

TV Close-Up: Bret Harrison

by Eirik_Knutzen

Way back in 2002, Bret Harrison auditioned before producers Michelle Fazekas and Tara Butters on "Law & Order: SVU" for a tiny guest shot as a "basic molestee" named Sam Cavanaugh. It wasn't much by Hollywood standards, but it paid better than being a waiter for the day at a local hamburger emporium.

BRET HARRISON - Bret Harrison is the star of 'Reaper,' a one-hour comedy series revolving around a 22-year-old slacker named Sam Oliver. CNS Photo courtesy of CW. And his agent - or was it his manager? - kept telling his client: "You've gotta do these small things because in the end they may pay off. Who knows? Maybe somebody'll remember you and bring you back in for something bigger."

And that's exactly what happened. But it took five long years before the fib to give a young actor a ray of hope became reality. Auditioned again by Fazekas and Butters - now creators and executive producers of "Reaper" - they cast Harrison, 25, as the star of "Reaper," a one-hour comedy series revolving around a 21-year-old slacker named Sam Oliver.

"Sam's a guy who doesn't know what he wants at this point in his life, lives at home, has a dead-end job at a home-improvement store and is just trying to get by while trying to figure it all out," explained Harrison. "Then he discovered that his parents sold his soul to the devil (Ray Wise) before he was born. Now the devil has forced him to become an unpaid bounty hunter tracking down evil souls who have escaped from Hades and returning them to hell where they belong."

To portray a credible slacker, Harrison claims to draw on the experiences of several friends still trying to find out exactly what they want to do with their lives.

"The funny thing is that I've never experienced something like that," he chuckled, "because I always knew from an early age that I wanted to be an actor. I took part in all the school plays, took private acting lessons from the age of 15 and made my professional screen debut at 17 in a (TV) movie called 'A Separate Path to Glory.'"

The native of Portland, Ore., even dropped out of high school during his senior year (though he soon earned his diploma through a university correspondence course) and drove down to Hollywood in the company of his father. To their credit, his divorced parents - his mother is a special education teacher and administrator in Oregon; his father works as a pharmacist in Florida - did not snuff out the dreams of their teenage son before he got started.

Between waiting tables and scouring Los Angeles for managers, agents and roommates, Harrison managed to nail down a number of low-paying acting jobs - including "Undressed," a micro-budgeted MTV soap opera-type show apparently aimed at sleep-deprived youth. A huge career boost was turning a guest-starring role as Brad O'Keefe on the sitcom "Grounded for Life" into a long-term job as a regular.

He gained additional valuable experience in parts large and small, ranging from guest appearances on "The OC," "That '70s Show" and "Boston Public" with a number of telemovies and feature films, including "Orange County," "Lightning Bug," "Everybody's Doing It" and the upcoming independent "poker flick" with Burt Reynolds, "Deal."

Somehow the short-lived sitcom known as "The Loop" playing a character named Sam Sullivan failed to terminate his career, which is why he is now surrounded by a frenzied phalanx of flacks, hair dressers, makeup artists, wardrobe people and a still photographer prepping him for an intensive publicity photo layout taking place in a normally serene sound stage in Vancouver, British Columbia.

It only took hard work and extreme luck to make it this far, according to the personable and unpretentious actor, who never fails to impress that fact on his actress younger sister, Lyndsay Harrison, as she forages for roles in Los Angeles.

"She knows what I have been through and what is required of anybody trying to break into the acting business," he said. "She's got guts, trying to do it by herself."

Working long hours, Harrison's idea of bliss at the moment is crawling into a warm bed in the wee hours of the morning after the director yells, "It's a wrap!" It's very exciting to be the star of a big-time TV series with a great buzz, but the demands on time and energy are huge. He has already found out that it can take a toll on relationships, including his own with actress/stylist girlfriend Lauren Zelman.

"I'm having a great time (professionally), but making my new home in Vancouver is a lot harder than I thought it would be," he sighed. I have a girlfriend in Los Angeles (and) we're trying to make it all work, but it's very difficult. I went into this with such a positive attitude, but you never know how long this show will go on."

But Harrison has no intention of switching professions in the near future either.

"A couple of weeks ago, I popped out of a sewer and ran after a burning car," he said, laughing. "Yesterday, I didn't do that and it was a lot of fun. What I love about acting, is not knowing. I never want a 9-to-5 job."

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