



## The persuasive Mr. Cumming

Alan Cumming talks about 'The Good Wife' and converting Helen Mirren to Crocs

By Nina Metz, Tribune reporter    October 22, 2010



Actor Alan Cumming is photographed during a visit to the city for the Chicago International Film Festival in Chicago, Illinois, October 18, 2010. (Scott Strazzante/Chicago Tribune/MCT)

Better known these days for his recurring role as the besuited political spin doctor on "The Good Wife," Alan Cumming was in town this week to pick up an award from the Chicago International Film Festival. It was a coincidence of timing, no doubt, that the fest was honoring the 45-year-old Scottish actor as part of its OUTrageous program of gay and lesbian films, in light of last week's episode of the CBS legal drama (set in Chicago, but shot in New York), which also dealt with gay issues.

"Oh, the gay episode! I get you, yes of course. I didn't think of that," Cumming said when we sat down over coffee. "I'm more interested in the fact that I play someone from Chicago on TV, and I've spent two nights in Chicago in my entire life. So I was so excited to come here. I feel like I'm a sponge."

The show itself may not feel particularly Chicago in look or spirit, but something about the city as portrayed in the scripts has captured his imagination. "I'm really fascinated by it, actually, because it's such a different city to the other ones I've been to in America. And also the way people talk about it — the way *Chicagoans* themselves talk about it, quite open about some of its foibles and political corruption and its history."

A natural conversationalist prone to amusing anecdotes, Cumming will be back in Chicago in May for a one-night performance of his solo cabaret show "I Bought a Blue Car Today" at the Harris Theater. But home is in New York City, where he lives with his husband Grant, an illustrator.

"The great thing is that I'm living at home when I do 'The Good Wife.' This week I'm having a meeting with Michelle and Robert (King), who created it, about what's going to happen to Eli—if they picked up my option. I'm only actually contracted for the first 13 episodes, and there's an option to do the rest. And I kind of think that they'd want to do more, but theoretically Eli could be dead at Christmas. I hope not, I like him."

Cumming, it should be mentioned, doesn't own a TV. "I don't watch (the show) when it comes out. But I've made a point of watching it the next day on Hulu because people come up and say things to me, and I really want to be cognizant of what they're talking about because they're quite specific sometimes. I mean, the first episode they were like, 'How could you delete that message?' endlessly."

Last year, Cumming found himself in Hawaii for several weeks filming Julie Taymor's adaptation of Shakespeare's "The Tempest," which opens in December with Helen Mirren giving a female twist to the role of Prospero.

Cumming plays the shipwrecked Sebastian, yet another political wheeler and dealer (albeit one he describes as "a bit more stupid" than his character on "The Good Wife"). He doesn't have many scenes with Mirren, but they spent plenty of time together off camera. "I converted her to Crocs," according to Cumming, who said his co-star was all too happy to make disparaging remarks about his footwear.

"I said, 'Don't you think it's interesting that Crocs and Uggs are the two types of clothing that our society has allowed everyone to say are ugly? It's a received thing that we are told that Crocs are ugly. It's almost like prejudice in a way. It's Crocs prejudice, and it is flock mentality.' And she said, 'Hmm, that's an interesting sociological point. But they're still ugly.'"

A few weeks later, "I got out of the van at the location — some remote volcanic wasteland — and running from her trailer came Helen: 'Alan, Alan! Look!' And she had a pair of pink Crocs on. And she went, 'My feet got so sore with flip-flops, so I tried them on and they're the most comfortable things ever. I've got three pairs now!'"

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