

PETRIE

In Conversation with Jack Wolfe

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JACK WOLFE IN ALEXANDER MCQUEEN



There are many things that are out of the ordinary about Jack Wolfe. Back in school, when kids his age would dash off to play sports, he would find solace in the music room playing piano. Now 26 years old, Wolfe is deservedly ready for the spotlight. Starring in Florian Sigl's *The Magic Flute*, he plays the role of Tim Walker – a teenager who enrolls in a storied boarding school in the Alps, where one day, he stumbles upon the fantastical land of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

PETRIe spoke to Wolfe as he limbers up for a season of promotion to discuss his lead role in the film, the much anticipated second season of *Shadow and Bone* and the dizzying reality of being an actor.

Taanya Garg: How would you describe your younger self? Can you share a bit about your journey transitioning from performing on stage to acting on screen? What prompted the transition?

Jack Wolfe: I was raised around music. My parents are both musicians – my mum teaches piano, and my dad plays the cornet and works with brass bands. In fact, my mum was my piano teacher. So, before acting – there was music.

After I watched a few plays and started visiting theatres, there was no going back. I just couldn't see myself wanting to do anything else – it was like magic to me. As soon as I got a chance, I joined the Yew Tree Youth Theatre in Wakefield, where I grew up. At the time, a Saturday morning class costed only £1.50 and was led by this incredible woman called Sarah Osborne. Every week, we would learn about what it was like to be an actor. Most importantly, I think it brought me out of my shell a bit. I was a very nervous child – extremely shy and highly strung. Going to youth theatre helped me find a voice for myself, make friends, gain confidence, and also made me realise that I wanted to pursue acting in the future. So, it was really instrumental in my training.

TG: Do you remember the first musical you saw?

JW: Yeah, of course. I have so many early theatre memories.

My grandma took me to see *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Cardiff when I was a kid. I was terrified! I found the whole thing so intimidating and scary, but in a way that also felt really electric and thrilling. I also used to watch plays as part of school trips. I think what drew me to it is that there are no hard rules on what a world can look like inside a theatre. There are endless possibilities, so you never know what might inspire you.

TG: You trained from the Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts in London in 2017 and also Chetham's School of Music in Manchester. Can you share the significance of this time in the development of your career? What is something you feel film schools don't prepare you for and can be learnt only once you start working professionally?

JW: I went to Chethams when I was 16, before I went to Mountview. At the time, I thought I was going to be a musician, that I would write music and play the piano; that's how I had imagined my life to be. My time spent at Chethams was really memorable – I made some amazing friends. But it was also the time when I felt very intimidated by talents of everyone around me. I just didn't feel like I was good enough to be a part of that world.

Going to Mountview was like a dream because I always knew that I wanted to be an actor. When I got in, I was so excited that I could study what I love every day, surrounded by people who enjoyed it too. I think it's a real privilege to be able to study what you love.





It is a real gift. Both of the schools were so important to what I'm doing now, in so many different ways. For example, a great thing about going to a drama school is having the space to fail – to get things wrong, try again, and to learn what works for you and what doesn't. This also comes with a lot of pressure. I think you don't always get that space outside of school. In theatre, you've got rehearsals. Although you get to do different takes on a film set, everything works at such a fast pace that there isn't really time to feel things out all the time.

School also helps you develop a sense of self. Outside of training, I've learnt just how true it is when people tell you to hold onto qualities that make you different. I didn't really believe in it at drama school. I thought, 'Oh no, I must be like all the other boys my age – be as tall as them or engage in things they are interested in'. When in reality, everything that I'm interested in, be it the stories I want to tell or play roles that feel authentic – have always come to be when I listened to the parts of myself that are different or unique; parts that I earlier wished weren't there. This has been a really interesting lesson too.

TG: Were there times when you felt unsure of your decision to pursue acting professionally?

JW: Yes, I think all creative people feel that way to some degree. It would be amazing if you could rely on something like acting or music to pay rent and make money out of it all the time, but it has not been that way. There're loads of different things that I've had to do. Especially when you're starting out, it's really hard to detach yourself and to not equate your worth to the amount of work you might be seen for, because it feels personal. As an actor, what you're giving is yourself. So when it doesn't feel like that's going well for you, it can be a really hard thing to come up against.

There have been so many times where I think I've questioned it, as I'm sure other people have as well. I think as I'm growing up, I'm learning that it's best to detach yourself from those things. It's never personal. Ultimately, all you're trying to do is collaborate with somebody to try and tell a story, it's not about you or who you are. In the end, it's all about what you can offer as a storyteller.



TG: Acting can require a lot of resilience – do you have a support system that has been influential in getting you to where you are now?

JW: Definitely. I think that's the key, isn't it? My support system has been the people who are the closest to me – my friends, my family. They are what keep you going. And a lot of the people closest to me are also actors and artists. So, I think we all need to look out for each other and support each other's work. It also really inspires me when I see my friends succeeding – to see them achieving the things they have always wanted to achieve. Nothing makes me happier than seeing them take a bow at the end of a show they really wanted to do or see them on TV. So, celebrating all the good times together is a really exciting, wonderful thing to do.

TG: What about the times when you faced rejections? How do you overcome those?

JW: It changes all the time. I think it depends on how connected you feel to the story for which you're auditioning. Sometimes, you feel like you're a part of it, when you understand who your character is. And when that is taken from you, it feels like a shame because you never got to go through what you had envisioned for that role. I feel that so many of the careers, especially at the beginning, are out of our hands. It's all decided by other people. And if I'm not the right person for a particular collaboration, And if I'm not the right person for a particular collaboration, I have to trust that it is not my story to tell; that there are other stories

I can share and other projects I can work on. It can be really challenging but you eventually get used to it. There's an enjoyable aspect to it too – tough as it may be, you get to go to different auditions and see them as a completely separate opportunity to work with new material and meet new people. There are so many things you can take out of that experience.

TG: Both of your parents are musicians; do you think that playing the role of Tim Walker in *The Magic Flute* felt like a natural choice due to your upbringing and training or were there new skills you had to learn to fit in the role?

JW: In terms of the actual character, there are a lot of similarities. It was quite easy sometimes. Tim finds himself at a music school and feels like he isn't ready to be there, which is something that I have experienced as well. So, that was a really exciting thing to sort of get to grips with. One thing I've always found the most interesting about playing characters is finding what's different about them to you. And Tim is a lot braver than I ever could hope to be. He deals with a lot of grief at the beginning of the film, so there were loads of elements to unpack and discover. For the film, I had some vocal training with a man called Sam Kenyon who helped me overcome my fear of singing opera.

Singing opera can be very intimidating. I used to think 'Am I allowed to do this? Like, is it legal for me to sing opera like this?' But I learnt that Sam and the director, Florian Sigl, just wanted Tim to be an average teenager who enjoys singing and is discovering the material authentically for himself. And that's something I got to do on the job as well.

TG: Can you share your experience of landing a role as the lead of *The Magic Flute* – from the auditions to who you called first when the cast got confirmed?

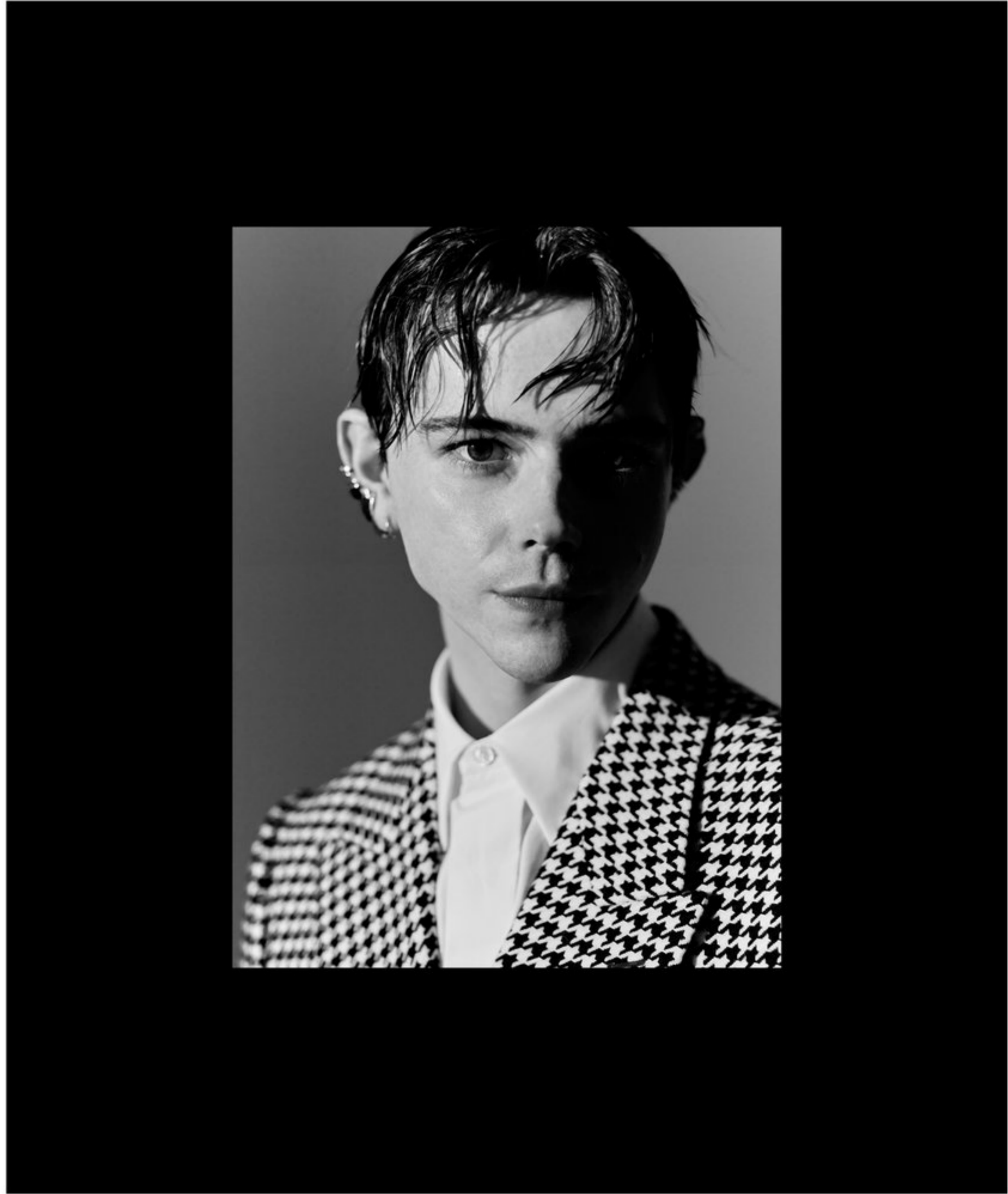
JW: So, I auditioned for *The Magic Flute* a couple of years ago. The project looked very, very different back then from what it is now. I auditioned for a casting director called Sophie Holland; she has such a clever way of thinking about characters. She gave me the opportunity to audition, even though I had mostly done theatre work until then. That was a really important bridge for me. I went into the audition, sang for the team and acted out some of the scenes. But at the time, the project was an investigation into whether we could adapt this opera, add a real life framework onto it, and tell the story of a young boy seeking escapism into something that could hopefully be accessible to an audience unfamiliar with opera. The team had so much passion about what they wanted to do with the film, that I just knew it was going to be a special project. But it took years to happen. It was in 2020, during one of the lockdowns, when I found out that they're going ahead with the film.

I was actually terrified during lockdown because I thought that I wouldn't get to act for a while. So many of my friends were in the same boat and the theatre went dark. So it felt like a huge opportunity. But this was also when I lost a lot of confidence. It was a big journey, getting myself to feel like I was worthy or ready to lead a film like that. I found support from people like Sam Kenyon. And knowing that the project was made with a lot of love added a completely different feeling to it.

TG: Can you share your creative process behind composing the music for *The Magic Flute* – from the writing stage to the finished version? Have you composed any songs for *Shadow and Bone* as well?

JW: In *The Magic Flute*, there's a scene where Sophie, played by Neve McCormack, and my character, Tim, are sitting at the piano and we sing together after school hours, in the middle of the night. It's a really special scene because we recorded the tracks before we started shooting.









Left: still from Netflix's *Shadow and Bone*. Right: stills from *The Magic Flute*.

Martin Stock, the music supervisor, was really kind and asked us if we'd like to arrange the music ourselves. So, Sophie and I sat next to each other in the studio and improvised the cover of the song in the film; we had such a lovely time together. We were making each other laugh, and we sort of finessed the song afterwards.

I feel like this song came from the heart, which is something I used to do with my friends in school, so, that was really cool. As for *Shadow and Bone*, you'll have to just wait and see. But the musical side of Wylan really meant a lot to me. Hopefully, it's something I have taken special care of.

TG: You've mentioned previously that you felt like an 'infant' when you first stepped on the set of *The Magic Flute*; comparing that day to the first day of *Shadow and Bone* – how different were the two experiences?

JW: *The Magic Flute* was like a completely new world for me. Like I said, I went into it with a lot of fear as well, with a lot of impostor syndrome. But I was lucky enough to work with a cast and crew who were so caring and so excited about the story we were telling. I learned a lot on that job about just how many people work in front of and behind the camera, and in different countries, on one story together. That was a big lesson to me and constantly made me question how as an actor, I could make those jobs as easy as possible for everyone from different departments. Because ultimately, the story is only as good as the sum of its parts. And that's what I took with me to *Shadow and Bone*.

I think both Tim and Wylan are characters that I feel really safe with. They're both special in their own ways. There's a quality to Wylan and I just could not wait to bring him to life. I was just so excited to see my first lines, especially after reading the books. It was a very different experience of walking to the set on the first day, because it felt like I came with a lot of research. Leigh's books are full of the best kind of character writing and it was just a joy to jump in completely. I came to the first day of shooting with two books worth of character in my head. And these incredible scripts. I was ready to just get going.





TG: How was your experience of working with the other cast members of *Shadow and Bone*? Is there something that you've learnt from them that you'd like to share?

JW: Well, firstly, they're all as kind as they look – they're like a real family. I think we all looked out for each other. We were shooting in Budapest and were out there for six months. Because we weren't able to come back and forth all the time, we developed a real bond together as a cast. That sense of community is something that I'm always looking for. This was one of my biggest takeaways of working on *Shadow and Bone* and its impact on the work you do, when people feel safe and supported.

TG: What are some of the present industry norms you hope to refer to in past tense when speaking of your career in 10 years' time?

JW: I think so many things have to change, which we're all aware of. But I hope in the future I'm lucky enough to still be acting. I hope I'm working in a world where real diversity is seen throughout the industry, in front and behind the camera; that everybody's stories are told and that everyone has a chance to tell those stories. That there will be real parity, which would be great.

TG: Two of your most recent projects – *The Magic Flute* and *Shadow and Bone* – both look at themes of fantasy and escapism. What is your idea of escapism when life gets monotonous?

JW: What I've actually found recently, if I'm being completely honest, is that real escapism to me at the moment is watching old reruns of game shows. There's magic and innocence to it, and it's so much fun. Even doing puzzles on the train like arrow word books help me get out of my head for a bit. This is of course, subject to change.

TG: And would you like to continue working across genres of fantasy and escapism or are you keen to explore other themes as well?

JW: Definitely, I'd like to make it as varied as possible. I'd like to work in theatre more and work in more films. That's always been the big dream for me - to work on things that feel very different and far away from each other.

TG: The theme for *PETRIE's* December issue is 'optimism,' surrounding the ideas of celebrating the unknown. How does this relate to your life and career?

JW: I think that it's a really great way to look at a career from a distance, right? If we could all have that, it would be magic - to be able to celebrate things we don't know are going to happen. That's sort of true optimism, isn't it? That I may not have much control over what tomorrow is going to look like. So I might as well jump in with complete joy. That sounds like a really wonderful way to live.

The Magic Flute is currently in cinemas in Germany and Austria. Season 2 of Shadow and Bone will return to Netflix on March 16th, 2023.

