

The Boys in the Boat

One thing to know about being a professional actor is that you have to handle a lot of rejection. On a daily basis. Since the start of the pandemic, most of the audition process has moved online with 'self-tapes' being the first step on the road to potentially landing a role. Self-tapes involve setting up a camera, lighting and a backdrop in our own home, roping in a friend, partner or family member to read in lines with you; then sending the tape off into the cloud to be watched, assessed and judged by a whole series of individuals. Sometimes you book a job from your tape. Sometimes you book a 're-call' from your tape. Most of the time you hear nothing at all.

So it was exciting when I received a call from my (amazing) agent, Lindsay, on the Friday a week after I'd submitted a self-tape for George Clooney's new movie which would tell the amazing under-dog story of the Washington eight man rowing crew that overcame all the odds to take gold in the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

"Get rowing," she said, "they like you and want to see what you can do."

Less exciting was the thin red line on the covid test when I woke up the following morning. Devastated, I thought that was the end of it. I couldn't attend the rowing recall and there was no chance they'd wait around until I was testing negative. Game over. I tried to forget about it.

But, by some minor miracle, they were willing to wait. They wanted me to do an acting recall on Wednesday evening with the casting director in LA, Rachel Tenner that night. My temperature was through the roof, I had the classic hacking cough, I could hardly breathe. But somehow I got through it. And I made a good impression. "You better be able to row," Rachel laughed. I hoped I could.

Four days later, testing negative but still feeling like a dead weight, I dragged myself to a rowing club in west London at 6am where I'd hired a rowing tank for 90 minutes with the aim of: a) reminding myself how to row again; and b) trying to capture some decent footage that might land me the job. Footage collected and sent to casting, I tried to forget about it again and headed off on a trip to the Lake District with my partner and her family.

A week passed, I gradually recovered from Covid, did some more self-tapes, a re-call for 'Ladhood' (a job I booked!) and just about managed to hold my nerves in check. We returned to London on the Friday and I was just about to write it all off when I received a message from Rachel Tenner: "Congraaatuullllaaaatioooooonsss! You start training on Monday!"

Elation. Speechlessness. Tears. Panic. Pretty much in that order. Dinner and an early night. I needed to get back in the rowing tank on Sunday to hone my rowing skills as I'd be joining the crew 3 weeks into their training schedule.

Saturday: book the rowing tank, hit the gym, get carb loading, watch youtube videos. Early night.

Sunday: Norovirus. 18 hours on the bathroom floor. Misery. Messages to production. There was no way I could start on Monday as I risked making the rest of the cast ill. I'd start Tuesday and a car would pick me up at 5am.

Monday: Try to eat. Fail to eat. Hydrate. Rest and recover.

Tuesday: Force down a bowl of Weetabix. Can't risk a coffee. Get picked up by the nicest driver in the world, Joseph, who makes me laugh and calms the nerves.

I arrived at Radley College at around 7.30am to start training and am introduced to the coaches (Terry O'Neill and Nick Harding) as well as a group of rowers who would be assisting us. "Are you from Lancaster?" asked a rower I'd not met before. "Yeah, are you?" I responded. "I am, you were at LRGS weren't you? So was I," said Andrew McMahon (OL, 2006-2013). That calmed the nerves significantly and I was mentally prepared for getting in the boat and giving it my best despite having only eaten a few Weetabix in 48 hours.

The first outing was, of course, an absolute disaster but I somehow managed to do enough to not get immediately fired. Within days I was up to speed with the rest of the cast and into the swing of a gruelling training regime that lasted 5 weeks.

Our typical day consisted of collection by a driver at 5.45am followed by a two hour drive from Walthamstow to Radley College. Coffee then a dynamic warm up before heading out on the water for an hour. More coffee and a snack followed by 45 minutes of Tabata strength training. Then out on the water again for another hour before a protein heavy lunch. Finally a three and a half hour return home journey through London's rush hour traffic. Repeat, five days a week.

Three weeks into this routine we had a surprise visit to training. George Clooney and Grant Heslov (the film's co-Producer and second-unit Director) had come down to Radley to check on progress and collect some footage as they pieced together how they were going to overcome the challenges of filming on water. We'd been doing well in training up to this point – we were rowing well as a crew and starting to put pieces together in our training sessions. We all felt confident and excited to show George exactly what we could do.

But ask any rower and they'll tell you: if you're not rowing as one, you're not rowing anywhere well or fast. We were awful. Whether it was the pressure of having one of the most famous men on the planet watching us, or that everyone was out to impress, we just couldn't click. Production must have been worried.

By the end of five weeks though, thanks to the amazing support and guidance of Nick and Terry as well as our physio and trainer, Barry Sigrist (of Production Physiotherapy), we were pulling together as one and starting to look like an actual crew. We were introduced to our replica 'Husky Clipper' – a beautiful wooden shell that had been meticulously crafted to exactly replicate the boat the boys had taken over the line in Berlin 1936.

We then started three months of filming during which, if we weren't on set, we were in training on the water or in the gym. As you can imagine, there were significant challenges to filming on water. The time taken to reset, getting cameras close enough without disturbing the water, capturing the power and energy that goes into shifting a wooden shell through the water. [You can see amazing behind the scenes footage, which shows how we did this much better than I could put into words, here on youtube.](#)

One of the highlights was, of course, working with George Clooney on a daily basis for three months. He has so much experience, knowledge and insight that it's impossible not to learn something new everyday. Moreover, he's a genuinely friendly, interesting and interested man. Working with him was everything I could have hoped for and more.

Other highlights include having the chance to row at Henley and Eton Dorney, rediscovering a love for rowing (I now have a Concept2 in the cellar and am joining John O'Gaunt RC) and of course being paid to get into the best shape I've ever been in!

But most of all I'm grateful for my fellow boys in the boat. If you speak to anyone that has rowed crew they'll tell you the bond between oarsmen and oarswomen are forged in sweat, exhaustion and blisters. It's a bond that you can only really comprehend when you feel it. We're all still in daily contact with each other despite being dotted across the country and the world. In fact, the best moment of my recent trip to LA to attend the premier of the film wasn't hitting the red carpet for the first time, or sitting in the beautiful Samuel Goldwyn theatre to watch the film. It was the rest of the evening, sitting in a hotel room together with a crate of beer and takeaway pizzas, laughing the night away that I'll treasure the most.

This bond is clear to be seen in the film. I think it's one of the elements that gives the film so much of the heart and soul that audiences have loved (as evidenced by the 96% audience rating on Rotten Tomatoes).

I'd love it if you had chance to support your local cinema and watch this film on a big screen, where it belongs. I'm sure you'll enjoy it as much as we enjoyed making it.