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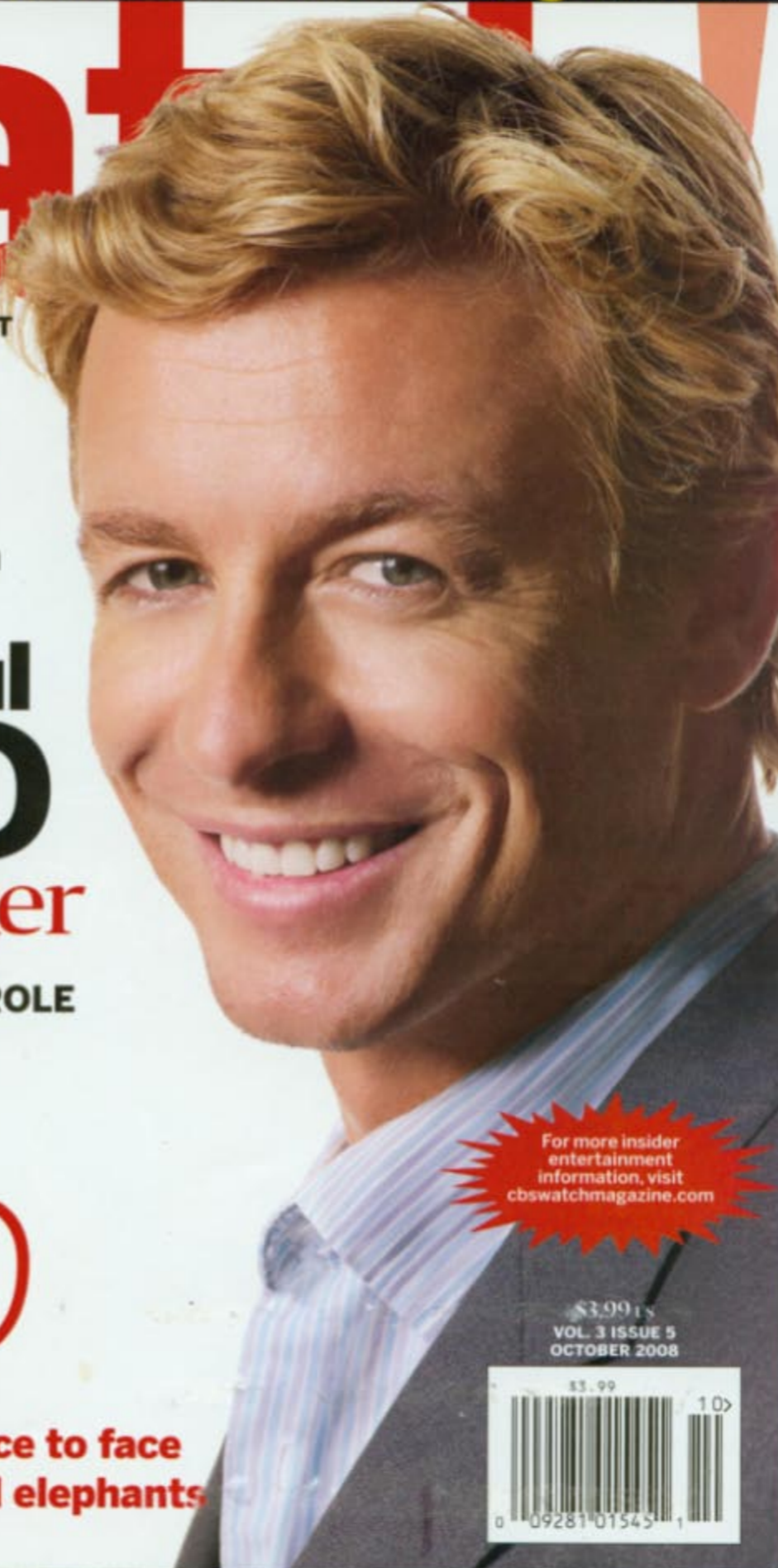
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Simon Baker

FROM *THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA* TO A STARRING ROLE AS *THE MENTALIST*

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MIND AND MATTER

**AUSSIE ACTOR SIMON BAKER EXERCISES HIS
POWERS OF OBSERVATION AS *THE MENTALIST***

BY JIM COLUCCI

DDressed in a broken-in button-down with a blue cap shading brown, horn-rimmed specs, Simon Baker, star of CBS' new prime-time show *The Mentalist*, settles into a corner booth at the Coast Bar in Santa Monica's Shutters hotel. In the picture window behind him, in-line skaters dart by on a surfside path, the blue of the Pacific shimmering beyond. It's a familiar setting for this actor with the blond, beach-boy good looks.

Raised in the Australian state of New South Wales—at the country's easternmost point and surrounded by sea, he notes—Baker seemed destined to surf. And for Aussie actors, custom seems to demand a stint in Hollywood, where Baker is part of this generation's wildly successful bumper crop from Down Under. Like many of his countrymen, Baker has spent his 12 years in the United States playing exclusively American characters and has by now become accustomed to the hard R's that make one sound more Melbourne, Fla., than Melbourne, Australia. Yet today, in his real, everyday life, his order—which comes with a bright smile for the waitress, revealing the finest, most endearing of lines around piercing blue eyes—is delivered with an accent that's flavored with some serious shrimp-on-the-barbie. As he asks for water, the “a” in “sparkling” is, ironically, flat. “I haven't consciously changed the way I talk in everyday life,” the soft-spoken actor explains. “I have no problem playing an American, and I feel like I've been here for long enough now that I think I'm starting to kind of understand them. But I just can't answer the phone in my own home with an American accent, because I'd feel like a wanker.”

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

For Baker, success in Hollywood came quickly. During his first year, he landed a role in a CBS pilot. Although it never proceeded to series, it did bring the actor to the attention of network president Les Moonves and other powers-that-be who would ultimately shape his future. But with the recognition and work came a price: homesickness. "I spent a lot of years living here wanting to move back," Baker admits. "I didn't want to let go of my past in Australia." He longed to bring up his children—Stella, now 14; Claude, 9; and Harry, 7—in the land where he had been raised by his housewife mother and butcher stepfather in a big, blended, blue-collar family, he says.

And so, three years ago, Baker and wife Rebecca packed up the brood and headed back home. By then, his big-screen career had taken off. For just one film alone, *The Devil Wears Prada*, he flew around the world five times, reporting to sets in Los Angeles, New York and Paris. But all that global crisscrossing was nothing compared with the exhausting schedule Baker had encountered on his previous job, the title role on the 2001–04 CBS series *The Guardian*.

TELEVISION BECKONS

"I felt very proud of *The Guardian* when it first started," Baker says. "I thought my character was a really interesting antihero." But the starring role of Nick Fallin, a corporate attorney sentenced to community service work

with a child-protection agency, was, he remembers, a "hard, heavy role" with even heavier time requirements for a family man with a then-pregnant wife and a young baby. Ultimately, Baker theorizes, *The Guardian* ended after only three seasons partly because, although it had been conceived as a character-based drama with a serialized story line, the show tried to morph into something more procedural, with more "standalone" episodes. "It had a foot in both camps," he says, "but it didn't really commit to either."

Following the move to Australia, Baker became intent on concentrating solely on film projects, happy to avoid working TV's common 18-hour days. Still, at the beginning of every year post-*Guardian*,

during pilot season, he continued to receive a stack of scripts for hopeful new U.S. series. In 2006, that stack contained the pilot script for what would become one of CBS' new drama series that year. *Smith* was about a gang of professional thieves, and Baker says he remembers thinking that *Smith*'s ensemble cast, packed with big-name movie stars like Ray Liotta and Virginia Madsen, would afford him less screen time and, thus, shorter hours. Plus, it constituted "an interesting approach to a television show. I didn't know how it was going to work, but I'm very much drawn in my career—perhaps to my detriment—to things that seem to be a bit of a risk or a challenge. So I was definitely willing to go along for the

ride," Baker says. Willing, that is, only after negotiating a deal, highly unusual for television, committing him to only one season.

A RETURN TO FORM

That fall, *Smith* was canceled after airing only three episodes. Still, the experience was positive enough that it made the Bakers long for the life they'd left in L.A. And so, after only seven months away, they moved back, but with a new plan: Simon would take time off from acting to spend time with the kids and work on the house. He loves to work with his hands, he says, building, taking apart, rebuilding.

After a year, Baker got a job offer he says he just couldn't refuse. One of his idols, film director Martin Scorsese, would be lensing a 10-minute ad for Freixenet cava wine, to run solely in cinemas in Spain. The commercial spot, a mockumentary about supposedly recovered "lost" pages from a never-before-known Alfred Hitchcock script, called for Baker to slick back his hair, Cary Grant style. Currently viewable on YouTube, this homage to Hitch shows the actor, nattily attired, sneaking his way past enemy agents at Carnegie Hall, winning over a beautiful blonde—and clearly having fun. "I just love Marty—he's such a great, inspirational teacher," Baker says. "So as interested as I was about filmmaking, he was enthusiastic about teaching me." The actor says he then decided to return to work full time, because "I realized, when I was on that set, [acting] is what I love doing."

Before his self-imposed hiatus, Baker's big screen career had been building up steam. But he had begun to feel creatively limited as he fell into an ever-widening gulf in the film biz. Movies these days, he found, tend to fall into two categories: big-budget blockbusters for which large studios might hire him to play merely a "sixth-tier character" without much dimension, or truly low-budget indies.

The latter definitely afford the chance to play juicier roles, Baker says—even if the lower paycheck does constitute a "rolling of the dice" for a father with three kids to support. "Even when I was playing a sport as a kid—surfing, rugby league, water polo, touch football or table tennis—I always wanted to play someone who was better than me. As an actor, I thrive when I'm working with people and material which are better than me." In independent film, he says, "more often than not, you are the most experienced person on the set."

A READING OF THE MENTALIST

And so when two TV scripts arrived via Australia Post this past March—the Bakers were again home visiting family—the actor was now slightly less reluctant to open the envelopes. Both pilots had been recommended by his agents, but he read them, he says, solely out of loyalty to CBS and to Moonves, whom he credits as one of his strongest careerlong supporters.

As is their custom, the actor and his wife sat in bed with the two scripts, with Rebecca getting first crack at *The Mentalist* by Bruno Heller, the creator of HBO's critically acclaimed series *Rome*. "After reading the opening teaser, she kept commenting on how *The Mentalist* was really, really well written," Baker says.

His interest definitely piqued—"I quite liked the script, which I thought was clean and sharp," he recalls—the actor agreed to a phone call with Heller, an Englishman

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Lance Stedler/CBS



with "a good sense of self-deprecation, which I also carry on my sleeve, so I clicked with him straightaway." Soon thereafter, Baker was on a plane to Los Angeles, to arrive only three days before the start of shooting his lead role. En route, he says, he was still wondering, "What am I doing?"

THE MINDSET OF A MENTALIST

For an actor who likes a challenge, the first obvious one was, "What exactly is a mentalist?" Mentalism, as Baker has discovered, is an ancient set of techniques for glean- ing information from, or "reading," others. But unlike the so-called supernatural work of psychics, "90 percent of whom are phony-baloney," the actor says, mentalism is purely a trade, a study of some specific techniques. "There are elements of mentalism in many other occupa- tions" that require reading the intentions and body language of others, Baker has learned, "like sales." And, of course, acting. And so, for a performer always so intent on observing the jobs of others on the set—"I do enjoy acting, but I can't help but want to learn and see more," he explains—the character of Patrick Jane, a former fake psychic who now uses his skills of observation as an independent consultant working with the police, ended up being a perfect fit.

YES, BUT CAN HE SMILE?

On the morning of Wednesday, May 14, CBS' top executives unveiled the network's fall lineup at a press breakfast for critics. Having seen *The Guardian*, one female writer wanted to know, "This time, will Simon smile?" It was an oddly phrased question, but hearing it now, Baker knows just what she means. Whereas *The Guardian* slogged about with a somewhat "turgid" tone, he says, *The Mentalist*, even as its pilot reveals a dark back story for Patrick Jane, already has

more moments of lightness and fun. "He won't let his own personal tragedy defeat him. He still has a kind of lust for life," the actor explains. "It was very important to me to have a multifaceted character like that. It's more interesting to play because I don't always have to be in the heavy doldrums."

Jane will certainly have his emotional baggage, Baker says, but there's still a mischievous quality to him, where his eyes can't help but light up with a childlike appreciation of a mentalist's magic. In fact, it's Baker's own playful quality that first attracted Heller to casting him. "I had seen *The Guardian* and various bits of Simon's movie career and had noticed that even in roles that weren't quite right, he always popped and held your attention, with a sort of light about him," *The Mentalist* creator says. "I think we're bringing out a side of Simon which people perhaps haven't seen enough of in the past. And I think they'll be surprised and pleased by the kind of sunshine he brings."

Following the writers' strike of last winter, Heller notes, *The Mentalist* came together exceedingly fast. The process of producing the pilot and ascribing quirks and characteristics to its lead character, he and Baker agree, was extremely collaborative. "The character depended quite a bit on casting and so was never 100 percent there on the page," the writer explains. "What Simon brought in spades was an ability to be witty and humor- ous and arrogant and clever. He can be very open and giving, but also quite mysterious. He has the ability to fix people's attention on him and then, without being antic or overdramatic, hold them. That part of his charm is now a big part of *The Mentalist's* charm as well."

THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Without Baker, there would have been "very few people who fit the character, a cross between Cary Grant and Robert Downey Jr.," Heller explains, in yet a second comparison of his star to the screen legend. But will Baker's Patrick Jane be as dapper, to play up his own physical attributes? The question makes the actor squirm. "You're asking me to comment on my appeal to women?" he says, clearly embarrassed. "Ask Nina Tassler."

"Let's just say he's aging gracefully," the network president responds. "He's a genuine, authentic person, and that comes through. I think that's what women respond to. He has a sense of whimsy and a twinkle in his eye, but never at the expense of the humanity and soulfulness of his characters."

And the admiration, it seems, is mutual. At CBS, Baker says he finally feels that, both emotionally and physically, he's in the right place at the right time. "I feel incredibly privileged, because I know I couldn't do a film where I'd get to play a character as much fun as Patrick Jane," he says. A fan since childhood of procedurals like *Columbo* and *Quincy*, with their strong lead characters, Baker confesses that "this is the first time I've ever done something where, when I saw the pilot, I was excited to see more." Still, he's too modest, he admits, to go on the talk show circuit and say outright, "Watch this show!"

"That's one thing that's been hard for me to get used to in America," the actor realizes. "People say, 'You need to sell yourself a bit more.' It's been a difficult thing for me to struggle with." But, he adds, he hopes—and dares to be even somewhat confident—that he'll have at least five years with *The Mentalist* to work it all out. ■

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