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Everybody's Talking About Max Harwood

WORDS
TAANYA GARG

PHOTOGRAPHER
CARLO ZAMBON

FASHION DIRECTORS
ZADRIAN + SARAH

HAIR STYLIST
NADIA ALTINBAS

MAKE-UP ARTIST
ADAM DE CRUZ @ ONE REPRESENT

STYLISTS' ASSISTANT
JOSEPHINE HATFIELD

SPECIAL THANKS TO
PUBLIC EYE, A.I. PR, ALEXANDER MCQUEEN
AND LOUIS VUITTON.

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MAX HARWOOD IN LOUIS VUITTON

For *PETRIE*'s October issue, we speak with Max Harwood – a 24-year-old British actor making waves in the film industry with his debut as Jamic in the movie adaptation of the hit musical *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*. The film (now out on Amazon Prime Video) follows the journey of a Sheffield-based gay teenager chasing his dream of becoming a drag queen.

In many ways, Max shows the same will as Jamic; whether it is by defying all odds and auditioning for the role when it was against the film school rules, or by unapologetically being himself while playing the character, allowing him to be flawed and amazing. In this interview, Harwood speaks about the joys of playing a lead gay role for his acting debut, the many firsts experienced, including dressing in drag, upcoming film, *Magpie*, and more.



Taanya Garg: Can you tell me a little about your entry into acting and what drove you to pursue this career?

Max Harwood: My love of acting started at a young age. Growing up, I watched a lot of musicals and used to put on little shows in my living room with my younger sister. After Sixth Form, probably around 17 or 18, I decided that I really wanted to pursue acting. So, I did A levels in theatre studies, along with art photography and music technology. That's when I realised I was heading more towards a career in theatre acting.

I was told by everyone that drama school was the way to become an actor. I found Guilford School of Acting where I was offered a one-year foundation course in musical theatre. That's where my love of acting in theatre and film began. I then went to another school to learn musical theatre and professional dance and landed the role of Jamie in my second year there; enabling me to evolve, learn and create as an actor.

TG: *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* is not a usual movie that portrays how a character struggles to come out as queer nor is it centred around romance; the plot follows a Sheffield-based teenager's dream to become a drag queen. Was that something that appealed to you?

MH: What appealed to me was that it wasn't a tragic coming out story. Jamie is already out as gay when we meet him. This is just a story about any young person stepping into their most authentic place, how they go about that, and the troubles they face. It's universal in that anyone, whether queer or not, can relate to him. I love that we're exploring a feminine hero here. It is brilliant that being a gay actor myself, I get the opportunity to play a role that isn't

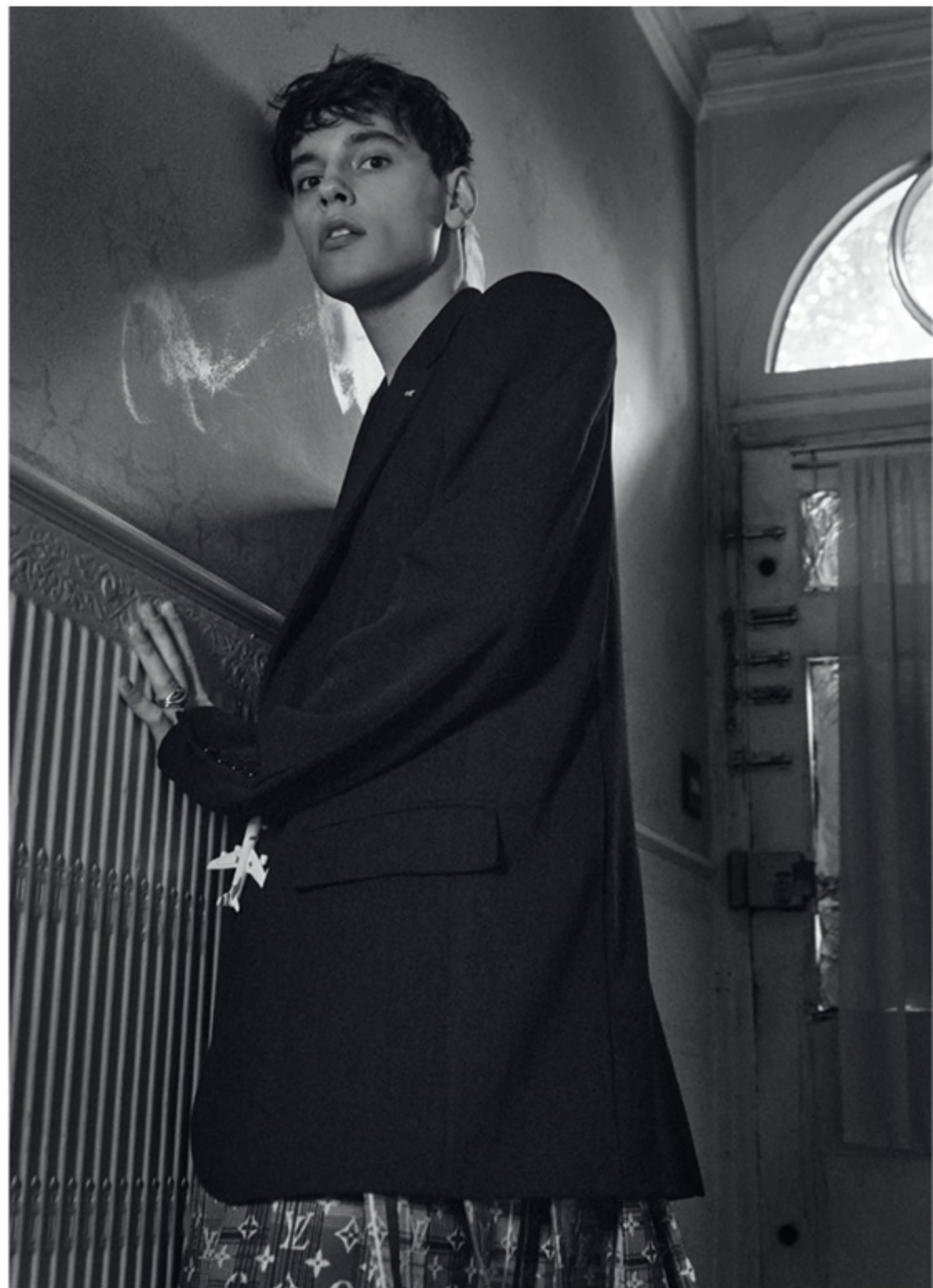
stereotyped or tragic. No spoilers: Jamie doesn't die, which is often the narrative we, as queer people, are given. It felt like a fresh take on the queer experience of growing up, which really drew me to this role.

TG: What was the audition process for the film like? You did not have an agent at the time and had to apply for the role by yourself; were there any other challenges you faced in your journey to playing Jamie?

MH: It was a long process. One challenge about auditioning is that you never really know how it went. The creative team is meeting other people for the role; you have to take things step by step and get closer. That can be quite hard to deal with – the uncertainty of whether you pitched something right or done something they like. Also, the film is a musical. Jamie is dancing, singing, acting in drag, and going through a wide spectrum of emotions. For that reason, the role required someone who could do all of that. Important in the audition was making sure that I could act while being authentic and spontaneous, which was another challenge.

TG: What are the positives and negatives of pursuing a career in acting so far?

MH: The positives are that I entered the industry at a really fantastic level; I've had the opportunity to meet, work with and learn from some really amazing people. Richard Grant is an Oscar nominee, Sarah Lancashire is a BAFTA winner, and their openness to share their experiences and skills with me has been the biggest positive learning experience. The negatives about being an actor are the human elements of it; I'm an actor and I feel pressured thinking about my next project. After taking on the role of a leading actor in my first job,





I want to make sure that the projects I take going forward are really interesting and are the ones I love. Roles such as Jamie, where a queer person plays the lead role don't come up often. I suppose imposter syndrome is another one; it makes you question being the right person or this is the journey to be on? Generally speaking, despite COVID being a huge negative, everything for me has been extremely positive. I am surrounded by the most amazing people: my styling team, Zadrian and Sarah, my publicists, Sally and Eleanor, and my agent; I'm really leaning on these people to guide me step by step to make this all work. It's all a team effort.



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TG: With this being your debut film, were there any moments of self-doubt during shooting? What helped you to overcome them?

MH: I don't think I've shared this yet but I'm going to share it now, because it feels like the right time with this interview. I can be a very anxious person and there was a moment on set quite early on, where I had a panic attack in a scene with Lauren. We were in the bedroom, and we were shooting the scene where there was a globe lamp and I think that was the moment when I realised I had to look after myself in this process. I was giving my everything and putting so much pressure on myself. Moments like that made me realise that I'm a human, the people making this film are human and I'm not a robot. Now that I've had that experience, I feel that I'll be able to navigate those moments in a different way.

The outside perspective about films is often that it's really glamorous and looks unfazed. On the flip side, behind the magic curtain, you realise that it's not that. And that you can be flawed and amazing. I allowed my character to be flawed, to be human and I let go of myself a bit more by having that experience.

OCTOBER 2021



MAX HARWOOD IN LOEWE



TG: Do you feel that doing this movie changed your perception of drag as an art form? Did you learn anything surprising that you were previously unaware of?

MH: It has been a huge learning curve. My experience with drag before this film was very limited. I had watched *RuPaul's Drag Race*, specifically the seasons that are out now and all the other things I did which helped me find my love of drag. I've discovered that drag is more than just one thing, it's more than just a fashion moment, it is more than just a comedy queen; the facet and the art form of drag are so expansive, it continues to change. I hope that it allows the world to accept all forms of art one day. I learned that drag is hard. It's really challenging. It takes a lot of energy, time, patience, and creativity. One thing that I didn't realise before is how much effort it takes to put on all of this armour, as it were, go out there and then step into some element of yourself that you hadn't discovered before.

TG: In the film, Jamie is gifted a stunning pair of red heels that further instils confidence in him to pursue his drag dream. What is the favourite piece of clothing or accessory you own which holds a similar value in your life? What influence does fashion have in your life?

MH: Those shoes are gorgeous, I love them but they really hurt the feet. My favourite piece of accessory is probably my St Christopher pendant. I'm not particularly religious but I was christened when I was younger. I think he's the patron saint of travellers. Clothing wise, I love it when I put on a good pair of sunglasses. You know how Jamie feels boujee when he puts on a pair of heels, that's how I feel when I put on sunglasses.



The influence fashion has on my life is growing, as I enable myself to try different clothes and become more open to exploring different styles. I always feel that fashion should be an extension of yourself. However, there are times and moments when I believe fashion should be a statement to be glam and for it to be fun, for instance when you get to attend events. No one I know in my life personally would wear the most stunning off the runway Alexander McQueen suit to Tesco. In those rare moments when you get to experiment with fashion, you have to allow yourself to be glamorous and live in that fantasy. Much like drag, fashion is transformative and amazing, and it is art form through which you can explore really exciting things.

TG: There was a piece of incredible advice by Pritti (played by Lauren Patel) in the film: 'Stop waiting for permission to be you.' Is there a life quote that you abide by? In your own life, what helps you to stay true to yourself?

MH: I know, for many reasons, for many different people, that line will hit hard and resonate. Lines that I abide by in my life are 'Say yes more'. I'm not as wise as Pritti, she is a special character. 'You do you' is also a good one because no one does you as you do. I always go 'peace and love' on Instagram. Probably nothing is as eloquent and beautifully posed as by Pritti.



PETRIE

OCTOBER 2021



MAX HARWOOD IN ALEXANDER MCQUEEN

TG: You have already established a strong social media presence and your following is only expected to grow once the film releases. What is your relationship with social media like?

MH: Social media is a strange and wonderful place. My relationship with it changes; sometimes I love it and love the energy. But sometimes it can also be a negative space to be in if you start thinking of it as a marker of all-round success and let it affect you. I think I find a good balance between using social media to voice my thoughts and feelings about things and also using it to connect in an authentic way with people across the world. My social media platforms are relatively small, compared to other people in the industry, but it's enabled me to connect with some American actors who I've never met in real life before. It has been fun sharing experiences with people that are going through similar things as you.

TG: Now that the movie is officially out, do you have a sense of what your 'Max Harwood's life takeaways' are going to be, when you look back at *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* a few years down the line?

MH: Because it's been two years since we made the film, I've already been quite reflective of the process. So, I would say my life takeaways, thus far, have been: amazing friends, amazing conversations, and amazing self-discoveries about my queerness. I think if we have this chat again in two years, I'd probably give you a very similar answer of it being a crazy ride or being a lot. I really hope that my takeaways would be that I'm very proud to have made a film that impacted many people; I really hope that it helps others to not shy away from stepping into their most authentic selves.

TG: You have mentioned before that you want to continue telling important stories through your work for as long as you can. Is there a story close to your heart, either inspired by your life or someone else's, that you would love to portray on screen?

MH: I'm still yet to discover that. I think that story hasn't found me yet and probably won't find me in my teenager-looking years; probably it'll hit me when I look like a fully grown adult. This would be my honest answer. But as I continue reading the scripts that get sent to me, I find myself constantly asking if the script speaks to an experience I want to lend my voice to and if it's a story the world needs.

TG: What are you looking forward to the most once the film gets released? Are there any upcoming projects that we should look out for?

MH: I'm really looking forward to finally being able to say, 'Oh, I'm an actor. And you can see me in this film,' when people ask if I've been in anything. With this film coming out, hopefully, I'll be able to plant my feet and firmly say that I feel like an actor. I also feel excited to see the incredible things Lauren, who plays Pritti, does; she is a brilliant actor, very talented and an amazing human and friend. Lastly, I can't wait to transform as I go into different roles and snap up the challenges that make me feel scared.

As for future projects, you can look out for me in an upcoming film called *Magpie*, which is being directed by Dean Puckett and will star Buket Komur, Tuppence Middleton and myself. I also have another project which hasn't been announced yet; I went to the studio yesterday to do some ADR for it and it looks really cool.

