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Entertainment News

Jesse L. Martin no stranger to Shakespeare

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NEW YORK (AP) - Jesse L. Martin has achieved a fair amount of fame from roles in Broadway's "Rent" and TV's "Law & Order" but he is still awed around Al Pacino. And that includes Al Pacino's lunch.

The "Scarface" and "The Godfather" star was often brought a ridiculously large, overstuffed sandwich during rehearsals for the new Broadway production of "The Merchant of Venice." Pacino generously let his fellow actors help themselves.

"I swear to God, there are probably four or five actors that eventually would get over to that tuna sandwich and take a big chunk and eat it and say, 'I'm eating Al's sandwich! This is Al's sandwich! He said we could have it,'" Martin says, laughing. "We get a little geeked out that we get to eat Al Pacino's sandwich."

Martin, who is quick to smile and looks jaunty in a flat cap and jeans during an interview, has been enjoying life since he ended his nine-year stint as Detective Ed Green on "Law & Order," in 2008. He's spent time in South Africa for a TV show, done an upcoming indie film in Texas called "Puncture" and performed Shakespeare in the Park. He doesn't regret leaving behind his gold shield.

"As interesting as you can be and as hard as you can work, it starts to feel the same after a while. So I knew full well that if I didn't get out of that position and get back on stage or explore other roles, I'd be really hurting myself. I'd be really dimming myself as an actor," he says.

The chance to do Shakespeare represents a coming home in many ways for Martin, who got hooked on the Bard while growing up in Buffalo, N.Y. In exchange for acting classes at the University of Buffalo, Martin spent his summers as a teen building sets and hanging lights for the city's own Shakespeare in the Park program.

"Somehow, I don't know how or why, but I completely fell in love with Shakespeare. It was like this code," he says. "Once the code started to reveal itself, it got really, really exciting."

So Martin, 40, leapt at the chance this summer to do two Shakespeare plays in repertoire for the Public Theater in New York's Central Park - "Winter's Tale" and "The Merchant of Venice." Reviews were so good for "Merchant" that producers decided to mount it this month in a Broadway theater.

Martin plays Graciano, a "philosophizing rogue" who becomes a vocal critic of the merchant, played by Pacino. "He's one of those guys who'd rather have a drink than be serious, who would rather laugh than not. He spends a lot of time getting encouraged and reprimanded at the same time," says Martin.

Daniel Sullivan, who directs the play, credits Martin with happily incorporating himself into the new cast. "He's extraordinarily full of life," Sullivan says. "People respond to him very much on a sort of instinctive level. He comes extraordinarily prepared. He makes very strong choices from the very beginning. He's always very alive and improvisational on stage. He's just a wonderful Shakespearean actor."

Many people might not be aware of that, since Martin is known more for playing the gay computer geek Tom Collins in "Rent," both on stage and in the 2005 film version, or the sharp-dressed Green tracking down criminals on TV.

While in South Africa filming the now-canceled "The Philanthropist" for NBC, Martin was wandering around Cape Town, thinking he'd escaped into anonymity. He never expected that one of his shows would be on the air there.

"I was walking down the street one day and a young Xhosa boy came up to me and he was like, 'You are Detective Green.' I said, 'You watch "Law & Order"?' He said, 'Everybody watches "Law & Order." We don't have our own cop shows so we're going to watch this,'" recalls Martin. "I was just blown away."

The residual checks aren't too bad either, especially after marathon reruns. "It's like the gift that keeps giving," he says. Can those checks add up to much money? "You'd make enough if you've done as many as I have," he replies.

That "Law & Order" gig almost never happened. Martin says he auditioned as a guest star for the show 13 times. He finally got one - a car radio thief with no more than four lines - but balked.

"It was so small and I was scared that if I took that role I wouldn't be able to be on that show again for another year or two. So I didn't take it," he recalls. "I don't know who I thought I was! I was totally broke as an actor, needed all the exposure I could possibly get. ... But it turned out well because I ended up getting The Role."

These days, though, the actor says he's not willing to wait for parts to come his way. He wants to generate his own.

"The older you get, the more you realize you don't want to just sit around and wait for someone to call you. In my 20s, that's the way it was. Even in my 30s it was kind of that way, but I did have a solid job at the time so I didn't really worry that way," he says.

"But now I can't really sit around waiting for someone to call me or for L.A. to bring me up to the big leagues. Now it's going to be about creating things for me to do."

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