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How Jason Clarke Found Alex Murdaugh

The actor on the surprising transformations required to play the convicted killer in *Murdaugh: Death in the Family*.

By Adam Rathe

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DANIEL DELGADO JR.

When Jason Clarke began preparing to play Alex Murdaugh in the new series ***Murdaugh: Death in the Family***, the actor had one thing on his mind. “He’s a big, heavy man from an old, traditional family, and there’s a darkness inside him,” Clarke says. “I went back to my old drama school trick of asking, ‘What is he?’ And I kept going back to a great white shark.”

It's no wonder Clarke had an apex predator on his mind. *Death in the Family*, a limited series airing now on Hulu, tells the story of Murdaugh, a powerful South Carolina lawyer from a line of powerful South Carolina lawyers who was convicted in 2023 of a slew of financial crimes as well as the murder of his wife and one of his sons. "There's a fantasy that other people have perfect lives," biographer Meryl Gordon **told T&C** for the December 2022 issue. "We put families on a pedestal, particularly if they have a well-known name or are incredibly wealthy or have achieved great things. There's a desire, an aspiration to be like them. But usually, if you get closer you discover that they have problems."

When he won the role, Clarke made it his mission to get closer. "I knew about the story but hadn't followed it closely," he says now. Upon landing the part, he dove into recordings of Murdaugh's trial and worked with a dialogue coach to nail the character's drawl. He even visited South Carolina's Hampton County, where the crimes took place; "I drove out there and met a couple of people," he says. "It's a very good community and they really were traumatized by the fact that somebody had been living in their midst who was so different than what they thought he was."



EMILIO MADRID

Jason Clarke not only plays Alex Murdaugh in *Murdaugh: Death in the Family*, which is streaming now on Hulu, but also has starring roles in the new series *The Last Frontier* and the film *A House of Dynamite*.

Series co-creator Michael D. Fuller says, “Jason is such a dedicated actor. He's so brilliantly talented, he immerses himself so much in his work, and he cares so passionately. He's got a great perspective when it comes to

the practicalities of production, but also the art and craft of realizing this performance. I've always been a tremendous fan of his... and there's a swaggering sensibility, a charm, and a charisma that he naturally has that he was able to imbue the role with. He's just brilliant to watch work.”

Getting into the mind of a convicted killer would be one thing for Clarke—an in-demand actor who this month alone also stars in the Kathryn Bigelow film *A House of Dynamite* and the series *The Last Frontier*—but it was the physical transformation that he underwent that proved more difficult. “I wondered if I could do it, and then thought, I think I can—but this is going to hurt,” Clarke says. He decided against using prosthetics for the role—save a wig to mimic Murdaugh’s thinning hair—and instead took a different approach. “I was in Paris at the time and thought, I'm going to try to do it with pastas, bread, and cheese, and I'll eat late at night and early in the morning. It took a while to do it, but when [the weight] started coming on, it was scary how hungry I was and how much I was carrying.”

What he was carrying wasn't merely physical. “It broke me down,” Clarke says, “but in the end, it was a bit of luck because it had me feeling like I'm a fucking victim here, too. I can't eat properly, I'm sweating, my legs are swollen. It added to that mentality.”



JASON MENDEZ/GETTY IMAGES FOR NETFLIX

A *House of Dynamite* director Kathryn Bigelow with Jason Clarke, one of her stars, at the film's New York premiere.

Not that other recent projects Clarke has been drawn to are much lighter. In *The Last Frontier*, he plays a U.S. Marshall in an Alaska town where a plane crashes and frees a group of dangerous prisoners, and in *A House of Dynamite* he plays a Situation Room official during a nuclear crisis. (The point of the film, which earned a reported 11-minute standing ovation when it premiered at the Venice Film Festival, is, Clarke says, “we really don’t know anything—and that freaks me out when I really think about it.”) When asked what might be next for him, Clarke doesn’t miss a beat: “I need a comedy.”

Still, he's proud of what *Death in the Family* has done. The story of the family's dark downfall has already been the subject of at least two documentaries and seemingly endless coverage, but this show manages to strike a different note. *Variety* **calls it**, "a profoundly compelling character study of a man so deeply rooted in his own lure, anchored by legal, political and financial influence, that the idea of being swallowed by his own monstrosity was foreign to him." Clarke himself puts it a bit more plainly: "We wanted to make it more like *The Sopranos* and like a murder of the week," he says. "It's about this epic, Shakespearean tale of irresponsibility and mess. Too often you see bad guys just being bad guys. It gets a bit boring."