

Alaina Zulli

Okay, this is Alaina Zulli, it's June 5, and I'm interviewing—

Thomas Vance
Courtney Vance.

AZ
Who likes to go by Thomas.

TV
Yes.

AZ
We are in the Barney Building of NYU. Thomas, let's start with your background. Tell me where you were born, about your parents.

TV
Okay. I was born in Southern California, Long Beach.

AZ
I'm sorry.

[End of CD 1, start of CD 2]

AZ
Okay, let's resume.

TV
Okay. Let's see. But we quickly moved from there when I was 1 years old. My mom wanted to be closer to family so we moved to Indiana. And then after that my parents separated. They were never married, but they were together for several years. My dad moved to Cleveland and I grew up in Indiana for the next eight or so years, which I liked because I was close to my family. You know, I basically my cousins were like my brothers and my sisters. I was really close to my grandmother. I stayed at our house all the time. Then we moved

to Texas because my mom changed her job or something. Her job required her to move. And I lived in Texas from 9 to 14. I wouldn't say that I hated it there. But at least in Indiana, which is a pretty backward state, I had my family and stuff but in Texas there wasn't even that. I mean, it was just, we lived in the suburbs. It was everyone was the same, all the houses look the same, everybody dressed the same. People were very small minded, you know. I remember the first time I ever got political was like, in the 2000 election or whatever. I didn't have really any idea of, you know, I didn't have any particular political beliefs at that time. But I knew enough to know that I was like, I wouldn't have been a person that voted for George Bush. I was like, "Wow, that's crazy." Oh, and I went to a Baptist School there. That was weird. Like, have you ever seen "Saved"?

AZ

Yeah.

TV

It was—that movie is not even a satire. My school is exactly like that. There was no difference. My school is like "Saved." It was, you know, I mean, I mean, very, like hypercritical people will you know, like, oh, Jesus will save you blabbity blah from your sins and you know, trying to be really like peppy and happy, but really sort of with this very mean spirit. But yeah.

AZ

So were you really religious?

TV

I went to church every Sunday.

AZ

Baptist?

TV

Baptist. But that was about it. I celebrated Easter and Christmas, but nothing beyond that. I think my mom had a religious phase when I was probably like, eight or nine. And you know, started like going to like these like, mother and

daughter Bible camp getaway things, which are really weird. And she made me go like Bible School in that Baptist School. And then after that, I guess we kind of faded, we stopped going to church. And now I'm very vocal, like, I don't like going to church at all. Whenever we go back to Indiana, she's like, it's Sunday, we should go to church. I'm like, I'm not going. And then I end up going anyway. She's like, it's for grandmother. I go. And anyway, my mom was like, I want to be a lawyer. I'm gonna go to school in New York. I've always wanted to live there. So when I was 14, we moved here. And so far, so good. I like it a lot. So that's my background for the most part.

AZ

Okay, good. I don't know if you mentioned it, but when, what year were you born?

TV

1988. November 17, 1988.

AZ

Okay. Move on to your sexuality.

TV

Okay.

AZ

Tell me when you knew, when you came out. Your whole story.

TV

I've been told that I like realized a lot later than most other people because I was like, now looking back and like, oh, yeah, I was totally, like 5 years old. But it didn't. I didn't realize until I was probably 15 or 16. I don't know. I had this crush on this girl at my school. And I was like, oh, no, she's just someone I'd like to be a friend or something. And then I was like, no, I totally want to have sex with her. And I don't know, I don't think I had any problem with it. Like, I wasn't like, there wasn't any conflict or anything. Actually, I was kind of happy. I was like, okay. My best friend was gay. And he was the first person that I told I was like, I think I like girls. I'm just like, yeah, I know.

AZ

So he knew already?

TV

Yeah. That's basically, I came out to my mom when I was 17. I told her I was bi and she was really upset. She was more upset than I thought she'd be. You know, she's liberal person. And so I wasn't expecting that at all. Is like what? No, I think she was more shocked than anything. And I cried, whatever, because she was not very sensitive at all and then like, like random—we didn't talk about—and then like randomly like two months later she was like, what did she say? She said something like all that matters is that you have healthy relationships and that was like the end and it was really weird and random. I'm out to pretty much everybody at my school, like all my friends and stuff. Let's see, more about my gay-acity. I don't know, even looking back like like even in middle school. Like now what I realized were like crushes and stuff on different girls I just completely misunderstood as something else.

AZ

Tell me about your name.

TV

Oh, Thomas? I think I started, I started going by that like maybe a year ago. It's not, I know, it's like a boy name. But I didn't choose it because I want to be a boy or anything. But there are a lot of reasons. I had this one teacher. Her name is, her name is, George that's like actually her birth name. And I was like, wow, that's kind of cool. And then I was, I was, looking at the word Thomas and Tom and stuff and like the history of the word and what it meant and how it was like used to describe like, wayward women and stuff like that. And then how it sort of morphed into Tom as being like lesbian and then also like, tomboy and stuff. And my great grandmother's named Thomas which is weird.

AZ

The first name was Thomas?

TV

Mhm. And so I was like maybe Thomas for mine. I like it.

AZ

That is interesting.

TV

Yeah.

AZ

Okay. Okay, since the topic that I brought you here to discuss is lesbian style. First, describe your style for me. Tell me about your style.

TV

My style it, it changes. I think it would be hard to like, I think it's pretty laid back. I kind of have like, I guess what you'd call like a punkish face. And I still try to sometimes implement that into what I wear. I wear ties a lot. I like to wear jeans. I don't wear shorts at all. Never. I like to wear polo shirts. I like to wear black a lot. I used to wear a lot of graphic tees but I kind of got away from that because I thought it looked immature or something like that. I'm trying to sort of make my style a little bit more mature. Now I'd say I like to experiment a lot. Like yesterday, I had like this mohawk thing going on that I tried to fashion worked pretty well until it rained and my hair kind of shrunk. And it was ugly. And then and I was like these crazy like psycho boots with this really short skirt. It was cool. I liked it a lot. Sometimes I like to be really wild. Other times I like to be laid back. I think the one unifying theme in my style is that it's, it reflects my mood at the time. Like yesterday was kind of like a pissed off day. So I wanted to be like, you know, that was like those are like my fuck society boots. Today, actually, today is like, I need to do laundry day, more than anything. But it changes. I wouldn't I wouldn't say it's like whether it's like, girly or more boyish. I like to wear skirts a lot. I like to I like to wear skirts a lot actually. And dresses. And but for the most part I like to like every day you could probably find me with jeans and a polo shirt and like brown boots or something or Converse.

AZ

Converse?

TV

Yeah.

AZ

Yeah. Does, do you think that your sexuality has any effects on what you wear at all?

TV

Yeah. I I don't know. Not even what I wear but just everything like about, like how I hold myself and stuff and like I don't know. Whenever I dress like even when I wear a skirt, I tried to make it more lesbian or something. I don't know exactly what that means.

AZ

Can you try?

TV

Okay. I don't know. Like, if I wear a skirt I'll try to have like maybe a more boyish hairstyle or something. I'll never wear like I guess like a frilly t-shirt or something with a skirt. I'll wear like a blue jeans skirt or something and like a shirt like this. And boots, or I guess I try to sometimes make it a little edgy or boyish. And for me, I guess that equates to lesbianism. I don't know how I guess.

AZ

Don't be embarrassed. That's a very, I mean, yeah.

TV

Like the other day or whatever I saw this girl on the train. I had a crush on her. I'm pretty sure she was a lesbian and I think so cause she was with a girl and they were like all being girlfriend-y and I don't know, she wore this she was wearing like baggy capris or something and this brown shirt and shoes. And now that I'm thinking about it's very not interesting outfit, but it looked really like I don't care what I wear. But actually I do look so I can I think that kind of-it

definitely doesn't influence what I wear. I always—when I was a kid I was a big tomboy I never like, I never wore dresses and stuff but that was more because I didn't want to be perceived as being girly. Not that I had actually any problem with wearing them. I find them comfy and cute. In middle school I had like this like I said that like punk phase and you know. Now, now I've just kind of developed, it kind of encompasses all of those my like childhood phases like so I tried to incorporate it. Punk boy, androgynous style, if that makes sense.

AZ

Sure.

TV

When I see some pictures of myself. I wore some really ugly things.

AZ

Wore or wear?

TV

Wore. Now I like to think that I don't dress quite as badly. And even when I see pictures of myself last year, like I had on this like, blouse or whatever like button up shirt and like a brown like vest sweater sweater vest over it. And a tie. I really liked it. I was like, oh I look cute in that picture. But I don't think I'd wear anything like that today.

AZ

Why?

TV

I don't know. It's, I liked it. I think I wrote then because I was like trying to be more boyish, but now it's a little too preppy for me. I like to have like fun like radical political beliefs. So I'm gonna like look like a person has a lot of [inaudible]. That's pretty much yeah.

AZ

Yeah. You've kind of touched on this, but maybe you can just go into more detail. What, if you see someone on the street or when you dress, what makes you think somebody's lesbian?

TV

I don't know. Like it's hard because you could see like, two women wearing like similar things. I'm like, oh, she's a lesbian. She's not. I don't know. Like when I think, I guess it's like the way you style your hair and I don't know I'm trying to think of like things that I look for when I see. Like that's something I look for like, you know on the subway train I'm like, like who's gay?

AZ

Oh, yeah.

TV

And I guess kind of look for whatever is a little bit different than the rest of what people are wearing like stuff like all the other one then. Usually like the person who I'm assuming is a lesbian will like, the clothes will just be like a little bit different than the rest of the woman on the train. I'm not even sure how it's different. It's just different. Like just like how I could say like, think of like urban or Black style or something like so you can have like two guys wearing a polo shirt and jeans or something. And like one you would think is being more urban style and the other like preppy and I don't even know what it is. It's just how it's worn in a way like the size is it loose or tight? So I guess I think of maybe being a little bit baggier, but not always. Definitely not always. Maybe a little edgier. I think those are the things I look for: edgier and baggier. Those are the two words I guess I would use to describe it, you know. I don't know, I guess there's a lot of girls I would imagine that would don't dress in that way that are still lesbians. I guess I just missed them on when I'm playing who's gay?

AZ

Sure. I'm always really surprised when they go to a gay bar. Let's see who's really out there.

TV

Yeah, for sure.

AZ

So I've been out of high school for a long time now. So I'm curious. In lesbian community, there are lesbians that seem to be very anti fashion for various reasons, often because it's seen as being, dressing for the male gaze, dressing for, you know, just for men. What is it like for you? I mean, what are your peers like in high school?

TV

Well, I don't know any other gay person at my school. I know a lot of gay guys. I don't know any other girls that are gay. There's just one girl now. She's bi. I don't know, like, the way they dress is very different than the way that I dress. I don't think that I have any judgment or anything. I mean, because I don't really think that clothing is that big of a deal. I mean, it does I think it does often reflect a lot about your personality and that kind of thing. But even like, when I look at my own, how my fashion has changed. Yeah, when I look at how my fashion is changed, it almost often reflects how I view myself as a person. So I do think it's important, but in school I've never, like gotten made fun of or anything like that, or for the way that I dress or for being gay. I mean I'm sure the larger community doesn't know that I'm gay. I mean, it's really annoying when people ask you questions, like, what kind of guy you like? I mean, it's like, every time it's like, you have to come out every 10 seconds like, actually.

AZ

Yeah, right.

TV

So I don't know if maybe even people ask that, to find out if I'm gay or not, because I had like roundabout questions like, what kind of person are you into? Or something like that. So maybe people do think that I'm gay. I know that total a lot of people and they weren't surprised at all. And I remember I told my one of my best friends Justine and she's like, oh, my God, my sister told me but I didn't believe her. And I don't know if that if that meant even before I realized that I was came off a certain way. I don't think that I was like,

like going at girls on the street or anything like that. So I don't know what it was that would have tipped people off to it. So I'm sure a lot of people think it or suspect it. And I haven't noticed any change in how they view me or yeah.

AZ

Yeah.

TV

Did I answer your question? I don't think I was even sure exactly what you're asking.

AZ

Oh, I don't think I made it clear. I don't know.

TV

Okay.

AZ

Question. Oh, well, there are a lot of gay men in fashion. They're, they're just really interested in fashion. They work in fashion. Very few lesbians. Do you have any theories?

TV

Any theories?

AZ

Well, I have personal experience.

TV

When I say it, it sounds pretty, like I guess old fashioned. But I think gay men in general or a lot of gay men gravitating more towards the arts in general. And I guess you could, in a way consider fashion to be part of the arts, its creative. While lesbians don't—I can't even I mean, there are some pretty cool like what I would deem like lesbian styles, but I don't know if that would appeal to the larger population.

AZ

Like what?

TV

Like, lesbian styles you mean? Yeah, like I don't know, like I couldn't really see like, what I'm wearing right now like going down the runway or something like that. And when I think of like, even gay fashion, it's a little bit like, it's very, like together and tight and like, I feel like I should snap when I think of gay fashion like, like when when I think of like, yeah, like male gay style. And I'm trying to theorize, I think it has to do with the fact that fashion is more girly, or something like that. It's girlier. I don't know. I don't know. And also, like, I think that America thinks like, gay guys are cute or something like when you think of like, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy like, oh, those gay people. They're so cute in their gay ways. Look at his gay outfit, his gay twang, and all this stuff. So that's how I think that they're sort of receptive to, like gay men in that way. And I think maybe they might feel a little bit more threatened by women in fashion just like they might be threatened by women in any kind of power control in general could be part of it. I just want to put this out there. This about my my friend Josh, and he visited me over the summer. Obviously, he's not a lesbian, but he's gay. And we were hanging out just day-to-day he wears, I don't want to say he's a bad dresser, but very plain, you know, nondescript average American kind of dress. And so when I was like, oh, let's go hang out at the East Village it was like 11pm, he's like, oh, no, we have to go home. I have to dress gay or something. Okay, okay. And I don't know, the thing is I knew exactly what he meant. I was like, yeah, you should probably change. And we went home and I don't know, like, I think a lot of time, the way you dress has to do with like, recognition or something like in a way like you want to be recognized for being who you are or something, especially by your own community, like, like, hey, I'm gay, you're gay, too. We're sisters. And I think I think that definitely affects how I dress.

AZ

It does. Okay, it's the end of my list here. All I can remember. Is there anything else you want to add?

TV

Is there anything else you want to add? Not that I can think of. It's hard to just think of something.

AZ

Okay, thank you very much.