

TV Close-Up: Nikolaj Coster-Waldau

by Eirik_Knutzen

Nikolaj Coster-Waldau was nursing his morning cup of coffee on a cold, blustery day last year at his warm and cozy home in a small village on the outskirts of Copenhagen, Denmark, when his London agent called with most excellent news.

NIKOLAJ COSTER-WALDAU - Nikolaj Coster-Waldau plays ace NYPD homicide detective John Amsterdam in the cop drama 'New Amsterdam.' CNS Photo courtesy of Julie Dennis-Brothers. She had just heard that Swedish film director Lasse Hallstrom ("Chocolat," "The Cider House Rules," "What's Eating Gilbert Grape") was casting the lead for "New Amsterdam," an American television series pilot he was set to direct and executive produce. And he apparently thought the handsome Danish actor could fit the bill.

Intrigued, Coster-Waldau asked to see the script, which arrived the next day via messenger. When he put it down a couple of hours later, he was genuinely excited about the prospect of starring in "New Amsterdam" as ace NYPD homicide detective John Amsterdam.

At the age of 366 or so, he has vast experience in criminology and knows every square inch of Manhattan, the densely populated urban center that popped up after his 1642 arrival in the colony of New Amsterdam (now New York City) as a Dutch soldier. Amsterdam is old and wise, but looks forever young because the Native American maiden whose life he saved during a massacre soon returned the favor by casting an ancient spell that conferred immortality upon him.

Coster-Waldau, 37, was on his way from Copenhagen's Kastrup Airport to London's Heathrow Airport in a flash, took a meeting with Hallstrom and his fellow executive producer David Manson, then committed a brief audition to video - which went straight to the production company and network officials in Hollywood.

Within weeks, the new Great Dane reported for work in New York.

Before the writers' strike, there were eight episodes in the can, according to Coster-Waldau.

"With immortality as a blessing or a curse, Amsterdam has to reinvent himself every 20-30 years. To keep his secret, he has to remain ruthless by dumping friends and lovers. The spell can only be broken when he meets his one true love ... then he dies."

Shortly before shooting the first episode of Fox's "New Amsterdam," the lanky actor wrapped production on "The Kautokeino Rebellion" near Tromsø in northern Norway for Norwegian motion picture director Nils Gaup ("Pathfinder"). If the TV series allows the time, he plans to film the Danish feature "At the End of the World" in Australia ("we need a rain forest") in late spring or early summer.

Born and raised along with two older sisters in a small community near Copenhagen, Coster-Waldau's mother was a hardworking librarian who kept it all together while his father "was in between jobs most of the time."

The reason he became an actor is simple: He always loved acting. He learned the finer points of the craft during his four years of training at Denmark's National Theater School - free of charge. All public education is gratis in Denmark, thanks to high income taxes.

In 1992, he made his professional acting debut as Laertes in a stage production of "Hamlet" at the Betty Nansen Theater in Copenhagen, followed by regional theater and starring in his very first movie, a 1994 low-budget Danish thriller titled "Nattevagten" ("Night Watch"). Convinced that he could work in English-language projects, he moved to London in the mid-'90s.

But it took a while, necessitating occasional trips back to Scandinavia for modest movie roles paying well enough to prevent eviction from his one-bedroom London flat.

"I guess the low point was in 1997 when I found myself trapped on a yacht off the coast of South Africa making a sausage commercial for German TV with a very angry, disillusioned American director," he recalled.

"It was gruesome experience because this guy kept yelling at me, 'Just take a ... bite and smile!'" he continued. "I couldn't escape this guy who basically screamed at me for two solid days by jumping overboard because we were in shark-infested waters."

Taking a break, he went home to do a radio play that was set in Greenland. The strapping actor played a pilot who fell in love with a native Greenlander, portrayed by 100 percent Greenlandic actress Nukaka Motzfeldt - a former Miss Greenland from the town of Uummanaq of Inuit and Norwegian extraction. They were married after he shot the American-financed film "Bent" in Scotland and are now the loving parents of daughters Philippa, 7, and Saffina, 4.

"Black Hawk Down" - the U.S.-financed war film set in Somalia and shot almost entirely in Morocco - finally opened the sluice gates for him in terms of English-language films, including "Enigma," "Wimbledon," "Kingdom of Heaven" and "Firewall."

"As luck would have it, I developed a mid-Atlantic English accent," he laughed, "where all well-traveled actors meet."

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