Tv Close-Up: Terry O'Quinn

by Eirik_Knutzen

A recent graduate of the University of Iowa and still dripping wet behind the ears, Terry O'Quinn made his professional acting debut in a production of "Tartuffe" at Baltimore's Center Stage in 1975.

TERRY O'QUINN - Terry O'Quinn, who recently earned the 2007 Emmy for best supporting actor in a drama series, is back on eight new episodes of 'Lost.' CNS Photo courtesy of ABC.In fact, he loved it so much that he hung around the venerable theater for another four or five years, despite the fact he didn't work very frequently or get paid quite enough to live in much more than hovels (despite a roommate or two) or eat lots of boxed macaroni and cheese. And he loved every split second of sharing the wealth with his friends and acquaintances.

And then came a major break: He was cast in director Michael Cimino's (later much-maligned) movie Western "Heaven's Gate" (1980). O'Quinn was hired to play a U.S. Army cavalry officer, Capt. Minardi, a rough, tough soldier born in the saddle.

When asked by the producers, he indignantly replied, "Of course I can ride!"

A fairly sensible young man, he decided to take riding lessons immediately.

As his "Heaven's Gate" shooting schedule kept getting postponed, O'Quinn found a beautiful horse farm on the outskirts of Baltimore and learned to ride from Lori, the owners' beautiful daughter. Taking the task very seriously, they spent lots and lots of time in the saddle together.

"She taught me a lot and I became a pretty good rider," he said, grateful to a fault.

Broke as usual, "I ended up living on the farm above the barn, with the grooms," explained O'Quinn. "Then her parents finally threw me off their place because they thought I was a gold digger. So I left, and Lori went with me, to live on the cheap. We could barely afford two bucks of gas in the tank at a time. It was fast - we met in May and were married in November."

Today, they have two lovely houses - one in the heavily wooded countryside near their beloved Baltimore and another on the beach on Oahu. They regard their rustic Maryland property as their primary home; their sleek Hawaii beach house overlooking a magnificent cove serves as their home away from home when he films episodes of "Lost" just a few miles down the highway.

O'Quinn, who recently earned the 2007 Emmy for best supporting actor in a drama series, is back on eight new episodes of "Lost" as the Hollywood screenwriters' strike-shortened season (his contract calls for 16 "Lost" episodes per season over three years) grinds on. Bald and solid as a tracer bullet, the 55-year-old actor soldiers on as the mysterious John Locke, an enigma to friends and foes alike.

Due to the third season's cliffhanger episode, it is known that Jack (Matthew Fox) and Kate (Evangeline Lilly) are off the island and a host of new faces have stepped off the freighter (including Jeff Fahey, Ken Leung, Rebecca Mader and Jeremy Davies). But nobody knows if they'll be around for eight more episodes.

But Locke's fate remains a mystery, according to O'Quinn, who obviously won't tell what he knows about the current crop of shows.

"All I know is that he remains a man seeking some meaning and purpose to his life. He has been almost a non-person all his life; this is his opportunity to make sense of it all. Sometimes he's right, sometimes he's wrong."

Although O'Quinn loves the colorful Maryland fall and freezing winters, he wishes he were back in Hawaii toiling 16-hour days in paradise.

"My wife and I get homesick - Hawaii still feels foreign to me as I was born in Michigan and used to pure winters," he explained. "But the writers' strike is screwing everything up for us all, particularly the (production) crew on 'Lost.' They are unemployed.

"I spent most of my career in that situation, so I know of where I speak," he continued, a tad bitter. "The guys behind the camera work very hard but live pretty much paycheck to paycheck. Married with children, they're now out in the cold. Ironically, I've been in this business for many years but 'Lost' is honestly the first time I feel comfortable. I happen to be in a really good place right now."

One of 11 children born in Newberry, Mich., to an amazing homemaker and a beleaguered school principal, the seventh child in the Quinn (he changed his last name for professional reasons) clan grew up in a lively household where slacking off was not tolerated.

But while the rest of the brood found sensible occupations (except a young brother who teaches drama at an Illinois university), O'Quinn fell in love with acting as a teenager after watching Franco Zeffirelli's lush, award-winning film of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" several times. Despite appearing in only one high school play, he found lots of stage work in college to go with his drama studies.

O'Quinn's extensive credits now include two grown sons, grandchildren, the motion pictures "Tombstone," "The Rocketeer" and "The Stepfather," plus recurring roles on "JAG" (Adm. Boone), "Alias" (FBI Director Kendall) and "The West Wing" (Gen. Nicholas Alexander).

And a spectacularly successful 28-year marriage to Lori, but did he finally win his in-laws' blessings?

"We don't need to go there."

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