



Celebrating My Roots: An Interview With Actress Vanessa Vanderpuye

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The must see show, especially if you are an action lover like me, is Sky One's detective drama Bulletproof. Having joined the show for the second season playing the role of Arjana Pike, British born actress Vanessa Vanderpuye returned to screens this January to reprise her role in the new three-part special filmed in South Africa, alongside her fellow actors Noel Clarke and Ashley Walters.

Vanessa is very passionate about her African roots and has always been led by the life mantra - You can be anything you want to be, so don't be afraid to dream. This belief led her to follow her fervor and flare for acting and to many other achievements along the way including a successful modelling career.

As an actress on the rise, I think there is so much we can learn from Vanessa's experiences so far, and so it was a great pleasure to be able to sit down with the lady herself to find out more.

Vanessa it is an absolute pleasure to be joined by you today, and greetings to you from a very cold United Kingdom. How are you enjoying your time in Ghana these days?

Ghana is absolutely amazing. The people, the weather, the food - I love it so much and am happy and grateful to be able to spend time with my family here whilst travel is restricted because of Covid. Lots of work can be done online with zoom and everything now, so I am currently giving myself time to think and organise the new year, whilst doing a few things I have lined up over here in Ghana.

We are at the start of the new year, and the concept of new beginnings and new directions to explore is very much at the centre of many people's minds. What does that concept mean to you?

I have never been the type of person to make new year's resolutions as such, I am more interested in planning ahead, then looking back to see what worked and what didn't and then comparing it to what I had planned for the year. I think the concept of new beginnings for me is about starting a fresh, looking

back at the errors you have made and also the positives that have worked for you which you can take forward.

Now there is a multitude of exciting things we have to speak about today, but let's go to the very beginning of memory lane, and some of the things that have inspired you and fuelled your dreams growing up?

My dad was a source of great inspiration for me. He was someone who was such a hard worker and who always reaffirmed positive messages to me by telling me that I could be anything I wanted to be. There were a lot of great things I learned about him from his younger years and what it was like for him growing up in Ghana, things that I didn't know until he passed away. His life and everything about him have always been a great motivator for me.

As for other things, growing up I just loved watching TV and seeing stories being told, especially black stories, because it really gave me an understanding of where we came from. For example, shows like Roots, or The Colour Purple and films like that. It was so interesting. I loved learning about our history and people telling their stories. It was also amusing to see that they were always based in America.

Something we love celebrating here at the magazine is this idea of self-love and owning your identity. What has that journey looked like for you? And at what point did you start to recognise your identity shining through?

I think there were different points in my life I started to recognise my identity, for example growing up in the UK, because there is a point where you realise 'oh I am different'. It started with culture, then food and then history. Learning to love myself fully, I feel that was later on, probably at university when I became a bit more confident in myself. I knew what I wanted to do work wise and I just aimed everything towards that. Every step of the way, I became more confident through learning to speak positive affirmations to myself and through celebrating every win, no matter how small!

You appeared in the latest three-part special of *Bulletproof* on Sky 1 reprising your role as Arjana Pike. What has it been like to take the role to the next level with this series and also what was your initial impression when you saw what the directors had in mind for the vibe of your character?

I think filming this series in South Africa was really great. There was a noticeable change in my character because you see more of her personality – a woman with a successful career, as well as a wife and a mother. I had lot more to do this season as I was more hands on and more involved within the main plot line, which was obviously really exciting! I can't give too much away for the viewers who haven't tuned in just yet, but there is certainly a lot more action and cliff hangers in this season!

Now, the word on the street is that you actually have been applying those good old transferable skills and knowledge, as you have a degree in Criminal Justice. That is pretty darn cool, can you tell us more about that?

That was the only thing academically I knew I felt strongly about studying, and my mum was keen for me to study something other than acting. As an African parent, she didn't see acting as something that would be a stable enough career choice for her kids, my parents didn't go to University. I was the first in our family to go and the eldest of 4 girls, so she wanted me to lead by example. I was obsessed with any crime drama TV shows or films, so I knew that had to be the area of law I would focus on! I knew that I could transfer some of those skills in the long run, even if I only studied criminology for my degree and didn't go on to practice as a profession.

If we go back to your other acting achievements and your nominations for Best Actress in *Dreaming Whilst Black*, that must have been a pretty special feeling?

I think it was like a tap on my shoulder to say well done and that I was taking another step in the right direction.

It's amazing because you are being recognised for the skills you are working so hard at. It is definitely a humbling feeling to know that you are doing something right and again it gives you the confidence boost to keep on going and to go bigger and dream brighter. I am particularly inspired by people who, regardless of the challenges they face in life be it health or anything like that, still have that fighting spirit to pursue what they love. While it is sad to hear that you had a few health issues along the way, you didn't allow it to define you or take away your spirit.

I guess I had to take sometime out for myself and I had to let myself heal. I did a lot of praying and a lot of research into my condition [endometriosis] so I could understand it as well. There was nothing I could really do at the beginning, especially after my surgery, other than look into the factors that can aggravate the condition and explore what things I could cut out of my diet to help ease the symptoms. As hard as it was, I just had to release all the pain, cry it out, pray and research. I did take a good few months out and I nearly quit because it got to a point where I was bed bound for a month. At the same time though, I think it was also a point where I really started to understand the importance of self-care and doing more things that make me happy rather than always feeling like I have to please everyone else around me. I am such a people pleaser, but I had to learn to put myself first when it comes to certain aspects of my life especially when it comes to my own health and my mental health as well. With everything combined, I think it definitely made me more resilient.

How did your time at Identity School of Acting help to shape your ambitions in a way that felt authentic to you?

It was really good. I trained at Identity for a short time before I got a role in a theatre show. My teacher at the time was very strict and direct but I like that style of teaching. He just didn't take any crap at all. I am the type of person who likes to ask a lot of questions whether it is positive or negative, because I want to know where I have gone wrong so I can learn how not to make that



mistake again, so yeah it was really good to gain that feedback. I was able to learn about type casting and how to be really honest about the roles you want to be put in. It was a great learning curve to trust my instincts and my direction as well and how to tap into deeper emotions and translate those onto screen. From this, I was driven to explore more film and television opportunities. I have learnt a lot from theatre too. In some ways you can become more disciplined as it doesn't allow for second chances when it comes to a live performance, you have to roll with the punches and think on your feet - ON WITH THE SHOW!

What are some of the other exciting things you have coming up?

With Covid everything has slowed down! I did a film in Summer 2019 which should be coming out by

this summer. It was really great and since it was an action-thriller, that was something I was able to tick off my bucket list! Hopefully when people see it, they will get to see a completely different side from me as an actor. I am someone who likes to stay active, so I would love to do more action films and keep things versatile. *Tomb Raider*, *Black Panther*, *Mr & Mrs Smith* – I loved those kind of films, so lets see what the future holds!

Sending our love and thanks to Vanessa. Remember to check out the three-part special of *Bulletproof* which is now showing on Sky One and Now TV.

As a bit of an extra treat for all our Darkus readers, you can also listen to our full-length interview with Vanessa on our Official Darkus Podcast, which is available on all major podcast platforms.