



‘People of Earth’ Star Wyatt Cenac Will Make You Believe in Aliens

The former *Daily Show* correspondent and his *People of Earth* co-star Ana Gasteyer talk their new sitcom, aliens, leaps of faith, being weird, and pushing for diversity.



KEVIN FALLON

From *The Daily Show* to hit (or at least critically respected) comedy series is a well-trodden journey. The Comedy Central program has always been one of comedy's most fruitful incubators of talent. See: Stephen Colbert, Steve Carell, Samantha Bee, John Oliver, Josh Gad, Larry Wilmore, Ed Helms, Rob Riggle, Kristen Schaal, Matt Walsh, Jessica Williams, Michael Che, and so many more.

But from the *Daily Show* to a series as high-concept and unusual as *People of Earth*? That journey is a little more, let's say...alien.

Of course, Wyatt Cenac was never going to have a normal journey.

"I wouldn't consider myself a traditional sitcom actor, or someone you'd even think would be in a sitcom," Cenac tells *The Daily Beast*, sitting at the bar at The Beverly Hills Hilton where he was promoting his winningly offbeat new series: a sitcom about alien abductions that is as sympathetic and touching as it is sardonic and unexpectedly clever.

"So anything that in that regard that is perhaps a little more untraditional I'm going to gravitate towards," he says.

Before leading the cast of *People of Earth*, a sitcom about a support group for alien abductees which launches Monday night on TBS and co-stars *Saturday Night Live* alum Ana Gasteyer,

Cenac was best known for his refreshingly off-kilter four-year tenure as a *Daily Show* correspondent and writer—and then, after he left, his atypically off-kilter relationship with its venerable host, Jon Stewart.

Whereas *Daily Show* correspondents reliably develop a certain cadence—a mile-a-minute, breathless satirizing of current events, like a news junkie's heroin injection of political-themed energy—Cenac became known for literally stopping the show. As in, his pattern of speech was so slow and his points, especially on matters of race, so painstakingly methodical, that the abrupt change of pace from the show's usual sprint could give you whiplash.

But in commanding your attention in such a deliberate way, his segments were always all the better for it.

The lethargy of his delivery—and our interview does indeed mosey along, taking Cenac's lead—shouldn't be confused for a lack of passion, however. It was revealed during a 2015 appearance on Marc Maron's *WTF* podcast that in 2011, when Cenac was the *Daily Show*'s only black writer, he voiced his displeasure for the tone in which Stewart mocked then-presidential candidate Herman Cain. Stewart screamed at Cenac to "fuck off," and Cenac left the show soon after.

When Cenac revisited *The Daily Show* for Stewart's last episode, the two agreed that they were "good" with each other.

In the time between *The Daily Show* and *People of Earth*, Cenac shot a few comedy specials and, this summer, led a stand-up series on new platform Seeso, but found it hard to break through in a more mainstream or traditional capacity.

"That's something you can ask a bunch of execs and sitcom directors who never put me in anything," Cenac says when asked what about his particular style he thinks didn't jibe with the run-of-the-mill sitcoms he was submitted for. "I think that's maybe more a question for the marketplace than it is me. I'm just making what I make, and whoever receives it or thinks it has value, I don't have any control over."

In this case, it was *People of Earth* executive producers Greg Daniels, whom he worked with as a writer on *King of the Hill*, and Conan O'Brien, with whom he's shared a long-standing mutual admiration, who found value in his style, Cenac explains. Very slowly.

But that speed also shouldn't be misconstrued for ambivalence, or even lack of excitement.

Cenac lights up, even if his diction doesn't, when *People of Earth* co-star Ana Gasteyer joins the table to deep dive more into the show.

Cenac plays Ozzy, a reporter sent to Beacon, New York, to write a feature on Star Crossed, a support group for locals who believe they have been abducted by an alien. Gasteyer is Gina, their well-intentioned if ill-qualified group leader, who chastises Ozzy, "we much prefer the term 'experiencers' to 'abductees.'" It just gives us a little more agency."

But while there are certainly jokes had at the loonies' expense, there's also a surprising and ultimately touching dignity given to them as well, especially as they help Ozzy work through a personal trauma that connects him to them more than it might at first seem.

Gasteyer, Cenac, the writers, and the cast did copious amounts of research before shooting the show, including watching hours of videos of experiencers recounting their time with aliens, to garner a sense of what it must be like to have such conviction about something so hard for others to believe.

"In general when you approach the show with this research, it's insane what these people are saying," Gasteyer says. "If you take that standpoint then it's kind of patronizing and, sure, hilarious."

But if you actually pay attention to these people who really believe this had happened and how they're feeling, "there's a huge sense of alienation, a huge sense of terror and of being gaslit for a lifetime of trying to explain something that the general population just doesn't believe," Gasteyer says. "It's weird. I wouldn't say you feel sorry for them, necessarily, as much as it's just empathizing with the sense of phenomenal frustration over not being taken seriously."

And *Star Crossed* isn't only tinfoil hat people, Cenac notes, which makes the community all the more interesting. It's CEOs and school teachers as well as the guy who lives in his mother's basement. "I think that's something that gets to the real human aspect of it," he says, "that these people have these experiences and beliefs—is that any more wrong than..."

Gasteyer pipes in: "Religion?"

Letting out a laugh, Cenac says, "I don't know if I was going to say that..."

But Gasteyer, with Cenac nodding along, continues: "But if you start to think about, if you start to get really reasonable about it, it's true. Religion, in and of itself, is so far out. If you really take a step back, you really have to take a leap of faith. The word doesn't just mean that you think God did it all. You really have to believe that, if you're Christian, Jesus died and came back to life. That's a pretty big leap of faith."

Cenac agrees. "There is something to that," he says. "You believe a man can turn water into wine, is it so farfetched that I could believe there is life on other planets?" Watching the videos of real-life experiencers, he says, there is an undeniable faith that these people have about what happened to them that gets them through their day.

"The agents of it might be different, but it's that faith that carries them through," he says. "In some way this is a show more about faith and believing than it is about aliens."

Insistent that it couldn't be articulated more perfectly, Gasteyer mimes getting up to leave: "We should probably leave that there. Gotta go!"

But before they do, we talk about one particular leap of faith Cenac took after getting cast in *People of Earth*, one that, once again, exemplifies his uniqueness in the industry, which is to say his fearless conviction.

"Really hope @TBSNetwork is committed to hiring diverse and gender balance people of Earth to help write and produce *People of Earth*," he tweeted in January.

It was a necessary call out to his employers—the much-needed goal of inclusion and opportunity in television will only be accomplished if it is actively pursued. But it's also one that many of his colleagues wouldn't feel comfortable doing.

"I guess I felt comfortable doing it because I don't really know if I have anything to lose," he says. "What are they gonna do? Fire me? Alright. I get fired. Find another job. It feels like you have more to lose by not saying anything than you do by saying something."

The crippling problem when it comes to behind-the-scenes diversity is that networks and showrunners routinely dip into the same wells of talent when stuffing new shows, limiting who gets access to the opportunities.

"The challenge is to look beyond that," he says. "Whether it's for voices in the writers' room or for performers on the show or for crew, there are a lot of people who have been shut out of those pools that have a lot to offer and are probably very hungry to get offered something. So if me saying something is just a nudge to maybe get other people to talk about it, then cool."

The acting of saying something is, yes, very cool. But in Hollywood? Couldn't be more alien.



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