

Captain America

FROM FIGHTING FLAMES TO FIGHTING FOR CAUSES THAT MATTER, JASON GEORGE IS READY FOR ACTION

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Jason George knows a thing or two about greatness. The 46-year-old actor has been surrounded by it all his life: he was raised on “the largest naval base in the world” in Virginia Beach, Virginia; as an avid comic book collector (he owns several thousand) he knows what superheroes stand for; he has worked alongside television’s most lauded producers, namely, Aaron Spelling and Shonda Rhimes; and he has portrayed heroes onscreen. So, it’s safe to assume that he has gleaned the wisdom and insight needed to be considered one of the greats, and I can attest after spending over an hour with him one snowy evening in late March, that he too is cut from hero material.

We are seated in the Mandarin Oriental's speakeasy, The Office NYC—an intimate wood-paneled room appointed with trinkets from the past like old-fashioned typewriters, vintage spirits, and tufted dark leather couches and armchairs. The Los Angeles-based actor is in town with his costar Jaina Lee Ortiz to promote their new TV show, *Station 19*, and has been at it all day, so a cocktail is welcome. A “rum guy,” Jason orders the Dealer's Choice, leaving the mixologist to concoct a rum-based libation especially for him. I follow suit, except, I ask for vodka. Once that's taken care of, Jason continues telling me the fateful story about how his acting career began.

In 1996, Jason participated in a worldwide casting search for the role of Michael Bourne in Aaron Spelling's *Sunset Beach*. The night before the audition, Jason performed in a play in Philly, then went out and partied all night since he didn't believe the audition would lead anywhere—at best, he thought he could make some connections. A few hours later, early Sunday morning, he was on a flight out to L.A., and finally got some sleep en route. “The funny part is, had I been fully conscious and awake, well rested, I probably would've gotten really nervous when they handed me the second scene. But I was just in a mellow state where I was like, ‘Let's do this.’ Tuesday: I found out I got the job. Wednesday: I shot my very first feature film role, which was *College Kid* in the movie *Fallen* with Denzel Washington. Thursday: I moved to Los Angeles. And Friday: I was doing a photoshoot on the beach with Sherri [Saum, who played Vanessa Hart on *Sunset Beach*].” He's been acting and living in L.A. ever since.

During his three-year stint on the Emmy Award-winning soap, Jason received an Emmy nomination in 1999 for Outstanding Younger Actor in a Drama Series for his role as Michael. When the show ended, Aaron Spelling—the late producer whose successes included *Charlie's Angels*, *Dynasty*, and *Beverly Hills, 90210*—took Jason with him. “Spelling produced mostly primetime, so he pulled me off that soap directly into a primetime show [*Titans*]. Nobody wants to hire you for any job until you've already done that job, so I got series regular on my resume and that got me into a whole other section of my career. Again, shooting me ahead a few years because it's really hard to break out of the soap market.” What was it like working with the iconic producer? “He was amazing, because he was everybody's favorite uncle, everybody's grandad. He met my mom once, would ask for her by name a year later. He'd say, ‘How's Shirley?’ And I was like, ‘Ohmygod, you're amazing!’ My mom, to this day, is like, ‘Me and Aaron.’” He laughs. “She's on a first name basis with Aaron Spelling.”

From there, Jason appeared in a list of TV series and films including, *Barbershop*, *Eli Stone*,

Mistresses, *Grey's Anatomy*, and now, the latter's spinoff, *Station 19*, which premiered on March 22nd this year. Jason's *Grey's Anatomy* character, Dr. Ben Warren, has taken a new job at the fire station down the street from Seattle Grace Hospital in *Station 19*. “Ben's like, ‘I want to do more. I want to get my hands dirty, and get closer to the source of the issue,’” Jason explains about his character's progression from anesthesiologist-turned-surgeon-turned-firefighter. “[Miranda] Bailey [his *Grey's Anatomy* wife and chief of surgery at the hospital, portrayed by Chandra Wilson] would say he has professional ADD.”

In last year's season finale of *Grey's Anatomy*, which Stacy McKee (*Station 19's* creator) wrote, Ben throws on a firefighter jacket and runs into the burning hospital to rescue a friend lost in the fire. “A whole bunch of fans jumped on it and thought, ‘Oh, it's a firefighter spinoff!’ I was like, ‘That's so ridiculous.’ I literally laughed.” To Jason's surprise, Stacy had some ideas brewing. For years, there had been talk about a second spinoff (the first was *Private Practice*) that was more connected to *Grey's Anatomy* and Stacy liked the idea of following the first responders, he tells me. “I still look at Stacy, waiting to find out if she was planting seeds,” he says about the finale. “‘Cause Ben ran into the fire. So, I think that, coupled with—he's gotten into trouble doing the things he knew he shouldn't have done... [referring to past incidents where Ben bended the rules as a surgeon when it meant life or death for the patient]. Now, we're going to go play in this sandbox out in the world where there's a lot fewer rules.”

Jason received the call from Shonda Rhimes (the creator of *Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice* and *Scandal* and founder of the production company *Shondaland*) and *Grey's Anatomy* producer Betsy Beers last July while vacationing on the east coast with his family. At this time, Shonda explained the premise of *Station 19* and the perks: It shoots in L.A., which means getting to live at home with his family; it's a firefighter show, so there's lots of action, and because it's a spinoff, he can easily return to *Grey's Anatomy*. “There's no downside here. Literally, inside of a minute and a half, I was in.” Jason's only concern was that it didn't come across as if Ben was getting kicked out of Seattle Grace Hospital, and he wanted to ensure that Ben's change in profession made sense—and it did. And yes, he's aware that his character just took a major pay cut, but Ben's not worried about it. “When we first met Ben, he was an anesthesiologist and the joke was, they called him The Gas Man. Bailey actually said to him, ‘You just show up, knock people out, and then roll away with your bags of money.’ He was a bachelor for a good, long while. Ben has put away money. Oh, and by the way, his wife is the chief of surgery... We're

good for cash. Cash is not the issue. Let me do the thing that excites me,” he says with a grin.

While Ben is the sole character bridging the connection between the two shows, he's not the lead, he tells me. “I wouldn't say I was leading the spinoff. It's a Shonda show, so there's a beautiful Latina, Jaina Lee Ortiz, who is the lead female of the show. I'm #2 on the call sheet.” Jaina plays Andy Herrera a second-generation firefighter, the daughter of Captain Pruitt Herrera, who steps down due to health issues. “She's this powerful woman fighting to earn her leadership spot in this station,” Jason explains. “Ben's the new guy right now, so it's an incredibly humbling thing to be this accomplished person in every other facet of your life...and you're basically starting over again. It's all the complex emotional relationships that you expect from a Shonda Rhimes show, but with triple the action that we're used to 'cause we're running into fire.”

Like his character, Ben, Jason loves an adrenaline rush, and has already been pushing the limits onset. When he heard about all the things he'd get to do on the show—swinging axes, climbing, being around fire—the 10-year-old in him was ecstatic. “I've had two or three different conversations about what insurance will let me do.” He flashes a mischievous smile. “We have a 100-foot ladder on the truck, and insurance is supposed to let you climb five steps. When I got to 30 feet, they got nervous. When I got to 40, they yelled, ‘Cut!’ I've had my hand swatted a couple of times.” Confident in his abilities, he's had some previous experience climbing the fire truck ladder having participated in firefighter training for charity in the past. “Somewhere around 75 feet, it's bouncing, and it's nerve-racking, but it's also fun.” And *Friends* fans might recognize him as the dashing firefighter who saved Phoebe's fire alarm from the trash chute.

The brawny actor navigates his life off-screen in an equally upstanding manner. Take his Twitter bio, which reads: “Dad who moonlights as an actor... Believer of Truth, Justice, and the Samaritan Way.” He is a man who cares deeply about social issues, particularly about gun safety. As someone who grew up a “Navy brat,” Jason was surrounded by guns and strongly believes in the Second Amendment, and also believes that those who support the Second Amendment “and people who don't like guns, but want to feel safe, could have a real conversation about: How do we pass laws that meet everybody's needs and makes sense? Guns are fun to shoot. I'm a good shot. But when there's a shooting of kids in a school, and everybody just throws their hands up and says, ‘This is a shame this happens,’ and nobody does anything, I get pissed. I have kids and Sandy





What are you watching on TV?

"I binge watched *Jessica Jones*, which is, again, a Marvel superhero thing. It's a phenomenal feminist take on a superhero. This season, every director was a woman, some of them were friends. I think it was written all by women. They take the normal issues that people have, that women have, and they turn it up to exponential levels. I was really impressed by it."

Hook is where I kinda really flipped out, and from there, the bill [H.J. Res 40. See side box for more.]. No! We're going to make a change," says the Everytown For Gun Safety supporter. "Nobody protects their house with an automatic weapon or goes hunting with an AR-15... When there are shootings, we yell at them [NRA], so we don't yell at the gun manufacturers. It's like the Wizard of Oz: Be afraid of that guy over there. Don't pay any attention to that manufacturer behind the curtain. That's a problem because they're stopping the conversation."

The other problem, Jason adds, is the nonsensical Dickey Amendment passed by former congressman Jay Dickey of Arkansas that "forbid the government from studying gun violence. Literally, don't study it... The government should be the neutral party, the referee. You pass a law to make us *not* analyze one of the major problems in our nation today, just because you want to make sure nobody gets real information and it becomes a problem? Any sane human being sees that's a problem." [See side box for why the former congressman regrets passing this amendment.] What gives Jason hope is the kids and the moms who are pushing for action. "Kids from Parkland are on fire. They're going to keep everyone else energized. I don't think these kids are going away. Most of them are going to be voting in a year or two, if not this year, so, I'm hopeful in a way I haven't been in sometime, and just trying to be a part of it as much as I can and support any way I can."

A self-proclaimed "big old geek" with a comic book collection consisting of several thousand (stored at his mom's house), he is the dad who takes his three children to see every superhero movie released. We talk comic book movies and about the complex characters in them. "Marvel tends to do things right, 'cause if it's just dudes in tights fighting, I could care less. The thing that always interests me about superheroes was the same thing you do with mythology or *Grey's Anatomy*. Let's take these people that are kinda heroes or are perceived as heroes, let's look at their flaws. Let's look at who they are as people, and how tough it is to do this thing. It kinda sucks a lot of the time. If you're one of the best soldiers ever, you get tons of praise and medals, but you leave your family, you put your life in danger. All this other grief comes with it. That's been the case with Odysseus from the *Odyssey*. So was the case in my family, and every family I grew up knowing." A couple of superhero films he appreciates are *Black Panther* ("That is religion in my house. I've been waiting for that movie basically my whole life.") and *Logan* ("For me, that was to superhero movies, what *Unforgiven* was to westerns. It's like, you can do another one, but why? You're never going to beat that.").

So, what superhero would you like to portray? I query. Reluctant to answer since "a lot of the great ones are taken," Jason finally plays along. Captain America, because he too

belonged in the Jazz Age and identifies with him. "He's the incredibly patriotic guy, who also has tremendous problems with the government and that, to me, is the African American experience in a nutshell... There was a point where the original Captain America quits and one of his best friends, who happens to be African American, becomes Captain America for a while." This reminds him of the "American Boy" limited series piece of art by Chaz Guest that hangs in his dining room. "It's a small black boy with cotton in front of him, standing against the American flag, and it's like all the complexities of being an African American rolled into one image for me, 'cause I'm the kind of idiot who will tear up at the singing of the National Anthem and then I will march because Black Lives Matter. And I have friends who don't see how I can reconcile those two things." He explains that America is about these perfect ideas, and how the men who created them weren't even aware of how perfect they were. For example, the U.S. Declaration of Independence reads: "All men are created equal"—'all' including African Americans, and men also meaning women, he tells me. "We've managed to screw it up seven ways to Sunday, but the ideas are still something to be striving for." Spoken like a true patriot. It could happen, I comment about him portraying Captain America. He flashes me an incredulous look along with a response that matches. Hey, I can see it, even if he can't.

A film you can count on seeing Jason in very soon is *Breaking In*. Slated for release this May, Jason appears in the home-invasion thriller as Justin Russell, alongside Gabrielle Union. "I hang out with strong women," he says about "Gabby," who he first met while filming the 2007 indie, *The Box*. "She's fun. We laugh, crack jokes." Tightlipped about the movie, all Jason reveals is that he plays Gabrielle's husband. "She goes to her father's house and craziness ensues."

With over 59 acting credits under his belt, Jason is more excited about *Station 19* than he's been for any other project for a while now. "It's all the factors coming into play, not just brilliant writing and great words to say and great complex relationships to get into but, I get to be on the ground floor, helping build what that environment is, behind the camera and in front of the camera... Every day I am on the verge of tears because of what's happening on our show. Table reads for *Grey's* and *Station 19*, people cry...It's gotten to the point where we point and laugh at each other. Table reads are just so much fun; it's where I can just be a fan of the show...which is a testament of how good these shows are." ML

Keep up with Jason on Twitter: @JasonWGeorge, Instagram: @JasonWinstonGeorge. And don't miss *Station 19* Thursdays at 9/8c on ABC.



Working in Shondaland

"TV is a place to escape, but it could also inform and educate, you just can't get on a soapbox about it. Shonda's always going to make a thing that entertains the hell out of you, but if she could get you to open your mind at the same time... 50% of the population are women, but how come 50% of the leads in television aren't? In Shondaland, they are. She's not going to make a big deal about it, but there it is. There are times that I turn around and look and there are 5-6 people of color in a scene. No big deal about it. They just happen to be of color and really the best doctors in town. The fact that she'll very subtly put that in there, while still making a very good product, is just inspiring as all hell. Something that I want to emulate as I go forward in my career...It's really not easy to be an executive producer and become a brand, but Shonda and Spelling have mastered it and they have very different brands."



A CALL FOR GUN SAFETY

H.J.Res.40

In February 2017, the House and Senate passed the H.J.Res.40 bill (that President Donald Trump quietly signed), which revoked the Obama-era regulation. As stated on NBCNews.com: "President Barack Obama recommended the now-nullified regulation in a 2013 memo following the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, which left 20 first graders and six others dead. The measure sought to block some people with severe mental health problems from buying guns."

"The first major gun legislation that our current president signed, under the cover of darkness, made it easier for mentally ill people to buy guns—a law from the Obama-era that's specifically targeting veterans in large part, that said, 'If you are deemed mentally ill enough that you can't handle your own money, then you can't buy a gun.' I think that makes sense..." says Jason. This particularly hits close to home since—Jason points out—veterans are most likely to commit suicide using a gun. "There's so many laws that I might disagree with, but I see the justification. I might disagree with it, but I get it. There's no version of that that's not just about money. That's money over lives and you can't tell me it's not."

Former congressman Jay Dickey of Arkansas' Regret

In an NPR interview with host Steve Inskeep on October 9, 2015, Jay Dickey admitted that the Dickey Amendment was a mistake. The transcription reads: "Since the 1990s, that provision has commonly stopped any gun studies because researchers don't want to risk losing federal money, and that is what Jay Dickey regrets. The Arkansas politician and owner of two shotguns says he just wanted the CDC to follow a simple rule," says Steve. "Don't let any of those dollars go to gun control advocacy," says Jay. The increase in mass shootings over the years continues to remind Jay how this amendment has failed our country. "I've gone back through it in my mind to say, what could we have done, and I know what we could've done. We could've kept the fund alive and just restricted the expenditure of dollars," says Jay. Steve replies, "It has created a strange situation, hasn't it? If you want to learn details about mass shootings, you can't really find good information." Jay responds, "Well, I think you're right. And the thing that really brought this to my mind was watching as the little barricades were set up between the interstate to stop head-on collisions. The highway industry spent money in their scientific research to figure out what could be done, assuming that they were going to allow cars to continue to be on our highways. Enormous reduction of head-on collisions has been caused just by that little 2-and-a-half, 3-foot fence. We could do the same in the gun industry," says Jay.

Steve replies, "You're saying there might be some way to not interfere with anybody's right to own a gun, but regulate it in such a way that fewer people are killed by guns?"

To which Jay responds, "That's correct. I can't tell you what that might be, but I know this. All this time that we have had, we would've found a solution, in my opinion. And I think it's a shame that we haven't," says Jay.

To help get the Dickey Amendment repealed, sign the petition:
www.change.org/p/u-s-house-of-representatives-let-the-cdc-conduct-research-on-gun-violence-end-the-dickey-amendment

Also, contact your local representative and let them know that you wish to have the Dickey Amendment repealed: www.house.gov/representatives/find