

In



Dennis We Trust



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By JOE RHODES

Dennis Haysbert, back in America for less than a week, saw the headlines along with everyone else, the announcement that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, terrorist and insurgent, the most wanted man in Iraq, had been located, targeted and killed.

He saw the spokespeople standing at podiums with their pointers and pronouncements, the shouting pundits on cable tv, the preening legislators, the declarations of a victory achieved. He saw the blurry video footage of the 500-pound bombs zeroing in on the house north of Baghdad, the explosions, the smoke, the shuddering palm trees, the photos of al-Zarqawi's cleaned-up corpse. He watched it all from a distance, just like you and me.

Except that, even as he sits outside the pro shop of his southern California country club on a sunny summer afternoon, eating a grilled chicken salad, sipping an "Arnold Palmer," iced tea and lemonade, looking out over perfectly-manicured fairways, he can't help thinking of the parts we didn't see.

"Somewhere out there is a guy with a wife and kids who went undercover to perform that function," he is saying, his voice somber and low, "and then tried to get the hell out in one piece. He had to make that call, whether to light up that house, even if there were

innocents inside. He had to listen to that disembodied voice that says he has to do it, no matter what. And what did he have to go through, emotionally and spiritually, to do that? How does that affect you as a soldier. How does that affect you as a human being?"

Someone had to clean up that corpse, and the others that were alongside. Someone had to do the dirty work, leaving the glory and the speeches to others. Dennis Haysbert thinks about this – is haunted by this – because for the last year, as Sgt. Major Jonas Blane on CBS' raw and often gut-wrenching hit series "The Unit," created by David Mamet and drawn from the experiences of Delta Force veteran Eric L. Haney, he has been playing just such a man.

"These men are not robots," Haysbert says. "They don't just go out and kill for no reason. They really have to look at the greater good of what they do, and sometimes that's not so clear. They pay for it emotionally. And that's what I want to get across to the audience."

This, in the last few years, has become Dennis Haysbert's stock in trade, playing men of conscience, authority figures with human frailties, trying to do the right thing. Before becoming Jonas Blane on "The Unit," which begins filming its second season this month, he was President David Palmer on "24," a morally upstanding character whose unexpected assassination at the beginning of last season still rankles him. He is just back from two months

in South Africa playing Nelson Mandela in "Goodbye Bafana," a feature film about Mandela's years in prison, and the white guard (played by Joseph Fiennes) who became his friend. He also plays an FBI agent in the upcoming film "Breach" (with Ryan Phillippe, Chris Cooper and Laura Linney) about real-life FBI mole Robert Hanssen.

And then, of course, there are those Allstate commercials, built around Haysbert's calm, commanding presence. There is something about him, the focus groups show, that people inherently trust. He is part Walter Cronkite, part Sidney Poitier, a man who can be believed.

"These are strong men, they are good men, they do hard things but they are not aberrant characters," Haney says, explaining how difficult it was to find someone with the right qualities to play Blane, a warrior who loves his family and his country, but has little use for bumbling bureaucrats who jeopardize his team's covert missions. "There are plenty of actors who can play rogue cops, bad guys, wife beaters, but there aren't many who had the composure and the compassion, the gravitas, to play this part.

"We had seen a lot of really good actors, but they just weren't right. Then Dennis came in and the first thing he said was, 'I want to know who this man is. I want to know what kind of chunks this has taken out of him.'" I turned to David Mamet and said right then, 'That's him. There's our Jonas.'"

It is not an accident that Haysbert, who just turned 51, has built his

career playing heroes and leaders of men. He decided early on, when he was growing up in San Mateo, California, outside of San Francisco, that he would not make living playing fools. He resisted casting directors who wanted him to play pimps, gangsters, buffoons. Even his comedic roles – such as Pedro Cerrano in the “Major League” films – had a strength to him, partly because of his imposing stature and powerful voice, but mostly because there were lines he would not cross.

“I once had a casting director say to me, ‘Can you make the character blacker?,’” Haysbert says, his eyes flashing a no-nonsense glare. “To which I retorted, ‘What the hell does that mean?’

“Should I go out in the sun a little longer? Do you mean, ‘Could I be a little more stereotypical?’ Probably. But I’m not. Because that’s not who I am. If that’s the kind of person you want, there are lots of guys doing that and more power to them. It’s not how I want to be seen.

“Whenever I go through a door, this is what I have,” he says, touching his arm, indicating the color of his skin. “But I won’t be victimized by that. I am black and that’s a really good thing to be. But because I’m a black man you want me to play something sub-human? No. You’ll never get that out of me.”

If Haysbert ever had any doubt about what he was willing to do for a part, he says it disappeared a long time ago, when he was only 22 years old, still living the Bay area, visiting his

brother, Charles, who was 12 years older, who was undergoing chemotherapy, trying to stop a cancer that would eventually take his life.

“We had a deathbed conversation, although I didn’t know it was his deathbed at the time,” he says. “We were having dinner and he just looked at me and said, ‘What do you want to do with your life.’

“I said, ‘I want to be an actor. I think I have a lot to say.’”

“Well, can you do it here?”

“I said, ‘No, not really.’”

“Then get the hell out of here. Because tomorrow is not promised to any of us.”

Dennis Haysbert, unexpectedly, begins to choke up. He breathes deeply. He wipes away the traces of a tear.

“And I knew then that I couldn’t just do this for the gig. It had to mean something. Because my brother meant something to me.”

He’s been offered roles, he says without boasting, that would have paid him more than the parts he’s taken, “enough that I could have afforded to come here in my own helicopter, landed right on the fairway and not worried about the consequences of it. But I couldn’t do those roles. I didn’t want my kids to see it. I didn’t want other kids to see it. I had to do things with some kind of moral fiber attached.”

He is not complaining about the time it has taken for his star to finally rise.

Dennis Haysbert does not believe in accidents, but he does believe in fate. That he is able to take care of his children (Charles and Katharine, from a marriage that ended five years ago), to spend his time working for causes he believes in (including the Discovery Channel Global Education Project in South Africa) is all the proof he needs that success has come at the right time in his life.

"I believe in visualization," he says, "and I visualize the roles that I want. If I hadn't envisioned playing an athlete, I wouldn't have gotten 'Major League.' If I hadn't visualized playing a president, David Palmer never would have happened. You've got to have a sense of what you want to do, otherwise the universe is just going to throw something at you, and you'll have to deal with that."

He is interrupted by a club member named Trixie, who has spotted him from across the patio. She comes bounding up to the table, full of loud congratulations on "The Unit," bringing a large smile to his face.

"I love the new show so much," she exclaims. "So pooh-pooh on 24. That'll teach 'em to kill you off."

He cannot help but laugh. "See, no accidents," he says. "I swear I didn't coach her to say that."

He prepares to head back to the driving range, to take in the afternoon sun. "I'm happy things have turned out this way," he says. "They didn't have to. But I believe you're in control of your own reality.

It depends on how big you want to dream. And I haven't dreamed my biggest dream yet."

Joe Rhodes is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.

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