

Young Nelson

sailing to screen success

Sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll may not always be the best route to success, but for Wesley Nelson, playing the young Ian Dury in the recent bio-pic was just one more twinkle in an already sparkling career. **Annie Makoff** finds out more about this driven young man and his forthcoming adventure in TV

I've been acting since I was six," says Welsh-born Wesley Nelson. "It's something I've always done. My older brothers and sisters have been involved in acting so it's been a family thing."

Wesley, who played the young Ian Dury in *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll* (pictured right), is clearly no newbie to the acting profession. Having performed on stage, for radio, for the big screen and for television, the fourteen-year-old is very much the young veteran of the British acting world.

He is currently filming for a new CBBC series *The Sparticle Mystery* (pictured left). The thirteen-part drama filmed entirely on location, is set in a world without adults. When a science experiment goes horribly wrong, every adult on Planet Earth is teleported to a parallel dimension, leaving the world's children to fend for themselves. Together, they must form their own civilisation whilst uncovering the mystery that is the Sparticle Project, which could help them realign the two universes and bring the adults



back once and for all.

"*The Sparticle Mystery* is meant to inspire children to tackle problems head on, and work together as a unit," Wesley says. "It's got an underlying message about the importance of working together to achieve the end goal."

Featuring an all-child cast, the science-fiction drama explores a world without Mum and Dad – a world where children must be responsible for themselves and each other, a world

where children must be their own heroes if they are to save civilisation from ultimate destruction.

Having worked predominantly with British film-makers, British theatre and radio, Wesley has not found his disability to be an issue. "Hollywood may be different, so it may not be fine for me to walk into Hollywood and expect them to see past my legs," he explains, "but I have not experienced discrimination at all with people I have worked with. The directors always say that if you're right →

for the part, you should be able to get it regardless of disability."

To date, most of Wesley's parts have been written for disabled people, though in the case of the National Theatre's production *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, he played a part that wasn't specifically for a disabled person.

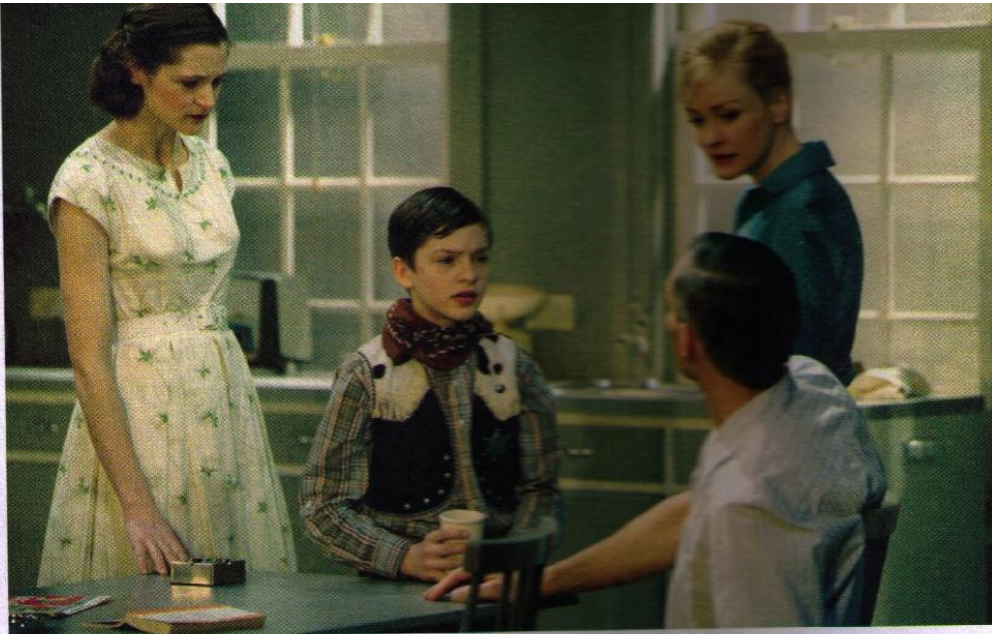
Wesley is adamant that being disabled hasn't negatively impacted on his acting career. Which is refreshing to hear.

"They could have got someone who wasn't disabled to play Ian Dury in *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll* and someone who wasn't disabled in *Mrs Affleck* and the other things I've done. But they didn't, they chose me," he says. "I think it shows that if you're disabled it doesn't matter, whatever you want to be you can still do it."

In this latest TV adventure, Wesley plays Jeffrey, a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy who is the "lionheart" of the Sparticles gang. "I really bonded with Jeffrey – he is a really great character to play," he says. "Jeffrey has cerebral palsy like me, but his disability is more severe. I was able to draw from my own experience because there were some emotional parts in there."

For Wesley, *The Sparticle Mystery* was an entirely new experience. The all-child cast who ranged from nine to fifteen years old became his "on screen and off screen family", who all got on, socialised and had fun. And having fun, according to Wesley, is half the acting experience.

If playing Jeffrey was challenging (or "different", as Wesley insists) due paradoxically to their similarity, playing a real person – the young Ian Dury – brought different challenges. *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll* drew in Ian Dury fans in their millions, all expecting to see a real likeness to the rock legend. For the role, Wesley immersed himself in all things Ian Dury. He watched music videos featuring Dury, listened



to his parents' record collections and found out as much as he could about his life and childhood.

"I became absorbed in him" Wesley explains. "We became the same thing. Even though it's challenging trying to be just like him, it was still really enjoyable. I got to rub shoulders with the likes of Ray Winstone and Herby Jones and they were great to work with."

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And after all that work on *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll* what was it like to see himself on the big screen? "It was really cool" says Wesley. "But as an actor I'm quite critical and found myself thinking 'I could have done that better'. At the same time, it's great – seeing something you've been working on for so long and you get to see all your work put together."

As Wesley points out, seeing yourself on the big screen and gauging people's reactions is a totally different experience than on stage, where audience feedback is instant and, if you've done well, phenomenal. When Wesley performed in *Mrs Affleck* at the National Theatre in

2009 (pictured above), he was exhilarated by the audience reaction and even had someone approach him after the show congratulating him on his "incredible performance".

Looking at his impressive credits list, it is hard to imagine that Wesley, who will take his GCSEs in just under two years, finds any time for his school work. But Wesley's mature and practical approach translates across all areas of his life. He successfully juggles both priorities – not only catching up on schoolwork in between rehearsals, film shoots and at weekends but he proudly asserts that he is actually ahead in some subjects because he works at a faster pace than most his age.

His school have always supported his acting career, by ensuring they send work for him to do in between his acting jobs. At the same time, Wesley is acutely aware that should he fall behind with his work he wouldn't accept any more acting jobs until he has caught up again.

"The golden rule is take it as it comes. If jobs come along that the school and my parents are happy for me to do and I know I'm up-to-date with my work, I say yes. It's a similar approach I take to auditioning. If I don't get the part for a particular job I wait until the next job comes along and I try and get that, and so it goes on." Wesley adds: "That doesn't mean I don't think 'why didn't I get that job?' It would be wrong if I didn't try and learn from my mistakes

but you mustn't dwell on the parts you didn't get – otherwise you won't enjoy the experience."

It is perhaps surprising that so young an actor would have adopted such a mature, philosophical approach to his career, especially when the acting profession is anything but predictable, as out-of-work actors will testify. Yet Wesley is confident in his acting career and has learnt not to get hung up on each job he doesn't get. "People do write for disabled children," he says. "And there are always jobs for everybody, no matter what your disability or your background."

Wesley's relaxed and happy-go-lucky character means he has no "favourite" dramatisation or play he'd love to appear in. If other boys his age were asked 'What would be your

dream film to star in?' they would reel off a list of titles. But not Wesley. Wesley is vague, and happily so. "I've never really had a part where I've been the villain. I would enjoy that," he says. "Or maybe playing a radically different part that would stretch my acting ability even more."

“You mustn't dwell on the parts you didn't get – otherwise you won't enjoy the experience”

Although he doesn't name obvious favourites, Wesley watches a range of films and programmes, not just for entertainment like most people his age, but to observe the techniques of other actors. He does admit that his favourite actor is Robert Downey Jr. who has

starred in the *Iron Man* films and *Sherlock Holmes* and he lets slip that his favourite TV series is *Friends*. "I'd love to meet Robert Downey Jr and also the whole cast of *Friends*," Wesley says. "That's partly what acting is about – being able to watch other people's work and enjoy what they do."

As to his future, Wesley is vague, of course. "I'd like to continue acting, and if there is work, I'll do it. If not, it's not the end of the world." He says: "Somebody once said: with acting, there is never an X Factor. You always hold on to the things you take from acting. Maybe it's confidence, maybe it's social skills, maybe it's something else. These skills never leave you. That's why acting is so great." ■

• *The Sparkle Mystery* will air on CBBC early in 2011.



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