

Live and let live

New York's Yaphet Kotto keeps the faith and keeps acting **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

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I'm back," says actor Yaphet Kotto, "and I want to work."

After spending most of the '90s on TV's "Homicide," Kotto spent the past seven years founding an

artists' retreat in the Philippines. He's now in a comedy, "Witless Protection," which opened Friday; it co-stars Jenny McCarthy and Larry the Cable Guy and has Kotto excited about acting again.



Yaphet Kotto is back onscreen in "Witless Protection." His movie debut was in 1964.

"I was on the beach when I got the script," says Kotto, who was born in New York and has the royal blood of Cameroon in his veins. "I read it and I knew I was leaving town."

It wouldn't be the first time a script has changed Kotto's life: He was living in the projects in the South Bronx, forging a challenging life as a practicing Jew and activist for racial justice, when he got the script for 1964's "Nothing But a Man," starring jazz great Abbey Lincoln. "I had just finished doing a record, and was the co-chairman of Bronx CORE [the Congress of Racial Equality]. A lot of politics and civil rights were running through my head," says Kotto, who won't give his age but says he's nowhere near the 70 years some Web sites claim he is. "I had to choose between politics and acting."

Kotto chose acting, and went on to a series of firsts: He was the first black man to kill a white man in a major Hollywood movie, in 1970's "The Liberation of L.B. Jones"; during filming, Kotto first heard

a new term from director William Wyler when discussing a pivotal scene.

"Wyler didn't want me to cry. He said, 'Too many African-American men have done that on film. ... You are not suffering.' That was the first time I'd heard the term 'African-American,'" Kotto says.

His groundbreaking continued when he became the first black man to play a James Bond archvillain (in 1973's "Live and Let Die"). Later, director Irvin Kershner, who directed Kotto to an Emmy nomination in the 1977 TV movie "Raid on Entebbe," offered him the Lando Calrissian role in 1980's "The Empire Strikes Back." He turned it down, choosing instead to work with Robert Redford in "Brubaker."

Redford's Sundance Institute inspired Kotto to start his retreat in the Philippines, which has taken up much of his time since "Homicide." But New York is still home.

"When they move the Stage Deli away from Carnegie Hall, then New York will no longer be my home," Kotto says. "And they ain't movin' either of them." ♦