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Patrick Swayze: In the belly of 'The Beast' with the former 'Dirty Dancing' star Chicago's grit and glamour co-star in FBI TV series

"So, did you miss me?" says actor Patrick Swayze, walking past the chess pavilion on North Avenue Beach. Bundled up against the encroaching cold, he says: "You carry this job with you, and there's no washing it off."

Swayze is talking to co-star Travis Fimmel in a scene for "The Beast," the gritty FBI television series that has adopted Chicago as its home city. But he could easily be talking to his public too.

The actor has kept a low profile since being treated for pancreatic cancer earlier this year. And until lately, "The Beast" had been Chicago's most secretive production since "The Dark Knight." Recently, however, while filming the 11th of the 12 episodes ordered by the A&E television network, the Tribune visited the set.

On this particular day, crew members scramble around North Avenue Beach, setting up cameras and sound equipment. Extras mingle around the bike path, enjoying the late fall sun. Scattered among the crew are the logos of other shows, notably "Prison Break" and "ER," on jackets and hats. This is a hometown crew, working on the only show currently filming with Chicago as a backdrop. Most are veterans of "The Dark Knight" and television shows such as "Early Edition" and "Chicago Hope." Today, they're prepping a walk-and-talk between undercover FBI agent Charles Barker (Swayze) and his rookie partner Ellis Dove (Fimmel). In TV terms, Barker comes from a long, noble tradition of ignoble anti-heroes—a character of suspect (and perhaps flexible) morality. The series' metaphorical title refers not only to sinister forces he fights, but also to the nature of undercover life and its consequences.

"The pilot broods over what happens when you fight the beast," says executive producer John Romano ("Third Watch," "Hill Street Blues"). "Sometimes, you become the beast yourself."

But "The Beast," Swayze says, also is Chicago itself.

"It has an incredible, civilized wildness to it, which hopefully comes off on film," Swayze, 56, says after the shoot. "I couldn't see, honestly, shooting it anywhere but Chicago."

Although the first draft of the pilot set the story in Washington, D.C., Illinois' tax incentives—and a call to the Chicago FBI field office—changed all that, says co-creator Vincent Angell.

"We talked with an agent, had long conversations with him," Angell says, and the producers were convinced that due to the high-profile undercover cases in Chicago historically, the city would be a perfect fit.

For Swayze, filming anywhere but Chicago was a deal-breaker.

"When they tried to shoot anywhere else but Chicago, I said I wouldn't be in it," Swayze says. "It was that important to me."

Swayze's affection for the city had long been cemented after shooting the cop movie "Next of Kin" here in 1988. He hung out with blues musicians such as Sugar Blue and Buddy Guy, visiting seedy biker bars and

blues clubs "out in the boonies," he says.

"I spent a lot of time around this town, every section of this town, on a Harley," Swayze says. "I fell in love with the music scene, initially.

"And then I started realizing that I felt very, very at home here."

"The Beast" won't be all glittering skyscrapers and safe, sunlit neighborhoods. The producers told their location manager that they wanted not only the iconic, but the crumbling, forgotten corners of the city.

"We have a philosophy: In every episode you're going to see something pretty about Chicago and something grisly and impure about Chicago," Romano says. "You're everywhere from Millennium Park to ... parts of town you don't want to be in after 10 o'clock. I don't want to be specific about neighborhoods; that would be unpleasant. But we're always showing both sides."

For Swayze, the shoot here has been both breakneck and surreal.

"I'm doing great," he says. "For whatever reason, the cancer has stopped dead in its tracks."

He has been drinking "serious, body-builder shakes," which have helped him gain back the 20 pounds he lost during chemotherapy, an experience he has called "hell on wheels."

"Health concerns haven't been an issue; it's just time," says Swayze, referring to the production's six-day workweek. "I know I've worked this hard in my life—I just can't remember when."

That said, the production team hopes to see "The Beast" nest in Chicago for another year.

"Fingers crossed," says co-creator Angell. "We're hoping to come back here for a second season."

"The Beast" debuts on A&E in January.