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By Robert K. Elder
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Swayze feels at home in Chicago Shooting TV show here, actor talks about the city, his career and his health

It's a surreal time for actor Patrick Swayze.

Not only is he starring in his first television series, A&E's "The Beast," but he's also filming it in a city that's hosting "Dirty Dancing," a musical adaptation of the 1987 movie that made him a household name. Add this to the 56-year-old actor's recent bout with cancer and a six-days-a-week shooting schedule, and you get a very intense, very introspective conversation.

Q What makes Chicago a good home for "The Beast"?

A I play an unorthodox, rogue FBI agent. Something felt like the right match with this character and this city. There's a huge sense of loyalty you get here. In the series, loyalties are constantly tested. It kind of reminds me of Texas, where your handshake is your contract.

We've seen Chicago in films but never in a series like this, on this level. Chicago is "The Beast," like many things are the beast—the dark side. Working undercover is the beast. But Chicago needed to be its own animal, its own living, breathing character that encompasses everything, holds the characters within its consciousness.

Q Your soundstages are in Cicero, but you've filmed in some of the grittier parts of the city.

A I felt that Chicago added so much, just in terms of the energy. If you read any Tom Clancy novel, Chicago is much more a dangerous point in this country than people realize. Tom Clancy says, if you want to invade the U.S., come through Mexico and come through Chicago, and split the country in half. Chicago has much deeper-reaching fingers, from a national security point of view, than most people realize.

There's a sense of family here that I haven't gotten anywhere else. There's a bond. You feel it in the crews. It has true character and a uniqueness you wouldn't find in just any other city. And that's not just blowing smoke. I really mean that.

Q What's it like to be in the city where a stage version of "Dirty Dancing" is running?

A It's surreal, but nothing new. The musical has played in London and Australia. But the other day, we were filming, and my character Barker is crossing the street when two cabs with ads for "Dirty Dancing" go by!

Q Are you at least curious to see the musical?

A No, I'm not, actually. That was then. That was a moment in my life that meant a lot and, needless to say, was history-making for me. But I usually watch a movie I'm in once and then move on. It holds a wonderful place in my heart, but it wasn't where I was "discovered." Long before that, there was "North and South" and "The Outsiders." "Dirty Dancing" launched a period of my life.

Q Does the fact that Chicago doesn't have many paparazzi make it easier to work here?

A Yeah. But they seem to come out of the woodwork.

But the lies that are constantly coming from the tabloids, it does get disheartening.

I think the latest one is, "Patrick has collapsed on the set and has chosen a burial plot next to his sister." They're printing the lies. Normally, I don't care what they write—but I'm not collapsing on the set. I'm thriving.

It's not easy. It's more a 24-hour-a-day job than anything I've ever done.

The fat lady can sing for any of us, at any time. In fact, the fat lady is singing right now. I have to go; we're shooting.