

TV Close-Up: Paul Blackthorne

by Eirik_Knutzen

Killing time on the train from London to visit family and friends in northern England, Paul Blackthorne whipped out the pilot script for "The Dresden Files" for a quick read.

A couple of hours later - having thoroughly digested the screenplay based on Jim Butcher's series of novels featuring professional wizard-low-grade, private eye-small-time Chicago police department consultant Harry Dresden - Blackthorne thought to himself, "Goodness me, that looks like fun."

PAUL BLACKTHORNE - Paul Blackthorne plays a small-time private eye who helps the Chicago police in the thriller 'The Dresden Files.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sci Fi. By the time Blackthorne returned to California - he reportedly divides his time between a Beverly Hills, Calif., flat and a London apartment - his people had helped him obtain meetings and interviews with "Dresden File's" producers and representatives of the Sci-Fi network.

Somewhere along the line, the dark, skinny, 6-foot-3-inch, 37-year-old, relatively unknown actor convinced those higher in the food chain that he could play a credible sorcerer ready and willing to put his mysterious powers to good use. This is not to say that Blackthorne is a true believer in the supernatural realm or a frequent employer of black magic practitioners.

"But, I try not to close my mind to anything," said Blackthorne, who has seen and experienced weird things in exotic locations on the globe - including parts of India and China - during almost his entire life on the road. "I'd say it's a given that we really don't use much of our brains and think that we perceive all there is through our five senses.

"I think there is a lot more going on in a human being than what he or she can see, hear, smell, taste and feel - but what that is, I have no idea," he continued. "It's just reasonable to suggest there is more going on than we think it is. I haven't figured it out yet because I'm working on the meaning of life at the moment. Give me a few minutes."

When not pondering the infinite, Blackthorne is busy in Toronto pretending it is Chicago and having a great time of it. He is perpetually amused by his Harry Dresden character, a somewhat seedy and genuine wizard determined to do his bit in life but not looking to save the world. He could probably do better financially by performing as a magician at children's parties.

The gangly actor has done well since arriving in Hollywood, Calif., to promote "Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India" (2002), a Bollywood feature film that was Oscar-nominated for Best Foreign Language Film. To play the lead, he spent six months learning Hindi for his role as Capt. Andrew Russell before reporting on the set in Gujarat, India. Banging on Los Angeles' studio gates, he soon accumulated an impressive number of TV series pilots, episodic guest shots and recurring roles on "Presidio Med" (Dr. Matt Slingerland), "ER" (Dr. Jeremy Lawson) and "24" (bioterrorist Stephen Saunders).

Although his character was dead - shot by Theresa, the enraged widow of deceased CTU agent Gael Garcia - by the end of the third season of "24" (2003-04), Blackthorne counts the experience as highly meaningful.

"Working with Kiefer Sutherland is a treat for anybody," he said. "Just being in the room with an actor of that stature elevates your game a bit. You tend to grow up a bit."

A British army brat, he was born in Wellington, Shropshire, and raised on military bases all over England and Germany. A strong singer as a child, his mother kept him out of trouble by pressing him into the National Youth Music Theatre in London as a "precocious little kid running around on stage singing party songs in West End musicals and festivals."

Restless and tired of school, Blackthorne took on a slow journey around the world at the age of 21 on a zero budget. His stops included most major cities and points of interest throughout Europe, Asia, Australia and the Americas.

"I still have no idea of how I financed all the travel," he said, laughing, "but it did include bumbling around in restaurants occasionally."

Back in London, the lifelong bachelor and cricket player stumbled into a bit of modeling, took a few acting lessons and made his professional debut as a thespian in a TV commercial for a British supermarket chain. Many lucrative commercials later (including the Grim Reaper campaign for Virgin Atlantic), Blackthorne crossed over to legitimate acting in such modest films as "Romeo Thinks Again" (1998), "The Truth Game" (2001), "Mindcrime" (2003) and the upcoming "Special" (2007).

"Right now, I'm very happy with 'The Dresden Files,'" he said. "What can be better than getting it on with a beautiful detective (Valerie Cruz) and having a neurotic, 500-year-old wizard roommate who knows everything (Terrence Mann)?"

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