



A NEW HOPE

*After his game-changing part as the first black stormtrooper and rave reviews at the Old Vic, John Boyega is now one of Britain's biggest acting exports. But it's his strict Peckham upbringing that keeps him real – and helps him define a new kind of fame. By **Scarlett Russell***

Photographs **Nathaniel Goldberg** Styling **Verity Parker**



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Style **Interview**

We all look for a mentor from time to time, but John Boyega never expected his to call out of the blue from Hollywood as he was driving through Forest Hill, southeast London. Not recognising the number, Boyega pulled over. It was Robert Downey Jr.

“When I was starting out, I didn’t really know what to think and I wanted to get some advice,” Boyega, 27, says. “I was a huge fan of his. I think our agents spoke, and then he called me up out of nowhere and we had a good long chat. He was, like, ‘Next time you’re in LA, come to the house.’ And I went to his frikkin’ amazing house — and Orlando Bloom was there eating pancakes. I stayed there all Sunday eating good food with nice people.”

If you’d told the preacher’s son from Peckham when he was growing up on a council estate that one day he’d be hanging out with Hollywood stars and be part of one of the most successful movie franchises in history, he might not have believed you. Boyega gained worldwide fame in 2015 with the role of Imperial stormtrooper-turned-rebel Finn, in Star Wars: The Force Awakens, the opening film in the third trilogy of the epic space opera. Set 30 years after Return of the Jedi (the final film of the original trilogy — try to keep up), The Force Awakens co-starred Carrie Fisher, Harrison Ford, Daisy Ridley and Adam Driver, and is the fourth highest-grossing film of all time (it has taken more than \$2bn worldwide). The final episode of the nine-film saga, The Rise of Skywalker, is released next month.

As for Boyega, fans now have tattoos of his face on their bodies, besotted children cry from the shock of meeting him (“definitely my craziest fan experience”) and he has earned enough to buy a flat for himself and a house for his parents, both in London. He’s a lot of fun. Over an hour and a half, sipping lemonade as we sit in a pub in Vauxhall (he’s teetotal — also, it’s 11am), he talks freely, digressing into skits and laughter along the way, but lowering his voice when we broach more serious topics.

Boyega and his two older sisters, Blessing and Grace, were raised by their Nigerian parents, who came to England in the 1980s. He likes to have Songs of Praise on in the background at home on Sundays “when I’m feeling churchy”. Grace lives with him and works as his assistant. Blessing works at his company,

UpperRoom Productions. They are a close family. “When I tell people where I was raised, they always go ‘Oof, how was that?’ as if it was rough,” he says. “I reckon I had a better childhood than most people who were raised in amazing environments. It was happy and active — playing on the estate, climbing trees, going to theatre clubs. There was so much community, so much to get involved in.”

There were dark times too, however. They lived on the same estate as Damilola Taylor, the 10-year-old who was stabbed to death with a broken bottle in 2000 on his way home from Peckham Library — in 2006, two teenagers were convicted of his manslaughter. It has been reported that Boyega and Grace were among the last to see Taylor alive and, in 2017, he clarified in an interview: “I was merely walking with him before it happened. Me and my sister didn’t know any specifics until the police showed up.”

He doesn’t bristle when I raise this; in fact, he’s keen to talk about knife crime, now at a nine-year high in England and Wales. He slams the government’s recent #knifefree chicken box campaign — an attempt to divert young people from carrying knives by printing real-life aspirational stories on the inside of fried-chicken boxes. “That is never going to work,” Boyega says. “They’re aiming for a certain demographic, which is fine, but what makes you think a quote on a box is going to make them drop their knives? I don’t think their lives or the complications of what they go through are being considered.”

What will work, then? “After-school clubs and community centres opening their doors and giving opportunities to kids. Teaching kids about their historical and cultural values instead of teaching them the same old bollocks. Support for single mothers, single fathers and teachers. If you cut schools’ funding, you get a bunch of teachers in overfilled classrooms

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who aren't motivated to care for the kids and who can't handle so many different personalities and issues."

Boyega credits his own after-school activities for not only keeping him out of trouble, but also founding his love of acting. When he was 10, he won a scholarship to attend Theatre Peckham, and later attended Identity School of Acting. His classmate Letitia Wright is another alumnus who made it big in Hollywood, starring in *Black Panther*. "I went to McDonald's in Dalston with Letitia all the time, and she would talk about what she was doing right now, everything that was going to happen," he says.

He also admits to waiting outside a stage door to meet Daniel Kaluuya, another London-bred actor who has made it big, with a 2018 Oscar nomination for his starring role in *Get Out*, after watching one of his first plays. "When you see a lot of people growing into their own and it's not just about their colour, it's about their talent, that's all you want. You want to see your world represented in a natural and cool way," Boyega says.

The 2011 sci-fi horror-comedy *Attack the Block* was the big break that brought Boyega to the attention of JJ Abrams, the director of *The Force Awakens*. "I met him in America and he said he'd get me into something," Boyega says. "I thought, 'Bullshit. Don't try that LA shit with me. You don't have to do that. It's cool to meet you, that's it.' But, bloody hell, he came through!" After a nine-month audition process, including an arduous weight-training regime for a part he hadn't even been given yet, Boyega became Finn. When the trailer showed him as the first black storm-trooper, the internet had a minor meltdown — not all of it favourable. He responded to questions over the ethnicity of his character in an Instagram post, writing: "Get used to it." In 2016, he won the coveted Bafta Rising Star Award, previously given to the likes of Tom Hardy and Kristen Stewart. The following year he won rave reviews in the play *Woyzeck* at the Old Vic and was directed by Kathryn Bigelow in *Detroit*, a 1960s historical drama.

He's still not impressed by "that LA shit", though. "I'm not attracted to a lot of the uppity stuff," he tuts. "Soho House, those tiny portions of food at parties — I'd rather just hang out with my friends." He says he's "just not interested" in alcohol, but loves being the designated driver on nights out. "I've got a grandad gene, I like to be at home watching *Cash in the Attic*. But when I want a vibe, I throw a house party or go to a club." His favourite place in LA isn't Beverly Hills, it's the distinctly less starry Inglewood: "A good, working-class, heavily black community that is also very historical and creative. It reminds me of Peckham."

The *Rise of Skywalker* will keep Boyega busy for the rest of the year. Of course we don't know how the saga will end, but the teaser trailer was viewed 111m times in the first 24 hours, and fan theories are in overdrive. Next year he will be starring in *Small Axe*, an anthology series for BBC1, directed by Steve McQueen, about "black people's part in the making of Great Britain", in which he plays one of the UK's first Afro-Caribbean police officers.

"Life is good," he grins. "Health is good. Family is good. But I don't shy away from my want for a partnership and companionship." Currently single, Boyega tells me he has been in love and had a five-year relationship. Does being famous make it harder to date? "Nah, and anyone who tells you it is, is lying!" he shouts, bursting into laughter. "It's complicated, though. There are people reacting to your celebrity a bit, you've got to suss that out early on. But I never understood people who say, 'I can't be with you because I want to focus on my career.' What were you focused on before? Why can't you focus on both? It's about supporting each other's endeavours."

Has anyone famous ever privately messaged him on social media, ie slid into his DMs? "My DMs are dry! The other day, my mates were, like, 'Let's go in your DMs, let's see what it's like [to be famous].' My boy scrolls through, like [he grimaces], 'Bruv, this person is asking you what planet Tatooine is on.'" He breaks into full-bodied cackles. "Star Wars geeks. Those are the DMs I get," he says. "I like it, though, let's be honest: I love the nerdy stuff." A politically engaged family man who's a romantic at heart and a Star Wars geek? Not bad for the boy from Peckham. ■ @JohnBoyega

Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker is in cinemas nationwide from December 19



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