

Living in New York City in 2005, C.S. Lee was “scratching to stay alive,” as he puts it. He was performing in free theater and wasn’t sure how he would pay next month’s rent. A handful of TV and film work barely kept him afloat while his mother urged him to find a job other than acting.

Then a pilot script about a forensics blood splatter analyst by day and serial killer by night landed in Lee’s hands. “Based on the script alone, I thought it was very good. It was a smart script,” says Lee. “Little did I know that three years later it would come this far.”

In the hit Showtime series *Dexter*, now in its third season, Lee plays Vincent Masuka, a fellow forensics lab buddy of the title character, Dexter Morgan, a charming serial killer. Based on the book *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay, the show sets out to capture the psychology of a serial killer with a con-

who plays Debra Morgan, Dexter’s sister and fellow cop, trained at Juilliard. With such a pool of acting talent, Lee says that working together is easy. “We come prepared to do the work,” he says.

While the cast is often surrounded by dark storylines and macabre sets, the grim subject matter is counterbalanced during off-moments on the set. “We keep it light on the show and joke around. Obviously when we’re shooting a heavy scene we tend to stay secluded and get the work done first. But we all have a good time,” says Lee.

Though he doesn’t consider himself a comedic actor, Lee’s turn as Masuka has shown off his talent for comedy. “I don’t play it for laughs,” he says. “[Masuka] has a certain interest in certain fields that appear funny to the audience, but in my mind some people have quirky interests.”

Killer Instincts

Not addicted to *Dexter* yet? Sure, the charming serial killer is a good enough reason to watch, but wait till you get a load of his snarky, witty, womanizing colleague, courtesy of actor C.S. Lee.

STORY Jennifer Chen
 PHOTO David C Lee, perlee.tv GROOMING Samuel Paul

science. When Lee first started on the show, he struggled with who Masuka was “simply because [he] wanted to find [his] own character.” Lee spent time discussing his character with the show’s director and writers and then developed the character on his own.

The wickedly funny, womanizing Masuka is a far cry from Lee and his blue-collar hometown of Vancouver, Wash. Raised in an all-white community, Lee admits he barely had any Asian friends. He played high school football and then started acting in school productions, eventually earning a full scholarship to Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, Wash. A dedicated actor with a passion for film, Lee continued his studies at the prestigious Yale School of Drama, earning his master’s in acting. Known for its esteemed alum like Meryl Streep, John Turturro and Angela Bassett, Yale was “constant work from day one,” says Lee. “I remember every day being so tired. I would be involved in up to three shows at a time. In Yale cabaret, we put up a play in a weekend.” The hard work paid off for Lee who says that he “learned the majority of [his] acting chops there.”

Joining the cast of *Dexter*, Lee found himself among fellow classically trained actors. Michael C. Hall, who plays Dexter, has a theater background and Jennifer Carpenter,

In fact, Lee’s work in *Dexter* got him noticed by NBC and he landed the role of the pushy, controlling Harry Tang on the network’s hit *Chuck* in 2007. Harry is the assistant manager at a computer store where Chuck works; Chuck is a computer geek who fortuitously ends up as a secret government spy. Harkening back to his Yale days, Lee performed double duty during that time, racing from the Warner Brothers lot after shooting *Chuck* to the set of *Dexter*, a scheduling nightmare for Lee as scenes had to be switched around to accommodate his dual roles. Eventually, he ended his stint on *Chuck* to focus on *Dexter*, but fans needn’t worry that it’s the end of Tang. According to the storyline, when Harry starts to discover Chuck’s secret, he gets relocated to Hawaii to manage a pineapple plant. “Harry’s just in Hawaii on assignment so hopefully you might see him in the near future,” says Lee.

With what little free time Lee had left, he managed to land roles in two upcoming films, *The Unborn* with Gary Oldman, set for release on January 9, 2009, and *Tenderness* with Russell Crowe. In each film, Lee plays non-Asian-specific characters. Lee stresses the importance of playing roles in which race is not specified because “there’s not that many parts written for Asian American males,” he says. “Sometimes it’s easier to be an Asian American female actress because there’s a sex appeal, whereas



“Asian American males are still in a neutral cardboard state. Hopefully that will change.”

— C.S. Lee on roles for Asian American male actors

Asian American males are still in a neutral cardboard state. Hopefully that will change.”

It was a race relations lesson Lee learned when he first moved to New York City after graduating from Yale. “It was a foreign thing to me to be hanging out with people like me. And my first year in New York I was meeting all different types of Asian people,” says Lee. His work in New York theater for eight years exposed him to a whole community of Asian American artists as well. He acted with the National Asian American Theatre Company founded by Mia Katigbak, which performs theater classics like *Antigone* and *Othello* with an entirely Asian American cast. “To be able to do masterpieces with an Asian cast is amazing,” Lee gushes.

But Lee is not putting all his professional eggs in the acting basket. In fact, before he committed to acting at Cornish, Lee was set to attend undergrad at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts for film. His passion for film started in high school when he immersed himself in art house films. “These films helped me understand society, family values and issues,” he says. “If I could make a film to bridge the gap between people that I’ve grown up with ... it would be a great way to help people realize that in the end, we’re the same.” Lee has already directed several short films, one of which, *Crumple*, even won a best film award in 2005 at the

First Annual 64-Hour Film Shootout in New York, and he hopes to direct more films in the future.

But for now, Lee is enjoying his life in the artsy Los Angeles neighborhood of Los Feliz, and has even taken up golf. “It must be the Korean blood in me,” he jokes. “I find golf incredibly addictive.”

With season three of *Dexter* well on its way, Lee is keeping mum about plot points. He says that the third season will be one of their best, with a few writers from the *The Shield* joining the writing team. “We have a tremendous amount of talent in the writing department. The scripts I’ve seen are great. I can’t wait to see how it plays out,” he says.

Lee does let a couple tidbits drop. Apparently, veteran actor Jimmy Smits will be joining the cast as a recurring character, upping the name value of the credits. And Lee reveals that audiences will see another side of Masuka — more than just his womanizing, smart-aleky ways. When asked about Masuka’s unrequited love for Dexter’s sister, notorious for dating bad boys including a serial killer, Lee says, “Jennifer and I always joke that when the series ends our characters will end up getting married. She has to go through all the bad guys first.”

The funny, snarky Asian guy getting the girl? Certainly a good enough reason to watch. ❀