

DIVERSITY BEHIND THE LENS

By Ashanti Scoffin-Thomas

'Diversity behind the lens' is a photography series celebrating people of colour in creative industries and their captivating careers. The series features a range of local creatives from the south of the UK telling their stories of success and setbacks in the creative industries through portraits and written interviews.

Being of mixed heritage herself, Ashanti Scoffin-Thomas feels strongly about elevating people of colour's voices and giving more representation to Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities. 'Diversity behind the lens' was a way she could start to do this and create a series in her final year of university that is personal to her.

Reuel James

Filmmaker, Photographer, Actor

Oxford



With representation of diversity always being quite limited in the media, did you growing up or do you now have any role models that are people of colour?

From the get go it had to be Will Smith and Denzel Washington. They're all the way up there for me. What I like is that Denzel Washington only ever plays himself you know but he always finds himself perfectly matched with the role at the same time and I think I really admire that because it was an example of being able to be true to yourself but then embody every role that you take on. And Will Smith had something similar in that he seems to be the fresh prince wherever he goes, but then he can also do high drama. I liked seeing the fresh prince, I can't lie, I wanted to cut my hair like him because I literally idolised him like that. So, I liked his journey and I think whenever I'm taking on an acting role, I wonder if I can go from where I am to where I can be in the same way he went from being the fresh prince to being who he is now.

What has been your career highlight so far?

Definitely working on a film called *Maggot Brain* recently. I got the chance to play George Clinton and I think growing up amongst parents of our era, all the village, there's always been old school chunked my way, so I've always come across George Clinton but I had never specifically been a fan of him or followed his work through and through but when I was taking on this role the director was a huge visionary, the producer was a huge visionary and the team I was working with, everyone came together and I think playing that role was definitely a highlight. That's film, for theatre, definitely playing Mufasa because I love *The Lion King*.

You have been in a few different acting roles now, how have you found yourself getting into these roles and what was the process like?

The Lion King was quite easy to do because there is quite a definitive Mufasa, it's James Earl Jones. So, I wanted to model myself on him but kind of do my own thing and I was lucky to be able to see the theatre production as well. So, I think my main focus was how do you carry the message that the original character was able to do so. Other than that, I kind of figure out as much as I can about the character, find out where I'm similar and where I differ and then work towards finding that point in the middle where I can convincingly become that character.

“Once you start to develop that spark and cultivate it, then the world is your oyster”

Aaliyah Yaqub

Production Coordinator

Banbury



“Don’t ever feel like you have to change just to fit in”

What made you want to get into the creative industries?

I think I’ve always been a create person and I’ve always been involved in some sort of creative hobby for like most of my life. So, when I was younger, I liked to paint and draw and as I got older, I liked doing photography. So, I was always involved in creative activities throughout my life and then it just kind of developed into something that I wanted to do as a career.

With representation of diversity always being quite limited in the media, did you growing up or do you now have any role models that are people of colour?

To be honest not really. I think that one of the reasons I wanted to get into it as well because I didn’t ever see anyone like me to look up to, in any kind of aspect like when I’ve been at school or at Uni, there was no one that I saw that was in the position that I wanted to be in that looked like me, that came from the same background as me or anything. So, I think for me it was important that I would want to be that kind of person.

You went from doing camera operator roles, you’ve done a bit of directing, how did you decide to make the change to do the pre-production side of it with production coordination and how did you find that change?

I think for a long time I just thought that the only things that were available to me in the media industry were camera oping or directing or producing and I’d say a lot of it was the lack of knowledge of the industry. For example, I have no one in my family or no one that I know that has been in the industry so my view at the time was very limited, it was only stuff that I had learnt about. So then when I started to look more into it and look at the different roles there are, I then also did some work experience as a production assistant, that’s when I first realised actually there’s more jobs in the media industry than camera oping and directing. Then I started looking at those career paths and the career progression of those types of roles.

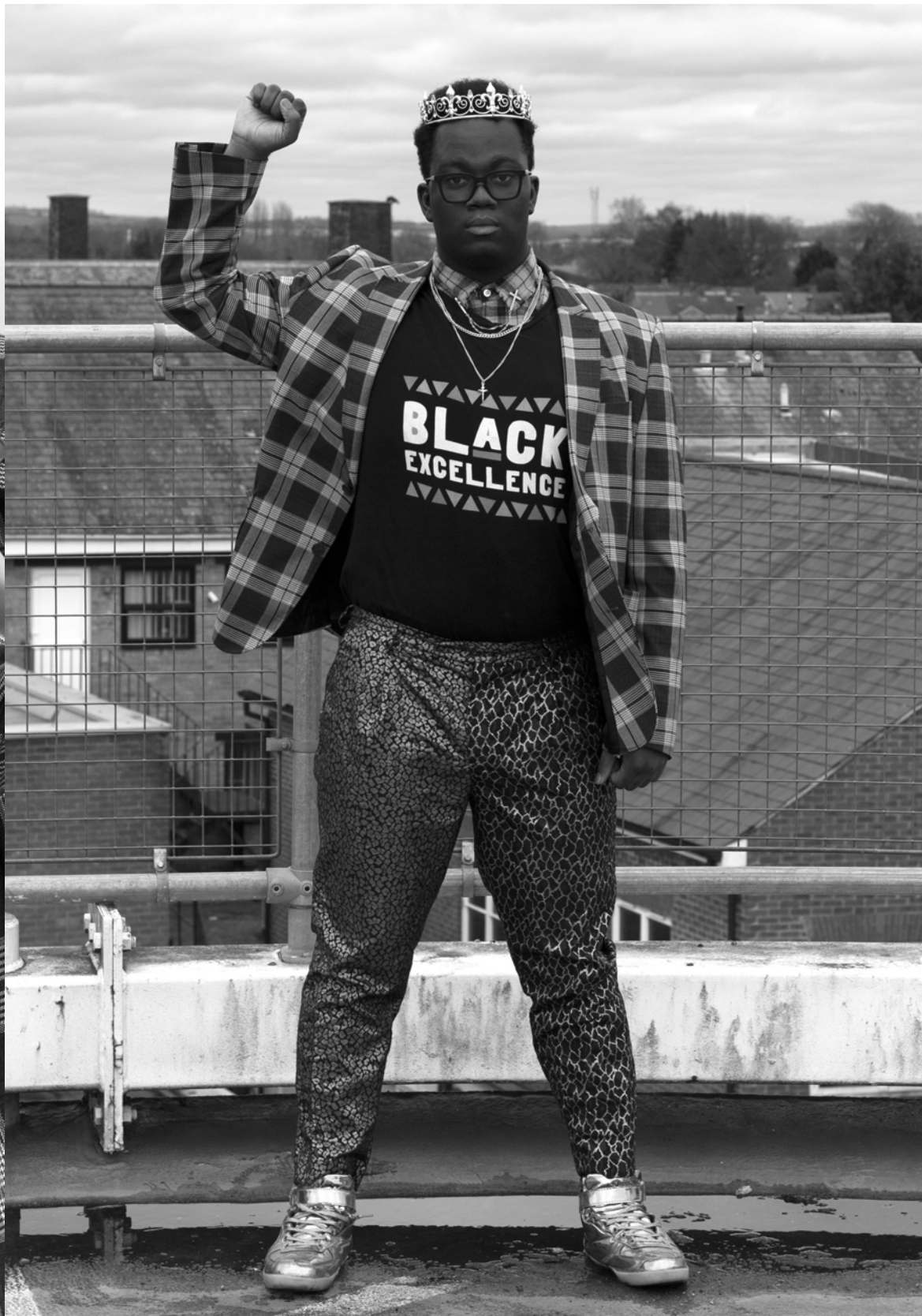
What has been your career highlight so far?

One of the biggest highlights is what I’m doing currently which is working on a BBC1 drama. It’s the first time that I am doing something outside school or university that is the genre I want to be in and the type of role I want to be and working with some really great people and people that I look up to and that have worked on some of my favourite shows.

Darius Smith

Content Creator, Writer, Dancer

Bicester



How have you found producing things and making content in the pandemic and has Covid-19 had an impact on you and your work?

I would say that creating short films in a pandemic is a lot of stress, I think creating anything in this time has been stressful. Any creative person who from the 23rd of March last year sat and was like so all the creative things I was doing I now can't do because its technically illegal. It is very difficult to get your head around. I think for the first three or so weeks I went to a very dark place, I've been through depression before, and I went back to that place, and it was horrible. Then after that three-week period I was like actually no I need to do something in order to get something back for myself. It's a turn of phrase I coined at that time; I went into "creative overdrive". I was just creating, whether it made sense, whether it was worth it, I was just creating for myself to be able to feel something.

Do you have any dream goals you want to complete in the future?

I have a lot, it's all on my vision board. There are things like I want to own an extremely successful international fashion brand that is not only providing people with clothing but is also helping the planet and the people on it. So, whether that through charitable giving or sustainability, I really want to be in a place where what I'm creating helps people. On top of that I really want to be able to create films, documentaries, TV shows, presenting. A very huge dream of mine is to be in a position where I have enough financial freedom to help others. I'd love to be in the position to show people that no matter where you start off in life, you can do anything that you set your mind to.

You're very big on charity work and giving back, is that something you've always been like or was it something you've been taught, where did that come from?

I think it's always been there. My grandma started a soup kitchen 30 years ago, so feeding the homeless, helping out with clothes and various different other things. I've always grown up around that. From the day I was born, I've seen people who are homeless and see them come in their first day getting some food and see how they transform, and they grow and learning that the stereotypes that we have of homeless people are wrong, a lot of them are. I will see a need somewhere and I'm like ok I need to do something!

"I was just creating for myself to be able to feel something"

Emma Sheppard

Musician- Viola Player

Bicester



What made you want to become a violinist?

When I was about five I saw a violin on TV, pointed to it and said I wanted to play that. No idea why, I grew up in a house full of wind and brass players! I started viola a few years later, and ultimately enjoyed the viola world more.

With representation of diversity always being quite limited in the media, did you growing up or do you now have any role models that are people of colour?

None really, but in a wider sense TV was important as I grew up. I saw people of colour who made it through the glass ceiling: Floella Benjamin on *Play School* and *Play Away*; newsreaders Trevor MacDonald and Moira Stuart. I am, needless to say, deeply sad about what emerged in recent years about Bill Cosby, but our family were avid watchers of *The Cosby Show* - an American sitcom about a middle class, successful, African-American couple (lawyer and doctor), and their kids. Seeing this portrayal of a black family was so important, and so different to what I saw elsewhere: not only on TV, but also the ideas people around me had about people of colour, who they were, and how they lived. As a mixed race girl growing up in a predominantly white world, I was called a “Bounty Girl” after the chocolate bar (not the ad) - you know: black on the outside, white on the inside - because being smart and into classical music was deemed “white”!

What has been your career highlight so far?

It’s been an incredible privilege to travel the world and play in famous concert halls as part of the job. I remember feeling in such awe at the Musikverein in Vienna, but ‘home’, and the most electric atmosphere will always be *The Proms* at Royal Albert Hall, London. It feels pretty cool to have recorded in big name studios (Abbey Road; BBC Maida Vale; Skywalker Ranch, USA), and to play for things like *Dr Who* and *Call the Midwife*; to have worked with household names like Pet Shop Boys, Jon Lord, Rick Wakeman, Andrea Bocelli, Alfie Boe (I sadly turned down a Peter Gabriel tour so can’t include that name drop here!). Classical highlights: playing Ravel piano concerto with Martha Argerich and hearing her play live, working with great conductors like Rattle, Roth, Muti, Mackerras, Masur and just so many other great soloists, conductors and colleagues. There is really a constant ebb and flow of highlights.

“It’s been an incredible privilege to travel the world and play in famous concert halls”

Shenali Karunatilake

Videographer

Southampton



“I tend to use my creative outlet in ways to release things for me”

What made you want to get into the creative industries?

What made me want to get into the creative industries is my ongoing passion for arts. I've always had a big connection with anything artsy, filming, video, painting, everything. When I was really young, I started painting really early and just found it was a good emotional release for me. So that's why I tend to use my creative outlet in ways to release things for me.

With representation of diversity always being quite limited in the media, did you growing up or do you now have any role models that are people of colour?

So, I come from a very ethnic background and growing up my mum was my biggest inspiration in terms of art because she was an art teacher in Sri Lanka and gave up her degree in order to come to the UK and build a family. So, in light of that she's kind of pushed me to go and follow my own dreams and my own heart and work towards achieving what she couldn't in art.

What has been your career highlight so far?

The biggest highlight of my career would probably be working for the BBC with Solent Productions. We did live lounges for Solent, filmed and edited them, the music introducing live lounges. I just had loads of fun, I got loads of experience, I met loads of people and I feel like it opened up so many doors for me.

With the pandemic this year a lot of creatives have found their work changing, how has Covid-19 affected your work?

I think the whole pandemic has negatively impacted my career path because I just graduated from Uni and was offered a job with Channel 4 in Southampton, which is why I stayed in Southampton another year. Essentially that was my way into the media industry but that has kind of been stripped from me now because once the pandemic happened the show got cancelled and I got a call saying our meeting had to be postponed. I think it's really put a big strain on a lot of people's creative outlets, and it does really knock your confidence with getting out and creating essentially because there's just not as many things that inspire us anymore because we were just sat inside all the time.