

JOEL DE LA FUENTE

GALACTIC PILOT AND PHILOSOPHER

SPACE:
ABOVE
&
BEYOND

WHEN you are shy and insecure, signing up for a tour of duty in the military is probably the last thing you would think of doing. For Paul Wang his own curiosity led him to join the Marines. Little did First Lieutenant Wang realize he and a band of newly trained cadets would one day be Earth's first line of defences against a race of aliens known as Chigs.

"He was someone very much in transit," says Joel de la Fuente who played *Space: Above and Beyond*'s resident philosopher and good humoured pilot Paul Wang. "Emotionally, I feel that he went from one place to very much another as the season progressed. I think that Paul joined the Marines at a time when no one thought that there was going to be any more war. He was basically going for training, education and ideals other than fighting. Suddenly, he finds himself in the middle of what he was most scared of," laughs de la Fuente. "His whole journey since then was about coming to terms with this and being able to affiliate himself with a group of people, both of which have given him strength."

Wang & Wong

De la Fuente was living in New York City when approached to play Wang. His audition tape was sent to Los Angeles and, not long after, the actor was flown out to California for a second screen test. When offered the job by the show's creators and producers, Glen Morgan and James Wong, the East Coast resident travelled westward and relocated to *Space: Above and Beyond*.

"To be honest, what attracted me to the job, at least initially, wasn't so much my character as the people who were working on the show, Glen and Jim. In the pilot there really wasn't much for Paul Wang to do and it was unclear as to where he was

going, so I had some apprehension about that. When I went in to meet with them they were really great about saying, 'As the season goes on, we want to develop this character in depth but a lot will depend on the person who's in the part. If you want, why don't you take a look at some of the stuff we've done before for *The X-Files* and then let us know what you think.'

"The very fact that they were so open about having a dialogue with me made me very excited about the prospect of working on *Space*," continues de la Fuente. "When you start a relationship with people that could go on for a long period of time it's really good when you feel that there's a dialogue there right from the start. Since then I feel like we had the opportunity to sort of try and find a direction as to where the show was going and, bit by bit, the characters got more and more fleshed out."

The son of medical doctors, de la Fuente was born in New Hartford, New York and raised in Chicago, Illinois. While both his parents would probably have been pleased to have seen their son pursue a career in medicine, they both supported him when he decided to become an actor. They also provided him an education he could always fall back on should he ever decide to change careers.

"This past Christmas my mother gave me a copy of this old *Doctor Seuss* book I had a long time ago. Inside were pages where you filled in responses such as, 'When I grow up I want to be...' Scrawled in my writing as a third grader I'd written actor, so I think that I've always had leanings towards the profession.

"As I grew older and got into the position of making decisions for myself, becoming an actor was not foremost in my mind," he admits. "This was due primarily to the



Paul Wang ready for action in *Sugar Dirt*

fact that I didn't see many Asian-American actors. When I did see them they were almost always playing characters who are stereotypical or negatively portrayed perceptions of Asian-Americans. Because of this I never thought it was a viable career option for me even though I loved acting.

"I think that's where the influence of my parents really helped and pointed me towards something I really wanted to do. I love them so dearly for that because I couldn't have done it without their support," says de la Fuente proudly. "I needed their strength to provide an example because I didn't have one out of popular culture. There are very few Asian-American actors out there whom you can choose to emulate – it's not a complete anomaly – so I credit my parents for that."

Commercial

While still in college, de la Fuente made his first appearance in front of a camera in a commercial for American football. The actor, who holds a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree from New York University's Graduate Acting Program, made his professional theatrical debut in 1995 as one of the two leads in the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

"Working on that play and getting the chance to step out in front of two thousand people on a beautiful evening in Central Park is about as perfect as you can get," he recalls. "Every night we were interacting with so many different cultures and people, some of whom had never seen a play before, let alone Shakespeare. I can't think of a better experience because it was about the inspiration and craft of acting as well as about giving something back to the community. We were rewarded, not just emotionally, but with enough money to actually live on," he laughs. "It was a great way to leave school and come into the full-time world of professional acting."

After having been hired for *Space: Above and Beyond*, de la Fuente and the rest of the cast headed to Australia to film the show's two-hour pilot. Although the actor had already worked in the theatre and appeared in the film *Roommates* as well as in the ABC Afterschool Special *Summer Stories*, he had no real experience in episodic television. This type of inexperience was shared by most of the young cast. De la Fuente credits director David Nutter for helping him and his fellow cast members to quiet any initial fears they might have had.

One of the few Asian-American actors in popular culture



Realistic war drama in *River of Stars*



Ready for action in the pilot





Coping with Space Hardware...

"David had us in for individual conferences and made us feel very much at ease. The first week of filming focused mainly on Morgan Weisser and his character of Nathan West, so the rest of the cast had some time off. All of us ended up spending a lot of time together, more than if we had shot the pilot in Los Angeles, and this enabled us to develop really strong rela-

tionships with each other. We were all very different types of people but became close friends. Since the pilot the show turned into more and more of an ensemble piece, so, it was very important for us as actors to be able to talk and communicate with each other. Working together on the pilot helped lay the groundwork for our relationship."

like in the sense that he's so open and full of wonder about everything. He's the one who's always kind of making the extra joke and is very insightful with his humour, so it's always right on, but he doesn't really have a bad bone in his body. He's a lot like Cooper.

"Morgan is such a terrific actor," says de la Fuente emphatically. "I think he does great work and he, like Rodney, can be quite irreverent at times. He was the youngest person on the show and brought not only an intensity to his work but a relaxed quality as well. That was a really great thing for all of us to see and to learn from.

"I would have to say that Lanei Chapman [Vanessa Damphousse] was my closest friend on the show. She's an incredibly intelligent woman and an aspiring film-maker as well. When one character might have an entire episode to sort of elaborate a point, Lanei might have the equivalent of *one line*. To see what she can communicate to the audience with that one line or in the background of a particular scene, in which she ends up coming to the foreground later on, is really remarkable. She and I bonded enormously over the workings of the show and I feel that we learned quite a lot from each other.



The fighting side of the Marines was a shock for Wang

Friendship

The friendship that de la Fuente and the rest of the *Space* cast shared during their time in Australia grew and developed further after they returned to Los Angeles to continue work on the series. He is sincere with his praise when asked about working with each of his colleagues.

"Working with James Morrison [Lieutenant Colonel McQueen] was a real treat. He's been around a few years longer than I have and has a life in the theatre as an actor as well as that of a writer. He was a really wonderful sort of example and teacher for me.

"I love Rodney [Rowland, who played Cooper Hawkes]," laughs the actor. "I've never met anyone like him before. He's this incredibly dashing young man but at the same time he's wacky and extremely child-

Wang captured in the disturbing *To Die for*



Supportive

"Kristen [Cloke, who played Shane Vansen] was incredibly supportive of everyone. She was quieter than the rest of the people in the group. She had interests outside the group and the show, but when it came time to do the work she made herself present and was very giving of her time when it was asked of her, so I have a lot of respect for Kristen. She represents the demographic, for example, that Fox was going for. That's an enormous amount of responsibility and one I hadn't seen her struggling with to kind of carry. She was graceful about it and that was the terrific thing about her."

Throughout the programme's first few episodes viewers watched Paul Wang use his sense of humour to defuse and lighten up tense situations. The young pilot's mood becomes much more sombre, however, in the two-part story *Hostile Visit* and *Choice or Chance* in which Wang is captured by Artificial Intelligence (AI) beings. Scenes showing his interrogation

and torture provide de la Fuente with a powerful vehicle in which to showcase his acting abilities and also set the stage for future obstacles the character must overcome.

"*Hostile Visit* is the episode in which I feel the programme truly became an ensemble piece. Everyone contributed something to that show. It was similar to one called *The Enemy* which we filmed a couple of weeks prior, but McQueen was much more heavily involved in *Hostile Visit* as was Tucker Smallwood who played Commodore Ross.

"The episode concentrated a lot on character. The cadets of the 58th Squadron are made aware very early on that they might be going on a suicide mission. From that point on there's about 20 minutes or so left in the episode during which you see the characters just sitting and thinking about the situation. I actually got to work with my real-life girlfriend Melissa Bowen who plays Paul's love interest, Lieutenant Stroud. She's an actor, too, and had come out from New York City at about the same time we were filming this episode. So she

auditioned for the part along with everyone else. We were worried that we wouldn't have any on-screen chemistry," he laughs, "but it worked out fine and we ended up getting to work together for a few weeks, which was nice."

Torture Scenes

In *Choice or Chance*, de la Fuente filmed his interrogation and torture scenes with his friend Doug Hutchinson, who played an AI called Elroy-L. These scenes, which required both actors to reach a certain peak of emotional intensity, are particularly memorable for de la Fuente. "That's one of my favourite recollections in terms of working with someone because Doug is such a terrific collaborator. We shot all those scenes in one day. Doug, the director Felix Alacala and myself were all on the same page creatively, throwing ideas out and trying different things, and I really think we got some nice stuff together. I feel very good about the work and happy that the writers trusted us to try something like that."

interview

Critics often compared **Space: Above and Beyond** with many of the other popular Science Fiction shows then on the air. The series differed from them in that it was, first and foremost, a war drama which just happened to be set in the future. It did not sugar-coat the horrors experienced in wartime nor did it exploit them. It was this honest look at an often painful subject which helped the show to gain its own legion of loyal viewers.

"While the comparisons are flattering there are strong differences," explains de la Fuente. "A lot of times I feel that some people are quick to want to make comparisons. Finding the differences are a little harder."

Violence

"Our show was considerably more violent than programmes such as **Star Trek**. I'm totally open to the fact that our show was too violent for some people. We played the show as a military drama with the model being classic World War II movies. So, when you start to go down that road that's where the differences start occurring.

"From what I've heard, a lot of the criticism levelled at the show may stem from the ideological differences between where we are in the Nineties versus where people were in the Fifties and Sixties. Back then there was an openness and a kind of optimism and simplicity that is often lacking in today's world. It makes me want to say, 'It's too bad that we're not as simple any more and that it's a lot more complicated now.' I feel that a lot of the issues that come up need to be dealt with extremely delicately. On the other hand, we need to be very careful of oversimplifying complicated issues like war, race, and things like that."

Like his character of Paul Wang, de la Fuente feels that he has a certain responsibility when it comes to his job. "Personally, the most rewarding thing, I think, about acting is that when you do your job well you're able to understand a little more about people and the human condition. As I get older I'm learning that, while it feels great to act, it doesn't really mean anything until you're able to share it and communicate it honestly and well. In doing this, you're contributing something to the community, which is, I feel, one of the responsibilities that goes along with being an actor," he says thoughtfully.

Steven Eramo

The cast became good friends when making the pilot of *Space: Above and Beyond*



The Galactic pilot in the pilot

