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WHERE'S LABEOUF? The actor with Sarah Roemer (l.) in "Disturbia." Below, in his breakout Disney TV series, "Even Stevens," which debuted in 1999.

A kid actor transforms

Shia LaBeouf, star of 'Disturbia,' grows up

BY MICHAEL GILTZ



Shia LaBeouf was ready to head to Yale. After growing up on camera in the Disney TV series "Even Stevens" and a number of increasingly accomplished movies, LaBeouf wanted to major in psychology and study hard in order to become a better actor.

But then came offers to star in the summer blockbuster "Transformers" ("That's the 'Star Wars' for '80s babies," says LaBeouf of the giant-robot action flick), to do voice work in the animated "Surf's Up," and to anchor the thriller "Disturbia," opening Friday, in which he plays a high-school student under temporary house arrest who suspects a neighbor (David Morse) of being a serial killer.

"Yale was on the back burner this year because all the opportunities arose," says the 20-year-old Los Angeles native. But "unless some opportunities arise that are equal or more to what happened this year, I'm going to school."

One opportunity that hasn't arisen is the next Indiana Jones movie. A recent Internet rumor that he'd play Harrison Ford's son sparked a wildfire of interest — one sign of how far LaBeouf has risen — and he politely repeats the fact that there's nothing to it. Still, after the rumors began, did he ask his agent to check with director Steven Spielberg about a possible role in the fourth installment, due in 2008?

"No," says LaBeouf firmly, before pointing out he's already working with Spielberg, who's an executive producer on both "Disturbia" and "Transformers."

"I wouldn't want to jeopardize my relationship with Spielberg, to force myself into a situation that I haven't been approached about," he says. "I'm sure he heard about these rumors. If he thought it was an interesting idea, he'd approach me. But he hasn't approached me, and I'm not going to force the hand."

Smart kid. Still, if LaBeouf is waiting for the movie roles to slow down, Yale is going to be a long time coming. He starred in the 2003 Disney hit "Holes,"

learned to play golf for "The Greatest Game Ever Played" in 2005 and last year had a memorable turn as an acid-tripping political volunteer in "Bobby," as well as the gritty '70s New York-set "A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints."

But it's not hard to woo LaBeouf from school — a good script will snag him.

"It took me a long time to find 'Saints,'" says LaBeouf about his never-ending search for good material. "And when I found it, they didn't want me for it! I was the Disney kid. So I had to go earn it."

"I went to the audition room and punched a hole in the casting office wall. It was just somewhere I went during the scene and decided to [follow it]."

"Then I paid to fix the wall."

His passion extends to "Disturbia," which, LaBeouf says, differs from the average kid potboiler, and is more a voyeuristic drama a la "Rear Window."

"Usually, teen-thriller films are very one-note, just screaming and running all the time. It doesn't seem very human. I think people are sick of that," he says.

"But we do have a bunch of different windows. There are [several] elements to the film."

LaBeouf does seem to have an old-school actor's soul inside his Gen-Y body, and prefers not to get caught up in angst or internal dramas. And he has fun while making movies, even if co-stars like Morse ("The Crossing Guard," "The Green Mile") need to work another way.

"He's one of the best character actors America has," says LaBeouf of Morse. "It was tough to be on set with him, though, because he's Method and was into his thing. We didn't talk for two months, that was part of his journey."

The next part of LaBeouf's journey is hosting "Saturday Night Live" this week.

"When you start in this industry, there are a few things you dream about: An Academy Award, Scorsese, Spielberg and 'SNL.' I'm 20 and two of those four things are off my list. It's nuts!" ♦

Yale's on the back burner as his career heats up.