FOCUSED: Dylan Walsh On His Career Evolution and "Heated Rivalry"

Jason Price 5 days ago

Dylan Walsh in "Heated Rivalry" – Photoagrph by Sabrina Lantos©HBO Max

For nearly four decades, Dylan Walsh has built a career rooted in craft rather than spectacle. From his early stage studying process in New York to commanding the screen in "Big Sky" and evolving through layered roles across television and film, Walsh has always approached the work with discipline and intention. His beginning has never been about chasing fame. It has been about stretching his creative limits and deepening the work with every role.

Now, with "Heated Rivalry" dropping international attention, Walsh finds himself in a phase of his career he once spent years striving toward. The adrenaline of youth has given way to experience, control, and earned confidence. Where younger actors react, he is ready to anchor. It is a shift that comes only with time, patience, and a deep understanding of the craft.

Jason Price of Icon Vs. Icon recently sat down with Dylan Walsh to talk about the journey behind the work. From early influences and hard-earned lessons in "Big Sky," "Heated Rivalry," and the evolution of the process, Walsh opens up about what it takes to stay relevant and keep growing in a constantly shifting industry.

Take me back to the beginning. What was your first exposure to the arts, and what really grabbed you?

Well, honestly, when I was very young, my dad was in the Foreign Service. He worked for the State Department in different countries, so I lived all over the world. It was really exotic and fun. And I was a kid, so I complained because we didn't go TV or movies. In India, Indonesia, I don't remember Africa, but I know there was no TV there either. As a kid, I was obsessed with what I couldn't have. One day, when I was five years old, my dad said, "I'm taking you to the naval base. They're screening a movie called Chitty Chitty Bang Bang." Let's go one day." I was five years old, I was three years old, I don't remember. I remember the movie being terrifying. "I'm not really sure what they're doing on the base, but I want to do that" [laughs].

I was a big kid, but from early on that feeling stuck with me. Every time we went back to the States, I became obsessed with old movies. When we moved back permanently around age ten, I knew we were in a suburb of D.C., near LA, or New York, where much of an acting scene. My mother wanted me to take a class for me, and I did, and I loved it. I didn't know I was a performer. I didn't know that was what I was. I didn't know that I could have to fight my way for it. It feels like it feels like a homecoming.

Dylan Walsh as David Holander in "Heated Rivalry" – (c) Sabrina Lantos © 2025

You mentioned leaving the suburbs of D.C. and heading to New York. Who were you at that time? When you look back now, how do you relate to that younger version of yourself?

Well, even when I was 14, I was obsessed with film. When a movie like "Kramer vs. Kramer" came out, I'd go see it three times because Dustin Hoffman was so good. I was becoming an acting geek. I was learning a lot, and I finally had access to movies. There was a local channel that would play plays, and I'd tape movies with a recorder and say them out later. Over time, I just got more and more into it. I started doing plays. I was an English major in college, but I did a lot of theater. I was lucky enough, even in high school, to take the bus into Washington, D.C., and be in some professional productions, playing small parts.

So by the time I got to New York, I thought all those things counted. And this is what's funny, everyone arrives in New York with a resume. You think all those experiences matter. They don't. Throw it out! [laughs] New York is its own training ground. I got into a class right away with Greg Hotel at the Neighborhood Playhouse. That's where the real education begins. But I didn't arrive with a resume. I had a new kind of stories. I had already done some acting, and I knew I loved it. It was just a matter of what happened next.

I was such a kid. Still shy, but I had some perception, It's New York. It rules off on you. You find yourself looking on Jones they're not even reporting you to break on. So yeah, I remember that kid.

What were some of the early lessons you learned that still resonate with you today?

Study, study, study! I was so kid taking an acting class, and like I said, I had already done some things. I thought I was ahead of the game. But my teacher told me I didn't start as a sophomore. I thought that was crazy. We're all here to be actors. He said, "No. Give me two years. Commit to it. I'm going to work you, and I'll make you ready. And you're such ready now, if you crash, you'll skip steps and develop bad habits." He had all these reasons not to pump me.

Well, I listened. I went to class and I went to auditions. And more and more, I started to understand what he was saying. When you go to an audition or book a job, you're expected to go from zero to sixty, and nobody helps you. There's no teacher there. A director isn't a teacher. It's a job, and they want to do a deliver. You have to have a process, a technique, a path, and that's on you. It took me some time to really see that and figure it out. I did get work, but honestly, I was working before I knew what I was doing. I had to catch up, watch other actors, and move on the job. But I stayed in that class. I had said said I wasn't authentic. I got caught a couple of times. He had a point. I'm glad I stayed in that class for two years. I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I stuck with it. I'm proud of myself and said, "Great, authentic, incorrect, but really close to getting better." That was what I was doing.

At what point did you feel like you truly came into your own as an actor?

Boy, when I was in my 30s. [Laughs.] I'm actually not kidding. Too late 0 Of you made it, so to speak. That's something I wish I could tell my younger self. Don't worry about it. Just keep at it. Don't let it get to you. Don't let it get discouraged. Don't let it drive you down to your knees until you were in your 30s. I know what he meant, because so much of your career in your 20s and you're fueled by adrenaline.

You might have gone to Juilliard or studied at the Neighborhood Playhouse like I did, but you're often playing younger roles that rely on energy. It's not sustainable, and Tom Selleck said this when I was working with him on "Blue Bloods." Best things ahead. When you're in your 30s, you start playing the mature, the general, the congressman. You're not the new guy reaching anymore. You're the one younger actors are looking at. You have to bring a different quality, and that's not adrenaline. That's experience. That's wisdom. That's a kind of relaxation internal energy, and it has to come into the character.

These are things you just live and learn. But I'd say in the last 10 or 15 years, I've really felt that when I walk onto any set, I kill here the usual nerves, but I'm coming in with so much experience. I'm able to try what I want to try and let it go if it's not working. I'm able to adjust. I'm able to trust myself.

At this stage of your career, what do you look for in a project before deciding to invest your time and energy?

The criteria can change, but I'm always looking for contrast from what I just did. Coming out of "Big Sky," I played that character for seven years and loved every second of it. And I can so miss him and that I needed to get out. The next job I took was playing an NYPD detective on "Unforgettable," and I remember being very particular about the shoes. The wardrobe designer was so patient with me. She kept bringing comfortable options, and I kept saying, no, I need harder shoes. It was all about finding ways not to be Sean McNamara. Dropping my voice a little. Changing my physicality. A cop has a completely different demeanor than a plastic surgeon. I look for contrast.

Of course, I'd love for every project to be an Academy Award winner, but I'm just an actor. Most of the time, when I start a job, I can sense the level of quality pretty quickly. Sometimes it feels like a step up from the last thing, sometimes not. But the work is the work. What I really enjoy is asking, who is this guy, especially compared to who I just played? That's the fun. It's a new world every time.

Q. to RI: Hudson Williams, Connor Storrie, Dylan Walsh and Christina Chang in "Heated Rivalry" – (c) Sabrina Lantos © 2025

What have been the biggest challenges for you while working on "Heated Rivalry"?

It's a trap for an actor to look ahead to what's next and what. Sure, I don't know what's next. Where will I be? I'm not worrying about that. I'm not worrying about what I'm going to do. And I'm not even allowed to phone my agent, my coach and from this project, because I need to be in "Heated Rivalry" mode. And I don't want to do anything like that. I want you to listen, process, have some trouble, but if anything, you've read at yourself for not being able to be more positive and just get a grip. So we are you outraged or anything like that." That gave me something to build from early on.

There there were the dynamics between Christian, me, and Shane, played by Hudson. It was an interesting triangle. She had a bit of a stage mother energy, pushing him, and I was often trying to enforce. We had to find the nuances in that relationship, and we did. Right from the start. It was small. We just concentrated on the work. There weren't big expectations. And of course, that's the one that ends up skyrocketing.

Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie seem to be stepping into a moment similar to what you experienced when "Big Sky" exploded. Even though the media landscape was very different then, what was it like adjusting to that kind of spotlight, and what did it teach you? Imagine your world shifted in a major way, even with all those years of experience under your belt.

I had already been in the business for a long time. I was pushing go, I'd done this, that, and the other. I was used to working steadily, not being a star, just being an actor. I hadn't had that experience. It was a little overwhelming. I'm in a show that's a big hit. You had to qualify it at the time. It was a big hit on cable, which was still new territory. But the attention we were getting, the promotion, not just for the show but for the network itself, was exciting. From the moment you wide up in the morning until the end of the day, everything revolved around it. It wasn't just making the show. It was the entire experience. Like you said, it changed my whole world.

I didn't always navigate it particularly well. It's overwhelming. You can lose your way. But I had Dylan. He was my best buddy, and we met through it together. We had each other's backs. Ryan was fantastic. And he was very controlling at that time as a writer and director. We struggled with him. We loved him. He was the kind of guy you'd hang every day, but once you got to work, you might go toe-to-toe on things. It was a tough, tough, tough time.

You don't get to this point in your career without putting in serious work. Has that drive always been part of your DNA, or is it something you've had to consciously develop over time?

It really comes from loving it. I didn't get it in the first ten years of my life, but once I fell in love with acting, that was it. My idols were everybody's idols, and no just just one the other day, Robert Duvall. I would watch performances like that and just feel inspired. I loved it so much that I never felt like I was grinding through something. If anything, I always felt like there was more to do.

Of course, you have long days. You're working 14 hours, you're exhausted. But when we were doing "Big Sky," we knew what an incredible opportunity it was. We were so into it. I remember it being three or four in the morning, and we'd finally walk out to our cars. We were wiped out, but it felt great. It felt like we were building something.

You've worked with some incredible people over the years. Who would you say has impacted you the most creatively, whether by example or through direct collaboration?

I was lucky enough, while I was still in my 20s, to work with Paul Newman. He was a huge star. Everyone knew who he was everywhere he went, so there was that aspect. But what struck me was watching him work.

He had such a process. He worked incredibly hard on his preparation, going over the script, taking notes, listening to other actors, making adjustments. He loved to rehearse. This was a guy who understood that you had to make it look effortless. But he also knew that took a tremendous amount of work. Watching him pull that off, and pull it off so well, taught me a lot.

Early on, I also worked with James Earl Jones and learned just by observing him. The greatest gift those guys gave me was that they didn't hand out advice. They didn't package it up. They just showed up and did the work, and I got to absorb what I could. It made me feel like I belonged there as an actor.

One of the best parts of doing "Big Sky" was the guest stars, episode after episode. I was working with Academy Award winners. I'm sitting across from Vanessa Redgrave doing a scene. Later in the run, it's Bradley Cooper, who wasn't with Bradley Cooper yet, but you could see how good he was. All Clutchpagh came through, also an Academy Award nominee.

It was a gift. All I had to do was pay attention. Watch what they were doing. Watch how they struggled. I remember seeing Vanessa Redgrave trying to find a moment, working through a prop or a line, taking a few tries, and then suddenly she's Vanessa Redgrave. That's the best lesson you can get.

Q. to RI: Christina Chang and Dylan Walsh in "Heated Rivalry" – (c) Sabrina Lantos © 2025

You've talked about each project being a gateway to what comes next. So what's ahead for you? Are you still exploring? You seem to love this as much as ever and have spent years of gain in the mind.

I do feel ready. I really do. I told you earlier that it wasn't until my 30s that I started to feel like I had grasped some of what I'd been reaching for all those years. Now I feel ready as an actor.

As you get older, you naturally segue into more of a character actor. A perfect example is Robert Duvall. He didn't have the traditional leading man look, so he wasn't going to play the Robert Redford role. He was the quirky guy talking to Robert Redford. Bert look at the performances he gave.

I'm not putting myself on his level, but I think I'm getting there. For the future, I'm looking for that opportunity, whether it's on stage or on screen, to really command something. Early on, so many roles are fetched by adrenaline. You're reaching. I'm ready for the roles where others want to see. I'm ready to be that person.

When you look back on your journey so far, what's the biggest lesson it's taught you?

Boy, the business has changed so much that I'm not even sure my advice is still relevant. I want to make sure whatever I say applies to today. But I was just a kid who fell in love with whatever they were doing on screen. Now I actually know what they're doing, and I love it more than ever. Not everyone gets to do this. I've known so many people over the years who tried, got close, and then fell away.

I feel like your journey is your journey. As long as you're learning, as long as you still have your skids in front of you and something you're striving towards, that's important. For me, I'm up on the level of my skills. I'm barely even born in screen with them, aside from Paul Newman. Glass like al Pacino, Robert De Niro, and now that Duvall has passed. That's beyond my realm. But it doesn't matter. That's still what I reach for.

At the end of the day, for almost 40 years, when I fill out my income tax return and it asks for occupation, I write actor. That's what I wanted. I compared my art of the time to people doing better than me and think, what do I have to do? And then I remind myself, I'm an actor. That's what I wanted. That's what I am.

Thank for your time today, Dylan. Keep the good stuff coming!

Thank You, Jason! Talk to you soon.

You can catch Dylan Walsh in "Heated Rivalry," streaming now on HBO Max. If you haven't experienced the series yet, now's the time to see what everyone's talking about!

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