

BEN LAWSON

THE MESSAGE BEHIND 13 REASONS WHY

BY CHRISTINE MONTANTI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK VELTMAN

Australian TV and film actor Ben Lawson is no stranger to portraying controversial characters on American network television. Known for his dynamic roles as a double agent on the ABC series *Designated Survivor*, and as the boyfriend of a transgender attorney (played by real life transgender actress Laverne Cox) on the CBS political drama *Doubt*, Lawson appreciates playing thought-provoking characters who encourage honest conversations. This busy Hollywood actor shows no sign of slowing down anytime soon! Currently, Lawson is starring in the second season of Netflix's critically acclaimed teen drama series *13 Reasons Why*, while he continues to be involved in back to back network TV projects.

The former star of the Australian soap opera *Neighbours* plays baseball coach Rick on the Netflix mystery series; it revolves around high school student Hannah Baker, portrayed by Australian actress, Katherine Langford, who records thirteen cassette tapes to reveal the reasons she commits suicide. When questioned about the controversy surrounding the show's graphic depiction of suicide and rape Lawson explains, "As uncomfortable as the viewers may feel about the show's content, audiences should not be blind to the heartbreaking issues teenagers are confronted with on a daily basis in high schools and colleges."

Lawson gives an inside look at what viewers can expect in the second season of the devastating drama series. "In the first season we just heard Hannah's narrative, in the second season we realize that every person that received one of those tapes has their own story, and the truth is going to get a little murkier! "Is there just one truth or is there a little bit more to it?" This season speaks to what we see happening in colleges and schools around America, and there is a heart wrenching truth to it. For teenagers in general, this is a very difficult time in their lives."

As for the character that Lawson portrays on the Netflix series, he explains, "Coach Rick is very much about protecting himself and the school. For any one of his players to be accused or indicted would be a tragedy because he really just needs his team to win, and that is really all he is about. It's not like Rick has any personal love for his players; he is simply using them for his own gains. Although Coach Rick believes it was a horrible thing that happened



to Hannah, he feels she did it to herself and that was on her. Rick wants his players to get on with their lives without wanting to acknowledge the reality of the systemic problem that is happening in the school."

It's no surprise that *13 Reasons Why* has sparked debates on many controversial issues involving rape, suicide, and bullying. Some critics claim it's an honest approach to opening up conversations about these issues, others, including mental health experts, say the show is just interested in the shock value and is dangerous storytelling at best. They believe portraying Hannah as the heroine is glorifying suicide. The Los Angeles based actor comments

on all of the controversy and the important conversations that the show's content yields. "What the show has done successfully is it has started a lot of conversations that teenagers in general are reluctant to talk about, things that are troubling. It is a very difficult time in their lives. I think what the show is doing is stating to adults, parents, teachers and friends, as uncomfortable as this is, hey look, let's not be blind to this! The show is always going to come under fire for various criticisms, and everyone is going to view it differently. I think on the whole, the show is reaching out and starting very important conversations."

In response to the criticism the show has received, *13 Reasons Why* creator Brian Yorkey has said that "Silence is the real killer!" "Brian is right!" Lawson admits. "I haven't heard that quote before but that is a great one! I think that the human condition is prone to suffering in silence. Even as adults, it's hard when we face these problems in life. It is really hard to reach out. What the show and Brian are saying is "that those of us who are still growing and trying to figure this out, please don't do this alone!" We all know how hard that this time in our life is. We as adults have all gone through it and the moment you reach out, things start to get better."

A role that previously opened up meaningful conversations for which Lawson has said he is appreciative is when he played the boyfriend of a transgender attorney in the CBS series *Doubt*. "This was something new, and something I haven't done before," Lawson confesses. "As any actor wants to grow and do something different, this role was such a gift. Take away the transgender aspect of it. The lawyer himself was fantastic. He was so sharp, and the story was very well written. Then you had this other side of him; he was falling in love with this transgender woman, and then he had to deal with how he wanted to make that relationship public. It was a great storyline." As for what it was like working with real life transgender actress Laverne Cox, Lawson reveals, "Laverne is so sweet and really helpful, and we became good friends on that show."

The Hollywood actor's next project will be shooting a pilot for ABC's *False Profits* where he plays Jake Amato, the "good looking" building manager of TJ Maxx. Lawson describes the character he portrays on the comedic soap: "Jake is a widow and a single dad. He starts falling for the character played by Bellamy Young. Bellamy's character is the antagonist, and she is putting all of her savings into a pyramid scam because she is trying to start a new life. These two meet, and I think as the season goes forward, we will see what happens with them. Although the show is a drama it is very, very funny!"

As the interview concludes the Australian native describes what his experience has been like on *13 Reasons Why*. "As an



actor you just want to do something that means something to someone. God knows I have been doing this for a long time, and most of the stuff that I have done has been pure entertainment. That's great, and that's very important as well. It is what appealed to me about being an actor when I was just eight years old. But, to be involved in something that is actually changing the way we think and talk about things and our awareness . . . that's a gift and a real blessing!"

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