



Hidden agenda

With its twists, turns and cover-ups is *The Event* the new *Lost*?

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Cover story



Shall we tell the president?

TV3's upcoming conspiracy series *The Event* hopes to fill a certain island-shaped hole in our hearts. Sarah Lang spoke to star Blair Underwood.

MEET A 40-something, good-looking, black US president with a young family, smooth voice, powerful rhetoric, strong ideals, warm temperament and a mandate for change. Yes, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the part of President Elias Martinez in the upcoming smash-hit TV series *The Event*, which premieres in New Zealand on November 16, is a sketch of America's resident president.

Playing President Martinez is multi-award-winning actor Blair Underwood, 46. Although he reckons Martinez is an amalgamation of a few figures, he admits that comparisons between the real and fictional presidents are inevitable.

And Underwood, who rallied for Barack Obama's candidacy, knows the world's most powerful man better than most. The actor met him while researching his Golden Globe-nominated *LA Law* role at Harvard Law School about 20 years ago.

Underwood confesses it's weird to imagine Obama watching him play president in this conspiracy thriller. "I know he's busy with leading the Free World but I ran into the First Lady a few months back and she said she'd keep an eye out for it."

It would be no surprise if the First Family has caught a few episodes. Averaging more than nine million US viewers since its debut in September, *The Event* has just been picked up for a full 22-episode season. It's also airing in Australia, Canada, the UK, South Africa, Sweden, Russia, Poland, Italy, the Philippines, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. No wonder TV3 snapped it up, to the delight of Underwood, who fell for New Zealand while here for *Telethon* 20 years ago and is keen to come back.

The hugely likeable, laidback actor is now filming episode 10 in his turn as president. "Yes, it was very flattering to be asked. I don't ask why, I just say thank you very much."

When the call came to join the *Event* cast, he was busy putting together a documentary about the history of African-American entertainers, but the TV series was too good to turn down.

"What's fascinating about this show is we're straddling three genres: love story, political thriller, and . . ."

Sorry folks, I can't expand on that as the exact

storyline must stay under wraps but I can reveal that a computer programmer (Jason Ritter) whose girlfriend is kidnapped stumbles into the biggest cover-up in history. The ructions ripple all the way to the president, whose advisers are keeping a big secret from him, a secret which will change the course of his presidency, his country and perhaps of mankind. Think Guantanamo Bay, but bigger.

As the first episode flicks between timeframes, you're not sure how it all fits together. But while the show echoes *The X-Files*, 9/11 movies and, dare I say it, *Lost*, fear not: the writers aren't making it up as they go along and won't drag it out indefinitely while the storyline gets ever more bizarre. Underwood says lessons have been learned from the *Lost* backlash. "They've really thought this show out. You don't want to frustrate the audience." Indeed, we find out what



"the event" is in episode one, and from there get enough answers to keep us going.

To preserve some mystery, though, the actors are only filled in on a need-to-know basis. I don't think Underwood's joking when he says a secret dossier about the storyline was delivered to his house. The plot is almost as secretive as "the event" is within the show's world. "I know," Underwood agrees. "But I'm enjoying not knowing." Especially when his kids (9, 11 and 13) who watch it with him, ask what happens next. "It's the only thing of mine they've ever watched or been interested in, and I can genuinely say I have no idea what happens. It's a good position to be in. You don't have to lie."

The show sucks you into its vortex via a website which presents "the event" as factual and the characters as real people with specific interests, back stories and even faux news

articles. "They've really created a world beyond the TV screen," muses Underwood. President Martinez, for instance, is an Afro-Cuban son of immigrants, a Yale graduate, devoted father, good cook and baseball fan who gave up sport for politics and who plays drums in the White House's soundproofed basement to relieve stress.

That realism appealed to Underwood. "The producers said 'This will be rooted in reality.'" The event may be unthinkable, but the reactions to it aren't. You believe this could unfold as it does, and watching episode one confirmed that for Underwood. "I've been disappointed in the past but I was completely blown away by this."

I ask Underwood if he has ever been a conspiracy theorist, expecting him to say no. "Yes," he responds. "My father is a 27-year Army colonel of the United States military and when I was a child he worked in intelligence, so we

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BLAIR UNDERWOOD ON THE REAL PRESIDENT

knew from a very young age that there are always things going on that you're not aware of, that you don't need to know. I absolutely believe and know without a doubt that there are things going on behind [closed] doors."

The Event is nothing if not thought-provoking, especially about the fragility and blurring of rights and truths and what we should or shouldn't sacrifice for the greater good for a better world. "It's asking 'What do you believe? And what do you do?' In the president's case, especially." Because Martinez is a good guy pulled in two directions: between his values and the most sensible course of action.

Underwood admits that yes, it was daunting to imagine himself into the headspace of someone whose decisions could rock the world. But he decided that his character was man first, president second: "A man who happens to have

taken this office." And a man who had just a three-month apprenticeship for running the country. "Like the real president's circumstance recently: arguably nobody is really ready for that first step. The idealism goes by the wayside when you're faced with the reality and the gravity and the weight of that office. I cannot imagine having the stress of the world on your head," he says. "You think of clergy and doctors as always on call; but when you're president you really are always on call."

It's not a career move that appeals to Underwood. Also a director, a producer and a co-writer of detective novels (plus an awarded philanthropist), this creative chameleon has his own production company.

"It enables my need to express myself and flex different creative muscles. What made me want to become an actor, and what I love most about it, is the ability to become different people."

LA Law's stubborn attorney Jonathan Rollins (1987-94) is perhaps his best-known character but there have been many more. Often playing educated, authoritative men, he has appeared in feature films (*Gattaca*, *Full Frontal*, *Rules of Engagement*), theatre, TV films, and many TV shows (*The Cosby Show*, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, *In Treatment*, *Dirty Sexy Money*, *Sex and the City*).

In the process, he has nabbed a fair few female fans. Once featured in *Playgirl* magazine, Underwood has twice been named one of the world's most beautiful people. "My mother probably put that out there. No, I'm kidding. It's fun because I could be called worse things, but I don't put a lot of thought into it."

What he does put a lot of thought into is his projects. Making a conscious decision not to sell his soul, he hasn't tried to scale the Hollywood ladder. He picks parts not according to blockbuster status or big budgets but the strength of the character, script, producers and writers.

"At a certain point you have to contribute to things you're passionate about. And I've done creatively fulfilling projects that I'm very passionate about but nobody sees it. I want people to see it. I want an audience." He's certainly got that now.

The Event debuts on TV3 Tuesday, November 16, at 8.30pm (*Outrageous Fortune*'s former timeslot).