of exhibitionist.

This is their life as art.

Yes. And this is, you know, my executive producer, who is a woman called Sarah Dillistone, who is a very dear friend of mine now, and she kind of created this genre in this country and really tailored it, and she is the woman to thank really, when you turn on a channel and you see, you know, 10 different versions of these kinds of shows; it all kind of came from her. And something she always said is that – again, Paul, I'm not going to presume you know who I'm talking about here – Spencer Matthews is kind of the golden, class A, amazing, archetypal structured reality star. And I agree. He has no issues with privacy, he said that all the time to me. He was like, "There's no sanctity for me in those kind of boundaries." He loves the camera. He's a show off. He's very fluent and funny. And it just made sense for him, it was really fun for him to live his life through that platform and through that lens, and I know it was challenging – for all of them it's challenging at times, it's not always a big laugh – but he really loved it. And you see that, when you watch him, you see the ease that he feels doing that, and you can tell he's not being manipulated.

So to continue the analogy of The Truman Show, the cameras were on him 24/7. What would happen, for example, with Spencer if they had been a development in one of the storylines off camera? Do you ask them to redo it?

No, no – they could never redo it. As I said, that would be kind of most nightmare situation if we ever felt like they were redoing it. It's all about it has to be first time, it has to be real. You know, the thing is with these shows is that there is a team behind them of incredibly hard working and very clever creative people. And I must say I wasn't referring to myself when I said that!

I love all these caveats.

But you know, I was always in awe of them, you know, watching how they created this thing. And a lot of it is accelerating reality, and a lot of it is, as I said, being ahead of something so that the possibility of something happening off camera kind of can't happen. And that's why these shows are such a machine because it would be filmed and scheduled in a way that would mean that you were capturing reality for the first time, and of all the things that I've ever done in my working life, I've got to say it like, being on set, when you watch one of those moments happening feet away from you and you're looking in the monitor were the most exciting moments of my life. When you see someone for the first time being told by their partner that they love them, or being told by their partner that yes, they slept with someone else in their bed, you know, that that is really amazing story telling. And it was a complete joy and it was invigorating and thrilling to be a part of it.

You came in after the first season, so did you already have a sense of just how big this already was and how big it was going to get?

Yes, I think I did. I think I did. It kind of rocketed from about Series 3 onwards. I'm trying to think, Series 3 is when it won the BAFTA. But I just knew that there was a real appetite for this kind of storytelling, and Sarah Dillistone, who as I said she kind of created Made in Chelsea, and she's also the brains behind TOWIE and she'd done many kind of precursor shows to those shows, was such an expert in creating this kind of storytelling and blurring those lines of reality and kind of heightened reality, and I knew that it could only grow and grow, and it has continued to grow and grow. And I remember on my first – this as a story I tell over and over again, but I do find it a kind of very poignant insight into why people love those shows – on my first week as a story producer, the other story producer said... I said, "Why do you think they're so successful, these shows?" And he said, "Can you imagine your favourite romantic comedy, like Four Weddings and a Funeral, and can you imagine how you would feel if that moment at the end when they kiss in the rain, you know their lives are continuing when they shout cut? How would you feel about it and how much more invested would you be?" And it's a simple analogy but suddenly it makes you understand why it's so compulsive, why it's so human.

Because they're real people and like you say, it's a constructed reality but it is based in reality.

It is. And, you know, there's no makeup artist, there's no them all going kind of in separate Addison Lee's home, there's no green room. This is their real life.

As you mentioned the phrase 'on set' a few moments ago. It wasn't really a set as such, was it?

No, sorry...

They're all real places.

Yes, sorry – location is what I should have said, yes.

But it's interesting that you said that because it shows that it is a constructed reality as you've said. You know, you're aware that you are behind the camera and they're aware that they're in front of the camera.

Yes. And also that's... I wouldn't say it was like a Brechtian tool, but that definitely is conscious in terms of the execs want that feeling. And when you watch made in Chelsea there's a gloss to it. There's a very specific grade to it that makes it look, you know, the production values are very high. Sarah was really inspired by kind of those big glossy American dramas like Gossip Girls and you know, so that is a kind of conscious construction as well.

So you started off here in this building by leaving the fringe and ruining everyone's office, and then within a blink of an eye you're now the story producer on one of the biggest shows in the UK. You must have felt at this point that your career had taken off in the right way.

Yes. Yes, I did feel that, and it was just a really creative, really fun thing to be a part of, and it was also it was strange to have people want to listen to my ideas. That is why I was there. You know, I was being paid to give my creative inputs, and that was an amazing privilege to have, aged 22.

A creative input that was more value than Nelson Mandela's at this point! I love that, it's great.

My friends still let me forget that.

I think it's absolutely fantastic. I've never even been on a list that Nelson Mandela's been on, never mind beaten him!

Well, if Tatler's listening, Paul...

Absolutely! Let's hope that they call. I'll take the phone off the hook. So what came next then? Because I mean that must have opened a seriously large amount of doors for you.

Well, it did and it didn't really, because I was kind of qualified for nothing really in the TV world, because it was a very specific job. You know, there were only three shows of its kind, and that's if you count Geordie Shore, and a lot of constructed reality purists will tell you that Geordie Shore is not constructed reality.

What's Geordie Shore? Forgive me for interrupting.

It's kind of like a fly-on-the-wall show that sometimes is grouped into structured reality.

Oh, I see.

So I wasn't really qualified for anything. You know, I'd never been a runner, I'd never been a researcher. I was learning TV on the job, you know, Sarah often talks about how funny it was to witness me kind of getting to grips with the TV world, kind of understanding the language, because I just had no idea. And story that she loves telling is the first episode that I ever story produced, they gave me a rough cut of. Do you know what a rough cut is?

I do.

See, I didn't know what a rough cut is.

Why don't you explain to our listeners what a rough cut is?

So a rough cut is just kind of the first draft of an episode of something, so there will often be kind of black holes in it...

Like the rushes on a film set.

Yes, exactly. So there'll be scenes and underneath it will say 'insert another scene here' or, you know, 'music will come here' or whatever. So they gave me this rough cut and they said, "Do give us any notes that you think about the episode." I wrote this very delicately worded email the executive producer saying, "Look, I think this has the capacity to be a good episode but if it went on TV as it is it would be a complete embarrassment." I was like, "Guys, there are moments in it where it says 'music should be here' instead of music, you know, it's just not good enough."

That's great. You should frame that.

Such a patronising 22-year-old! So then from there I did another... Sarah... this is why I was very lucky actually in that in Sarah Dillistone I really found someone who... it's kind of like an old school mentor and was very keen on not hanging me out to dry with no, you know, no experience at all. So she was keen to kind of beef out my TV work, so she gave me a job as a researcher on the studio shows, even though that was you know a good few steps down from the job I was doing. She was like, "I think it's important that you have an understanding of how TV works at this level." Because she didn't want me to have these huge gaps in my industrial knowledge, and I'm so grateful for her that she did that. She put me on another structured reality show, which was a show that kind of toured music festivals, so I was on the road for three months, so that gave me much more of an understanding of being like a field producer. And then after four series I said, "I think there's probably not much more I can give to Chelsea," and she said, "I think you're

probably right. I think that's come to a natural end," and so then she offered me a job in development, which was at the same production company. And that was kind of coming up with reality, game show, entertainment, documentary programme ideas, kind of pitching those.

So you were full-on creative at this point.

Yes. Yes. I mean, I don't know how... I think I was pretty crap as a development producer, I'll be honest!

It's tough!

I don't know how good I was because I think I found it frustrating that everything was so theoretical, so you could kind of work on an idea of something for like 18 months sometimes, and then it would sometimes be as simple as the channel commissioner going, "Yeah, well we're not really in a sort of game showy kind of mood at the moment," so that's binned.

Or, "If Bill Oddie could present it then you've got a deal."

Yes, exactly.

Just like W1A.

Yes. "Can you get Caroline Flack attached?" And then suddenly it's like a whole day is passed with coming up with Caroline Flack puns. So, yes. So that's what I did for about two years, and then I really wanted to go into – and the whole time I was doing that I was also kind of moonlighting as a freelance journalist – and then... but TV work up until two years ago was really my main job.

That paid the rent.

Yes, exactly. And then I went... I wanted kind of some scripted experience, so I got a job as a script assistant on Fresh Meat, the E4 show, which was very below what I had been doing before, in terms of what my jobs were, but it was absolutely crucial, and I was so lucky to get that job because it was sitting in a writers' room. It was listening to the writers come up with ideas. It was being lucky enough to work with Sam and Jesse and watching their process, and seeing how they create was really amazing and an unbelievable education.

Did you recognise your own student experiences on that show?

Not really, because I went to Exeter University, so it was... you know, the first night that I spent at Exeter University, we went home after being at this club, we went back to this girl's room called Octavia where she had quail's eggs and celery salt for all of us to eat.

Sounds a bit working class for me actually, I'm from better breeding than that.

And so no, I really missed out on a big kind of grimy student experience because I went to bloody Exeter! I should have known, someone should have told it was the green welly boot uni. But yes, that was really fun. And then from there I did some script development at that company objective where I was reading drama scripts, and then I directed all the online content for Channel 4 for the Peep Show and Fresh Meat videos. And then I went freelance. That was two years ago.

So all the time you were working on Fresh Meat you were actually running your Sunday Times Style column, weren't you, on dating. Tell us about that.

Yes. So I got that through... I don't know how. I always try to trace back why I just started writing about relationships and dating, but I don't know, I have like the most disastrous love life of anyone I know. The other day I did a panel event and I was billed as a 'sexpert'. It's like, "How has this happened?"

I could be billed as the opposite of that!

So can I! I don't know how it happened.

Did you feel like the kind of Made in Chelsea front of camera people at that point? Because you have give quite a lot of your personal life away.

Yes, it's so funny, I did think to myself I wonder if this is karmic retribution for kind of following people's real life, and now I have to do the same. Yes, so that was... I think it all started because I had a column for an online magazine called Ask Men, which was a kind of dating and relationships column, and I had that for about a year, and then... so I think that's just how I kind of established a kind of accidental niche, and then an editor who I'd worked with at Debrief, the fashion editor of Debrief, Pandora Sykes, went over to Sunday Times Style and then Jackie Annesley, the editor, and Laura Atkinson the deputy, were looking for a dating columnist and Pandora said, "There's this girl who has written for me at Debrief who writes about dating, I think she'd be good." So then I wrote a kind of audition piece, and then yes, went from there.

And it developed quite a following, did it not?

That's very kind of you to say! I never really know to be honest. And that's not false modesty, it's because of the Sunday Times paywall. You never really get a sense of, you know, I never really knew how many people were reading it. People my age didn't really read it because millennials are entitled, and they want all their content for free. So even my best friends would say, "Can I have your Sunday Times log in and password?" and people my age I don't think on the whole really buy papers. So I didn't really get much engagement on it. Weirdly, I remember talking to Camilla Long about this and she said she felt exactly the same, that she would kind of tweet out this column into the ether...

Into a black hole.

Yes. And she – I mean, Camilla obviously got much more engagement and traction than I did because she's Camilla Long – but she said that there's... you don't have much of a sense of how many people are reading and what they're thinking. You know, I think I only ever really got two comments from people every week, maximum, and that was mainly randy housewives saying how much they fancied Cosmo.

Cosmo Landesman?

Yes.

The problem you've got though is if you wrote it for the Guardian and comments were open, you'd have the two positive comments then a million horrible people.

Hell. Yes, hell. Yes, well this is when I'm really in favour of paywalls, particularly as a young female journalist, because I am just not made of tough enough stuff for that, truly. And I'm so in awe of the female journalists in particular that week in, week out, I know who write for the Guardian, have to deal with that. It really protected me as a young columnist; it felt even though it was this amazing opportunity and this brilliant platform, I just didn't have to deal with that sort of abuse on the whole. And people who wanted to be there and read it had paid to be there and read it. And I have experienced what that is for a writer, and it really protected me and I'm all in favour of it.

It's incredible, because Barack Obama said many, many years ago, he said, "We can disagree with one another without being disagreeable." And yet if you look on Twitter and you look on social media, it seems to be so negatively motivated, so hate-filled. You know, whenever I do anything reasonably noteworthy on social media you can expect 50 tweets saying quite horrible personal things back. I've got a litany of like weirdos on Twitter that I've blocked for many, many years.

You can't! You shouldn't block them though.

Ah, yes – you're supposed to mute them, aren't you?

Yes. Because they'll be so happy that the great Paul has blocked them.

Ha – the great Paul. I sound like a magician. Where's Debbie McGee?

But they make it their bios, you know? They'll be like, "I was blocked by on this date." So you've just got to meet them.

Actually there's a few people who have been blocked by Donald Trump and they honestly do use that as a badge of honour, it is in their Twitter header. I'm hoping he'll block me at some point, I've tweeted a few negative things.

Oh, keep at it! Keep at it.

I will, but I'm not obsessed, I think that it would be a bit weird. But how long were you right in the column at The Sunday Times for?

Two years.

How did that come to an end? Or did that just come to a natural end?

It just came to a natural end. I kind of felt I was on borrowed time with that column. I loved writing it so much, but Cosmo and I by the end would ring each other and be like, "God, what do we write about this week?" Because Chelsea had to be real – it had to be real – and the number of times people just go, "Oh, just..." you know, make it up, and it's like, that won't make good copy.

The minute it comes from an inauthentic place, you're knackered as a writer generally.

Exactly, exactly.

And you're writing for lots of other magazines at this point like Marie Claire and various newspapers. Did you embrace the portfolio career then, as a writer?

Yes so I love working for a range of titles, but at the beginning when I first went freelance a lot of it was just about, you know, making my rent every month, so it was just whoever would take me. And you know, the best advice that Cosmo Landesman gave me, who's always been a freelance journalist, is actually borrowed advice from your very esteemed guest Eleanor Mills, who apparently said to him, "Cosmo, if you want to be a good freelance journalist you have to have 13 ideas for articles before you sit down for breakfast." And I think that's a really good piece of advice. And that's a skill I've really had to try and hone because I'm so bad at pitching and coming up with ideas. So at the beginning it was just like, yes, anyone who'd have me.

You've done a short film haven't you, Anna, Island, with your friend Lauren Bensted, and it was accepted at the London Short Film Festival. Is that where you want to take your career, ultimately?

Yes, definitely that's a strand that I want to pursue. It's hard, I think we live in a time where women are often told that they have to be one thing because it's kind of more digestible and easy for everyone else to understand, and I just don't ever see myself doing just one thing. And I really hope that I can always straddle those two worlds; I'd always liked to be a journalist, I think being a journalist is the best job in the whole world. I think it's such a privilege and so exciting to go to the frontline of an experience, whether that be, you know, a theatre production, a restaurant, or a date, indeed, whatever, and then be the channel between the experience and the reader and being that kind of trusted voice. I always say it's like... being a good journalist, when it goes right, it feels like being the funniest person in the pub who everyone wants to listen to when they're telling the story.

It's an incredible privilege.

It's an incredible privilege, and what a fun great job. So I'll always want to do that, but then I love creating worlds. I love writing scripts, and as you mentioned my writing partner Lauren Bensted is one of my best friends. *Anna, Island* all came about because Lauren and I had done kind of various creative projects when we were younger together, we had a very bad band when we were teenagers, at one point named Raging Pankhurst, and then we...

You should write a memoir.

And then we went to Edinburgh together for two years. The musical that I did where I played a tennis playing housewife after my very serious journalism Masters, Lauren wrote that musical and cast me in it. And she said to me, three years ago actually this month, she said, "I think we need to be creating some stuff." And I was like, "Yes, I agree. I don't think I want to be in a band any more though, mate, I don't think that works any more."

I like how the creative process works. "We need to be creating some stuff."

Literally, she said that. She was like, "We have so much fun doing it, we should just..." and actually, it sounds so silly, but really I think that that makes total sense. Like I was listening to Jill Soloway do a podcast recently, who's like my hero, who's the writer and director of a show called *Transparent*, and she said that every auteur that she loved, like the Judd Apatows, every time she looked at how they created, it was just kind of knockabout fun with their friends and their family and people that they liked creating with, and it just created this like loose, easy, kind of enjoyable viewing experience. And it sounds insane that Lauren called me one day and said, "We need to create stuff. What stuff do we create?" And I was like, "Oh, I don't know. Definitely not music any more. I don't think... I think were getting old enough that could stray into David Brentian territory." She was like, "Ooh, what about short films? Why don't we give that a go?" I was like, "Okay, let's try it."

What came next?

So then we wrote this short film script called *Anna, Island* which is about a girl who's obsessed with Desert Island Discs, and kind of a day in her life, and then we tried to enter it for funding for something called... for a BFI funding scheme, and in the funding scheme, a week before we did this big application, got producer on board, they were like, "Oh, you have to have shown that you've made a film before." So we literally did a crash course on how to use a Canon 5D, found a real life story that we really liked of these two old friends who lived on Tags Island, which is an island on the Thames, and how they used to swim round Tags Island every day...

It wasn't you and Lauren, was it?

Oh, God, no!

That's okay.

So then we just took the camera down, and we don't think we even hired a sound recordist, I think we got a to do it and stuck him in a boat, and then filmed the whole thing and edited the whole thing in a week, just so we could do this BFI funding for *Anna, Island*, ironically of which we didn't get through even the first round. But then we had this little documentary as a calling card, and then we were just like, "Screw it, let's make it on our own. Let's extend our overdrafts..." – I think it cost us a grand each. Lauren always jokes that at the end we didn't have a production company, so we should have just done the NatWest logo because that's what facilitated it –

Thirty-two per cent APR.

Exactly! And then we just got all our mates involved. We got... you know, when I look back at that film, it's such a time... it's like such an embarrassment, Lauren and I hate watching it back because it's like this very bad, weird sitcom pilot and the guys in a short film that's got kind of dodgy bits in the script, but it was all shot mainly at my flat, in my grim flat in Camden that I lived at the time. The guy that I was going out with at the time, a comedian who I was writing about in my Sunday Times column, he's in it. My brother's in it. Lauren's ex-boyfriend was the musical producer. Kirsty Young somehow we strong-armed into doing it, so she's got this very strange cameo at the end, and it was just done with real fun and love, and it was just so... when it got accepted to the London Short Film Festival, we had this Q&A afterwards, and this woman put her hand up and she's like, "We're so impressed that you managed to get all those filming locations. Must have cost a bomb, you know, to have all the TFL signs in the background, how did you get that permission?" And we were like...ooh...

Moving swiftly on...

Yes, moving swiftly on! And it's so funny, because now that was about two years ago since we made that film, Lauren and I have since got this great agent at Curtis Brown who does all our screenwriting and directing work, we've got a couple of scripts in development with different production companies, Lauren's just got, finally got BFI funding for this great short film, and we really miss making those like mad little films for a grand, and in fact we're talking about maybe just taking a few days out in August and doing another one because there is something just so... when you're that unmonitored and no one's watching your budgets and no one's watching health and safety and, you know, it's just so loose and fun, it's a really great way to create at the beginning I think.

It sounds like, as you're professionalising things you're just slightly becoming ever so slightly more remote from the creative front line.

Exactly. Exactly. And there's just so many more rules, you know, so many rules when you're filming. Its kind of there's a real freedom and when its just you and your best mate and your brother and your boyfriend sort of all just running around London with a 5D.

You feel that it's still quite a male dominated industry, the film industry? Because whenever you look at any director on anything, it's likely, almost overwhelmingly likely, to be a bloke still.

It's a very depressing reality. I think it's... you know, something that I noticed when I was writing my dating column is people still have a bit of a problem with female story tellers, particularly when it's real life or personal stories, and a woman telling that truth is somehow deemed a sort of blabbermouth sort of unboundaried, arrogant narcissistic blabbermouth, in a way that no one has ever accused, you know, Richard Ayoade or, I don't know, Ted Hughes writing birthday letters. And I think that kind of confidence gap between men and women is very prevalent when it comes to storytelling, particularly when it comes to the film industry. I'm so early on in my career, I've had to deal so little the kind of big names in the industry, but I know from people that are way ahead of me that yes, that is a huge problem.

It's back to the double standards of society generally, because a female who's a reasonable sexual history is a slut whereas a bloke who has had the same number of sexual partners is a stud.

Don't I know it! Bloody Cosmo Landesman, it used to drive me insane! He would write these incredibly sexually provocative...

And the comments would be, "Legend!"

It would be, "Legend!" it would be, "You old card!" "He's a one!" And then it would be me saying, you know, I snogged someone in an alleyway...

And you weren't married! That is a disgrace.

I'd get these emails from sort of middle England, these men called Peter in Dorset, telling me about why my life is heading in a very worrying direction.

Why is it any business of Peter in Dorset what you do in an alleyway with a bloke?

Well...

I don't think anyone's ever asked you that before! Welcome to Media Masters...

Well, indeed. Well, I mean the problem is that...

There's an arrogance there that they feel entitled to contact you about it.

I know. I think the problem is... it's so funny, because I used to talk to Cosmo every week whenever I got another email from some middle-aged man, telling me that, you know, I'm living my life in a worrying way. Do you ever get those? He's like, "No!" I'd love one of those e-mails of concern!" I'm like, "They're not concern, are they?"

They're horrible judgements!" He just used to get women sending pictures of themselves in their underwear, which I never got.

I never got that either.

Well, you can advertise now!

I think my wife would be annoyed! Although if my wife is listening, you can send me some pictures of yourself in your underwear if you want. No, tell me – moving swiftly on – yes, we are getting quite Partridge-like in this podcast actually, I'm quite enjoying it. This is obviously the best podcast in the world, but the second best podcast I would say is your good self!

Oh, you charmer.

Tell us about the podcast – how did that come into being? We don't even have an Instagram account, but you're really big on Instagram in terms of promoting the podcast, driving traffic, driving listeners. Tell us about the whole thing.

Yes, I mean, I am very lucky in that I have absolutely no qualms with being a really annoying self-promoter.

Absolutely.

Doesn't worry me at all. And in fact if anyone ever says to me, "You're going a bit heavy on the 'here's my article, read this', 'here's my episode, listen to it'" I say, "Look, I've got to make money." I live on my own. I live in London. I've got to make money. And I know how these things convert, and I know that if people are listening to my podcast I'll get bigger sponsorship, and I know that if people are reading my articles editors will keep commissioning me, so...

It all feeds in. It's like a virtual circle, isn't it? It all feeds into the same thing.

Yes. And I try and counterbalance it as well so it's not just me sort of, with my skirt over my head constantly on Twitter and Instagram saying, "Hello!" You know, I try and share stuff as well, and I'm aware of curating that, so it's not just a kind of ongoing sort of just myself.

Right, start at the beginning, then. What is the podcast, what's in it, who should listen to it and why?

So the podcast was initially called The PanDolly Podcast. It was created by Pandora Sykes, who was the fashion features editor at Sunday Times Style.

I like it, a portmanteau. Pandora/Dolly.

Exactly. She had the idea and she said, "Would you like to do it with me?" and I said yes. So we did that for the Sunday Times Style for about six months, maybe a bit

longer. And then that came to an end so we decided to take it independently and rebrand. And we called it The High Low, because we wanted to have a mix of kind of high brow and low brow culture and discussion, and high and low being kind of upbeat and more serious. The main thing that we wanted to do is we wanted to start a discussion amongst women – and men, we do have some male listeners, though it's mainly female listenership – and for there to be no qualms about asking questions and being curious. This is a big problem I think people of my generation face, I think were so keen to be a fountain of knowledge on everything that we're bad at learning, because we're so worried about getting something wrong or being embarrassed, you know, we made two gaffes last week on the episode, we called Chris Evert a him, and apparently it's a she. I said À Bout De Souffle was directed by Truffaut and I was corrected that it was Goddard – but afterwards I tweeted saying, "Look, this is really important." Because people love tweeting us and being like, "You got that wrong." I'm like, "Yes, we did get that wrong."

In a sense it's still attention.

Yes, but I'm also...

And you're not there as some kind of academic record, are you? You're doing a real podcast by real people.

Yes. And I'm not a connoisseur, and neither is anyone who's 28. And I hope I never think of myself as a connoisseur, I hope I'm always willing to say, "Oh, I don't understand that, can you explain it?" So that's really at the heart of it, and we hope that people feel like they can listen to us and feel like we would never be judgmental of what people's awareness of culture or kind of anti-culture or current affairs is.

And how is the podcast going? What kind of doors has it opened? Have you managed to commercialise it? How often does it come out? What's the typical format, etc.?

So we have just got in the last month a big sponsor – NARS, the make-up brand, is a sponsor –

We turned them down.

With a face like that?!

Absolutely!

Yes, so that's pretty great, because I mean, as I'm sure you know if you've kind of done a long successful podcast, it is really difficult to monetise it at the beginning, and I think people are still really unaware of how important podcasts can be for their brands. And I think brands are just starting to realise now that if someone tunes in every week to listen to someone they trust and they find funny, if that person is saying in their voice in their ear, "This is something we think you should buy," or, "This is a brand that we're affiliating ourselves with," the power of that advertising... but you know, brands still take a lot of convincing with it. It's such a new thing.

They're still locked in the kind of late 1980s quantity is what matters, Coronation Street with 28m viewers and Pampers nappies, rather than someone with say 30,000 listeners but they're of a certain niche – and if you're trying to sell to that niche that's even better than 28 million.

Yes. Yes exactly. So yes that has been a bit of a struggle, and we've just not made any money out of it.

But the plan is global domination.

Yes. The plan to make some money, yes! I'm really lucky with Pandora being my co-host because she's a very business-minded person. She's like my Karren Brady. And she's kind of... she's really helped me, generally actually, take money more seriously. And we've got to make money out of it. Just there's no question, we've got to make money out of it, because it's basically two days' work a week really.

You're putting together a lot of content for it in a way that, you know, this is quite easy really insofar as, you know, Charlotte I presume, finds an interesting person, sits them in that chair and I chat to them for an hour, and then after that we'll both get the number 72 bus home. But you know, if you're putting packages together and having lots of different content, that's a lot more work.

Yes, yes. And it's also, you know, we're always trying to strike a balance Pandora, I think, is more kind of keen on a more kind of manicured, together, kind of more magazine-y show, whereas in my head I just want to be like presenting TFI. So somewhere between kind of that chaos and that togetherness, I think is a perfect balance and we always meet each other in the middle. But you can't go in there and go, "Oh, this week we'll talk about Trump's latest hoo-ha, this week we'll talk about..." you know.

It's almost boring what Trump does now even though it's not, because he's president of the United States and what horrendous new thing is he managed to do. He's the most creative person in the world, because I think he's tried everything horrendous already.

He's untouchable.

He finds a level of horrendousness. It's like, "I couldn't have even thought of that."

He keeps bouncing back. But yes, we can't go in, you do have to be kind of an architect of conversation a little bit. You can't just go in there and go, "Let's just talk for 10 minutes on misogyny in women's sport." There has to be some form of order, because it's really fun doing that in the studio but it's not great listening back to it, and you've got to think about your listeners. So it does take some work, but I really love it. I really love being a woman doing a podcast, I think there's a reason why women do really, really well with podcasts. I think it's really nice to be judged on my

voice and my brain and my heart and my thoughts rather than the mini-skirt that I'm in the back of the Sunday Times Style with people saying what they think about my legs in it.

It's a problem I have with this podcast, is a lot of people just judge me solely on my looks. I get a lot of women emailing me saying, "I don't listen but you look great." It's awful.

Well, thank God you've finally got a safe space.

I feel like a sex object, frankly. It's awful. It's awful.

As a straight man I'm so glad that you finally found somewhere you can be yourself. Yes, so I really like it for that. I really like the intimacy of that kind of conversation. I love the listenership that we're building. I just really enjoy, you know, I'm obsessed with radio, as you probably have picked up on, I'm obsessed with Desert Island Discs, it's kind of been the narrator of a lot of my life, you know, wandering around, feeling lost and kind of listening to those voices.

This podcast is very Desert Island Discs like. I mean, there's no island, no records, no Bible and all of that, but it is basically chatting to someone at length.

Yes.

And I'm not Sue Lawley or Kirsty Young. Yet.

You are a bit like parky, and you know Parky did it for a couple of years.

A fellow Yorkshireman! Yes. I often say to prospective interviewees when we invite them on the show that this is more Parkinson than Paxman, because a lot of people think that they're going to have their feet held to the fire, and it's going to be a kind of Paxman-esque interrogation.

I must say, I was very worried about that, but then I listened to the back catalogue and I realised it just always sounds very relaxed and enjoyable.

And it is. And in fact, we've only got a few more minutes left actually, we're running out of metaphorical tape, and as a regular listener you'll know that I use that phrase a lot. So let me ask you a few final questions. Where do you think you'll be, say, five or 10 years from now? That's a very job interview-esque question, that, but you know, you've got the journalism, you've got the podcast. Do you see it all coming together in a more kind of financially sustainable way, or will you be presenting a TV show, as you mentioned? In your mind's eye, where you want to be five or 10 years from now?

Definitely never, ever on camera ever. I would really like to be carrying on doing journalism. I would really like to be doing more interviews. I love doing interviews. I'd

like to write those kind of big full juicy profiles where you don't have a publicist standing in the corner of the room, that would be my dream. I'd love to do that. I'd really like to do an agony aunt column, I want to be like kind of filthy, flawed agony aunt, that's one of the big goals for me at some point in my life. I really like writing columns because I like that kind of storytelling element. So that's the journalism side. I would really love to write a TV show about relationships and friendships, and particularly the friendships that I have in my life, the female friendships that I have in my life, because I don't think I've ever really seen a show where that's been reflected in an authentic way. I'd really, in terms of how my friendships operate, I'd really love to see that. I want to make the next great romantic British romantic comedy. The podcast, I'd love that to keep going, I'd love to... we're getting authors on now once a month to interview about books, so I'd love to kind of keep growing that and maybe doing some more live events with The High Low, and then I've got my first book out next year which is... memoir. And then I'd really like to try and write fiction at some point. I know that's like a very arrogant thing to say...

My wife writes fiction. It's very hard work.

It's so hard! The number of men that you like, meet on Tinder who three pints in will reveal to you that they think they've got like an amazing sitcom in them. I don't want to sound like that guy, because I know fiction is a very different beast to non-fiction and it is raft that... it's so challenging and I think it would take me a very long time to learn, but I'd love to give that a go. Yes.

Last question, then. What advice would you give to the much younger you then that's done these 30 internships and also destroyed this building with fridgegate, as it were. Would you do anything differently?

No, I wouldn't actually. I think... definitely my personal life suffered when I was spinning lots of plates in my mid-20s. I just don't regret that. I think if there's a time for your personal life to suffer it's when you were 25 and kind of skin and footloose and fancy free without a family without any responsibilities. So now I don't think I have any regrets. I think I would love to go back with a slightly tougher exterior to my younger self, but I suppose everyone feels that. You know, as I said writers I think generally have this horrible dichotomy of having both incredibly large and incredibly fragile egos, and I think I've got much better at accepting criticism, and realising it's okay for not everyone to like my work, that's completely fine. And they're not wrong, it's just they don't like it. And it's not that, you know, they don't understand it or I'm not their cup of tea, they just do not like it, and that's okay. And I'm much better with that now, and I hope that that kind of toughness and that rationale will just continue to grow as I get older.

Dolly, it's been a pleasure. Thank you ever so much.

Thank you.