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## From Scene Stealer to Oscar Contender

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# From Scene Stealer to Oscar Contender

Richard Jenkins '69 takes top billing in *The Visitor*

Story by AMELIA BENNER '09



Above, Jenkins (left) bonds with his houseguest in a scene from *The Visitor*.

After decades on television and in the movies, Richard Jenkins is seeing his name in the lights for the first time this spring. The veteran character actor, who IFC.com has called “one of cinema’s great scene-stealers,” is garnering widespread acclaim for his starring role in *The Visitor*.

Richard has portrayed a wide array of colorful supporting characters during his 30-year career, including a gay FBI agent in *Flirting With Disaster*, a deceased father figure on the

popular HBO series “Six Feet Under,” and several offbeat roles in films by Joel and Ethan Coen. He has also worked with well-known directors such as Woody Allen, Mike Nichols and the Farelly brothers and has appeared in over 70 films.

Director Tom McCarthy — whose first film was the critically-acclaimed *The Station Agent* — wrote the role of disconnected, discontented economics professor Walter Vale with the 60-year-old Jenkins in mind. *The Visitor* depicts Vale’s complex relationship with a young Syrian jazz drummer and his family, and the aftermath of his arrest by Homeland Security.

“I felt like I needed an actor who could really vanish into the role and maybe someone who wasn’t immediately recognizable as a Hollywood star,” McCarthy told the *New York Times*. “He could really play the everyman, the average American, and be really believable.”

*The Visitor* marks Richard’s first role as a leading man, and the reviews have been overwhelmingly positive. *Variety*’s John Anderson called the film “a perfect vehicle for Richard Jenkins” and predicted that it “could be this year’s humanistic indie hit,” adding “Jenkins has hooked us early and reels us in like fish.”

Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* magazine raved that Richard doesn't merely "tackle" his role, he "wears it like a second skin." "In *The Visitor*, Jenkins delivers a master class in acting," Travers wrote. "Oscar, take note."

A native of DeKalb, Ill., Richard continued his studies at Indiana University after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan as a theatre major. Despite his Hollywood connections, he and his wife Sharon (Friedrick) Jenkins '69 have lived outside Providence, R.I., for over 30 years. Before entering the world of film, Richard was a regular in regional stage productions, including 15 years at the Trinity Repertory Theater.

But the film's Illinois Wesleyan connections don't end with Richard Jenkins. His co-star Danai Gurira is the daughter of Josephine (Chiza) Gurira '67, who now lives in Zimbabwe. *The Visitor* is Danai Gurira's first film, although she has guest-starred on "Law and Order: Criminal Intent."

*The Visitor* premiered April 1 at the New York Museum of Modern Art, where Richard and Sharon appeared on the red carpet. His next film, the Will Ferrell comedy *Step Brothers*, opens on July 25.



**Jenkins and his wife Sharon at the movie's premiere.**