

Justin Bruening: 'Knight Rider'

by Eirik_Knutzen

Day after day after day, Justin Bruening - the new "Knight Rider," airing Sunday Feb. 17 from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m. on NBC - would report at the crack of dawn at various sound stages near Los Angeles, leap into the latest remake of KITT (a 2008 Ford Mustang Shelby GT500KR), gun the 600 horsepower engine, and go absolutely nowhere. While talking to himself.

The gleaming vehicle - one of six identical muscle cars with similar license plates - used in a particular scene would be surrounded by green screens to accommodate filling in the background later with film, video or computer-generated images of objects ranging from stationary palm trees to speeding beer trucks.

Under no circumstances was he allowed to drive the car on-camera, a task left to stunt drivers. When occasional shots called for close-ups inside the car with genuine exteriors in background, Bruening would keep his hands off the wheel as a special edition of KITT rolled via remote control. Or, a small driver hidden in a compartment on the miracle auto's roof would do the actual steering and breaking.

Bruening, who had never worked on a project using the green screen process before, soon learned to focus on a nail in the wall delivering his lines with the whole gamut of emotions. But he felt a bit silly at times while exchanging words with the ultra high-tech, fully air conditioned car as it never answered back.

"It's weird enough when you're sitting in a car that isn't moving but everything else is," laughed the star of the two-hour telefilm (backdoor pilot), already signed if the show goes to series.

KITT's new voice is Val Kilmer's - an actor Bruening has never met as his work is done solo in a recording studio. Will Arnett ("Arrested Development") recorded the entire movie-version until it was discovered he has an endorsement deal with General Motors; the new KITT is a Ford Mustang.

The pride of St. Helena, Neb., pop. 85 or 86, was only three years old when the original "Knight Rider" (1982-86, created by Glen A. Larson) when David Hasselhoff (Michael Knight) eased into the driver seat of KITT - then a T-Top Pontiac Trans Am cruising at 300 mph voiced by William Daniels. The young Hoff, already a big soap star on "The Young & the Restless," played an undercover cop shot in the face rescued by dying millionaire Wilton Knight who willed him the car.

Today, the lanky, 6-foot-3, 28-year-old Bruening plays Michael Traceur, a 23-year-old disillusioned Army Ranger Iraq War vet wasting his time, piling up gambling debts in Las Vegas and probably kicks the dog. He finally becomes a do-gooder when his ex-girlfriend, Sarah (Deanna Russo), shows up on his doorstep with a ridiculous story about her father/KITT inventor, Charles Graitman (Bruce Davison), being kidnapped. Her

automobile listens intently to every word.

A few minutes later, the 6-foot-4, 55-year-old Hasselhoff shows up in a cameo role and presents himself as Michael Knight Sr. to Michael Knight Jr. (who drops his Traceur last name in a flash).

"We had a passing of the torch kind of exchange when my character meets his father for the first time," said Bruening. "I had never met David Hasselhoff and was a huge fan of the original 'Knight Rider' series since I was 5 years old. It was an iconic moment for me when he walked on the set."

A genuine farm boy, Bruening was raised on a dairy farm near St. Helena by his loving grandparents, whom he calls mom and dad (his biological parents are a nurse and a farmer/John Deere mechanic). Eventually, the family dairy business made a transition to crops, mainly corn and soybeans, managed by an uncle.

Shortly after graduating from Wynot High School down the road, a spell along with eight classmates, he gave Nebraska's Chadron State College a shot before moving to San Diego in 1999 - ostensibly for a short visit with relatives. Then he was hired for a three-year stint at a Blockbuster video outlet.

Soon settled in California's sunniest city, Bruening tried to cure a brutal hangover after an all-night birthday party with a cup of coffee at a local McDonald's on his way to work. While clinging to the counter and placing the caffeine order, a woman in line wanted to know if he was interested in modeling.

Honest, he said no.

A legitimate modeling agent, she refused to take no for an answer and paved the way for a well-paid Abercrombie & Fitch catalog layout leading to acting classes. But he didn't quit his Blockbuster job until cast as Jamie Martin on the New York soap "All My Children" from 2003 until 2007. Incidentally, Jamie's father, Tad Martin, was played by veteran actor Michael E. Knight.

Bruening met his wife-to-be, Alexa Havins, on her first day as the shady Babe on "All My Children."

"Jaime met Babe at a party ... they met again in a hotel room," he explained, laughing. "The very next day, it turned out that she was the wife of Jamie's brother, who had been away for quite a while."

"From then on, our on-screen relationship went downhill and our off-screen relationship was all uphill," he continued. "Alexa became my beautiful wife in June, 2005. "With our 'AMC' contracts up last summer, we opted for moving to L.A."

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