

TV Close-Up: Harry Dean Stanton

by Eirik_Knutzen

The reason he got involved with "Big Love," according to Harry Dean Stanton, "is that it is controversial, unique and totally different from any other (American) television series, ever. Then I met the writers, who said they were thrilled to have me in their project. That was probably the biggest inducement. ...

HARRY DEAN STANTON - In 'Big Love,' Harry Dean Stanton portrays Roman Grant, the leader of a fundamentalist offshoot in Mormon Utah that condones polygamy. CNS Photo courtesy of HBO. "Well, I got a good deal financially on it, too," he continued, laughing. "I don't get what Jack Nicholson gets, but who does?"

Keeping him in the style to which he is accustomed, Stanton portrays Roman Grant, the greedy, vindictive and manipulative leader of a fundamentalist offshoot in Mormon Utah that condones polygamy.

The rough, tough, craggy-faced, messianic-like Grant is also one of three fathers-in-law of Bill Henrickson (Bill Paxton), an archenemy married to his daughter - Nicki (Chloe Sevigny) - who refuses to share the profits from his successful hone-improvement retail outlets.

Henrickson, blessed with access to an unlimited amount of Viagra, works like a dog to keep his spouses (with seven children between them) happy within the confines of their three adjoining homes in the suburbs of Salt Lake City.

They are vulnerable legally, however, as polygamy was outlawed in the Mormon religion more than 100 years ago and remains illegal in the other 49 states.

Although both appeared in the box-office smash "Twister," Stanton and Paxton didn't meet and become good friends until last year's premiere season of "Big Love." Since then, they've bonded further on an independent

film titled "The Good Life," co-starring and co-produced by Paxton, who also introduced his old friend at Stanton's recent induction in the Cowboy Walk of Fame in Santa Clarita, Calif.

"Frankly, I have eschewed all awards, including the Academy Awards, before this," mused Stanton. "I just never desired any of them ... But the Cowboy Walk of Fame is a little different, honoring lots of movie cowpokes. And as we shoot 'Big Love' right there in Santa Clarita (on the outskirts of L.A.), I wanted to establish as much cooperation and harmony as possible between the township and all the people involved with our production."

Stanton - 81 years young on July 14 - is also considering a number of feature film offers when "Big Love" wraps after 12 episodes this season.

"There are all kinds of things out there, and I've got to pay the rent - plus I want to keep doing it," said the poker-faced actor. "One of them could be a prison story with Tommy Lee Jones set during the 1960s civil rights conflicts in Mississippi."

The sons of a tobacco grower and a housewife, Stanton and his two younger brothers were born in West Irvine, Ky., moved for a time to North Carolina, then trekked back to Kentucky in time for high school. By the time they had settled in Lexington, their parents had divorced and remarried. After a stint in the Navy during World War II, Stanton matriculated at the University of Kentucky without a clear vision of his future. He subsequently changed his major every year, switching from music to journalism and radio announcing. And then he found speech.

"My speech teacher was also the director of the community theater, which was connected to the university," he explained.

Cast in a local production of "Pygmalion," he knew instantly that he was on the right track.

"Acting seemed so natural to me and I went with the line of least resistance. I could do it and knew I was good at it. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't be successful at it."

He dropped out of school with a year to go, winding up in New York for a year doing everything from driving taxis to joining the road company of a children's play.

Finally serious, he made his move to L.A. and signed up for theater training at the Pasadena Playhouse in 1949 - along with other hopefuls, including Gene Hackman and Robert Duvall.

Occasional guest shots on episodics (including "Inner Sanctum" in 1954) made his life easier at times, but it took eight years for Stanton to make a living at his chosen profession. "Tomahawk Trail" was the first of countless Westerns - his screen credits now include "Cool Hand Luke," "The Godfather, Part II," "Alien," "Paris, Texas," "Repo Man," "Pretty in Pink," "The Green Mile," "The Pledge" and "Inland Empire."

Still single after all these years (although his many past girlfriends include Rebecca De Mornay), Stanton lives alone in a modest cottage in one of L.A.'s most expensive tracts of real estate. Between acting jobs, he usually staves off boredom leading the Harry Dean Stanton Band (vocals, guitar and harmonica) at L.A. nightclubs.

"I have an eclectic taste in music that ranges from jazz, salsa, blues, country and rock to folk, bop and pop," he said, laughing. "I recorded the opening vocals in 'Paris, Texas,' but I've never tried to make money at music. I'll just let it happen."

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