TV Close-Up: Robert Knepper

by Eirik_Knutzen

Innocent people often wince when they spot Robert Knepper's craggy face when he drops in for a cheeseburger or shops for underwear. They know that he is only an actor who portrays Theodore "T-Bag" Bagwell - a convicted child molester and murderer on "Prison Break" - but he scares the hell out of them anyway.

Even Knepper had to think twice before taking on the role of a totally warped, violent and inbred criminal with a heartbreaking childhood provided by heartless parents who turned him into a large container of deadly toxic waste.

Incredibly twisted, Mrs. Hollander (K.K. Dodds) - the first woman he ever loved - had no choice but to turn him over turn to law-enforcement authorities.

ROBERT KNEPPER - Robert Knepper, right, seen here with Wentworth Milen, stars in the crime drama 'Prison Break.' CNS Photo courtesy of C. Hodes."A pretty new dad with a 2 1/2-year-old son when I discovered the part, I thought Bagwell was a disgusting human being rotting in jail for raping and killing underage children," he recalled. "But I agree with Robert DeNiro in that it's more exciting to play people making interesting choices in life than none at all.

"Besides, I really needed a job to feed my family after two short seasons on the HBO series 'Carnivale' as (dogged reporter) Tommy Dolan," he continued. "HBO is notorious for its excellent scripts and compelling projects, but they don't pay worth squat - so (money) didn't last long with a new kid."

And Knepper has never been bored for a full minute since taking the mad-dog T-Bag character away from dozens of hopefuls holding SAG cards. For example, after escaping from the Fox River State Penitentiary with all the other freedom-loving inmates, he handcuffed himself to Michael (Wentworth Miller) only to suffer a traumatic separation when Abruzzi (Peter Stormare) cut his left hand off.

After the hand was crudely reattached by a veterinarian, Bagwell felt compelled to chew if off again when he was abandoned while tied to a radiator in an empty house when the cops were closing in. He finally solved the ghastly problem by stealing a prosthetic arm belonging to a highly decorated war veteran.

Although the 47-year-old actor is naturally right-handed, his left hand was chosen for amputation after the writers discovered that he had a shoulder injury sustained in the prison-escape scenes.

"The cons had dug a hole into the guards room - after getting in and out of that hole a few hundred times, I tore a rotator (cuff) or something."

A dedicated performer, Knepper now wears a genuine prosthetic hand made by a Dallas-based company for the close-ups.

"God bless these people ... they made a glove of PVC that unfortunately is exactly the same size as my hand," he moaned. "So when it gets hot the glove tightens up and it feels like boa constrictors wrapped around each of my fingers. I can only wear the thing for 20 minutes at a time."

And it does get hot in Dallas working on the old "Walker, Texas Ranger" sets during the summer, according to Knepper, who suffers more in the extreme heat than the average gloveless actor.

"When its 122 degrees out, being put in the trunk of a car a dozen time is not the happiest of times. I've seen crew members drop in their tracks when it's hot enough to fry an egg on the hood of your car."

Born to a homemaker and a veterinarian in the small community of Fremont, Ohio, Knepper and his younger sister, Kay, were raised in the idyllic Toledo suburb of Maumee.

"It was a fantastic childhood. ... I grew up right along the river, kind of like Tom Sawyer," he said. "I floated down the river on a dead tree I called Wilma.

Early exposure to acting at the Maumee Civic Theater, where his mother was in charge of the props, simply stayed a lifetime. At the age of 9, Knepper joined a children's summer theater program taught by "Mr. Markle, a remarkable man." Once involved, there were few options.

As a young man, he became obsessed with Illinois' famed theater program at Northwestern University, but dropped out sometime during his fourth year to make his professional acting debut in a production of "Ties" at Chicago's Victory Garden Theater.

"I loved working and living in Chicago, where actors went to see each other's plays and drink in the same bars," he recalled.

"The downside to Chicago was that many of their fine actors seemed to stay there forever; I always thought there had to be more to life than that," Knepper continued. "But one of the most exciting periods in my professional life was going back to the city some 20 years later to shoot the first season of 'Prison Break.'"

It was tough breaking into the Hollywood scene in the late '80s, but backed by his wife, Tori, he always knew in which direction he was heading. A recurring role on "The Paper Chase" in 1986 opened the door, which now includes TV credits for "Tour of Duty," "China Beach" and "Murder, She Wrote." His most recent films include "Good Night, and Good Luck," "Hostage" and "Species III."

"But, the wonderful thing now is feedback from fans starting to change their mind about T-Bag," he said. "Somehow they see a spark of humanity in him."

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