



# The Other Ivy League

Sure, HBO's *Entourage* is the ultimate inside take on the industry — as seen from agents' offices and lunches at the Ivy. But the series stars swear it really *isn't* art imitating life. So why do Hollywood types think otherwise?

BY AMY DAWES

To any savvy, get-around Angeleno, a visit to the set of the HBO hit *Entourage* could be considered redundant — after all, this is the show that visits us, turning iconic L.A. spots like Jerry's Deli, the Chateau Marmont and the sidewalk cafés of the Sunset Strip into backdrops for the doings of rising movie actor Vincent Chase (Adrian Grenier) and his homeboy hangers-on.

Still, nothing quite prepares you for a location like the one chosen for this shooting day in early April — a 15,000-square-foot Malibu beach house that sprawls in multi-level splendor against an ocean bluff, just a few doors north of Geoffrey's, the swanky cliffside eatery. Arriving by shuttle from base camp at nearby Zuma Beach, even the slim, glossy-haired Grenier is impressed, blinking in the joy of discovery as he explores each level.

"This is how I want to live my life!" he proclaims as he enters a high-ceilinged great room with a giant slid-

ing door open to the sea. The possibility that this is how he *does* live his life hasn't quite sunk in. Even in the midst of filming season four, there remains a healthy disconnect between the star and his character, who enjoys a much-envied lifestyle heavy on hot nightclubs, cool parties and eager women.

"Every day I get to be Vince, but every night I go home and have to be myself, which is not nearly as interesting," he declares. In this particular episode, the

**MALE CALL:**  
The Hollywood buddies on HBO's *Entourage* are: (from left) Jerry Ferrara, Kevin Connolly, Adrian Grenier, Jeremy Piven and Kevin Dillon.



## GOLD Standard

**HE'S AGGRESSIVE, SARCASTIC AND PERMANENTLY PISSED OFF.** He's the profane, hard-charging alpha dog who goes to the mat to make deals for his star client, Vince Chase, even after he's been fired. He's fictional talent agent Ari Gold, as portrayed by Emmy winner Jeremy Piven on *Entourage* — and he's become must-see television for real-life agents.

"There's a lot of underlying truth to his behavior, even though it's heightened for drama," observes Chris Barrett, owner of Metropolitan Talent Agency. "His fear is palpable, and fear is what Hollywood runs on. I don't think anyone watches Ari Gold saying, 'This is the way I want to deal with my client,' but we do watch it and we are tickled by it."

"It's a fun thing — everybody watches it and talks about that Sunday's episode," says agent Vanessa Livingston, who represents television writers at Rothman Brecher. "I love his character; I think he's fantastic. He's a shark with a heart of gold. [The term] gold takes two meanings, because he's all about money, but he's also got heart — he really does care about Vince."

Livingston's favorite episode is the one in which Ari hits rock bottom after being fired and has to be driven home and consoled by his much-abused assistant, Lloyd (Rex Lee). "That's the one where I said, 'They get it,'" she says. "Because even with the biggest producers and agents in town, there are so many moments and stories like that, that people never see or hear about."

Now, in season four, could the twitching, phone-smashing Ari (who was allegedly based on Endeavor Agency founder Ari Emanuel) get any worse? Well, yes. In one episode he hits one out of the park, pulling an appalled producer out of temple on Yom Kippur to talk business. Creator Doug Ellin says that while the behavior is not something he's directly observed, it's always "at least within the realm" of what's plausible.

"People outside the business ask me if that's what I do," says Livingston, "and I say, 'Yes, but it's not how I do it.'"

Asserts Barrett: "I'm sure there are agents who have parts of Ari in them, but most of the ones I know are quite ethical. We live in a sophisticated world with a lot of checks and balances. If you were as manipulative as Ari, your client would know about it." —A. D.

story has Chase being led to the beach house by a pretty girl who pulls up next to his car on Pacific Coast Highway and invites him to follow her to a party. "That doesn't happen to me!" Grenier insists, eyes wide and voice full of indignation. Agreeing that it might have, in a looser, more hedonistic age, he concludes, "I was born in the wrong era," but adds on reflection: "Then again, then there wouldn't be *Entourage*."

Three years ago, there was no *Entourage*, and HBO's hottest half hour was the wrap-up season of the trailblazing *Sex and the City*. But behind the scenes, actor Mark Wahlberg (*Boogie Nights*, *Three Kings*) and manager-producer Stephen Levinson were working with writer Doug Ellin on a concept for a show about a young male star and his retinue of friends from the old neighborhood, based loosely on Wahlberg's life. In mid-2004, after a rigorous development period, the single-camera dramedy debuted and slowly began to get attention.

In the hinterlands, it played as a fantasy excursion into the coveted lifestyle of young guys with a ticket to the show-biz dream, guys whose loyalty and honest give-and-take get them past their flaws and weaknesses. In Hollywood, it gained traction as an envelope-pushing exposé of often-outrageous behind-the-scenes behaviors and business practices. For agents, executives and their beleaguered assistants, *Entourage* became a fascinating guessing game: Who is that character based on? Could they really get away with that? Should I be doing that, too?

Characters began to pop: The bombastic struggling actor Johnny "Drama" Chase (Kevin Dillon), with his much-imitated war cry, "Victory!" and the ethically unbound über-agent Ari Gold (Jeremy Piven), who announces bygone with an invitation to "hug it out."

The ratings crept up, to an average 2.6 million viewers for the 10 p.m. Sunday airings last season (slightly better than *Deadwood*), and recognition began to arrive: Piven won a Primetime Emmy in 2006, while head writer Ellin and episode directors Dan Attias and Julian Farino were Emmy-nominated that same year. The Golden Globes, SAG and People's Choice Awards have also bestowed nominations, while not yet awarding prizes.

Then circumstances conspired to give the show its biggest break yet. As of April 8 — the premiere of season four — it landed the enviable time slot on Sunday nights directly following the final episodes of *The Sopranos*.

"I think we're rolling now, and it's a pretty nice bonus," says Dillon. The time slot had Jerry Ferrara, who plays Turtle, the

good-natured go-fer for the group, so excited he was rewatching seasons of the mob drama to sharpen his appreciation of the show-biz moment. If anyone left in the business wasn't watching *Entourage* already, they'd be watching now.

Were the kids from Queens and their handlers ready for this much attention? Would the storylines hold up? Would cast and crew melt down, or make the most of it?

"I'm under an insane amount of pressure," confesses Ellin, the creator and showrunner, holed up in his office with Rob Weiss, a coexecutive producer and frequent writing partner, just days away from the series' season premiere. So far, the production team had shot twelve episodes, with eight to go. But the remaining eight weren't exactly on paper yet. In fact, there were pages due the next day that were presenting problems.

As a result, Ellin's fifth-floor office, which overlooks midtown L.A.'s placid, leafy Carthay Circle, has taken on the psychic atmosphere of a combat zone. "When you get this far into the story arc, it's like getting deep into the jungle and you just want to get out the other side," says Weiss, who sports a trendy stubble and a vintage Harley-Davidson T-shirt and slouches deep into the furniture. "The last two episodes, we were probably in there among the thickest trees, with the most snipers."

"You can find yourself in a box sometimes," Ellin concurs. "You have to fight your way out — or find your way out. With this show, it's not one of those procedurals where there's a formula. It's really a blank page, and we're a very small group making this show. It's tough. I don't know how the [broadcast] networks do it."

The previous year, the pressure was non-stop from September to August while the team turned out its first big order: twenty episodes for season three. (They had produced eight in the series' first year and fourteen in the second.) "Toward the end of those eleven months, I thought we were going to die," Weiss remembers. "Everybody was toxic."

The makers of *Entourage* have to stay ahead of not just episode orders but also trends in pop culture and nightlife. The day before, they'd shot at a tiny L.A. nightclub called Winston's that had been favored lately by paparazzi-bait like Paris and Nicky Hilton. "The thing with this show is, are you behind the ball with what's hot, or are you in front of it?" asks Weiss. "I think this show stays on it."

"It's important for us to be out in the real places," echoes Ellin.

The only set the show uses is the one for

Ari Gold's agency. Fortunately, success has increased their access to the playgrounds of the players.

"The first year, we couldn't get anything," Ellin recalls. "We had to shoot at the Ivy without permission — we had Jeremy Piven walk out of the Ivy, and we just grabbed it. But now people are more welcoming. It gives them a plug. It helps them to be on the show."

The same isn't necessarily true for the many cameo appearances by stars playing themselves — Ellin insists those are tough to wrangle. "A lot of people are afraid to be themselves and be seen in a realistic light," he says. "Cameos are the hardest part about the show. The people we want don't need us. Scarlett Johansson? Val Kilmer? U2? [All have appeared as themselves.] None of them have benefited from this."

**A** FEW DAYS LATER, DILLON AND FERRARA (as Drama and Turtle) are on the front lines, shooting a double-date scene on the deck at Gladstone's, the iconic seafood restaurant at the ocean end of Sunset Boulevard. It's sharp, funny material: Turtle is desperate to escape his middle-aged, overweight date, and Drama is begging him to "take one for the team" so he can have a shot at alone time with her hot girlfriend. Dillon has a lot of lines to deliver, and he keeps getting tangled in them. "Somebody get me some more marbles for my mouth!" he finally yells in frustration.

Though on set Dillon behaves like a friendlier, less macho version of his character, both he and Ferrara maintain that there is little resemblance between their lives and the ones they portray. "I'm a homebody," says Ferrara. "I like to have people over to the house." When he's in public, he reports, "People will come up and say, 'Where's Drama?' and I'll think, 'Do you know it's a television show?'"

"The one I always hear," says Grenier, "is, 'Yo, Vince, where's Turtle at?'" (As for Kevin Connolly, who completes the foursome as Eric, Vince's manager and close friend, he's exempt from work this particular day.)

Dillon, who lives nearby in Malibu and has a year-old daugh-



PHOTOGRAPH BY CLAUDETTE BARIUS/HBO

## DARK Victory

**THE CREATORS OF ENTOURAGE LIKE TO SAY THE SHOW'S SUCCESS STEMS** from its portrayal of the fast friendship of four guys who grew up together, rather than the fast-lane lifestyle it depicts.

In *A Shot in the Dark*, Adrian Grenier takes that theme a step further, exploring emotional ties among men in a revealing and highly personal documentary about his own search for his father.

Grenier, who plays pretty-boy movie star Vince Chase, grew up knowing little about his father, who save for one childhood visit was absent from his life. In 1999, at age twenty-three, he contacted a man named John Dunbar, who'd had a youthful summer fling with his mother in the '70s, and began to build a relationship in a series of awkward and harrowing encounters that he documented on camera.

The film, which premiered June 3 on HBO, is remarkably touching and absorbing, due in large part to its unvarnished emotional honesty. "I was seeking the truth," says Grenier, whose mother raised him in New York

City. "The raw truth, not just the truth I wanted or that I thought would make an interesting story."

Grenier — who's been seen in the Sundance hit *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole* and, more recently, *The Devil Wears Prada* — says his training allowed him to remain open and vulnerable on camera. "We all naturally want to put up fronts and barriers," he says. "I don't think I could make this documentary now — I'm a lot more media-savvy and wary."

The documentary takes on qualities of a mystery, with suspense building about whether Dunbar will turn out to be his father, and whether Grenier's hopes for a satisfying bond will be realized.

"It's not a movie about me," Grenier says. "The theme is much greater than my personal story. I think people watch movies to learn something about themselves, and I believe they can take something from it, a perspective on family and the relevance of fatherhood and what's important.

"Or so I hope," he adds with a laugh. —A.D.