

A Night Out With Rainn Wilson



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By Joe Rhodes

Rainn Wilson, 42 years old and apparently more famous than he realized, wandered onto the grounds of the Griffith Observatory, still in the outfit he'd been wearing as he walked the red carpet and introduced the Jonas

Brothers at the Teen Choice Awards barely an hour before: a second-hand suit coat, a striped tie, dark jeans and brightly-colored Puma kicks. His only attempt at anonymity was a blue baseball cap shading his increasingly-recognizable face. It wasn't enough.

The glasses alone were sufficient to give him away, black-framed confirmation that he was indeed the man who plays Dwight Schrute, Steve Carrell's authority-obsessed second in command on "The Office," a character that has rapidly morphed into a middle-management cultural icon, the stuff of Bobblehead dolls and look-alike contests at countless corporate events. Yet, there he was, early on a summer Sunday evening, walking by himself across the still-sunny lawn in front of the iconic art deco Observatory building, the most spectacular scenic overlook in Los Angeles, with unobstructed views that encompass everything from the Hollywood Hills to the Pacific Ocean and, since it is free, a weekend gathering place for thousands of tourists from all over the world.

"I love that L.A. has such amazing cultural landmarks and most Angelenos never go to see them," he said, "There are amazing museums here and most people don't even know it. I go all the time.

The last time he was here, at the Observatory, six year ago, he was able to take his time. But that was before "The Office" or "Six Feet Under" or the non-stop promoting he's been doing all summer for "The Rocker," his first lead role in a movie. Things have changed.

The first time he was on top of this mountain, he was just a visitor in town, still living in New York, where he spent most of his 20's. He was in Los Angeles with a troupe of fellow New York actors, trying to get producers interested in a television version of an off-Broadway play of "slacker vaudeville" they were doing.

"Me and the three other guys were walking down that trail, right there," he said, pointing to a dirt path leading up the hill from Griffith Park below. "And we stopped, held hands, looked out over L.A. and, in the most ironic way possible, said, "You're gonna be mine, L.A."

"And now," he said, mocking himself, "L.A. has, in fact, become mine."

Giggling teenage girls started trailing him. Fingers were pointed. Whispers began. A steady stream of surprised onlookers asked him to stop and pose for photos, which, unfailingly, he did. He posed by the bust of James Dean, bronze acknowledgement of the Observatory's key location in "Rebel Without A Cause," 53 years ago. He posed in front of the giant telescopes, by the sundial, the scale model map of the solar system (one foot equals 20 million miles) that dominates the front lawn. He posed on the terraces and on the steps, by the signs pointing the way to the Leonard Nimoy Event Horizon Theater and Wolfgang Pucks' Cafe At The End of the Universe. Every few feet, acquiescing to the non-stop requests, he stopped and posed again.

He hadn't counted on this when he suggested the Observatory as a place to spend an unhurried evening. He wanted

to take in a show at the Planetarium, check out the Foucault Pendulum in the main rotunda, amble through the marbled corridors and take in the giant models of the Planets, the gigantic photographs of distant galaxies. Cool science geek stuff just waiting to be absorbed. Growing up in Seattle, he spent his summers taking astronomy classes at the Pacific Science Center. He loves this stuff.

He ended up in the Stellar Emporium, the Observatory gift shop, buying a globe and some binoculars for his four-year-old son, Walt, who's started showing signs of loving this stuff, too. As the sun went down, fewer people recognized him. He was able to look out, undisturbed, over the twinkling horizon of Los Angeles, towards Koreatown and Beachwood Canyon, neighborhoods where he used to live.

"That's insane," he said, taking in the view, the streaks of twilight, the silhouetted hills and distant lights. He wanted to take a photograph and pulled out his I-phone to capture the moment. But too much time had passed. The battery had died.

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