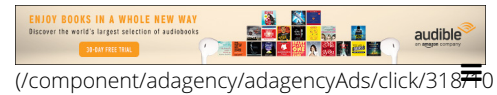




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## The Truth About Becoming An Actor In Toronto Featured



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Ryan Singh first stepped into the "entertainment" spotlight in his homeland - Guyana, South America at just 6 years old.

The stage for his life's calling was set when he stepped out and performed poetry in what was to be one of many national performing competitions. When he moved to Toronto at age 16, with stars in his eyes, he thought for sure this was his chance to make it big. He soon learned the road would be anything but glitz and glamour. Ryan Singh has not only produced his own films but starred in dozens and produced several more. ByBlacks sat down with Singh for a look back on how he got to this point in his career, where he's rubbing shoulders with the likes of Matt Damon and Angelina Jolie.

**Can you talk a bit about what it was like trying to get into the arts scene in Toronto, as an outsider?**

I had a bit of experience working on stage in Guyana, having started at age 6. I had toured the country twice in a theatre troupe with my then school teacher, Vivian Williams and had also done the quiz competitions victoriously in high school. I also lived vicariously through videotapes my father had sent me of work he was doing on stage and in film. Come to think of it, my father has been living back in Guyana for several years now and he admires my social media posts of the work I am doing. But that is an aside.

Coming to Canada and having all these dreams and imaginations, I thought it would be easy to break into the film business. I sat in front of the television watching "One Life To Live" the daytime soap for two months before approaching my mother and asking her to get me signed up with an agent. She looked through the newspapers and selected an agency. We went there to sign with them and of course received the sales pitch of having to pay to join the agency, plus pay for photographs which was a huge amount of money. My mother signed me up. I spent several years with that agency waiting for my first call before realizing that it wasn't going to happen. So one day I decided to visit the location and realized it had gone out of business. My father, who lived in the city was not as entrenched in the industry as I had hoped. So with no direct connections, it took me a long time to get started.

That said, I wasn't deterred. At school, York Mills Collegiate Institute, I took acting and media studies. I worked with Rogers community television as a co-op student and later went to the University of Windsor where I majored in Communications with a focus on film and television. Leaving university and coming from a single parent household, I took any job I could get to help my mother, who was an ECE assistant, a part-time night student and mother raising two younger children, to supplement the household expenses. My next two agents didn't fare well either.

It was a hard sacrifice at the time because I literally watched the momentum and dreams fade. To overcome this, I connected with my father in 2001 and remounted a play he had previous success with. It did well with a very limited festival run. But that was enough to ignite the producer in me. It was from this point, I spent the next several years working the local black community theatre circuit, working with several up and coming directors. I was acting again and felt very comfortable until I outgrew it. I knew there was more out there and so I bought my first camera with money I had made working in a government job. I was going to transition out of theatre and get into making movies. I approached my father for a script that I would make into a film. I knew nothing about the business of filmmaking aside from school and the copious amount of television and films I watched. I had also learned about directing actors through the several theatre projects I had done and I loved it so much. My film endeavour soon became a theatrical disaster when it was decided that we should workshop the script on stage first before making it into a film.

I had seen my father struggling as a nightclub producer, music talent manager and concert promoter. All of the conversations between him and I went back to the wonder years when he had written a couple of theatrical production that were a smashing success before he was politically exiled from the country, losing everything. It was a narrative that moved me and I wanted to restore the confidence in him that would allow a generous return of success and would afford our family an opportunity to get out of the struggle. That endeavour cost me a lot of money, years of hardship, a strained relationship with my family but it was a valuable learning lesson in the world of productions. Although it was a financial flop, it afforded me the opportunity to gain my first ACTRA credit, which allowed me to become a union member. Becoming an ACTRA member without any previous professional screen experience became its own challenges. In 2008, I finally landed an agent who worked to get me into the room. Warren Beatty and I spent 8 years together before we amicably parted ways. I am currently represented by Catherine Knights at Catalyst TCM.



### **Did you have any experiences that made you feel like completely giving up on filmmaking or acting?**

Starting out is very difficult. It takes a lot of work and effort to establish yourself in the industry. A sort of right of passage. Money can sometimes be unpredictable. With a wife and now having children, sometimes I wonder if having a regular job would make me happier. But immediately, my answer is no. My wife Cheryl, understands this about me very much. We've been together for more than 17 years. I am happiest when I am in the production business and she is super supportive of my endeavours. I have even included my children in the business. My dedication to this business is unwavering. So even though my career as a filmmaker and actor has been developing slowly, it is developing with a fortified strength the likes of steel. Even though I worked a myriad of jobs including factory labour, McDonalds server, Toronto Parks and Recreation program leader, Painting and Renovations, Government of Ontario, International Volunteer Communications specialist, personal support worker and a bunch of consultancies for good measure, I always had my eyes on the prize.

In fact, while working with the Government of Ontario, with the potential to earn a fair salary and have a stable job, it dawned on me that I would be so far removed from the arts that I may never be able to achieve my dreams. I began having panic attacks from that anxiety. I decided to take a mental health check using the benefits from my employment. This was before the Bell Let's Talk engagement. I wanted to know what was wrong. After only two sessions, it all

became abundantly clear to me. I needed the arts to live. It was my life's calling, the air I breathe, my everything. I knew then that I could not live with anything other than being an artist. It was on this occasion, August 2005, that I bought my first video camera and set my emancipation date to quit all the other vocational jobs and concentrate on the entertainment business.

My first film was shot in January 2006. It was called "Violated". I began working on my father's play in April 2006, by the end of 2006 and into 2007 I had been in three short films and half a dozen theatre production. In Sept 2008, I quit my last job working with people living with developmental challenges and began working on my first documentary on Barack Obama's successful bid for president, "He's our President, too".

### **What advice do you have for young actors on the come up?**

My advice to young actors is this:

1. Do your research - This is the most important part of any business. You've got to know what you are getting yourself into. While acting is an art, it is also a business, people's livelihoods are dependent on it. Know how it works, ask questions, find out about agencies, training programs and career trajectories.
2. Create a plan - This is a critical roadmap to achieving your desires and mitigating risk. You are spending real money and a significant amount of time from your life pursuing this passion. Make it worth your time.
3. Network - In no other business is this more true than the entertainment business. Everything about it is built on relationships and teams. An actor's team consists of:
  1. Talent Agent
  2. Teachers/coach/mentors/facilitators
  3. Managers
  4. Lawyers
  5. Actors, directors, producers, crews
  6. Casting
  7. Accountant
  8. Transportation
  9. Family
  10. Gym/Health/Spiritual
  11. Media/Marketing/Promotions/Social Media
  12. Fans
4. Training - If you are not working, then you should be working on your craft. Like an athlete goes to the gym in preparation for a meet, so too as an actor we should always have our tools ready for 'action'.
5. Preparation and humility - When you have done all the work, and you are ready to work or are working, you are still part of a larger organ. You have to have a sense of humility to know that even when you feel you have arrived, there must be humanity in you to keep you grounded.
6. Write - This is the last point I would add to a non-exhaustive list. Write and create stories. Do something in between waiting for opportunities to come. At the very least you will be continuing to work on your craft and at best, you will be the person other actors will be waiting on to create opportunities for them.



### **What's been your most favourite role yet?**

*Conduct Unbecoming*, a film that was directed by Sidney Furie (Lady Sings the Blues), I played a soldier being court marshalled. It was a great opportunity to play that role and live like a soldier for that film. I also enjoyed working on *Downsizing* directed by Alexander Payne and starring Matt Damon. As an actor, I am observing the culture of the set and how the director works with the actor. Both of these directors have really amazing relationships with each of their actors whether they are the lead or playing a bit part. That is a beautiful environment to be in. My work playing an evil, corrupt Police Chief in *11 Blocks* was a career highlight. It was an indie film directed by Sasha Moric and Matthew Bennett, two people who used the opportunity to create a project that would later be distributed in more than 80 territories globally.

But my most favourite role on film was playing Gobin, the father of 10-year-old Rishi in *Mr Crab*. Directed by Faisal Lutchmedial, this film is a quintessential story of the Caribbean culture and the way love and discipline are expressed in the home. Working on this film followed the loss of my first child and preceded the birth of my twins. So, in preparing for the role, I invoked memories of my childhood and that of being an impending father, opportunity loss. Following the birth of my twins, while watching a screening of the story at a film festival, the film took on a totally different meaning in my life. It is a story that I feel will continue to grow with me and will remain a beautiful statement in my filmography.

#### **Who's been your most favourite Hollywood actor to work alongside with, and why?**

When I worked with Melissa O'Neil (Canadian Idol Finalist, *Condor*) on the set of *Dark Matter*, I became a fan. There is the saying that one person can make the difference for everyone by the way they behave. Melissa makes it a point to introduce herself to everyone on set, thank them for being there and shows genuine excitement to work with you. Seeing that trait, made me more excited to ensure we all have a great working experience.

Another celebrity I had a chance opportunity of encountering was Angelina Jolie during the screening of *The Breadwinner*, the Golden Globe nominated and OSCARS hopeful film directed by Nora Twomey. *The Breadwinner* is an animated film about a young Afghan girl who must pretend to be a boy so that she can work to feed her family after her father is arrested. I filmed the recording session for the auditions and subsequent productions of this film.

When productions began, Nora shared with us a video message from Angelina Jolie, who, in the interim had joined the production as an Executive Producer. I've always admired Angelina's work as an actor and never really thought much else about ever working with her. But being this close was exciting. During TIFF, my wildest imagination would become a reality. I met Angelina Jolie after a series of serendipitous events. Our encounter was brief, as words tumbled off my tongue like a gymnast on a balancing beam. Whether it was nervousness or excitement, I could hardly remember what I said, all I knew was that I was in the presence of a person with genuine humility, a person who held my hand and patiently waited until I had fully expressed myself. It is not what you do that is important but how you make a person feel that matters. As artists, we are in the business to impact people on an emotional level and that has a lasting effect.



#### **You've made a number of films yourself, which has been the most enjoyable and why?**

Every project provides a different level of enjoyment and excitement. Making the project "*Violated*" got me to discuss the issues of consensual sex and its impact on society. My autobiographical documentary "*Mom*" forced me to go deep and speak frankly about overcome the fears of becoming a father when you grow up without male role models. I received several accolades for this film including a Best Documentary Under 40 Minutes Award from Caribbean Tales International Film Festival. The project, "*Fried Bakes and Dumplings*", explored the immigrant journey from the Caribbean to Canada and how these seniors made Canada home. It received an Audience Choice Award in Jamaica's GATFFEST Film Festival. I've also been an Executive Producer on *Rasta: A Soul's Journey*, directed by Stuart Samuels featuring Rita and Bob Marley's granddaughter Donisha Prendergast as well as *IRL: The Series*, a television and web series that turns social media on itself.

Working on the Black Experience Project Final Report, which I produced on behalf of the Environics Institutes and its partners was a great story to work on as well. It captures the results of a six-year long study and juxtaposes them with current experience of a diverse black population's experiences living in the Greater Toronto Area. It's a story that finds me being both the storyteller and a subject of the experiences as exhibited in the results of the study.

#### **What projects are you working on right now, which are you most excited about?**



Currently in theatres are "Downsizing" and "The Breadwinner" which I am immensely proud of working on. Both of these projects embodies a lot of heart and humanity in them. I am working on a project about my experiences following a group on their first trip Africa. It features Spoken Word Artist Dwayne Morgan, dancer April Mullings and expat Ramie Veerappan whose vision it was to take groups of people to a post-Apartheid South Africa for them to experience a country she had hope for when she was a child.

I am also in post production on "Ray of Hope: Rathika Sitsabaiesan Returns to Sri Lanka". This story chronicles the experiences of Rathika Sitsabaiesan, a young Canadian Member of Parliament and community servant, who has been asking questions about a civil war that has displaced thousands of people and left a community shattered. When Rathika decides to travel back to Sri Lanka, to see her family and piece together a fragmented memory of her youth, her life and security are put at risk. Her six-day visit to Sri Lanka turns into a cat and mouse game as Government surveillance of Rathika's movement escalates into an attempted arrest forcing her into hiding. Will she get out alive? What must the people risk to keep her safe? How does one woman's action affect the security of an entire patriarchal society?

Along with several other narrative productions being developed, I am also beginning my journey as a writer. There are so many stories I want to tell that have an immediacy. I can't wait for others to make them, I want to be the auteur of my experiences as an artist. Writers have the most fun.

**As an actor, I'm guessing you've seen the ins and outs of this whole industry a few times over. I've got to ask, what do you think of the #metoo movement, and were you surprised by any of the men that have been called out?**

I think the #metoo movement is very important. Sexual assault and misconduct doesn't only have an immediate impact on an individual, it has a lasting effect on how that person pieces together their ability to trust and interact with others. It is a wake up call for people who exude power and abuse those powers. As a black man, I was very surprised by the revelations of white men being sexually abusive. Growing up, I've felt the stereotypes of... if you are a black man, you are predestined to be sexually aggressive. So it's a shock to be seeing the curtain pulled aside and secrets being revealed from the other side as well. However, that said, no one should ever have to experience sexual exploitation or harassment in any form and worse have to keep it a secret when unfortunately it does happen.

**Do you think the #metoo movement will create any real change?**

Change is coming, but to what degree, I don't know. But for the sake of my son, my daughter, and so many boys and girls out there, something's gotta give. I recently volunteered to be the facilitator for the ACTRA Toronto Conference 24-hour Film Challenge. In this role, I have the opportunity to design what the film's projects and challenges would be. I've proposed making films with women at the helm of the creative decision making process. The challenge happens in February, but I am excited to see the types of stories that will be made. In a small way, doing this will empower some woman to know if she can make a small film in 24 hours, there is nothing stopping her from making bigger stories. But the opportunities have to be made and the environment to foster such growth has to be nurtured respectfully.

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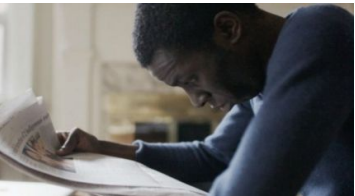
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