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# Clash of the Titans

By Kasha Van Sant

## Ex-boxer and night club owner swaps the ropes for the boards with Jet Li



*Tamar Hassan behind the scenes during the JetLiUK interview period.*

Standing at an intimidating six foot three inches, Tamar Hassan looks every inch the tough guy, right down to scary brow-furrow. But the deceptive menace breaks out into the sunniest smile immediately. "Acting was never a goal; basically I've owned nightclubs and restaurants up till about two years ago. Then I sold them and decided to take acting on." He says grinning, "a few friends of mine said I should be an actor because I am always entertaining people. I was like, "acting's a mug's game", until I met Camilla now my partner in business and my agent and manager. Through a couple weeks of persuasion I decided to go and get screen tested and she liked what she saw, so she took me on. Within weeks I got my first job on Eastenders, with no training. It sort of just catapulted from there."

It's not hard to see why. With a distinct look, Turkish Cypriot, Hassan has cornered the market in British hard man, move over Vinny Jones. With his big presence and sultry good looks, it is small wonder that he is a spearhead for the Brit pack of actors hoping to take Hollywood by storm. With the aftermath of Lock Stock & Two Smoking Barrels and Snatch still being felt all over the British film scene, this seems like a tailor-made genre for him.

"I've just finished filming The Layer Cake, with Tom Hardy, Daniel Craig, Colm Meaney, George Harris. It's quite funny Matthew Vaughn said to me "where was you when I was casting Snatch and Lock Stock?"And I said as it happens I wasn't acting, I wasn't interested then, but a lot of my friends were in those films. A lot of people say I bring a special aura to the screen, so I do fit those films. A lot of the films that I have done have been around the British gangster genre."

With a "refuse to lose," policy instilled in him from early in his boxing days, Hassan completed the circuit of British dramas. The big break however came in a role alongside Orlando Bloom, in the Calcium Kid. Having caught the thespian bug, the businesses were sold and it was time to seriously pursue acting, the career. But he still has his fingers in a lot of pies, especially with his kids'outreach work. Eyes crinkling, he laughs, "a lot of pies, I do a lot of work for the community. It's all charity based it's not a profit organisation. I have a boxing club and a football club to train the kids. When I got that film, working with people like Orlando and learning, being on set I thought, "this is what I want to do, and go all the way to the top." Six films in, I haven't done too bad in six months."

Indeed Tamar Hassan has a lot to smile about, he has successfully picked himself up from the wrong side of the tracks to launch head first into the impenetrable and lucrative world of Hollywood; securing representation from Orlando Bloom's management company along the way. Still pinching himself he has just finished the highly acclaimed Luc Besson film Danny The Dog/Unleashed with Morgan Freeman, Bob Hoskins and the legendary Jet Li. Gushing with excitement, Hassan tells of his admiration for Luc Besson, "I love him for actually giving up and coming new talent a chance, he's found a lot of names. What I love about him; is he does give the Brits a chance, for me to bag a Luc Besson film which was my second film; is amazing. Bob Hoskins has been an idol of mine since I was a child and Morgan Freeman, come on! Morgan Freeman, the 'Professor of Hollywood'. He's a god and he has even played God! And then Jet Li, what can I say? I have a twelve year old son who's absolutely crazy about him. So for me to land a part like that it's a dream come true."

If fitting a genre was all that Tamar Hassan was supposed to do in life then he can die a happy man, as his role in the film demands his apparent menace. Playing, Georgie alongside Hoskins' Bart and Jet Li's Danny; Hassan discovers that loyalties can be divided more easily than he once imagined. Playing the right hand man to the tyrannical Bart, Georgie watches the abuse that is unleashed upon prize fighting Danny. A vivid exercise in dehumanisation.

"He's a dog in the film and he can't speak, and he's brought up in a cage and he's got a collar round his neck. We carry him around like a dog, but I actually feel sorry for him and we have this bond. When Bart, who is really evil screams and shouts at him throws stuff at him; when I am taking him away it's like "come on Danny," I'm sort of cuddling him and being really nice to him. I felt sorry for Danny and I bonded with Jet Li in the film. I was Bob's beef but I was still more with Jet."

Although able to "turn on the tap", when it comes to tyranny, soft-hearted Hassan was nicknamed "The Beast" by Bob Hoskins. "For me it's acting so I'm not the hard bully or villainous character I play, I'm like a bear."

With regards to research he need look no further than the melees that are the reality for nightclub owners. "Yeah well I've had a lot of experience with villainous characters. From celebrities to footballers to villains; they all frequent the nightclubs. I've seen a few things happen."

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*A scene from Unleashed featuring Tamar Hassan and Jet Li.*

The more time spent with Hassan, with his cockney accent and infectious enthusiasm, I see a man who has been given an opportunity to get it right and be proud. Although a newcomer to the industry he has remained magnificently grounded despite what he has achieved in such a short period of time.

"I come from what they call bread and jam, a very poor family. We had nothing, coming from that sort of life and getting out of it means everything to me." It is therefore no surprise that it is a feat to earn this man's respect. Laughing he admits,

"I'm really funny like that, because I have had a lot of heartache and a lot of people have trodden over my family. Growing up in London in the Sixties with the racism; was very difficult. I used to get the slander here, then I'd go back to Cypress and I'd get it there too. Growing up was difficult, so I'm reserved. I hold back a lot, I don't let people in." He may be guarded but that is no bad thing in the cutthroat world of acting where each job is sacred, and a face that fits one day might not the next.

But being in close contact with one of the worlds' most spiritual actors has rubbed off. With the on screen rapport between Jet Li and Tamar Hassan being almost palpable; so too was the off-screen bonding. Both are men of discipline, fatherless children who had to break down barriers to reach their goals - so their burgeoning friendship comes as no surprise. This leading martial arts actor whose career has been eclipsed by that of Jackie Chan has much to offer. Hassan is the first to admit the profound effect that he had upon him. "I learned a hell of a lot from Jet. Not so much acting wise but as a human being. He taught me a hell of a lot of values. It's tiny things like when he talks; there's always something to what he's saying. He never talks idly if he's going to talk to you, he'll talk to you about something that means something. He's always on that educational thing. You'll ask him a question and he'll think about it. He's always working your mind; he doesn't give you anything easy. Sometimes you will go up to him and say, "you alright Jet?" and he won't even talk to you, then he'll look at you, then I'd walk past him and I'd push him and he'd sort of smile. Whether he's meditating or doing something that I have interrupted I don't know. But me being the pushy character that I am if I say hello I want a response."

Jet Li is a man whose life was spent dedicated to his art; this must instil trepidation into many. Not Tamar Hassan, but did Jet Like our loveable rogue? Painfully honest he replies, "I think he did. So many people are walking on eggshells around him, and I can't be like that. I'm like, "come on man we're working together, we're colleagues." I think he liked it when I was poking him or when we did the scene in the back of the car, when it gets crashed. There was all this rubber glass and I remember I'm meant to be knocked out. He's dropping glass in my ear and the director's shouting at me to "keep still" and Jet's going "will you keep still, will you keep still?" With this cheeky streak so much in evidence the two were bound to become comrades. "He's got a really lovely childlike way about him. He likes a lot of fun." Such as? "If you go onto my website there was actually this dummy that they made of me. I was quite shocked with Jet because he doesn't like people taking pictures of him. He was always OK with me saying, "Jet, Jet come and have a photo," then he said to me, "you want a photo? I'll give you a photo." The dummy was used in the car when it crashes. He actually bent the dummy over and stuck a pole up its backside. He said, "take a photo of this." Roaring with laughter he exposes the side of the shy, timid man that his vast army of fans have never seen.



*Unleashed production imagery used in the original interview context.*

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"We had lots of fun like that. We celebrated his 41st birthday in Paris and he got lobster for everyone. The whole cast and crew was eating and he came running over and sat on my lap. Then he starts playing with my ears and scratching my head, I look at him and ask, "you all right Jet?" He said "yeah." Having discovered a mutual respect and fondness, ever cautious the two took time to get to know one another. Jet generously giving multitudes of signed photos away to Hassan's children's projects.

As an ex-boxer how does Hassan feel about martial arts after meeting Jet? "It didn't really mean that much to me. I don't know how to put this but I always used to think that martial artists were a joke. I've come up against kick boxers at my gym, once you put their feet down they can't do anything. It's a completely different discipline. Having said that when I saw what Jet could do, it completely changed my whole outlook on martial arts. The discipline of it and the internal power that they actually hold. I mean some of things that Jet was doing, I asked him, "do you train?" he said "no I trained all my life, I don't train no more. I am too old". But he looks great; he looks like a young man!!"

Doubtlessly the effect upon Hassan has been phenomenal; he goes on to say,

"I found that before you actually experience someone like Jet Li and you watch it in a film, being an actor you sort of think, "oh computer graphics, cheating." Jet Li really can deliver the business. I've seen the man go to work. I mean the size of him! He's such a little disciplined man and there's so much more to him. I mean OK you've got ropes and things when he hits people they don't fly up in the air but if you actually experience the man in real life. What he done to poor Bob Hoskins." Pausing to laugh he adds, "what he done to some of the other stunt actors. He really hurts you; he's an absolute awesome character." Although Hassan did not feel the force of Jet Li first hand, having no fight scenes together, he admits that although having been a kick boxer too he would not stand a chance, "but I did say to him, "if I grab hold of ya, you're in trouble!" he said "I know that's why you're never going to catch me!"

There is a trend for other British names to adopt the martial arts trend, what does he think about that? The allure began with Snatch star Jason Statham, whose role in Jet Li's, The One led to his martial arts style action role in The Transporter, and of course Luke Goss's role as high kicking bad guy in Blade II. Would Hassan move with the migration? With reference to Luke he replies, "fair play to him. Another thing I don't like about this industry; is that so many people slag each other off. There's no generosity in the game. I think he was great in Blade II and I think that he really pulled it out of the bag playing a British gangster. If he does want to move into Hong Kong movies then I think he'd be great."

In typical Tamar Hassan style he is happy to talk about others but what of himself?



*Tamar Hassan behind the scenes.*

"I have already been told by a lot of directors that they think I'm going to be an action hero. I don't like that word, but an action movie star; because I have got such a big presence. I'm such a big man." A British Arnie in the making?

"Yeah, whether that means martial arts or running around with two shot guns on the back of a bike; I'd love to do it."

There are many sides to Tamar Hassan that we have yet to discover, at the moment he is full of an honest vitality that has been missing from films. Behind that cheeky school boy grin lies a shrewd disciplined mind. A keen observer of human interactions and philosophies, he has hit a few nails on the head. At last we have a true champion from the streets. Watch this space.

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