



Alice Smith

## ON BEING ME

Louis Theroux



We invited Louis Theroux to give a careers guidance speech to pupils at the Idler Academy. Here is an extract from that speech.

I TAKE PROFESSIONAL ROGUES, CON MEN, PEOPLE WITH questionable ethics who were involved in conflicts or compromised in some way or another, and I try to find something vulnerable in them. That is what my life is based on doing. I do this by talking to them, spending time with them, getting to know them. I work under the guidance of a maxim written by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, that even when we lie, we still tell the truth with the shape our mouths make.

It's a strange job and not a job I sought. And for those of you interested in pursuing a career in documentaries about oddballs who have strange beliefs, this could be very useful. I could give you a few tips.

### LESSON ONE:

#### Get Other People To Do The Work For You

I am not responsible for my success. I mean this in a literal sense. Television is a collaborative medium and I make it with an invisible cadre of elves, producers, editors, executives who all collaborate.

Like Homer the Greek poet, I'm a committee, a collective with joint authorship over the product I produce.

It's interesting to think that if you came to see Louis Theroux this evening, he's not actually here. Think about that. If you want a refund I can't vouch for the fact you'll get it, although it's worth a try.

#### LESSON TWO:

### Bumble With Intent

I don't say this out of false modesty, but to give you an idea of how the shows work. I get accused of being *faux naïf* in reviews all the time. I think part of that, not the whole story, is that on screen people think I'm too feckless and too bumbling actually to make the shows that I appear in. And in all honesty, I am too feckless to make them, so the persona, such as it is, is a real one.

I feel odd when I talk about bumbling because bumbling is one of those things that if you're going to do, just do it, don't talk about it. To speak in terms of bumbling being an asset – calculated bumbling – is not good, and yet in a weird way my career is sort of based on that. How do you bumble authentically but in situations that you can predict and control? That's your job: to disarm people by being non-threatening. How do you achieve that kind of authentic incompetence?

There is an answer: it is to put yourself in danger. I'm not a brave person, but I can be a little bit brave under one condition. That condition is when I'm being filmed. The great thing about being brave while you're being filmed is that it's preserved forever. You can be brave, even just a little bit brave, maybe once a year, even once every two years, which isn't very often, and it's recorded for posterity: you can get a reputation for being a danger-seeker and a brave person.

#### LESSON THREE:

### Avoid Fame

Now I want to talk about a secret pitfall – a treacherous snare that lies out there for you, a kind of mistake I made, or a kind of dark purgatorial moment. No, not just a moment really – a few years. The snare is a surprising one – it's a kind of counter-intuitive snare – it's the snare of too much success.

Success stole up on me quite suddenly and from an unexpected direction. From the North. From Leeds specifically. In the form of the eccentric DJ and charity fundraiser Jimmy Savile. In 1999, I made a documentary about Jimmy Savile and for some reason it seemed to touch a nerve and people watched it. It led to other documentaries about celebrities and a weird thing happened. Nietzsche, who I quoted before, has another aphorism: 'He who would fight monsters must beware that he does not become a monster.' Now I would put forward the idea: 'He who interviews celebrities must beware he does not become a celebrity.' Well it's easy to say that, but it's less easy to do it.

The problem was that the more well known I got, the harder it was to find celebrities to interview. Or at least the people I wanted to interview didn't necessarily want to be interviewed by me. I became slightly desperate.

The early signs of the Hamilton documentary were not encouraging. We were struggling to find things to film, and we were even thinking of abandoning the whole thing altogether, when Neil and Christine told my director a secret. They told him a 'thing' was going to happen.

Now my director told me there was a 'thing', but he didn't tell me what the thing was. I asked him whether it was a big thing and he said, 'Yes, it is a big thing.' We agreed that I shouldn't learn what the thing was and so when I was told about the thing on camera, the thing would be more of a surprise.

One evening I met Neil and Christine outside their lawyer's house in the West End. Neil is standing there and he informs me that he and



Christine are right now about to meet their lawyer and then travel on to a police station in Ilford in Essex where they will be arrested for an alleged joint rape of a woman at a swingers' party, so I'm like this ... [makes shocked face]. Oddly it was an authentic reaction. Even though I was expecting to be shocked, I was more shocked than I was expecting.

While for Neil and Christine this was not good, for the documentary it actually was *quite good!*

A media siege then ensued. Neil and Christine made the decision to let me and my director keep filming, to keep us as houseguests, to continue filming the strange experience of being within the media bubble.

The media crews became more and more interested in me and in my presence there. Newspapers ran pictures of me referring to me as 'wacky presenter Louis Theroux.' It was not pleasant. I had the sensation of no longer being in control of the creative process. I was experiencing a good deal of anxiety. It was hard to convey to friends why I felt weird about what I was going through. People said: 'Oh, you're sitting on the scoop of a century, you must be really happy.'

It didn't feel like that. It felt like I was strapped to a runaway bronco, to something uncontrollable, and I found that because of the anxiety I was drinking with the Hamiltons more than I should. I wasn't really interviewing them any more, I was just sort of lolling around. Neil and Christine were also anxious, as they were being accused of rape. They were coping the same way, by drinking.

One evening as I lay with my glass of wine on the sofa, Christine came over and draped herself around me and said something like: 'Isn't it silly that we can't flirt like this without people getting ideas? I mean, I'm old enough to be your mother, for God's sake.'

Somehow the moment of me being hugged by an overly relaxed Christine Hamilton was a strange new kind of danger. It wasn't so much the physical intimacy, it was the way in which I was pole-vaulted into notoriety. I had no idea how potent an image it would be when it was transmitted. It was somehow the capstone of my involvement in the story. I was no longer peering through the looking-glass. I was very

far from invisible. I was distorting the experience that I was trying to document.

Thereafter it became an almost conscious effort to disentangle myself from the celebrity world.

It was quite easy to decide not to pursue any more celebrity stories especially as no celebrity would actually agree to do a documentary anyway.

#### LAST LESSON:

### Don't Burn Your Bridges

We have reached the last lesson, which is to do with journalism as a hit-and-run profession, and about burning bridges. I think that you should go through life as a journalist, attempting to be, as much as possible, a kind of a litter-picker. Don't burn your bridges, try to leave the place as you found it, but also don't worry too much if the bridge gets burnt, because sometimes it happens. Try and tell the truth and try and be a good person. One of the pleasures of making documentaries for as long as I've been making them is that the stories that I've covered have changed and developed. I've tracked them a little bit and I've kept up with what's going on. I did a show about the Westboro Baptist Church called 'America's Most Hated Family' and I did a follow-up several years on. I was able to see how they'd changed.

Maybe one day I'll be interviewed by an upstart journalist from the BBC, and I like to think I'll be telling the truth but it's possible I won't. But if I am, I do know the shape of my mouth will reveal the truth.

