



EXPOSITION MAN

Joel de la Fuente is busy explaining it all
In Space: *Above & Beyond*.

By BILL FLORENCE

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He may be new to recurring-character status on a prime-time TV series, but actor Joel de la Fuente is *not* new to hard work.

At least, not anymore.

Fox's SF-adventure series *Space: Above and Beyond* has put de la Fuente through his paces in its premiere season. As Paul Wang, a soldier and fighter pilot in the Marine Corps'

58th squadron, de la Fuente spends a great deal of time running, crawling through mud and water, and fending off a mysterious alien race alongside his squadron cohorts.

Small wonder, then, that de la Fuente finds himself pushing this interview back later and later in the evening. The work days on the *Space* set run long—14- and 15-hour days are not uncommon—and today, set-ups in dusty underground tunnels prove especially challenging. By 10 p.m., the previously announced shut-down time, the cast and crew find themselves well behind schedule. It's nearly midnight before de la Fuente can finally talk about *Space*.

"I auditioned in New York," he explains. "I was a New York resident at the time. Then, I flew out to LA for a screen test." He soon found he had come to stay: James Wong and Glen Morgan, creators and producers of *Space*, gave him the role.

"At that point, I wasn't familiar with *The X-Files*," admits de la Fuente. "I watched my first episode when I got the audition for *Space*, and I watched just about all the Morgan/Wong-written episodes when we were in Australia shooting the *Space* pilot. They had brought their entire library [of *X-Files* shows] with them. The other actors and I spent all our free afternoons and late nights watching *The X-Files*, and we talked about the episodes vociferously. We became dedicated fans.

"This was definitely *not* Jim's or Glen's idea," he hastens to add of his praise. "Those guys are great; they're so unassuming. They never toot their own horn, and I think they haven't been given credit for some of the things they contributed to *The X-Files*."

Battle Fatigues

Reflecting on his *Space* character, de la Fuente says he's pleased that, little by little,

Paul Wang is becoming multi-dimensional—although some backstory revelations have been snipped from overlong scripts. "One thing that's starting to get a little clearer is that Wang comes from an underprivileged background," the actor offers. "That's not necessarily obvious in his personality, but his family didn't have money when he was growing up. He was raised in a very bad neighborhood. There have been segments of this in scripts that were cut, small things here and there. And, the main reason Wang joined the Marines was to get away. He didn't join out of any particular interest in the Marines."

In early shows, Wang was a lighter, more comic character than he has been of late. Episodes like "The Enemy," in which the heroes are subjected to an alien fear-enhancing weapon, and "To Die For," in which Wang is tortured at an alien prison run by Artificial Intelligence (AI) beings, started Wang down a darker path.

"The producers want to explore the grimmer elements of the war situation," says de la

BILL FLORENCE, veteran STARLOG correspondent, previewed *The Tomorrow Man* in issue #226.

Fuente. "That's why we did the torture scene, the aftermath of which will be dealt with later. It will be good for my character."

Wang's confession tape, filmed after the AI named Elroy (Doug Hutchison) appears to have broken him, will resurface later. The actor explains further: "There has been a huge focus on military drama in *Space*. The World War II genre is the single biggest influence for our show. What often happens, especially with Shane [Kristen Cloke], Cooper [Rodney Rowland] and Nathan [Morgan Weisser], who tend to be extremely heroic and mythic figures, is that the mortality of youth in war is lost. Glen and Jim wanted to make clear with the torture scenario that war is ugly; it's very real, and that torture is an awful thing which happens in war. We're going to explore the ramifications of that and the residual effects it has on people."

The torture scene was perhaps de la Fuente's finest hour yet on the show. Difficult as it was to create a scene of such personal and emotional pain, he admits it's just the kind of opportunity an actor relishes. His

torture: to engage the victim emotionally and verbally. So for Wang, it's all about reaction and a silent resistance. Any time he engages Elroy verbally, he's losing. If you start to engage the torturer in conversation, you're giving up your most important form of resistance. You're already on your way out."

Wang has not only grown more serious in recent episodes, he has also become the cast's chief expositor. "We have a little nickname for me on the set now: 'Exposition Man,'" he chuckles. "Recently, there was a monologue I had to deliver about a reference to something in our [characters'] past, and when I started to give this monologue, the cast began singing 'Exposition Man.' It seems I've assumed the role of fleshing out the show's expository elements, which I like

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notes with considerable irony. "None of it is real to begin with! Glen and Jim are trying to keep the techno-science simple. The primary focus of *Space* is relationships."

Personnel Rosters

Various episodes have revealed that Wang is a Chicago sports fan, a trait that comes straight from the actor. De la Fuente was born in New Hartford, New York, but a year later his family moved to Chicago, where he was raised. "When we came back from shooting the pilot and were getting ready to shoot the series, Wang was suddenly a huge Chicago sports fan, which came out of conversations Jim, Glen and I had about sports while in Australia. They're both San Diego Charger fans, and I'm a Chicago Bears fan...and a Cubs and a Bulls fan as well."

As *Space* progresses, de la Fuente has noticed what he calls a "synthesis of our personalities with the characters," though he's not sure whether the characters are becoming more like the actors or vice versa. "There are interesting things happening to us as a group of actors," he asserts. "That's exciting, because the relationships between the characters are truly the show's most important element. It's true that there's a focus on the hardware and the special FX. But we feel those elements work best when the character relationships work well. The FX come out of the story; they're not just a pyrotechnic display of what Area 51 [the show's FX company] can do—and they can do amazing things."

Of each of his fellow cast members, de la Fuente expresses the highest regard. "We're all from different backgrounds and we're pretty different as people, but we've all become good friends, and much of that has to do with all the time we spent together in Australia. We are unified in the idea of working toward an ensemble feel."

"Morgan [Weisser] is great. He's entering an interesting time on the show, because for the first time, we're starting to see a side of Nathan West that's not directly linked to his girl friend, Kylan. It was a challenge for Nathan to play the role of the lover. That's a difficult part to play, and in some ways a thankless role, but he has done a really good job. Now, Nathan's moving past that and into a full life with the Marines. People are seeing different sides of Nathan, starting with 'Stay With the Dead.' It was a great vehicle for him and he was fantastic in it."

Cloke (STARLOG #224) "plays the honcho on the show, and in many ways, she's similar to her character," de la Fuente comments. "She's very maternal toward the rest of us. She's caring and giving."

Playing Cooper Hawkes is Rodney Rowland (EXPLORER #11), whom de la Fuente says is as unpredictable as his character. "He's a wild cannon. You don't know what he might do next, but when he does it, there's



Photo: Andrew Semel

"My role on the show is to serve the show," states *Space: Above and Beyond's* Joel de la Fuente, who knows that his character may some day fall in battle.

off-screen relationship with Hutchison (who, incidentally, terrified fans of *The X-Files* with his creepy portrayal of Tooms) helped him push the scene to the limit. "I'm really pleased with the way it came out. We shot all those scenes over the course of *one* day, and we shot them pretty much in order, which helped. In some ways, it was the most fun I've had working on *Space* since we started, mainly because it was such a pleasure to work with Doug. We had a good chemistry going, a trust between us. So, we played around with the material and the director was interested in trying different things, too. The trust element helped us go to a place that would have been harder to get to otherwise."

"Of course, the torturer does all the talking," explains de la Fuente. "That's a tactic in

doing. It's good because it gives something to the character. Wang does know a lot about history and literature. Take the AI wars, for instance. Wang will talk forever about that."

Along with exposition comes technical and pseudo-scientific jargon, most of which is falling to de la Fuente. Fortunately for him, *Space* tends to stay away from extensive technobabble. "Dampousse [Lanei Chapman] gets some of it too, and so does McQueen [James Morrison] when he tells us what to do on a mission," de la Fuente notes. "But there isn't really that much."

"Some people have criticized the show, saying its science and technical stuff doesn't make much sense to the layman physicists out there. They say it doesn't adhere to the physics established by other SF shows," he

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such genuine honesty behind it that you know where he's coming from. So even if it's a situation where you don't agree with him, you totally understand him. Rodney's wild side really complements the work we do together. He also brings out a younger side to all of us."

De la Fuente calls Chapman (STARLOG #223) his closest friend on the set. "She's extremely perceptive, very well spoken and articulate. We're shooting an episode that focuses primarily on Damphousse right now, and Lanei's doing a wonderful job with it."

Sharing de la Fuente's birthday is James Morrison. "In some ways, he's a father figure. We look up to him. He has had strong training in the theater and he has done a lot of work over the years, and we all respect him for that. He has a really young heart; he plays around with us all the time and he's very much a part of the group."

Casualty Figures

Much of the press on *Space* has cast Weisser, Cloke and Rowland as the three main leads, with the other actors in supporting roles. Yet many viewers see the series as more of a true ensemble piece. De la Fuente considers this, then takes the high road. "I can understand both viewpoints. My own opinion is that the show's strength lies in its ensemble workings. But those three have been the focal points for much of the series thus far, and at this point you know the most about them. Their backstories were dealt with in the pilot and in episodes since then. They are definitely the principal players in *Space*, but we've all been given more to do as we go along, so it is an ensemble piece."

De la Fuente watches every episode of *Space*, sometimes with two or three fellow cast members. "And I can tell you, the series gets better every week. There is now a clearer sense of where the show is headed. Glen and Jim have a unique take on things. They have a good sense of making things specific and yet not obvious. They tell familiar stories in different ways. With a genre like WW II, they're not looking to tell stories that have never been told before. They're just looking to tell them in a more interesting way."

Casualties are a realistic part of all wars, and if Morgan and Wong intend to deal with their intergalactic war realistically, charac-



"It's *already* pretty funny the way an extra lieutenant shows up on the mission and you know who's going to die!"

ters must die. In fact, de la Fuente says all the actors have been told that *any* of the characters could die. Is de la Fuente worried that Paul Wang might be one of those casualties? "My role on the show is to serve the show," he says frankly. "However that comes to pass, then fine. So far my role has been to provide a comic element, and that developed deeper into providing a more human side to the suffering of war, with this torture thing. If later it comes to be that Wang has to die, well...I trust Glen and Jim to have a good reason for doing that."

"They told us any of us could die, but it wasn't a threat. They just wanted us to be aware of that situation. It starts to look funny after a while—in fact it's *already* pretty funny the way an extra lieutenant shows up

on the mission and you know who's going to die! So, we're trying to develop people around us who could die as well, or even just be injured. I think it's very possible that in a year or two, not all of us will be around."

And if *Space* should meet with wild success and run five or six years, Joel de la Fuente wouldn't mind if Wang manages to stay alive. "I can't knock the employment," he quips. "So far it has been an amazing education for us all. None of us actors have worked in episodic TV before as regulars, nor do we have major credits. Fox took a big chance on us. Two or three years of this would be great, but I can't really think about it in terms any longer than *this* season. There's so much to do in the year in front of us. My plate is full, and I'm having a great time." ☆