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Why You Should Know 'Snowfall' (and 'West Wing' and 'Wire') Actress Michael Hyatt

By Stacy Lambe 11:30 AM PDT, July 5, 2017



Photo: Getty Images

Playing tough-loving single mother Cissy Saint on [Snowfall](#), filmmaker [John Singleton](#)'s new drama about the origins of the crack epidemic in America, Michael Hyatt got the part the

way she's gotten countless others: Auditioning.

"I'm a working actor," Hyatt tells ET. The explanation is so matter-of-fact that the question of how she got the role on the new FX series almost seems ridiculous -- but that's to say she sees it that way. The opportunity for the part came along and "I auditioned for it."

Such is the life of Hyatt, who has built an acting career largely filled with playing familiar faces on various award-winning TV series. There's Angela Blake on season five of [The West Wing](#), Brianna Barksdale on [The Wire](#), Judge Sheffield on [Franklin & Bash](#), Katherine Davis on the [second installment of True Detective](#), Det. Muncie on [Ray Donovan](#) and Dr. Akopian on [Crazy Ex-Girlfriend](#), who was most recently seen on the season two episode "Can Josh Take a Leap of Faith?"

"The majority of my career has been doing these recurring roles," Hyatt says, acknowledging that it's every actor's dream to work consistently (or "be a series regular"). But she's grateful for the work that she does get.

"I know lots of people who would love to be where I am," she says, adding that it hasn't come without its disappointments or struggles. "In between roles, you're waiting for the next job," she adds. "The fact that I'm a working actor is a blessing."

So when it comes to playing Angela Blake or Katherine Davis or Brianna Barksdale, Hyatt welcomes the opportunity. "You prepare at home, you step into this well-oiled machine,

you feel the vibration and adjust your energy, you do your thing, then you say your thank yous and walk away,” she says of stepping into an existing series, where the rest of the cast and crew has had time to develop intimate relationships with one another.

“It’s happened for so many years, it’s the way I know how to do things. So much so that when *Snowfall* came around” -- Cissy is a series regular role -- “I had to retrain myself to stay in the room. There is no exit. You stay in the room and develop these relationships. You see the character grow from moment to moment. It’s a different energy.”



Michael Hyatt: Where You've Seen the 'Snowfall' Actress Before

Born in England to Jamaican parents, Hyatt emigrated to the United States with her mother and siblings. She studied acting at Howard University and later at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, and it was soon after graduate school and only a handful of one-off roles on TV that she landed on *The Wire*.

As Brianna, Hyatt played a mother caring for a son who she insists turn himself in and accept a lengthy prison sentence, only to be killed behind bars. She soon finds herself at the helm of a crumbling family empire, caught in the crosshairs of obligations and relationships. She appeared on 12 episodes over the course of four seasons. The role was minor compared to those played by Idris Elba, Dominic West or Michael K. Williams, but certainly not insignificant or forgettable to fans.

“I could have not ever imagined that *The Wire* would play such a pivotal role in my life,” Hyatt says, looking back on the part. “That job has stayed with me throughout my adult life and career. It’s come up so many times.” Her parts on *The Wire* and *The West Wing*, which briefly overlapped on TV from 2003 to 2004, have, in many ways, led her on a journey to *Snowfall* and are now coming full circle.

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Director Dan Attias, who helmed several of Hyatt’s episodes on *The Wire* and *Ray Donovan*, also directs the FX series’ third episode. Seeing him on *Snowfall* was like seeing an old friend. “We embrace each other and have our moment, ‘It’s you again,’” she says, adding that they’ve now gotten to the point where they understand each other without speaking. Meanwhile, *The West Wing* executive producer Thomas Schlamme, affectionately called Tommy by many of his former stars, serves as executive producer on *Snowfall* and was in the casting room when Hyatt auditioned. While Schlamme left the NBC drama after its fourth season and he and Hyatt never met or worked together on the series, Hyatt has great reverence for the TV producer. That fact turned out to be a lucky coincidence for her as she auditioned with this “curly-haired white man,” who was not immediately familiar to her. “Truthfully, when I’m auditioning I’m not paying attention to the details of who’s involved,” she admits. It

wasn't until much later in the process that she learned it had been Schlamme. "Had I known the infamous Tommy Schlamme was the man guiding me in the room, I would have freaked out and probably stuttered my whole way through the audition."



Photo: FX

Now, on *Snowfall*, which may be her most high-profile role to date, Hyatt's embraced playing a single mother desperate for her son, Franklin (Damson Idris), not to get caught up in South Central Los Angeles' crack race. "I understand who that woman is. I understand every single day making it work, even though it is a struggle, because you're living for someone beyond you." A mother herself, Hyatt says she's not sure if she would have appreciated *Cissy* at any other time in her career. "I have great respect for the journey that she goes through," which culminates in an emotional finale directed by Singleton.

Her first time working with the filmmaker, Hyatt found that she had to set aside any ego she may have brought to set. "As a director, the brother, to me, is intense," she says. Initially unsure of how it was all going to come together, it all finally clicked when she locked into Singleton's vision. "There was a moment when I looked into his eyes and I saw the painting he had painted. I saw how profoundly beautiful it

was ... The stuff he was guiding me to do was so amazing. It was incredibly demanding and it was one of the most fulfilling experiences I've had as an artist."

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With *Snowfall* set to debut on Wednesday, July 5 at 10 p.m. ET, Hyatt has been busy promoting the show, including a Los Angeles premiere where she reunited with the cast and crew for the first time since filming wrapped in February. It was there she saw Schlamme, to whom, she admits, she still hasn't mentioned her part on *The West Wing*.

At the premiere, however, she was tempted to find out. "I saw him, and every time I wanted to ask, 'Is it by coincidence, Tommy? Or did you know?'" Hyatt says of the unasked questions she has for him. "For some reason there's just the notion, 'No, you don't really need to. Just be here, be now and appreciate what we have now.' So I leave it alone."