

TV Close-Up: Nathan Fillion

by Eirik_Knutzen

"The great thing about friends and relatives is that I don't have to explain the concept of 'Drive' to them - they'll watch simply because I'm in it," said Nathan Fillion, only half-joking. "I tell everybody else that it's about a secret cross-country road race with a prize of \$32 million."

NATHAN FILLION - Nathan Fillion, who gained a following as Capt. Malcolm Reynolds on the sci-fi series 'Firefly,' now plays Alex Tully, a man who enters an illegal race to save his wife in the TV thriller 'Drive.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jeremy Cowart. Fillion - who gained an ardent cult following as Capt. Malcolm Reynolds on the defunct, 14-episode sci-fi series "Firefly" and its low-profile film sequel "Serenity" - now portrays Alex Tully, a moderately successful Nebraska landscaper whose schoolteacher wife has been kidnapped by a mysterious entity who promises her release if he enters "The Race," an illegal, dangerous affair.

Along the way, he meets the other players and discovers that each has a radically different, personal reason for competing in The Race. All are mindful of the rumored \$32 million in cash to be awarded the winner by the inscrutable Mr. Bright (Charles Martin Smith), The Race liaison bearing orders and clues.

"None of us know how it's going to end, or when," said Fillion, 36, only halfway through shooting the first 13 episodes in and around Los Angeles. Tully's fellow racers include Kristin Lehman as a gorgeous stowaway, Wendy Patrakas as a battered wife trying to save her baby, Dylan Barker as a super-straight scientist and Emma Stone as his rebellious teenage daughter.

Before reporting for duty on the "Drive" set just northwest of Los Angeles, Fillion managed to crank out two feature films: the supernatural thriller "White Noise 32: The Light" and the romantic comedy "Waitress" opposite Keri Russell. Both projects are scheduled for release later this year. He also managed a guest shot on "Lost" (one of his favorite TV shows) as Kate's husband.

The handsome Canadian - affectionately known as Capt. Tightpants to his adoring "Firefly" groupies - was born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta, along with one brother. From a family of educators, his parents are now retired high school English teachers and his sibling is the principal of an elementary school. He was only four months from joining them when he dropped out of the University of Alberta.

Until then, acting had just been a lark in terms of elective high school classes and extracurricular activities. Fillion did take part in a few university plays, but found more satisfaction working off-campus with the Rapid Fire Theatre (an improv comedy troupe) and appearing in various venues at Edmonton's annual Fringe Festival.

Fillion was only four months away from earning his education degree when somebody working with the daytime soap "One Life to Live" found one of his audition tapes. Two weeks later, he was living in a tiny, very expensive apartment in New York. In 1997, three years to the day after his arrival in the Big Apple, he moved on to the big dance in Hollywood. A couple of weeks later he was in London filming "Saving Private Ryan" for Steven Spielberg.

Then, his career came to a grinding stop - for a year.

"I couldn't believe it, but I had enough money to keep going for a year," explained Fillion. "That was enough time to fall in love with Los Angeles, where I ran around in perfect weather in my huge 1975 Cadillac El Dorado convertible. Reality finally set in when I had to pay the rent on a credit card and was waiting desperately for my income tax refund. But as soon as I started worrying about money, I got a job on a sitcom."

In all, he spent three years as Johnny Donnelly on "Two Guys, a Girl and a Pizza Place," enough to pay the rent on a large flat in a nice neighborhood or a healthy down payment on a house. It ultimately led to a recurring role in 2003 as Caleb (he had read for the role of Angel, but didn't get it) on "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

It turned out that "Buffy" creator/executive producer Joss Whedon had bigger plans for Fillion, which included starring as Capt. Mal Reynolds (the intrepid leader of rebel space jockeys set some 500 years into the future) on "Firefly." Despite excellent reviews, "Firefly" burned out after a very short life, the victim of a weird time slot on Fox, frequent preemptions and airing most episodes out of order.

"Nothing meshed and people thought the show was canceled long before it was ever canceled," explained Fillion, who is still single after all these years and living in L.A. with a feline named Dirty Cat.

"I was really upset and heartbroken over how the show was treated and pulled. I was very bitter until about two weeks into shooting the film version of 'Serenity.' Although nobody saw it, it turned into the biggest break of my life. Doors opened, and I love going to the Sci Fi conventions where 2,000 people as passionate about the projects as I am laugh at all my crappy jokes."

© Copley News Service