

Hollywood, Etc.: Jeffrey Donovan - up from the ranks

by Eirik_Knutzen

"The whole television series business is a strange world where I'm not at a place where people just give me my own TV show," mused Jeffrey Donovan, a good man with 20 years of professional acting experience who finally made his mark as the star of the cult cable cop show "Touch of Evil" (2004).

A BIT BURNED ABOUT IT - Jeffrey Donovan, a spy on the outs with his U.S. handlers, uses his covert training to help others in trouble in the TV thriller 'Burn Notice.' CNS Photo by Jim Fiscus. Unfortunately, "Touch of Evil" - where Donovan played a cop who took a bullet to the head, and spent 10 minutes technically dead before roaring back as a nerve-wrecked slob - was down and out after 13 episodes. Fortunately, the show's producers only had fond memories of his work when they were developing "Burn Notice," the saga of a high-level CIA operative suddenly axed without due cause.

"'Touch of Evil' was my first starring show, gave me lots of insight to the work that goes into carrying a show and validated everything I had worked for," said Donovan, 39. "People were investing millions in my show and millions of people were watching something produced by hundreds of people with families to support. To take such a beautiful gift for granted is a sin."

In terms of "Burn Notice," the bottom line is that Donovan doesn't have to worry about rising from the ranks anymore. "I understood Matt Nix, the writer's tone immediately, then showed the development executives at the USA Network his character's (Michael Westen) dark humor and sarcastic bent.

"I think of 'Burn Notice' as a spy show with humor and every week a high-stakes case involving international players is solved," he explained. The fun started when the intrepid intelligence agent was fired by unknowns within the "Company" through a process known within the spook community as a "burn notice." Rather than a 30-day termination notice and a limp handshake, the agent in disfavor is frozen out of the loop in terms of intercourse with former colleagues, just as he is virtually stripped of his identity as well as bank accounts.

Westen returns to his native Miami to lick his wounds before launching a counterattack against those who burned him.

Hanging out in such Miami neighborhoods as South Beach and Coconut Grove, Westen is surrounded by a motley group of friends and enemies including Madeline (Sharon Gless), his hypochondriac, chain-smoking mess of a mother. The comely Fiona (Gabrielle Anwar) is his hot ex-lover and cold-blooded Irish Republican Army operative; Sam (Bruce Campbell) is a shady former sample of his profession - and only friend. Serious about infusing the spy community with realism as well as amusing stuff, Donovan and Matt Nix are frequently in touch with a "Deep Throat"-type technical adviser within one of the federal government's alphabet soup of covert operative agencies. "I don't know this person's real name, or where he works, but we are in contact through (phone) conversations and e-mails," he explained.

"I don't even know how (the producers) were connected with this guy, someone with an intimate knowledge of field agents like Michael Westen," Donovan continued. "He helped us create a picture of many field agents and their real activities in foreign countries; they have no life at home. I know he's well informed, but if we knew his identity, he wouldn't be a very good spy, would he?"

From Amesbury, Mass., Donovan and his two brothers were born to a housewife and a career military man who did three tours in Vietnam as a radio operator. The class clown at Amesbury High School, he had a knack for impersonations - down to uncanny spoofs on famous singers and actors. As much of the mirth he evoked was in class, he spent a great deal of his spare time in detention.

A kindly, though exasperated, English teacher finally suggested that he take out some of his hyperactivity with an acting summer program at a nearby college. "I immediately discovered that I loved the attention from acting everything out. When I got back, I founded the first drama club in my high school's history."

Revvng up his life, Donovan earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Bridgewater State College before receiving a Masters of Fine Arts sheepskin from New York University's Graduate Acting Program. With summer stock experience in college, his first small job after NYU was a Broadway production of "An Inspector Calls." A part in the microscopic independent film "Throwing Down" (1994) followed.

The dark, stringy, six-footer ("Marital status? Non-applicable") never looked back and takes great pride in the fact that he paid off \$50,000 in student loans within two years of graduation. Between New York stage gigs, Donovan spent a brief part of his life on the daytime soap "Another World" and did countless guest shots before becoming a regular on such fare as "The Beat." Donovan's current independent movie, "Expecting," is about to hit the film festival circuit and will complement his dozen or so big screen credits - including "Sleepers" (1996), "Blair Witch 2" (2000) and "Hitch" (2005). "They all mean something wonderful to me," he said, "but TV, 'Touch of Evil,' changed my life."

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