

## TELEVISION

# Spoils for 'Victor'

'L.A. Law' gives Jimmy Smits his big career break

**N**o one remembers it, but three years ago Jimmy Smits was the costar of the hottest show in America—for 12 minutes.

Then he got blown up.

"I was Don Johnson's original partner in the 'Miami Vice' pilot," says Smits. "A car bomb killed me and paved the way for Philip Michael Thomas."

But Smits has overcome. While "Miami Vice" has become dated and dull, "L.A. Law," the show in which he now costars, is already being touted by the nation's critics as a television classic with a long life ahead of it. Long after the pastels on "Miami Vice" have faded, people will still be admiring the legal foreplay at McKenzie, Brackman, Chaney and Kuzak.

Smits, 32, a native New Yorker, considers himself lucky to be on "L.A. Law," one of those all-too-rare series that garners not only ratings, but respect. On "L.A. Law" there are legal battles and skirt-chasing every week—but the show also manages to be both intelligent and poignant. And Smits, playing hot-shot Hispanic lawyer Victor Sifuentes, has emerged (like costars Harry Hamlin and Corbin Bernsen) as a telegenic sex symbol.

That wasn't true at the beginning of the season; fellow cast members did the smooching while Sifuentes did summations. But that didn't bother Smits, an M.F.A. graduate of Cornell with a great love for "the classics," who gladly tackled the legalese "as if it were a soliloquy from Shakespeare." He says the producers were "establishing that Victor was a good attorney first." But now they've paired him, almost satirically, with a string of loony, lusty ladies—like the dentist who interrupted foreplay for a little flossing. The serious message underneath his character's disastrous love life, says Smits, is "that Victor is looking for Miss Right and not Miss Right Now."

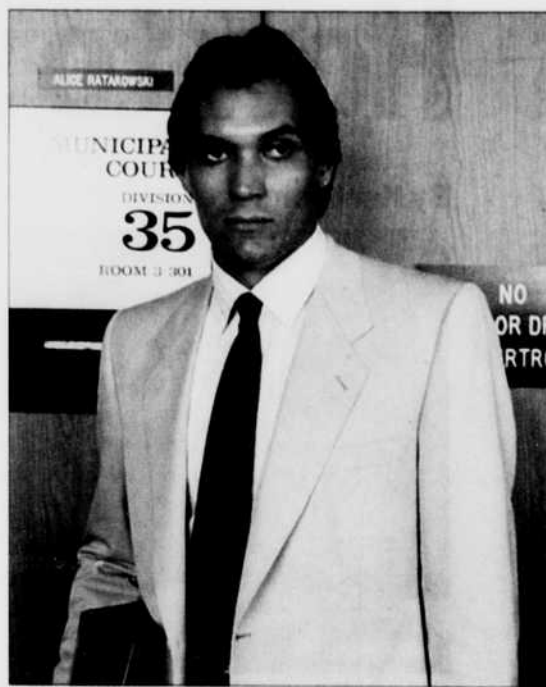
More importantly, Victor Sifuentes is one of the few Hispanic characters on TV or in the movies who isn't dealing dope or leading a street gang. The significance isn't lost on

Smits, of Puerto Rican descent, the oldest of three kids in a family of "lower-middle-class laborers." Says Smits, "What I like about Victor is that he's third- or fourth-generation here, and he's reflective of a lot of Latinos in the United States. People who have gone to college and don't necessarily speak with a Spanish accent and are in the mainstream. People who run businesses, are part of major corporations, are professionals."

**Like a monk:** Smits was the first of his family to go to college, working his way through Brooklyn College and Cornell by counseling youths. His parents wanted him to be a teacher, but supported his acting despite some reservations. "When I first started out, they were very hesitant. They didn't understand why I wanted to do classics. It was like, why are you doing plays where you speak funny? Why aren't you doing Pepsodent commercials? I mean, their scope is television." At Cornell, Smits studied his craft from 8 a.m. until the wee hours of the night and felt "like a monk."

After getting his M.F.A., Smits went to New York. Bit parts in soap operas and some stage work landed him the "Miami Vice" part, which led to playing the nasty coke dealer who terrorized Gregory Hines and Billy Crystal in the movie "Running Scared." He was in Boston, doing a guest

'Team player': Locker-room scene on 'L.A. Law'



On the case: Smits as Victor Sifuentes

stint on "Spenser: For Hire" when his agent sent him the "L.A. Law" pilot script. "I took one look at it and said, 'Whoa, this is heavy-duty stuff.'" The producers of "L.A. Law" weren't looking for big names. Smits says they were after "people who hadn't done a lot of television. And it wasn't only an actor's ability, but whether or not he could be a team player."

And he is. One look at what he wears tells you that—an "L.A. Law" sweatshirt and a Cornell T shirt.

**No Hollywood parties:** Smits divides his time between Los Angeles and New York, where his 12-year-old daughter and four-year-old son live with his ex-wife. He lives in an apartment close to the lot where the show is filmed because "we work 5 to 9, not 9 to 5." He claims not to have been seduced into a showbiz lifestyle: "I don't go to Hollywood parties and stuff like that. I just want to be able to do my work, go home and see movies or whatever."

With "L.A. Law" a success, Smits has picked out some furniture for his Los Angeles apartment, bought a car and done something any college student or recent grad can relate to: "I just finished paying off my student loans. I'm serious. I had defaulted on one. I've just had the opportunity to pay them back now. I've been nickel-and-diming them for a while." There's already talk that "L.A. Law"—and perhaps Smits—could be getting an Emmy statuette or two next fall. But right now Smits "can't think about that. It's frosting on the cake. I'm still eating the cake, and it's fiiiine."

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