

'WIOU' brings humor, wit to dramatic newsroom setting

John Shea chooses first series with care

By Mary Ann Townsend

WIOU marks a huge turning point in actor John Shea's career.

His first venture into series television is set to debut Wednesday, Oct. 24, on CBS, unless the World Series requires a seventh game.

Throughout his acting career, the Yale Drama School graduate has garnered an impressive list of Broadway and feature film credits, with Broadway's 1976 production of *Yentl* and film's 1982 *Missing* among them.

But a recent painful event, the loss of a close relative, prompted Shea to put work on hold for six months to re-evaluate his life and the direction his career had taken. He realized he needed to make his name more well known, but he did not want to sacrifice his standards of quality in the process. He's hoping, and with good reason, that **WIOU** will help him attain that goal.

"I wanted to do this now instead of later, because when someone close to you dies, you realize just how fragile the whole thing is. It sort of hits you in a place that you never really knew before. It sort of wakes you up and shakes you up and you start thinking very, very seriously about how you're spending your time and what you want to accomplish," Shea explained.

While his acting credits are impressive, Shea said he realized he had little name recognition, and that was hurting his chances to pursue his talents for directing.

"I felt like I'd been orbiting. I've been doing a lot of things that are offbeat these last few years, kind of off-Broadway things and art films, and things that weren't particularly commercial or successful or mainstream. And I realized that it had come time in my career where I had to do something like that."

Having been identified with heavy roles such as the title character in HBO's *The Impossible Spy*, a young American killed in the Chilean revolution in the feature film *Missing*, and a Nazi in NBC's *Hitler's SS: Portrait in Evil*, to name a few, Shea said he looked for a role that blended comedy with drama. After reading 30 scripts for this fall's new shows, Shea knew there was only one role that fit him, that of news director Hank Zaret in **WIOU**.

Zaret is trying to pull a fading big-city television station out of the ratings cellar while coping with the egos and eccentricities of his staff. The storylines can focus on current social and political topics, which appealed to Shea's serious side, while at the same time provide humorous moments.

As icing on the cake, **WIOU** boasts an impressive cast, including Helen



John Shea tries to lift a TV station out of its ratings slump on **WIOU**.

Shaver, Mariette Hartley, Phil Morris, Harris Yulin and Dick Van Patten.

Shea researched the role by observing the news staff at KCBS in Los Angeles. He found some similarities between him and his character.

"It's a delicate dilemma that my character gets into, and will have to constantly walk this tightrope to make this station successful and make it first place without compromising the ethical standards, the journalistic standards that he was brought up with," Shea said.

"And that's a problem that I face," the actor continued, discussing putting his name into a mainstream project in which he could take pride. "So I'm making an effort, sort of like my character, to walk that tightrope."

BY MARY ANN TOWNSEND

CLABLE



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