

# RED IS THE NEW BLACK

VETERAN ACTOR JAMES SPADER TAKES ON "THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME" IN ONE OF THE MOST ANTICIPATED TV SERIES OF THE YEAR.

WORDS KINDRA COOPER

James Spader (*Boston Legal*; *The Office*) is once again commanding attention on our small screens, this time in the role of, as he puts it, "a very bad guy".

Spader stars in *The Blacklist* as Raymond "Red" Reddington, aka "The Concierge of Crime", who brokers shady deals and leaks classified information among terrorists, corrupt politicians and mobsters. This elusive criminal surprises and perturbs the FBI by turning himself in, with an offer to help capture the "clients" on his "blacklist" in exchange

for immunity – but he will work only with rookie FBI profiler Elizabeth Keen.

"He's definitely a very bad guy, but he seems to have a plan of sorts that maybe might turn out to be righteous – I don't know," Spader said in a telephone interview.

"But there's a strange honesty and truth about him even though he lives in a very nefarious world [...] when dealing with this young woman, Elizabeth Keen, and I'm intrigued by that relationship."

Which means the role has just the kind of complexity that the 53-year-old relishes.

"I like to play characters that are very difficult to pigeonhole, that really have a great deal of conflict in their life and in their character, in their temperament. And this guy is certainly that," said Spader.

The relationship between FBI profiler Liz Keen and Red is unveiled by degrees: after Keen discovers fake passports and a handgun belonging to her husband, she can no longer ignore Red's insinuations that Tom Keen has a shady past. Red's seeming omniscience confers on him even more power when he divulges that he knew Keen's estranged father, hence his insistence on working with her.

A crime show so riddled with relationship drama begs the question: Is the real focus on interpersonal tangos or down-and-dirty crime-solving?

"I think in this show, it's sort of all wrapped up together. I think there's things that Elizabeth Keen will learn about her life that's wrapped up in the world that Raymond Reddington comes from," Spader explained.

"And I think his life experience relates directly to her life – and not just her life in the past, but more importantly, to what her life is in the present and will be in the future."

## Role Play

Throughout his 35-year career – his first major role was in 1981, as the older brother of Brooke Shields' character in *Endless Love* – Spader has hand-picked roles with bite – "dichotomous" characters who, if not outright repulsive, certainly demand contemplation. He claimed particular attention as soft-spoken voyeur Graham Dalton in 1989's *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, who films women discussing their sexuality. The film was archived in the US National Film Registry for its honest depiction, which Spader modestly attributes to "chaotic dumb luck".

Spader subsequently became sought after by casting directors to take on characters with odd fetishes – which seem

to be a recurring theme in the actor's résumé. *Secretary* (2002) explored the dominant-submissive sexual relationship between Spader's character and his secretary, Lee Holloway (Maggie Gyllenhaal). In the psychological thriller *Crash* (1996), Spader's character and his wife attempt to reinvigorate their sex life by deriving pleasure from car crashes, with some critics decrying the film's graphic sexuality and violence.

Spader's latest film, *The Homesman*, co-starring Hilary Swank and Meryl Streep, is in post-production. His next film role is Ultron in the upcoming *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* to be directed by Joss Whedon.

But he has also branched out into theater, having starred in David Mamet's *Race* on Broadway in 2009.

"I think the industry used to be much more compartmentalized," Spader said. "I think that people are spreading themselves out a little bit more and taking advantage of opportunities in all the different mediums." He attributes this shift to what he refers to as a "contracting economy."

But with Red in *The Blacklist*, Spader feels that he has hit on the role of a lifetime.

"I expect to be surprised along the way, because that's the fun of doing a television series in the same way that it's the fun of watching a television series," he said.

"Television can take a left turn very, very quickly and then come back on the road again and then take a very severe right turn. So just as long as I'm maybe two or three steps ahead of the viewer, I feel perfectly comfortable."

The *Blacklist* airs on AXN every Wednesday at 9 p.m.



Photos: Courtesy of AXN

