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PHOTOGRAPHY **JOSEPH SINCLAIR** / STYLIST **EDITH WALKER MILWOOD** / GROOMING **SHAMIRAH SAIRALLY**

WORDS **JENNIFER PARKES**

"Alright, we're on it now!" Ameen, thankfully, is still open and eager to talk after half an hour of connectivity issues have stalled our chat. Speaking from Los Angeles, where the London born and bred actor is based these days, we're here to talk about his latest project as the lead role in Idris Elba's directorial debut.

Set in '70s Kingston and '80s Hackney, *Yardie* tells the tale of Dennis, aka D – a young Jamaican man who, after witnessing the brutal killing of his beloved older brother, is taken in by local music producer and crime lord, King Fox. His journey leads him on to London and a bloody quest for retribution against his brother's killer.

But this isn't the only story Ameen has to share; a captivating conversationalist, he fills us in on everything from his North London roots and chance Hollywood encounters, to what might come next for the star of *Kidulthood*, *Sense 8* and, now, *Yardie*...

Looking back, are there any scenes in *Yardie* that stand out as particularly memorable for you?

In itself, [filming] was such an experience of getting to understand what it was like for my parents in the '80s. The nicest moment I remember is D going into the club for the first time; my brother had a nightclub in

Hackney back in the '80s and early '90s, so to be there and get the texture of the time – how people used to club, and the food stalls outside – I loved it.

There's another moment, in Jamaica – I wasn't actually in the scene, but it's just before my brother is shot and there's this amazing dance party happening. Where we were filming, there's two warring gangs in real life, and they put aside their differences for that day, so they could be there as extras in the movie and shoot this beautiful scene with everybody coming together. It's weirdly symbolic, because that's a moment in the film as well as in real life.

As a North London native, did you discover anything more about the area while filming?

I really learnt what it was like to be in that particular moment in history, from all sides: you have D, as a young Jamaican in the system, trying to work his way through it via more nefarious activities; then you have Yvonne and the people that came over during that period, the second wind after the Windrush in 1949, working in the nursing system. I was born in England, as a British person, so there's that detachment, but I really got to personalise what my family went through

The film is based on the novel, *Yardie*, by Victor Headley, had you read it before filming?

Oh, yeah! Wait, do you know the story of how I got this part? I was on my way back to LA from London in 2015, and I got in this lift and there's Idris. He goes "I was just watching you in *Maze Runner*, and you were wicked! I'm about to direct my film, and I was going to get in contact with your people." We ended up sitting next to each other on the plane and I was like, "Mate, I'm here with you on an 11-hour flight, let me read the script and give you an answer now!"

Now, if you look at the back cover of the book, *Yardie* is described as the 'British Scarface' – and who's sitting two seats in front of us? Al Pacino! It was one of the weirdest, most serendipitous things, which leads me back to your question. I was on holiday after that and read the book, and D was a much more brutal, unforgiving character than he was in the script at the time. Idris and I sent notes back and forth, and we decided I should go method, so I was essentially D for 3 or 4 months, staying in the accent and seeing the world from his perspective.

People say method acting can be pretty tough, how did you find it?

When we wrapped in Jamaica, I

remember feeling a great sense of loss. I felt down for about 2 or 3 months, because I liked being in that time and having the wife and child, and then it was like, "Oh, that's not my life at all". When you're first starting it you feel like a bit of an idiot, but after a while it becomes natural; you know you're acting but, eventually, you start accepting the circumstances.

***Yardie* is Idris Elba's first stint as a director, how was it to work with him in that capacity?**

The greatest thing I can say is just that I trusted him. He knows the right language and the right space to give you. It's probably one of my favourite experiences with a director, and I hope we collaborate again. There's space for sequels as there were 3 books for *Yardie* so, if it's a success, maybe we'll go again!

You've directed a few short films yourself, is that something you'd want to do again?

I'm so passionate about directing, and I've got a few things in the works. I'm more of a writer-director, I have a particular voice and I love to express that, so with a bit of luck I'll be directing a lot in future. I feel that within the film market for young people of colour, especially in the UK, a lot of our films have been in

the gangster genre, and I'd like to see more coming-of-age stories. I grew up on films like *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, so I'd love to do more stuff like that.

What is it that draws you to a particular role?

It's kind of two-fold for me; I like to choose different characters or worlds. If I'm choosing a part based on a character it's like, what makes this person tick? What's drawn them to these places? I'd love more of my work to go in bigger universes too, like the *Marvel* world, that'd be fun! When you're telling those stories

about futuristic worlds, which invite a huge audience in, you can really hide the medicine in the food and create wonderful messages, but also have a great time in the cinema.

What advice would you give to someone looking to pursue a career on screen?

I would just say, if you really want this, pursue the passion. At some point it's going to be difficult; it's a glamorous business, but an emotionally tumultuous business. You might not work for 2 years, and that could be because of lack of opportunities afforded to you, or that you're just like

"I don't want to do something that I don't want to do, I want to do something great." I'll be interested to see what my next role is after *Yardie*.

Having started off in stage school, you must have done your fair share of singing and dancing too?

I've done all of it! My parents sent me to the Barbara Speake Stage School, where Naomi Campbell and Phil Collins went, so I spent my entire childhood doing that. It's been an interesting journey – I performed with Michael Jackson when I was 11, that's dope! One of my dreams is to

do a modern-day musical, I guess they've done it with *La La Land*, but to do my own *La La Land* would be amazing, having to train those old muscles!

Finally, what is your FAULT?

I think my greatest flaw is also my strength, which is focus. I'm always either super focused, or I'm so unfocused and almost scatty; I'm either extreme discipline or none at all, and that goes for everything, not just work. That's one of my faults, amongst many I'm sure!



JACKET BY STELLA MCCARTNEY



SUIT BY **FARAH**;
JUMPER BY **FILIPA K**;
TRAINERS BY **STELLA
MCCARTNEY**