



Hollywood actor Steven Parker of Centennial shivers in the snow outside his family's home Dec. 28. Parker has been in several movies, including "Juno," and is on TV's 'ER'.

Ann Foster | afoster@ccnewspapers

Local actor lands role on 'ER'

Teen from Centennial specializes in 'nerd' roles

By Peter Jones
Staff Writer

Steven Parker isn't a doctor, but he plays one on TV.

At Park Meadows, the actor was approached by a half-dozen onlookers who could have sworn they had seen his youthful face before — and not while on the uncomfortable end of a tongue depressor.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look like that guy on 'ER'?" one shopper quizzed 18-year-old Parker.

"Yeah, I've heard that before," he replied.

Parker admits he bears more than a physical resemblance to Dr. Harold Zelinsky, the awkward 19-year-old genius who was introduced to the NBC hospital drama earlier this season.

"I play the nerdy types more than anything else," said the Centennial teen. "That's really who I am — a nerdy guy who never really fit in with the pack."

Fictional Dr. Zelinsky — with his tendency toward socially insecure outbursts — is even less adept than the self-described nerdy actor who plays him, however.

"To prep for that role, I went to a party and I just observed all night how I was acting and then I just went to the extreme when I was on the set," Parker said. "My character is amazing in the medical profession. He can do a 14-hour surgery and save somebody's life, but he can't say hello to the woman at the drive-through window."

Like his TV counterpart, Parker prefers the pressures of an ambitious career over casual social interaction. Give him the choice between mingling at a Hollywood party or facing the pressures of stand-up comedy and he'll take hecklers over party minglers every time.

"I'm terrified of social situations," the actor said, "but if you put me in front of 200 people, I can make them laugh hysterically."

Parker's résumé includes stand-up comedy, music videos, commercials, sitcoms and more than 20 movies, including the recent and critically acclaimed "Juno," in which he as a bit part as a high school lab partner who loudly breaks up with his girlfriend in a memorable scene.

Parker caught the acting bug as a child. At 7, he began playing bit parts at the now-defunct Country Dinner



Courtesy photo

Actor Steven Parker and fellow 'ER' cast member Parminder Nagra take a break on the set.

Playhouse. Even then, theater was more than a pastime for the ambitious young thespian.

"Everything was such a big deal for me," he said. "I took my two lines so seriously. I wanted to be perfect."

The hard work would pay off. At 12, the budding actor somehow talked his parents into taking him on his first jaunt to Los Angeles. Despite an almost complete lack of work, Parker remained resilient and made two more pilgrimages to Hollywood in as many years. He received little employment for his efforts, but learned his craft in intensive acting classes.

"It was extremely intimidating," Parker said of Hollywood. "There were a million actors who looked just like me. I had no idea how I was ever going to overcome it. But acting gets in your blood. You just can't live without it. You'd rather be a failure than not try at all."

After appearing in several unpaid student films, Parker eventually inked a deal with an agent and received his coveted Screen Actors Guild card. His first paying job was playing a zombie in a music video. Always committed to fully exploring his characters, he soon reprised the role in a Diet Coke commercial.

Parker got his big break in 2005, when he landed a major supporting role in "Rebound." The comedy starred Martin Lawrence as a disgraced professional basketball coach who tries to resuscitate his career by coaching a team of middle school misfits to victory.

While the script dribbled familiar territory, "Rebound" was a major

score for Parker, who worked hard to perfect his character — the lanky Wes, a hopelessly uncoordinated "band dork" who gets recruited solely because of his 6-foot-plus height.

"I worked my butt off before the filming," Parker said. "We had two months of prep time, and I memorized the whole script. I did everything I could to get that role perfect. Doors started opening after that and I started getting a new confidence."

Before long, the actor was working in movies alongside the likes of Christopher Plummer and Diane Keaton. His projects for release in 2008 include "Section B" and "Happiness Runs." He played a small part in 2006's Academy Award-winning "Little Miss Sunshine," but wound up on the cutting-room floor.

Parker landed the role on "ER" despite the initial misgivings of a casting department that ironically thought the actor looked too young to play the 19-year-old medical genius.

"They wanted somebody about 25 to play it. They didn't think anyone would believe I was a doctor," Parker said. "But it really isn't a challenge. People are believing it."

The youthful actor hopes to eventually graduate from what is effectively Central Casting's nerds-on-call division. While Parker does not think he is cut out to be a "leading man," per se, he would love the opportunity to stretch his range in an off-beat lead role.

As inspiration, Parker turns to one of his favorite actors, Philip Seymour Hoffman, who was known for playing a slew of unstable characters before landing lead parts in such recent films as "The Savages" and "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead."

"I'm having so much fun doing all the things I've always dreamed of doing, but there's so much more I can do," Parker said. "I would love to do lead roles and have millions of dollars coming in, but that's second to just experiencing today and not worrying about what's coming next."

Parker, who lives in Burbank when he is not home for the holidays, is content for now to hone his craft while making a living — even though his career has often involved rejection, stress and 70-hour work weeks.

"Acting is harder than anybody could ever expect," he said. "Not only do you have to be good at what you do, you have to be good at auditioning. You have to be good at people skills. You have to work harder than you've ever known."