

TV Close-Up: Taylor Handley

by Eirik_Knutzen

Not related to any of the executive producers, Taylor Handley found himself among the members of the ensemble cast of "Hidden Palms" after an exhausting, yet routine, series of auditions - starting with the original casting call, a producer session, a studio test and a network test.

TAYLOR HANDLEY - Taylor Handley stars as Johnny Miller in the coming-of-age drama 'Hidden Palms.' CNS Photo courtesy of Justin Lubin. It's a miracle that anyone gets cast in a Hollywood project - unless they're named Spelling, Spielberg, Lucas, Douglas, Hanks or Baldwin - and nobody is more aware of it than the handful of outsiders who break through the familial bonds occasionally. That includes Handley, who was born and raised in the affluent city of Santa Barbara, Calif., north of Los Angeles.

Only God knows how he eventually wound up with the plum role as part of "Hidden Palms" mostly veteran ensemble cast, but, truth be known, he really doesn't care. Billed as a coming-of-age drama "shrouded in mystery," the one-hour series is dedicated to a close examination of the "surreal city of Palm Springs" as perceived by 17-year-old Johnny Miller (Handley).

Miller - a newcomer to tall palm trees, extreme heat, huge mansions and the endless vista of manicured golf courses - is looking for the meaning of life after a year in alcohol abuse rehab, a problem he developed after watching his father's suicide. The therapy helped some, but didn't ease certain shocks upon release.

The nastiest surprise of all is that the youth's loving, mysterious mother (Gail O'Grady) has already remarried a mysterious man with no visible means of support (D.W. Moffet). Johnny's pain is soothed somewhat when he hooks up again with a girl from rehab, Nikki (Tessa Thompson), falls in love with the town-beauty princess, Greta (Amber Heard), and finds lust in the heart of Tess (Sharon Lawrence), a fading beauty with a penchant for young men and boys.

In March 2006, the entire cast and crew of the midseason replacement "Hidden Palms" assembled to shoot the pilot entirely in and around the festive municipality of Palm Springs, Calif., to rejoice in the perfect weather. It was a perfect gig for Handley, 23, who already knew the area well after attending several Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festivals in a row.

But when the series was picked up for seven more episodes scheduled for a late-spring, early-summer premiere this year, the entire production was moved to Avondale, near Scottsdale, Ariz., with every intention of duplicating Palm Springs. Non-natives in either municipality wouldn't know the difference.

According to producers at Lionsgate Television, "The decision to locate production elsewhere was based on the long-term production infrastructure needs of the series." Which usually means that such a decision was made due to cheaper costs in Arizona.

While waiting for a full-season pickup of "Hidden Palms," Handley hopes to hype a couple of independent feature films - "The Standard" and "Zerophilia" - and shoot a third, "September Dawn." Other recent credits include the movie "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning" and recurring characters on "The O.C." (Oliver Trask) and "Dawson's Creek" (Patrick).

Handley is also the lead singer and guitarist of Nobody's Looking, a band struggling for success, but their new record "Please Help Me Explain Myself" can still be found after much work in esoteric little music shops.

Acting hit him like a rock to the base of his skull while attending a summer camp heavy on performing arts. He took his new creative outlet to school in the opulent area where he grew up near Santa Barbara's Old Mission, then badgered his mother to haul him around Hollywood some 100 miles down the road. On his third audition, he cast with Michael Keaton in the Warner Bros. film "Jack Frost."

Although from a family of entrepreneurs - his older twin brothers once formed a crappy rock band called Porn Star; they created and eventually sold a profitable skateboard and clothing company under the same name - Handley was satisfied with learning how to golf from his father, but (to his mother's relief) showed no inclination toward a career in the real estate business.

Soon after graduating from Santa Barbara High School, Handley moved on to Los Angeles, enrolled at Santa Monica College and began his quest for a measure of fame and lots of money. Totally single ("I don't have time to date anybody"), he spends most of his spare time with such solitary interests as surfing, skateboarding, travel and photography.

"Surfing can be scary because you often get a feeling like something is swimming underneath you and about to bite your leg off," he said, laughing. "The only thing that happened was the board smashing my nose. I just grabbed two sticks off the beach and pinched my nose back together."

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