

Roger Pretto

Florida Talent on the Road UP, and OUT

By Anne Rose

He paints, he writes, and... his acting talents are in peak demand in Florida. Local agents consider him the best actor in the state. Yet, in spite of his latest successes on stage, television, and film he's working less than ever. How can that be? Apparently it's a phenomenon common to actors who succeed in Florida.

Roger Pretto, star of the local popular and controversial film *The Victims*-believed the necessary opportunities to succeed were available in Florida when he decided to move to Miami five years ago at the peak of his notoriety as an actor/artist in Panama. *Miami Vice* was still roaring strong and major film studios were under construction. Florida's film industry seemed on the road to generating its own films. Roger wanted "to widen (his) artistic horizons."

Coming to the US was the obvious thing to do for the aspiring actor. He speaks perfect English. He was educated in American schools since childhood, lived in different parts of the US during the late 50's and mid 60's, and his wife of 25 years and his two children are American. He feels at home here. He also dreamed of performing in American films... but not always.

From age 23, Roger had been CEO for a decade of a 45 employee international corporation in Panama. He made a comfortable living as a businessman, but never really found fulfillment as one. When he realized at 30 that his true calling was to be an artist, he stepped out the corporate doors and never looked back.

Notoriety as an artist came rapidly and fate in 1977 lured him into acting. Without ever having performed on stage or in public, he was offered a leading role in a major hit play. He fell in love with the art of acting and plunged in to explore the expressive possibilities and creative challenges he sensed lay within it. Lacking any serious TV or Film industry, Panama was only able to offer the stage as an outlet for his now burning desire to act. When he realized that Panama's limitations for growth as an actor were seriously curbing his progress, he decided to emigrate.

Once in Miami Roger took on the discouraging process of becoming a working actor in South Florida. He plowed stubbornly through the grinding mill of cattle calls for commercials and occasional bit parts in TV and movie productions coming to Florida.

Roger's acting skills were promptly recognized by local casting offices who began calling him in to read for more substantive roles. But the characters he was assigned to audition for were always Hispanic. With features that don't fit the Latino stereotype generally sought for ethnic roles, Roger faced a great number of rejections because physically he wasn't "right for

the part." Perfectly capable of non-ethnic characterizations, Roger struggled (and still does) against the propensity of agents to call him in only for Hispanic role readings.

Yet, it was a series of memorable *Miami Vice* performances and other film appearances as an Hispanic that soon established the actor as one of Florida's best.

Versatility makes for great acting and Roger, even when confined to Hispanic parts only, proved he has the dramatic stuff that breaks molds. In *Vice* he dressed the different roles he landed with remarkably contrasting portrayals. His handsomely suave drug kingpin Morales in "Kill-shot," for example, is drastically dissimilar to the politically obsessed commissioner Vazquez he played in "Rising Sun of Death." His single scene characterization of Miranda, which is said to have been the best thing in the series' otherwise unimpressively performed final episode, stands markedly apart from Morales and Vazquez.

Given longer parts Roger's transformation skills within a single role are even better displayed. In *Victims* he played 20 years of Paul Genesco's life with an involvement of character that's as subtle as they come. At first he's the ingratiating innocent Paul who lands on US shores penniless and illegally, but determined to survive and dream. Then, imperceptively, he molts into the older well grounded developer Genesco who achieves wealth and power only to fall from those heights as a victim of AIDS. Roger gave a performance filled with unequivocal emotional rawness which critics agreed contributed singlehandedly to the film's unexpected local box office success (it ran close third regionally to *Sea of Love* and *Black Rain*.)

Roger was finally given the opportunity to break the Hispanic typecast, playing Police Chief "Zeke" Harris in *Superboy*. He credits the show's casting director's vision and proper understanding of his skills for calling him in to read for the strictly Anglo character. Roger gives the *Superboy* cast much needed quality and balance by playing Harris effectively as the authoritative figure which understands and paternally excuses the heroes' innocent mischiefs which frequently land them in trouble.

Roger's acting savvy was even more evident on stage in *Darkness at Noon* portraying the imprisoned aging Russian Commissar riddled with personal ideological turmoil and guilt. Roger graced the role with consummate actorial deliverance and unpurged believability. A pity the play was so pitifully promoted, for this was a performance not to be missed.

If his future achievements match the quality of his most recent ones, Roger might well be on the road to great things. Recognition will most likely be forthcoming if *Victims* manages national

distribution. The film has enough mass appeal to override its inherent shortcomings. Had the story allowed Roger's character more dramatic ground and delved deeper into the emotional ravages of AIDS, the film and Roger's performance could have easily met the standards for important recognition.

In South Florida Roger has been consistently accumulating recognition points. Though his sizzling characterization of Lt. Harris in a kiddie series like *Superboy* might not earn him national attention, locally it has fixed him as a qualified acting asset. Roger is sure to harvest even further local prestige from the stunning and electrifying portrayal he gave as Rubishov in *Darkness at Noon* — a performance which critics agree qualify him for a Carbonell.

For someone accumulating such solid performing merits, one would think the name Roger Pretto would be more familiar to Florida's entertainment public than it is. But for someone who harvests success modestly, this is not surprising. Roger's personality insulated approach to his career's achievements keep him off the media spotlight. He prefers it that way, if he can help it. Assigned to produce the TV spot for *Victims*, he wrote the copy without mentioning his name as the starring role. "The film's message was the important thing," he says.

Roger shuns socialization as a means to gain exposure and work, and he adamantly rejects publicity geared to building up a celebrity. At the opening of *Victims* he refused to stamp his hands and sign his name in concrete for the media as others have done on the theater's sidewalk.

To gain new opportunities Roger prefers to let his work speak for itself. That work has so far earned him a respectful notoriety among his peers and a discreet and loyal popularity. Casting directors seek him out because the professional quality of his work can be relied on, not because he's networked with them at parties or paid them social calls.

"I'm a simple sort of guy who keeps very much to himself," Roger says. He clarifies that he's not a recluse, he just prefers to be "socially removed" for now. "There's so much I want to do that requires being alone."

Roger says he needs the time to devote himself to painting and the writing of a third and fourth screenplay. Naturally he hopes for another good role in a film. *Victims* could prove the right vehicle to get it. His performance and screen charisma proved he can carry a film effectively. If released nationally *Victims* might bring him new offers from productions now under planning in Florida. Those fruits, however, are proving slow in coming, if they come at all, and the actor is growing impatient. He might move on.

Roger prefers not to leave

Florida. He's done well here. Consistent good work over the five years he's been here has earned him progressively better roles and steady employment. That's success by Florida standards. But now that very success has trapped Roger in a limbo good actors in Florida inevitably fall into and that eventually forces them to leave.

To build upon their growing success, serious actors must match or surpass their previous accomplishments. To do so, they need new opportunities to try out for bigger and better roles. In Florida those opportunities are simply not available frequently enough, if at all. The waiting can prove corrosive and frustrating for actors with star quality. More and better work is the stuff that feeds a performer's growth as an artist. That growth can be stunted by a loss of working momentum.

Aggravating the problem, is the lameness with which talent agencies throughout the state promote outstanding talent. Florida agents operate under an antiquated system ill-equipped to generate quality opportunities for quality talent to try out for. They seem incapable of effectively promoting the exceptionally skilled performer. As a result producers are generally left unaware that high caliber talent is available locally. They cast their more important roles in either LA or NY and turn to Florida only to fill the less significant ones.

With a series of important TV roles under his belt and a starring one in film, Roger is understandably hungry for more. Seriously committed to his craft he knows that to excel he must hone his skills at bigger and better things. But the local talent services are just not ready to push open the doors that provide them. So, as good actors usually do here, he's about to leave us. Florida's about to lose another artist.

Talent as Roger's improves the quality of Florida's ballooning film industry, an industry which produces films capably but has yet to realize what *Victims* proved can be done — that the capacity to finance films where local stars can star in them exists as well.

I spoke with Roger about this dilemma our better talents have always been faced with.

Q. Why are you thinking of leaving Florida?

Pretto: I have no choice, it seems. I'm just not working enough at the things I want to work at. The opportunities to try out for those things are not available here in sufficient numbers.

Q. Is it hard to get work here?

Pretto: Not for me. I've been lucky. I've been working pretty regularly for a number of years, but not enough on the things I want to. Commercials and bit parts are nice to get. They pay the rent, but the reason I got into acting in the first place was because I discovered it was another artistic vehicle I could use to discover wonderful things about the human condition. Those things are built into good scripts and good roles. These are the things I'm after.

Q. You're critical of the way the talent agency system works here in Florida. Is that part of the reason why you're leaving?

Pretto: Yes. Not because the agents are bad, but because the system, how it operates, is not geared to opening major doors for someone with my needs.

Q. How does it keep those doors from opening?

Pretto: Unintentionally the system restricts good talent from landing more and better parts

and increasing one's worth as an actor.

Actors can register here with as many agents as they wish. This system is justified by the notion that there is not enough business around for talent to be signed exclusively with one agency as they are in New York and LA. This might have been true some years ago, but I believe the film industry in Florida has advanced enough to make that type of reasoning obsolete now. A good actor needs an aggressive agent to sell his skills with all the enthusiasm and negotiating expertise that agent can muster. The agent must work for him as hard as, if not harder, than the actor himself would.

To expect this kind of allegiance and dedication from an agent, the agent must be insured that the rewards of laboring for you will be theirs alone. The way Florida's multiple agency system is set up, however, the long lasting compensations for the agent's extra-ordinary efforts are simply not insured.

Why should an agent bend over backwards to get your career moving when the next time a job opportunity comes along another agent might get your commission if they happen to get you on the phone first?

Q. How much commission do agents get?

Pretto: 10% of your gross earnings. That sounds like a lot because it is a lot in a sense. At times I've felt I'm giving the commission away, because all the agent does for you is call you on the phone, submit your picture, and notifies you if you're booked. When you're making a reasonably good income, paying 10% out of your gross pay for these meager efforts just doesn't seem right. On the other hand I have a lot of empathy for talent agents and their struggle for survival here. Trying to make ends meet on 10% of little bits of salaries from talent that's registered all over the place doesn't amount to much believe me.

Look, I'm just touching lightly over this issue. The problem goes much deeper than that. Bottom line is that the system is unfair to both talent and agent.

Q. What should be done?

Pretto: It has to change. Agents should get together and find a way to deal with this. It's in their best interest. There'll be a price to pay, of course.

Q. What price is that?

Pretto: Some agencies will go out of business. If the answer is to sign talent on exclusive terms, agents are going to have to scramble for the best talent. Since the best talent will be getting the most work, the question for the agents will be, How do I convince the best talent to sign up with my agency? There's the rub. There are agencies that simply don't cut the mustard. Good talent will want to keep away from them.

Q. How does the exclusive arrangement benefit talent?

Pretto: Agents will be obliged and hopefully motivated to work hard for you since the reward for their efforts, the commission, is exclusively theirs. With this compensation guaranteed for them, we as talent can finally expect agents to earn their 10%.

Q. If getting the role is really determined by how talent does in an audition, why should any added efforts from an agent other than submitting you for a reading make any difference in getting you the role?

Pretto: Because a reading is

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Roger Pretto, Florida Talent on The Road Up and Out, *Continued from page 17*

not necessarily the best or only system available to filter out the best qualified talent. By relying solely on cold readings cast selectors can very well be cheating themselves out of hiring exceptional talent.

Personally, I don't do my best in auditions. One doesn't always have what is necessary to audition well. Many times the very environment one is to do the reading in is terrible. For so many stupid reasons "things" just don't "feel" right to the point where one simply doesn't do their best. When a reading is the only criterion used to select talent, good talent may very well be overlooked.

But what about the actor's reputation, his past work? These are elements that are clear testimonies of his skills, perhaps the best of testimonies. Those will never be exposed in a reading. The "impressive" information on your resume surely doesn't seem to compensate either for the unlucky conditions or deficiencies affecting your reading.

A. How can the casting selectors be made aware that a talent warrants a closer look, further consideration?

Pretto: Well, to start with, the most practical method would be through a video Demo, a kind of visual resume of the talent's past work. What better proof is there of an actor's true performing skills, of how he really registers on camera, than a sample of the excellent work he's done in the past? The video is a new and powerful tool for that purpose.

Q. How does one get the directors and producers to take the time to look at an actor's video?

Pretto: That's where both the casting and talent agents come in. It should be one of the agent's functions, don't you think? I mean, an agent, should use any recourse at his or her disposal to help get their client the job. Besides, the written resume is usually looked-over together with a head shot. Why can't time be taken to look over a visual one? Agencies, talent and castings, in Florida are not hip to using the video effectively.

Q. Why can't the actor do this on his own? Why must he depend on the agent to do this for him?

Pretto: Because when an actor suggests a viewing of his demo, directors and producers, even casting directors generally take this as being pushy and stepping over boundaries the talent has no business crossing. I know 'cause it's happened to me. I've lost good chances at parts because the mere suggestion irritated someone at the reading. And in our business all it takes is but one little "false step" like this on the talent's part to turn the attitude from "the powers that be" against him.

Pushing for your talent is an effort more generally accepted from an agent, for obvious reasons. Getting the video seen is one of the ways agents should also work for talent. But it takes a gutsy agent that isn't intimidated by the Hollywood directors or producers; one who believes in you and who has the incentive of making money from the efforts he puts forth in peddling your worth in this fashion.

Q. Why so much faith on a video?

Pretto: Believe me, the attitude and atmosphere towards you

during a casting turns much more positive when, prior to the audition, the person selecting talent is familiar with your past work. I know for a fact that videos when used properly reap excellent results. I've seen them work in my own case. They can offset the effects of a faulty reading on the mind of a director, because they not only help to show how the performer registers on camera, but also serve to broaden the knowledge of the talent's proven acting capabilities.

To get a director familiarized with your work, when you're not famous, depends strictly on how capable the agent handling you is.

Yet, how can you demand that an agent go these extra miles for you, to invest the time and the energy in pushing you this way, when once she's pushed you effectively, another agent can gain from her efforts, by simply getting you on the phone first?

Q. What is the cold reading good for them?

Pretto: I think it serves to indicate to the director and producer how easy or not it will be to work with a particular actor. A reading should be more like an interview to sense the personality and the professional reliance the production can have on a particular talent. An egotistic intransigent talent's traits will most likely emerge in a well gauged conversation rather than a cold reading.

Q. Are you suggesting disregarding the reading altogether as a means for assigning roles?

Pretto: No, not at all. The reading is imperative to tell how professional a talent is and how generally suited for the role he is. An amateur not sure of what he's doing will reveal that in a reading. A professional, on the other hand, will be able to make reasonable sense of what he's to do from the sides he's been provided with. The audition also serves to tell if a talent is physically suited for the role.

That doesn't mean that readings aren't good enough altogether. At times a talent will give a reading that will knock everybody's socks off. Yet, there are many cases where talent doing marvelously in the reading does horribly at the set. Performing on a set is a whole different ball park that requires skills from talent that are not necessarily revealed in a reading.

Q. How have you gotten your better roles?

Pretto: A few through cold readings, most after getting the right people to see my Demo.

Q. So you'll vouch for the Demo.

Pretto: Absolutely.

Q. If the Demo has served you so well why must you leave Florida. Can't it continue to serve you as it already has?

Pretto: The Demo doesn't get me parts, it just oils the process. The agent has to get the Demo seen by the director or producers, which they don't here. It's a constant struggle, and it gets even more frustrating when good parts come around so seldom.

Q. How did you get the Demo seen for the roles you've gotten after using it?

Pretto: On most occasions I did the pushing. Except for two roles, the efforts backfired because of the irritation my "impertinence" caused. The others I got through the admirable efforts of a casting agent that gives proper use to video Demos. In my

case she shows the video every time a good role comes along that she feels I might be good for. She does the same with other talent.

Q. You mind telling us who that is?

Pretto: Not at all. Ellen Jacoby. Ellen makes up for the deficiencies in the agency system. She knows her business, she's aggressive, and isn't intimidated by Hollywood directors or producers. She'll sit them down and put the Demos on for them.

Q. She's the one that got you the part in *Superboy*, right?

Pretto: Yes. She's about the only one that's realized I can do other than Hispanic roles.

Q. Let's talk about *Darkness at Noon* and your stage work. You did theater in Panama, but purposely avoid it here. Why?

Pretto: It's too costly for me. I love the stage. Nothing in acting satisfies me more, but I just simply can't afford it. The pay's lousy, and you can hardly do anything else while you're doing it. I've got bills to pay every month; kids to help support.

Q. Speaking of your kids, you've been married for 25 years with the same lady. How have you, as an actor, managed such a feat?

Pretto: I don't care to talk about my private life in public, thank you.

Q. OK. Back to *Darkness at Noon*. Critics and public alike have recognized your performance as one of the best Florida theater has seen in years. Doesn't that stimulate you to do more theater?

Pretto: Not necessarily. I mean it's great to get good reviews and good audiences and all that, but I do stage because the play, the role, and the director, are right, as with *Darkness at Noon*. The applause and the accolades become relevant only on the stage. If the right play, with the right role and the right director comes along, that's what I would consider to hop back on it.

Q. What was right about *Darkness*?

Pretto: Everything. The play had political messages still relevant, in fact very relevant today, which I am passionate about. The character had a dramatic skin I could fit into with gusto. Rubashov is so unlike me, I couldn't turn him down. And the director was wonderful.

Q. You were offered the part then? You didn't audition for it?

Pretto: Yes, but not because I'm a great actor or anything like that. The guy who had the role couldn't do it, the director coincidentally saw part of my performance in *Victims*, called me and asked if I could do it, he was pressed for time, I had 3 days to give an answer.

Q. You obviously accepted it?

Pretto: No at first. I said I had to read the play first. I did, but turned it down because I didn't want to pay the sacrifice of doing stage work. But it's hard to say no to a play like that, a role like that, and particularly Joe Adler, the director. He takes the credit, or blame, for convincing me.

Q. Why blame?

Pretto: It was a joy to do the play. The cast and the people backstage I worked with were great. But the play went almost unnoticed for no fault of the cast, the director or play itself. It was just not promoted well. It was painful to play to small audiences generally insulated from the important sociopolitical considerations the play evoked.

Q. How did Adler convince you?

Pretto: Joe's personal passion for theater is like nothing I had seen before. It's a passion I knew existed because I once shared something similar for it. Oh I have strong passion for acting and for other things in life, and I thought I displayed those passions rather openly, until I met Joe. Joe's creative fires are always on maximum and those who get close have an exhilarating opportunity to bask in them. His passion was contagious. I just had to admit that it would be an incredible experience to be directed by this forceful art of a man. I couldn't say no to the opportunity.

Q. You're a celebrity in Panama. You're very famous there. Can you achieve the same recognition here as you have there?

Pretto: I didn't come here seeking fame and fortune. I came here for the opportunity to do more and better work as an actor. I'm trying hard as hell to earn it.

Q. You're also an artist with a number of international exhibitions to your credit. Are you trying as hard there?

Pretto: Painting for me is a humble and humbling ability I realize I have to express my more profound human and universal considerations. But it is such a privately personal enterprise — not in a selfish sense, but in the sense of it being a private activity as opposed to acting which is a communal one — that I need to have time to spare and the peace of mind to undertake it. Lately I've been so concentrated on pushing my acting career forward that I've had no reservoirs of time and energy for painting. The right breaks in acting might afford me the time and space to satisfy the urge and needs that I have for it.

Q. I read an article in the *Caribbean Review* (an FIU publication) of a biography someone is writing on you. Can you tell us something about this?

Pretto: It's not a biography exactly. The author is writing about her experiences when she and I met, the time she spent at my mountain retreat and the lasting impressions the experience had on her, I guess.

Q. Where is the retreat?

Pretto: It's about an hour from the Costa Rican Border near Panama's only Volcano. It's an incredibly beautiful place, not the house, but the surrounding environment. The house is a simple cabin high in the jungle with no neighbors nearby. I'm in the middle of a pristine rainforest.

Q. Who takes care of it while you're gone?

Pretto: The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute used it for five years. They've since left. It's somewhat at the mercy of the jungle now. The Noriega situation discouraged anyone from wanting to inhabit it. I couldn't get a caretaker. Things might be different now that the military regime is gone. I dream of writing and painting up there for the rest of my life.

Q. You're considered one of Panama's foremost artists. An historical political exhibition you put on, on false nationalism in 1984 added to the long line of controversy that has followed both your careers in your country. Why the controversy?

Pretto: You ask the question as if I purposely make the controversy happen. I don't. I don't do anything intending to create controversy. I just say what I have to say in and out of my

work and that seems to create discussion.

Q. Usually a person that voices polemical opinions and principles publicly attracts controversy, willing or unwillingly.

Pretto: I guess that's true, but then I can't be other than frank and open with my opinions, particularly those about political and social concerns. And I don't believe in just paying lip service to principles. We know how good politicians are at that. I believe principles aren't worth anything until they're acted out. I guess that type of behavior harvests some Karma, which I accept.

How did we fall into these tangents anyway? We're supposed to be discussing the actors' problems in Florida, not talking about myself?

Q. Well, the fact that you have an opinionated background on other matters make these questions relevant don't you think?

Pretto: No. My opinions about the agency system are not because I'm one that likes to voice opinions. Every talent, every agent I've spoken to about this issue, shares my views. I'm not the single voice in the wilderness. When there's such a consensus of opinion on something that is affecting our capacity — talents' and agents' alike — for improving our employment conditions, I just feel something should be done to make the change happen. You're giving me a public forum to address the issue. I welcome and appreciate the chance. All the better for our common cause. That's all.

★★★★★★★★★ Grand Theft Hotel



Loni Anderson

Synopsis

Burt Reynolds stars as B.L. Stryker, the private investigator hired by the manager of a posh resort hotel (guest star Charles Nelson Reilly) to protect a priceless necklace on display. Stryker warms to the task with a likely suspect, the enigmatic Dawn St. Clair — played by Mrs. Reynolds (guest star Loni Anderson) — in the "Grand Theft Hotel" episode of *B.L. Stryker*, which aired Saturday, February 24 (9:00-11:00 p.m., ET), as an ABC Saturday Mystery Movie.



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