

Vivica A. Fox happy to be part of Cougar shift; Ben McKenzie felt compelled to make the move to 'Southland'

by Marilyn Beck & Stacy Jenel Smi

Vivica A. Fox is happy that her April 15-premiering TV Land show, "The Cougar," could add more momentum to the trend toward older women getting romantically involved with younger men. The sexy Vivica, 44, is a self-proclaimed cougar, what with her former relationship with rap star 50 Cent, age 33, and past marriage to singer Christopher Harvest, a.k.a. Sixx Nine, who is five years her junior.

"There are a lot of women who are reaching 40 and are still young at heart and feel really sexy. They want to enter into the dating pool and not necessarily have to go with the guys who are ready to retire," notes Fox. She finds, "You don't get the stares anymore. Other women are now like, 'Oh, does he have a friend?'"

Fox, who hosts the reality show in which a group of men in their twenties pursue 40-year-old Stacey Anderson, adds, "When they announced that I was the host, my office was getting a bunch of phone calls from women saying, 'I'm a cougar! I want to be on the show!' There's definitely an audience out there who are really looking forward to it."

MEANWHILE: Vivica tells us she doesn't miss her ballroom dancing days on "Dancing With the Stars" but she is keeping up with the show.

"They're dropping like flies, which is unfortunate, because it should be fun," says Fox, speaking of this season's rash of contestant injuries. "They're trying to do too much that's way out of their league. It is the type of show where you've got to grow. If you start out doing too much, then the next week they're going to expect more, and you're going to kill yourself to live up to that. If there's one thing I could tell them, it's slow down if the step doesn't work, try to simplify it."

When asked if she ever gets the urge to bust out all the moves she learned on the show, Fox responds, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no. Mama's retired those stiletto shoes. Whew, that was the hardest gig ever. That was even harder than 'Kill Bill.'"

THE VIDEOLAND VIEW: Benjamin McKenzie admits he "wasn't really looking to get back into series work quite so quickly after 'The O.C.'" But getting the script for John Wells' "Southland," premiering Thursday (4/9) in "ER's" old slot, changed his mind. "Everyone on the writing and producing side has won multiple Emmys," notes the 30-year-actor, who goes from playing troubled teen Ryan Atwood for four seasons on his old series, to rookie cop Ben Sherman on his new one. "I knew I was in good hands. I also really responded to the character. I felt I could very easily be this guy," he adds. "Not only is his first name the same, his father is a lawyer. Although my father is a very good, responsible, ethical lawyer and this guy's father is a scumbag."

McKenzie felt, too, that "It's time for a good cop show that's not really following the procedural form. This one is character-driven."

And, he adds, it looks different. "We have these RED digital cameras that allow you to shoot a lot more and do mainly handheld shooting. There's not as much set dressing. We can keep the locations as-is. We've been in L.A. and in the middle of Hollywood. People will wander into the shots â€” not extras. It's something between a really first-rate cop drama and an episode of 'Cops' in terms of having a realistic, gritty feel."

FOR THOSE WHO THINK YOUNG: Garry Marshall has a full agenda, what with two films in active development, the goings on at his Falcon Theatre in Burbank, his occasional on-camera work and various other activities. "I don't fish. I don't sit with a pole and say 'I'm retired,'" says the 74-year-old creative force behind numerous TV shows and films including the "Princess Diaries" movies, "Pretty Woman" and "Runaway Bride. "We keep working and doing stuff. My wife, Barbara, is a nurse, so she keeps an eye on me." Sister Ronnie is producing his stage musical adaptation of "Happy Days" that's been touring the country. The current tour runs into June, "and then we'll do another one," Garry says. "It's very exciting, live theater." And sister Penny may be doing her long-discussed Harlem Globetrotters documentary after all. "She loves sports. I do all the love stories. She does all the sports."

STAR ATHLETE: David James Elliott has been going from project to project with little break in between for most of the past year, but the triathlete and former "Jag" star isn't letting that stop him from taking on physical challenges. Next up: "I'm getting ready to do the Alcatraz Swim," he tells us, referring to this summer's 1.5-mile race from Alcatraz Island to San Francisco's Presidio Park. Next up in terms of Elliott's viewability: his starring role in the Sci Fi Channel's April 19 and 20 "Knights of Bloodsteel" miniseries.

With reports by Emily Feimster.

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