TV Close-Up: Paul Giamatti

by Eirik_Knutzen

Paul Giamatti was intrigued when he received a script the size of Cleveland's phone book for "John Adams" - a seven-hour miniseries - and the word from Executive Producers Tom Hanks and Gary Goetzman that they wanted to retain his services in the title role.

PAUL GIAMATTI - Paul Giamatti portrays Founding Father John Adams in the miniseries 'John Adams.' CNS Photo courtesy of Kent Eanes. A student of history, Giamatti thought the massive project (set for a six-month shoot on the East Coast and parts of Europe) would be a slam-dunk - until he realized that he knew next to nothing about the United States of America's first vice president, second president and father of its sixth president.

Somehow, several of the finest points in the life and times of John Adams had escaped the star of the much-awarded film "Sideways" with an Oscar nod for "Cinderella Man." Within weeks, Giamatti embarked on a six-month journey on a budget in excess of $30 million with more than 50 speaking parts (including fellow Academy Award nominees Laura Linney and Tom Wilkinson).

The 40-year-old actor's immediate task was to sort out the complex character of Adams, the firebrand leader of the American independence movement who helped write the Declaration of Independence.

The sweeping saga - starting with the Boston Massacre in March 1770 and ending with his death at 91 on July 4, 1826 (only a few hours after Thomas Jefferson's demise) - also frames Adams' 54-year romance and rock-solid partnership with his wife, Abigail (Linney), the mother of his four children, plus his chief political rivals Benjamin Franklin (Wilkinson) and Jefferson (Stephen Dillane).

"To be honest, I really knew next to nothing about Adams when the script landed in my lap," said Giamatti, "including that he was one of the creators of the Declaration of Independence and had a famous marriage. In my mind, he was sort of the Boring Founding Father because I didn't know much about him.

"Then I came to a big surprise," he continued, laughing. "I discovered a very human, complicated man constantly in conflict with himself. He had a Puritanical streak, which I believe made him terrified of being vain and arrogant. Yet he was terribly vain and incredibly arrogant. There were times when I almost felt like I was playing (Richard) Nixon - a very intelligent, highly conflicted and difficult person."

"John Adams" was shot at blinding speed under the direction of Tom Hooper from a script by Kirk Ellis and Michelle Ashford based on David McCullough's Pulitzer prize-winning biography of the same title. It was shot during the first half of 2007 in Colonial Williamsburg and Richmond, Va., with Budapest, Hungary, standing in for several European capitals including Paris, London and The Hague.

A fellow New Englander from New Haven, Conn., Yale graduate (BA in English and MFA in Drama) Giamatti feels he had a strong sense and sensibility regarding his Harvard-educated Adams character.

"I felt close to the character, probably because I have lots of relatives in the New England states. What really resonates is our work ethic, something very much in Adams' background."

The son of heavy-duty educators was invited to join the Skull and Bones secret society during his senior year at Yale. His mother, Toni Smith, taught English at the upper-crust Hopkins School and his father, A. Bartlett Giamatti, was a professor of comparative literature at Yale before being elected the august institution's youngest president.

Much to the younger Giamatti's relief, his father had moved on to bigger and better things by the time he graduated from the exclusive Choate Rosemary Hall prep school and enrolled at the venerable Ivy League university.

"My dad was a huge baseball fan, and one day while he was president of Yale he made a crack to somebody that he'd rather be president of the American League," he laughed.

"Somehow it stuck in somebody's mind because when he left education (in 1986), baseball came to him and he was appointed president of the National League. On April 1, 1989, he became the commissioner of Major League Baseball, in time to become Pete Rose's archenemy, but he passed away only five months later."

Always interested in acting, Giamatti went through the Yale School of Drama with the likes of Edward Norton and made his 1991 professional stage debut in an obscure play at New York's La Mama Theater Company, which paid $300 for a four-week run. His brother, Marcus, chose his own path to acting.

His first major screen role was that of Kenny "Pig Vomit" Rushton in Howard Stern's "Private Parts" in 1997, followed by "The Truman Show," "Saving Private Ryan," "The Negotiator" and "American Splendor" over the years. Still a resident of New York's Brooklyn Heights, he prefers the company of his son, Samuel, 6, on days off as his wife, Elizabeth, is often around as a producer of their independent films, including the upcoming "Pretty Bird" and "Cold Souls."

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