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Timothy Olyphant: Justifying a character

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Actor Timothy Olyphant seems to have been born wearing the Stetson hat and ambiguous smile of Raylan Givens, the character he portrays in the TV series *Justified*.

The hat is every bit a distinguishing mark as Givens' cocky jibes and out-of-time antics which audiences of cable TV have grown to love.

Olyphant describes the wily Givens as "funny, cool and smart" but insists on this simple premise: "He's just going to work. He's just trying to make a living like everybody else."

Indeed, Givens is no comics superhero. Being quick on the draw is a must for a US Deputy Marshal, particularly in crime-riddled Lexington, Kentucky; However, Givens is undeniably the cream of the police crop, and when he draws his gun, he means to kill.

Givens' almost naive, tunnel-vision pursuit of justice often lands him in sticky patches.

"He fancies himself a bit of a cowboy. He's just one of those guys who were born 100 years to late," explains Olyphant.

This point couldn't be more stark than at the beginning of Season 1, where Givens guns down

cartel drug runner Tommy Bucks in a Miami hotel.

"We're not allowed to shoot on-site anymore and haven't been for, I don't, know a hundred years?" the irate Chief Deputy fumes. Unruffled, Givens quips, "It was justified" – now the character's catch phrase. Givens is transferred to the Lexington Field Office in Kentucky, which, for him, is far from a happy homecoming.

Against the backdrop of his childhood home, the complexities of the character begin to surface. He may be a swashbuckling lawman, but Givens is no insentient Spock.

"With good characters it's about the contradictions – that thing that makes the character complicated," says Olyphant. It's a conflict of emotion with reason and past with present wh he is assigned to investigate Boyd Crowder (Walton Goggins), a childhood friend who now detonates buildings for kicks, and finds himself working in close quarters to ex-wife Winona Hawkins (Natalie Zea).

"Working with Walt [from] take to take, it's different every time. The more we play around w find more possibilities and things start to come to life in unexpected ways," Olyphant told Th Jakarta Post in a telephone interview.

"What's lovely about the job is that I can say the same for many of the cast members on the show; they make it easy."

Over the course of the conversation Olyphant extols his fellow actors. "It's just an incredible group of actors, writers and directors. It was a wealth of talent this season.", and he is most generous in crediting Elmore Leonard, crime novelist and author of *Fire In The Hole* and the short stories that inspired the TV series.

"I really think the world of the guy's work. Something I find very comforting about being in Elmore Leonard story [is that] you feel you're in good hands."

"What's fun is taking this modern cop and having him waltz through life as if he's been born hundred years too late. It just doesn't make sense in this day and age, and yet the story seems to work out for him," says Olyphant. In other words, in the end everything is justified.

Like the character he plays, for Olyphant simplicity is key.

"I'm not too big on getting into the mind of a character. I'm more a proponent of just playing the scene, just figuring out who wants what and what happens if they don't get it," he confides.

"I found that the best way to be is out of your head a little bit. Keeping it simple helps me do that."

Givens' tack is much the same when faced with the sullyng of the family name because of estranged father Arlo Givens' former days of stealing mining equipment in exchange for cocaine.

"He just doesn't know how to compute it all, so like most of those kinds of guys he just move: on."

With regards to *Justified's* increasing global presence, Olyphant is reservedly pleased.

"For the most part people have been very complimentary, very generous. It seems that cable television has really given [screenwriters] the medium to practice their craft."

That modesty has been Olyphant's meal ticket.

"It's so easy to get self-involved and self-conscious in this line of work. The best thing about this show is there's not a lot of drama. Everybody shows up to work, they know their lines ar seem pleased to be there."

Season 3's most notable plot developments are Winona's pregnancy and the formerly bulletproof Givens getting shot, which, Olyphant believes, calls into question "whether he is

still 100 percent.” We have yet to find out.

If variety is the spice of life, then Olyphant’s career is well seasoned. He played psychotic, “Ghostface” mask-wearing college student Mickey Altieri in thriller *Scream 2* (1997), who didn’t so much murder as butcher his victims.

Wielding a hunting knife as casually as a wooden spoon, Olyphant’s eyes turn empty of emotion, and in a voice that wavers with the undertones of insanity, he purrs, “Have you eve felt a knife cut through human flesh and scrape the bone beneath?”

In the game-to-film adaptation of *Hitman* (2007), Olyphant starred as Agent 47, an international assassin working for an underground cult known only as “The Organization”.

Alleged to have been born without a conscience, Agent 47 kills when instructed. It is only when Russian prostitute Nika Boronina (Olga Kurylenko) becomes ensnared in the conspirac that Olyphant begins to lend Agent 47 a human touch by degrees – not an easy feat.

“You’re looking for parts that have dimension, parts that are complicated to give you room to have fun on the job,” Olyphant says of his flavorful career.

In 2004 he was cast in *The Girl Next Door* as a flamboyant porn producer opposite bombshell Elisha Cuthbert, who stars as Danielle, a former porn star.

When asked of the experience, he cheekily concedes, “Well, she looked great and that’s always nice to be around.”

Olyphant said there was no need for him to socialize off-set with Jennifer Garner to strike the sizzling chemistry of the culminating kiss between his character, the freewheeling Fritz and Gray Wheeler in *Catch and Release* (2007).

“I don’t put a lot of stock in that. My wife [Alexis Knief] and I have known Jennifer for a long time and are very fond of her.”

Despite being nominated for an Emmy in 2011 for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series for his performance in *Justified*, Olyphant regards his profession as any other 9-to-5 job.

“For the most part it’s just a lot of hard work [laughs]. The wonderful thing about this job is that when you’re in the thick of it there are endless amounts you can put into it and it’s terrifically rewarding.”

Olyphant – who lives in Westwood, California with wife Alexis Knief, his college sweetheart, and their three children – advises aspiring actors, “Persistence is a big deal”, and that acting is “being truthful under imaginary circumstances”.

– *Photos courtesy of beTV*

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