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In person, actor James Purefoy seems like a charming, erudite fellow. So does his character Joe Carroll on THE FOLLOWING—at first. Carroll is a serial killer who escapes from prison in the first episode of the hit Fox thriller, only to be recaptured by Kevin Bacon’s character, ex-FBI agent Ryan Harding. Alas, Ryan discovers as the series goes on that Carroll has quite a few friends on the outside who are willing to die—and kill—for him in extremely gruesome fashion.

While THE FOLLOWING (which airs Monday nights at 9/8 Central) was created by SCREAM originator Kevin Williamson, the show is notably far more serious than the film franchise—which seems to be fine with TV audiences, who have tuned in en masse for the episodes aired so far. Part of the fun, and the fear, is that anybody can be one of Carroll’s disciples, from an angelic-looking young nanny to a seemingly friendly security guard, and they can have been living in constructed identities for years.

The Somerset, England-born Purefoy is no stranger to horror, having starred alongside Milla Jovovich in the original RESIDENT EVIL as her treacherous boyfriend, played the title role in SOLOMON KANE and appeared as Henry Clerval in the 2007 televersion of FRANKENSTEIN, but he’s never had a role quite like Carroll. He has played a very tricky and occasionally homicidal lawyer in the English miniseries INJUSTICE, but isn’t sure if that character would have followed Joe Carroll or not. “I suppose he might have. I don’t know. I think that character was very much his own man.”

The actor helpfully explains the proper pronunciation of his last name—"Pure—like orange juice—foy"—and then gets down to the business of discussing how came to play a charismatic, persuasive college professor-turned-murderer. Wanting to work in the U.S. was "very much" part of the equation, Purefoy explains. "I was beginning to feel a bit lonely in London. A lot of my friends came over here and have been part of the great American golden age of television. I had been asked to do a number of pilots, and this one was sitting there, and I was offered it and Kevin and I had to go and sniff each other's behinds like a couple of dogs in the park."

Working for a major U.S. network has gone pretty much as Purefoy expected—and of course, this isn't his first American TV gig, as he reminds: "I'd had experience with it, because I did THE PHILANTHROPIST for NBC. So I'm very aware of the micromanagement you get with American executives. But I enjoy it, very much so. I take it very seriously. A lot of money is involved."

Obviously, he's not going to let readers who have been following THE FOLLOWING in on the answers to the show's mysteries at this early stage, but Purefoy says he's aware of why Carroll is doing what he does. "I know what he wants. [He'll do] anything he can to achieve his objectives—which are very simple in comparison [to his methods]." Purefoy does, however, a tip for people who want to figure out whether a character on the series is going to suffer an early demise. "There's potentially seven years of [THE FOLLOWING]. So if you hear too much backstory on somebody, they're going to die quite soon. Generally speaking, the people that you hear the least about are the ones who are going to stick around."

There are some similarities between his own profession and what Carroll does in terms of powers of persuasion, Purefoy notes. For example, "Talking to journalists. I'm trying to get you to write really lovely things about me and the show. Of course I'm trying to get you to do something. Manipulation is all part of our business, isn't it?"

The blood and viscera quotient on THE FOLLOWING is high, which attracted quite a bit of attention and controversy before and during its premiere. Purefoy won't say whether he's actually been grossed out by anything on the show, but allows, "There have been moments of panic, moments of scenes in which I've thought, 'OK, Kevin wants us to do this, it's all part of the story.' Despite that, before 'Action' is said, I think, 'I've got to do this now. But between "Action" and "Cut," who knows what's going to happen?' If you're really flying as an actor, you don't know what's going to happen in that space. It should just happen in the moment. There have been two or three scenes that I've had to steel myself for."

Despite the splatter factor, much of the dread in Purefoy’s scenes is psychological. After all, Carroll isn’t as hands-on as some of his followers are. “No,” Purefoy agrees, “like a lot of arch manipulators, he gets other people to do his dirty work for him. And I learned that from Marc Antony [from William Shakespeare’s JULIUS CAESAR and ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA]. He was very good at getting other people to do his dirty work. I get a lot of journalists asking me about hand-to-hand fighting. I went,” Purefoy acts surprised at the suggestion, “ ‘Really?’ ”

What Purefoy says he’d most like people to know about THE FOLLOWING is this: “I have a fear of what I call ‘ambient TV’—TV that washes through you. You could be doing anything [while it’s on], it doesn’t really matter. I like television that grabs you by the throat, pushes you up against the f**king wall and won’t let you go. That excites me. That’s the kind of TV I really enjoy watching. I’m sure you must watch loads of ambient TV. But you must also watch stuff where you say, ‘I need to see what happens next.’ Dickens, Shakespeare, whatever—all of those great writers make you want to know what’s coming up. And that’s storytelling. Good storytelling is paramount. We as a culture love hearing new stories, and this is a good new story. I defy anybody to watch an episode in its entirety and not want to know what happens next.”