



Growing the Robson Green brand

Successful screen star Robson Green may be one of the nation's heart-throbs, but he's more than a pretty face. There's also a shrewd business head on those shoulders, as Peter Jackson discovers for *Take Time*.

ROBSON Green is someone who puts on make-up and ponces about in front of a camera.

I must hasten to add that that's not our opinion, but that of his late father, a miner.

Robson Green recounts this with a chuckle, in answer to me asking him how he would describe what he does. Then, on a more serious note, he gives me a definition of acting: "I help tell stories and I fake sincerity by playing characters within those stories."

But, I put to him, surely he does much more than just acting? Yes, the Dudley-born lad not only left a £105-a-week job as a draughtsman at Swan Hunter to tour small town theatres for £42-a-week, but, he also, during his acting training, was a member of a successful North East band *The Workie Tickets*.

And music continued to be a theme. When he made it big in the TV drama series *Soldier Soldier*, he was persuaded by Simon Cowell to release, with co-star Jerome Flynn, *Unchained Melody*, which went on to sell 1.9 million copies.

Even now, with great acting roles in series such as *Wire in the Blood* and *Touching Evil* under his belt, he is still more than an actor, the 45-year-old has also presented *Robson Green Extreme Fishing* and *Robson Green's Wild Swimming Adventure*. Isn't acting only a part of what he does?

He sounds horrified. "That's a very English question, if I may say so. It's all part of the package! They would never ask that question in America. As an artist, you have to be prepared to adapt to any story and any situation. So in America, me being able to sing, me being able to dance, me being able to present, is a really good package to have, and it's probably one of the reasons why I have survived for 27 years in what is a very insecure market.

"I understand there are two words in showbusiness, there's the show and there's the business and sometimes, as a brand, you have to diversify."

Further diversification came when, in 1996, he set up an independent production company *Coastal Productions*, based in Newcastle. This was motivated as much by idealism and local patriotism as hard-headed business calculation.

He explains: "I was being surrounded by people from the North East who were always saying how producers never employed people from the region? Why did they employ people from

London to play North Eastern characters? Why was everything set in London? If there were North Eastern characters, they would probably be in submissive roles and cameo roles.

"Very early on, I realised that if anything was going to happen in the North East someone was going to have to make a move to create an infrastructure, to create a production body in the region to produce quality drama that would be distributed around the world.

"It was a dream, but I had the means to make it reality because I was earning a lot of money from *Soldier Soldier*, so I had the means to set up a company and finance writers to create scripts for stories based in the North East of England that I could take to networks."

He admits that it was something of a risk at the time, underwriting and financing the overheads of a company on Newcastle's Quayside, a business partner, a secretary, an office manager, a development person and a script editor.

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He says: "There were serious overheads and you are talking very little change out of a six figure sum initially and, for a script, you are talking £25,000 or £30,000 to employ an A list writer."

Coastal Productions' first projects were co-productions with companies such as *Granada* and it produced shows like *Grafters* and *Touching Evil*, both filmed in the North East.

Initially, he had to be in the productions, as he was the one getting the commissions.

"Because you are a popular actor, because you are a popular brand, people see your worth and, at that time, if Robson Green was in a production, it would usually get commissioned and commissions are everything," he says. "No matter what people say about having good ideas, getting them commissioned is everything."

Was he nervous?

"Oh, yes, I had very little business acumen, but the one thing I understood was how the business worked in television – and I knew my worth at that time, I knew what my market value was. I knew my worth in Soldier Soldier, I knew my worth in Touching Evil and I knew my worth in Reckless. I knew how powerful a brand I was within ITV and the networks in general, so I knew we would get it commissioned.

"What I was really nervous about was getting the product made, being able to sell that product and then having something left so I could pay the bills, that's what I was really nervous about."

Knowing his own worth is clearly important to Robson Green. That's not to imply any conceit, indeed, he comes across as modestly down-to-earth; rather it is plain that he is nobody's fool. He is on record as having described his own father as 'an exploited man', and, I put it to him: there has been determination in his own career that nobody was going to exploit or control him.

He confirms: "I knew at a very early stage of my career that you ignore the business side of acting at your peril."

But, he was confident enough in his own abilities to look after that business side himself.



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"Something like 98% or 99% of the actors I know have agents or have always had agents, but only recently have I taken on an agent. For 25 years I had nobody negotiating my fees, I was my own negotiator. I have always sought my own work, I've always gone to producers and writers and talked to them about the work I want to do, so, yes, I've had control of my destiny, rather than having put it in the hands of someone else."

And where will that destiny take him next? In the autumn ITV will be screening Joe Maddison's War, a WWII drama in which he stars with Sir Derek Jacobi and Kevin Whately, but after that, what's the next diversification for the Robson Green brand: directing perhaps?

"Recently I've been playing a werewolf in a thing called Being Human for the BBC, and I'm doing a little stint in Waterloo Road. As for directing, that could be, I've been asked a few times to direct for the BBC, so who knows? But, at the moment, I'm just enjoying being an actor and I have a young son who I want to spend a lot of time with; and he loves me being a werewolf."

Robson Green and Coastal Productions have been advised by Muckle LLP since 1993 and during the company's growth in becoming an award-winning production company whose work is shown in some 40 countries around the world. Muckle LLP also advised Robson and Jerome Flynn on record deals with the then little known Simon Cowell. Other work has included advising on funding structure for Coastal Productions, helping it to manage a significant assignment of rights to a large Australian distribution company and also advising it on acquiring the rights to Wire in the Blood.

Robson says: "Muckle have been great and have helped us on a number of issues from distribution agreements and funding arrangements to writing my will."