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Character actor enjoying Starr turn

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BY MIKE THOMAS mthomas@suntimes.com

Former Chicago-based actor Mike Starr -- who you might recognize from his appearances in films and television shows ranging from "Goodfellas" and "Ed Wood" to various crime dramas and the now-canceled NBC dramedy "Ed" -- is in town this weekend to celebrate the worldwide premiere of his latest film, "Osso Bucco," at the Wilmette Theatre. It also screened a few days ago at the Midwest Independent Film Festival.

Shot in Chicago and co-directed by Gary Taylor and Fred Blurton of River West Films, "Osso Bucco" is a romantic mob comedy set largely in an Italian restaurant on North Broadway.

'OSSO BUCCO'

7:30 tonight, followed by a discussion with the filmmakers and Mike Starr

Wilmette Theatre, 1122 Central, Wilmette

Tickets, \$10

Additional screenings Saturday through Wednesday

Tickets, \$6-\$7

(847) 251-7424, www.wilmettetheatre.com

For the Queens-born Starr, a 30-year veteran of the thespian scene, his role opposite Illeana Douglas marks his first turn as a romantic lead. Or, as Taylor joked on the set, "Mike's kissin' a girl!"

Q. *What's the difference between playing character roles and the leading man?*

A. There's more responsibility. I always feel you have to step up, but it's just like being in a different position in the batting order.

Q. *Once you're successful at playing one type of character, you tend to get cast in similar roles. You've played a lot of Italianesque heavies over the years. Have you been able to shed that image to some extent?*

A. What's funny is that someone will say, "You played Italianesque heavies," right? So then you say, "Where?" "Goodfellas." I say, "No no no, he [Frenchie] was not a heavy. He was a cargo supervisor who was half Irish, half French." They say, "Hoodlums." "Well, now, [he was] German." "Easy Streets." "No, we were Irish." So it's funny, because I think it's the state of mind. ... If you're a white guy in organized crime, you're immediately Italian.

Q. *You did the series "Ed" for a couple of years on NBC. Do you miss having a regular TV gig?*

A. [Laughs] I think you miss that steady work, but I love the idea of changing and doing different characters. And that's not to say that if tomorrow the writers' strike ends and someone comes up and says, "Geez, I got a pilot that's perfect for you," that I wouldn't be thrilled to do it -- something good.

Q. *Is your unique look a blessing and a curse in that it gets you roles but it also puts you out of the running sometimes, too?*

A. That's probably true. A lot of times I'll say, "Oh, God, this happened," or "I would have been in that." And then I say, "Wait a second." I can look at some other situations where I happened to turn the right corner or be in the right place at the right time.

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