

ACUTE ISLAND FEVER

Lost's Illin' Villain

» TV's favorite desert island has angry polar bears, a murderous smoke monster, and a crazy French woman, but **MICHAEL EMERSON's** mild-mannered manipulator is the scariest thing around.

Michael Emerson should be unemployed right now. When his *Lost* character, Henry Gale, was found hanging up a tree in a bear trap last season, it was clear that the odds (and the writers) were against him. His story didn't add up, and then he was taken hostage by a gun-toting former Iraqi soldier and a crossbow-wielding survivalist. He was slated to die a few episodes later. Instead, Henry—who, if we can believe anything he says, is actually named Benjamin Linus—has turned out to be more terrifying than anything else on the island.

Even Emerson hasn't figured out what makes his character so spooky. "Maybe it's that he seems to have an agenda but no one knows what it is," the actor speculates. "Because the evidence of him being a wicked guy is sort of slim. He's the one who always seems to be beaten, shot with arrows, tied up."

He's also the one who tried to strangle L.A. cop Ana-Lucia, beat the crap out of con man Sawyer, pitted de facto leaders Jack and Locke against each other in a carefully calculated mind game, and turned out to be—maybe—the leader of the villainous Others.

In the spring premiere, he's also the one bleeding to death while spinal



Opposite page: Photographs by Dan Szebel

surgeon Jack holds his survival for ransom. "Lost is a show about people coming and going," Emerson says. "It's probably not too good to get settled here." A few cast members have purchased homes near the Oahu set; Emerson is still renting.

Maybe that's because he's learned how unreliable his profession can be. After graduating from Drake University in 1976, he joined the ranks of struggling actors in New York City, eventually taking a job as a magazine illustrator. He tried again in Florida in 1986, doing community theater for seven years. Then he gave Hollywood another try. "I was searching for the next thing to do," he tells us. "There was nowhere to go but up."

And up he went, with a few small film roles here, a TV movie there. In 2000, he nabbed a recurring spot as a serial killer on *The Practice* and walked away with an Emmy.

"I've ended up on the dark end of the spectrum," Emerson says. But "even the worst people take pride in their work. And it makes a nice dilemma for the audience if they get caught up with you, if they become accomplices in a way."

That doesn't mean he has any idea what the hell is going on with the show. "I always thought the Others were a band of freedom fighters who broke away from some abusive governmental agency or something," he says. "But they seem to be sort of commandos now. When Henry Gale said, 'We're the good guys,' I think he meant that. But I don't know if that's going to play out. The writers trick me, too. They get me thinking of myself in a glorified and heroic way, and then they have me do something terrible."

If the fall episodes were any indication, Ben will continue to do terrible things—assuming he survives his spinal surgery. But like any realistic *Lost*-away, Emerson's given his grand exit some thought. "I think if and when [Ben] goes, his eyes are still open." **O+**