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## CBS Drama 'Scorpion' Takes Stories From Computer Genius's Life, Work

ByKathy Shwiff



Front row from left, 'Scorpion' cast members Elyes Gabel, Katharine McPhee and Ari Stidham. Back row, computer expert Walter O'Brien, left, and executive producer Nick Santora. — Associated Press

The new [CBS](#) drama “Scorpion” is based on the life of Walter O'Brien, the fourth-smartest man in the world.

O'Brien, who has an IQ of 197 and runs a company that solves high-tech problems for businesses and governments, estimated that 70 percent of the pilot's plot actually occurred, although he predicted that what viewers believe is true probably isn't and vice versa.

He joined “Scorpion” cast members and producers during a discussion sponsored by the Paley Center for Media in Los Angeles on Sunday night. The panel was distributed on the Internet through

Livestream.

The writers have changed the names and cities but episodes depict things that happened, O'Brien said. "Every episode is based in truth, especially when you get to the emotional level of the show."

Scooter Braun, one of the show's executive producers and a talent manager who represents megastar Justin Bieber, said he met O'Brien through a friend's father and knew his story would make a good TV series.

The show was created by Nick Santora, a writer and producer who has worked on "Prison Break," "Lie To Me" and "Breakout Kings," among others.

The characters are based on O'Brien and the people he works with, and Santora said some of the actors have met the individuals they are portraying.

Casting the lead was difficult because we had "to find an actor that the audience would like and want to get to know but (who) would have trouble emoting," Santora said. Elyes Gabel, who plays O'Brien, was "able to play the difficulty of expressing emotion while being emotional," he added.

Gabel, who has appeared on British TV shows as well as HBO's "Game of Thrones," said, "You guys realized more than I did how suited I was" to play O'Brien. When he has a question about his role, "I pick up the phone and call Walter."

Katharine McPhee, an "American Idol" runner-up and one of the stars of NBC's "Smash," plays a waitress and mother of a 9-year-old son who also has a very high IQ. She has trouble connecting with her son until they meet O'Brien and his team, who become their surrogate family.

Robert Patrick, who appeared in "True Blood" and "From Dusk till Dawn" among many TV shows and movies, plays a government agent who coordinates the work of O'Brien's group. Patrick said his part is a "culmination of a lot of characters I've played in the past." He especially likes the paternal aspect of the role.

Patrick praised the script for the pilot, which involves a software glitch in the Los Angeles International Airport tower that threatens controllers' abilities to safely land dozens of planes. "I haven't read anything quite like this. It's got the action and some real poignant moments."

The pilot, which airs Sept. 22, was directed by Justin Lin, who directed some of the "Fast & Furious" movies and is set to direct the next film in the "Bourne" series.

Eddie Kaye Thomas, who had roles in the "American Pie" and "Harold & Kumar" movies, said he had a meal with O'Brien and the man whom Thomas is portraying in "Scorpion." It was interesting to see "how different Walter was with this guy," he said.

"The show is about how difficult it can be to be this smart and how important it is that we find each other," he added.

Santora said the show is a procedural, with weekly episodes that will have a beginning, a middle and an end, but it also will explore the characters' back stories. The character played by Jadyn Wong had a "heartbreaking childhood," and McPhee's character "has a very important visitor from her past who comes back."

Santora also expects more episodes full of action. "CBS supports our desire to do bigger stories," he said, adding that the producers want to "give our team the opportunity to be heroes."

O'Brien, described by executive producer Alex Kurtzman as the son of an Irish potato farmer who hacked into government computers at age 12, said he grew up watching "The A-Team" and "MacGyver" on TV, "and now I run a team saving the world."

The Los Angeles resident said he knew he would lose some privacy with a TV series based on his life but he welcomes a chance to show other "mentally enabled" people, especially children, that they are not alone.

"I'm going to lose some privacy, but we're going to help some people," he said, noting that there is a higher rate of suicide, unemployment and substance abuse among people with the highest IQs.

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