

JAMES MORRISON

AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

ACTOR, writer and director James Morrison's father was in the construction business. He says, "He was an office manager in Anchorage, Alaska and from the time I was 14 he always gave me jobs as a laborer on the road crews building the highways through Alaska. It was hard work but I appreciate my father for doing that because from it I certainly developed, I think, a strong and valuable work ethic."

"When I was in my early twenties I decided to become an actor and since then I've held all sorts of jobs as most actors do — truckdriver, waiter, furniture stripper, landscaper, all that stuff. I haven't had to work a civilian job like that for a while. I've been lucky enough for the past 10 years or so to be making my living as an actor but with varying degrees of success. For me *Space: Above and Beyond* was by far the most lucrative opportunity I'd had."

After nearly 20 years performing in award-winning theatre productions with

some of America's foremost writers and directors, James Morrison realized his dream: having his work reach a worldwide audience each week in *Space: Above and Beyond*. As Lieutenant Colonel Tyrus Cassius McQueen, code-named Queen Six, Morrison led the 58th Squadron into battle each week to defend the Earth against aliens known as Chigs.

Award

Back in 1989 Randy Stone, now 20th Century-Fox Television's senior vice president of talent and casting, first spotted Morrison playing "an ugly American type" in a stage production of *El Salvador*. The play was particularly memorable for the actor. He won not only the Dramalogue and Los Angeles Drama Critics Awards for his performance but also the heart of his future wife, Riad Galayini, who played a prostitute in the play. In addition, Morrison discovered that he had

gained another friend and supporter in Stone.

"He saw the play, I think his estimate is 35 times, something like that," says the actor. "Since then he's been a supporter of mine and would bring me in to audition for things whenever he could. He happened to be casting *Space: Above and Beyond* and called me in. I met with Glen Morgan and James Wong [the creators of the series] and then had to read for the network."

"In the show's pilot my character has a monologue he delivers to the troops in the last third of the script. That was my audition piece. When I read for the network it was in a room filled with around 20-25 people. I delivered the orders directly into their eyes, as it were, so, it sort of gave me an advantage. I think it actually put me in a position of power because it was as if I really were their commanding officer."

The network obviously was sufficiently impressed with Morrison's commanding presence because the actor was offered the



Ready for battle...

role of McQueen that night. When **Space: Above and Beyond** first began, McQueen was a bit of an unknown quantity. Although audiences eventually get the opportunity to look behind the character's steely gaze and find out more about him, it was this sense of mystery which first attracted Morrison to the role.

"He's the enigmatic badass, if you will, who emerges from the fog, shakes things up and then splits," chuckles the actor. "This type of character has appeared in literature throughout history, certainly in more recent genres like westerns. I've always been fascinated by the guy who comes down from the mountain, saves the town and then goes back up the mountain and no one ever hears from him again. He's the archetypal quiet stranger of few words. That's what appeals to me about McQueen and that's what I saw first."

Meeting the Cast

Morrison travelled to Brisbane, Queensland, Australia with the rest of the cast and crew to film the show's pilot but did not actually meet his co-stars until they shot the scene with McQueen delivering the aforementioned monologue. "I wasn't a part of the group and that was as it should have been since McQueen is their commanding officer. So, I literally was a stranger.

"I think the way the show developed was that we became increasingly tight-knit and reliant on each other," continues the actor. "McQueen became a much more integral part of the group. Things happen as they had to happen and I'm very grateful that McQueen become, at times, the focal point that he has.

"I sort of think it's something they couldn't avoid because of the character's strength and the possibilities that existed from the way they introduced him. As he went along we saw him find out things about himself because of his relationship with these young people. I find it much more interesting to watch someone discover something about himself instead of just sitting back and having it told or shown to me. That way, we as an audience become part of the character's learning process. It's this sense of discovery, I think, that's most interesting about McQueen, particularly from an acting point of view."

Special Bond

McQueen shares a special bond with one particular member of the 58th Squadron, Cooper Hawkes (Rodney Rowland). Both



McQueen

he and Hawkes are what is known as In Vitros, a race of people conceived by artificial fertilization. Bred for war, they remain suspended in cryogenic sleep until age 18, at which time they are awakened and sent into battle.

Since In Vitros are born from parents who have never lived they have never had the chance to benefit from a loving family life. Unfortunately, because of this they turn out to be very poor soldiers and have neither a love of family nor a feeling of patriotism for their country. In Vitros are also very childlike and innocent when they are first 'born' and have trouble dealing with their emotions and developing relationships with other people. The on-screen bond which developed between Hawkes and McQueen benefited both actors in terms of fleshing out their characters.

"A lot of people have said that the relationship between McQueen and Cooper is that of a father and son. I envision it more as when you see yourself in someone and want to help them avoid the same mistakes you made or help them around the pain you experienced. I guess that's a father and son but I think of it more as a mentor or guide.

"Take my word for it, if you do this you'll end up this way. If you have to go through this, though, I'll be there for you.' What is that? That's a father, that's unconditional love. OK, father and son," laughs Morrison.

"They say that your personality is formed in the first two years of your life based on behaviour around you. I would assume that genetics has a lot to do with it as well, but male and female role models are important in the examples they set. What do In Vitros have? Indentured servitude, military service and the monitors in the In Vitro facilities. We went through the learning process and I think that's what was so great about these two characters. We got to watch them develop through their interaction with each other. They couldn't have cast a better actor than Rodney because of his natural childlike qualities."

Cast Qualities

Morrison's paternal instincts are also evident when he talks about the rest of the cast. "I came to love and admire each of them because of their contributions and dedication to the show. As you know,

Space: Above and Beyond started out as something much different. It began with the focus on the three main characters and became a true ensemble, so, we had to adjust to that in our own ways. I think we all helped each other through those dark, transitional times and I feel that's a tribute to all of us working as a unit.

Looking back on **Space: Above and Beyond**, one of Morrison's favourite episodes is *The Angriest Angel*. In this story, McQueen is forced to confront some demons from the past, including the fact that he is a grounded pilot. The episode gives him the opportunity to climb back into the cockpit and finally lay some of those ghosts to rest forever.

"This episode has to be my favourite simply because it focuses so much on, I hesitate to say it, me," he laughs. "When I first read the script I felt an immense and overwhelming sense of gratitude that my character had been chosen to portray a story of such personal redemption. I don't mean to sound maudlin or mushy but you just don't get scripts like this in television very often.

"Another very moving story is *River of Stars*. This episode is both thoughtful and daring in that some of the ideas put forth are about where our faith comes from, what deserves our faith and what gets it in spite of the war that our hearts and minds are engaged in. I was very touched by the episode.

"I think the writers on our show put a lot of effort into telling interesting stories. Look at the episode *Who Monitors the Birds*, a very compelling story with three minutes of dialogue out of 46. When has that ever been done on television? They took a chance with this stuff and I really appreciate and admire them for that.

"I also like *Stay with the Dead* because of what it establishes," continues the actor. "It's sort of a turning point for McQueen in terms of how he feels about people he's allowed himself to become close to. This is a man who, for many reasons, hasn't allowed himself to be close to anybody for a long time. Regardless of its predictability or implausibility plot-wise, it's a well-crafted, well-told and well-directed story and Morgan Weisser [Nathan West] is wonderful in it."

A Military Drama

Despite its glitzy galactic dogfights and marauding alien menaces, **Space: Above and Beyond** is, according to its creators, a military drama which just happens to be



The *Space: Above and Beyond* line-up
Actors Morgan Weisser, Lanei Chapman,
James Morrison, Joel de la Fuente, Rodney Rowland, and Kristen Cloke

james morrison as mcqueen



set in the future. Morrison is happy with this label since he admits to not really being a fan of Science Fiction on television.

"A couple of my friends, Ethan Phillips and Robert Beltran, work on **Star Trek: Voyager** and I admire the work they do," he says. "Knowing what it takes to make an hour television series of any kind, I appreciate my fellow workers' efforts because it's so hard. I think what we did on **Space: Above and Beyond** was a little bit different. We sort of became a hybrid of a world that we can relate to today and a Fantasy world.

"The thing that appeals to me, though, and this is just my opinion, are the relationships among and feelings within the characters that they try to focus on in the confines of a one-hour format. It just so happens that the story takes place 70 years in the future and 16 light years from Earth, but more importantly than any of that, it's an exploration of the human condition. Frankly, if it doesn't speak to the human condition it's really not worth beans. So, I think that is where the appeal lies."

The actor made his professional debut playing a corpse named Bartholomew Sholto in the Alaskan Repertory Theater production of the Sherlock Holmes adventure *The Sign of Four*. Over the years he has worked in numerous other plays including *Twelfth Night*, *Richard II* and *Julius Caesar*. He has played Brick twice in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (the first time winning his first Dramalogue Award). He was honoured with another Dramalogue Award for his performance as an imprisoned serial killer in *Down the Road*. His television work includes roles in **Quantum Leap**, **LA Law**, **Frasier** and **An Enemy of the People**.

An accomplished writer as well, Morrison has penned works which have been produced and workshopped at the Sundance Institute, The Ensemble Studio Theater, The Playwright's Center and the MET Theater. His first play *Idle Wheels* opened in February 1996 at the Road Theater in Burbank, California. He recently wrote and directed the short film *Parking*, produced by his wife Riad. It has been screened at the Palm Springs International Film Festival and Slamdance where it received the Audience Choice Award for best short film.

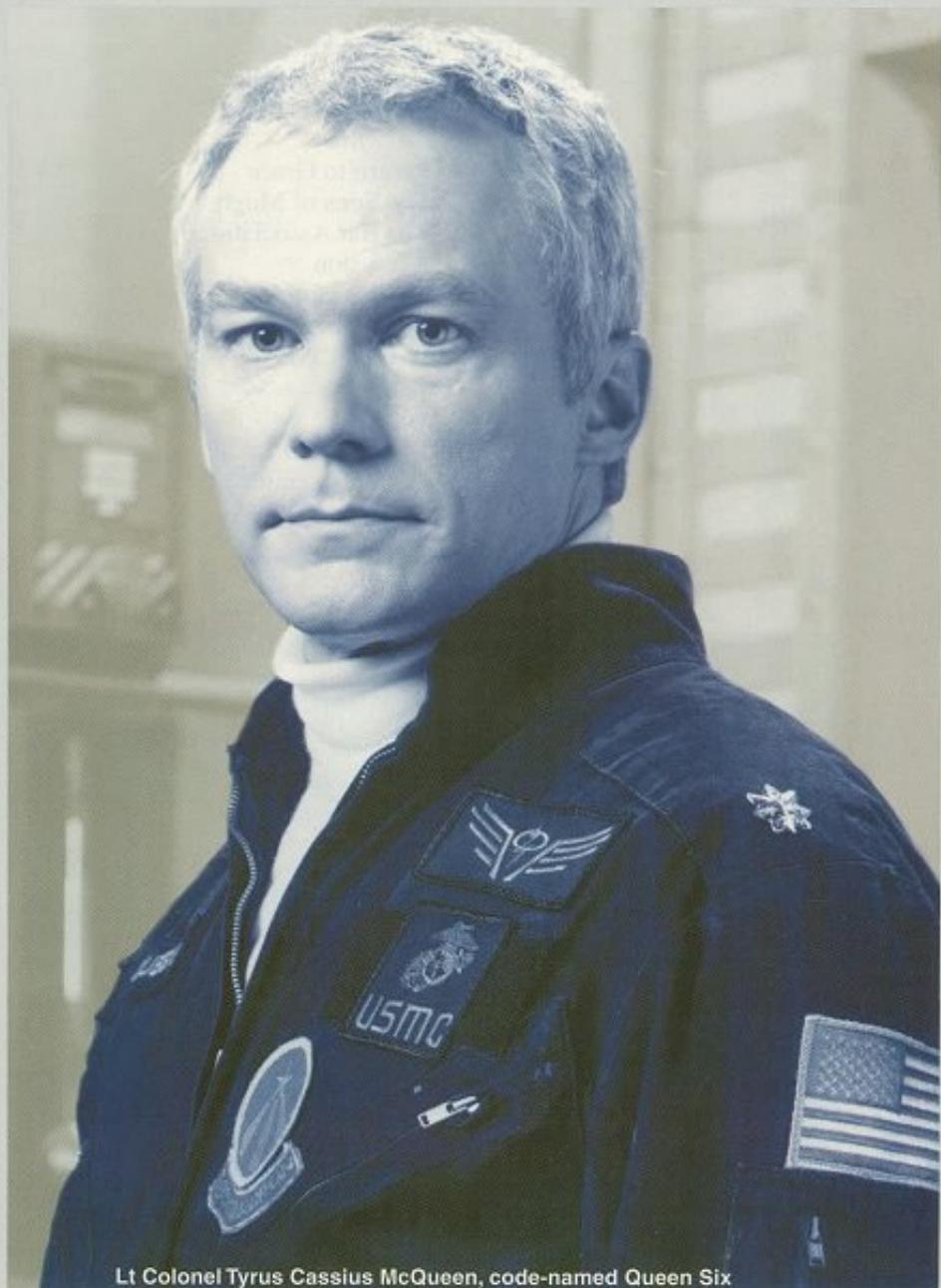
"*Parking* started from a short play that I wrote when I was a member of the Los Angeles Playwright's Group. It's based on an experience my wife and I had in a crowded parking garage where someone

parked behind us and trapped us in our space. After 35 minutes the person finally showed up and I launched into a 20 monologue. The film is an examination of urban etiquette and the cement-and-steel belligerence of humiliated testosterone in an urban parking structure – all in 10 minutes and 36 seconds."

Whether he is working in front of or behind the camera, Morrison is concerned with concentrating on the collaborative effort it takes between cast and crew to get the job done. For him this is the most enjoyable part of working as an actor, writer or director.

"The more I worked on **Space: Above and Beyond** the more I realized how fortunate we all were to be working with people who appreciated this kind of synergy," muses the actor. "It's apparent when you work with someone who thinks they can do it without the rest of the cast or the rest of the creative force. It's a much more pleasurable experience to work with people who are willing to collaborate. I say 'Steal my ideas and let me steal yours. Then we can all take credit for the final product.' I find that to be the most rewarding thing about this business."

Steven Eramo



Lt Colonel Tyrus Cassius McQueen, code-named Queen Six