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words by Evan Fowler; photo by Robert Todd Williamson

Zach Gilford



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TROUSERS BY MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA

These days, film studios are keeping a tight grip on their purse strings, playing it safe with reliable genres like action-adventure and science-fiction -- usually starring the same famous faces that already sell magazines. Meanwhile, network television has evolved to accommodate the type of acting and directing previously reserved for indie features and Oscar buzz. If TV is the new indie, then actors like Zach Gilford are Hollywood's new leading men.

After graduating from Northwestern University with a degree in theatre and education, the Chicago native landed the role of Matt Saracen on NBC's critically acclaimed series, *Friday Night Lights*. Known for its atypically unrehearsed look, the Emmy-winning drama follows the lives of a high school football team in small-town Dillon, Texas. "On most TV shows, there is very specific blocking," Gilford explains. "You sit around for hours while they light it, and then you do the scene over and over, exactly the same way." Peter Berg, creator of *FNL*, took a very different approach than most studio execs: a collaborative one. With three hand-held cameras shooting simultaneously, the actors have more freedom to move around and take creative risks, even with what they say. "Sometimes we just make it up as we go," he describes. "Dialogue is hard to write, and with mostly middle-aged writers from L.A. writing for high school kids in Texas, they respect us enough to trust us with their story and let us make the words our own." It's an artistic license that not only wins awards, but can lead to some pretty impressive platforms for an up-and-comer.

Gilford recently appeared in the season finale of *Grey's Anatomy* - a no-brainer for the show's casting director who also works on *FNL*. "I've been on a TV show for three years," he says. "But after the [*Grey's Anatomy*] episode ran, my phone, texts, emails were all blowin' up!" Reaching over 16 million viewers, it proves that a guest-starring role can mean a huge amount of exposure for an actor. To be "asked" to fill the role means he's got chops. Nobody, however, was more excited than his mother, who watches the show with a religious fervor. "I tried to keep it a secret but she Googles me like 80 times a day," he jokes.

His obvious talent and television success was bound to make him a safe bet for the big screen. "Movies are different," he explains. "Just because you get called in doesn't mean you're going to get it. They scour the globe for the right actor, and then you find out they went with Russell Crowe." Nonetheless, casting directors have seen something in Gilford that millions of *FNL* fans have known all along. The actor will soon be seen in the upcoming comedy *Post Grad*, opposite Alexis Bledel of *Sisterhood of the Traveling*

Pants fame. The film, which also stars Michael Keaton and Jane Lynch, follows Bledel's journey from college back to her parents' house and her attempt to deal with life after graduation. Gilford plays the lovingly supportive, precollegiate BFF who seems to be the right guy at all the wrong times. The movie also features some surprising cameos, including comedian Demetri Martin and comedic icon Carol Burnett.

Soon to follow is *River Why*, another coming-of-age quest, in which Gilford plays a young fisherman, eager to leave his city surroundings for a life in the wild. Ironically, it was on this film that the actor, who spends nearly every spare moment outdoors, had to face his biggest challenge yet: his fear of fish. After being surrounded by fish for nearly the entire duration of the shoot, it wasn't until he had to climb into a tank with two giant Chinook that the crew learned of his phobia. "Everyone was like, 'How did you make this movie?'" he jokes. "If I have a fear, I don't let it take over. I just do it."

Good advice for any actor with Gilford's passion. "Moviemaking isn't what it used to be, but where there is talent, there will always be an audience. "There are a lot of ups and downs," he explains. "There's no way to know how this journey will play out." Lucky for us, this young actor's journey has only just begun. ■

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