

GLASS MAN



ŞOPÉ DİRİŞÜ

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The Thinker

After briefly contemplating a career behind an office desk, actor ŞÖPÉ DİRÍSÙ has emerged as “one to watch” after appearing in two of last year’s top small-screen dramas. *Glass Man* catches him in a reflective mood ↓

THE THINKER

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If there was ever a time to release a film or series, you couldn’t have got much better than 2020. Locked-down in our houses, we were more glued to our television sets than ever before. As luck would have it, 30-year-old British actor Şöpé Dirísù, was all over our screens, starring in Remi Weekes’ 16-time BIFA nominated *His House* on Netflix, for which he was nominated for an EE BAFTA Rising Star Award, and in Sky’s second most watched original drama, *Gangs of London*. Since then, the parts have come streaming in – a voice-over role in the second season of *His Dark Materials* and starring in Emma Holly Jones’ rom-com *Mr Malcolm’s List*, Camille Griffin’s *Silent Night* and Eva Husson’s

adaptation of *Mothering Sunday*. Not bad for a pandemic, but he’s far from smug: “I’m not grateful that we’ve gone through this health crisis across the world – I would never be so selfish as to be happy that [it] happened ... but I am aware that some people have benefitted from it.”

He pauses before adding, “It’s hard looking at 2020 because obviously it was a year of devastation – Black Lives Matter and Trans Lives Matter, and the health crisis across the world.”

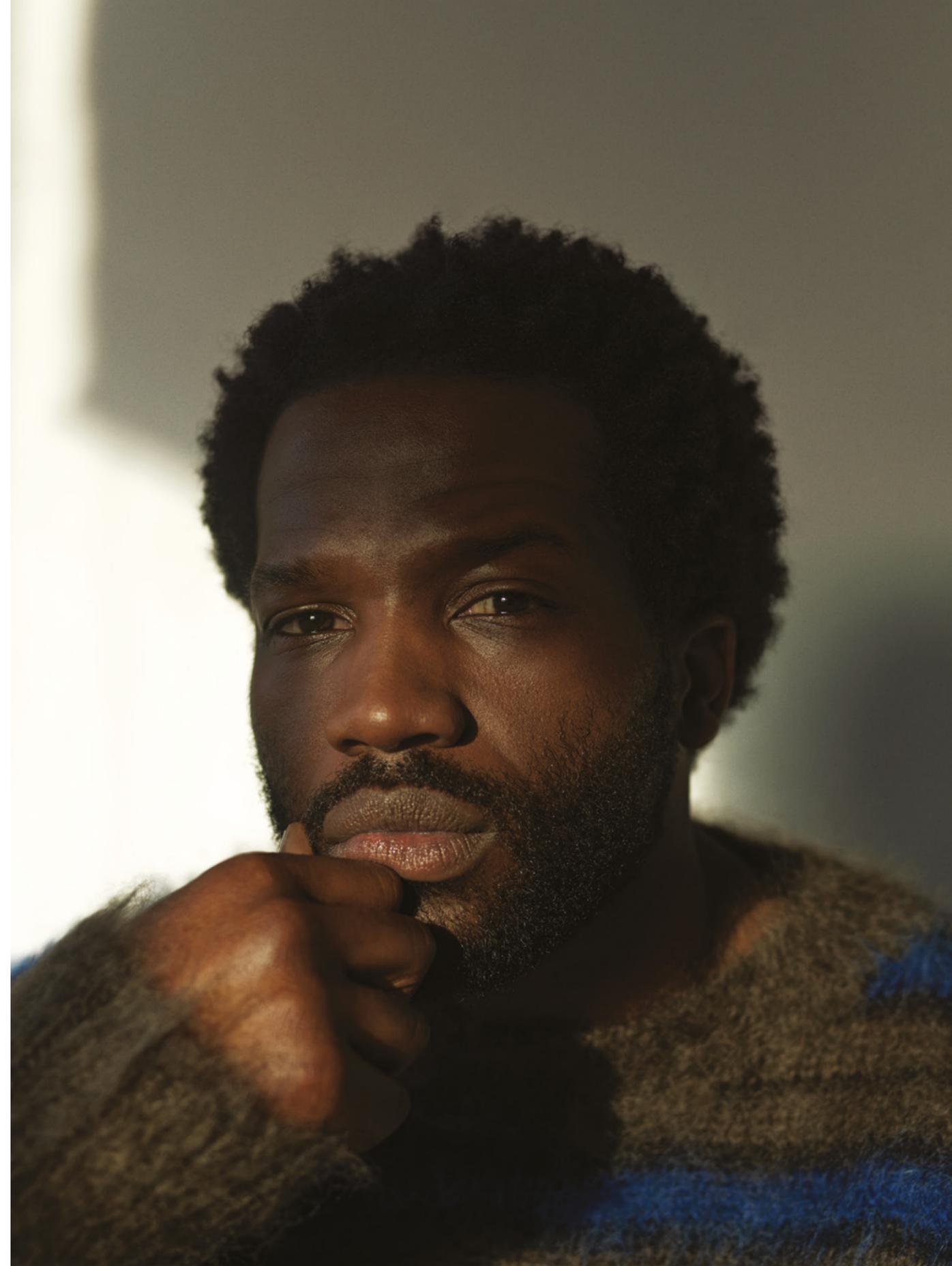
Born in London to Nigerian parents, Dirísù got the acting bug early, joining the National Youth Theatre at 15 after excelling in drama at school. However, he went on to study economics at the University of Birmingham, where he also played quarterback for the university’s Lions American

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RICHARD JAMES



MARNI at MATCHESFASHION



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football team, before returning to the theatre, specifically the Royal Shakespeare Company.

So what does a self-confessed busy-bee do when the film industry comes to a screeching halt due to the effects of Covid-19? Dirísù found solace in Japanese anime, first recommend to him by actor, director and friend Elliot Barnes-Worrell. What began as a bit of escapism, turned into quite a meta-experience: “*Attack on Titan* starts off with a community of people trapped inside a wall, and watching that whilst we were trapped inside our houses during the first lockdown is a little bit reflective on life.”

That lockdown made Dirísù feel that the greatest achievement of his career had been “the relationships that I have been exposed to and the friends that I have made as a consequence of doing the work”. He also discovered his reliance on family and friends and the need for routine: “I learned that I’m not as independently driven as I’d like to be, that I do need deadlines, structure, consequence — have you ever tried to run on a treadmill that’s off? That’s what it felt like.”

This isn’t the first time Dirísù has jumped off the treadmill, though. Halfway through his second year of university, he was writing a report on child labour in developing countries. “I thought ‘I can do this, I’m reasonably good at this, and if I choose to, I could probably make a living off writing reports or working for the Bank of England or in the City — just being sat at a desk in an office for the rest of my life, I can do it’. But it didn’t make me happy.” He soon realised that he was “on these train tracks to a life that I don’t want to live.”

Those train tracks had been previously set: “Being the child of an immigrant, the story is a very familiar one; that your parents want you to be this thing, a professional, something where the subjectivity is taken out of it. So if you work hard, you will climb a ladder, as opposed to freelancers or artists.” When Dirísù revealed his misgivings to his mother, she understood: “[She] said ‘I just want you to be happy, so if it means you have to try acting, try, if it means you have to play American football, try. Whatever it is.’” Ten years on, he hopes “to continue to repay that faith that she had in me and that freedom she gave me.”

Dirísù feels he learned a lot starring opposite Matt Smith in *His House*, a story about a young refugee couple with a ghostly twist. “He elevates

the script so much with the things he puts on it. I can’t really explain it but working with him was a bit like a masterclass — so inspiring. Like my mum, he took the reins off of what we were allowed to do. I’d like to be a bit more like Matt.” Playing his character, Bol, also gave Dirísù the opportunity to explore “the interrogation of African masculinity”. Dirísù’s father, his father’s friends and that generation of African men who emigrated to the UK definitely helped inform his building of Bol. “You may not have seen characters as nuanced and complicated,” he says. “It’s nice to see that traditional masculinity is being relaxed in some areas of film and television, and I’m looking forward to seeing the breadth of roles we can play.”

Dirísù also wants to question who tells the overall narrative, citing *Parasite*, *I May Destroy You* and *Black Panther* as shining examples of how much story there is still left to tell. “I would just love that to not be exceptional. Looking at the Golden Globe nominees, it’s not as representative as it could be. And that’s in front of a camera. I’m asking or hoping that representation comes behind the camera as well. One of the things about Remi [Weekes’] film, *His House*, is that his lived experience of being a man of colour in the UK comes through his work. There’s the nuance of what it’s like to be an outsider in a new country ... But for someone like himself and myself, who were born here, there’s still that feeling of estrangement. It’s difficult to capture that if you’ve not lived it. Diversity was the buzzword two years ago, but it’s not even that. I just want a plurality in storytellers.”

I quote Ernst Fisher’s “art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it”. Dirísù agrees wholeheartedly. “In terms of protests last year, be that Black Lives Matter or End SARS, there was ... a tipping point and a breaking through to new ground through which we can build the world that we all want to live in.” This is what the word “breakthrough” — the theme of this issue — means to him. He adds earnestly, “I feel that there was a breaking through to people to understand something that maybe they’ve been oblivious to or not had the lived experience of, in terms of understanding the frustrations of the black community across the world ... I hope that it spills into 2021 in the future going forward.”