

Without Sin – press pack

Series synopsis:

Psychological thriller *Without Sin* explores the relationship which develops between a grieving mother and the man she believes murdered her daughter.

In this four-part drama, Vicky McClure (*Line of Duty, This is England, Broadchurch, Trigger Point*) plays the role of grieving mother, Stella Tomlinson, whose 14-year-old daughter Maisy, is found dead at their family home with the bloodied, hooded figure of Charles Stone (Johnny Harris - *The Salisbury Poisonings, Medici, Troy: Fall of a City*) standing over her.

The Nottingham-based drama focuses upon Stella's life three years on from the death of her daughter and how she is still hostage to her grief. The loss of her beloved only child has created deep divisions in her life, as she struggles on a daily basis to come to terms with this.

Wracked with guilt and remorse at the events of that night, she chooses to live a nocturnal existence as an Uber driver. She is estranged from husband Paul, who still lives in the family home. When contacted by Restorative Justice, and in an attempt to move on, Stella and Paul reunite to listen to a taped recording of Charles, who they believe wants to atone for his sins and apologise for murdering their daughter.

Following this development, Stella returns to her roots in the Millfields estate. Surrounding herself with the people she trusts and holds dear, her mother Jessie and best friend Remy, she decides to take things with Charles one step further.

Stella agrees to visit the prison alongside a Restorative Justice Mediator and come face to face with her daughter's killer. But nothing could prepare her for what Charles has to say next...

Without Sin is a co-production between Left Bank Pictures and BYO Films.

Episode synopses:

Episode 1:

We meet Stella Tomlinson three years on from the night that her 14-year-old daughter Maisy was found murdered at their family home, with the hooded figure of Charles Stone standing over her body. Wracked with guilt and remorse at the events of that night, Stella chooses to live a nocturnal existence as an Uber driver. She is estranged from her ex-husband PAUL, who still lives in their old family home with his new girlfriend, Meera.

When contacted by Restorative Justice, and in an attempt to move on, Stella and Paul reunite to listen to a taped recording of Charles, who they believe wants to atone for his sins and apologise for murdering their daughter.

Following this development, Stella returns to her roots in the Millfields estate - a stark contrast to the middle-class neighbourhood she lived in with Paul and Maisy - and surrounds herself with the people she holds dear, her mother Jessie and ex-boyfriend turned best friend Remy. But when Paul tells her that Meera is pregnant and he wants to move on with his life, Stella hits rock bottom.

With nothing to lose, Stella agrees to visit the prison alongside a Restorative Justice Mediator Bobbi, and come face to face with her daughter's killer. But instead of confessing to Maisy's murder, Charles flips the meeting, telling Stella he's been framed. He urges Stella to investigate the disappearance of another local girl, Cleo Dale, who he believes is somehow connected to Maisy's death.

At home, Stella tries to push Charles' words out of her head, but when she learns that Maisy and Cleo were friends - they attended the same local riding school - she returns to the prison to meet with Charles again.

Episode 2:

At their second meeting, Stella wants answers. Charles tells Stella that he was sent to her house that night by the McKellers, a notorious crime family on the Millfields estate. When he got there, Maisy was already dead.

At home, Stella wrestles with whether to trust Charles and follow up on Cleo's disappearance. In spite of Paul's protests, Stella tries to find answers in the old community she left behind, and reconnects with Jessie and Remy (now a police officer, who still harbours romantic feelings for Stella) in the process.

She tries to unearth who Charles really is and starts visiting those who knew him best. Whilst his son Teddy has stayed loyal to his dad, Stella can detect some tension between the father and son. More worrying is her meeting with Charles' father, Eric, who gives Stella a troubling insight into Charles' past. But in spite of the warnings, Stella still finds herself being drawn into Charles' story of innocence - that he was set up by the McKellers.

Linking the McKellers to the murder comes with its own risks for both Stella and Charles, so while she investigates on the outside, he tries to keep a low profile on the inside, particularly after Karl McKeller is suddenly transferred to the same prison wing as Charles.

Meanwhile, Stella investigates Cleo's disappearance and delves into her troubled life, learning that she lived between her addict mother Elaine and a care home. It's a far cry from the world Maisy lived in - or so Stella thought.

After discovering a troubling video of Maisy and Cleo stealing and taking drugs, suggesting they may have been hanging around with the McKellers, Stella is left questioning how well she really knew her daughter.

Episode 3:

Stella recognises the location in the video of Maisy and Cleo as the local riding school, owned by Jessie's new boyfriend Kelvin. She questions him in conjunction with Maisy's murder, bringing mother-daughter tensions to the surface.

Stella delves into Maisy's secret life, discovering a photo of Maisy with a message addressed to 'Misty' written on the back. After visiting Maisy's old school friend Aashna, Stella learns that there was a rumour that Maisy was going out with a drug dealer.

When Kelvin confesses to taking backhands from the McKellers to keep the riding school afloat, Stella begins to investigate Roman McKeller, a mid-level operator in the crime syndicate. This leads her to his nephew Lee – could he have been one of the boys Maisy and Cleo were hanging around with?

As Stella pursues this lead, Charles tries to keep his head above water in prison, while grieving after his father's death – who passed away thinking Charles was a guilty man. The McKellers are onto him, and Roman pays Charles a visit - threatening not only him, but Teddy too - leading a volatile Charles to attack Karl in prison.

When Stella manages to track down Lee, who refers to Maisy by her nickname 'Misty', she becomes convinced of his involvement in Maisy's death.

Episode 4:

Stella finally tells Charles she believes him - she thinks Lee is behind Maisy's murder and Roman is covering it up. But Stella is stunned when Charles tells her she needs to stop her investigation, now his son's life is at risk.

Yet Stella won't give up. After breaking into Lee's car, she tracks a parking fine to a run-down building, where she finds a dishevelled Cleo, seemingly being held captive.

Meanwhile, Charles finds himself fighting for his life in hospital after a savage stabbing, as the McKellers make good on their threat, turning his naive cellmate JAMAL against him.

Stella takes Cleo back to Paul's house, to keep her safe from the McKellers. Triggered by being back in the house where Maisy died, Cleo comes clean about what really happened. At the same time, Teddy visits Charles in hospital and also confesses.

Stella and Charles learn that Maisy and Teddy were in a teenage relationship and Cleo was Maisy's best friend. On the night she died, Maisy invited them - along with Lee, who worked as a petty drug dealer with Teddy - to get drunk at her parent's empty house. A fight ensued after Maisy discovered that Teddy and Cleo were sleeping together in secret, bringing the class divides between Maisy and the rest of the group to a head. Maisy lashed out aggressively, causing Cleo to hit her over the head and accidentally kill her.

Panicking, Lee called his dad, who sent Charles, working for the McKellers at the time, to Maisy's house. Teddy, harbouring resentment towards his dad, let Charles take the rap for Maisy's murder.

Cleo lived with the guilt until she got into the back of Stella's Uber one night and, seeing how broken she was, decided to run away with the help of Lee.

A few months later, Stella begins a new Restorative Justice journey with Cleo - this time, she's ready to forgive - and is back in the family fold with Jessie and Remy. She meets up with Charles, now a free man, who says he's leaving Millfields to start afresh, while Stella tells him she's doing better.

Interviews:

Vicky McClure (Stella Tomlinson)

How does Without Sin embody what you want to do with BYO Films, your new production company (*Without Sin is a co-production between Left Bank Pictures and BYO Films*)?

Our slate is very random and varied, from factual to drama to comedy to series to films... Johnny [Owen, partner] is a documentary filmmaker, radio presenter, writer, so the spectrum of what we want to do doesn't really sit in one place. Some of the drama concepts and developments that we're working on at the moment are very different to Without Sin, but they certainly sit within a world that we understand and can relate to.

What is special about filming on "your patch"?

Every city says it's all about the people and that's certainly the case in Nottingham. I see the amazing talent that's here – even just the alumni from the Television Workshop – there's obviously something in it. Yet we don't tend to shout about it. I want people to see what our city looks and feels like. People will get to know the history behind the Left Lion in the Market Square, the heritage of the market in the Victoria Centre: my granddad was a butcher and had a stall there. It's going now, but we managed to film a short scene there, which meant a lot to me, to make sure that those places and people aren't forgotten, to remember where you came from. The fact that I still live here and can now bring my work home is a massive deal to me.

How did you come across Fran Poletti, the writer of Without Sin?

Sian McWilliams at Left Bank Pictures was working with her. We shared the desire to create impactful roles, usually within that bleak, dramatic thriller world. Fran was really willing and understood that we like to question things and pick them apart, so it needed to be collaborative. The story was always there, but the script was moving and shaping as we went along. Sometimes that meant you didn't know what was coming, so you leant into that realism. There was a lot of play time.

How would you describe Stella?

Lost, grieving, paranoid, scared, lonely and wanting to be lonely... All those emotions that come with feeling like you've got nothing to live for. If ever you outlive your child, it will change you forever – that's what has happened to Stella. Without Sin picks up her story three years on – you can see a real change in her image and lifestyle.

What is Stella's initial response when Charles gets in touch?

I've heard it said that curiosity is the strongest human emotion, and I don't dispute that. If someone says, "I've got something to tell you but I can't tell you right now," that can stop your entire day. Stella

has nothing to lose by meeting Charles. We don't know what questions she's got, but she would have relived that night so many times in her head, thinking about how she could have done things differently. If ever there was an opportunity for that to be quashed so she might move forward in some way, what has she got to lose? That's her reasoning, alongside saying "Fuck you, I'll do what I want," to Paul, who doesn't want her to meet Charles. It's quite a human reaction.

What was family life like before Maisy's murder?

We do establish that there were complications and not everything was as Stella would have liked it to be, but I think they were happy. She had a good kid and it wasn't all that bad with Paul. It's just that Paul has been able to move on and Stella hasn't. She's smoking cannabis and trying to block things out, but it is actually creating an active mind and a degree of paranoia, especially once she's met with Charles. That's not healthy.

Does Stella have friends or confidants?

Paul does come back into the fold, but Remy has been a confidant to her for a while, as well as her mum in spite of their complicated relationship. Remy always has good intentions for Stella. If things had been different, they could have worked well together.

Did you do any research into Stella's story?

Fran did bags of research, and Andrea [Lowe], who plays Bobbi, spoke to a restorative justice counsellor. I didn't feel the need to speak to bereaved mums. I know people who have lost children and I'll never know how that feels, but they've reacted to it in their own way. This was a particular circumstance, so I reacted to it in a way that I felt was reflective of Fran's writing and the character that I was forming. I had the opportunity to laugh at times, be livid at times, be sad... Stella's emotions are all over the shop, because that's life.

Perry Fitzpatrick plays Stella's husband, Paul. You've worked together several times – did that shorthand make the relationship easier to play?

It's not about making life easier, although I've known him since I was 11 and have acted alongside each other in many different roles over the years, that short hand is always very helpful. I made a point of saying I'm not going to make the final decision on that role knowing Perry was in the mix. They need to have the job because they're the right person for it: Perry auditioned and got the job on his own merits. It was the same for Johann Myers who plays Remy. I worked with him years ago and said we should get him in, and he really impressed everyone – he's got that energy and a smile that lights up the entire screen.

What else is going on in Without Sin, beyond the thriller aspect?

It is a very twisty plot driven thriller, but also feels to me very raw and real – we've been pretty bold about showing all sides. The way that we've shot it, the characters we meet and who inhabit the world, it does have that working-class tone and I'm hoping people see the beauty within that, even down to the house parties.

Would you like to tell more of Stella's story?

I'll let the audience decide...

Johnny Harris (Charles Stone)

How did you get involved in Without Sin?

I worked on *Troy: Fall of the City* with Sian McWilliams and we stayed in touch, then Sian moved to Left Bank Pictures and we had a catch-up. She asked me what I wanted to do next, and it was the ten-year anniversary of *This Is England 86*. Vicky McClure is my best friend, we speak every day on the phone, so I told Sian that Vicky and I were interested in getting back on screen together to tell a different story and create two new characters. Sian had been working with a Nottingham writer, Fran Poletti, and when Fran outlined who these characters were and where they could go, it was very enticing.

What is the particular onscreen chemistry you share with Vicky?

The hope with any actor is that when you go to work in the morning and look another actor in the eyes, you're searching for truth. I trust Vicky with my life and I hope the feeling's mutual, because we've gone through it all together. She's seen me at my lowest ebb and in my most glorious moments, and vice versa. Her performance across the whole story of *This Is England* is one of the finest character arcs ever committed to screen, so to go to work with my best friend and one of the finest actresses working today? It doesn't get any better than that. This was very different from *This Is England* in that our relationship was very combustible, very physical, very explosive. In *Without Sin*, it's completely contained, there's not much we can do, even with our voices, other than look across the table and try to communicate in the most limited circumstances. So it was all in the eyes, really.

Who is Charles Stone?

When we first meet Charles, he's in prison, serving a life sentence for the murder of Stella's child, Maisy. When Stella meets him, he protests his innocence and from there on, it becomes a story about whether he did or didn't do it, told through the eyes of the mother of this deceased child.

Could you talk a bit about Charles's backstory?

There are no spoilers in me saying that he was born in London, raised in Nottingham and that he has a son. Everything else about his childhood, his father and mother, is revealed throughout the show. It's fair to say his upbringing wasn't straightforward, but it also isn't rare these days. We hear stories like Charles's more and more. He's a very complex character, but it's difficult for us to know whether that's because he's a very malicious, manipulative, sadistic psychopath or whether it's because he's an innocent man who has been deeply wronged. In other words, he's either a very complicated man in a very simple situation, or he's a very simple man in a very complicated situation. Somewhere within those two is where the drama is rooted. As an actor, I'm trying to make choices that are ambivalent and open to debate.

What was your way into playing him?

I knew the ending and whether he was guilty or innocent, so I knew his truth. That was all I needed because there was no way I couldn't find some parallels to my own life. We've all experienced moments where we've wronged – the power of that can crush you unless you make it right. And we've all been in a position where we felt an injustice has been done to us. Hopefully, using your own experiences, you pull people in, entertain them and make them think along the way.

What did you make of Fran's script?

I love working with new writers because that can bring a combustibility and an energy. Being from Nottingham, Fran knew the place and the people, she knew all about the tone and spirit up here. From the moment I met Fran I liked her, she has a very similar humility and feet-on-the-ground quality to Vicky.

What sort of spirit does Nottingham bring to a project?

It's too easy to just say it's really friendly, but... it's really friendly! Maybe we can take things for granted a little bit in London, but there's a spirit and can-do attitude in Nottingham. Vicky is deeply loved there and she does a lot for the city behind the scenes with the dementia choir but also at council level.

Where did you film the prison sequences?

We dressed a disused building and shot quite a few scenes there. We also shot some scenes in Shrewsbury Prison, which is also where they shot Jimmy McGovern's Time. It's an incredible location, one of the last places for hangings and a museum now, but we were able to go in there for a good few months. Those were real prison wings and real cells, and extremely cold.

What is the significance of the title for you?

I've got my ideas about it, and what I love is that it's open to interpretation. We had a different title originally, then we had to change it and this one came up. Usually you'd have hours and hours of debates at exec level over something like that, but there was none here. Everyone knew it was right.

What are the big themes raised in the series?

What people take from it will be completely their own thing. For some, it will be the theme of justice or injustice. For others, it will be the theme of connection or the inability to connect. It could be so many things, and if drama is done right then it should be.

Frances Poletti (Creator)**Could you set up the story of Without Sin?**

Without Sin tells the story of Stella Tomlinson (Vicky McClure), a mother held hostage to her grief after the death of her 14-year-old daughter Maisy (Justine Moore). Returning home from a night out she finds ex-con Charles Stone (Johnny Harris) hunched over Maisy's body. Charles claims he was robbing the house when he found her fatally wounded. Despite this he was arrested and charged with murder. Our story begins three years later when he contacts Stella through the Restorative Justice programme, admitting his guilt, promising to finally tell her the truth of what happened that night. Stella, now separated from her husband (Perry Fitzpatrick), is living a lonely, isolated nocturnal life as an Uber driver in Nottingham. With nothing to lose, hoping it might offer some closure, she agrees to see him. Charles however flips the meeting, continuing to protest his innocence, stating that the killer is still out there, targeting vulnerable girls from Stella's old estate. Despite herself, Stella starts to develop a Hannibal Lecter / Clarice dynamic with Charles in which they work together to investigate the

disappearance of a local girl he believes is connected to Maisy. However, like her loved ones, we fear Charles is manipulating Stella's trauma and that she might be helping to free a guilty man.

Many dramas would look at the immediate aftermath of something as traumatic as losing your child. What interested you about picking up the story three years later?

Well it's when time has elapsed after a tragedy occurs, when everyone has stopped calling and checking on you, your marriage has broken down, your ex is now with someone else and having another baby – what then if you haven't managed to move on with your life? Stella is in stasis and then in that first episode, Charles unexpectedly offers her a chance to try and feel alive again and make amends for the guilt that's never left her surrounding her daughter's death. But it's at huge risk as she couldn't be more vulnerable to his potential manipulation. This is a character who you can take anywhere. She's already been brought to her knees, has nothing to lose and is still reeling from trauma, desperately seeking redemption.

Where did the idea come from?

Vicky and Johnny had been looking to collaborate on a project for a decade since *This Is England*. I had to find something that would feel different but also play to their strengths as actors. My exec producer at Left Bank Pictures, Sian McWilliams, had recently watched a documentary about restorative justice and we agreed it was a rich jumping off point. Characters that meet under those circumstances are tied together for life due to a traumatic event, their dynamics intrinsically complicated and dramatic. I knew that creating the characters of Stella and Charles for Vicky and Johnny would offer them a range of complex emotional journeys that they could build upon from the page. They would be able to provoke and challenge each other through the complex relationship their characters shared.

What research did you do?

On each of the crime dramas I've written I've worked closely with former police officer Lisa Farrand as my advisor. Lisa started work with Sally Wainwright, inspiring the creation of Sarah Lancashire's character Catherine Cawood. She brought the same rigorous attention to detail and knowledge as to *Happy Valley*, ensuring I felt confident of the criminal world and justice system we were creating on screen. I combined this with detailed research into how the restorative justice system works, I also spoke with men like Charles who had been in high category prisons and listened to both Shawn Atwood and James English's criminal guest interview podcasts.

How did *Without Sin* go from concept to screen?

Exec producer Sian McWilliams knew of my crime writing and when she became Left Bank's Head of Development brought me in for a meeting, wanting us to find a new investigative idea. She mentioned that she'd struck up a friendship with Johnny after they'd worked on *Troy: Fall of a City*, and that he and Vicky were looking for a project to collaborate on. I've huge admiration and taken inspiration from both actors' work, especially on *This Is England*, and so it was an opportunity I couldn't miss. Vicky had just started her own production company and wanted to do something set in Nottingham, which is where I'm from as well, so it all came together once we'd found the right idea.

How helpful was it to know you were writing for Vicky and Johnny early on?

Really helpful as I had access to them throughout the writing process. We'd go through the scripts in forensic detail regarding character psychology, tweaking dialogue and backstory and so on. Making sure everything aligned with the characters they were building in their minds in preparation for the shoot. Johnny plays these dark, complex characters so well, which is where the Hannibal Lecter dynamic came from, but he's also the loveliest man in the world, so we wanted to play on that. Is Charles really evil or did he just come from a bad place? Vicky was after something less procedural, but still with an investigative drive and with her strong Nottingham connection it enabled me to write scenes in locations we'd both grown up around. The visual reminders of the ex-mining communities, the hustle and bustle of Nottingham market and the beauty spots along the river Trent were all on my wish list to show onscreen one day.

What flavour does Nottingham bring to a drama?

I always try and think of what socio-political context I can add through my choice of location. In *Without Sin* it was having a supposedly notorious estate next to a gated affluent community and how character motivations and sense of identity was affected by which area they came from or now lived. I also love the Nottingham accent and it was a passion for the whole team to really have the series not just look but sound like Nottingham.

What have you learnt from writing your first series?

Mostly it was learning to think on my feet and embrace the compromises, coming up with better ways to do things under pressure. Vicky had a tight shooting window and production faced delays and setbacks after the Omicron strain emerged – we were up against it at every stage. With just four months to write the final three episodes, it was also about putting my trust in the actors and their different ways of working. Johnny prefers to workshop his lines before and then learn them, so on the day he's absolutely off book. Vicky is more free-flowing and likes to work with the energy in the room, adlibbing to keep it fresh. With nothing ever set in stone, the script constantly evolved, it was a living, breathing entity.

What's the significance of the title for you?

It's from the Biblical quote: *'Let he who is without sin... cast the first stone...'* Despite Stella carrying the weight of Maisy's death, it wasn't just she who let her daughter down. Everybody's culpable in some way and ultimately she realises this.

Does Stella have more story to tell?

Yes and I'd love to return again and build on it as it was so rewarding creating the characters and world and I'm hoping the audience will be equally pulled in. And there's certainly unfinished business in Millfields that a second series would allow us to explore.

What's next for you?

I've just finished writing the pilot for a new crime drama based around police corruption affecting married officers and their family set in Sheffield. It explores the potential of the Defund the Police movement and addresses recent systematic failures within the force and how they affect local communities, especially vulnerable women. For this I'm working with Mark Herbert of Warp Films which is a dream come true. He and Shane Meadow's work has been a huge influence throughout the

years. Social realist skewered crime dramas are definitely where I'm finding the most fulfilment and enjoyment in my writing but we'll see what the future holds!