

Work in progress

Actor Robert Ristic on growing into himself

Robert Ristic is not quite where he wants to be just yet. Though sitting—fidgeting—in a cafe is certainly delaying the 26-year-old actor’s downtime after a long bar shift, this applies most obviously to his career. After stints with various youth theatre companies, he was signed to CvGG agency in 2020, which also represents the likes of Benedict Cumberbatch and Helena Bonham Carter. Now, as he sips a black americano, he has recently started filming the fourth season of Amazon Prime’s *Jack Ryan* alongside John Krasinski. In his biggest role yet, he plays a recurring guest star.

He is amused to discover that all this can be gleaned from a quick Google search. He chuckles, impressed, when confronted with facts about himself, as if they have been obtained through telepathy. Cracking jokes and chortling at them, he is warm and keen to converse, to ask questions in return. Visibly uncomfortable with a one-sided interview, he is nonetheless eager to deliver. He is not afraid of silence.

His father is a music producer and his mother emigrated from Laos. From the latter he has inherited not just his eyes, a rich brown, but a love of cooking, which he sees as another expressive art form. “The way I learned about love was through the actions of my mum. She didn’t know how to say it in English, so it didn’t come in the form of ‘I love you son’. It came in the form of making sure I was fed well.” For Ristic, acting and cooking are aligned: “It’s that pressured environment. If you get distracted for a split second, then you miss something. I think that’s related to both disciplines being meditative.”

Growing up in Finsbury Park, the best part of childhood was the purposelessness of it all, existing purely to chase new sensations and wallow in them. His most vivid memories are playing with his best friend, Kenan: “We would be on our bikes and then mid-ride we would jump off onto the floor just to see what it was like—and it hurt, by the way—but that was fun. You don’t have a goal in mind apart from just seeing what something is like.”

Being an only child largely shaped who he is. (“It informed my imagination, which in turn led me to act”). Most of his time was spent role-playing by himself. He would march into the living room clutching a leather briefcase with a combination lock. (“That was an important factor,” he smiles. “It made me feel like there was some secrecy to what I was doing. I would pretend that I was important.”) Here, he would surround himself with the sheets of paper he had stuffed inside it, and scribble with “a clicky pen” for hours. “I did that like at least every other day.”

But the creativity he developed came at a cost. “It’s been a very confusing journey for me. Initially, being an only child made me reclusive.” This lent itself to introspection, which led him to acting, but also resulted in depression. What ensued was a long struggle to disentangle his craft from his mental illness. “That was a trap because it made me feel like depression was my superpower.” He later realised that this was actually inhibiting his acting. “It meant I couldn’t really connect with people in life the way I wanted to, because what I care about most is showing and giving love to people, but I didn’t know how. And then how could I truly feel something when I’m acting? I was just faking it every single time.”

He seems self-conscious at points, perhaps a hangover from his reclusive years. Guarding his words, he speaks slowly, deliberately. What makes it pass his filter is eloquent, sometimes even poetic, but it is not without effort. Is he trying to perfect a role now, that of the insightful interviewee?

Ristic admits that he has long struggled with his own sense of self. Acting left him feeling lost when the curtain had been drawn, when there were no pre-written lines to deliver, and no stage directions to follow (“I struggled to form an identity of my own”). Getting tattoos helped. These served as inky prompts for when he was off-stage; everyday cues to remember who he was and what mattered. “It is a way of solidifying very clearly what is important to me.” They remind him that he is more than his ability to morph into different characters. “I’m not just a blank canvas,” he insists.

Ristic’s season of *Jack Ryan* is expected to air in 2023. He can’t share any more details about his role, he teases, because “the name of my character keeps changing.” This seems fitting, serving as something of a metaphor for his own ongoing process of self-actualisation. “My biggest fear is never managing to fully express myself. And I don’t think I’m there yet.”