

### FEATURES



## GETTING TO KNOW HIM A Look at the Real Michael Weatherly

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With his extremely likeable blend of good looks, breezy and humorous charm, and charismatic screen presence, it is not hard to see how the decision was made to cast Michael Weatherly as loveable playboy wannabe/Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo on the CBS police procedural smash drama series “NCIS,” now in its eighth season and going strong.

Originally from New York City, Weatherly grew up in the moneyed community of Fairfield, Connecticut, in an affluent atmosphere more suited for Jay Gatsby than a young artist preparing to step into the cold world of auditioning for film and television roles. His mother worked as a hospital administrator and his father achieved massive success as the importer who introduced the Swiss Army knife to America.

After attending a variety of colleges, including The American University in Paris, the young Mr. Weatherly decided to leave school to follow his dream of pursuing an acting career, a decision his father chose not to financially support.

In his early twenties and on his own in New York City, Weatherly managed to make ends meet long enough to book his first TV gig, a minor role as Theo Huxtable’s roommate on “The Cosby Show” in 1991. From there, things started to move. Roles on the ABC soaps “Loving” (1992-1995) and “The City” (1995-1996) led to appearances on “Jesse” (1998), “Charmed” (1999) and “Ally McBeal” (2000) as well as a starring role, opposite Jessica Alba, in James Cameron’s “Dark Angel” (2000-2002). Then, already with a body of work that showcased him sharing the screen with such luminaries as Christina Applegate, Rosario Dawson, Jennifer Garner, and Chloe Sevigny, Weatherly got his biggest break yet, portraying Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo in a two-part episode of the CBS legal drama “JAG” (2003), which spawned the enormously successful crime drama spin-off “NCIS.”

We catch up with Michael Weatherly on the set of “NCIS” where we find him to be every bit as loveable and charming in person as he is on TV. Maybe even more so. While shooting a scene in the interrogation room, he cheerfully ad libs “Venice Magazine” into the dialogue during one of the takes, checking in later to make sure that the “shout out” was seen on the monitor.

Michael Weatherly is a genuinely good guy who is genuinely good to be around. He makes sure that you get lunch. He makes sure to introduce you to Mark Harmon. He carries the confident spirit of the ultra-popular high school kid who is also kind enough to rescue the new kid in town by taking him under his wing. And he tops off this likeability with a mischievous and playfully devilish sense of humor, exemplified by his suggestion to hold his Venice interview in the Autopsy Room of the “NCIS” set, which is exactly where we sit down to talk with him.

**Venice: It seems like every time I turn on my TV, “NCIS” is on. How would you say you have been affected by the phenomenal success of this show?**

**Michael Weatherly:** I don't know if I can directly correlate the level of the show's success with any of the changes that have taken place. I think it has been less about the success of the show and more about the stability of having a job for eight years and working with a great group of people for that amount of time and really being able to build a life that, up until this point, was very difficult to do because of the gypsy nature of being an actor. So, I think the greatest change was the gift of stability. I was able to get married a few years ago. My beautiful wife is a doctor, an Internal Medicine Resident, here in Southern California.

**What kinds of jobs did you support yourself with during your starving actor days in New York?**

I sold shoes. I delivered pizzas. I was a host at TGI Fridays in Rockefeller Center, which was very fortunate because when you work in a restaurant, you get to eat for free. So, that solved two problems. It gave me a little bit of money and it fed me. I also used to play the guitar in the subways. I would make \$30 or \$40, which, at the time, was all I would need for the week. I could go shopping and get rice, potatoes, Ramen noodles.

**Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo, your character on "NCIS," is quite the flirt. A bit of a prankster, a bit of a playboy, constantly making references to films. How much of this character did you help create and how much of him is actually like you?**

DiNozzo is definitely a collaborative creation. Part of the energy of the character originally did come from me because I wanted DiNozzo to be fun, just so I could jumpstart myself out of the rut I was in as an actor at the time. I started out doing soaps and by the time I got to "Dark Angel" and some other jobs, I was kind of in a box, having played this Randy Bland-type character for years. Kind of like a department store mannequin that talks. When I first became excited about acting, Tom Hanks and Cary Grant really appealed to me, but when I started acting, none of those kinds of roles were available. That style of role wasn't around. So I was always getting projects, whether it was "Charmed" or "Dark Angel" or "Ally McBeal," that were about a central, powerful woman and I would be playing these guys who were always doing the complaining. "NCIS" helped me get away from that through DiNozzo, who is partly a creation of my own somewhat bizarre sense of humor, but much more a creation of the "NCIS" writers.

**Did getting to play DiNozzo allow you to become more passionate about acting?**

Yes. "NCIS" is the first acting job I've had that's made me really love acting. I can't wait to hear the word "action" and I die a little every time I hear the word "cut." It used to be the opposite. It used to be that I would get so nervous before the word "action." Now, it's a countdown. I can't wait!

**Have you ever done any theater?**

I was never a theater guy. I've always liked the cameras and the pressure of the three minute scene, as opposed to the two-hour play and having to memorize all of those lines. I've done a few plays and it all just felt too much like doing homework. It reminded me too much of school and I just don't respond to that. I have more of a Vince Vaughn approach. *[laughs]*

**DiNozzo and you are both funny. Who were your comedic influences when you were a kid?**

Steve Martin. Robin Williams. David Letterman. Bill Murray. I saw Spalding Gray perform monologues that I thought were fascinating. I used to memorize Letterman's "Late Night" monologues, as much of them as I could, and then stand up in the back of the school bus the next morning and perform them, interjecting Steve Martin's "Wild and Crazy Guy" stuff in when the Letterman stuff wasn't working. *[laughs]*

**Being funny and going for the laugh is a style of behavior that can become hard to shut off, particularly with people who are natural born or compulsive performers. Do you ever have trouble turning the DiNozzo character off?**

I have been getting much better at turning it off. For one thing, it is absolutely exhausting to hold onto that character for ten months at a time, always being a bubbly, shallowish, fratboy type. And I'm really just not that guy, politically or emotionally or in any other way. But I know that people do assume that I'm just playing myself, that I'm just being myself when the cameras roll. They think that I'm that dynamic guy all the time, so the first time that I get serious with someone, they get very confused and think that I am kidding! I can only imagine what Steve Martin's life was like for about three years when everyone thought that he was "The Jerk." *[laughs]* And I do recognize that, all things considered, this is really a great problem to have.

[laughs] My wife had never seen “NCIS” when we met and she’s only seen a few episodes since we’ve been married, so she only knows me at home, where I am much more quiet and very different from who I am at work.

**Your wife has seen only a few episodes?**

She’s a very busy lady, and I’m not so sure my character really appeals to her. [laughs] She prefers the version of me she gets at home.

**How do the two of you spend your time when you are both finally away from the entertainment and medical professions?**

We have two German Shepherd dogs, Oriana and Quantum, who we love and spend a lot of time with. We also love to travel and read.

**What authors do you enjoy?**

Martin Amis. Saul Bellow. Philip Roth. I also like to read biographies.

**You played Robert Wagner in “The Mystery of Natalie Wood” (2004) and Robert Wagner plays your character’s father on “NCIS.” What was it like when the two of you first met? Had he seen your portrayal of him?**

Some mutual friends wanted to introduce me to RJ, so we all planned to meet and have a small dinner together. Before the dinner, RJ called me up to let me know that he had heard that I had played him in the movie and that he hoped that I understood that he had not seen it. Of course it was something that would have been very difficult for him to watch. To see a movie about the woman you married twice and loved deeply and desperately and who died so tragically. I would not want to watch that either — to see someone else respond emotionally to the most important things in your life. RJ is just an unbelievably genuine, heartfelt, sweet, and generous guy. Getting to know him has been so special and so great. He called me because he wanted me to know that he had seen the episode of “NCIS” that I had just directed. He introduced himself on the phone by saying, “This is your illegitimate father calling, and I’m a very proud father.” [laughs] I just love his regard for the craft. He’s such a great example.

**You made your directorial debut with “One Last Score,” a recent (2011) episode of “NCIS,” and the first episode directed by a cast member. How did the experience make you feel?**

It was wild! And I loved it. I absolutely loved it, even though the balancing act of acting and directing was a lot to manage. I think I got a little too excited at times, running around like a Golden Retriever puppy. I definitely look forward to doing it again and taking a few more swings at it.

**How did it feel to have to step into an authoritative position with your peers?**

I think it helps that I’m a father. I do have that role and responsibility in my life, so I think that helps make it a little easier to move into an area where you have two hundred people looking at you to give them direction.

**Speaking of parenthood, do you remember your parents’ reaction when you told them that you were going to leave college to become an actor?**

Well, both of my parents were very supportive in one way. They did listen to me when I jabbered on about this acting thing that I wanted to do. But my dad did make it clear to me that, if I went after it, I was on my own. He wished me good luck with my endeavors, but if I needed rent or food or any of those staples, I was going to have to be responsible for them by myself.

**What advice would you give to someone wanting to become an actor?**

Well, all anybody ever said to me was “Don’t.” [laughs] So, maybe that’s the best advice, because if you really want to do it, you’ll ignore that advice and that’s exactly the kind of tenacity you need to make a career out of acting. It is essential to be in an acting class and to take it seriously. You have to make acting a number one priority. If it is the number one priority in your life, you don’t have any back-up plan. There’s no other option. It takes that kind of dedication. Ultimately, everybody finds

their own path. There are no two people who have had the same path in an acting career. And, of course, ninety percent of it is luck.

**There have been many fantastic guest stars on “NCIS” over the years. Who stands out in your mind?**

Gena Rowlands was an absolute blast for me because of all the great work she’s done. *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), *Opening Night* (1977). Her work is so magnificent. Just to be able to sit with her was amazing. Hal Holbrook. Charles Durning, who was nominated for an Emmy for his turn on our show. Zac Efron was a guest star on season three. He was terrific and he kept talking about this little Disney musical thing he did that was about to come out. We wished him good luck with it. [laughs] We’ve had Abigail Breslin, who was great. And Bob Newhart! His first scene was at my desk, wearing a hat and a trench coat and stammering the lines, “Wh-Wh-Wh-Where do I? H-H-H-How do I? Can I get to autopsy?” It was epic! And, of course, Robert Wagner.

**Have you had any other great moments on the phone with Robert Wagner?**

I was sitting in a restaurant in the South of France and we were just about to order our lunch when I called up RJ. He said, “Where are you?” I told him the name of the restaurant and he said, “Have you ordered yet?” When I told him that we hadn’t, he said, “Put down your menus. Get out of there.” He sent us to another restaurant about a hundred yards away and told me he would call them and let them know that we were coming. We arrived to find the place packed. Absolutely packed. All of a sudden, a table comes out of nowhere. RJ had them bring us out a table and set up a great patio spot, in an absolutely packed restaurant. Now, that’s a great “NCIS” guest star! [laughs]

**What does your dad think about your having gone into acting now?**

Well, both of my parents love “NCIS,” so, now, I think they’re proud. [laughs] ▼

*“NCIS” airs Tuesdays at 8PM on CBS.*