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Gifted to love

A supernatural gift turns a cold-hearted self-absorbed doctor into a reluctant altruist in *A Gifted Man*.

By KENNETH CHAW

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MEET Dr Michael Holt. He is bolting down the whitewashed corridors of a hospital with lightning-fast efficiency. Don't worry about coming up with a courteous smile for him, or engaging in the obligatory eye contact, or even lowering your head to give that fail-safe nod – just walk on by. And if it's your birthday, do yourself a favour and keep your "it's my birthday today!" enthusiasm at bay – unless, of course, you have a thing for his cold, nonchalant reply, "again?"

Though gifted with an exceptional talent for his work in neurosurgery, by the looks of it, this medical whiz in television programme *A Gifted Man*, portrayed by Broadway-turned-on-screen actor Patrick Wilson, will need nothing short of a supernatural gift to shed his egoistical persona.

And that's exactly what he gets. A run-in with his ex-wife, Anna – a doctor herself who runs a clinic that gives free medical care to the underprivileged at the Bronx – leads to what seems like a regular dinner appointment at first glance. To his horror, Michael discovers the next morning that Anna has tragically passed away in a car accident two weeks ago, putting his encounter with her the night before to question.

The story goes on to reveal that Michael has been gifted with an ability to see Anna (in the form of a spirit), who urgently seeks his help to run her fast-diminishing free clinic. Hesitantly, Michael agrees.

Over the episodes that follow, Michael is pulled into a whirlwind of heart-wrenching scenarios, compelling him to offer up both time and expertise to ailing patients too poor to seek medical attention, all these while juggling

to keep his exclusive medical practice – Holt Neuro (open only to the rich and famous) – alive.

Along the way, Michael begins to uncover life's meaning within the dilapidated hallways of Clinica Sanando and for the first time, he finds himself doing the last thing on his usually selfish mind: giving.

While one cannot help but burst into a roar of laughter seeing the brusque, suit-and-tie-clad doctor scooping up a bunch of needy children in his flashy sports ride, *A Gifted Man* offers a poignant, thought-provoking look at some of life's most fundamental struggles, while tugging at the core of every human heart.

Fresh off a production shoot for one of the episodes, *Star2* caught up with its 38-year-old protagonist, Wilson. The Virginia native explained that what sets the series apart is its ability to go beyond solving mysterious medical cases (a theme seen time and again in other medical dramas) and simply tells the honest tale of one man's struggles.

"You'll see the struggle of a man – who's usually the chief, top-notch surgeon in the business – who has the rug pulled out from under him," Wilson offered in a telephone interview from New Jersey. Wilson's character struggles to reconcile his materialistic pursuits with his newfound altruistic self (which may have even been there all along). Michael has forgotten who he is and perhaps the very reason he became a doctor in the first place – to save the lives of both the privileged and underprivileged.

Struggles present in the series ring true in today's increasingly "touch and go" materialistic society, contributing a big part to the show's appeal.

Viewers who may have taken the same climb up the corporate ladder at the expense of the people around them will surely identify with him.

"... People are striving to be the best they can in a job, (but) at what cost, you know? Have you left out your family and your

friends?" Wilson asked.

When queried if he has tapped into his altruistic nature, like his character, Wilson shares that he, too, stretches out a helping hand ever so often in various initiatives organised by Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, a non-profit organisation that mobilises the entertainment industry to raise funds to help individuals stricken with HIV/AIDS, among other critical illnesses.

The television show, which made its debut on Malaysian TV last night, features a string of talented cast and crew members such as two-time Tony Award recipient, Jennifer Ehle (who plays Michael's ex-wife) and 2011 Emmy-winner Margo Martindale (Michael's assistant), besides Academy Award-winning director for *Silence Of The Lambs*, Jonathan Demme, and Academy Award-nominated screenwriter, Susannah Grant.

Wilson himself serves up some serious acting chops, bringing to the table a Golden Globe and Emmy Award nomination.

His portrayal of the troubled doctor anchors the series firmly to the ground by bringing a sense of believability – yes, even to a show toying with supernatural elements. Wilson's portrayal will have viewers hating the doctor, yet one cannot help but feel deeply for him.

"I don't want everybody to like him, but I want people to care," he explained.

Meanwhile, fans who are wondering whether Wilson is anything like the cold-hearted character he plays can finally heave a sigh of relief. "I'd liked to think that I'm a little nicer," he quipped.

A Gifted Man is a breath of fresh air sweeping over a sea of waning medical dramas.

Nevertheless, it is just as capable of falling under television's age-old curse: predictability.

From here on, it is up to its producers to keep the episodes fresh and dynamic while still marching to the beat of its own drum.

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As to whether the conflicted doctor will ultimately embrace altruism whole-heartedly, or succumb to his materialistic yearnings instead, it seems that the safest bet would have to be the latter for now. Even so, don't be too surprised if you catch him smiling every now and again, because you just can't keep a good man down.

■ **A Gifted Man** airs every Tuesday at 10.55pm on AXN Beyond HD (Astro Ch 720).

