

EPISODE 10  
DRAFT VERSION 2  
RUN TIME  
HOST Aimée Lindorff (AL)  
GUEST Ilai Swindells (IS)

Blurb:

In this episode we speak to actor, voice artist, and presenter Ilai Swindells about his career, particularly producing and releasing work during the pandemic shutdown and the dreaded Queensland exodus.

Born and raised in North Queensland, Ilai's appears as Ramsay in the pandemic comedy *Retrograde* and voices teen werewolf Freddy Lupin in the animated film *100% Wolf* which premiered online in Australia in May 2020.

Resources:

- *Retrograde*: <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/retrograde>
- *100% Wolf*: <https://www.flicks.com.au/movie/100-wolf/>
- How *All Rise* Pulled Off Its Timely Virtual Episode: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/how-all-rise-pulled-timely-virtual-episode-1293115>

Credits:

- Produced and Presented by Aimée Lindorff

	<p>Welcome to SQ On Air, presented by Screen Queensland - exploring the issues and news affecting the Queensland screen sector.</p> <p>I'm Aimee Lindorff, and today I speak to actor, voice artist, and presenter Ilai Swindells about his career, particularly producing and releasing work during the pandemic shutdown and the dreaded Queensland exodus.</p> <p>Born and raised in North Queensland, Ilai's appears as Ramsay in the pandemic comedy <i>Retrograde</i> and voices teen werewolf Freddy Lupin in the animated film <i>100% Wolf</i> which premiered online in Australia in May 2020.</p>
AL	Ilai, thank you so much for joining us on SQ on Air.

IS	Thank you for having me.
AL	Tell us a little bit about your career and about your journey to Melbourne. You are, as we said, Queensland-born, you started out in Townsville, how did you end up in Melbourne?
IS	<p>I was kind of always told by everyone older than me, and teachers and whatnot, and mentors, that at the time I couldn't stay in Queensland to pursue acting seriously, because there just wasn't enough there for opportunity-wise at the time, and if I wanted to have a serious crack at least in Australia, I had to base myself in Sydney. And yeah, I had to sort of pursue it there.</p> <p>So I was pretty aware of that early on, during my little study time of acting in Brisbane, and when I finished that, I wrapped up on that, I just decided to move, and I think I was 21 at the time, and yeah, I just went solo and just decided to do it from there.</p> <p>It's working out great, I guess, in some respects, and it's working out maybe not so great living in COVID HQ here in Melbourne, the most severely hit by Miss Rona. But I do miss, it sounds cliché, but I really do miss Queensland and the sunshine, I would say.</p>
AL	That's a pretty big jump to go from Townsville to studying in Brisbane and then suddenly living on your own in Sydney. How was that process for you, how did you adapt?
IS	I think in many ways I really took like a duck to water to it, I really loved it. I loved being in exciting Sydney, because it was also vibrant and new for me, and Sydney's a massive, crazy city. But then I think the only thing that anchors me was maybe I had some, my friends in my casual job that I was doing, and I had a lot of support from my parents, and yeah, close friends. And I kept the same agent at the time from Brisbane with the transition to Sydney, and she sort of had a few actors who had made the same move, to Sydney, and we all connected and kept each other grounded, and helped each other audition and test our stuff as well. So I had a little tiny network.
IS	I didn't go to a traditional drama school or anything, and I think you're already at a bit of a setback when you don't go to those big drama schools, because they leave

	<p>with an army of friends, and they're all leaving with the same objective and they're all helping each other. But when you go to little colleges and stuff in wherever you come from or you just do master classes here and there or drop in classes and you just, you sort of have the same ambitions, but you don't have the whole team of friends. It can be a little dicey and a bit lonely in that sense, so you're having to go up against all these kids who leave these drama schools where they've been training for three years like every day, like crazy, and they've got all these friends to lean on in the industry, I would say.</p>
AL	<p>I want to ask, because you have come back to Brisbane for work, you have come back to Queensland. Tell us a little bit about <i>Death of a Salesman</i>, how did that come about?</p>
IS	<p>I'd never done any state theater play in Sydney or Melbourne anywhere, and for the first one to be in Queensland, my home state, was really special, and yeah, it was just such a fun group to be a part of. And Queensland Theatre Company is, I think, thriving more so than other theater companies, I've noticed, because of the way they handle their artists and how they're just welcoming and there's a big open door policy there, and they sort of really like to nurture people from very early stages in their career</p>
AL	<p>I want to talk about another Queensland production, or at least a Queensland-seeded production, <i>Retrograde</i>, which was an exciting production ... I'm going to stop saying production now. It was an exciting project that was conceived, developed, produced, shot, and delivered, and screened all through this global pandemic shutdown period. How did you get involved in <i>Retrograde</i>? Tell us a little bit about that project.</p>
IS	<p>Yeah, my agent sent through an audition and I did the self-test with a friend, and then a week later I think I went in for a callback and Natalie Bailey, the director, was there, Dan Lake, one of the producers, was there. Lou Mitchell from Maura Fay Casting was there, and I read the same scene with Nat's direction a few times, and had a conversation about what I was doing now, and all that sort of traditional stuff, and then a week later I got the call, which was really rare and amazing. Although I've managed to stay busy juggling a bunch of other things, but it's still a rare opportunity to even be given the chance to act in Australia. I don't know what the percentage is, but it's somewhere under 10%, like people who are acting on a regular consistency. And then on top of that, you get offered a job in a pandemic, it's just amazing. You're just like, "Well, okay, everything else has been shut down, I'm very aware of how grateful I should be."</p>

IS	<p>And the whole cast felt like that. Even though we were charting new territory, it was special to even be working, because we could see everyone else around us just be shut down. People who either had jobs and then the shoots were rescheduled, postponed, or people who just were not doing anything at all. So all of us were aware of how lucky we were to be a part of it.</p>
AL	<p>So tell us a little bit more about that process of production with Retrograde, that obviously it's not your typical TV series. It operates under the screen life format, which is using computers and mobile formats and ratios and styles to display content. How was the process behind the screens different for you?</p>
IS	<p>It was very different in the sense that I would say traditionally actors are always instructed to not look into the camera, right? But because you're acting in front of a device like a laptop or a phone, to get the best eyeline for what the audience will then view as you looking at the other actors in the scene, the only way to achieve that was to actually barrel the camera. Which was really odd to do, because you want to look at the actor is your first instinct, because why wouldn't I? It's a person on the screen, I'm looking at this talking head. But then later, if after a take or two, you had to keep resetting and reminding yourself, and Nat, the director, would always remind you too. It's like, yeah, no, you've got to look into the camera lens, because that's, for the audience, the way it will translate is you're actually looking more directly at the actor.</p> <p>And yeah, if there was stuff happening in the background that we would later, it would be added in later. It was a weird thing to, yeah, get around.</p>
AL	<p>Directing via physical distancing. It must've been a challenge to get that, particularly when you've worked in theater and you've worked in television too, where you've got that intimacy of closeness in the directing space to then go from, the director's not even in the same suburb as you.</p>
IS	<p>Yeah, it was a lot to get around. So funny. Well, it became really important to be quiet and silent when she was giving notes in between takes, because those moments were really important, because the Zoom favors sound, and if there's any kind of other sound going on in other people's locations in the background, it would sort of distract and highlight their box, and then you would be struggling to hear her,</p>

	<p>So there's a lot of talking heads in the chat, in the communication chat. But it's funny, because actors also had their own, I think a week after we started shooting, or after we did the first episode, the producers decided to create a different, separate online virtual chatroom for the actors to do their own line runs or quick rehearsals before takes. So it was funny, you're still, in a traditional sense, if that was a normal set, that would just be someone's dressing room, or that would be a trailer, or you would go down the road and just do a line run with your actor cast, but in this world, you're doing it on your phone or whatever, in a separate chatroom. So it's kind of funny.</p>
AL	<p>The key word that kept popping up with Meg and the team was it felt a lot more collaborative, because you were experiencing what was happening at the same time as you were shooting it, so you were able to put your own unique spin on each of the scenarios.</p>
IS	<p>Yeah, became really meta, didn't it? As we were going through. Yeah, collaborative is the key word there, and that was definitely so true. Every read through, the actors got to share their own insights and their thoughts on everything that the characters did and said, and all the writers really gave the actors their time, and we all got to contribute in separate ways. Even during shooting, if there was something funny, another line that the actors wanted to throw in, maybe, or yeah, add for a different take, there was room for that, and I don't think that always happens on regular productions. And even though we shot extremely fast, there was still time to do that, and everyone got heard</p>
AL	<p>What appealed to you about Ramsey as a character, what was it that drew you to him?</p>
IS	<p>The fact that he's just a big sort of hedonistic fellow who lived life to the fullest. I think I related to those parts of him very much so, and he just was unashamedly himself, all the time. And he also, like a basic point of view, he just had the funniest lines in the series. He was definitely the lighter side of the more heavy stuff that was going on, and that was just so much fun to just voice and just be a part of</p>
AL	<p>He also had one of the heavier, I think, emotional touchpoints through the series, with dealing with his mum's illness and then subsequent, spoiler alert, death. How do you, particularly when you're operating quite isolated in the space for that delivery, did you find that helped or hindered those emotional scenes?</p>

IS	<p>The way we show and how we shot the scenes was not a hindrance at all, because had that been on a traditional set, or on the set that we were on, I think it still would've been an incredibly easy, relaxing environment to shoot in, because of the writing, I think, was just so great. Anna Barnes wrote that final episode, and I could've been in a sandstorm out in like 50 degree heat, and it still would've been an accessible scene to tap into because of how beautiful the writing was, and also the song that was used for the tribute. Yeah, the funeral sort of piece at the end there, the Talking Heads track, Once in a Lifetime, is a beautiful song by itself, and then to have the version that Esther ended up performing in the episode was just so touching and moving that I, no matter what happened in every take, I was struck by her performance and by everything that was going on, because yeah, I thought I had a special connection to that song regardless, and then to have it shown to me in those circumstances with my mom's death, and it all happening before me, it all just felt very accessible and real. I didn't need any sort of substitution to kind of tap into, because it felt actually real.</p> <p>And also funny, still, at times. His eulogy that he reread for his friends was still very funny, even in extreme moments of pain and darkness and tragedy, this guy manages to crack you up. And that is one of the most beautiful things about the writing and that character that they created. It's a joy to perform, because he's so relatable, and he's trying to [inaudible 00:30:45] yeah, make the best of everything in that situation.</p>
AL	<p>I was genuinely shocked at how moved I was, like it's been promoted as a pandemic comedy, and then this final episode just smacks you right in the heart. And-</p>
IS	<p>Yeah</p>
AL	<p>... I think it's a credit to the writers, the directors, and to you guys as the actors to be able to deliver that, not only through a digital space to each other, but then through the screen to the audience, so kudos to you and the team.</p>
IS	<p>Yeah, and you know what, I think it might've struck a special chord with a lot of people, because there was a lot of funerals happening during that height of the pandemic as well, where that was a very real thing where you had a max capacity that you were legally allowed, so for anyone who watches that episode, yeah, I</p>

	think they might take their own personal experiences out of it, because people weren't just dying from COVID, people were dying from preexisting conditions they already had. so it's a very real experience that a lot of people have already been going through.
AL	talking about the limitations of being able to, as you say, go to funerals and the like, and even being on set with each other, what do you think, particularly, are we learning about the industry that we could take into the future, that we could, now that the industry is kind of reopening, for want of a better word?
IS	I think what we could probably take into the future from this situation is that maybe less is more, because you've had to learn how to work with less, less human power and less, maybe, finance, less ... Yeah. Less, I need another less there, I don't know what to say, but-
AL	Less faff.
IS	Yeah. Less faff.
IS	CBS episode of All Rise in America, how they ended up shooting their final episode virtually on Zoom, and what they were able to achieve in half the time with half the people was amazing, but it was something that needed to be done, because there was an hour of television or so to be filled, but they did it because they just, they knew they had to do it. It's amazing what humans and what people can do in life when you're just faced with the dilemma. In retrospect, people might look back and go, "Oh, how did anyone actually ever do anything?" It's like, well, you don't know what you can do until you're faced with that situation. If you're permanently ill, or if you're going through rehab, you don't know what you can achieve until you're in that situation. All humans underestimate how strong and how smart and probably, yeah, clever they are.
AL	I do want to talk about <i>100% Wolf</i> , which is an exciting feature film, animated feature film that you've been shooting over the past couple of years, but then premiered during this time when we're demanding content during the shutdown. Tell us a little bit about that project.
IS	That project was so much fun, and I think it was probably the most, just fun thing I've ever done, and I'm really glad to have been a part of it. Because yeah, it did

	<p>take a couple years to voice the feature film, and then the subsequent TV series, which should be out later this year or maybe early next year on ABC Me. I mean, obviously it was a tiny bit sad to have it not premiere in its traditional cinema release across Australia, but thankfully it got its cinema release elsewhere in the world. It's just an amazing thing to be a part of, because you do put in so much time voicing something that you don't get to see the fruits of until many years later when it's finished, it's beautiful, and the film is world-class.</p>
AL	<p>So it does have a world-class voice talent involved. You've got Jane Lynch, you've got Jai Courtney, Australia's Jai Courtney. Yourself, of course. You've got Magda Szubanski, Rhys Darby from New Zealand, and Samara Weaving, again from Australia. That's a pretty stellar cast to be associated with.</p>
IS	<p>I know, right? And what's interesting too about a pandemic and animation mixed together, when you add those two elements, is that everyone completely voices it separately in different parts of the world. I think Jai voiced his in Kentucky, somewhere in studio. I think Samara did hers from LA somewhere. I did all of my voicing at Trackdown Studios in Sydney, and then some at Trax Studios in Sydney. Animation's probably thriving in the pandemic, because animation never needed traditional senses of recording. It's really interesting how animation will probably take over the world, and kind of already is. Video games, films, TV series, it's much, I don't know, it's much more free in the sense of its medium, because you can just, you have so many things to explore from pages on paper to what you can achieve on screen, because you just don't need to physically be anywhere to make those things happen. If I want a car explosion or a car chase, I can just animate that.</p>
AL	<p>it costs the same wherever you set it, and it's just a different way to budget, I guess.</p>
AL	<p>And animation, too, I was talking to Ludo Studio and Like a Photon Creative, who do [inaudible 00:45:38] and [inaudible 00:45:40] respectively. They're talking about animation, obviously you can do it through a pandemic, you don't have to be in the same room. But also, kids' content. The explosion of kids' content during this time when schools are obviously shut, parents are entertaining and teaching from home, and suddenly demanding all this fresh content because they've run out of episodes of whatever their favorite show is. So being able to have these kids' movies actually</p>



	<p>premiere during this time, probably, while it's certainly not ideal, and you don't get that cinematic experience, it's definitely going to get eyeballs, I think.</p>
IS	<p>Yeah, and I think that's the major reason for <i>100% Wolf's</i> success too, because it came out during a time when things were restricted and people couldn't go anywhere, so they were at home on the couch and they were soaking it up. And thankfully they did. I think kids' content's always going to be a huge thing there'll be a need, and animation, especially, is always a thing that we love to consume. No matter how old you are</p>