

SPECIAL FORCES

The powers that be have spoken,
and *Believe* Jake McLaughlin is the man for the job

Words by Vanessa Pascale

Standing at 6'1 with dark blonde hair that skims his broad shoulders, actor and combat veteran Jake McLaughlin has that look that commands attention, especially onscreen, where his blue eyes are all that much more vibrant (something I realized in the film, *Savages*). Having appeared on hit television series like *Grey's Anatomy*, *CSI: Miami*, *The Mentalist* and films like *Safe House* *Warrior*, it was simply a matter of time till he would helm a television show.

This past April, Jake was in New York City filming J.J. Abrams' latest production for NBC, *Believe*. "I don't know what I'm allowed to tell you because they've been very secretive about everything," Jake says about the TV pilot. Starring alongside actors Delroy Lindo, Sienna Guillory, and Jamie Chung, Jake plays Tate, an escaped prison convict on death row broken out of prison to protect Bo, a 10-year-old girl (the same age as his real-life daughter), with special powers. "It's not really my thing," he says of the character. "You can imagine what that would entail, going from minutes away from being killed to being thrown into this weird scenario where I'm protecting a girl I know nothing about. There are some pretty neat little twists and turns to it," says the 30-year-old while we chat over cocktails in his hotel lounge.

Intrinsically on point with Tate's appearance and persona, Jake tells me that it's almost as if this role was written for him as they are surprisingly similar in character. "Every time there is a kid onscreen the parents are always babying them. Its like, 'No, that's not the way it is,' at least that's not the way I am with my kids," say the father of two. "I like that there is a more realistic aspect to my interaction with her [Bo] in the show." Only instructed not to shave (he already had the beard going) and that they would eventually cut his shoulder length hair, he took it upon himself to bulk up. "I started putting on a lot of weight for this show. I've

done a lot for forty seconds of fight training onscreen. He's in prison. He's not doing anything, but waiting to get killed. He'd be doing the prison workout, the mixed muscle medley," Jake laughs "Alfonso [Cuarón] said that one of the reasons that they cast me is because I didn't look like an Abercrombie model with the short hair and perfect skin..."

Jake had previously worked with April Webster (who handles casting for J.J. Abrams) on *Super 8*. "I did that pilot *Frontier* last year for NBC. One of the big battles when you get cast in a pilot is getting network approval. 'We think he or she might be marketable enough to carry a show.' I guess that sort of carried over to NBC this year. I never did a network or studio test for this. I auditioned once and got the part. That doesn't happen that way very often, at all." Gracious and humble, Jake realizes how fortunate he has been in acting. "There's no other reason why I'm here other than luck, hard work and perseverance..."

Jake received his "break" into showbiz in 2006 with the help of good friends/ former L.A. neighbors Brendan Wayne (John Wayne's grandson) and his wife Sara Arrington. "I go to Iraq, fight in the war, come back, got married, got out of the military a few years later, and move back to Chico (Northern California)," he tells me. During this time, Jake was working in construction, his wife just had their son and with only \$200 to his name, he was prepared to sell his truck to pay rent, when he received a phone call from Sara --who happens to be involved in casting for movies. Paul Haggis (writer-director-producer) was not receiving the authenticity he sought from the actors auditioning for his movie, *In the Valley of Elah*, and wanted to have some real veterans audition for him, and Jake fit the bill.

Jake flew to Los Angeles to audition, where he also advised Paul on the military aspects of the script. "It felt



kind of weird answering. He won two Academy Awards in a row for best writing. What is he asking me these questions for?" Jake says modestly. Called back for a second audition, Jake became discouraged when he saw James Franco go in after him as he was leaving. "I'm thinking, 'Fuck! There's no way I'm getting that part if people of this caliber are going out for roles.'" Three days later, Jake received the call that he landed the part. "I just started flipping out. My wife was in the living room on the phone with her mom and dropped the phone. It was pretty amazing. To have two children and be flat out broke —this doesn't happen to everybody," Jake shares. "I'm always going to be grateful that through the good graces of other people thinking about me, I am where I am today. Being a combat war veteran, a lot of people have been there as well, that's something I think about everyday."

While manual labor is no longer a job Jake needs to resort to, that's not to say he's been keeping his hands clean. He recently helped a former boss put a new deck in at his house. "I like doing that kind of stuff," he says with a smile. "I like having something to do everyday; otherwise you can get into this funk and get depressed. I don't care if it's digging holes in the ground or going on set and acting. You can go months without working in this industry and that sounds great, but it's actually not as great as it seems, at least not for me."

Not your typical attention-seeking actor, you won't find this outdoorsman patronizing Hollywood's hottest haunts. Though, I did meet Jake on the outdoor patio of nightclub, My House, five years ago at the height of its run in the City of Angels. Refreshingly down-to-earth, (not something you run into frequently in Hollywood), at the time Jake was acting in Starz's television series, *Crash*. We remained in touch (via Facebook) and over the years he has offered up useful advice on everything from domain names to flat screen TVs. With that being said, a nightclub is not his usual scene.

When Jake wants to unwind, he hits up an old biker bar in the woods. "Just a bunch of good ol' boys, that's my idea of a good time." A true blue Ford-enthusiast, if he could, he'd take Mike Rowe's job. The owner of a 92' F-150 (gifted from his grandpa when he returned from Iraq), he recently bought his wife a Ford Escape, and is in the market for an F-150 or F-250 for himself. "I need a truck for all the things I do for fun." Since Mr. Rowe hasn't put in his resignation just yet, Jake says his ultimate job would be to host a hunting or fishing show. A quintessential guys' guy, (and I must add articulate and a bonafide gentleman, he wouldn't allow me to pay and ensured I had cab fare), it's easy to see why Jake was cast for a lead role in *Believe*; he certainly has that leading man part down. Watch out, Matthew McConaughey. **ML**

Starting Out...

James Franco (met during the filming of *In the Valley of Elah*) hooked me up with his manager out of being nice. He was like, 'You have to live in Los Angeles, if you want to get a good go at this [acting]. I'll call you when you get back to L.A. and set up a meeting with my manager.' I didn't think that he wasn't going to do it but I also didn't think he was going to go... it's not something you want to remind someone to do. But he actually called me a couple days later, which is a testament to him being who he is. He's also a fellow NorCal boy, so that probably helped a little bit too," Jake says with a smile.



A REAL AMERICAN HERO

Frequently cast as a soldier-type or in combat situations in films and TV, before Jake became an actor he was working as a security guard at Universal Studios Hollywood, who enlisted in the military the day after September 11th (then 19-years-old). "I wanted to go kick some ass. I was ready." A S.A.W. gunner in the army infantry for just under four years, Jake did one tour and was deployed for a year to Kuwait (4 months) and was a part of the first unit in Baghdad and Iraq (MSNBC reporter David Bloom was with his unit when he died on the way up there from a blood clot in his leg).



"They naturally send me out for a lot of that stuff, because they know I'm a vet. I almost completely stopped doing any military roles because they don't get it right in Hollywood. They try to put their own little twist on things and it's not realistic. They don't do it justice. I don't want to be a tool used for that or dishonor anyone I served with or even myself by doing things that are done wrong, though I might've done that since I've been acting. If they really get it right, I'll do it or if it's a period piece, something like that I would love to do," he replies thoughtfully.

Jake was getting ready to leave for a 3-day reunion in Savannah with his former comrades when we spoke. "Ten years that we've had the invasion of Baghdad. There are about 130 guys going. We've had a couple of mini-reunions between our tighter knit group of guys. Not a day goes by that I don't think about everyone of those guys and that time in my life. I just miss being with them everyday. You're young guys, on your own for the first time, I guess you could compare it to going to college; generally speaking, people don't shoot at you at college. You get a little bit of a tighter bond than some frat brothers might," he laughs.

There are so many that experience PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) afterward. Was it hard for you to deal?

"The post traumatic stress stuff, it's kind of a weird thing to deal with. A buddy of mine killed himself a few years ago and I didn't find out about it until recently. I got a hold of his mom, who runs a charity called Operation: IV, and told her if there's anything I can do to help her out, whether that be speaking at an event, whatever she needs me to do, I would be more than happy to because he was a friend of mine.

It's a tough thing to deal with. You spend a year in a place that's constantly reminding you of how quickly everything can be taken away from you and you come back from Iraq and you're surrounded by a bunch of people who really don't have any clue how good they have it and it kind of pisses you off. You sit in lines and hear people complaining about stupid things. And then I find myself getting pissed off at how long it takes people to get off of airplanes and how stupid people are when they drive, especially in Los Angeles... I think there are different levels of it. There are different ways it affects people. It's definitely been an anger thing for me. I've never been diagnosed with it, because I've never seen a psychologist or anything like that, but I've taken anger management courses."