

Sandro Monetti

Hollywood journalist & presenter

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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 down the line from Hollywood, California by Sandro Monetti, the leading British entertainment journalist in LA, and ultimate Hollywood insider. Sandro has interviewed all of the biggest stars in the world from George Clooney and Will Smith to Madonna and Paul McCartney. A regular contributor to CNN and the BBC, Sandro is also an acclaimed author and writer for stage and screen with three hit plays to his name. An entrepreneur too, he created LA's number one tour on TripAdvisor, the celebrity insider movie locations tour. Sandro, thank you for joining me.

As someone who's listened to every magical minute of Media Masters, it's so flattering to be invited to this compendium of classic conversations. And I only hope I don't blow up the franchise by being your most boring interview ever, Paul.

Well, I think Sandro, we should declare to our listeners that we're old friends. So I'm now going to say it will probably be the most boring interview ever. But that's only so I can tease you because we have a bit of a double act going on. Don't we?

Yes. Which chuckle brother are you exactly?

Well, if you're Paul, obviously then I'm Barry. Which one's dead?

To me, to you, Paul. Let's take it away.

So I've known you for years, Sandro, and we've always been at various events in Hollywood and you're someone who's figuratively and literally out there. I mean, but it's been nearly a year now without the red carpet events and glitzy parties. You must be suffering more than most in lockdown because I imagine your house is just a base.

Well, socialising has been replaced by social distancing, but as every professional knows there's power in adapting to changing circumstances. And yes, my working environment has changed from the red carpet to the home office. I'm still doing what I did before, in a different way. Yes, I'm still interviewing the stars, but now via zoom and reporting not in the studio, but from my home office. And I also took the opportunity of lockdown to write a book, my memoir 'Confessions of a Hollywood Insider.' So every negative comes with opportunities.

I've read that book and I want to put it to you directly that it's not very good and that you've let yourself down.

Thank you. I wondered who wrote that negative review anonymously.

Yes it was me that wrote all eight negative reviews, but unfortunately your lawyers got them successfully removed with a restraining order and all that kind of thing. I mean, on a serious note though, what kind of Hollywood will emerge from lockdown? I mean, COVID has decimated cinemas, chains being forced to close, will streaming exclusives kill the big screen?

It's a fascinating question. And one I think about and talk about a lot. First of all, cinemas will never die. Even the invention of television couldn't kill off cinema. It remains the cheapest form of a night out for the family and so as we slowly get back to cinemas, the question will more be who will be owning them. But I think they'll definitely exist. I know that Netflix, before the lockdown, bought a couple of cinemas, one here in LA, one in New York, I could see Amazon owning them as ridiculous as it sounds. I think the death now is sadly sounding for independent cinema, but a cinema itself will survive. As for the streaming services, so much of Hollywood operates with money. I was fascinated by the decision of Warner Media to put all of its 2021 releases on its streaming service, HBO Max, but that deal is a bit more complicated when you really look into it because the way star contracts are structured, there's a lot of backend deals for A-List stars where they get percentages of the money that the movies have made in cinemas, and that's going to disappear. So there's a lot of renegotiating. And like a lot of things in Hollywood, it will all come down to money, but the customer experience of going to the movies I'm confident will survive. I think there's probably a real thirst for it as well. I'm an awards voter. So I've been watching over a hundred movies lately and realised there's no substitute for seeing these films on the big screen.

Now I should declare to our listeners that I was lying when I said your book was terrible. I thoroughly enjoyed it. And it was actually very, very funny as well. I mean, there's so many anecdotes, I don't want to eat to kind of repeat all of them. Otherwise, there's no reason to buy the book. But you're the man who knows every A-Lister in town. What is the secret to winning the trust of these massive stars? Because you don't want to be cheesy and shallow like the Hollywood cliché. But on the other hand, you've got to develop a rapport with these people very quickly, have you not?

Yes you do. And it's empathy and expertise, I would say. I very much miss the party circuit and when publicist gatekeepers would bring their stars over, I was so honored. They would make a beeline for me in the crowd because they know they're going to get a conversation with someone who's not going to do something stupid. I'm not just a reporter, I'm a fan. I've seen everybody's work. I consume it all. One thing I learned from my background in Fleet Street was very much putting myself in the heads of the people I'm interviewing. Plus, I always learned the old secret of always opening with a compliment. The thing is when you're interviewing all these stars, you have to make them feel relaxed because some of the biggest stars in the world are actually very nervous to do public speaking or interviews. Usually the most outgoing ones, Eddie Murphy, Robert De Niro, they're incredibly shy, people like this as well. So you need to relax them and win their confidence. And you do that with compliments, by knowing their work, and showing empathy. Maybe that's an oversimplification, but it's something I learned at the start of my journalism career. And it sustains me today.

I mean, what's the funniest encounter you've ever had with a big name, give our listeners a taste of what's in the book. And who has been an absolute stinker? I mean, can you name names? Did your path ever cross with our former president, Trump?

Oh, I certainly did. I mean, on a visit in 2012, I was checking out gift items in the kiosk of the lobby of Trump Tower. And I noticed a new cologne for men Trump had bought out and it was called 'Success.' And so I asked the salesman behind the counter, does this have a sweet smell? He didn't get it. And he said, "yeah, it's got a fresh and woody scent, with a blend of Juniper, bush, wood and ginger, why don't you try it?" And so I picked it up to spray myself on the neck and as I was doing so the man himself, Donald Trump emerged from the lifts of Trump tower and walked past me towards the street and being distracted, I sprayed myself, not on the wrist as intended, but in the eyes. And I was temporarily blinded by the spray, I was staggering back from the overpowering smell. And I came to a halt right in front of Donald Trump, wiping my eyes still with the tester bottle in my hand and ever the salesman, Trump said to me, "that cologne is fantastic. It's the best." And then he turned and went about his day; once a salesman, always a salesman. I didn't buy a bottle of Success. The American voters didn't buy what he was selling, not the majority of them anyway. And how ironic it is, back then I thought it was just another celebrity I've met. And instead he became president of the United States. Anything's possible.

Back to that then, I mean, who's the funniest encounter you've ever had? Who was the greatest fun in Hollywood?

It's hard to narrow down just one. But I think when I look back on my life, the most fun moment I had was at the first Hollywood movie premiere I attended, it was also the first attended by Prince Charles. I'd flown over for the premiere of Kenneth Branagh's Frankenstein movie. And I remember being at the party afterwards, it was a lot more informal than Prince Charles is used to. He had Danny DeVito slapping him on the

back, promising to look him up the next time he was in town, he had a Kramer from Seinfeld, Michael Richards, trying to explain to him who he was. Prince Charles was happily signing autographs, something you'd never do back home. And then when the clock hit ten o'clock the party immediately emptied. People realised they had to be up for their LA power meetings and pilates. So all that was left was Prince Charles, myself and Kenneth Branagh; and Prince Charles turns to me and says "one is not used to this, in Britain I'm always the last to leave. But we do things differently in Hollywood." And that was my first experience of Hollywood. And I've just fallen in love with it ever since. Most Hollywood stars are really nice, there's a minority who are arses and I'll happily name names if you like.

Well, that's an offer that I couldn't refuse. Please begin the naming.

Maybe you were lucky to grow up in a household of fabulous music like The Beatles or The Stones, not me. The soundtrack of my childhood was Barry Manilow because my mother was a huge fan of all his songs. And when it was coming up to her 60th birthday, I remembered that she'd never seen Barry live. So I decided to fly her over, from England to Vegas to see him in concert. And I knew there was a bit in each show where Barry calls a fan out of the audience to sing a song to them. And it was 'Can't Smile Without You.' And when he asks for volunteers, well, both of my mum's arms go up in the air, she's shouting "me Barry, me Barry" and like the old showbiz ham he is, he looked through the spotlight. He pointed directly to my mother and said, "Yes, you come on down." And so despite her bad hip, she raced to the front of the stage, "Barry, Barry, Barry," and just as she got there, Barry looked her in the eye and said, "not you, the pretty woman behind you" and my beautiful mother turned away, so disappointed and has never listened to Barry Manilow again. What a douche.

That is horrendous. Isn't it? I mean, that anecdote is in your book. I recall that. And that was one of the most memorable ones, as far as I'm concerned. Do you find that most people are sort of big egos behind-the-scenes, or are they quite reasonable? I mean, there's the whole, a few of the people I know in Hollywood say it's often the up-and-coming people having their first taste of fame tend to let it go to their head. Where's the old hands like Robert Redford and Harrison Ford and people like that are just polite and professional. They turn up and they've got a job to do. And they're very polite and respectful of others.

What I've learned from interviewing every big star is quite often the opposite of the roles they play. All of us suppress certain parts of our personality, but a lot of these actors bring those parts out on screen. And I noticed that anyone who plays a villain is usually incredibly nice. And in some cases those that have the nickname America's sweetheart can be America's monster. So that's why I love my job so much because you never quite know what you're going to get. But luckily I think the bigger the star, the nicer they are, because if you really want to endure and survive in Hollywood, then you have to be nice to the press, because yes they can make you, but they could break you. And the ones who've been around a while have learned how to play the game and the ones who've fallen from fame have often made that mistake.

Tell our listeners about the journey then. You don't sound like the Hollywood type because of course you were born and raised in Blackpool. How do you sort of look around this sort of misery and the bad weather in Blackpool and think I want to go to Hollywood? I mean, surely you should've stayed in Blackpool, it's what you knew!

Well, Blackpool is fantastic. And it's where I got my love of entertainment from because to me, it's the Las Vegas of Britain. Growing up with those end-of-the-pier shows and theatre shows, and yes I would go and see the likes of Cannon and Ball, The Krankies, Stu Francis. To me, there's no difference between them and Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and George Clooney.

Could Brad Pitt crush a grape?

Well, I'd like to see him try! We're all fueled, aren't we, by our childhood experiences and I think it was Rudyard Kipling who said "show me the child at seven, I'll show you the man." And at seven, I was just seeing those shows and being so swept away by the love of show business. And I knew I wanted to work in it in some way. I didn't want to be an actor so much, but I wanted to chronicle the stars and interview them. And that's how it worked out. So Blackpool put me on that path. And I wanted to ultimately go to the world's capital of entertainment, which is Hollywood, of course. And here I am more than 20 years later.

So tell us, how did you get there? How did you start out as a journalist? What were your first steps along the way? And how did the move to LA actually happen?

I started my own magazine at school, filled it full of celebrity interviews and scurrilous gossip about the teachers; studied journalism at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston; got my first job in my hometown newspaper, The Blackpool Gazette and used my local area column to fill that with sensationalism. I always had a tabloid sensibility, I suppose. And then shortly after that, I was working on national newspapers and magazines. I worked on Smash Hits, I worked on the Daily Star, The Express, The News of the World, but Hollywood was always calling me and the opportunity to move out there was actually given to me by Sky Television. They needed a fixer in Hollywood, at the time they were filling Sky One with lots of prime-time American shows, and they needed a connector to do lots of things for them out in Hollywood. And because I'd been to the state several times on press junkets and interviews and had a relationship with Sky, I got that job. And it was interesting. It really established me in Hollywood because I could go to all those shows and movies with a big sort of channel behind me, I got to know everybody. And years later, when I switched back to journalism and writing books about Hollywood and interviews, I still had the contacts I made then. So, yes it was all a gradual climb with the ultimate goal of Hollywood in mind and reach.

Obviously you and I have spent many evenings together. And you've regaled me with amazing tales of Hollywood behind-the-scenes and the history of it as well. It's all fascinating. And one of the things that struck me as we talk, as we have done over the years, is that huge passion that you have for the history of Hollywood. It still fascinates you just as deeply as it did when you first moved there, why is that? What is it about the sort of the business of Hollywood and the place itself that inspires and intrigues you so much?

It's a dream factory. I've always been a very aspirational person. I found my home in Los Angeles because it's like a giant shiny casino for people who want to make their dreams come true. Now, not everyone's going to achieve those dreams, but it's fun to hang out in the casino. And when you look around you, every major building or street has been used in a movie over the years. I don't think Hollywood does enough to celebrate its own history. That's why I created the 'Celebrity Insider Movie Location Tour' a few years ago, because rather than seeing the homes at the stars, I wanted to see where the famous movies were shot. I live around the corner from Nakatomi Plaza, which was the skyscraper in Die Hard. And there's the Pretty Woman hotel. There's the Ghostbusters hotel, all of Hollywood history is here all around you. And I'm also drawn to the classic stars. When people ask me my favorite movie stars, I mention the likes of James Dean, Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe. I wrote a play about Marilyn called 'Marilyn and Sinatra.' And that was a story I learned about the little-known romance between these two great showbiz icons. And it was a great extension to me to go from writing articles to writing plays. It's just another form of storytelling. And one of the things I've been developing during lockdown is having edited the film footage from that play. So now you can watch that for free on streaming. If you just go to bigstreamentertainment.com, you can watch 'Marilyn and Sinatra;' that's my play. And so I like to bring to the world stories that maybe people don't know about the history of Hollywood.

When I think of Hollywood and people that moved to LA, it's always to either partly reinvent themselves or chase a dream. It is the ultimate place for aspiration. Is there an element for those that don't make it, of either bitterness or disappointment? I mean, we've had quite a few of the Hollywood people on the podcast before and Ken Hurt the entertainment lawyer and agent said that for every J-Lo that makes it, which is great – she deserves to make it she's very talented – there's equally another 20 other people just as talented as J-Lo that been waiting tables for 20 years, waiting for that discovery. And once you've passed the talent threshold, it's then just a matter of look and who you know, and are there still a lot of people that are sort of still trying to get the Hollywood dreams ten, 20, 30 years in?

Hollywood is not a meritocracy, unfortunately. And I would like to play some part in changing that because like everything it's about connections and who you know but yes, there is so much talent out there. Acting in a lot of ways is a bit like sports; you just need someone to pass you the ball to show that you can kick it in the goal. And a lot of work I've been doing with BAFTA and other organisations has been to try and create access for all. I was very lucky and was able to achieve my dreams in

Hollywood, but others have obstacles that are holding them back, which are due to a whole range of factors. And it shouldn't just be that you know someone in the business or you get lucky, it's about giving talent a chance to shine. And yes, there is very much the two-year rule here I've noticed among the Brits, a lot of people who sort of move out here, oh well, I'll give it two years and if I don't like it I'll go back. Within those two years, a lot of people have fallen in love with the place. And I think the most important lesson to remember is it's not about the destination, it's about the journey.

I mean, I've known quite a few Brits that have gone out there and stayed like you have, but I also know quite a few Brits that have after two years, said: 'Well, that's enough for me.' It was a great place, but they miss Blighty. I know you return regularly, but moving back to Britain is not on your agenda, is it? You're firmly there and have been for many decades now?

Yes. And the world has become a lot smaller over the years with things like Skype and Zoom and everything we've been learning most recently. And also you do have those same connections. When I first came out here, there was no way to watch British television in America. But now I can feel connected to Britain a whole lot easier than I did before, but everyone needs to find their place in the world. And it was clear to me very early in life that Hollywood was going to be mine because it had been such a huge influence on me growing up with American movies and TV shows. And everyone's just got to find their own place in the world. And yes, I think I'm a lifer now.

Is everyone in Hollywood from somewhere, if you were at an average Hollywood party or soiree, get-together, what percentage of the room would actually be from the valley or from downtown? I mean, are most people drawn to LA from somewhere else, or is there a gravitation of a family starts their roots in Hollywood and then second, third generations are there by now and therefore they wanted to get ahead in Hollywood, but they're also from Hollywood a bit like the sons and daughters of actors and rock stars tend to follow in their parents' footsteps.

It's so rare when you meet someone who was actually born and raised in Los Angeles, wherever else I go in the world when they hear my English accent, there's always some reaction to it. Here, there isn't. Because the majority of people moved here from somewhere else. It's like I said before, people are drawn here to make their own personal dreams come true, or by aspiration. Now that might seem cheesy to some, but I absolutely love it. And so, yes, we're all sort of drawn here by this, by this magnet of Hollywood. And some of us love it. Some of us find it very difficult, but to me, there's magic in the Hollywood Hills.

You clearly love it, but you've really made a huge success of it as well. I mean, you have what I would call the ultimate portfolio career because you're succeeding at so many different things: journalism, you're an onscreen correspondent for CNN and the BBC, playwright, consultancy as well, you're

writing, you're involved in the creativity as well as reporting on it. How do you fit it all in?

Well, passion fuels everything. I mean, as you've learned from this interview, I'm one of those lucky people who knew early on what they wanted to do, and Los Angeles has a can-do spirit. It's something that I think drove me out of Britain towards Hollywood in the first place. Because there, it was a great deal more typecasting, you're either sort of one thing or another, here nobody looks at you strangely when you want to do lots of different things. Every business card here seems to have slashes on it with this, this, this, this, and this as well. And anything's possible here. So from an economic reason, the way showbiz journalism has changed, you have to diversify, and there's lots of skills we have as entertainment reporters that can transfer to different areas – be those publicity, be those consulting, be those writing film books or TV. So I think that's what's been able to set up this portfolio career. Also, I think something I've noticed from people in Hollywood, whether they're famous or not famous, is the importance of mental strength. And I think as long as you're always doing something that makes you happy, that will give you that sort of mental strength to continue. And a lot of people think it's weird, but I'm happy most days of my life because I'm doing something creative and trying to help others reach their goals as well.

What's your favorite bit of your week?

My favorite bit of the week is, I think, when I watch my football club, Ipswich Town, and they actually win. Now obviously this doesn't happen every week. But my favourite bit of the week is to go on a call or an email thread afterwards with my fellow fans of that club, who are all over the world, and we sort of bag on the team and say how rubbish they are. And that feels a great sort of sense of connection. So, even though I've left Britain, my football team has never left me and I continue to follow them. I think also that I found during lockdown re-watching old movies or old TV shows personal favorites, you realise how the Hollywood creatives have got us through this, those old comedies really put a smile on my face.

Why don't you support Blackpool? I mean, that is an outrage.

Yes, isn't it? Well, I was living in Colchester when I was about five or six, and that's the age when I first got interested in football. And so Ipswich Town back then were like Liverpool or Manchester United are now. And I'm very loyal and passionate, and the things you're loyal and passionate about never leave you. Girlfriends come and go, your football team, more's the pity, stayed with me forever. So that's why I support Ipswich Town. And it's a constant in my life, constant misery, but at least it gives me something to laugh about.

I think you're a traitor and nothing less than a disgrace. You should always support your hometown. I support York City and they're shite! But anyway, back to more serious matters. You were director of BAFTA in Los Angeles. How

important is the British film industry and how is it viewed by Hollywood power brokers?

Well, the British film industry and British talent gets great respect and rightly so. I've spoken to a lot of British actors here and they say the second they walk into an audition room and the casting director hears a British accent, they automatically assume that they must have fantastic training, whether that is the truth or not. So there is a real advantage there, but it's backed up by talent. And there's a feeling in the industry that the training is really great in Britain and also the range of skills. I'm not sure I completely agree. I would say that whenever I see Shakespeare, it is better performed by American actors than British, generally. I think that British performers tend to be more slavishly devoted to the text, whereas Americans connect with the emotion much better. But to get back to your original question, yes Britain is in very high regard in Hollywood and rightly so, there's a huge amount of talent. And if we can walk towards continuing that and getting it recognised, you only need to look at the major award shows and see consistently in the years that I've been covering the Oscars, there's usually 20, 25% of the nominees being British. It's an incredible achievement and something we should be really proud of.

How long do you think it'll take Hollywood to bounce back from all of the nightmare that is COVID. It particularly has affected LA more than many places in the world. I actually used to work regularly in Hollywood, and I subscribed to the Los Angeles Times. And LA county is suffering unbelievably at the moment to the point where ambulances are having to decide who they're bothered to take to hospital because they can't waste resources and people who are certain to die, they're running out of oxygen. It does seem that LA county has been a hit really hard.

It's a tragic situation. Everyone in the world has had their life up-ended by COVID and the numbers and the hardship here in Los Angeles are especially bad. It's interesting that here, actors and filmmakers are actually considered essential workers, perhaps because the entertainment industry is such an economic driver for Los Angeles. So every effort has been made to get productions back. So many of my actor, writer, producer, director friends have retrained as COVID compliance offices, because that is now the most important job on the set, even more so than the director, because if the protocols are not being followed, the whole production can be shut down. And as I speak to you at the moment there is a pause on filmmaking because the numbers are so bad. There are other areas of the United States and around the world where shooting is done, but let's hope Hollywood bounces back because one thing that the pandemic has served to remind us is the importance of great entertainment and how much it makes us smile at times when we really need a smile.

Has the 'Me Too' era changed things? I always thought the Hollywood casting couch was a bit of a myth, obviously just from looking on from afar and with the exposure of Harvey Weinstein and rightly he's gone to prison. Are there other producers that have so far got away with it? Has it changed things for

good? Has the casting couch gone? Has it created a level playing field? What are the actual changes that you see on the ground now, as a result of that?

As a Hollywood historian, I know that the casting couch has been around since the early days of tinsel town. It's absolutely wonderful that Hollywood is now a much safer environment due to the bravery of those people who stepped forward and those who actually listened. And I don't think that it's been entirely eradicated, but Hollywood is now a much safer place. And the sleazebags now will at least be given pause. There are consequences for such actions. And it's a much safer environment to work in than it used to be. And that's one of the best things that's happened in Hollywood in my time.

Do you think they'll bounce back reasonably quickly then? Cause like you said, there's a huge demand for new Hollywood TV and movies, but on the other hand, with the streaming services and the huge back catalog that Netflix and Amazon Prime and BBC iPlayer and all of these kinds of on-demand services, I mean, I feel I could watch Netflix for five or six months just to catch up before I'd even be interested in the new materials. So has that created a buffer zone to satisfy people's tastes? Or do you think ultimately people are going to want to see that new material ASAP?

The streamers are the new giants of the entertainment industry. It's upended everything. It always used to be here that the studios had all the power. Now they are very much playing catch-up. It will be interesting, I think as 2021 continues, to see what Hollywood will decide to do with the movies that are still unreleased. Will they sell them to streaming or will they hold out for cinema releases? Like the James Bond franchise has done, for example, with 'No Time To Die' being delayed again until October. I'm surprised, I really thought that the likes of Apple could buy that film for 600 million and then the Bond franchise could make even more money than they would from a cinema release. But these are the economic decisions that will have to be weighed up in the blockbuster world. In the independent sector, it's going to be really, really difficult because it costs a lot of money to make movies when you're a big producer, big production company in a studio or streamer, you can afford it. But the independent sector has now got to pay extra to make sure all the safety protocols get met as well. So unfortunately like a lot of industries it's going to be a survival of the richest.

So tell us a bit more information about the genesis of the book. I've read it and a few of the stories you've actually told me in person, it was great to hear them again, but was it that people have been clamoring for these anecdotes? Some of them you couldn't make up, could you really? They're so random. What gave you the idea to codify them and distill them into this book?

I've been lucky to have a front seat in showbiz history with 20 years of interviewing all the biggest stars in Hollywood. And when people find out what I do for a living, it's not long before they ask me, what's so-and-so like, so a few years ago I had put this into a show and I did a show in London, New York, Manchester, the Edinburgh festival,

regaling people with these stories of about 15 to 20 Hollywood stars. And when lockdown happened, I thought, well now's the opportunity to actually take the time to write this out to the longer form in a book. So I started with a list of the 100 biggest stars in the world, realised I'd met them all and decided to tell stories about each of them. And along the way I thought, wow, I've embarrassed myself so much and done such stupid stuff. And I realised that I was a starstruck fan in a lot of this. So I am the butt of the joke in a lot of the stories I realised, but it's also helped me really understand a lot about the nature of celebrity, what makes stars really last and endure and shine. But most of all it's been a laugh. And so it's a comedy book and I'm lucky enough to have over a hundred funny stories, and I really hope people enjoy it. I recently just recorded the audio book which is now on audible and other forms. And it was nice to do the impersonations of all the stars from Al Pacino to Mr Stallone and all the rest of them. So that was a fun challenge.

You and I are both big fans of Sylvester Stallone and the Rocky franchises in particular. I mean, tell us about your encounters with them. You actually were the original interlocutor of those highly paid evenings where you pay 200 pound for the dinner, and then there's two chairs on the stage and you were one of them. And Sylvester Stallone was the other. I was one of those people that paid 400 quid for me and my dad to go and see it, but tell us it from your point of view, because it was quite the tale with it being 11 or 13 hours late.

Well, the sign of a star is how long they keep you waiting for an interview. But I don't think they should keep you waiting when there's thousands of fans. I remember being at a Manchester arena about to go on stage to introduce the star at an evening with Sylvester Stallone. And one minute to go, I looked through the curtain and all I could hear was "we want Rocky, we want Rocky, we want Rocky." And then the promoter tapped me on the shoulder and said "bit of a problem, Sandro. Stallone's not here." "Oh you mean he's not in the theatre yet?" "No, he's not even in Manchester." "Where is he?" "Heathrow airport," "Heathrow airport? What's he doing there? And so Stallone had flown over from the Cannes film festival earlier in the day. And he wanted to hang out there longer. So his people had put him on a flight, not to Manchester as scheduled, but a later flight to London because they thought England's only a small island. 'It must be all close to each other.' And so I had thousands of bands, charting "we want Rocky" and Rocky was on the motorway being driven extremely fast to Manchester. So that was a nervous moment having to stall for a few hours, stick Rocky 4 on the big screen, give everyone a drink, tell a few jokes and personal reminiscences. But when Stallone eventually turned up, he was a fantastic value and he was something of a childhood hero to me. And it was great to bring this Hollywood star back to the Northwest. Those many hours of delay were well worth the wait.

You mentioned about the audio book. I actually might download that on audible. Because like you said, I'll be able to hear the impressions. I mean, for those that do want to experience it, would you say the audio book is the best way to do so?

Yes, I think so. Because I just love to do impressions. I remember my first interview in Hollywood was one of the last given by the star of *It's A Wonderful Life*, Jimmy Stewart. And I made the mistake of speaking to him like I spoke to most elderly people by raising my voice. And as I boomed out each question, Jimmy graciously answered and put up with this human loudspeaker act for about 15 minutes before patiently asking me, and here comes the impression "why are shouting son? I'm all old, but I'm not deaf." And so I think this really added an extra level of the stories to hear my terrible impressions of the stars will add to the comedy value of the book.

You also do quite a bit of behind-the-scenes consultancy work, don't you?

I certainly do. Both advising stars how to be interviewed and advising people how to interview stars. On the latter point, I created the world's first bachelor degree course in celebrity journalism. And I was keen to get across that when you're interviewing celebrities, it's not like interviewing anybody else because there's a whole extra level here that comes with ego sensitivity. Celebrities face rejection every day when they go to audition and they can go on social media and see it as well. So a very big part of celebrity interviewing is winning that confidence and relaxing them. And one way to do it is to always start every interview with a compliment. And I don't mean something like, 'Oh, my mother loves you,' which makes them feel old. Say something particular about a project of theirs and if it's something they've directed or written, that'll be something more personal, and then they can relax into the interview. And I say the same thing to celebrities as well when they're being interviewed, compliment the interviewer as well, because it's a nervous exchange, whichever side of it you're on, even if it's "I love your outfit" or "I love your magazine" or anything like that, there's no reason to be hostile. And I think that if you can both relax into it you get a better interview.

One of the most unusual things you've told me about recently is that you received an award from President Trump. Is that a blessing or a curse?

Well, I don't talk about it too much cause I don't want to lose all my social media following. But, yeah, framed on my wall next to a signed letter to me from former President Trump sent "on behalf of the grateful nation," is a medal. It's the president's volunteer service award. And it was given to me in recognition of community and charity work I've done for the betterment of others. I do lots of mentoring and try to help people break into the industry and achieve their dreams. I've never worn the Trump medal in public because it's so gigantic and bombastic. It looks like something the rapper Flavor Flav would carry off with confidence, but I'll show it to you next time we meet, Paul.

I'll look forward to that. You mentioned it earlier briefly, but can we go into a bit more detail about the play? You wrote a play, didn't you: 'Marilyn and Sinatra?' Tell us about the genesis of that. How did it go? You performed the role, I assume you were Frank Sinatra and what was the reaction like?

You never know who you're living down the road from in Hollywood. And I found that a near neighbor of mine was Marilyn Monroe's publicist. So I was of course unleashing so many questions on him. And this led to knowledge that Marilyn Monroe had a secret affair with Frank Sinatra. And I thought that was a story I had to tell. So, the play, which didn't star me but starred Erin Gavin as Marilyn and Jeff Bratz as Frank Sinatra, did really well, playing at the German Street Theatre in the West End of London, playing in New York, The Edinburgh Festival, we went around the world with it. Now it's streaming on bigstreamentertainment.com. And afterwards I produced a revival of The Seven Year Itch and I did act in that one, in the man part, not in the matter of Marilyn part. And so, I think I've been so inspired by both Hollywood history and the talented people I meet that I think, oh, I'd love to have a go at that. So, I've written short films as well. I'm currently writing a TV series. I mean, there should be no limit to ambition. If you're a writer, you can turn your talents to anything, whether it's an article, a book, a film copywriting or whatever. So as I look to the future, there's so many stories I want to tell. And now I've told my own story, in a book I'm increasingly drawn to telling the stories of classic stars, Elvis, Frank Sinatra, Audrey Hepburn, looking at these icons in a new way. And that's something I'm very excited to do in the future.

Which period of Hollywood do you think most fondly of it? I mean, is it now? What was the golden age?

Well, if I had a tardis, I think I would travel back to the 1950s and Romanovs restaurant on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, because that was the hangout for all the Hollywood stars. It's where the Rat Pack was formed. It's where so many romances started and ended. I'm writing a TV series about that place at the moment. And so Hollywood has always had magic. And at the moment, you know, these meeting places have changed. In the modern era, it was Soho House, it was the Chateau Marmont, and now we're all getting together on Zoom. But Hollywood will never die. Aspiration will never die. There's a lot of magic here. And as long as people like me and all the thousands afterwards who continue to come here to pursue our dreams, that Hollywood magic will continue. It just can't be undone.

Other than family and friends, what do you miss most about Britain?

Do you know, I miss the sarcasm.

Really?

Yes, Paul and I've noticed that when you're here in Hollywood, so few people get your wonderfully funny jokes.

It's because they're not wonderfully funny! You're a sycophant sir, I put it directly.

It's not programmed into the DNA here! It's a lesson I learned very early in Hollywood when you'd say something ridiculous and you'd get the reply "really?" Well, not really! It's a joke! But we are two nations divided by a common language. I remember my first day in Hollywood. I went to a Hollywood studio and the secretary behind the desk said, "have you been beveraged?" And I replied, well, not recently. And this is the kind of conversation you get.

Is there a British Mafia in Hollywood? I mean, do you Brits stick together? Cause I mean, other than BAFTA of course, do you find that you kind of stick to the same kind as it were? I know that you, and I've been many times, you're the combat of the Brits in LA quiz every week and you have a newspaper and all of that. Do you all help each other out? Does it bring you together that you're all Brits in LA, that you're far away from home? Or is it something that you join when you first started LA and then you sort of drift away as you sort of marry with the locals and develop a social life? Or is it something that when people start with Brits and LA when they move and they tend to stick there because that's their friendship base?

When I first moved to Los Angeles, I resolved that I was not going to hang out in British pubs or just be part of British community events. I thought, I just might as well just move to Marbella or something like that. I'm really going to embrace the experience and hang out with the locals. So that lasted about six months. And I would say that the British community is incredibly strong, largely thanks to the organisation and Facebook group Brits in LA. And so, yes, as you mentioned, for a number of years now I have been hosting the Brits and LA pub quiz every Tuesday. And I'm so proud that during the pandemic, this has continued as a virtual event. We even get players joining us from England, even though it's four in the morning when it's played on Tuesdays and all of us who move abroad need to retain those connections. You need friendships and the British community through Brits and LA through BAFTA in Los Angeles through the British consulate is really, really strong. And, I think that there's a real relaxed laid back atmosphere here and a real sort of friendship, which has been helped by the weather. It's a mutual support society. And I was wrong to steer away from the British community at the start. And I've really, really embraced it. And we say at Brits in LA, you don't have to be British to be part of it, you just have to like us and get the sarcasm that also helps.

One thing I've not asked you about so far is whenever I am in LA and I turn on CNN, or I turn on the local news, or even when I'm listening to Five live, up you pop! I mean, that's a big part of your job, isn't it? Where you're an onscreen contributor. Do you enjoy that? Do you like going into the CNN studio and sorts of giving your take?

Live broadcasting is my absolute favorite thing. And I've done so many of those talking head shows in the past, the things you watch on a rainy bank holiday, you know, the 100 most bizarre celebrity pets or something like that. And that proved to be great training for my job as a celebrity pundit, where you have to sum up any

particular news story from the business perspective, from the celebrity perspective, in two or three minutes. I really enjoy it. I do lots of radio work as well. I think at the BBC, they sometimes think of me as the angel of death because whenever a celebrity dies, I inevitably get the call. When my phone rings at three in the morning, first, 'Which star has died?' They seem to think that I have the right to a tone for celebrating their life and legacy. But yes, I absolutely adore that. And it's all storytelling and something else that's become a real passion of mine and I have to thank you, Paul, for enabling it to start, is my podcast 'Who's the best?' because I saw the way podcasting was exploding and I really wanted to be part of that. And I took the opportunity to have all my favourite stars on and interview them, I'm talking about the likes of Chesney Hawkes, Burt Ward, The Pointer Sisters, David Tennant, my favorites are all over the show biz map, and I've been able to get so many of them on Who's The Best. And that's been an absolute thrill as well. So whether I'm broadcasting on television, doing radio, doing podcasts, writing books, writing stories, it's all a form of storytelling. And I'm so passionate about Hollywood: its past, its possibilities and to be a chronicler of tinsel town in various forms is such a privileged position. And I'm so happy that my personal dreams came true.

The Chinese capital is increasingly becoming incredibly important in terms of getting Hollywood movies and TV shows off the ground. America itself has a fraught relationship with China. Various presidents have described them as frenemies. You edit a magazine that focuses on the Chinese influence in Hollywood and the capital flows. Tell us about it.

Hollywood International Filmmaker Magazine is an English language trade paper marketed largely to the Chinese and international audience. And it really is very much about the business of Hollywood, the changing nature of it as well. And it's been fascinating for me to see Hollywood from a global perspective as well and how we are perceived elsewhere. And yes, Hollywood superstars are Hollywood's greatest calling card to the world. And the Chinese film industry a couple of years ago was exploding with so many multiplexes that were about to take over from the USA as the main movie market in the world. Who knows what will happen in the future. But as I've realised through my work with BAFTA and other organisations, film is well and truly a global business and Hollywood is at the centre of it but the reach is certainly global.

Sandro, I hugely enjoyed that. I mean, we've been friends for many years. It's been interesting to hear it on the record because of course I've heard a lot of what you've said as your friend and colleague, thank you ever so much for your time. And I really, really appreciate it.

We all need mentors and champions and supporters. And I just want to thank you, Paul, for always believing in me and teaching me so much and for creating Media Masters, which I think is just as I said at the start a great compendium of educational conversations. I've learned so much as a listener. And if there's only one person who's learned something or been inspired by something I've said today, then fantastic, go for your dreams. Don't let anything hold you back.

I think I only have one listener according to the metrics. And that clearly must be you.

Well, I listened so many times, so that must be working. But it doesn't matter, Paul, it's like with a lot of the stuff that I do and the teaching, you just have to reach people and inspire them. Because I had so many mentors in my life, many of whom I never even met, who didn't realise how directly they were helping me. So you can learn from so many others. And if there's a way I can sort of send the elevator back down and help others get to their own particular summit, then that's fantastic.

Proud to know you, Sandro, thank you ever so much.

Hooray for Hollywood!