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Behind The Scenes: Monk's Final Case

By Joe Rhodes



Mr. Monk would not have enjoyed this; the way things ended after the 25th and final take of the final shot of the final season of the show that bears his name. Adrian Monk, germophobic, claustrophobic, emotion-phobic, would have been horrified by the crowd jammed into Stage 7 on Paramount's Hollywood

lot, the gushing well-wishers and co-workers moving towards him, the gauntlet of handshakes and bear hugs, people drinking champagne straight out of bottles, eating red velvet cake with their bare hands, crying, embracing; a seething mass of humanity, slowly closing in.

But Tony Shalhoub isn't Adrian Monk. Not any more.

After eight years of obsessive-compulsive hand-wiping, pole-touching and mystery-solving "Monk," the often under-appreciated show that re-vitalized USA Network, made Shalhoub into an Emmy-winning star and spawned a wave of quirkily-observant tv detective imitators, has finally come to an end.

The final episode, because this is "Monk," will put everything in its place. Before it ends – with a Randy Newman song written especially for the finale – loyal viewers will have the answers they've been waiting for: Who killed Monk's wife, Trudy, the crime that sent him into a catatonic state and has hung over the series from the very first episode? Will he be reinstated as a San Francisco detective? Will he ever unbutton that top shirt button? Is that Captain Stottlemeyer's real hair? (Ok, not the last one).

There will, of course, be complications along the way, not the least of which is that Monk will be told he has only three days to live. That is the scene being shot on the

last day of production, as crew members gather around, a gaggle of agents, managers and family members hovering nearby, champagne corks popping even before director Randy Zisk, yells “Cut” and “That’s a wrap” for the very last time.

“You’ll feel normal for a few days,” says guest star, D.B. Woodside, playing the doctor who bears the bad news. “Then there will be vomiting, followed by death.”

“Vomiting?” Shalhoub says, ever so Monkish, take after perfect take, drawing stifled laughs from the off-camera onlookers every time he does the line.

“Yes. Followed by death.

“Vomiting?”

He is surrounded by castmates – Traylor Howard as Monk’s assistant, Natalie, Jason Gray-Stanford as bumbling Lieutenant Randall Disher and Ted Levine, whose previous claim to fame was as the creepy killer Buffalo Bill in “Silence of the Lambs,” as Stottlemeyer -- in the final scene. None of them break character, not even once.

“I’m a little melancholic,” Shalhoub had said earlier in the day, as he wandered the set in between takes, exchanging hugs and sad whispers with the crew, signing

posters, props and copies of the final script. By then, the set that was Monk’s apartment was already gone, torn down the week before, the remnants stacked in the soundstage corner, the world of his tv character dismantled before his eyes.

“I do think we’re going out at the right time,” he says later. “Some shows go past the point where they should and I didn’t want that to happen to us.” It doesn’t bother him, he says, that he’ll probably be recognized as “Monk” for the rest of his life, no matter how many movies or plays he does. But he will stay away from tv series for a while. “I need to give it a rest,” he says. “I don’t think people are gonna be that hot to see me in another series. I want to do a lot of other things.”

It is supposed tough guy Levine who seems closest to the verge of tears.. “I’ve done enough television to know it can really break your heart,” he says, his eyes moistening. “This has been such a gift. I’m proud people know me as Stottlemeyer now. For a long time I thought it was gonna say, “Put the lotion in the basket” on my tombstone.”

The writers and producers, including co-creator Andy Breckman, have all flown in from New York to see the final moment. Much of the furniture in the production office has already been removed. “Monk has always been about loss,” he says, showing his family around the half-

empty office. "But this will be sad to see. At 6:30, I'm unemployed."

None of them can really explain how or why it lasted this long. An eight-year run for a one-hour series is rare, almost impossible, these days. But there was something about Monk's gentle all-ages sensibility – there was nothing edgy about it -- its resemblance to 70's detective shows like "Columbo" and "McCloud", that gave it staying power. And watching Adrian Monk cope with his phobias, getting better with every passing season, was often more interesting than solving the murder of the week.

"The trouble he has crossing the street to get to the crime," Randy Zisk says, "is sometimes more important than the crime itself."

They finish the 25th take at 6:33 p.m. Stage 7 is filled with cheers and applause, raised glasses and, in the middle of it all, is Tony Shalhoub, smiling, embracing, posing for photos, drinking it in. Then, in the midst of the chaos, he sees something that no one else has seen.

"What is that," he says, pointing to the floor. "Did someone lose a wedding band?"

"I guess doing this show for 8 years has made me more observant," he says in the midst of the party, laughing, promising that it wasn't a set-up.

So maybe he just was a paying a little more attention than everyone else. Maybe there's a part of him that will always be Adrian Monk.

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