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# ENTERTAINMENT

## Forest Whitaker Fights Crime On 'Suspect Behavior'

By Frazier Moore  
AP Television Writer

NEW YORK (AP) - Forest Whitaker is one terrific actor. From his start two decades ago in "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," he has logged powerful performances in such films as "Platoon," "Bird," "The Crying Game" and "Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai," and in a season-long arc of the acclaimed TV drama "The Shield." For his portrayal of mad Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in 2006's "The Last King of Scotland," he won an Oscar for best actor.

But do not think of Whitaker as only an actor. Think of him as a student; he does.

"Constantly, constantly," he says in his disarming, feathery voice. "I like to continue to explore."

Now for Whitaker the exploration is continuing on, of all things, a spinoff of the 6-year-old CBS procedural "Criminal Minds."

In "Criminal Minds: Suspect Behavior" (which premiered to a hit-size audience last week and airs Wednesday at 10 p.m. EST, right after its progenitor), Whitaker plays Special Agent Sam Cooper, who heads up an elite team of agents within the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit, charged with capturing the nation's most nefarious criminals (or at least some of the bad guys the other show doesn't nab).

The new CBS series follows a tried-and-true storytelling formula. But Whitaker, who says he signed on early in the development process and helped shape his role, sees "Suspect Behavior" as a character study as much as a procedural.

"My character is trying to uncover light," Whitaker says over diet colas in Manhattan last week. "He feels every person has inside of him a light, and he's stripping away all the things that cover it in shadows so he can get to the source. And from that discovery he hopefully can find a common ground."

That is a lot to expect for anybody, bonding one week with a lowlife who abducts little girls, another week with a psycho who gouges out the eyes of her victim.

But as Sam Cooper says to a



Forest Whitaker

colleague on the show, "You have to know them. Can't be afraid."

And in a future episode, even Cooper himself becomes the perpetrator.

"In a way, at least, I'm put in that position," Whitaker confides. "The writers are confronting the question, 'What are any of us capable of?' If we can get understanding, we can find compassion, and if compassion occurs and grows big enough, theoretically you should find love. That's what I'm really looking for: Where we're all one thing."

With that, he chuckles at himself and his lofty-sounding talk.

In person, the 49-year-old Whitaker does not come across as an actor of kaleidoscopic proportions. At 6 feet and 2 inches, he is more like an oversized teddy bear, with a friendly manner, his distinctive drooping eyelid (he was born with it) and a blinding smile.

Born in Longview, Texas, Whitaker grew up in Los Angeles, where his success in high school

football landed him an athletic scholarship at Cal State Fullerton. Then he transferred to the University of Southern California to study voice on a music scholarship. Then he made the shift to drama.

But along with what he learned in drama classes, he applied knowledge gleaned from martial arts and Eastern philosophy, which he began studying as a youngster.

He cites this lesson he borrowed from the dojo: "You should understand that everything doesn't go in a straight line, that some things go down and up and move around in order to get to a target."

"Of any principle in acting," says Whitaker, "I think of that more than anything else."

Whitaker's dodgy path to discovering a character typically leads him through exhaustive preparation.

"When I start a part, normally, I don't know where to begin," he notes. "And always I figure, I better try to start with the truth. So I find out some information."

To prepare for his role on "Suspect Behavior," he spent time at the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia.

But in the past, such as "Last King," he was known to withdraw into his rigorously created character, on- and off-set throughout a film's production. That is a total-immersion process he is rejecting on the new series.

"At times, I was more of a hermit, kind of socially inept," he explains, adding, "I'm better with people than I used to be," and speaks happily of being part of a family on "Suspect Behavior" that might be together for years. Having wrapped the 13 episodes of its first season, he reports, "I like the cast and the crew and the writers."

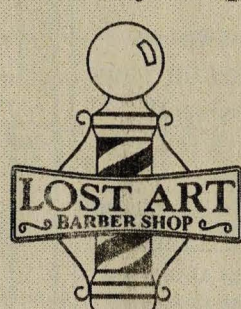
Meanwhile, he has found time within his series commitment to pursue other projects. The director of several films, he aims to do more, and among his credits as producer is "Brick City," a Peabody Award-winning docuseries aired by Sundance Channel focusing on Newark, New Jersey, and that troubled city's charismatic mayor, Cory Booker.

It is all part of Whitaker's devotion to being a student.

"When I was a little kid," he recalls, "I wanted to be an ethologist. I had learned that word for an animal behaviorist and I remember saying to my mom, 'If you really look at people and listen to them, you can discover who they are and where they live and what they've done.'"

"So, in a way, what I'm doing now is pursuing that. I've got the perfect job to keep exploring what I'm interested in."

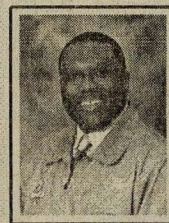
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