

NSW

B = Blake

P = Paul

B - "Cool, alright. We're recording, and like I just told my buddy Paul, who by the way I've known for like 20 years, to all my fans listening at home. I don't know how any one human other than my parents and my siblings has been able to put up with me for so long, but Paul and I have known each other so we were two little rugrats running around our families respective lake cabins, uhh in New Hampshire. And have stayed friends ever since. Uhh so I am Blake, the Social Media Assistant with the NH Council on Developmental Disabilities, for those of you who have not had the displeasure of getting to meet me yet, mostly kidding there. And uhh Paul you wanna go ahead and introduce yourself real quick?"

P - "Uhh yeah I'm Paul Philben, known on a lot of social media as P.T. Philben, I uhm am currently a writer's PA or support staff on a writers room for The Night Agent, which dropped last month (on Netflix) as of recording this. Uhh to a lot of success! I was diagnosed with Autism I believe at around age 4 or 5. At some point my diagnosis was re-evaluated to Aspergers, which is how I knew it growing up. I guess some people don't like that word anymore. But it's the word I knew so that's how I identify, as Aspy. And uhh yeah I'm excited to be here and to hopefully offer some insight."

B - "Cool cool, thank you! And by the way guys if you have not watched The Night Agent, uhm, having just finished it myself the other day, very entertaining. I would say it's very akin to the show 24, I don't know if you agree with that Paul?"

P - "Yeah, yeah that's a good comp" (comparison)

B - "Yeah that was my analogy I guess, so if you liked that show you'll probably like The Night Agent. But also just seeing Paul's name in the credits of the premier episode, was pretty wild for me, because growing up like I said we've known each other for quite awhile and we always joked and talked about him getting to Hollywood and this but until it's something that happens it's all very theoretical, like most things in life. Uhh and then it happens and you see it on screen and you're like "oh shoot, I know that guy! That's pretty cool" So that was a wild moment for me."

P - "Yeah, yeah it was funny because I looked for my credit and I couldn't find it and just assumed it wasn't there but you found it (laughs) so that was so funny."

B - "It took meticulous pausing and playing of the button because Netflix is very aggressive with their speed in the credits once you get through the producers and the cast etc"

P - "Which is weird because most people don't watch the credits, you'd think they would just play the credits at a normal speed, since they skip it usually anyway."

B - "One would think. They actually have you start the next episode automatically unless you click the watch credits option"

P - "Yeah exactly"

B - "Really interesting, but I was like I have a hunch I might see him in here so I was like, eh spend a minute of my time and see"

P - "Yeah I think it came after the logos, which is why I missed it. Uhm but yeah."

B - "But yeah that was interesting and you know guys I took a picture of it and sent it to Paul and his family and circulated it amongst people we know and was like "oh my god"

P - "Yeah people freaked out on Facebook which I hadn't been on in like years and uhh except for like one hidden Hollywood Assistant group. So I had to respond to people on Facebook for the first time in like years, so that was a wild experience. Uhm"

B - "Probably a lot of notifications backended, waiting for you (laughs). Uhh"

P - "Oh yeah, oh yeah" (laughs)

B - "As most of the folks who are watching this video are aware, April, which has a few days left in it, so I'm not late getting this project done, I still get my stuff done amazingly, uhh is Autism Awareness Month, Autism Acceptance Month, you know for folks. And wanted to talk to Paul, because he and I were long overdue for a chat anyways and we're cooking up a visit in person, to LA which would be pretty cool, uhh been once and did all the tourist trap stuff so really excited to do proper LA this time. Uhh but we wanted to chat with Paul because he works for Netflix which is just really cool, uhh I don't know many people personally that work for Netflix, so that was nice. And yeah just to get his perspective on things you see in the industry, experience breaking into the industry, as someone with Autism, and ummm yeah some of that. So Paul I'll let you lead off by kind of my first question so like what's the vibes been for someone you know with Autism, Asperger's, in the film/tv industry?"

P - "Well I've been pretty lucky with most of my interactions. There's a lot of anxiety going into an industry like this that's driven so much by social connection. And uhh having, having certain issues with like perceiving tone, or like not knowing the implications of what you say before you say it. I also have problems with like volume and like uhh can I swear?"

B - "Yeah I think most of the people watching this are adults"

P - " Yeah so like my other issue being my default expression being like "fuck you", my uhh default tone of voice being not particularly conciliatory, I have a loud booming voice that I have trouble keeping in check sometimes. So there's always this anxiety that I'm like fucking something up or tripping up some social interaction. And of course people are too polite to tell you. I always try to tell people upfront like if I do something to offend you just let me know. Uhh there hasn't been that much of an issue with this room in particular. But uhm naturally like I have, my first job out here was editing on Keeping Up With The Kardashians, not what I wanted to do but it was a fine first gig to have and there were some funny stories. But there was a point where my supervisor had to pull me aside and like my, there was an assistant story editor and my colleague who was also an assistant story editor, there were two on every team, had apparently gone to my supervisor and said that I sounded like very angry, like commanding. And what I thought were making simple requests, I don't blame her, like I was glad that she just took me aside and checked in with me. Uhh after that, after I left that job uhh I had a stint where I was doing odd jobs like Uber and stuff, and then the pandemic and the first like nearly year of that was just hell of like not being able to get any work and not being able to access unemployment because it was such an overloaded disaster. But uhm at some point during the pandemic, like I think it was already 2021 at this point, I get a notification from an organization called, uhm damn I can't remember what they are called, if I remember what they are called I'll say, but they were like a placement agency that specializes in people on the spectrum, and they were just starting to implement their work into like Hollywood jobs. They were like used to doing it with just like office work. But they were starting to do it with Hollywood jobs. And I get an email from them saying like this one show wants like Autistic PA's (Production Assistant) in particular and uhh thank god I answered that email because it led me to where I am. And it turns out it was for a Jason Katims show, Jason Katims is the creator of shows like Friday Night Lights and Parenthood."

B - "Yeah I recognized that name, I loved Parenthood!"

P - "Yeah and having watched Parenthood you know that there's an Autistic character on that show, Max. Who is very heavily based on Katims' son. Uhh this is all public. But this new show he was developing, or getting ready to shoot, was about three Autistic roommates, called As We See It. The Autistic roommates were played by actual Autistic people. He had Autistic people on the writing staff. He had a very big hearted investment in inclusion in this show. Uhm so I end up working for the show as like a Covid PA, just like handing people their proximity badges or whatever. So that if anybody gets sick we know who's sick and who's not, who was exposed to who, etc. Anyway, uhm at some point during the show I was given access to the pilot which had been shot before the pandemic. And I had a pretty strong reaction to it and I ended up telling this woman who was on the crew, like I got to basically meet everyone who was on the crew because everyone came for Covid tests every day. And I didn't know who she was at the time. But uhm I just tell her that I had this strong reaction to the pilot, specifically this scene where uhm where the main characters father sits him down for dinner and says like you need to go ask for your job back because he basically did the Aspy thing and told his boss you're an idiot without like being at all self aware. And he says like no I don't want that job, well do you want me to support you for the rest of your life? And he's like yeah kind of. And he says like well I can't I have cancer, and before I go I need to know you'll be okay. I need to know you'll be able to hold down a job. That you'll be able to get a girl, that you'll be happy when I'm gone. And that really, it made me think of my own father. Not in that we ever had a conversation that stark, because as you know he's alive, well, healthy."

B - "Yeah, also named Paul! For the folks at home" (laughs)

P - (Laughs) "Yeah PT stands for Paul the Third, and my father's name is also Paul. But anyway, so I had a strong reaction to that because it made me think of all the things my dad did and all the concern he showed when I was young. Like trying to get me to pursue girls, like doing this (motions with his fingers at his eyes in a "look me in the eyes manner") to teach me proper eye contact, and uhm I had that reaction so I tell this woman Elaine, not knowing who she was. She asked me to write it down in a letter format just to show it to people, to like affirm that people in my situation could have a positive reaction to the show. What I didn't realize at the time was that she was one of the most important consultants on the show, because she's like a relatively well known acting coach as well as an Autism inclusion advocate because her son is on the spectrum. And the people she shared it with included the Producers of the show. So I ended up having conversations with mainly Jenny Mullen, who was Jason Katims' Head of Development at the time. And a brief conversation with Jason Katims, and I formed that connection just through being lucky enough to express myself to the right person. Like it was an astronomical chance. And it was through Jenny that I ended up getting a

Writer's PA position on this show, The Night Agent. I mean coincidentally during the interview, I told Shawn this whole story, my current boss Shawn Ryan, this whole story, and it turned out he knew people on the Autism spectrum as well. And it was just an astronomical concurrence of events that uhm people talk all the time that in this industry how no one's story of how they make it into a place is replicable. Like one person's story is only one person's story. There's no like one select path. Just to like clarify something, getting support staff job on a writer's room is basically impossible. Like they don't post these jobs publicly. Everybody's fricking wants them. The fact that I was lucky enough to have this opportunity because Jenny knew someone who worked on the show who knew that they needed a PA, it's astronomical good luck. I think I earned my place here but it was also extremely lucky. So in the past few years I'd say I've had just this string of, both working under Katims, as a member of his shooting crew, and working directly with Shawn Ryan, two legendary writers, who are both men who I can't speak highly enough, they both have hearts of gold. And they both have a connection with the community. I am extremely fortunate that I have ended up in really good environments. You hear stories of some of like the worst people in Hollywood. Like there are certain writers rooms that are really toxic. That uhh don't treat assistants well. Uhm I feel very fortunate to be where I am. I guess whenever I tell people this story, because like people naturally want to know how you get into a writer's room. And like start with an Autism diagnosis I don't know."

B - (Huge laugh)

P - "I basically say that you just wanna be honest with people. And like speak your truth. Okay like Integrate was the organization that helped me get that first job. I asked a woman who worked there, whose daughter was on the spectrum, uhm how honest I should be about my Autism diagnosis. Like when I would apply for jobs early, never got a job through a job application by the way, it's always been, it's always been meeting someone."

B - "Good old networking"

P - "Yeah, yeah all networking. But I always struggled like, should I identify myself as a disabled person? Would they want to bother with me? And what she said was "if someone is going to not hire you because of your Autism diagnosis, it means you probably don't want to work with them anyway. It's precisely because I talked about who I was, what As We See It, which fortunately did get renewed, what that show meant to me, what that meant to my family. I have a ton of funny anecdotes about that show if we have time for it. It's because I was upfront about who I am, how that's affected me as a writer, that I'm here. I would not have gotten here if not for my Autism, in a weird way."

So, like it's astronomical luck as well but I've been very fortunate that this aspect of myself that's obviously very core to who I am, is a big part of the reason that I'm here and hopefully, around the corner, looking at getting a script on one of Shawn's shows."

B - "Ohhh looking forward to it and definitely watching that. And I always joked guys with Paul, I think I would make a great extra on a show. It would depend on the show but I would be a fantastic extra. And as you heard it's all networking, so now I have the network in place. But something you said really piqued my interest, and made me throw out one of my questions and bring in an organic question that came to mind. Was your reaction to As We See It was the show? Uhm to As We See It, I think my question is based on that. When you watch projects that feature people with Asperger's, do you find they are mostly genuine? Do you find it's like a generalization of people on the spectrum? What's the overall vibes of that? If there is any, maybe it's very individualistic, and it's not a one size fits all reaction. In general I guess the question is do you think Hollywood mostly "gets it right" (does the air quote with hands/fingers)? As I'm doing this with the air quotes since it could be based on individual taste."

P - "Yeah so that's kind of a complicated question. As We See It put more effort toward "getting it right" (does air quotes) than most shows. Like I said they cast people who were on the spectrum and playing characters with very similar levels of need. Which was really good. And they even hired Autistic actors to play non-Autistic characters, just for the hell of it. And not that there weren't issues with the show but the fact, the stuff they got right, they got really right. Like one little anecdote I remember was my sister watching the show with her boyfriend, now fiancée, who is also named Paul."

B - "Yeah also Paul, we're bringing in another Paul, all the Pauls." (laughs)

P - (Laughs) "Yeah, uhh so she reacted to the main character basically saying something rude, I can't remember what scene it was. It might've been when he's playing cards with a bunch of old ladies and they say "oh you're really good at this game" and he basically says "no you're just terrible at it". And she said that reminded her of me and her fiancée was like "what are you talking about PT is nothing like this" and she was like, she paused it and explained to him like "this is him to a T when he was Eight"

B - "100 percent" (laughs)

P - "He's come so far" or whatever and she told this whole anecdote about how one time she asked me how I was doing and I said fine and uhm she asked "do you want to know how I'm doing?" and I said no. Which is like the most Autistic thing, I have no memory of this, wouldn't do that now, but yeah my symptoms used to be a lot more

obvious, like uhh one thing I do kind of want to see is like, I'm probably going to go through a laundry list here. But one thing I want to see is the experience of someone who passes, quote on quote, because that's a whole different struggle. Like the way I've explained it to people is, so I prefer the term high need vs low need instead of high functioning and low functioning because high functioning to most people has meant "oh you pass for normal enough so I can ignore your needs and not feel bad about it", like ableist. Like I have needs, I just don't have as many needs as some other people on the spectrum."

B - "Sure"

P - "So like it's a daily struggle with the fact that like I know anytime that I can make some sort of mistake that I'm not even aware of. That will throw people off a lot. Because they'll, you know they won't necessarily know that I'm on the spectrum. It's a lot more comforting, like I have a couple friends out here who know, and are cool with it, and we have a rapport that makes sense to everyone involved. But I don't necessarily have time to do that with every co-worker. I don't have time to establish that rapport with every person I meet at a networking event. And that's a struggle. I would like to see more of that.

In terms of how the representation works now, Hollywood has a real fascination with the archetype of the savant. You know, like, your Rainman's or when you're talking about the more Asperger's side, like even if they don't explicitly say it like Sheldon from The Big Bang Theory falls into this category. The Benedict Cumberbatch iteration of Sherlock. That has sort of come to define Aspergers, particularly those last two in the minds of a lot of people.

And I do think that was actively harmful because it gives the perception that all Aspies have these specific traits where they're like very cerebral, purposefully rude and condescending, uhm Asexual is a big one, that these characters are more or less portrayed as Asexual. Or that they have to like overcome their Asexuality, even though there's no correlation between Autism and Asexuality, just Autism and awkwardness. So like, that sort of archetype, I've found, not that there aren't, here's the thing it's not like there aren't Aspie or Autistic people like that. But it's the fact that that is the trope that so many writers fall back on since it's narratively convenient. Like you have a character that can both solve a lot of problems, because they're brilliant but also create a bunch of problems because they're completely inept with regards to social interaction. Like that, I mean that's the essence of a lot of narrative television. Like just trying to create problems and then solve problems in a systemic fashion over and over again. So it's obvious why this character type is so prevalent. But there's a wide spectrum of people with Autism, Aspergers, whatever. And I would like to see a broader representation so that people don't have a very narrow view of what it means to be Autistic or Aspie.

Because too many people when they see or hear the word Autistic, they see Dustin Hoffman's character in Rainman. And when they hear Aspie and they see like Sheldon. Who's one of the most annoying characters in the history of television."

B - "I haven't really watched that one, and now, I don't know you're not really selling it to me so I don't think I will watch it." *laughs*

P - *Also laughing* "Yeah, what's annoying about that one is they say like "oh, we aren't pinning it on anything. Obviously he's like different but we're not going to like put a label on it." And I'm like "shut the fuck up, it's Aspergers, like we know what lazy tropes you're leaning on here" but yeah. Luckily I don't want to write sitcoms so I don't care if I piss off Chuck Lorre. But uh, yeah I'm sure he's a good guy I just don't like that one show. I love Two and a Half Men. It probably hasn't aged well but I liked it at the time. *laughs* So yeah I would say with regards to representation in Hollywood there is people who are definitely trying to push things in the right direction. I will say what's important to me is that it's represented well insofar as the actual symptoms as opposed to putting a big emphasis on the "I'm getting Autistic actors" although both is the best case scenario. And uhh I have a couple scripts with Autistic characters in it, but my scripts I don't know. *laughs* But definitely in general listen to writers who are on the spectrum because there's probably a lot of them out here who are undiagnosed as well."

B - "Yeah, so I do have 10 minutes left on the free recording, but uhh"

P - "Yeah they don't, they don't check to see if you just do it again, and I don't really have anywhere to be until like 8 *laughs* so"

B - "I gotta do that Rent performance, soon -ish with Keira, but "

P - "Oh right right!"

B - "I love Rent, I think it's a great soundtrack so I'm really interested to see that performance. Uhm, you know you kind of touched on a thing that itched my brain a bit. And I think something that I'm going to use my boss's phrase for it, something that we hate to see when it comes to the disability community. Is stories that really lean into like inspiration porn. And that's a direct quote from my boss so I am okay to say it. And there like "oh my god look at this Autistic person or this disabled person doing this totally normal mundane thing that like is not necessarily special", but they're like "oh my god" because they did it and my experience with the disability community is they're like "we don't want to be special, we're just doing the same thing that everybody else is doing. So treat us just like you would everybody else. I feel like it's important, to your

point, to have these perspectives in the writers room of these projects, to avoid the tropes. Uhm it sounds like the booking agency, we'll call it, that kind of got you"

P - "Placement yeah"

B - "Placement agency yeah. Is there a broader effort on that front in Hollywood? Are they doing that and like how's that been going?"

P - "Well in terms of representation in general there's been a big push in Hollywood recently. Both for like PR and genuine idealistic reasons. Like I think it was like 10 years ago, I can't remember the exact staff, something absurd like 90% of writers were White and 83% were white men specifically. It's much, much better now in terms of genuine parity, not that the US is the only place in the world, but it's much closer to being in parity with the US population. In terms of like gender and racial demographics. Not perfect but much closer to what it should be instead of what it was like 10 years ago. Both from the perspective of like, trying to do the right thing. But also like you get better stories when you have a broader range of perspective. Like if you exclusively white guys who went to school in the NorthEast then you're only going to get so many interesting stories. Whereas if you hire a diverse set of voices, not just in terms of demographics but I would hope that any writers room would include people of all cultural backgrounds, that includes like a hick from West Virginia. Hick might be a mean word but you, you get what I mean. Someone who comes from an unprivileged background in West Virginia regardless of their ethnicity. And uhm what I will say is I haven't seen as much of a push for that, in terms of neurodiversity. At least broadly in the industry. I remember one time in college there was like this screenwriting contest for diverse voices. And I attended their meeting where they were like answering questions about it. And I asked if neurodiversity counted as diversity for the purposes of applying for this. And she said "yes if you also have one of the other qualifications such as gender, race, gender identity" blah blah blah and I was like "you could have just said no"

B - "Yeah sometimes its easier to just say no."

P - "Yeah no would have been a much shorter and more respectful answer. I mean partially because it's invisible and you can't put it on a pamphlet or like, you have a picture of a writers room. And you say this is a diverse writers room. And if you have someone like me, who's an Autistic white guy, that doesn't help your narrative that you're trying to promote. And I think that while there are people who are doing this for honest reasons. Some of it is just PR. But also because it might not occur to them as much. Not to say that because neurodiversity doesn't occur to them doesn't make them an inherently dishonest person. But like I do think that representation, particularly in a

storytelling industry, is important because everyone's story deserves to be told. And that includes not just people on the Autistic spectrum but also other Neurodiversities and I would like to see a bit more of that."

B - "For sure. And you know the last question actually, you answered it earlier so I'm going to change it up on us again. And this one answer it as much as you're legally allowed to. We don't want to get you fired. Uhm not going to be responsible for that. What, for the fans at home, can you give on The Night Agent Season 2? When can we expect anything fun out of that as far as release dates, trailers, etc."

P - "Well okay so"

B - "Also for the folks that don't know the Writer's are 99.99% going on strike so there may be uhh"

P - "Yeah the current date is April 28th, and the Writer's Strike is expected to begin on Tuesday the 2nd. So uhm if that strike happens, everything is put on pause, until the end of the strike. Which uhm, I believe the last strike was four months, but that was considered a pretty long one. Yeah 100 days, so about four months. A little more than three months actually, yeah so I expect it to happen. And anything that happens there will inevitably delay The Night Agent. I think they said they wanted it released in summer of next year. But of course that's aspirational. As for how the show will do, I honestly, without being able to give you anything of substance, I feel more confident that this will be a really stronger season of television than I did last time. Not to say last time wasn't good television. But there was a goal to like try to get as much done as possible before the strike, partly because Shawn wanted to get people paid, and we kept at a really fast pace, it's been incredible to watch, and I think people will be very happy with the final product. Without being able to say anything about it." *laughs*

B - "Cool, cool, and for folks references at home, and then I'll close it out, the last writers strike, to my knowledge, a fair number of years ago, but a prominent movie you would all remember is you know 007, James Bond, Quantum of Solace. Was a production of the Writer's Strike. And you really get a view of how critical writer's are when you look at that movie and go "man this thing is stitched together in various ways" *laughs*

P - "Two other big examples of that are, I enjoyed this movie a lot at the time, but it's because I was just happy with loud explosions, uh Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen. There's a lot of stupid fun to be had in that movie but there's basically no script. Uhh but the other big example I give people, and most people who are into television at all have watched Breaking Bad. And I just ask people that "did you notice that Season 1 doesn't

have a finale? It just dissipates and then you move onto Season 2?" And they're like "yeah" and I say "Writer's Strike." They put their pens down, did not continue to make the show."

B - "Exactly, well Paul thank you, and folks I am going to keep Paul on a little bit longer just to shoot the breeze, we've got a lot of catching up to do. But thank you for hopping on, and talking about your perspective. And giving a peek behind the curtain of Hollywood, for folks in the disability community. And folks this will be up once I take the billion years it takes to transcribe all this. This will be up on the Council's website, it'll be up on the social media channels, and it'll be shared with Paul's parents who I'm sure are going to go ballistic that we got to do this in a professional capacity. And will uh hit stop recording, but thank you everybody for tuning in and yeah thank you Paul again."