



Yahya Abdul-Mateen II Continues to Surprise – And Be Surprised

The *Watchmen* and *Aquaman* star talks about his new comic role and his penchant for unexpected reveals.

BY [JOSH ST. CLAIR](#) DEC 9, 2019



It's late. Sunday night. Yahya Abdul-Mateen II is taxi riding uptown to his sister's apartment in Manhattan, scrolling through Twitter, filming himself and laughing, almost villainously.

He's been keeping a secret about his Watchmen character, Cal, for months, a secret he learned only after shooting the second episode when writer Damon Lindelof pulled him aside in LA for a chat. Before then, Cal Abar was simply the husband to Regina King's Angela Abar, and Cal's husbandry was just about his defining characteristic: he gets to smile at, talk to, and occasionally have pantry sex with King's leading hero. But then, suddenly, he was not Cal anymore. In episode seven, King will lovingly crack open his skull with a hammer, revealing radiating blue light and this boring, boring husband to be the most powerful man in all of comics—a being that can bend matter and teleport and who exists simultaneously across space and time—Dr. Manhattan.

This, Lindelof had told Abdul-Mateen plainly. No theatrics: he would be Dr. Manhattan, and that was that. On the outside, Abdul-Mateen took the news calmly; he was cool, professional. But on the inside he was losing his shit. He would be *Dr. Manhattan!*

But he couldn't tell anyone—for months.

He's been riding uptown to watch the latest *Watchmen* episodes with his sisters every Sunday, and every Sunday his friends and followers have been speculating, speculating, speculating. *What's the deal with Yahya's character? What's Yahya's mystery? What's his secret?* He had fooled them. Abdul-Mateen had gotten away with it, and now, in the back of the taxi, he can't contain himself. The episode just aired. He can finally let it out.

"I'm on Twitter watching people go up this emotional ladder," he says, recounting the ride the following week. "*What's going on? I think [Angela] knows who Dr. Manhattan is. Wait. Wait, Dr. Manhattan is the husband. Oh wait, no maybe it's the kid. Oh my god*

it's actually the husband. What is she doing with the hammer? Oh shit! It's just the funniest thing. The funniest thing in the world.”



MARK HILL/HBO

It's hard not to laugh with the New Orleans native. His eyebrow naturally cocks when he beams, and his smile sits somewhere between devious and genial, and can probably only, really, be described as *cheeky*. Abdul-Mateen is cheeky. But in the best possible way.

Which is what makes his Dr. Manhattan so interesting: a character he had to play with little, if any emotion, and known primarily for two features—being blue and being jacked. The actor's first thought after Lindelof gave him the news: "Oh shit, I'm going to have to get in shape." (Getting jacked took two months. Getting blue took 3 hours twice a week in the makeup chair.)

But Manhattan is also known for another feature, his preference for strolling around in the nude. And this was another decision Abdul-Mateen had to make after learning his

new role: would he really go full Manhattan? “Being on HBO, I knew that that was a possibility,” he admits, half-jokingly. “But I thought, *look, I’m young, if I’m gonna do it, I might as well go for it and have fun and enjoy it.*” So he went full Manhattan.

But Abdul-Mateen knew the naked part, the following week’s episode, might get a bit awkward at his sisters’ place. And his Twitter feed might look a bit different on the ride home. “I told them. I did give them a warning. I said, *hey, just to let you know, I’m gonna be naked!* But at the end of the day, they know it’s my profession. And it was all fun.” He laughs that big laugh.



MIREYA ACIERTO / GETTY IMAGES

To his friends and followers, especially to Abdul-Mateen himself, nothing is more surprising than his own career. He had originally addended Berkley for architecture and had worked at the San Francisco mayor’s office after graduating. When he was laid off, he thought he might pursue acting, which he’d enjoyed as a hobby in college. At first, he figured he would just move to L.A. and do what (he assumed) a young L.A. actor did: score a McDonald’s commercial. (He

heard Mickey D's paid a mean \$50,000.) But then he was accepted into Yale's drama program. He was spotted by an agent while performing Shakespeare. And he was soon cast as the spoiled, loudly-dressed disco prince, Cadillac, in Baz Luhrmann's *The Get Down*, his first TV role. He wasn't even out of acting school, and the Fates had decreed that Yahya Abdul-Mateen II would not be eating burgers for money.

Stardom would require embracing uncertainty, and *Watchmen* wasn't the first project Abdul-Mateen signed onto without knowing his exact part. Two years ago, he auditioned for a film codenamed "Ahab," attached to director James Wan. The film turned out to be DC's *Aquaman*, the studio's most successful superhero film of all time. Abdul-Mateen played Aquaman's antagonist Black Manta, a role that made him comic and film famous overnight. (His next tentpole project will be the *Matrix 4* in 2022. Of the film, he can say absolutely nothing. Such is the job of an actor: forever keeping secrets from fans.)

Unlike *Aquaman*, *Watchmen* proved a comic risk with a slower burn, but a deeper resonance. He said 'yes' because of the cast and crew and the network, HBO. And he's most proud of Lindelof's decision to turn the Cold War comic into an examination of race in 2019 America. "We're living in a time where it's very important to acknowledge the fact that racial trauma is real," he says, highlighting the series' primary focus (the show opens with the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921). "[We're] telling a story that's accurate, and we're holding up a mirror to society and saying, *Hey, this is not very far from who we actually are. And what are we going to do about it?*"



Abdul-Mateen in Netflix's *The Get Down*

NETFLIX

Many of his roles, in fact, have been of a similar salience, from a man struggling with his sexual identity in *Black Mirror*, to one towering, drunkenly, over his daughter in Jordan Peele's *Us*—the latter film an examination of class rage. (And the actor has recently finished filming the lead to Peele's *Candyman*, based on the urban legend and ghost of a 19th century black man, lynched for a forbidden interracial love affair.)

Though it might all sound preachy, *Watchmen* is not a show that gets on a soapbox and *preaches*, Abdul-Mateen makes clear. “It doesn't exaggerate the truth or exaggerate the ugliness. We're able to call it exactly what it is.”

And despite Twitter trolls taking Lindelof's version of *Watchmen* to be a comic turncoat, HBO retains much of the political bent from its source. Abdul-Mateen's Dr. Manhattan, like his comic iteration, resembles nuclear deterrence. He walks over Vietnam rice patties, superimposed onto that infamous helicopter footage—that one long take, trailing a bombing run—a blue Abdul-Mateen raising his hands as fields and homes and farms explode.

The series also retains the comic's seriocomedy, which might be likened to a Mario banana peel in a Gotham sewer drain—the balance of cultural camp with narrative grit. In that spirit, Abdul-Mateen plays Cal/Manhattan perfectly; he goes from walking like a dad, to walking like a god. “I built [Cal] to be a fluid character,” he explains. Something like a child. Dr. Manhattan, on the other hand, would be firm, rooted. “With Dr. Manhattan, I began to work in a different physical container. I wanted him to walk [more] upright. I wanted him to take up more space, to take more time when he speaks.” The result is something sad and insipid, a character who has grown

increasingly disconnected—from other people, from time—but also one that can still crack a Yahya grin; at his blue, blue heart, Manhattan is a still a womanizer.



MARK HILL/HBO

What *Watchmen* does differently with Manhattan, a former nuclear physicist, Jon Osterman, born of German-Jewish origin—what the series may take toxic scorn over—is the avatar Manhattan chooses as his earthly form, Abdul-Mateen, a black American man.

Abdul-Mateen doesn't think this fact will upset fans. "If it does, then more power to us for having the audacity to do it," he says. "He's Dr. Manhattan and he can do whatever he wants."

"I think it's really cool that we can put out this image today: Dr. Manhattan in the body of a black man and as a God."

As if to both anticipate and probably subvert fan reactions, *Watchmen* has Osterman's former colleague, Adrian Veidt (played by Jeremy Irons) mock his pal, telling him that it's 2019 and he can't be walking around in blackface. Veidt is the only character to point out Manhattan's race.

Though underplayed, Manhattan's blackness is important. It's the part of his reveal that Abdul-Mateen believes matters most. "I think it's really cool that we can put out this image today: Dr. Manhattan in the body of a black man and as a God—all powerful and all knowing. What better figure to face down white supremacy, the villain in our story?"

And who on Twitter could have ever guessed that?

JOSH ST. CLAIR

Joshua St Clair is an editorial assistant at Men's Health Magazine.

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