



Actor David Schwimmer arrives at the 74th Annual Golden Globe Awards in Beverly Hills, Calif., in January.

REUTERS/MIKE BLAKE

David Schwimmer

Famous for "Friends," the actor talks about producing a Christmas film - a story of people in temporary housing trying to survive poverty

BY ADRIAN LOBB
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"I had a friend who was homeless for two years living on Skid Row in Los Angeles. He kept it a secret from us, his close friends. We had no idea. And that is one of the most dangerous places in the U.S."

This is David Schwimmer. The 52-year-old is world-famous for his role as Ross in Friends. But his lifelong passion for

powerful theatre has led him to a new role, as executive producer on writer-director Alexander Zeldin's adaptation of his play LOVE for the BBC. The work has widened Schwimmer's understanding of issues around homelessness.

LOVE is a Christmas film, but not as we know it. Set entirely in shared temporary housing in a particularly bleak winter, it shows displaced families and individuals sharing space, enduring daily indignities,

alongside snatched moments of normality.

The play - and now the film - follows three main stories. There's Emma who is 32 weeks pregnant, crammed into a room with partner Dean and two kids after being evicted by their landlord. Dean is skipping meals and trying to keep the family together, Emma is desperate to find a home before giving birth.

Then there's socially awkward Colin, trying to keep his frail, elderly mum Barbara clean and healthy after 12 months in the hostel and Fawah, newly arrived from Sudan, estranged from her children and trying to navigate the system in a new language.

It's an unlikely house share. Lives beginning, lives ending and lives stagnating in a wholly unsuitable environment. LOVE leaves you feeling furious, but also moved. Did Schwimmer have similar feelings when he first encountered Zeldin's work?

"I found it very moving, I found it enraging, as you did, and most of all I found it energizing. OK, it is on me now, what am I going to do with this unresolved emotion?"

"The experience is unlike any other experience in the theater I have had. A feeling of total immersion. You are invited to participate and it activates you as an audience member. You lean in. So my experience of seeing LOVE was really feeling, and not just imagining intellectually, what it is like to be in that space and walk in the shoes of those characters. I have now seen something I can't unsee - so what do I do with it?"

So what did you do?

"One thing is to try to understand better what is happening in my own country when it comes to the homelessness crisis," said Schwimmer. "In my country a lot of it is tied to mental health. So I am trying to educate myself more about exactly how those issues are connected and what is being done in my community of New York."

"I live in the East Village and walk past and speak to homeless people on a daily basis because they are on my street. Both Alex and I are likeminded and feel that our job is to stir something in you and show you

maybe a world that you are not familiar with."

Zeldin wrote the original work after meeting Bill Rashleigh, investigations officer at the homelessness charity Shelter.

"He gave me a report called Christmas Families in B&Bs. I found voices of mainly mums, but a few dads, as well as their kids living in the conditions we show in this film, talking with such sincerity and love and power."

"I then spent 18 months meeting and working with these families. Not just interviewing them, I stayed in these places, visited them in Lewisham, Barking, Birmingham, they would act alongside the actors, be advisors, directors - constantly shifting roles to make everybody feel involved."

When it came to producing it for television, he was able to call on Schwimmer to help make it happen. "Every step of the way he created an atmosphere on set where everybody felt nurtured," said Zeldin.

The result is an enormously powerful piece of television. "This is not a political film in the strictest sense," said Zeldin. "However, the circumstances are those that have been created by the Conservative Party. They have demolished the welfare state, really aggressively since 2010. A quarter of the population is living in relative poverty, according to the United Nations. Something is wrong."

Despite the circumstances the families in LOVE are forced to endure, a few scenes - Colin washing his mother's hair, Dean's children rehearsing a school play - are wonderfully affecting moments of connection.

"They are absolutely my favorite moments in the film," said Schwimmer. "Because they are moments of such human connection and tenderness."

"Bringing this to the screen ... is a huge opportunity to get many more eyeballs on this story. We are very proud and happy."

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