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Interview: Coronation Street's Charlie Condou on fatherhood – on and off screen



Featured photograph by Rajan Wadhera.

It's pouring with rain when I meet Charlie Condou in Islington to talk about his role as gay father Marcus Dent on *Coronation Street*. Not just London drizzle; a proper Mancunian-style monsoon. It's not an ideal day for a photo-shoot – but I get the feeling, as we trudge around an Islington park, that the rain and impending interview are of less pressing concern for Condou than domestic obligations.

'I'm here to see my daughter,' he explains, as we settle down and dry off in Condou's favourite café. Georgia Mae, now aged two, is his pride and joy, and fatherhood is as natural a calling for him as acting. 'Before having Georgia I always loved kids,' he says, sipping a smoothie. 'I have friends with children and I'd always want to look after them; I have seven godchildren! Now I have my own, and it is a bit different – I don't think any of them are as fun as my own.' As he speaks, we're startled by a red-faced toddler throwing a tantrum at the counter, to his mother's evident horror. Condou chuckles. 'That might be normal, I suppose. Someone once told me it's a bit like being with a drunk midget!'

I'd wanted to be a dad since I was 13, or something ridiculous.

Now aged 38, Condou took a while to come to fatherhood. Given his evidently hectic schedule, however, that should come as no surprise. After finishing his first stint on *Coronation Street* in 2008, he had one more acting engagement (in *Good*, a drama set in Nazi Germany) before he and his long-time friend, the actor Catherine Kanter, started IVF. 'I'd wanted to be a dad since I was 13, or something ridiculous,' Condou says. 'I think a lot of gay people have conversations with their friends where they say, "we should have a kid together". When I had that conversation with Catherine it was all very noncommittal. But then as we both got a little older, she said, "if I get to 40 and I'm still single, would you have that conversation with me again?"'

'I sort of always knew I'd have kids, but I knew it wouldn't be simple. It's not just a case of meeting someone; you have to put a little more effort into it as a gay man. So that was how it began. Then I met my partner, Cameron, so it became a very different conversation. It was: "how are the three of us going to do this?" That was the real start of the process. We started IVF and really got the ball rolling.'

Art imitating life?



Charlie Condou. Photography by Rajan Wadhwa.

For Condou's on-screen persona, things weren't quite so difficult – though they might be deemed a little more stressful. Marcus Dent had returned to Weatherfield – the fictional part of Manchester where *Coronation Street* is based – after a three-year hiatus for an emotional reunion with his ex-boyfriend, Sean Tully (played by Anthony Cotton). The couple's easy reunion soon turned more complex as Sean's child, Dylan, returned to Weatherfield after Violet Wilson – with whom Sean had fathered Dylan after IVF – was involved in a car crash. Suddenly the stoical and calm Marcus found himself dealing with an increasingly flustered Sean.

So, which character is Condou really like? 'I'm very definitely a Marcus,' he responds. 'From the minute Georgia was born, I sort of took the lead almost instantly. Even though Cameron and Catherine were both brilliant as well, I think they were a little more like rabbits in headlights! I remember taking Georgia home from the hospital, and both Catherine and Cameron saying, "now what?"'

'It didn't faze me for a minute, and I don't know why; I was always really clear about how it was all going to be. So I'm definitely more of a Marcus!'

Marcus's return to the Street had been rumoured for quite some time before his reunion with Sean, whom he'd left in 2008 after becoming frustrated with his jealousy and childish behaviour. 'The producers had been looking to bring me back for a while, as far as I know,' Condou explains. 'I'd had a few conversations with them, and they kept saying they'd love to bring me back if I was interested. I'd always say yes, but only if the storyline was right. This storyline came about, and it just made a lot of sense to me – obviously, it's something very close to my heart.'

'Originally I said I'd just come back for the parenting story, because the child playing Dylan could only be with us for a finite period. But I enjoyed it so much that at the end of my contract, when I was asked

if I'd stay on, I said, "yep". So I'm staying!'

Starting out

Marcus Dent marks Condou's longest-running acting engagement in a career that started in 1985, when he was aged just 12. Did he always want to be an actor? He pauses. 'I think I always wanted to be a dancer when I was a little kid, and I guess that changed when I made it into my teens. I feel very lucky, because I knew what I wanted to be for a very long time. I did lots of little bits as a kid; things for the Children's Film Foundation, a part in *Robin of Sherwood*. But I didn't do anything seriously until I left school – when I started to make money from it!

I knew as a very small kid that I was never into things that other boys seemed to be into – rough-and-tumble games, that sort of stuff.

'My intention had been to go to university to study drama, but I got a role in an ITV drama called *Frank Stubbs Promotes* and I thought I'd take time off to do the series. The series got re-commissioned, so I took another year off and bought myself a flat in Soho. Before I knew it, going to university just wasn't happening any more. I was 19, going on 20, living in Soho and having a whale of a time.'

Memories of life in Soho, as a young gay man in the early Nineties, still bring a smile to Condou's face. By the time his career had started, he tells me, he had already realised he was gay. 'I suppose it was something I always had a sense of,' he recalls. 'I knew as a very small kid that I was never into things that other boys seemed to be into – rough-and-tumble games, that sort of stuff. I was a very sensitive child, I suppose. I don't think I became aware that I was attracted to men until I was in my teens; I would imagine it's like that for most guys.

'I came out when I was 18. It seemed very clear for me; it was just one of those things that happened. I met somebody, and that was that. I'd had relationships with women before, but suddenly everything just clicked into place.'

Tabloid tribulations



Charlie Condou. Photography by Rajan Wadhwa.

We are talking just days after the art critic Brian Sewell launched a bitter attack on *Coronation Street* in the *Daily Mail* for having, in his view, too many gay characters. Condou responded in the *Guardian*. I ask how he felt about Sewell's complaint. He pauses a while before answering, quietly, 'I think it was a bit sad, actually. From what I know about Brian, he's a bisexual man himself, which makes the whole thing a bit sad.'

'I know he's from a different time, and grew up when homosexuality was illegal, so I wonder if there might still be a lot of shame attached to it for him. I find that very sad; that kind of internalised homophobia, which is how it sounded to me. While he was talking about *Coronation Street* those were his personal views, and I found some of them really quite shocking. It's actually quite distressing; that in this day and age, there are still gay or bisexual men who have those sort of opinions. It's really, really sad.'

But isn't the fact that Sewell's screed appeared in the *Daily Mail* just a symptom of an innately homophobic tabloid press? 'I think it's definitely a tabloid thing,' Condou replies. 'They're looking for an angle, for some controversy. But the point I made in my reply in the *Guardian* is that they're misinformed. There are not that many gay characters in *Coronation Street*. There are between 65 and 70 regular characters, and only four of them are gay. That's less than the national average.'

Condou adds that far from 'corrupting' viewers, as Sewell had suggested, soap operas could actually help change society's views, where needed. 'I'm well aware that there are a lot of people who will watch *Coronation Street* and who will see Sean and Marcus have a kiss, and they'll sit there feeling a bit uncomfortable with it. I hope that after a while they'll just stop noticing it, and it will become perfectly normal for them. That's where programmes like *Coronation Street* can do really good work. They are political in a very low-level sort of way. They're not in-your-face; they're just saying, "look, this is how many people are living". And it works. Who would have thought that Hayley Cropper, a transsexual, could become such a popular character when she started?

'I think that's why I'm really proud of the way we deal with gay issues; in a way, we don't deal with them at all. Sean and Marcus have their problems, but very little of that is to do with their sexuality. We've moved beyond the days of characters struggling to come out. We're a long way beyond *Brookside's* lesbian kiss.'

Identity and relationships

I ask if Condou receives any feedback about his role, and he seems almost nonchalant as he replies: 'Oh yeah, all the time. I get a lot of people writing to say that they feel like they're represented by Marcus, because a lot of gay men don't identify with Sean. Having said that, a lot of people really do identify with Sean, which is really important.'

I had a difficulty when I was growing up, thinking: "I can't be gay, because I'm nothing like Kenneth Williams, or Larry Grayson, or Boy George."

'When I was growing up, it was really difficult to see gay role models on TV. A lot of gay men aren't very camp, and I had a difficulty when I was growing up, thinking: "I can't be gay, because I'm nothing like Kenneth Williams, or Larry Grayson, or Boy George." Those were the gay people I saw on telly at the time, and that's all I knew.'

Condou clearly invests a lot of energy into his role on *Coronation Street*, which makes me wonder about Marcus's departure in 2008. The storyline which led to his break-up with Sean was noted for being very

emotional; was that difficult to prepare for? Condou thinks carefully before responding. 'I don't know, really. I think I've been acting for so long now that a lot of that stuff is second nature. On *Coronation Street* you really don't have a lot of time to prepare for anything because it's all filmed so fast. I think you just jump in and commit to it.'

And although Sean and Marcus's parenthood has its parallels in Condou's own relationship with his partner, Cameron Laux, Condou is quick to scotch any idea that the characters' relationship bears any similarity to his. 'Cameron's completely different to Sean in every single possible way,' he laughs. 'I've been in relationships with people who, perhaps, haven't quite grown up yet, a bit like Sean. Sean and Marcus are very different types of gay men, as are Anthony [Cotton] and I. I think that's something else that's great about *Coronation Street*: showing that two men in a relationship and who are very different can work.'

A new life



Charlie Condou. Photography by Rajan Wadhwa.

Sean and Marcus bring us back to fatherhood. Georgia Mae was born via an emergency Caesarean section, and Condou explains that the first few minutes of his daughter's life remain a blur. 'It was terrifying! What I remember are not the things you'd imagine remembering. I don't remember holding her for the first time, or any of that sort of stuff. What I remember is being very conscious that I had to look after Catherine.

'When the hospital staff lifted Georgia up I remember being really shocked at how she looked; she had lots of hair, and she was sort of grey from the birth. I wasn't prepared for that, despite having read almost every book about newborn babies! For some reason, I wasn't prepared to see her looking like she was covered with clay.'

When, then, can he remember first spending time with his new daughter? 'That day I remember sitting in a chair with her and looking at her face, thinking she looked a bit bizarre! She was a bit puffy, and had a ridiculous amount of black hair. I remember being fascinated by her.'

Georgia now has, effectively, three parents. I ask how the family are preparing to bring her up. 'We're preparing for it in the way that any parent prepares for any dynamic in their family set-up,' he says. 'We

take each day as it comes, and learn from what Georgia gives back to us. We're really lucky. Obviously I'm biased, but Georgia is a really happy and content child. She's never had any problem going between the two houses [she spends half her time with Kanter, half with Condou and Laux].

'Sometimes I worry what that's like for her, but I think that's my stuff and it doesn't affect her. So many kids today grow up in broken homes with lots of hostility between parents, and we don't have any of that. We all love each other, and we spend a lot of time together anyway.'

As we prepare to leave, I wonder how Condou has been changed by becoming a father. 'I don't think it's changed me as a person,' he muses. 'Apart from the inevitable; you become a lot less selfish. You have to. Now I find I'm much less focused on myself. Even in a relationship you focus on yourself first a lot of the time, but when you have a child that's not an option. You have to put your child first.'

Our interview is over. The rain beats down again as Condou says goodbye and dashes home. As I traipse back to Highbury & Islington Overground, a child runs past, delightedly splashing in puddles as her father and mother try to hurry her along. Another happy child; two more busy parents. After this morning's chat with one very happy gay dad, the long walk through the rain seems worthwhile.

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