

Thomas returns as John Boy in 'Walton Reunion'

By John Crook

"You can go home again," says Richard Thomas. "That's the nice thing about it."

The actor is speaking about his return to the role that won him an Emmy 20-plus years ago: John Boy Walton. Thomas joins Michael Learned, Ralph Waite and other original cast members for "A Walton Thanksgiving Reunion," airing Sunday, Nov. 21, on CBS.

Calling from Washington, D.C., where he is finishing up a wildly acclaimed run as Shakespeare's "Richard III," Thomas says the personal reunion with his former castmates "wasn't a party I wanted to miss. We were all thrilled to be together. The show was a great part of our lives, and something I think we all were very grateful for."

The 42-year-old actor had to overcome some daunting logistical problems to squeeze even a tight Los Angeles shooting schedule into his theatrical performances in the nation's capital, and the outcome seemed a little surrealistic at times.

"I was only there for a few days, so for me it was kind of like halluci-

nating," he recalls. Then, in a breathless, unbroken account, he explains: "I finished ('Richard III') on Sunday, matinee and evening, and flew out at dawn on Monday, and they drove me to the set, and I shot Monday and Tuesday, then Tuesday night they drove me back to the airport and I took the red-eye back to Washington and got my robes back on again for 'Richard III.' I felt like I was in a dream state half the time. But it was wonderful; it was great."

Thomas says he left "The Waltons" at the end of the 1976-77 season (the fifth) only because he had intended to do so from the very beginning of the series. "I came back in the sixth year and did two episodes so everybody would know it wasn't because there was any conflict. It was just a career decision. I felt that I had done everything I could do (with John Boy) on a regular basis."

The TV movie takes place in 1963, with the Waltons gathering for Thanksgiving under the shock and gloom of the recent Kennedy assassination. If John Boy was 16 in 1929, as the series had it, then in "Reunion" he must be...

"Don't try to figure out the age," Thomas says, laughing. "The math doesn't work. It's like a Shakespeare play. You can't really figure out how old he is. We play games with time." The known circumstances in John Boy's life, however - his status as an established writer, his interest in marrying and settling down - suggest that the character is now in his mid-30s, the actor adds.

Slipping into John Boy's skin came disconcertingly easy after 17 years away, Thomas says. "I kind of let my own changes be his changes, rather than trying to create some kind of detailed past life. I figured...Let me just bring my own stuff into it and see what happens." After all, it is he later and it is him later, and we are kind of connected, joined at the hip, so to speak.

"I put on the wardrobe and stood out there on the back lot and did a rehearsal with an actress - and he (John Boy) was right there, all the time. He had been lurking for 17 years. I just kind of gave him a quieter sort of (personality)...maybe a little more pensive, a little more inward."

Thomas agrees with his co-star and close friend Learned that many TV critics missed the boat with the CBS series. "There was a lot of condescension about the show...not on the public's part at all. The public adored the show. When things get mythologized, people forget what they really were. People say, 'Oh, what a perfect family!' Well, it wasn't a perfect family. It wasn't supposed to be. The whole point was that it wasn't perfect. It simply stuck together."

The Manhattan-born and -reared Thomas says his father's family had much in common with the Waltons. "He was raised in the hills of eastern Kentucky during the Depression. Lots of aunts and uncles all living together and working through their lives. (The show was) very accurate, actually. I spent every summer of my life on (my grandparents') farm there. My roots are very deep in the hills of eastern Kentucky. I go there every year. Most of my family members are located in a part of the world that's almost exactly like...The Waltons."

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