



## A WOMAN OF MANY

# TALENTS

Tess Reidy meets actor, playwright and author, Zawe Ashton

**Z**awe Ashton, 32, has much to be proud of: she's written a play, a film and a book; she won the London Poetry Slam Championship in 2000, a Verity Bargate award nomination in 2007 for her debut play, *Harm's Way*, and received a Raindance film festival nomination in 2014 for best British short for *Happy Toys*, which she directed.

You may recognise her from *Holby City*, *The Bill*, *Casualty* and *Misfits* and for her 2011 role as Vod in the Channel 4 comedy *Fresh Meat*. She's also worked on films with Hollywood stars such as Jason Statham in *Blitz*. But, above all this, she says she's most proud of her work with Clean Break, a charity that uses drama therapy to change women's lives in prison and after release.

Zawe grew up in Stoke Newington, north London. Her mother, Victoria, arrived in

England in her teens from Uganda, where Zawe's grandfather, Paulo Muwanga, had served as both president and prime minister. Her parents were schoolteachers – her mother taught design and technology, and her father English – though he later worked for Channel 4 commissioning education programmes for schools. Her brother is a musician and her sister works in animation.

"It was rough. It's not the Stoke Newington that people know today – the >>

place where mothers with four-wheel buggies try to run me off the road.”

Half the houses on the street where her family lived were “squats” – empty buildings that were occupied by people who didn’t pay rent. Zawe says it was filled with lots of different characters. “It was a great place to grow up. It was always extremely creative. We had these rules in place with regards to the main high street – you had to be an independent shop or restaurant. I think that kept the artistic spirit alive,” she says.

Zawe got into acting at a very early age, at about five or six, at the Anna Scher Theatre School in Islington. “There wasn’t any sort of audition process. The classes were really affordable – about £2.50 per lesson – and so it encouraged lots of local kids to get involved.”

Anna Scher’s theatre school wasn’t like your average drama class. She taught the children about the likes of Martin Luther King, Anne Frank and Nelson Mandela and promoted ideas of love, peace and understanding. “She was an activist. We weren’t allowed to use the words ‘star’ or ‘fame’ – they were banned,” explains Zawe. “She wasn’t someone encouraging us to be a flash in the pan. She was really instilling extremely strong ethics into us. She would say: ‘Know why you’re acting, know why you’re taking a certain job.’”

“Whenever I work with women inside I always think: this could be me ... or any one of us”

Zawe isn’t the only star to have gone to Anna Scher’s, other former students include half the cast of *EastEnders* (Patsy Palmer, Joe Swash, Tameka Empson, Sid Owen, Gillian Taylforth and Natalie Cassidy – to name but a few) plus Gary and Martin Kemp, Linda Robson and Kathy Burke.

Since getting involved with *Clean Break*, Zawe has taken a different approach to her work. In 2006, she played 38-year-old Joyce Vincent, a woman who lay dead and forgotten in her flat in Wood Green for more

than two years, in the film *Dreams of a Life*. Zawe says: “My work with *Clean Break* completely impacted on the way I approached that role because of the women I had met and the notion that there are truly women that fall through the cracks of society, who we aren’t necessarily taken care of.”

Since then, Zawe has performed plays in prisons across the UK and was the writer in residence for *Clean Break* for almost two years, encouraging female prisoners to see the benefits of drama therapy for rehabilitation. The time also influenced the kind of work Zawe now chooses to do. One of her plays, *All The Women Who Thought They Were Mad*, is about the over-medication of women, particularly black women, in the UK and focuses on how dangerous that can be. “Prisons are full of women who committed non-violent acts

and mental institutions are full of women who weren’t that ill before they took the medication,” she says.

Zawe says she wants to continue both writing and acting. “The two inform each other really well,” she says. “Lots of people assume that because you’re writing you don’t want to act but I think there are so many women in this industry who want to be in something they care about. They want more agency in the work they’re committing to.”

Zawe says she experiences sexism and racism in her career. “I recently pitched a piece about an older woman leaving prison after a sentence for a white-collar crime but they said: ‘Oh, okay but could it be about a man?’ This everyday sexism, the everyday racism that you face is happening and you don’t even realise it. It’s hurting you deeply without you even knowing because it’s so institutionalised. It’s certainly something I’m involved in on a day-to-day basis, for sure.”

Zawe feels strongly that women, and particularly female prisoners, need support. She thinks the focus should be on helping people not to offend when they come out of prison and the government shouldn’t be making cuts to probation services. “The whole point of prison is to stop reoffending and create healthier societies and yet they won’t spend money on it,” she says. “There’s a lot of anxiety and complexity around leaving prison. It’s certainly not a case of you throw a bag over your shoulder and go off humming down the street.”

Women leaving prison need “as much individual care as possible”, says Zawe. “If the government truly does want better societies, then it needs to spend money to do that. The thing that frustrates me most is

ZAWE ASHTON  
WAS WRITER IN  
RESIDENCE FOR  
CLEAN BREAK



the way probation officers, for example, have to struggle to help people not reoffend and there is hardly any focus or money going to creative therapies in prisons.”

Zawe says that anyone who feels that prisons are too soft should go to one, or start writing to someone locked up in one “because holiday camp, it ain’t”. Some of the women she’s met and worked with have not seen their children grow up, some are in there for defending themselves against a violent partner and some have mental health problems and are not getting the rehabilitation that they actually need.

Her experiences have made her realise how one decision can impact on a lifetime. “The thing that astounds me most whenever I work with women inside, is that I always think: ‘This could be me; this could be any one of us.’ Few people wake up one day and say: ‘Hey, I’m going to commit a crime.’ There’s an individual story for each and every woman and that, we have to respect.”