

coverstory

BY JAY BOBBIN

Courtney B. Vance walks a treacherous '61st Street'



Courtney B. Vance and Aunjanue Ellis star in "61st Street," premiering Sunday on AMC.

After winning many awards by playing one of the most famous attorneys ever, Courtney B. Vance is portraying a different kind of lawyer in a different kind of story.

The actor follows his lauded work as Johnnie Cochran in "The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story" – plus his turns in "Lovecraft Country" and "Genius: Aretha" – in the Chicago-set AMC drama series "61st Street," which debuts the first of its two scheduled seasons Sunday, April 10. (The same night, AMC+ and ALLBLK begin streaming both the premiere and the second episode, with the two services then showing each episode a week before AMC does.)

Vance plays Franklin Roberts, who becomes the legal representative for Moses Johnson (Tosin Cole), a young athlete mistaken for a gang member by police. The case becomes about much more, as cops and the prosecution use it to try to settle some scores over an officer's death during a drug raid. Cast members also include recent "King Richard" Oscar nominee Aunjanue Ellis, Bentley Green and Holt McCallany ("Nightmare Alley").

Also an executive producer of "61st Street" along with others including fellow actor Michael B. Jordan and series creator Peter Moffat, Vance says, "I think we all had to get our minds around how big this thing was. We didn't have one person who

was overseeing the day-to-day operations, so all the actors and much of the crew had to pitch in and make sure we were on the same page."

Though "61st Street" is quite different from "The People vs. O.J. Simpson," Vance was drawn to both dramas by their shared theme of the legal arena, and by the ever-intensifying place the law holds for so many people in daily modern living.

"It is a prime time for discussions of right and wrong, of moral centers," Vance reflects. "I think we're at a crossroads about what's right for a city, a country and a society. If someone crosses a line, what is the right thing to do? We continually find ways to say it's the (citizens') fault, and maybe we need to look at the way police are trained and how they react to situations. Maybe we need a reboot, but at least we need to talk about it."

Vance spent much of last year filming both seasons of "61st Street," so his work schedule often coincided with that of wife Angela Bassett, a star and executive producer of Fox's "9-1-1." He's not complaining much, if at all: "We're blessed enough to be able to work, and we've been working our entire professional careers, since we graduated from Yale Drama School. I don't think I've ever had any other job, and that's very rare."

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