

Darren Scott

Editor, SFX

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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 by Darren Scott, editor of SFX, the world's number one sci-fi fantasy and horror magazine. Available globally in print and digitally for 27 years, SFX is the market leader in its sector, covering the genre from films to comics and games with its own unique tone. Previously, Darren was editor of Gay Times, the largest longest running and most recognised gay magazine in the world, driving the readership to nearly 3 million. He's also written for titles including in The Guardian, The Independent and NME. Darren, thank you for joining me.

Thank you for having me.

It's a great time for a sci-fi fantasy genre at the moment. Batman is in cinemas in June, it's becoming a serious contender for the top Oscars.

And rightly so, I think June is amazing. It's a brilliant time to be a geek and or a nerd. I always said that the geek will inherit the earth, so we have I feel. It's really strange actually, because when SFX first started, I mean, I remember buying it, it was 27 years ago now. I was obviously very, very young and it was a kind of magazine that you didn't really shout about. You know, it was a guilty secret almost because those kinds of things were really mainstream. So sci-fi movies and cartoon movies and all that kind of stuff weren't really big. They weren't as big as they are now and it's become really, really mainstream. So it is a really great time to be working on a magazine like SFX.

You must know the SFX audience very well. The old cliché of male sci-fi gigs doesn't apply anymore. Doesn't it? Do you think the male female split is now 50-50?

I don't think it's 50-50, but I think it's much, much bigger. I mean, certainly the fandom that I'm part of myself like Doctor Who, Star Trek, it's very much a split now and

rightly so. It's fantastic when you go to conventions and see people all dressed up in all different kinds of cosplay and things like that. Also just not being ashamed of being a fan of these things. The fandom now really wears their hearts on their sleeves and that's across the genders, it's really refreshing to see that now.

And it must be great to have such passionate and highly informed readers about the genre. I mean that enthusiasm, that deep knowledge is great, the passion, but can it also sort of count against you really, that you've got to struggle to think, well, what can I tell our readership that's new because they know this material as well as we do?

They keep you on your toes, that's for sure. So you're very, very, very careful not to make mistakes, but then I think because of the people that work on SFX, we all know the brands so well that - I don't wanna say we don't make mistakes because everyone does - but we are more mindful because we also have that as in encyclopaedic knowledge. But I think because so many sci-fi and horror brands are being reinvented and revisited, there's always a new way to look at these things. You know, Dr. Who's been going for 60 years now, Star Trek 55. So they're always moving these things on so there's always something new. And I think it's a really interesting time as well, because you have an old school type mentality of fandom. And you also have the new upcoming younger people embracing a new version of something who then can go back and look at what's gone before. It's very interesting. I find that a lot of people who were fans of something say back in the seventies or eighties, aren't necessarily as embracing of new versions of sci-fi as they could be. That's quite interesting. I wasn't expecting that when I joined SFX, I just thought that everyone would love everything unconditionally, but it's interesting to see people's different takes on things. And I suppose the internet has been quite a large player in that too.

It's interesting because I've been a big trekker for many, many years. And when J.J. Abrams did the three Star Trek movies, I felt a sort of loyalty to Gene Roddenberry and Rick Berman and thought, well, I'm not gonna watch this, It'll be crap. And it was to my detriment because sort of four or five years later, I caught up with all three on a Sunday. And they're absolutely fantastic. I mean, why was I so closed-minded? You want Kirk beaming down to a planet and then kicking ass.

I've been guilty of that with different franchises myself. I've always thought, oh, this isn't for me. And then by chance I happened to catch something and think, oh my God, why have I not watched this? When I joined SFX, I caught up on almost 11 years of The Walking Dead. I just started it in the beginning and thought, right, I'm gonna do this now, I think I probably should. And I absolutely love it. And I thought why did I deny myself that for such a long time and this as with Star Trek, there's different versions of The Walking Dead and you can dip in and out of it if you want to or you can watch the whole thing. Just the same with Star Trek. I think you're always gonna have the original Kirk. You're always going to have those original seasons, but

then you've got five or six other movies with the original cast. Then you've got the J.J. Abrams timeline and it's just there, just embrace it all. No one's saying that you have to like or love everything, but whatever's gone before. It's not going away. So you can always go back to it and still love that too.

Actually, The Walking Dead's another example of how sort of fleeting out of these things. I gave up on The Walking Dead in season two because obviously they ran out of money and it became 'the talking dead.' But by all accounts from season three onwards, it got really good again for a few series. And I probably gave up on it a bit too soon. I mean that's the kind of thing, ultimately, that advice that you're looking for from a magazine like SFX. Because our time is limited, I've got hobbies, running and so on and I've got maybe eight or 10 quality hours of watching TV that I'm going to properly invest in a week and I wanna make sure they count. And what we're not short of is options.

Yeah. There's never been more content, I hate to use the word. But with all the different streaming platforms now and as well as theatrical releases, graphic novels, audio dramas, I mean I'm probably forgetting something because there are so many different ways to consume all of these things now. And it just depends. I don't know whether you want to see or hear everything, if you're into a franchise, sometimes I feel that can be kind of overwhelming. So we do pick out the best of it. But we also know that there are all readers who have been with us for 27 years who expect us to be covering certain things. And we have to try quite hard sometimes I think still to get to represent certain things and people don't necessarily understand why you might want to cover something that's in its 11th or 12th season, but people have stuck with it, their fans for a reason and we have to represent them too. So it's always trying to find a new way to feature something that we've been doing for nearly 30 years. But thankfully, like I say, there's no lack of new ways to either revisit old material or brand new films and TV shows that are being launched alongside those. I mean, it's a lot, but it's great. Every day I kind of think this is incredible, right? I could never have imagined we would have almost too much sci-fi or genre content.

It's strange, isn't it? Because also that passion can sometimes backfire. I remember when Tim Burton did Batman all those years ago and there was such a backlash against Michael Keaton being cast as Batman. I'd look back now and think that was genius. He is Batman. Same with Daniel Craig and Bond, isn't it? Do you find that your job in a sense is sometimes to be the evangelist, to convince the die-hard fans that they do have to open their mind and give this a go?

I think to a degree there is an element of that. I think I try to always keep a very positive mindset when it comes to new versions of old franchises or older franchises rather. But I also understand that some people are never going to accept certain changes within certain things. And it's not really our place to try and convince them. It's just our place to have a healthy mix of everything that's in there. So you mentioned Batman. There is, there is a bit of a, I don't wanna say outcry. There's a bit

of a negative response to Robert Pattinson playing the role of Batman. And I realised today because people were tweeting me and they're saying 'hashtag sparkle bat.' I didn't know what they were talking about. And then I realised it's a reference to him being a vampire in the Twilight movies. And people have a problem with this actor playing this role, but surely that's what actors are meant to do. They're meant to play different roles. And Robert Pattinson, as far as I'm aware, he's not a vampire. So he doesn't actually sparkle and he's capable of doing different things. It's the same when you have Dr. Who or you have a different Star Trek captain, people always are very difficult I think, once they've made up their minds before they've seen anything, like you say with James Bond as well, it's hard to convince people. So you just have to almost let them sort of shout into the void of the internet when they slag something off, which is quite common, so you're aware. I wouldn't try to convince somebody. I would just leave it all there. So hopefully they could educate themselves. Michael Keaton, for example, he's coming back as Batman in three films. So time has proven that Michael Keaton is if not one of the definitive Batman, in my opinion.

Well, Jack Nicholson will always be the joker as far as I'm concerned, because he was just Jack Nicholson, wasn't he, with a bit of makeup on, I mean he was an absolute lunatic. I still love that film now, I watched it the other day. But here's the thing, I remember growing up, The Daily Mirror and The Sun were in a competition with each other, you bought one paper, the editors of big names, they'd poach each other's staff. Now, how does it work? Do you have a competition? Or is it an abundance mentality, rising tide lifts all boats? Is Empire Magazine, for example, I read both, I don't consider Empire your competitor. I consider both of them great magazines and I want to read both. Is that the way it works? And is it that I read your magazine on my iPad, but it's one tile amidst a million other tiles and apps. Are they your competition? It's not necessarily reading. Could it be YouTube? I suppose it's a very long and rambling way of saying, how do you get that cut through?

There is a lot of competition now. There is a lot of noise out there to try and get the attention through. And you're also trying to convince an audience who perhaps haven't really been involved with magazines before to invest in something that's printed on paper, which might be a strange concept to younger people perhaps. But you're also trying to get people back on board who perhaps have fallen to the side slightly along the way, and maybe don't realise your magazine is still in print. So what I'm trying to do is try and get more eyes on SFX and make people remember that it was a great magazine that they loved when they were younger. That it's still a great magazine, it's still around and it's never been more relevant. So we are trying to sort of break into the online world so to speak. Obviously we have our website as part of gamesradar.com. We do have a lot of social media presence. Haven't quite yet pivoted to TikTok. I think I'm slightly too old for that. But in terms of magazines, actual physical magazines, it's really about trying to catch people's eyes in shops, which of course has been very difficult in the past couple of years because people haven't been in them. So it is about trying to get your product seen by people that would be interested in the content obviously. So to do that, you now try to invest time and effort with studios and production companies so that they can get people that are working on a film or a TV show to speak about your magazine, to share it. So obviously the

director of the Batman, Matt Reeves, shared our magazine cover to his online followers recently, which is helpful. Obviously that's what you hope, that people will support you as you support them. I don't really think of any magazines being a direct competitor. I think SFX is one of, maybe you could count on one hand, I think in this country, the number of specific film magazines. And I would say that we're one of them, but at the same time, I think we are a sort of subset niche of our own because we don't really break out into things like West Side Story or Top Gun or Peaky Blinders. So we still have sort of age old rules that we abide by, content that SFX covers. So there is a bit of crossover with the film magazines and I think more so now because a lot of the film magazines that are left are just sort of dipping into television territory, which is something that SFX has been doing for 25 plus years. So sometimes it can be a little frustrating with all the streaming platforms and trying to remind people that you've been around 27 years. Because I don't think they really understand sometimes that everything's not our website. That actually there is something printed on physical paper that people hold. I've been doing this for such a long time that a lot of the PR people that I work with, thankfully, I had the pleasure of working with for a very long time. So it's not often the case in the UK at least.

Where do you draw the line in terms of what you will cover in what you won't do? Like if you are a practical motorhome magazine, you do motorhomes and if it's a caravan and it needs a car to pull it, then that's a practical caravan magazine. Is there a blurring of the lines at the outer edges?

I always kinda say it's fantastical. So it has, it can't really be grounded in real life. So it has to be a fantastical supernatural element to something. So if superpowered people or science fiction being travelling into space, but not just being a documentary about NASA, for example. In my mind, it makes complete sense. And I understand the rules as I inherited them. I did slightly change them because before the horror aspects only used to be supernatural, you couldn't do anything that was just slasher movies. They're just humans killing humans. But I argue that there's obviously a fan base for that and we should expand slightly. But for example, we wouldn't cover Sherlock the TV series, but at the same time we would cover James Bond. So again, that's something that I inherited. I don't really understand because I'm not the greatest fan of James Bond. I'm sorry to say, but that's something and that I just kind of went, okay, we have a legacy of doing that. So I'm happy to abide by that. But generally if you were talking about science fiction, fantasy and horror, it's quite all encompassing, especially with everything.

How does it work in terms of your relationship with the providers of content as it were? So there's you reviewing or doing a feature on The Walking Dead. If you are gonna say this season's not very good. Do you risk being sort of cut off from that studio or that showrunner? Because it is subjective, but on the other hand, you can't just sort of slavishly do the PR for every showrunner and say, "this is great." I imagine there's a bit of a sort of editorial tension. Is there not?

That's a really good point actually, because I do personally think about upsetting or offending people, but it is part of the business. If you are reviewing a film. I don't really review films personally. I am able to form an opinion on them and I'm certainly able to write with each and I also know exactly what we should be covering at any given point, but there are people better suited to reviewing, I feel, and I don't always agree with them, however, that's their opinion and that's their take and they've been doing it for a long time. And I feel that's acceptable when it is a property. We certainly, not that we would ever have been in a position to do it, but we would never personally have a go at somebody. We would talk about how a film didn't quite deliver or a TV show didn't deliver. But at the same time that wouldn't affect the way that we feature that property as a potential cover for example. I did a, I think it was a 12 or 14 page feature on the Batman and that just came from my love of the character and my love of the franchise ever since I was a kid, me being excited to be able to do that. Having not seen the film, having only seen trailers and imagery from it. And you're asking questions about the film that you think may get something that the readers are interested in rather than what you personally are interested in. And when you're doing that, you're not really thinking about whether something's good or bad or that person's previous work that you may not have liked, but when it comes to reviewing, that's a whole different kettle of fish. And I have to say, I don't think we've ever had, I'm gonna touch wood when I say that, I don't think we've ever had any problem with people disagreeing with book reviews or film reviews, just because it's just the nature of things really.

Do you have a to-do list when you take over as editor of SFX? Because obviously there have been editors before you that have tried things, some have worked some haven't. You obviously had some kind of a job interview, one would imagine where they said, what would you do with the magazine? So you've got through all that. You start on day one. Do you have a direction of travel? How does it actually work in terms of your stewardship as editor?

I very much had a plan for things that I wanted to do with SFX when I joined. And I don't necessarily think that when I was interviewed the people agreed with everything that I suggested, which is fortunate that I still got the job. But I didn't want to come in and change something that had been historic in a way, because I know as a magazine editor and as a magazine reader, I would hate it if I suddenly got a completely different magazine in the post or in the shops, the next time I picked up a copy simply because somebody else has taken over the reins of running it. So I slowly but surely put things in, took things out, slightly tweaked things. I don't think I did anything too drastic. And I think I certainly was talking about doing a redesign and I have talked about changing the logo and every time I mention it, people sort of shy away from it. "Oh no, we don't wanna talk about that" because obviously it's a time consuming task, but then the pandemic happened. So it was just really about staying in print and staying on the shelves and just buckling down and getting on with it. So we put all that on the back burner because I was thinking on the 25th anniversary, which was a couple of years ago, that it would be nice to slightly evolve it bit by bit over time and not just go here's a whole brand new thing. But I think even though I've been there three years now, it is a different magazine from when I started, although

you wouldn't look at it and go, it's completely different. There's just a lot of subtle changes that I've made to it. I don't know whether they're all for good. Certainly a lot of people complain that I reduce the size of the letters page. So if anyone really wants to help with that, they could write in more often than it would have more letters to print. So there's still a lot of things that I want to change and I think one of the main things is changing that logo so that I don't have the problem, which is plagued every editor of when the letter F is covered up, it looks like it says sex.

I think that's the best part of it, but each to their own, you're the editor and I'm not. Could you walk our listeners through like how you put a, I was gonna say an episode, I'm listening to too many podcasts, an issue together. Do you start with a theme? Is it led by whatever the big new bit of what you would call content is coming out? How does it actually work? And then how long does the whole process take from that to when you're holding it either physically or virtually in your hands?

Well, see, I believe I do things slightly differently than SFX has done before, and I'm only going by what the other guys have told me because they've been there for a really long time and thank God because they've been able to sort of breeze me through the process. We have a features planner that has everything on it. So we have every issue for the next year, month by month when it's on sale, what the press deadline is, and it's got section by section, everything that's gonna be in there, so the features, the new section, all that kind of stuff. And then whenever anything is announced as being coming out that month, we just go in and start up filling it in day by day. So we don't sit down on day one and go over what everybody's thinking, what's the idea, it's really led now by this document. So every day we're adding new things to it and chasing things up with PR companies or film companies and saying we want to do a cover on this issue and we want to do a news story here, we want to do a profile there. But all of these things are happening all over the place so that it's not a linear process. I can be doing something that's happening six months in the future. I could be doing something, for example, I'm still chasing up a main feature, cover feature, in fact, for the issue that goes to press next week. But I don't feel stressed about that because I know it will all fall into place and it's all happening. But sometimes particularly with TV shows and films, you are bound by so many embargoes and deadlines and imagery being held to the last minute because you can't just go and use any old picture, you have to use something that they're providing for a franchise, which has to be approved by a bazillion people before you even see it. So there's all of these things rolling at the same time that I don't even think about now because it's so far in advance, commissions are coming in and just being filed away, ready to run in a couple of months time. And it's different for Ian who's the deputy editor who oversees the review section and that is quite a big part of SFX' USP and that's quite intricate and it has always been that way. And they are more sort of up to the minute because it's difficult to get the actual film like a DVD with extras on it, or a copy of a book or some things, you get them sooner than later. So that's more up to the minute I think. But obviously we're out every four weeks, but at any given time, we're not just working on the next issue we're working on, I don't

know, I've got things planned right through until December, which is slightly geeky, but you might expect that from the editor of a sci-fi magazine.

Well, Merry Christmas. I mean, I mentioned it in terms of competition, like whether you view Empire, whether you're trying to take their readers or whether it's a sort of finite market share, but actually as you alluded to there, is Empire and other magazines like that actually competition in terms of exclusives as well? If you are going to have a new Batman film and there's this imagery, presumably you want exclusive imagery or an exclusive interview with Robert Pattinson, or is there like a little bit of trading where you say we'll dedicate the whole issue if you can give us an exclusive on the top three cast and the director and on, is it like an auction where empire will come and outbid you and say, right, we'll give you that. And blah, blah, blah. How does it actually work?

Sorry, did you say Empire? I've never heard of them.

That's good!

We don't have a bidding war. I mean, I understand that Empire is the market leader in global film magazines, but obviously Future, the company that publishes SFX. We also publish books and films, and I work with the film group. I'm part of the film group. So I am aware of all of everything that's going on in that sector. And who's trying to get what and who's doing what. I like to sit back and go, I'm just not gonna get involved with this. I used to have that to an element when I worked at Gay Times and my direct competitor was Attitude Magazine. So there was actually quite a lot of that. And I feel it was unnecessary for us to try and argue the case. I want this and you want that. And will be blocked from getting any coverage at all. And I don't have that now. So we don't really get told we can't get something because somebody else has got it. The benefit for me publishing SFX is that we run things quite close to release. So the other film magazines usually go quite early. So Empire and Totals film will be a good few months ahead of a release. So they'll do a big Batman exclusive a good few months before the film is in cinemas. Whereas we'll do something weeks before it's coming out, because I know as a fan of something, if I'm really into a thing that's just happened, it's just new in cinema or on television. I want to go out and buy that merchandise. And I want to see it on a shelf when it's there. So that's why I made a conscious decision to do that, to have SFX be really quite close to release. So that doesn't really come up. However, with other companies, we are able to sort of go into deeper negotiation, things that are a bit more nerdy, like Star Trek or certain things on genre shows on Netflix, for example, like Witcher or Dark Whistler, where we're able to go in and say, we can give you a special issue. We can do posts and stickers and huge amounts of coverage and stuff like that. And people, they really get into that and they appreciate that and they wouldn't necessarily get that coverage anywhere else. So I think Empire and Total Film do their thing and SFX does theirs, but sometimes there's a slight crossover, but I certainly don't ever think, oh, well, I'm gonna try and [get an] exclusive from Empire because I did that years ago.

Course. What is the product in your mind? Obviously the printed magazine is the McGuffin, it's the commodity, it's the thing. But like you do have website visitors and traffic. When you have a reader in mind, do you picture them holding the magazine? Are they reading it on an iPad? Or is it someone on the website because like any media brand now you have different revenue streams. You're not merely the magazine. You're much more than that.

Well, I definitely think that we have a hardcore old school fan base that's been with SFX nearly 30 years and they prefer the print. We do have a lot of digital readers. That's great and obviously the website, we share that with various other platforms within Future, we're underneath the gamesradar.com umbrella. So we're not really able to kind of branch out as much as I would like, but again, it's one of those things where you kind of just sit back and think, okay, well actually right now we're making this physical product every four weeks with three full-time members of staff that make SFX and everything else is freelancers. So we sort of buy your time and think, okay, actually the next opportunity, what would that be? Could it be events? Could it be YouTube? Could it be a podcast? God forbid, could it be TikTok or whatever? The next thing is that I'm actually having to dance to sell my magazine, but at the heart it's very much a print magazine. That's how I see it. And hopefully I haven't put all my eggs in one basket, but that is our focus because everything else comes off top of that. So there's news lines from the print magazine, the social media shares and coverage because that's where it's come from. So in the hope that you would then bring people back to reading the magazine, whether it be digitally, or print, it's always something about making physical products at the start.

What does a typical week look like for you? I mean, we've obviously spoken about the process of getting an issue out there, but like what's the rhythm of your working week and how has COVID impacted that? Are you just working from home now in a bubble or do you manage to get into the office? How often do you get to meet the subjects of the things you're writing about? Do you have set visits? Tell us about the sort of working rhythm of the typical week.

A typical week at SFX for me before COVID was absolutely incredible. One day I would be walking a film premier carpet in Leicester Square. Next I'd be on a set in Canada, then I'd be going to a convention in San Diego, all different kinds of things. It's just incredible. I remember just before COVID started, I think I had a week where I was meeting the cast of Wonder Woman in L.A. and then I was going on the set of Star Trek in Canada. And there were just so many things going on. It's just so strange to think that was two years ago now. And obviously there haven't been any set visits. They are going to come back, slowly but surely. And I am looking forward to that. It's a weird thing to say, but I miss the smell of wood on a film studio set because it's obviously all the sets made with wood. I don't think there's a typical week for SFX, really, because sometimes you can be up till quite late at night waiting to do a phone or a zoom interview with some American star or director or writer or producer. But I never really think of it as being sort of conventional, I have to start work at 10, I've

never done that as a magazine editor. I don't think you really can, but it's such a cliché, but it doesn't feel like work because it's something that I've always loved. I've always really cared about these things, these genres, these franchises, and I've also always loved making magazines. So it's almost mind blowing for me, even three years down the line doing SFX that those two worlds collide and I get to do it. So every day I'm kinda waking up thinking, oh God, what am I gonna do today? This is crazy. I'm interviewing the cast of Batman, or I'm going to an event where they've recreated a set somewhere, you know, or just silly things that a lot of people I think in this industry still sort of take for granted or turn their nose up at. But for me getting to see new episodes of a TV show, for example, just suddenly an email will pop up and say, you've got access to six episodes of this show, which comes out in a month's time and I'm just elated. I'm just so excited that I just get to sit and enjoy that and long may that continue, I hope. But I think COVID has been obviously terrible for everybody and particularly for print, it's been very difficult. At Future, we are now back in the office three days a week up until I think it was last month when they reopened the offices. I've literally been living in a tracksuit in my house with my dog for two years, which has been fine. But I do miss being able to go and meet and interview people in person. I found the whole zoom situation very strange. So I've also tried to sort of phase that out of SFX about mentioning that it was a zoom interview. I don't think people need to know anymore, but also any conversations about COVID no more in the magazines. No one needs to know, so to try and sort of not pretend that it's not happening, but just to let people escape, I think for a bit. If they're paying five pounds for a magazine about fantasy and sci-fi, then they really want to get away from this planet for a while.

What advice would you give to your successor?

Don't try it, bitch.

I like that. Actually. I think that's a good enough answer, actually. I can move on to the next thing. Listen, I obviously knew you when you were the editor of Gay Times, could you walk lists through your career? Did you always envisage that you'd be doing this? Did you want to do journalism? What did you study and what did you want to be when you grew up as it were back in the day?

Gosh, back in the day, free war. No, I had a very different career, very different life. I worked in a variety of different things, pensions and shops and all kinds of stuff like that. I was very much brought up to think just have something that pays the bills rather than to try and achieve what you wanted. Very different mindset, I think from nowadays where people are sort of led to do what they want and anything can be achieved. So I didn't study journalism until I was a mature student. So I think I was 28 and I had dabbled with fanzines and local newspapers up until that point. And I went to University in Edinburgh and I thought I would be quite lucky if I got a local newspaper job. We were writing about councils and all that kind of thing. And I thought that would be fine. I just wanted to be part of that industry and I never really had any aspirations. I never really had a goal that I thought I wanted to be this kind of

journalist. And I want to work on this magazine. Because I always thought that was sort of beyond me. I'd never really aimed high. If somebody had told me 25 years ago that I would be working on SFX magazine, I would never have believed you, that was just an unbelievable thing that was kinda job that somebody could get. So I don't say I was lucky cause I worked really hard and I was the editor of the student newspaper for two years when I was at university and I was working freelance all the time while I was there. I was just really putting my all into it. And I applied for a job as a Scotland correspondent for the Pink Paper, which was an LGBT newspaper that was published for quite a long time. I think it's very, very long running and I applied to do that. So I was doing that while I was at uni. Then they offered me a job when I graduated. So I had about six or seven months between when they offered me the job and then when I finished uni, they had to wait until I finished uni. And then as soon as I graduated, I moved from Scotland down to London. So then I just kept building it from there really. And obviously that company that published Pink Paper, they had AXM they had Diva Magazine. They had Gay Times. So I was able to work quite a lot of those, but it was a very quick process from me going from doing the features for Pink Paper to ultimately becoming editor of Gay Times, which I worked on for about 10 years, I think.

Wow, 10 years. That's a long time.

Yeah. If I'd have killed someone I'd have been out by then.

You must have enjoyed it after 10 years. I mean, it would be time to move on from anything wouldn't it after 10 years, you'd obviously done a huge amount. I mean, 10 years, Darren, you must have had some incredibly fond memories of your time there.

It was just the most incredible learning curve for me, baptism of fire, I think is what people would say. There were so many things that I learned while I was there. I wouldn't say I was thrown into it. I was throwing myself into it because I just really, really cared about it. It was a legacy brand that I was determined to keep going, that I didn't want to see it fail. I didn't want to be the one that had that on my shoulders. You know it's this 30 year old or plus mag, I dunno how many years it was for this very old magazine. You don't want to be the one that's caused it to go under. So I was driven, but I was also driven just cause I really care about making magazines. Obviously people would say in hindsight, you look back and think, oh, I would do things differently because I'm now very privileged to work for a different type of company that I've learnt so many things since being at SFX and working with Future that I think, oh, if I'd have I been able to apply that back in those days, but I didn't know any different because I was so fresh off the boat, I hadn't long graduated. And it was a huge learning curve for me, but it's like with SFX, you'd wake up and you would just be like, okay, what's gonna happen today because there were so many crazy things. We were so lucky to be able to do the things that we were doing and speak to the people we were speaking to. Because it was such a mixed publication, it wasn't just one thing we were able to do journalism on all kinds of levels. It wasn't just celebrities

or it wasn't just naked men. Although there were a lot of those, there was real world stuff in there as well. It was very important news there. And it was a mix of kind of activism and journalism, whether you like that or not, it was part of that job. So there were so many different things that I learned from that and I think I said this at the time that it would, there would never be another job like that because I don't think it's quite possible because I think other magazines, maybe you would have one person doing one thing and another we'll be doing another, but for us on Gay Times when I was there, everyone was doing everything because it was a very small group. And everyone was sort of throwing themselves into it. But when I look back and I think about all the things that I got to do it is quite incredible. And also it's quite exhausting now. Cause I think God, I was really up for it cause I was so much younger, but I think the best thing for me from working for Gay Times is that, it was because I worked at Gay Times that I got my dog, Toby the pug. We had a very, very happy life together. He passed away at Christmas.

Sorry to hear that.

Thank you. That was definitely the best thing for me because that changed my life in a way I wasn't expecting. That was great.

It's the same for me in a sense that I did a law degree many, many years ago, about 23 years ago and I'm not a lawyer. I enjoyed the course, but the thing that came out of it was I was at a random party from a fellow student. And I met this woman who became my wife. So although I started my degree thinking I would get a degree, I actually acquired a wife, which has been rather longer lasting. And I was gonna say slightly less useful, but I dunno, she might be within air shot. So I have to be careful, although we are recording this for broadcast but she won't be listening to this, obviously, why would she? I suppose the cliché question in interviews like this is what keeps you up at night, but like what are the challenges? It can't all be great. What are the things that keep you up at night? What are the downsides? The adage is 'heavy as the crown.'

It feels a bit strange to be able to be so positive about something because I don't really get kept up anymore. I think because I now have the benefit of so much experience that is also bolstered by working with a very small, but extremely competent team who get it and care as well, that I don't really have that much to bother about. I've had this discussion with friends where you start going, oh, oh God, this has happened, that's happened. But you're actually just looking for something to sort of moan about really, because that's what people do. And when I actually break it down and go, oh my God, it's so to get these pictures from that film company, you just think that's not really a bad problem to be having. That's really all you've got to worry about. Obviously I do worry about print as a commodity, being in decline. I think everybody is, I think if you're a journalist and particularly if you're working on magazines and you're an editor, then of course you would care about that because it isn't just the job. I mean, I would be devastated if I lost this job for a silly reason, for whatever external reasons shall we say, but at the same time, it wouldn't be the end

of the world because I could do anything really. I could work in a shop. I could work in pensions. I've done all those things before I could do them again. It's not that I would necessarily want to, but it doesn't stress me out anymore because I just think about enjoying what I've got now. Otherwise it's gonna be a waste of time, and all that time worrying about it. Then when it's over, I'll go, oh, I didn't actually enjoy it because I was too busy fretting about it. I've done that before. So this is why I think now, yes, it's nice to have little things that you're concerned about and you're getting to a deadline thinking, oh, I need that picture of a Dalek and it's the wrong one. That's a good place to be, I think, if that's all you've got to worry about.

Who are your editorial heroes? Who do you look toward and you gain inspiration from?

Wow. That is a very good question.

It's easy to ask the question, son. It's difficult to answer them. It's why I've never been a guest on this podcast. I'd last about five minutes.

That would be a good one to listen to you though, I have to say, you interviewing yourself!

One would assume that I get someone else to do the interviewing, because I think even by my own standards of arrogance and inward looking and recursion, they'd be like, hi Paul, welcome to Media Masters. Well thank you for having me on Paul. Why does everyone hate you, Paul? Well, that's a good question, Paul, I don't know.

You should just do it. Just do it. That would be brilliant. Has anybody else ever done that? I don't think I've ever heard about it.

No, no. But there's still time. Anyway, this is your podcast, darling. Come on. Let's get on with it.

I think fictional characters really have been my inspiration, which is terrible now. Cause I look back and think, oh God, you were doing it all wrong. So I was really into Miranda Priestly from The Devil Wears Prada. Wilhelmina Slater from Ugly Betty. Courtney Cox when she was an editor in Dirt. And it was all the wrong things. It was all really over the top.

I can imagine the headline now, "SFX editor says no one in real life inspires him." "No real life person could inspire me," says SFX editor. And it says "Sex editor" because the top of someone's head would cover the bottom of the F for the masthead.

Well, I think some people would say I was a sex editor for about 10 years.

Well indeed!

That's terrible, isn't it? That nobody inspires me. I think the problem is, being in this industry and hearing how other people behave. I just think you just need a glass of water and a calm down, because there's no reason for you to behave that way just because you're a magazine editor. So that's what I hear more about than what is inspirational. But I tell you, I mean he's no longer the editor of Insight Soap, but Steven Murphy, he's probably the most, what's the word I'm looking for. He's the person you'd sort of look up to your most because he just kept that ship going for the longest time. And you never heard anything bad about him. He was always loved by the PR's and he knew what he was doing. He knew how to make a magazine. It was in his bones. I talk about him like he's dead, he's not dead. He's on a cruise, which some people might say is pretty much the same thing.

That could be a sitcom quote. He's not dead. He's just on a cruise.

He'd be inspiring. But again, that's only in hindsight now that I look at him and think, oh God actually yeah. Because I've known Steven for years before I actually worked for a brief period while I was freelancing, I did some freelancing at Inside Soap. And they were the nicest team of people I've ever worked with. They were just all so lovely and so kind. And I think that just comes from the top. So I think when you get a good editor that just trickles down, not that I'm saying that Steven trickles, but maybe he does after his time on his cruise. I don't know. Hopefully he'll never hear this.

He won't hear it, we've got no listeners. This podcast descended into irrelevance about three years ago. You mentioned The Walking Dead, this is basically a zombie podcast. If my wife did listen to this podcast that would double the listenership.

She would say, what are you doing in there all that time, talking to imaginary people.

Exactly.

I guess it is kind of terrible that nobody really inspires me as much. There's people that I really like in the industry. There's lots of people I don't like, but I wouldn't say I'm necessarily inspired, I guess it's because I sound really arrogant, I guess it's because I know what I'm doing. I just got on with it. That sounds terrible. But I'm not really concerned with what other people are doing. I love magazines. I buy them and look at the covers. I'm always interested in what everyone's doing, but I wouldn't necessarily say that I get inspired. Does that sound terrible?

No, not at all.

I just wanna sort of get on with what I do, and enjoy it. And I wish that other people could do that too. And it's all very complicated and it's so nice now to be in a place where I love what I do. And I work with a great support network of people at Future and on SFX and Total Film. It's so nice to be able to do that. And you think, God I'd love this to last forever. And again, like I say, it's a job I thought I would never get. I thought that kind of thing goes internally. I'm never gonna get this job. You know, even though I had the experience, I just thought, why would I, somebody else would be finding this, but here I am and you just go, God, I don't wanna say lucky, but my God, I'm happy with it. It's a great position to be in. And I sound like I've been replaced by a robot.

Well, I think the headline will be “magazine editor sees no room for improvement.”

I'm perfect as I am frankly.

Exactly. And bugger anyone else who says otherwise.

I did say I wanna change the magazine slightly, but again, I don't wanna throw the baby out with the bath water.

So “slight changes needed to magazine” says editor. “Otherwise not interested.” Well, Darren, that was a hugely interesting and very enjoyable conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.

Thank you.