

coverstory
BY JAY BOBBIN



Matthew Rhys stars in "Perry Mason," premiering Sunday on HBO.

Matthew Rhys is HBO's new, very different 'Perry Mason'

Any preconceived notion you might have of "Perry Mason" is about to be tossed out of court.

The most enduring image of novelist Erle Stanley Gardner's iconic character surely is the urbane defense attorney played by Raymond Burr in a 1957-66 television classic that remains a staple of nostalgia-driven networks. However, a younger, scrappier Mason fuels a limited HBO series debuting Sunday, June 21. Executive-produced by Robert Downey Jr. and his wife Susan, and set in the Depression era, it casts Emmy winner Matthew Rhys ("The Americans") in the title role while exploring Mason's roots as an unconventional detective as much as a nascent lawyer.

"That is why I jumped at the opportunity," the friendly Rhys confirms of helping to generate a new Mason. "When the initial call came, this strange thing went through my head: 'Perry Mason?' I realize more and more that I'd had a unique relationship to it without necessarily having a true grasp of what it was. I was aware of the (original) show, but in true recollection, I wasn't sure that I ever watched it ... though my grandparents did.

"You feel like you know this identity of a trial lawyer who got everybody to confess on the stand," adds Rhys, "but as soon as you heard that HBO was remaking 'Perry Mason,' you knew immediately, 'Well, OK. That's going to be a

very different take.' And it is. It's the origin story of how he became a trial lawyer, and I thought, 'Oh, how interesting.' And then I read the first script, and that was that."

Such other familiar characters as Della Street (now played by Juliet Rylance) and Paul Drake (Chris Chalk) also are reinvented by the "Perry Mason" reboot. John Lithgow (as Mason's mentor in the law), Tatiana Maslany ("Orphan Black") and Robert Patrick ("Scorpion") are among the cast members as well. HBO-series veteran Tim Van Patten ("Game of Thrones," "The Sopranos") is the director and an executive producer of the show.

In preparing to play Mason, the Welsh-born Rhys – the real-life partner of his fellow "Americans" star Keri Russell – had a valuable resource in Tom Hanks while they made the recent movie "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," since Hanks had done the similarly styled 2002 film "Road to Perdition."

"When you're engulfed in something on this kind of scale, it's hard not to believe the world you're in," Rhys reasons of the "Perry Mason" costumes and production design that are so evocative of the early 1930s. "You don't see anything but hundreds of supporting actors in the costumes and cars, and whole streets have been made to look the way they were then, so it only strengthens the make-believe."

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