

An Issue About TELEVISION

NEW YORK

FEATURING:

ANDY COHEN vs. the HOUSEWIVES

By JESSICA PRESSLER

PLUS:

Inside the **Love Is Blind** Factory
Lionel Boyce, *The Bear*'s Other Beefcake
Survivor's New Survival Strategy

AND:

Can **Industry** Succeed *Succession*?

RALPH

A full-page photograph of Aaron Judge, the New York Yankees team captain. He is shown from the waist up, wearing a white short-sleeved polo shirt with the Polo logo on the chest and a dark navy blue baseball cap with the Polo logo. He is holding a white baseball with the Polo logo in his hands. The background is a clear, bright blue sky.

AARON JUDGE

NEW YORK YANKEES
TEAM CAPTAIN

LAUREN



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NIRO



A Bronx Tale:
The Original One Man Show
+ A Q&A with Chazz Palminteri
6/13 | 7 PM
Indeed Theater at Spring Studios



Analyze This
+ Billy Crystal and Robert De Niro
in conversation with Whoopi Goldberg
6/14 | 4 PM
Indeed Theater at Spring Studios



Silver Linings Playbook
+ A Conversation
with David O. Russell
6/14 | 7:30 PM
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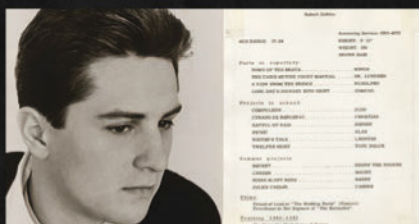
Mean Streets
+ A Martin Scorsese and Robert
DeNiro in conversation with Nas
6/15 | 2 PM
Beacon Theatre



Robert DeNiro
In Conversation with JR
6/16 | 11 AM
Indeed Theater at Spring Studios



Goodfellas
+ A conversation with Nicholas Pileggi,
moderated by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon
6/16 | 1 PM
Indeed Theater at Spring Studios



DeNiro Is An Icon:
Career-Spanning Exhibit
6/6 – 6/16
The Rupert Pupkin Hall
of Fan Experiences



De Niro, New York
Immersive Hexadome Film
6/6 – 6/16
ISM Hexadome



De Niro Hero:
Sandwich Tasting & Competition
6/16 | 12 PM
Spring Studios Roof

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baby reindeer is “a rare gem.” *VARIETY*

baby reindeer is “astonishing.” *The New York Times*

baby reindeer is “deeply personal.” *INDEPENDENT*

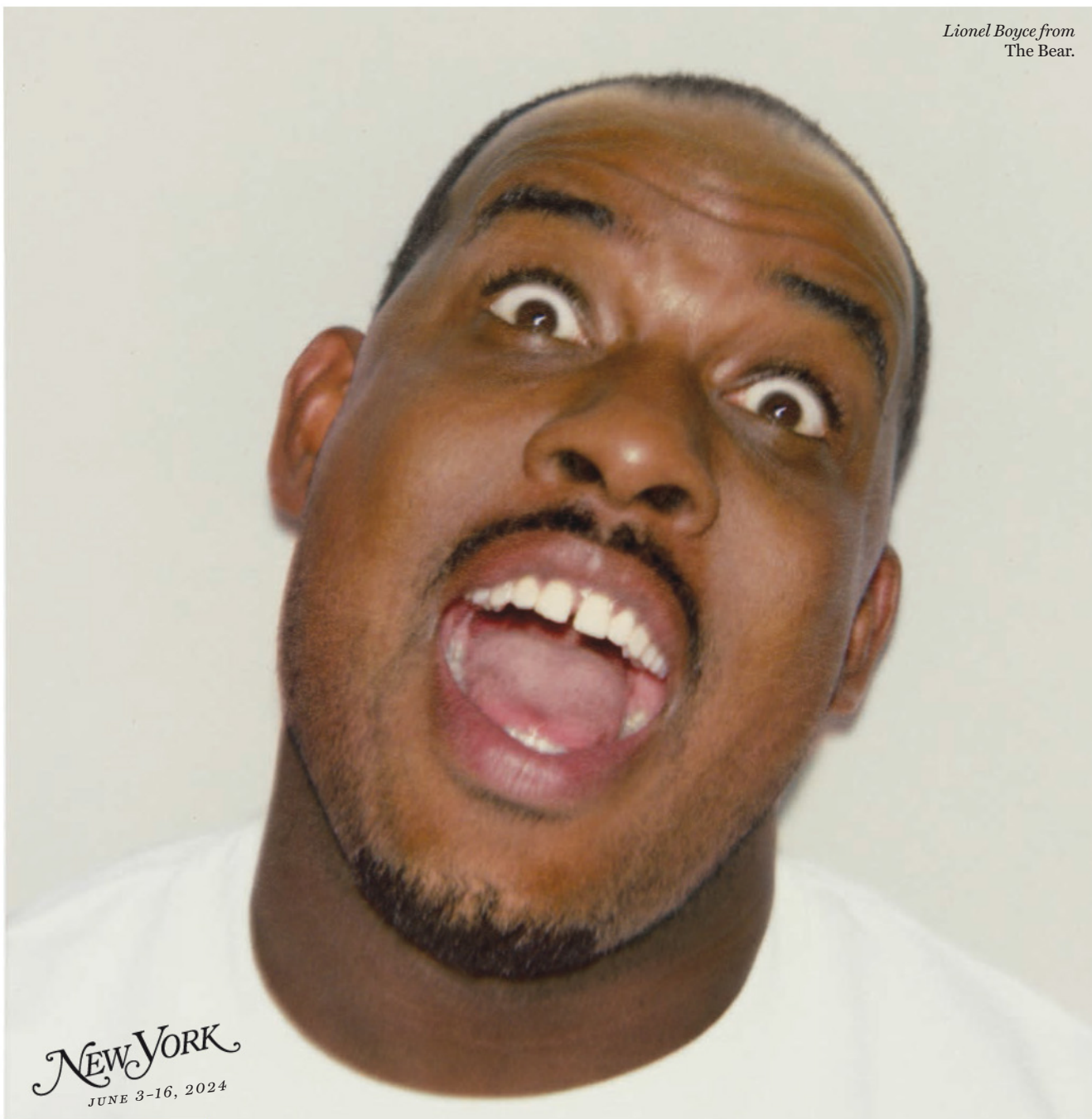
baby reindeer is “brave and moving.” *EMPIRE*

baby reindeer is “as powerful as TV can get.” *GO*

baby reindeer is “an autobiographical masterpiece.” *COLLIDER*

outstanding
limited series

Lionel Boyce from
The Bear.



NEW YORK
JUNE 3-16, 2024

THE TELEVISION ISSUE

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Andy Cohen. Photograph by Martin Schoeller for New York Magazine.

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The 1782 church in Granville that Cristiana Peña and Nick Porter renovated. Photograph by Chris Mottalini for New York Magazine.

ON THE COVER: STYLING: DANIEL GAINES. GROOMING: CAROLINE BLANCHARD. MAKEUP: NATALIE CARDONA. MANICURE: ADA YEUNG; TRACY LOK. CASTING: RENEE TORRIERE. HAND MODELS: CHRISTINA AMBERS; HEATHER BOND; MARGO SAH. SUIT AT BANANA REPUBLIC. SHIRT AT DOLCE & GABBANA. TIE AT BANANA REPUBLIC. JEWELRY: FROM TOP LEFT, TIFFANY & CO. (1, 4); J'EVAR (2, 9, 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23); VAN CLEEF & ARPELS (3, 6, 10, 18, 20); ALTR CREATED DIAMONDS (5, 15); JACOB & CO (7); HERMES (11); TYPE JEWELRY (8, 14); NICKHO REY (12).

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Comments



[1] For *New York's* latest cover story, Elizabeth Weil profiled Israeli American billionaire Miriam Adelson, assessing whether she would help fund Donald Trump's 2024 campaign and what she might expect in return (**"Miriam Adelson's Unfinished Business," May 20–June 2**). Eli Clifton of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft praised Weil's "fantastic reporting" on "how a far-right vision for Israel's (and Palestine's) future is a driving motivation for the GOP's biggest donor." Eric Alterman, the author of *We Are Not One*, a history of Israel-America ties, observed that Adelson's contradictory motivations provide **"a lesson in how to help to destroy democracy in two countries simultaneously with the money from your husband's sleazy gambling-and-prostitution empire."** Johnwkellet, meanwhile, wrote, "It's abundantly clear that a lifetime of striving to improve her personal circumstances and to improve the quality of life for drug addicts against a family history of survival has shaped an extraordinary life. It also throws a spotlight onto the absurdity of the glaring transactional nature of US politics and democracy." Reader 10_27_2011 said, "I hope she sees the irony in her addiction specialization and the hand that fed her." And Yahzi concluded, **"Society has walls—the border. It has a floor—welfare. Now it needs a roof—a cap on the total amount of wealth one person can amass."** On May 30, it was reported that Adelson would once again fund the Preserve America super-PAC, intending to channel more than \$90 million to the Trump reelection efforts.

[2] Jen Wieczner chronicled the rise and continuous fall of chess grandmaster Hans Niemann, 20, whom the game's No. 1 player, Magnus Carlsen, accused of cheating (**"Chess Brat"**). Reader dim said, "As a chess noob it's fascinating that (a) 'proven' cheating doesn't really seem to involve actual proof, just an interpretation of suspicious behaviour that could alternatively be explained by intuition, with that interpretation being done by highly interested/conflicted parties, and (b) **trust and reputation are so important and the game is so unregulated that an individual like Magnus Carlsen can effectively tilt the entire industry against an opponent because he feels like it.**" Chrisaherold added, "Doesn't make Magnus look good. From the outside looks like out of ego and ambition, he called Niemann a cheater, maintaining his (Magnus's) winning streak and wielding a sledgehammer to Niemann's career. Which also eliminated a future competitor." Noting Niemann's off-the-board behavior, Sarah.kg wrote that he appears to be **"just as deranged as his idol Bobby Fischer was. Doing \$5,000 of damage to a hotel room because you lost a game is unacceptable behavior in a toddler."** Cali33 agreed: "Hubris is not a mental illness. Underdeveloped social and emotional skills are but one of a cluster of factors that go into a diagnosis. We can feel sorry for this sad little man while also holding him to the same standards of, say, an average 12 year old boy."

[3] And Zak Cheney-Rice reported from Atlanta, where prosecutors are targeting protesters of a police-training center

(**"How to Criminalize a Protest"**). Attorney Akiva Freidlin wrote, "Glad to see the fascist Cop City RICO prosecutions getting national press. Should be an all-hands-on-deck moment for civil society but too many people are sleeping on it." Hussein Kanji saw the story as a marker of **"the regression from that high-water mark of hope in 2020 to the dispiriting state of affairs today, when dissent is being stifled, demonstrators are treated like criminals."** @valkyrie_falls_ said it "highlights the increasing rhetoric against protesters as violent aggressors, and details how APD has manipulated the 'outside agitator' narrative." "Atlanta resident here," wrote Minervawho. "This is the best coverage I've seen on this issue. **One might hope that good in-depth journalism on the training center would come from a local venue ... It's much easier to slip unpopular top-down policies into practice when the local press has been totally defanged.**" Asphaltdice wrote, "The police around the country will be trained to emulate this model, where the people themselves are the terrorist enemy," while radio show "Partisan Gardens" said the story drew "a straight line to the questions raised by the encampment movement for Palestine." Savetherobotz added, "The Georgia RICO law ... is far more expansive than the federal version and does nothing but make criminal everyday behavior and raise the stakes on mandatory minimum sentences. **The real problem is that people will heap praise on this law when it's applied to those they disagree with.**"

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INSIDE: *On the set of And Just Like That ... / Tormenting Tom Brady / The reverse Robin Hood*

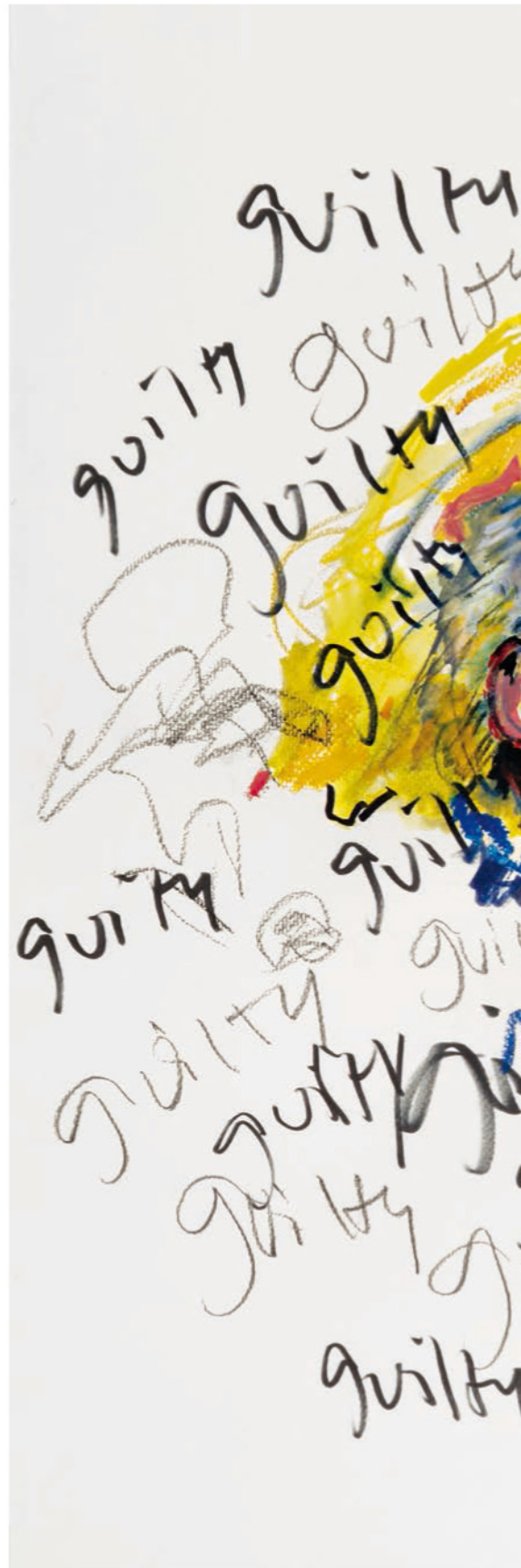
Court Appearances: Andrew Rice

The Moment Trump Was Convicted Suddenly, the whole atmosphere changed.

WHEN PEOPLE ASK me what it was like inside the courthouse where Donald Trump stood trial, I say it reminded me of covering a political convention. It was a programmed event with tentpole speakers like the star witness, Michael Cohen. There was a nominee, chosen by indictment, who swept in each day with a swarm of loyal surrogates. There was the press pack, wearing credentials on their lanyards, all writing down the same words and breathing the same stale air. After final arguments, though, the atmosphere shifted. As the case went to the jury, it felt more like Election Day, when there's nothing left to do but wait. The reporters hung around the 15th floor of the Manhattan criminal-court building, trading theories and gossip, trying out takes.

The jury of 12 New Yorkers—seven men, five women—seemed to be in no hurry. At the end of their first day of deliberations, May 29, they passed a couple notes to Judge Juan Merchan, asking for a read-back of some testimony and, more significantly, his jury instructions. The next morning, Thursday, they all filed into the courtroom and Merchan once again gave an explanation of the law. You couldn't blame the jurors for wanting to hear it a second time.

The Manhattan district attorney, Alvin Bragg, had advanced a complex theory of the case in which one intended crime (a conspiracy to win election via illegal means) was accomplished through a second intended crime (the jury could take its pick from several options, including a violation of federal campaign-finance laws) and concealed through a third crime. The charges Trump faced, 34 counts of falsifying business records, related only to this third crime, the cover-up. The triple-bank shot elevated the business-records charge, normally a misdemeanor,





Trump as he hears his 34-count guilty verdict.

to a felony. But it also furnished a larger justification for the prosecutors, who had been criticized for singling Trump out for a minor offense. It allowed them to say that the case was about something more nefarious than having a sexual encounter with a porn star, or paying hush money through a lawyer, or conspiring with the chief executive of the *National Enquirer* to keep a candidate's secrets.

In his summation, prosecutor Joshua Steinglass told the jurors they should analyze the evidence through “the prism” of “three rich and powerful men, high up in Trump Tower, trying to become even more powerful by controlling the flow of information that might reach the voters.” In other words, he was saying, the underlying crime was the denial of knowledge.

Going into the trial, many legal commentators—even ones who otherwise hated Trump—questioned whether Bragg’s theory would hold up. But Merchan had largely accepted it, and his instructions were written in a way that seemed to point in one direction. As the judge read them to the jury again, Trump sat with his eyes closed. But he belatedly woke up to the fact that the boring stuff was worth his attention. In the afternoon, from the courthouse holding room that he used as his command center, he posted to Truth Social that the instructions were “UNFAIR, MISLEADING, INACCURATE AND UNCONSTITUTIONAL.” His lawyers had promised to appeal any guilty verdict, and they stood a decent chance on the merits of their case. But for now, Merchan’s word was law.

Trump has spent this unusual election year treating his court dates as an extension of his campaign. During the primary season, he devoted much of his time to two civil trials, one for corporate fraud and the other for defamation. In each case, he has adopted his familiar political strategy: picking out his opponents—judges, prosecutors, even a court clerk—and savaging them on social media. Before the criminal trial began, he attacked Merchan as a biased hack, calling attention to the judge’s (tiny) political donations to liberal causes and the fact that his daughter is a Democratic political consultant. When a gag order, and the threat of being jailed for contempt, finally forced Trump to lay off, he called in reinforcements. “It is a political persecution; it is a witch hunt,” Donald Trump Jr. told the TV cameras outside the courthouse during closing arguments. He then singled out a member of the prosecution team who once served as an acting associate attorney general: “There is a reason one of the people sitting at that desk was the No. 3 person in Joe Biden’s DOJ. I know my father is

not allowed to say ‘Matthew Colangelo’ because he’s been gagged. The president of the United States is not allowed to exercise his First Amendment rights in New York City in this day and age.”

Trump has discovered, however, that the demean-and-destroy strategy that works so well for him as a candidate is less effective within the legal system. Merchan is silver-haired and generally soft-spoken, but his demeanor belied a determination to bring Trump to trial kicking and screaming. While Trump’s legal team successfully managed to tie up his federal cases with appeals and procedural motions, Merchan kept the New York State case running on a tight schedule. He denied the defense’s attempts to significantly delay the trial over evidentiary issues. He kept juror selection moving along quickly, and the jurors turned out to be diligent and committed. He held Trump in line. On the second day of jury selection, he noticed the defendant was audibly complaining. “I will not tolerate that,” Merchan told him. “I will not have any jurors intimidated in my courtroom. I want to make that crystal clear.” After that, Trump hardly uttered a peep.

Six weeks after the trial began, the case went to the jury. At around 4 p.m. on Thursday, the prosecution and defense lawyers, as well as Trump, reentered the courtroom, where the reporters in the gallery were lazily passing the afternoon.

The demean-and-destroy strategy that works so well for him as a candidate is less effective within the legal system.

Merchan gave them a routine update: He would be telling the jury to go home for the day as scheduled at 4:30. “We’ll give them a few more minutes,” he said, before disappearing out the side door. The judge was gone for a little while and then he returned with an odd look on his face.

“I apologize for the delay,” Merchan said. “We received a note. It was signed by the jury foreperson at 4:20. It’s marked as Court Exhibit No. 7. It reads: ‘We, the jury, have a verdict.’” From the gallery, there was a sharp collective gasp and the clatter of laptops. “Please,” the judge said, “let there be no outbursts, no reactions of any kind, once we take a verdict.”

Eric Trump, the sole member of the defendant’s family present, stalked out of the courtroom wearing a stricken expression and returned a few minutes later. His father sat at the defense table, his arms crossed over his bright-blue tie, and then leaned in as his attorney, Todd Blanche, whispered to him behind his hand. Trump turned up his chin and prepared to take the punch. He stood as the jurors filed into the hushed room without giving him a look. And then the foreman, an Irish immigrant, pronounced him guilty 34 times over.

Blanche asked, as a formality, for the jurors to be polled. Trump turned to look at them one more time as each was asked if they agreed with the verdict and each answered: “Yes.”

Otherwise, Trump showed no visible reaction. The man who never admits defeat or accepts punishment had suddenly been rendered helpless before the law. He is scheduled to be sentenced on July 11, four days before his party gathers for its actual political convention in Milwaukee. On his way out of the courtroom, Trump gave a dispirited, jerky handshake to his son and then walked to the press pen to deliver a statement. “This was a rigged, disgraceful trial,” he said. “The real verdict is going to be November 5 by the people.” If that one goes his way, Trump will return to power, and he will be able to put off any state-court sentence. He will also be able to order the Department of Justice to dismiss his federal cases. Then, if past is prologue, he will turn to payback and seek to lock up his perceived enemies.

Even if he never serves a day in jail, though, the conviction assures at least one outcome. This time around, there won’t be any conspiracy to hide the truth about the Republican Party’s candidate. And the American voters will know exactly what they are getting if they elect him president. Donald Trump is a criminal. ■

ALL MUST CHOOSE



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Neighborhood News:

The Chair Says 'Carrie'

Parker-spotting at Gramercy Park.

By Christopher Bonanos

"IT'S ONLY HER TODAY," a production assistant told a pedestrian on East 21st Street on the warm morning of May 21. The *her* in question needed no clarification because a few steps away, Sarah Jessica Parker had just made her way up the stoop at 3 Gramercy Park West, over and over, in take after take of a moment from season three of *And Just Like That ...* (Presumably, the PA was referring to the core Carrie-Charlotte-Miranda lineup because Aidan, a.k.a. John Corbett, appeared on the set soon thereafter. His character's good-bye at the end of season two seems not to have stuck.) In Carrie's scene, she held an animated conversation with an actor in coveralls. A van parked at the house suggests that he's an exterminator. Does Carrie Bradshaw have *rats*? Is this whole season an Eric Adams psyop? We don't know, and we won't until *And Just Like That ...* returns sometime in 2025.

Sex and the City-spotting has become familiar, almost cozy, after 115 episodes (and counting) and two movies over 26 years. Encountering the show is not quite as common as running into the *Law & Order* universe, but it's hardly exotic, partly because fictional Carrie, like real-life Sarah, is an out-and-about New Yorker. On this day, about 25 fans stood quietly at the corner of Gramercy Park West and 21st Street, taking pictures and videos. One passerby (named Sarah herself) said that she lives close by and had been surprised to see Carrie pop up in her neighborhood. "But it's fun," she said, adding that she follows Parker on Instagram. You could spot most of the fans texting friends, likely with a variation on "Guess who I just saw."

Shortly after noon, the shot was complete, and the crew began resettling the camera crane and everything around it. Another PA made a polite announcement to the onlookers: "This next shot, we're going to be facing this direction," he said, "so we're going to have to have you move." And just like that, they dispersed. ■







74 MINUTES WITH ...

Nikki Glaser

The comedian has been in the business for decades. But her set on the Tom Brady roast seems to have shifted something.

BY GRACIE HADLAND

AS I PULL UP to Bally's Casino in Lake Tahoe, right on the border of Nevada and California, I'm greeted by a 30-foot version of the comedian Nikki Glaser. The big-screen marquee is advertising her "Alive and Unwell" tour, and somewhere inside, past a maze of slot machines and solitary gamblers, she's getting ready for her sold-out Memorial Day weekend show. "Are you

going?" my cabdriver asks. "She's going to be a big deal after the roast."

By "the roast," he means *The Roast of Tom Brady*, which recently aired on Netflix to nearly 14 million viewers in its first week. Glaser was quickly, if unofficially, deemed the night's winner. Kevin Hart, the event's host, was visibly moved by her set, nearly choking up when he came onstage after she walked off. "That's the beauty of roasting,"

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he said to the crowd. “There’s an art to it, and when you get it right, goddamn it’s amazing.” It’s true: Watching her—one of the only women on a decidedly laddish stage—felt sort of like watching a woman going into the boys’ locker room and politely brutalizing them. “I get it,” she said breezily to Brady at one point, referring to his first, failed attempt to retire. “It’s hard to walk away from something that’s not your pregnant girlfriend.”

Glaser has been in the business for just over 20 years. She started doing stand-up when she was 18, first at an open mic at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where she briefly went to school, then, after she moved to L.A. in 2006, at various bars and clubs that would give her stage time. (For extra money, she nannied—at one point for Judd Apatow and Leslie Mann.) That led to an appearance on *Last Comic Standing* the same year, after which she headed out on the road, where she would spend the next decade relentlessly performing, sometimes six days a week. (“My goal in life,” she told this publication in 2011, “is to never nanny again.”) She was invited to do her first roast—of Rob Lowe—in 2016 by producers at Comedy Central, who’d seen her on Jeff Ross’s show *The Burn*. Since then, she’s had a smattering of high-profile projects, but each one has been notably short-lived. There was *Not Safe With Nikki Glaser* on Comedy Central (canceled after one season) and *FBoy Island* on HBO Max (canceled after two. In case you were wondering, the premise of the latter was to stick three women on a tropical island with 24 men—12 “nice guys” looking for love and 12 “FBoys” there only to compete for cash). She appeared on *Dancing With the Stars* in 2018 and was first voted off. But she kept getting invited back to do roasts, often as one of the few women on the stage. The same year as *Dancing With the Stars*, there was Bruce Willis’s roast. (“I know you as the star of every DVD you kind of just find on the street,” she said to a red-faced Willis.) And a year later, Alec Baldwin got on the dais. “That time, I was really speaking from *What do I actually think about these people*, rather than *What’s the funniest joke?*” she tells me in the greenroom a few hours before her performance.

She was asked to do her Max special, *Someday You’ll Die*, a year ago. Conveniently, it came out on May 11, six days after the roast. She’d planned to do just two weeks of press, but then many of the same people who had said “no” to having her on their shows suddenly started calling her back. She was, in rapid

succession, invited onto *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, *Today* with Hoda and Jenna, *The Howard Stern Show*, and *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, whom she told she felt like “Taylor Swift for a day.” As soon as all that finished, she promptly left Los Angeles for her tour.

Over the next several months, Glaser will be performing in theaters and casinos like this one across the country. Her set, like the special, focuses on what it’s been like to reach her 40s. On her decision to not have children, she jokes, “I just don’t feel like devoting my free time to something that could marry a DJ.”

“Finding a way to be yourself onstage is so hard,” she tells me in her raspy, speedy voice before asking her makeup artist to take her blush down a bit. It’s taken time to get there. “When I was four years into comedy, it started emerging in little places, and I’d be like, *Oh, what did I just do?* But people really responded to it.” She cites Sarah Silverman as one of her major inspirations: “She seems really nice but says crazy things,” she says. “I like being met where people still like me and are rooting for me, even when I can show sides of myself that are cuckoo.” It’s funny that given Glaser’s talent for publicly skewering people, her likability seems rather important to her. She’s wary of alienating people. In her comedy, she doesn’t often

“I practiced my set like 55 times. But when I got up there, I literally felt bad.”

address politics beyond vague allusions to the state of things or a few jokes about abortion that are legible as pro-choice. She tells me earnestly, leaning forward in her chair, “I think a lot about death and what people would say about me, and I just want people to be like, ‘She was really nice.’ I know that sounds crazy, but that’s my favorite compliment, as opposed to funny.” She says she didn’t mean to apologize so many times during the Brady roast. (After almost every joke, she turned to him and said “I’m sorry.”) “I practiced my set like 55 times,” she tells me. “Different variations of it, and I never once apologized in any of those. But when I got up there, I literally felt bad.”

After her makeup is done, she changes out of her yoga pants and Taylor Swift concert T-shirt. (She’s gone to the Eras Tour 12 times this past year. In fact, “One of the best things in my life is being a Swiftie. It brings me the most joy. It’s right up there with being an aunt, and I’m not kidding you,” she says, then adds, “Actually, it might beat being an aunt.”) She puts on a short white dress and looks through an assortment of very high heels. Onstage, she talks often about “fuckability” and fearing that her sex appeal will decline as she ages. (At the show, the man behind me cracked up when she compared her pussy to a used car.) “I didn’t know how to be sexy, or even lean into that, or that I could even market myself in that way, until I was 35,” she tells me. “Like, *Oh, I can dress like a pop star because that’s what I want*. It caters to the male gaze, which isn’t a bad thing in this business. But then you do start to worry, *If that goes away, what happens?*”

She, more than most, understands that “things going away” is basically what happens in her line of work. Since the Brady special, she says, everyone has been telling her everything is different. “I’m like, ‘Mm-mm,’” she says with a skeptical tone. “It was fun being the belle of the ball, but now it’s kind of cooled off, and thank God.” She’s more okay with things staying as they were, she says. She’d like to do *SNL* in theory, but when she really thinks about it, she gets nervous. “It would be a lot of pressure and work. So I’m sort of like—I just did a thing that people are happy about. Can I just tour now? I’m comfortable touring, I don’t get nervous touring.” In the meantime, she’s adjusting to one component of her ever-so-slightly new reality—getting recognized, after all of her years working, at Pilates. “The other day, a guy afterward was like, ‘By the way, huge fan.’ He was next to me the whole time. I was like, ‘I literally would’ve tried harder if I knew you knew I was Nikki Glaser.’” ■

WHITNEY BIENNIAL



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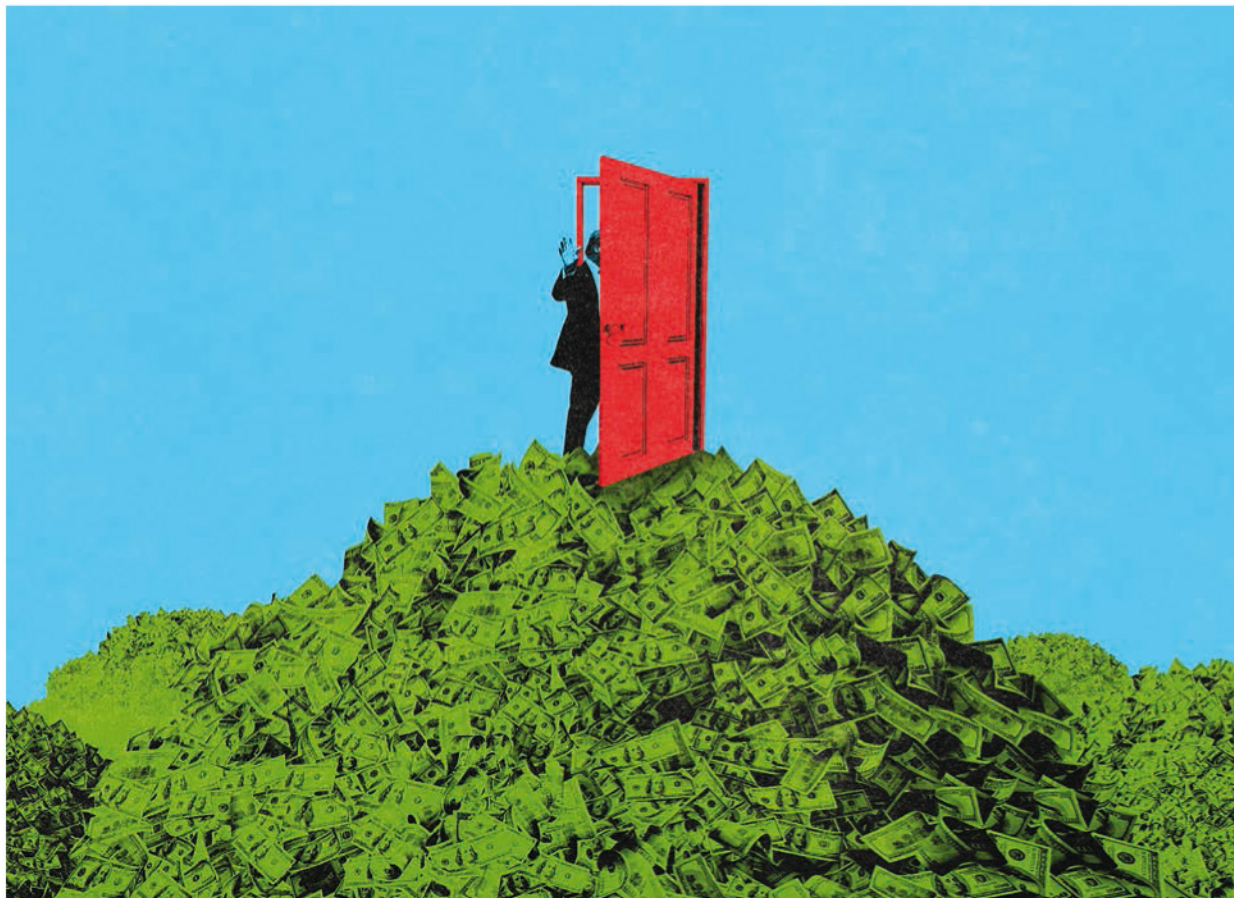
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The National Interest: Jonathan Chait

Trump's
Billionaire Boom
How he gets away
with promising to
make the rich richer.

ONE OF THE few advantages Joe Biden's campaign possessed at the outset of the year was money. The president had built a fundraising base as an incumbent, and many wealthy Republicans were estranged from Donald Trump over his coup attempt and their support for his ill-fated primary rivals. This spring, even though the battle lines of the presidential campaign have barely budged on the surface, that financial advantage has melted away as conservative billionaires have flocked to Trump's side.

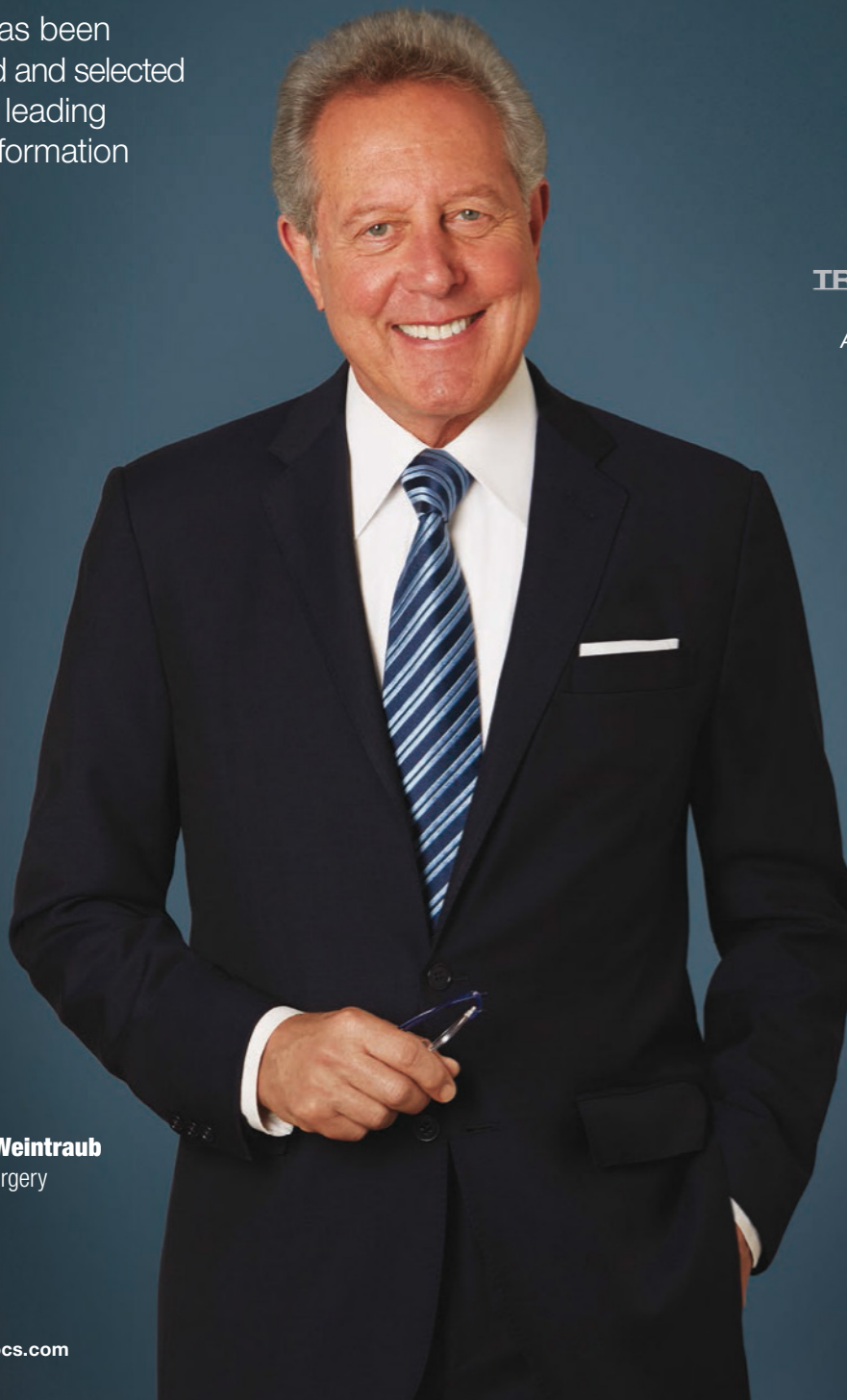
When describing their reasoning, several of the donors have offered up the peculiar rationale that left-wing protesters have gone so far in their attacks against Biden's support for Israel that they somehow feel compelled to also oppose the president. "Due to a dramatic change in circumstances," said financier Eric Levine in March, describing progressive protests against Biden, "I have decided I will vote for Trump in November." Recently,

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Blackstone CEO Stephen Schwarzman explained his reversal in similar terms: “The dramatic rise of antisemitism has led me to focus on the consequences of upcoming elections with greater urgency.”

The eagerness of billionaires to support a candidate who is also a billionaire and is promising to extend tax cuts for billionaires isn’t exactly dramatic. What is notable is how brazenly this alliance has been consummated without dispelling Trump’s image as the enemy of the well-to-do and champion of the common man.

Over the past two decades, and especially since the Trump era, voters with college degrees have moved toward the Democrats, while those without have moved toward Republicans. This ongoing shift has had all sorts of consequences, including making it easier for Republicans to cast themselves as populists and facilitating an erosion of working-class Black and Latino support for Democrats. The endless procession of reporters staking out diners and psycho-analyzing liberal elites has come to define the parties in the public mind.

The level of attention paid to the fast-changing composition of the two parties’ voting bases, however, has obscured the largely static character of their policy agendas. Democrats remain devoted, as they have for generations, to a more generous social safety net and higher taxes on the rich. Republicans likewise remain devoted to the opposite.

Trump’s billionaire surge has several causes. First, and most predictably, the end of the Republican primary terminated hopes wealthy Republicans harbored that they could return their party to power without sully themselves with an attachment to a post-insurrection Trump. Second, Trump’s strong showing in the polls and his penchant for graft increased the incentive to make nice. Trump’s first term made it clear that he has no compunction about favoring business leaders who support him and ruthlessly punishing those who don’t.

Third, apart from the obvious self-interest at play, wealthy conservatives hold moral beliefs about taxation that are difficult for most Americans to fathom. The American right has long regarded the fact that a majority of normal Americans can vote to tax money from a small minority of very rich ones for whatever purpose they see fit as the most outrageous feature of a democratic system. Schwarzman himself once said plans by President Obama to raise taxes on private-equity firms were “like when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939.”

Schwarzman is hardly alone in seeing proposals to raise tax rates at the top as

Hitlerian. A decade ago, the late venture capitalist Tom Perkins wrote, “I would call attention to the parallels of fascist Nazi Germany to its war on its ‘one percent,’ namely its Jews, to the progressive war on the American one percent, namely the ‘rich.’” Conservative financier Ken Langone once said of Democrats’ populist rhetoric, “If you go back to 1933, with different words, this is what Hitler was saying in Germany. You don’t survive as a society if you encourage and thrive on envy or jealousy.”

That billionaires would throw their support behind a would-be authoritarian who is promising to line their pockets may seem like simple corruption. But in the mind of the wealthy conservative, the election is a choice between two offenses against liberty: one candidate who might abuse power or disregard election results against another who will unleash unruly mobs to stick grubby hands in their pockets and tax them, Hitler style. Seen in this light, the upholding-the-Republic question is close, perhaps a draw. So why not pick the candidate who leans toward their self-interest?

This incentive looms especially large when you consider the fourth and last factor driving the billionaire surge: the unusually huge amount of money at stake.

When Republicans passed the Trump tax cuts six years ago, they set much of it to expire in 2025. (This was a budget gimmick to mask the cost in lost revenue.) This has set up the winner of the 2024 elections to have enormous influence over the direction of fiscal policy. Biden pledges to let the portion of the Trump tax cuts benefiting households earning more than

\$450,000 a year expire. Republicans vow to extend those tax cuts and possibly pile more on top.

Trump has repeatedly enticed donors with promises of lavish tax cuts, and this is one promise he can make credibly. Republicans in Congress are already drawing up plans for a legislative lightning strike if the elections give them full control of government. Congress’s bizarre rule structure allows changes in taxes to circumvent the filibuster, which is one reason Republicans have little interest in ending it: Their main legislative pastimes, cutting taxes and confirming judges, are already exempt.

Elon Musk told Trump he had been hosting “gatherings of powerful business leaders across the country” to try to “convince them not to support President Biden’s reelection campaign,” *The Wall Street Journal* reports. “The discussion at times centered on how attendees could give money to Trump outside of public view.”

But discretion is hardly even necessary. There’s an old saying: “Give a man a reputation as an early riser and he can sleep till noon.” Trump has the luxury of coasting on his reputation as a populist rogue. His defenders have spent nearly a decade building him up as a tribune of the people—“Robin Hood taking over the empire,” as former Trump aide Sebastian Gorka once called him.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party has increasingly adopted the priorities and language of its college-educated wing, making it easier for Trump to posture as an enemy of the cultural elite, when in reality he represents a different wing of the elite. The proliferation of commentary on Democrats’ struggles to retain working-class support has had the side effect of helping Trump—every instance of liberal hand-wringing about Trump’s hold on the working class sends the subconscious message that he is a genuine voice of the people.

And so Trump has been able to fill his empty coffers by undertaking one of the most nakedly transactional fundraising tours in the history of presidential campaigns, promising his well-heeled benefactors a generous return on their investment.

Pseudo-populism has always been integral to Trump’s shtick: his outer-borough accent, tacky hairstyle, garish tastes, and periodic overt racism all function as class markers. But Trump doesn’t actually hate the rich. He admires them. And the common people with whom he supposedly has developed some deep bond of fellowship were never intended to be the beneficiaries. They were, and remain, the suckers he is using. ■

Trump has been able to fill his empty coffers by undertaking one of the most nakedly transactional fundraising tours in history.

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MAN ON TELEVISION**
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WISDOM

ISSUE

bright spots, reality TV has dominated the cultural conversation this year—even has reached a mature new stage in its evolution: Everyone is suing each other.

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THE LAST INAPPROPRIATE MANN ON TELEVISION

How
**ANDY
COHEN**
survived the
'Reality
Reckoning'
(at least
for now).

BY
**JESSICA
PRESSLER**



ANDY COHEN THINKS ABOUT HIS CANCELLATION A LOT.

What will it look like? When will it come? “It’s fascinating to me, the idea that you could say something and everything would be pulled away from you,” he says. It was a bright afternoon in May, and we had been talking about an event he had coming up, “An Evening With Andy Cohen,” at the 92nd Street Y.

Cohen had been thinking he might read an excerpt from his 2012 memoir, *Most Talkative*, but now he was having second thoughts. “It’s called ‘Cry Indian,’ and it’s about a prank I played on my parents where I convinced them that I thought I was a Native American,” he says. It was a sweet, relatable story—about a joke gone too far and how being funny can sometimes tip into being mean—but he worried that the title and nature of the prank wouldn’t land with a 2024 audience. “You have to be smart about what you say because there’s no nuance anymore,” he says. “People are just waiting to be outraged by every little thing.”

This is a healthy concern for any public figure to have, particularly one who, like Cohen, has built his career skipping up to the line of propriety. As the host of the reunions for the various franchises of *The Real Housewives*, which he executive-produces, a daily live radio show, and the nightly *Watch What Happens Live*, he’s known for his willingness to go there,

plowing into sensitive subjects, addressing unspoken issues, and asking devilishly impertinent questions with his charming, crooked grin.

“I mean, he asked Shaq how—big he is,” sputters Anderson Cooper, who often plays the straight man to Cohen’s instigator, most famously on the duo’s annual New Year’s Eve broadcast from Times Square, during which Cooper once memorably held Cohen back by his collar as he ranted drunkenly against outgoing mayor Bill de Blasio. “I would never in a million years ask that question or even think to ask it,” Cooper continues needlessly. “But Shaq not only answered; he gave a really funny answer. With props.”

Cohen wouldn’t have it any other way. “I like being provocative,” he says. “It makes me feel alive in a weird way. It’s dangerous. It’s spontaneous. I think it sometimes gets to the heart of who a person is. If you navigate it well, it can become something incredible and intoxicating. It’s like dancing on the water: Are you going to go over or not?”

On the whole, Cohen has navigated it very well. Since leaving his desk job as a Bravo executive over a decade ago, he has managed to ascend to a level of fame that feels increasingly difficult to achieve. He’s America’s gay best friend, as his friend John Mayer put it. *Sesame Street* had him on to

define *popular* for Elmo. In the weeks I spent with him, nearly every stranger who approached him began with some version of “I love you.”

Still, he worries. “Sometimes at night I’ll be in bed and I’ll think, *Huh, did I say something?*” Cohen says. “I’m always waiting for the thing that’s going to make it all fall down.”

Earlier this year, it seemed as if that time might have come after attorneys for former *Real Housewives* filed lawsuits against Bravo and its parent company, NBCUniversal—the product of a long-simmering “Reality Reckoning” that pointed to Cohen as, among other things, an “omnifacient ringleader” with a “proclivity for cocaine usage” whose “discriminatory and retaliatory conduct” created a “rotted workplace culture.”

“It is inconceivable that Mr. Cohen remains in his post in spite of this behavior and harkens back to the bad old days of Matt Lauer and NBC News when profits were prioritized over people,” wrote Bryan Freedman, one of the Los Angeles entertainment lawyers leading the Reckoning. There would be more lawsuits to come, he added, telling *Variety*, “This is going to end up being a war, and I’m going to lead the war.”

NBCU and Cohen’s lawyers sent out the usual statements denying the accusations, specifically demanding a retraction of the cocaine allegation. But to a casual observer, it looked like the beginnings of a familiar story: the unraveling of a powerful man in an industry that was already widely regarded to be toxic and depraved. Lord knows it wouldn’t be the first time Elmo had put his furry mitts in the wrong hands. NBCU announced it was conducting an investigation, and rumors swirled that Cohen was hiring a crisis-PR team and negotiating a “departure package.” Chairman Frances Berwick delivered a chilling line: “Andy is a very sort of specific and exceptional talent, and he really is the face of the network,” she told *Variety*. “But I’m also happy to say that—and I think we’ve proved this over and over again—we’ve got 160 talents here who are also big faces of the network. And we’ve also been able to replace them.”

But then nothing happened. Instead of quietly disappearing while the courts worked out his fate, Cohen kept up his regular patter on the radio and on television. He went to parties, posed for pictures, helped Sarah Jessica Parker see her way down the red carpet at the Met Ball, and continued asking impertinent questions.

“The other night, we went to a party for Stephen Colbert,” his friend Amy

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STYLING: DANIEL GAINES, GROOMING: CAROLINE BLANCHARD, SUIT AT BANANA REPUBLIC, SHIRT AT DOLCE & GABBANA, TIE AT BANANA REPUBLIC.

Sedaris recalled recently. “And I turn around and he’s asking Colbert, ‘Is there anyone in your family that you don’t get along with?’”

Eventually, Bravo and NBCU announced that Cohen had been cleared in their outside investigation and that they were renewing *Watch What Happens Live* through 2025. Although no retractions of any legal claims were issued and the lawsuits were still pending, Cohen reacted as though that were the end of it, appearing on the cover of *The Hollywood Reporter* straightening his tie above the headline **WHAT, ME WORRY?**

Still, maybe it’s better not to tempt fate: “I was thinking about reading an excerpt from my first book,” Cohen says to the audience at the 92nd Street Y in a way that suggests he’s still considering it. But then he changes his mind. “Saturday, January 1st, 2022, New York City,” he reads instead. “Claire McCaskill texted the trashing of de Blasio was epic ...”

HERE AREN’T MANY things anyone can tell you about Andy Cohen that he hasn’t already said himself. Things he reveals in his memoirs (there are four, three in diary form) include:

That he is a “power top.”

That he accidentally called Snoop Dogg “Spook” but deleted it from the broadcast. (It turned out fine; they smoked a blunt afterward).

That he once told Mark Consuelos and Kelly Ripa’s kids about sleeping with a guy who had a uniball.

That he and Sedaris once did ketamine before going to the Polo Bar.

That he has seen the boobs of at least three *Housewives*: Vicki, Tamra, and Kim.

“I mean, it’s like he blabs everything,” says his mother, Evelyn Cohen, 87, who, on a Zoom call with his sister, Emily, struggles to come up with a story her son hasn’t told about his childhood growing up in St. Louis.

“Did he tell you about the Indian boots?” says his mother. “That was bad.”

Despite the confessional nature of his books, Cohen is less forthcoming in interviews, maybe because his line of work has made him fearful of allowing anyone else control over his story. In any case, Cohen’s story is at this point well known: Growing up in St. Louis, he was a soap-opera-obsessive kid who wanted to be on television “as himself,” but when he landed in New York in the early ’90s, someone told him he couldn’t because of

his wonky eye. So instead he got a job as a producer at CBS News and became a fun party-boy-about-town. “He has that magnetic energy,” says Sedaris, who met him through Parker. “He can’t sit still. I don’t know the type of dog he is, but he’s always, like, walking down the street, looking around, ears flopping. Always promiscuous, always has his eye out.”

He met Cooper when someone tried to set him up on a date. Cohen blew it: “I was like, ‘Your mom’s Gloria Vanderbilt.’ And he was like, ‘I’m not into you.’”

Their mutual friend Barry Diller eventually hired him at Trio, which merged with Bravo after both were absorbed into NBCUniversal. Cohen was working as the vice-president of programming in 2004 when a California production company came in with the tapes of what would become *The Real Housewives of Orange County*: “*Orange County* to me was the *Knots Landing* of *The Real Housewives*,” he says. “They’re in cul-de-sacs. They all go to the same club.” But he

got nervous when he saw the now-famous format the production company had come up with for the intro, which featured the women alongside contextless quotes from the show (“I don’t want to get old,” “85 percent of the women around here have had breast implants,” “He’s pretty much keeping me”).

“I was like, *Oh my God, the women, they’re going to hate this*,” he says. But when it premiered, in March 2006, they *loved* it: “So that was my first sense—*Oh, these women are in for the ride. So okay, let’s go*.”

Cohen’s enthusiasm for that show and others on the network led his boss to suggest he start blogging about them on the Bravo website, which led to his doing guest spots promoting Bravo’s programming and eventually hosting the network’s reunion specials, which was how he caught the eye of Michael Davies, a British producer who had imported the wildly successful *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* to the U.S. “He was asking *Flipping Out* host Jeff Lewis about the



▲ With Lisa Rinna and Kyle Richards at Ben’s baby shower in January 2019.



▲ Telling Mayor de Blasio, “Sayonara, sucker,” during CNN’s New Year’s Eve Bash.



implants in his lips,” Davies recalls. “And I had one of those moments where I could see the future.”

Obama had just taken office, and the national mood was optimistic. Cohen’s irrepressibility felt right for the moment. “I saw him as a kind of poster boy for post-ironic, positive television,” says Davies, whose company, Embassy Row, produces *Watch What Happens Live*.

The show, which started as an experiment in the summer of 2009, mirrored the loose, chatty vibe of the early internet in both its tone and format: On Thursday nights from midnight to 12:30 a.m., Cohen and whatever Bravo personality or celebrity he could wrangle played drinking games and took calls from viewers and questions over Twitter from a tiny studio in Embassy Row’s offices. The set was modeled on Cohen’s apartment, decorated with his own furniture. There was no air-conditioning.

“In the beginning, I was like Albert Brooks in *Broadcast News*,” Cohen recalls. “I couldn’t control my sweating.”

Afterward, they would review the tape and then head to the Boom Boom Room,

the club at the top of the Standard that reminded Cohen of Nexus, the favored haunt of Erica Kane on *All My Children*. “We would roll in at 1:15 a.m. and stay until four,” Cohen says. “It was great.”

He knew he was famous after Teresa Giudice shoved him to the side during a heated altercation on the season-two reunion of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*. “I was out at the beach on vacation, and it was on *Access Hollywood*, and there was a big picture of it in the *New York Post*, and people were talking about it on Twitter,” he says. By then, *Watch What Happens Live* had hit 2 million viewers. Bravo extended it to two, then five days a week, which afforded Cohen more time to discuss non-Bravo subjects and host bigger and better guests. Meryl Streep came on and played *Marry, Shag, Kill*. Hillary Clinton drank from the “Shotski”—a ski with shot glasses attached to it, a gift that had been given to Cohen by Jimmy Fallon and his wife. Oprah told Cohen he “carried the light.”

In 2013, Cohen was finally able to drop his day job and negotiate a deal for a mostly on-air role at Bravo that allowed him to remain the host of the network’s reunion

specials and retain his executive-producer credit on *The Real Housewives*, which was rapidly becoming its own multiverse with six active franchises and numerous spinoffs. (There are a lot more now.)

Cohen likes to refer to *The Real Housewives* as a “sociological time capsule,” and as the start-up era roared into being, the series gained a reputation as a launching pad for businesses, largely due to the success of *The Real Housewives of New York*’s hustling chef, Bethenny Frankel, who had famously sold the beverage division of her company, Skinnygirl, for \$100 million. The Housewives, newly redefining themselves as “entrepreneurs,” began using the platform of the show to hawk everything from brands of flavored vodka to their (questionable) singing careers.

“They are mothers, they are entrepreneurs, they are wives, they are women,” Cohen told Gloria Steinem on *Watch What Happens Live* in 2015.

“It is women all dressed up and inflated and plastic surgery and false bosoms and not getting along with each other,” Steinem replied stonily.

Cohen was visibly dismayed at the time,



With his son, Ben,
on the walk to
school.



**"I THINK IT'S A
FEMINIST SHOW.
AND I KNOW A LOT OF
FEMINISTS, BY THE WAY,
WHO VIEW THIS AS
A GREAT FEMINIST SHOW."**

and nearly a decade later, this point of view still bothers him.

"I think it's a feminist show," he says. "And I know a lot of feminists, by the way, who view this as a great feminist show—Roxane Gay, Camille Paglia, Sarah Paulson—just women that are very active in women's issues, who view this as a great feminist show. The other great thing that I love about this show is that I love that we have put more women over 50 on television."

Cohen loves women, he adds. "Women are precious to me," he says, rattling off a list of the many who made an impact on his life, including but not limited to his mom, his mentors at Bravo, Madonna, Diana Ross, and Cher.

And he *respects* women, especially the Housewives. "I really respect the Housewives so much because they open up their lives in a sometimes very raw way, and I think that would be really hard to do," he says. "I don't know if I have the constitution to do that on television. So the strength of these women ultimately to share that and then open themselves up for all sorts of conversations is something that I admire. So that's why if someone says it's about



On his way to record "Andy Cohen Live" on SiriusXM.



fighting or Gloria Steinem says this, I just think it's a lazy trope. I think that if it was just about women fighting, it would not still be on the air 18 years later and there wouldn't be ten shows going. There has to be humanity and there has to be humor, and you have to connect with these women. And so, obviously, there is drama and conflict, but there's a whole lot more."

As the *Housewives* rolled on, becoming an even bigger cultural and economic force, so did Andy Cohen. He started his own book imprint and his own radio channel with SiriusXM and, in 2017, replaced Kathy Griffin as Cooper's CNN New Year's Eve co-host. "Every day when I turn on my phone, I see content that Andy Cohen is responsible for," says Cooper. "Much more so than any late-night host. He makes it look easy. But he is paddling really, really fast under the water." Said like the true son of a swan.

"For the record, I would like to point out that I have wound up being the straight man of the two of us," Cohen says. "Maybe except for the year that I went off on de Blasio. But it's usually him in a puddle of giggles and I'm hitting the commercial

breaks and I'm moving it along. I mean, that's what winds up happening because he's a lightweight."

"HI, ANDY COHEN," says Cohen's 5-year-old son, Ben, scooting into the park near his apartment in the West Village. "He's totally taking the piss out of me," Cohen says. "Because he thinks it's so funny that people come up to me all the time and are like, 'Andy Cohen, Andy Cohen.'"

Cooper likes to say Cohen has more fun being famous than anyone, and Cohen agrees. "I lived in New York for 15 years without being able to get reservations at restaurants," he says. "So yeah, of course I'm going to enjoy it."

Cohen had a lot of famous friends by the time he became famous. "So I had a sense of how to behave," he says. "And then I had a lot of people who were normal people who were becoming famous, *Housewives* who were turning into beasts as a result. So I'm ultimately very appreciative of the whole thing. And you have to keep that perspective. You can't go all in on it. Because it can all go away tomorrow."

After he published his third memoir,

Superficial, in 2016, Cohen found himself at a crossroads: "When you see what you did every day for two and a half years, as fabulous as it was, it does make you look at your life: *Okay, well, is this what it's going to be?* I had just turned 49, and I was like, *This is like the last exit to having kids.* I was financially to the point where I knew that I could do it and have the help that I needed if I did it alone. And I also felt like, *You know what? If I never go to the Vanity Fair Oscar party again, I'm going to be okay.*"

Two years later, in December 2018, he summoned five of the most important women in his life—*Housewives* Teresa Giudice from New Jersey, Kyle Richards from Beverly Hills, NeNe Leakes from Atlanta, Ramona Singer from New York, and Vicki Gunvalson, "the OG of the OC"—to *Watch What Happens Live* to announce he was going to become a father via surrogate.

The following month, they threw him a *Star Is Born*-themed baby shower in Beverly Hills. It was the first time so many different *Housewives* had been in the same room, and the event was instantly hailed as historically significant. "It was like the



Avengers finale,” Cohen later said.

And it *was* a finale, in a way.

The year was 2019. The world was a different place from when Cohen and the *Housewives* started out. A reality star had been elected president. The country was divided. The world felt increasingly unstable, and so did the world of *The Real Housewives*.

“The show went from silly humor about middle-aged women getting drunk and being delusional about their status and having funny, petty arguments, to *Housewives* investigating and doing opposition research and making up false story lines and leaking stories on each other and trying to get one another other fired,” says one former New York *Housewife*. After she was fired, she came across a widely circulated online video of Cohen’s baby shower in which Lisa Rinna encourages the *Housewives* to get up on the tables and dance. “Dance for Andy and his baby,” she instructs. “Dance like your fucking lives depend on it.”

“I just thought it was such a cringe moment,” says the former *Housewife*. “Because that’s the dynamic. Everyone just dances for Andy Cohen.”

I T IS A TESTAMENT to Cohen’s great interpersonal skills that he was able, for many years, to preside over a large number of exceptionally volatile personalities before they began to turn on him. By the end of the decade, the divide between them was clear. Cohen was beloved and rich, so in control of his narrative that even his own mother couldn’t tell you something he hadn’t already said himself.

The *Housewives*, meanwhile, were essentially gig workers who had forfeited control of their images in service to jobs that offered them high status but didn’t even provide them with health insurance. So far, the \$100 million payout hadn’t materialized for anyone but Frankel.

Evelyn Cohen didn’t really watch the *Housewives*, but even she could see where this was going. “People were just becoming themselves on steroids,” said. “You play with fire, you get burned with these people.”

“*HW* this year is literally a microcosm of what the country is going thru,” Leah McSweeney texted Cohen on December 30, 2020, presumably in reference to now-infamous social issues that arose during

the filming of season 13 of *The Real Housewives of New York*, the details of which would eventually become part of the mudslide mess that slowly fell into Cohen’s lap over the next few years.

It was, of course, the pent-up resentment of the pandemic that set the ball rolling: Leakes, the breakout star of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, frustrated with her contract negotiations with the network and her co-stars, slammed her laptop shut during a virtual reunion in the spring of 2020. Leakes had quit before, but this time, things spiraled into a public feud and eventually a lawsuit that had her accusing Cohen, Bravo, and NBCU of racism and sabotaging her career. “Ole racist,” she tweeted. “No one knew you until YOU knew me. I’m ICON.”

Leakes eventually withdrew her lawsuit for reasons unknown (she declined, through her lawyer, to comment), but she resurfaced her claims during the so-called Reality Reckoning last year, appearing on Frankel’s podcast. “I thought we had a good relationship,” Leakes told Frankel of Cohen, but “I don’t think he ever liked me.”

According to Cohen, he was taken by



With Casey Wilson and Jessica St. Clair, left, after recording an episode of *Watch What Happens Live* in May.



surprise when Frankel, apparently inspired by the Hollywood writers' strike and out of the goodness of her heart, took to TikTok this past July to urge her fellow—well, poorer—reality stars to form a union and to direct their complaints about exploitation to her lawyers, Bryan Freedman and Mark Geragos, who were sharpening knives that might as well have had Cohen's face on them.

"Please be advised that the day of reckoning has arrived," read the startlingly verbose letter Freedman sent to Bravo's parent company. "The sordid and dark underbelly of NBC's widely consumed reality TV universe has remained under wraps for far too long."

Out of all of the *Housewives*, Cohen had been especially close with Frankel. They talked all the time, and since they both lived in New York and had houses near each other in the Hamptons, they met up occasionally. In their last text exchange, they had talked about taking a beach walk together.

This "sustained attack," as Cohen referred to it, went on for months. *Vanity Fair* published a huge story about it,

**"SOMEONE OFFERING
THEIR COKE,"
SAYS A PODCASTER,
"SOUNDS LIKE A NICE
PERSON TO ME."**



Heading to his dressing room after the taping.



which included, among other things, details about Real Housewife of New York Ramona Singer's tone-deaf behavior with new Black cast member Eboni K. Williams and other Black employees at the network, which were so damning it wasn't even okay to joke about how hilariously bad at texting Singer was.

Then the lawsuits started coming. Marco Vega, a butler at Dorinda Medley's Bluestone Manor in Massachusetts, sued Bravo and NBCU claiming he had been sexually assaulted by Brandi Glanville, a former Real Housewife of Beverly Hills, during the filming of *Ultimate Girls Trip: Return to Bluestone Manor* in 2021. This prompted Glanville to go on a Twitter rampage in which she blamed producers for encouraging her to get drunk and rip off the butler's shirt. Caroline Manzo, a Real Housewife of New Jersey, then filed a lawsuit against Bravo and NBCU saying *she* had been sexually assaulted during a different *Real Housewives Ultimate Girls Trip*, in Morocco, by Glanville, who obviously should never have been there because look what she did to the butler.

Then Glanville—who called the accusations of sexual assault “absurd”—felt like the network was hanging her out to dry and accused Cohen of sexual harassment for sending an inappropriate video that was obviously a joke, but he still had to apologize.

Then McSweeney—who had famously gotten drunk and nearly naked and thrown a lit tiki torch across Singer's lawn in season 12 of *Real Housewives of New York*, then returned for the following season sober and Jewish—filed a 109-page lawsuit that accused Bravo, NBCU, and the production companies of a wide range of offenses, including, but not limited to, failing to accommodate her recent conversion to Judaism by serving her pork and retaliating against her when she refused to drink alcohol, singling out Cohen in particular for “engaging in cocaine use with Housewives” and other “Bravolebrities” whom she alleged he gave more favorable treatment.

Cohen might have been a fan of soap operas, but he didn't like being cast in this one. He has never done cocaine with cast members, he says. “If you read my books, I tell you every drug I do.”

“It didn't feel great,” says Dierdre Connolly, the longtime executive producer of *Watch What Happens Live*, the office of which, incidentally, does not look like a coke den unless your jam is doing coke off laminated Uline cubicle desks with fabric walls. “It feels like so disconnected to what our day-to-day is. I look around and I see real friendships, and people laugh every day. It's chill and then all of a sudden it's kind of like, *Wait, what are people saying?* This is not our workplace. That's not true. And it's like something insidious can seep in even when you really try your best not to let it.”

Cohen kept doing his shows in the months that followed, but an almost visible Charlie Brown scribble of sadness hovered around his cartoon edges. “Andy Cohen has gone from a curious gossip with a twinkle in his eye to an exhausted peace-keeper with a show to run,” said one X user.

“There was a lot of noise,” he recalls. “And I was definitely sad about it. But I'm telling you—and it sounds like bullshit—but when I walked into BravoCon, it was like, *Dude, get off Twitter*. That's a bunch of clickbait. This is sanity.”

S

ANE IS NOT a word one might normally use to describe BravoCon, an event where, last year, 27,000 fans—otherwise known as Bravoholics—in hot-pink BRAVO-LOVIN' BITCHES T-shirts descended on Las Vegas to drink rosé at panels like “The Summer House Always Wins: Presented by State Farm” and attend “Pat the Puss” dance classes.

Bravo fans had been watching the Reckoning unfold, and they had a different take on the lawsuits from the ones they had seen in the media. “I think the problem is that there’s so many coming at the same time that people, especially people that are new to these, are taking it as a whole attack against Bravo,” says Angela Angotti, an Austin-based lawyer and a co-host of *The Bravo Docket*, a podcast that breaks down Bravo-related legal disputes. “But when you really look at them individually, what are the arguments here? Who are the players? What is the context? What do we know? The fans of the show have all the context. We’ve watched all the seasons.” While some of the allegations were disturbing, like Manzo’s description of her interaction with Glanville, Angotti says, “There are others where, especially as a die-hard fan, you look at it and you go, *This doesn’t align with what we know from watching the show or other narratives that you’ve put out there.*”

Like that of McSweeney, who talked about her drinking history in great detail on the show. “Leah McSweeney’s complaint had a lot of stuff thrown in there that really wasn’t relevant to the actual claims she was making,” adds *Bravo Docket* co-host Cesie Alvarez. “My opinion on that was that it’s attention seeking. They knew the press would jump onto that. McSweeney says that Andy Cohen did cocaine with other celebrities but not her. I mean ...”

“He won’t do that because it’s expensive,” points out Ben Mandelker, one of the hosts of a different very funny Bravo-focused podcast, *Watch What Crappens*. “No one is like, *Oh, cocaine is free.*”

“Someone offering their coke sounds like a nice person to me,” adds his co-host, Ronnie Karam, “I think the man should get a fucking statue in Times Square ... We’re vilifying him? I’ve never been this much of a fan.”

Bravo fans seemed to have fairly quickly reached a consensus on the real impetus for the Reality Reckoning, which comes up almost immediately during the Q&A portion of Cohen’s talk at the 92nd Street Y, where a woman in a button-down shirt stands up and says, to uproarious applause, “Fuck Bethenny Frankel!”

According to the Bravoholics, who have examined the evidence with the feverish attention of Heather Gay, it all goes back to a December 2022 episode of *Watch What Happens Live*. Cohen had invited Frankel onto the show to “hash out,” as he puts it, a public feud they’d been having in the tabloids over a new, *Housewives*-specific podcast Frankel had started called *ReWives*.

Cohen said he thought it was hypocritical that Frankel, who had “been trashing the Housewives publicly for the last three years,” was suddenly embracing the franchise.

Frankel seemed offended. “I actually haven’t been ‘trashing’ the show,” she said. “I’ve said it wasn’t for me. Because I do think it was toxic ... How could I be on for more than a decade and not have reflections to share? I’m not trashing people on the show.”

ALMOST

EVERY REALITY

It’s getting real. Last year, former *Real Housewife* Bethenny Frankel calling for stars to unionize for better treatment. There may be no union yet, but the gamut from villain edits to one contestant being forced to bake a

AMERICAN IDOL

Normandy Vamos claimed she and other contestants were not paid for spending up to 15 hours a day waiting at a hotel and that producers told her how to dress and act with the intention of **making her a laughingstock during her viral audition.** (A preliminary settlement is reportedly in the works.)



DEADLIEST CATCH

The owners of the **F/V Northwestern**, a fishing boat, claimed the show lacked a plan for **getting a crew member prompt medical care** during the pandemic. (The production company and medical contractor have denied liability and negligence.)



GOT TALENT

Jonathan Goodwin, a stuntman and contestant on the short-lived *America’s Got Talent: Extreme*, claimed he was **“crushed and burned by two exploding motor vehicles”** and rendered paraplegic because the show didn’t have proper safety procedures. (The case is in mediation.)



David Walliams, a *Britain’s Got Talent* judge, claimed he experienced **psychiatric harm and financial loss** when derogatory

and sexually explicit comments he made about contestants in private were leaked. (The production company Fremantle said it apologized and reached an amicable resolution.)

LOVE IS BLIND

Jeremy Hartwell claimed that the producers created inhumane working conditions; plied the cast with alcohol; **deprived them of food, water, and sleep**; and paid them less than minimum wage. (A class-action suit was settled for \$1.4 million.)



Renee Poche claimed the show took legal action against her for sharing that she was forced to spend time with a man she describes as a **broke, unemployed, and violent drug addict.** (A court ruled that the dispute had to be settled in private arbitration.)



Tran Dang claimed she was **sexually assaulted by her then-fiancé** and that producers didn’t intervene and made her film a final scene with him. (The ex-fiancé denied the allegations, while the show’s creator said Dang never shared any concerns.)



LOVE ISLAND

Jasmine Crestwell and **Alex Rinks**, former producers for the U.S. show, claimed they were fired for raising concerns about **unsafe conditions and racial discrimination.** They also alleged other producers pressured contestants to have sex and inappropriately discussed intimate footage of women islanders. (ITV America denied the allegations.)

MASTERCHEF

Mary Jayne Buckingham said producers prevented her from getting medical attention and **pressured her to film on the day she had a stroke**—because that episode’s baking challenge was her specialty as a pie chef. (The case is in mediation.)



PROPERTY BROTHERS

Mindy and Paul King claimed contractors botched their house, leaving them with a dishwasher that **caused a flood and a crushed gas line** that made their stove unusable. (The construction company denied faulty workmanship; the production company also defended the work, and it claimed the Kings denied contractors access for repairs.)



PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES; NETFLIX; NORMANDY VAMOS/INSTAGRAM; ROBERT ASLANYAN

Y TV LAWSUIT

suggested it was time for a “reckoning” in reality TV, but there are plenty of lawsuits, and their complaints pie the day she had a stroke.

By
JENNIFER
ZHAN

THE PRANK PANEL

Daniel Curry, a segment producer and creative consultant for the show, said that production **falsified an incident report** to downplay his injuries after actor **Johnny Knoxville** chased and



Tasered him on set, leaving him with a broken bone and torn ligament; that Knoxville and Eric André pressured him to keep quiet about what happened; and that he has since been blackballed from the industry. (Knoxville has yet to publicly comment.)

REAL HOUSEWIVES

NeNe Leakes claimed that **racially insensitive behavior was tolerated or even encouraged** on the *Atlanta* franchise and that she was punished for speaking up about racist comments from co-star Kim Zolciak-Biermann. (She later dropped the suit with prejudice, which means she could file it again.)



Marco Vega, who was hired as a butler on *Ultimate Girls Trip*, claimed producers encouraged **Brandi Glanville** and **Phaedra Parks** to get drunk and sexually harass him. (A show exec said Vega “seemed



to be having a good time,” and Bravo filed to dismiss the case.)

Caroline Manzo said she was kissed, humped, and **fondled without consent** by **Brandi Glanville** on *Ultimate Girls Trip*, claiming that producers regularly get the cast drunk and encourage or allow sexual harassment. (Glanville denied wrongdoing, and Bravo is seeking to have the case dismissed.)



Leah McSweeney said she was encouraged to drink and **punished for not drinking** as a recovering alcoholic on the *New York City* franchise; that it was implied she’d be fired if she left filming to visit her dying grandmother; and that Andy Cohen **fosters a “rotted workplace culture”** by giving special treatment to **Bravolebrities** who use cocaine with him. (Cohen and Bravo denied the allegations and claimed casting decisions are protected by the First Amendment.)



SOUTHERN CHARM

Joseph Abruzzo claimed the show defamed him by **suggesting he had taken nudes**, **been physically**



abusive, and had a failing political career. He also said he was pressured into signing a document that stated he could be portrayed in a way he didn’t like. (Producers denied this, and the case was ultimately sent to arbitration.)

SO YOU THINK YOU CAN DANCE & AMERICAN IDOL



Paula Abdul said the production companies protected judge and executive producer **Nigel Lythgoe**, whom she has accused of **sexual assault and verbal harassment**. She also said she faced workplace bullying and lower pay than male judges. (The companies settled with Abdul for an undisclosed amount; Lythgoe has denied the allegations, but her lawsuit against him is proceeding.)

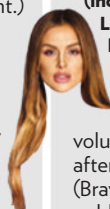


VANDERPUMP RULES

Faith Stowers claimed she was subjected to **racial slurs and vicious assaults**



(including co-star **Lala Kent** once **holding a knife to her neck**) and that she was demoted to a volunteer position after speaking up. (Bravo has yet to publicly comment.)



“Well you called it boring, toxic, women against other women.”

“I didn’t call it boring,” Frankel said. “I called it toxic, which I think it has—”

“You called *RHONY Legacy* boring ... on your TikTok,” Cohen said, turning to the program’s other guest, Jeff Lewis (the guy with the lips). “Jeff, are you enjoying this?”

“I actually am uncomfortable,” Lewis said.

By the end of the show, it appeared to a civilian that they had smoothed things out, but hard-core Bravoholics knew better. The *knew* Bethenny. They’d been watching her. For years. “This is a woman who we have never, in 14 years, seen her maintain a friendship with anyone. She cannot be close to anyone,” reported the host of a popular fan podcast who asked not to be named because she is afraid of Frankel. It’s a popular sentiment. “She cannot be close to anyone. She has done incredible work with charity, but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, we have not seen her hold one friend. This is the next turn of the screws for her. She’s turning on the person who has championed her. Who *loved* her.”

“She felt like, *Oh, they insulted me*,” the anonymous host went on. “So now she is creating this role for herself as a vigilante.”

“Once you see it, you can’t stop seeing it,” said Karam, of *Watch What Crappens*, pointing to Frankel’s suspiciously self-serving decision to bring Rachel Leviss—the other woman at the center of Scandoval, who is now using Freedman and Geragos to sue her ex and his ex-girlfriend—into her podcast network. “Her fingerprints are on everything!”

Frankel did not respond to a request for comment through her publicist, whose response, “This story is so old lol,” suggests she may have moved on. Frankel last week was crusading against Chanel, which she claimed had treated her differently when she went to the store in regular clothes than the staff did when she went back in a Chanel suit.

“We all know what happened here,” says Casey Wilson, co-host of the podcast *Bitch Sesh*. “We know these women. They are our friends. They are our insane aunts. We have watched them for hundreds of hours on TV and on social media. In this world, everyone is who they are, all the time.”

Including Andy Cohen. “This is my happy place in this universe,” he says, meaning Bravoland, which isn’t really a place at all but maybe more a state of mind. He was on his way to an event in D.C., where a member of Congress was interviewing him about his most recent book. (“You have no idea what kind of refuge you provided us through January 6th,” a member of the Foreign Relations Committee said on his way out.)

“It’s a glorious world. It’s fun. I love Bravoland. If you want to go to a different world, great. Go to a different carnival, but we’re having a lot of fun in here.”

He isn’t going anywhere. “I’ll keep doing the Bravo stuff for as long as Bravo will have me. Listen, age is just a number, man.”

I try to make a joke about how he probably shouldn’t quote R. Kelly, just in case.

For a second, he looks nervous. “Is that an R. Kelly quote?” he says. “I didn’t know that. I didn’t know that was an R. Kelly quote—wait, he’s not the only one who—I mean, as long as I’m having fun, it’ll be great.” ■

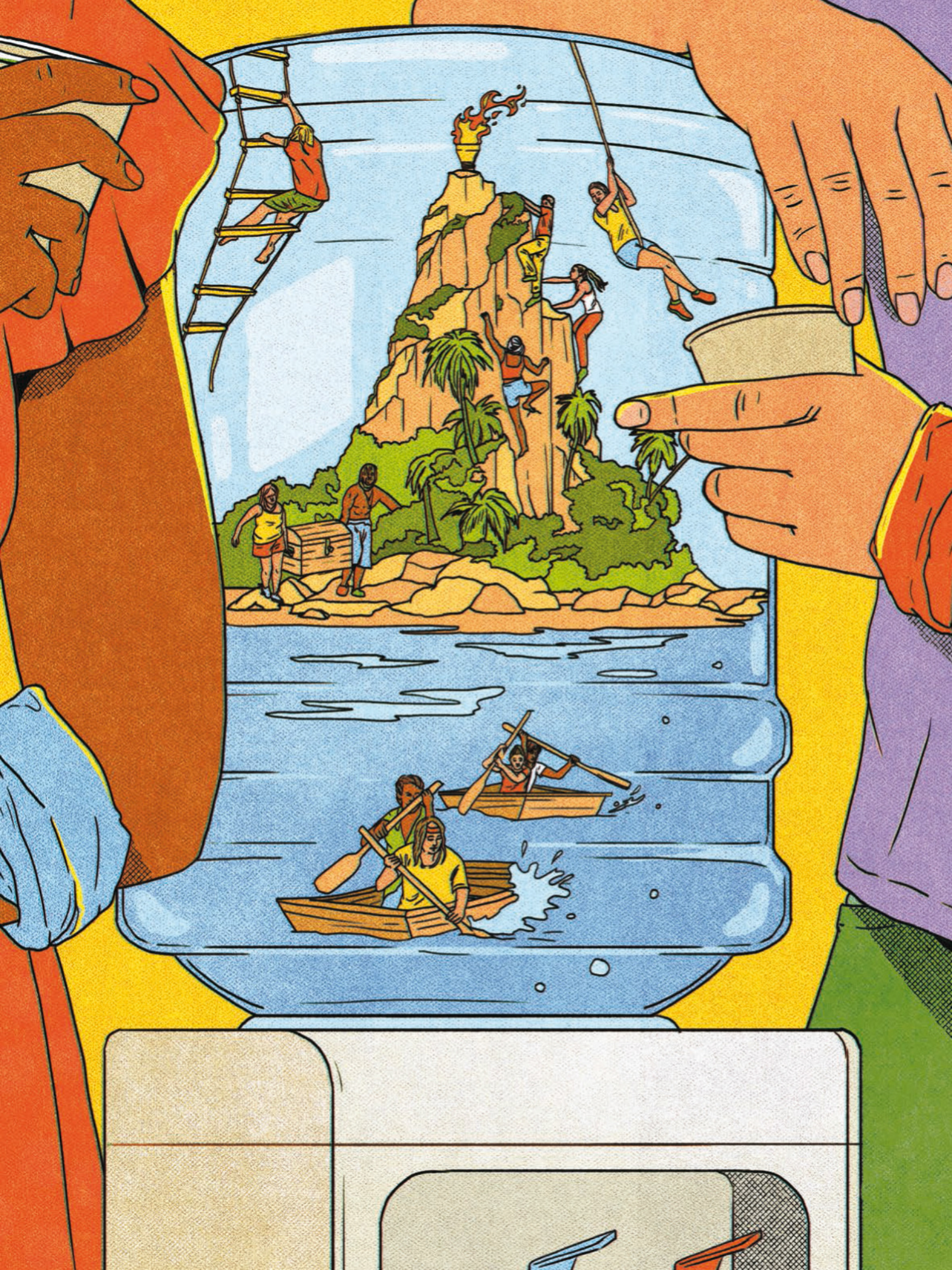
SURVIVORS'

BY MARK HARRIS

'Snuggly' Era

The game used to be a contest of social, physical, and strategic skill. Now it's turning into a show about NOTHING BUT ITSELF.

THE TELEVISION ISSUE



HAT DOES IT

take to win *Survivor*? You may find it bizarre that, almost a quarter-century after the CBS show premiered—essentially inventing the reality-competition genre in the process—the question still matters. But it does to its fans, and surprisingly, there are more than there have been in a long while. The show will never again reach the mass-audience heights of its first season, when nearly 52 million Americans glued themselves to their sofas to watch a corporate consultant named Richard Hatch become reality TV's first-ever triumphant gay villain. But today, hits are measured differently, and *Survivor*, by any metric, remains a big one. This past summer, it received an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Reality Competition Program, its first recognition in that category in 17 years. And boosted by a viewership that swarmed to the series in search of soap-operatic binge viewing (short arcs, big characters, noisy conflict) during the pandemic, the series just finished its 46th cycle as the No. 1 show on prime-time network television in several younger demographics.

Over the past 24 years, the premise of *Survivor* has remained the same: Sixteen to 20 contestants cosplaying castaways on a remote locale are put through a series of challenges while starving, getting rained on, and forging friendships, alliances, marriages of convenience, and bitter hatreds. They're eliminated one by one through secret ballots cast by their fellow players at a "tribal council" at the end of each episode until almost the entire tribe is gone and the one who's left is a million

dollars wealthier. What has changed is the audience: The show now attracts a new generation of fans preoccupied with the question of who obtains things fairly and who doesn't, whether that manifests in nepo-baby discourse or in declaring in every election cycle that corporatism, the media, and the two-party system all reward the wicked. For this audience, *Survivor* has proved a rich text.

There have always been, broadly speaking, two ways to win *Survivor*. The first route to victory is to demonstrate an exceptional skill—to be the most popular, the most manipulative, the most athletic, the most strategic, the most adept at managing relationships. These are the winners who make for an exciting narrative arc. One of the show's pleasures comes from watching characters who embody these different strengths face off against one another and seeing which quality the final jury, composed of eliminated contestants, will choose to reward. In one season, a player's pure charisma may trump another's carefully plotted, chesslike strategy, as when an incredibly winning cattle rancher named J.T. Thomas beat his closest ally, Stephen Fishbach (another corporate consultant), in *Survivor: Tocantins*. In a different cycle, brains and rationality might prevail over preternatural athleticism, as when the hyperanalytical Yul Kwon beat Ozzy Lusth in *Survivor: Cook Islands* despite the latter being one of the most physically dominant players of all time.

The other way to win is to strive assiduously to be none of those superlatives; to be semi-ignored as, say, the third best at everything, coasting under the radar as the bigger noisemakers to your right and left topple. Take, for example, the most recently concluded season, whose final stretch featured a cross section of classic player archetypes. There was the strategist: Charlie Davis, a law student who, at every stage, assessed his chances and plotted his moves with the precision of a mathematician. There was the chaos agent: Quintavious "Q" Burdette, a Realtor who cheerfully sowed paranoia, convinced his fellow players to backstab one opponent after another, and went out in a blaze of glory. Then there was the winner, a hair-salon owner named Kenzie Petty. Kenzie was not, by any measure, the strongest or most aggressive player of *Survivor* season 46. She wasn't the most strategic or the most charismatic. She was just ... a player, who won by hanging on until she was the last leaf on the tree.

Kenzie was far from the first contestant in *Survivor* history to earn her million dollars that way, and her victory, though

unexciting, was not illegitimate. After all, the show is called *Survivor*—you don't need to triumph; you just need to persist. The truth is that those who collect the check are rarely those who look like they're going to be the winner four episodes in: To take it all, you have to exhibit an unlikely mix of traits—likable, calculating, aggressive, dangerous, sincere, manipulative—while appearing just unthreatening enough that, at tribal council, you are never anyone's priority to eliminate. There are memorable exceptions. Tony Vlachos, a fast-talking cop who bulldozed his way to victory in the 28th cycle (*Survivor: Cagayan—Brawn vs. Brains vs. Beauty*), was nobody's idea of a subtle player. His gameplay (which included constructing a secret spy shack to eavesdrop on conversations, taking off into the woods to find hidden idols, and deceiving and double-crossing close allies) is remembered as the most over-the-top in *Survivor* history, and he tended to announce his plans as intemperately as a James Bond villain. The spectacle his ascent offered viewers was both yell-at-the-screen maddening—*couldn't the other players see what they were allowing to happen?!*—and undeniably great TV.

Today, it's hard to imagine Tony making the final four. Modern-age *Survivor* is increasingly tailored to the Kenzies of the world. The most frequent complaint I hear about the show these days is "People win for no reason now." And "no reason" is worse than a bad reason; a winner like Tony who makes some of us howl in dismay is better for the game's long-term popularity because we're at least engaged. A winner whose main skill was shrewdly evading attention often makes for a shrug of a season—and lately, it's sometimes hard to tell which of those wins can be credited to low-key manipulation and which are mere accidents.

Grievances about the randomness of outcome are closely connected to a broader dissatisfaction with the "New Era" of *Survivor*—a term the show itself uses to describe the six cycles that have aired since it returned in the fall of 2021 after COVID shut down production and knocked it off the air for 16 months. If, like me, you haven't watched for a long time, the show's New Era changes feel initially mild but cumulatively seismic. *Survivor* now unfolds over just 26 days, not 39. Host Jeff Probst (yes, still) is, at 62, less a drill sergeant than a warm, amused, disarming eminence, aware of his status as a super-celeb for the often decades-younger contestants. Those contestants tend toward the extroverted and

crybabyish—the most grating of them are a combination of every mean joke ever made about Gen Y, Gen Z, Gen Tik-Tok, and Gen Influencer. They are not stoic. Rather, they start sobbing in the season premieres—they miss their families (I'm sorry—were they conscripted?), they didn't think this would be so hard, they're tired, they're hungry—and they don't let up. They have food allergies and anxiety disorders and other issues that surely would have excluded them in 2000. Sometimes they quit because, you know, who needs this shit?

The most jolting and controversial change, though, is in the gameplay itself. The show has long featured immunity idols—tokens that, if a player chooses to deploy them, provide protection against being voted out for one ballot cycle—but there are now so many per season that a contestant can turn up at tribal council toting two or even three. In addition, the producers have introduced several “advantage” tokens, each of which comes with its own complicated set of rules: one gives you immunity but only in conjunction with someone else; another offers a one-in-six chance of immunity; another provides an extra vote. These are hidden near the campsites to be hunted down and pocketed by enterprising players. The effect has been to transform the game from its original survival-of-the-fittest mandate into a contest that feels crafted for those raised on video games in which everyone is essentially a lone wolf and the goal is to amass as many power-ups as possible on your personal journey. These advantages have a *deus ex machina* quality. Rather than nourishing the larger narrative, they can make the season feel like little more than an accumulation of disconnected bits of luck. The producers already seem to be pulling back on those gimmicks, and not a minute too soon.

These adjustments have shifted the competitive edge slightly away from athletes and alphas (which is welcome) and toward “students of the game” (at best a mixed blessing). All reality series lose their virginity this way shortly after their introduction when they become populated by players who have watched the show rather than by those who essentially invented it. But more than most, *Survivor*'s casting team has left a perhaps unhelpful amount of room for the *Survivor* geek—the guy (it's usually a guy) who seems to have mentally down-

loaded every season, contestant, and elimination vote and can cross-reference them at will.

High ratings notwithstanding, many fans are frustrated by the new approach. For one thing, all those extra tokens and trinkets make self-protection—the least interesting of all the necessary *Survivor* skills—the one that matters most. And by privileging a player's ability to insulate themselves from the ramifications of interactions with other competitors, the rules all but eliminate a long-standing pleasure of the series, namely, *Survivor* as metaphor. For many seasons, the show served as a window into how gender, race, personality, strength, intelligence, and social skills can all play into a determination of who comes out on top in any given power struggle. And the most memorable seasons turned the game into a microcosm of real-world issues in ways that were sometimes acutely

list of big, shrewd moves that might impress the final jury) as if they were crafting college applications. They fret about likability, not their own so much as that of anyone who might beat them in a final vote on the basis of personal charm.

As a result, *Survivor* is now in danger of becoming primarily about the ability of contestants to navigate its increasingly byzantine set of rules. This has always been a built-in hazard: Unlike competition shows from *Top Chef* to *American Idol*, this one has offered only the merest lip service to the idea that it's rewarding an objectively assessable talent; the only thing you have to be the best at to win *Survivor* is playing *Survivor*. You no longer get to the end by being the strongest or the most honorable or the most devious but by being the most *Survivor*-ish; if that's a meritocracy, it's a meritocracy for those who believe

LATELY, IT'S HARD TO TELL
WHICH WINS CAN BE CREDITED
TO LOW-KEY MANIPULATION
AND WHICH ARE MERE ACCIDENTS.

discomfiting—subsurface racism has been such an ongoing problem that a few years ago, CBS mandated that half of all its reality casts would henceforth be nonwhite—and sometimes deeply satisfying: The all-time classic 16th season, *Survivor: Micronesia*, became a gender-wars parable in which an ad hoc female alliance that called itself the Black Widow Brigade systematically took down every man in the competition and ended up as the final four.

As far as narrative potential goes, recent seasons mostly bring to mind the limited dramatic interest of wonkish gameplay for its own sake. Too often, New Era players attempt to finesse their way to the finish line not by managing the ideal combination of classic *Survivor* skills but by tediously attempting to work the system they've studied on television. Contestants make decisions for the express purpose of adding to their “résumés” (a term that refers to a player's

meritocracy is a scam. The series seems to have entered its Marvel Cinematic Universe phase: Like those movies, it has endangered its own vitality by becoming so entranced with its own arcane byways, procedures, and asterisks that they have become the primary driver of the narrative rather than ornaments to it. It is, in other words, threatening to become a show about nothing but itself.

At this point, the most radical thing the series could do is get back to the fire-food-and-fighting basics, consign those hidden-in-a-tree-stump idols and advantages to the dustbin, and play to its strengths. Better than any reality show out there, *Survivor* understands that all kinds of traits, from the inspiring to the dubious to the contemptible, will emerge organically from within a given group if all of its members want something badly enough. It's why we watch. And it's what the show needs to rediscover. ■

The SURVIVOR Eras

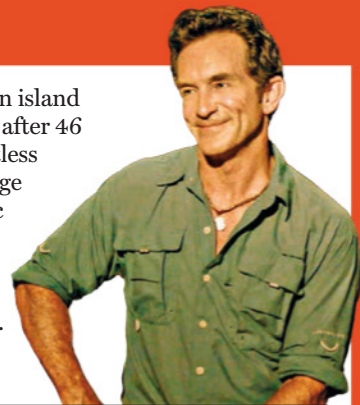
ERA	SEASONS 1-8 THE GOLDEN AGE SPRING 2000-SPRING 2004	SEASONS 9-14 THE IDENTITY CRISIS FALL 2004-SPRING 2007	SEASONS 15-20 THE RENAISSANCE FALL 2007-SPRING 2010	SEASONS 21-26 THE DARK AGES FALL 2010-SPRING 2013
RECAP	<p>► The show debuts, not as a sure thing but as experimental reality TV, and quickly takes over the nation. The first eight seasons are the series at its most world-conquering, catering to everybody and their not-dead grandma. Players are constantly building upon one another's work season to season, slowly developing <i>Survivor</i> into a game of complex strategy.</p> 	<p>► The series pivots from being part of the national conversation to being for fans. The mostly forgotten 11th season debuts the show's most iconic twist: the hidden immunity idol, an advantage that blocks other players' votes. Most of this era is a mixed bag—season 13 introduces five future returnees but is also divided by race.</p> 	<p>► Perhaps the most-discussed era, this is the show's greatest run. There is something for everyone: Memorable characters like Amanda, James, Courtney, J.T., and Russell all debut and return; the player strategies are both savvy and hard-core but not yet too meta; there are enough twists to keep everybody on their toes, but they never overwhelm the game.</p>	<p>► Immediately following its best era, <i>Survivor</i> struggles to create an entertaining show. They try bringing back Boston Rob, Russell, Ozzy, and Coach, but the magic is gone. During these seasons, typically one tribe wins out and dog-walks the other to the finish. The twists don't pan out, the casting is subpar, and it's oddly uncompetitive, making for the show's most boring era.</p> 
MVPS	 <p>Colby Donaldson (S2, S8)</p> <p>Richard Hatch (S1, S8) Sue Hawk (S1, S8) Rudy Boesch (S1, S8) Tina Wesson (S2, S8) Jerrin Manthey (S2, S8) "Boston Rob" Mariano (S4, S8) Rob Cesternino (S6, S8) Rupert Boneham (S7, S8) Jonny Fairplay (S7) Sandra Diaz-Twine (S7)</p>	 <p>Cirie Fields (S12)</p> <p>Chris Daugherty (S9) Eliza Orlina (S9) Tom Westman (S10) Stephenie LaGrossa (S10, S11) Ozzy Lusth (S13) Candice Woodcock (S13) Yul Kwon (S13) Yau-Man Chan (S14) Dreamz Herd (S14)</p>	 <p>Parvati Shallow (S16, S20)</p> <p>James Clement (S15, S16, S20) Amanda Kimmel (S15, S16, S20) Todd Herzog (S15) Sugar Kiper (S17, S20) Benjamin "Coach" Wade (S18, S20) Russell Hantz (S19, S20)</p>	 <p>Malcolm Freberg (S25, S26)</p> <p>NaOnka Mixon (S21) Boston Rob (S22) Sophie Clarke (S23) Coach Wade (S23) John Cochran (S23, S26) Ozzy Lusth (S23) Brandon Hantz (S23, S26) Kim Spradlin (S24) Denise Stapley (S25)</p>
DEFINING MOMENTS	 <p>► SEASON 1: Sue Hawk, the first-ever bitter juror, delivers an angry speech, known as "Rat and Snake," to her ex-friend Kelly Wiglesworth: "If I were to ever pass you along in life again and you were laying there dying of thirst, I would not give you a drink of water. I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you with no ill regrets." A series-high 51.7 million people watch.</p> <p>► SEASON 2: Mike Skupin falls in the fire and has to be medically evacuated, upping the stakes forever.</p>	 <p>► SEASON 10: After her entire initial tribe gets sent home, Stephenie makes fire by herself on Ulong Beach—the first tribe of one.</p> <p>► SEASON 12: Cirie pulls off one of the most strategic moves in the show's early history: the 3-2-1 vote. With six players left, she pits them against one another and misdirects votes, sending Courtney Marit home with only three votes.</p> <p>► SEASON 13: In a mid-game twist, the players are given a chance to "mutiny" and switch tribes.</p>	 <p>► SEASON 16: The Black Widow Brigade alliance of Cirie, Parvati, Amanda, Alexis, and Natalie blindsides Ozzy and persuades Erik to give up his immunity necklace, then votes him out. They run the game so well they make future players afraid of "women's alliances."</p> <p>► SEASON 17: At tribal council, Sugar calls Randy a loser with the finger L; Randy notes, "This vote is not strategic. It is strictly personal"; and Crystal speaks so loudly the entire group can hear her say, "Forget you, go home, good-bye!"</p>	 <p>► SEASON 21: NaOnka and Purple Kelly both quit in one episode; <i>Survivor</i> edits the latter so poorly that the "Purple Edit" becomes online shorthand.</p> <p>► SEASON 22: Boston Rob finally wins, but even that jury hates him.</p> <p>► SEASON 26: During final tribal council, a spurned Brenda forces Dawn to take out her false teeth on national television, then still refuses to vote for her to win the game.</p>
DON'T SKIP	<p>SEASON 7 (<i>Survivor: Pearl Islands</i>)</p> 	<p>SEASON 13 (<i>Survivor: Cook Islands</i>) & 12 (<i>Survivor: Panama: Exile Island</i>)</p>	<p>SEASON 16 (<i>Survivor: Micronesia</i>) & 20 (<i>Survivor: Heroes vs. Villains</i>)</p> 	<p>SEASON 25 (<i>Survivor: Philippines</i>)</p> 

TOUR



SURVIVOR began with a simple premise: 16 players on an island vote one another out until a single player remains. Now, after 46 seasons, the game is virtually unrecognizable with countless twists added to the format, but the passion remains. Entire cottage industries have sprung up around the show, chronicling strategic plays, and during the pandemic it scored a revival among young viewers owing to its endless watchability. With this much lore, even the most dedicated fans (and likely host Jeff Probst) can find it difficult to keep track of what exactly happened and when. Below, a timeline of all of *Survivor*, divided by eras.

BY JASON P. FRANK AND NIC JUAREZ



SEASONS 27-32 THE RE-RENAISSANCE FALL 2013–SPRING 2016	SEASONS 33-40 THE WORST THEMES FALL 2016–SPRING 2020	SEASONS 41-43 THE NEW ERA 1.0 FALL 2021–FALL 2022	SEASONS 44-46 THE NEW ERA 2.0 SPRING 2023–PRESENT
<p>► Producers start leaning into new and more intensely themed tribe separations. And the juries start a push toward wanting to see “big moves” and respecting the people who bested them. Players also decide to now vote in smaller “voting blocs.” By season 31, contestants acknowledge that their moves are not made to further their place in the game but to “play <i>Survivor</i>.”</p>	<p>► These seasons’ themes get more and more ridiculous until they’re ultimately garbled messes. The producers introduce twists that cause wider shock waves within the game, but players learn to anticipate them emotionally. This era is alternately thrilling and maddening: <i>Survivor</i> attempts to grapple with social change and botches it.</p>	<p>► During COVID, as the series is enjoying a streaming bump and exposure to a younger generation, producers do a hard reset in line with CBS’s new diversity initiative. This era’s winners are two women of color plus one idiot white guy. It also shifts to 26-day seasons from 39. By now, there’s a new focus on <i>Survivor</i> as a life-changing experience, and fan meta-narratives arise.</p>	<p>► All three of these seasons are well received by fans, yet nobody seems to like the New Era on principle—including players from previous seasons, who don’t appear to take the New Era players seriously. The fans want 39-day games back and for the show to let go of its sillier twists (some even want to get rid of Jeff Probst). Still, it mostly works thanks to strong casting.</p>
 <p>Tony Vlachos (S28)</p> <p>Ciera Eastin (S27, S31) Tyson Apostol (S27) Kass McQuillen (S28, S31) Kelley Wentworth (S29, S31) Jeremy Collins (S29, S31) Natalie Anderson (S29) Tai Trang (S32) Aubry Bracco (S32)</p>	 <p>Sarah Lacina (S34, S40)</p> <p>Zeke Smith (S33, S34) Ben Driebergen (S35, S40) Tony Vlachos (S34, S40) Domenick Abbate (S36) Wendell Holland (S36, S40) Mike White (S37) Kellee Kim (S39)</p>	 <p>Marianne Oketch (S42)</p> <p>Shan Smith (S41) Ricard Foyé (S41) Jonathan Young (S42) Omar Zaheer (S42) Mike Gabler (S43) Jesse Lopez (S45)</p>	 <p>Carolyn Wiger (S44)</p> <p>Yam Yam Arocho (S44) Carson Garrett (S44) Emily Flippen (S45) Dee Valladares (S45) Austin Li Coon (S45) Q Burdette (S46) Maria Shrine Gonzalez (S46) Liz Wilcox (S46)</p>
 <p>► SEASON 28: J’Tia Taylor pours the tribe’s rice into the fire while everybody’s discussing voting her out.</p> <p>► SEASON 28: Tony Vlachos plays the game at a million mph and somehow wins.</p> <p>► SEASON 31: Kelley Wentworth, an idol queen, finds two of them and plays them perfectly, idoling out Andrew Savage when she was at the bottom of the vote and saving herself at the final six—even if she can’t quite beat out Jeremy vat the end.</p>	 <p>► SEASON 34: Despite having no votes cast against her, Kirie Fields goes home because everybody else is immune. <i>Survivor</i> tries to bill it as a “great moment,” but fans are outraged, arguing producers have broken the game.</p> <p>► SEASON 39: Kellee Kim links up with other women to vote out Dan, whom she finds creepy and inappropriately touchy. They blindside her and vote out Kellee instead of Dan. He is later removed from the island for allegedly inappropriately touching a crew member, which he denied.</p>	 <p>► SEASON 41: Probst asks the contestants if “Come on in, guys” needs to change to be more inclusive; nobody says anything. The next day, Ricard tells Jeff he thinks it should be altered and promptly receives widespread hate online.</p> <p>► SEASON 42: Maryanne, an ebullient well of positivity (which many on the island consider annoying) and the season’s most outlandish character, becomes the first Black woman to win since season four.</p>	 <p>► SEASON 44: The last three members of Tika (Carolyn the now-sober wacky mom, Yam Yam the giggly bear, and Carson the nerdy twink) make the final four, despite being one of the strangest alliances ever.</p> <p>► SEASON 46: Q wins an Applebee’s reward and, though given three separate chances to bring along other players, never chooses Liz, who is allergic to everything on the island and goes to Applebee’s every week, to join his crew. Liz, pushed to the brink, screams, in front of Probst, “I’m pissed!”</p>
 <p>SEASON 28 (<i>Survivor: Brawn vs. Brains vs. Beauty</i>)</p>	 <p>SEASON 37 (<i>Survivor: David vs. Goliath</i>)</p>	 <p>SEASON 42</p>	 <p>SEASON 46</p>



Where couples see each other for the first time.



THE

TELEVISION

ISSUE

The Love Machine

LOVE IS BLIND creator **CHRIS COELEN**
drops a new group of singles into
his strange experiment—and wrestles with
all the lawsuits against the series.

BY KATHRYN VANARENDONK

Photographs by Michael Friberg

A DARKENED ROOM on a soundstage in Santa Clarita, California, seven engaged couples who have never seen each other will stand behind sliding doors on opposite sides of a long red carpet. The doors will open. They will meet for the first time, and they will react however that experience makes them react: with shock, delight, or barely disguised dismay.

This particular reveal is not going well. “Look at her face,” says Chris Coelen, the creator and executive producer of the series *Love Is Blind*, who watches from a large bank of screens. “She is not sold yet, in my opinion. Her face is so ... She had a big sigh.” They’re filming the upcoming seventh season of Netflix’s signature dating reality show. They know they’ll have to make cuts, and this couple is obviously on the chopping block. The man, Josh, asked producers beforehand whether they could help him get a prenup, which seems to confirm their suspicion that he and his new fiancée are more excited about being on television than about being married to each other. (In order not to spoil the upcoming season, future cast members’ names have been changed.) The woman, Kayla, is the only remaining cast member who hasn’t said “I love you.” When Josh and Kayla walk toward each

other, she squeals. He slings his suit jacket over her bare shoulders. Kayla tells him she swears her butt is usually bigger but she hasn’t worked out in two weeks. “You’ve got a great body,” Josh says repeatedly. Their kisses, which produce a rhythmic smacking sound, echo through the otherwise silent, cavernous soundstage.

Twenty minutes are allotted for this first meeting, and when time is up, they both walk back through their separate doors without turning around for a last look. This is a red flag for producers, who stare at the details of each reveal with the analytical intensity of commentators reviewing slo-mo sports footage. “This feels like our worst couple right now,” Coelen says. “Let’s see how the other ones play out. But it just feels fake.”

The morning’s other reveals go better. One couple may not be good for each other long term, but they’re clearly enjoying themselves; there is an almost alarming amount of giggling. Another couple, Wyatt and Harper, had an emotional connection before they could meet, but their in-person energies are out of sync. She is self-possessed; he is so overwhelmed he’s shaky and stumbling. “I find so many marriages work when it’s like the kindest men and the coldest women,” says Ally Simpson, an executive producer. Both of these reveals feel promising—even, and maybe especially, the mismatched one. Awkwardness is honest. “She needs a guy like that,” Coelen says. It’s everything the producers were hoping for: They’re adorable, a little tense, a bit unlikely as a pair but maybe actually perfect for each other.

One of the pods where participants blind-date.



The reveals are a crucial stage in what *Love Is Blind* refers to as its “experiment.” The hosts, Nick and Vanessa Lachey, begin every season by describing the pitch: Dating has gotten superficial, and this show is a chance to date without the distractions of physical looks, social media, and regular lives, an isolated meeting of minds before they must reenter the “physical world.” Cast members are “participants”; it’s a “process.” “If I was single, I would love to go through the process,” Coelen says, sounding like someone who regretfully does not qualify for an elaborate cosmetic procedure. The process is that roughly 30 single people, 15 men and 15 women, agree to date multiple other people in little rooms, called pods, that allow them to speak to whoever’s on the other side of a wall. During the ten days of filming in the pods, cast members must stay in the enclosed soundstage or inside their hotel rooms each night lest they bump into or deliberately seek out the people they’ve been dating. Their phones are taken away during production; TVs are removed from their hotel rooms. There must be no internet-connected device that would allow someone to Insta-stalk their potential mate. There are only two ways to see whom they’ve been dating: Get engaged or leave the show. After Reveals Day, producers follow a handful of engaged couples as they go on a five-day vacation, then spend four weeks back in something approaching their normal lives. Cameras follow as they get their phones back, return home and to their jobs, meet each other’s friends and families, and grapple with the person they’ve chosen to marry. In each wedding-themed finale, any couple who have

made it that far stand at the altar and either do or do not say “I do.”

When the show premiered in 2020, many rolled their eyes at the absurdity of the gimmick. Then, a few seasons in, came a guilty acknowledgment of its appeal. What happens when you fall in love with someone who looks different from what you’ve envisioned? The show can capture that feeling in real time in ways that surprise both the participants and the audience. Every season, someone announces tearfully that, for them, love *is* blind. However, the show can also be an extended exploration of all the ways that’s often not true. Sometimes, an instant distaste destroys the relationship. Or there’s a slow-burn erosion as potential future spouses see each other in a real-life context. Occasionally, they’re shattered by the hypotheticals: They eventually meet everyone else they’ve been blindly dating in the pods. With only conversation, Jeramey chooses the practical Laura in season six; once real life enters the equation, Jeramey dumps Laura for Sarah Ann. The dramatic irony embedded in the viewing experience feels distantly related to a prank show. There’s something illicit about knowing what someone’s crush looks like before they do, in watching a participant delude themselves by selecting someone destined to disappoint them and waiting for the other shoe to drop. Or maybe the delusion will stick and, actually, that’s love.

The show’s disarming qualities are also due to how it’s filmed. *Love Is Blind* looks and feels different from the choreographed set pieces on dating shows like *The Bachelor*. Coelen insists it is closer to a documentary than a reality

Chris Coelen (left) observes the cast from the control room.



series because producers follow the participants without attempting to control the way their stories play out. There's no thumb on the scale for who proposes to whom. There's not even an established format for each season: no rules about how many episodes are spent in the pods rather than back in the couples' hometowns, how many of them have weddings, how the rhythm of proposals or reveals plays out. This looseness contributes to the sense that it's not like all those other shows. It's freer, more honest, more authentic.

But a number of recent legal challenges from former cast members have raised fundamental questions about how *Love Is Blind* works. Several open lawsuits have alleged inhumane working conditions, including claims that the cast is encouraged to drink alcohol, not given sufficient food, and imprisoned against its will. Two participants say they were pushed to keep filming by producers with partners they allege were abusive. Reporting in *Business Insider* and *The New Yorker* has characterized the show as one driven by producer manipulation. Coelen's motivation for granting me access to the set stems from his growing frustration with the public perception of the show.

Love Is Blind's production company, Kinetic Content, of which Coelen is the founder and CEO, has denied all the allegations. They are a continuing source of irritation for Coelen, who often brings them up unprompted. Our conversations are studded with long, off-the-record interjections. He is aggravated by what he views as an untruthful characterization of the show. From Coelen's perspective, participants decide whether to have sex, whether to drink, whether to get into fights—that's all on them. From another perspective, calling it a documentary can be a way to avoid liability for what happens during production.

And *Love Is Blind* is, of course, not a documentary. The stories may not be produced in the same way "soft-scripted" reality shows are, as Coelen puts it. But in practice, the lines are blurry; producers are neither as fully controlling as some cast members believe nor as purely hands-off as Coelen suggests. There is both coercion and freedom on *Love Is Blind*: Producers do not script what cast members say, but they do ask leading questions, and some cast members have said they're encouraged to stay even if they've expressed a desire to leave. The interactions I witness are like a form of influence, making some paths feel easier than others, making some choices feel like rebellion and others like following the rules.

Near the end of pods filming, a cast member tells her fiancé that, earlier that day, she had been so overwhelmed she thinks she had a panic attack. Coelen shoots me a glance. "That phrase gets thrown

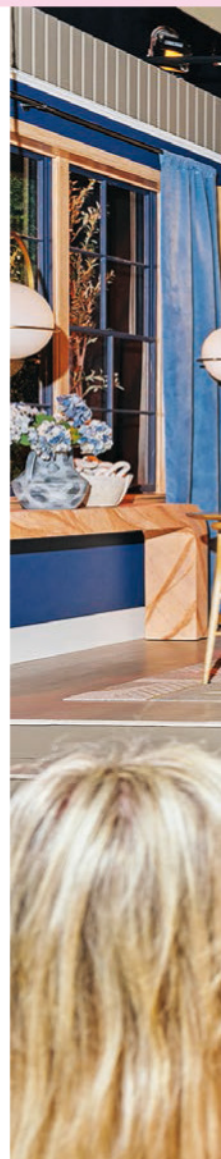
around a lot," he says. It's a colloquialism, he adds. It doesn't mean she *really* had a panic attack.

N PERSON, COELEN DOESN'T SUGGEST

a high-profile founder of one of the biggest reality-show production companies in Hollywood. He's 56, tall, and a little dorky looking. He wears transition lenses and the same outfit every day: a T-shirt and ragged jeans. He eats his cereal with water. "He just likes what he likes, and he'll eat it every day for the rest of his life," says his wife, Ashley Black. When she met Coelen on a blind date in the early aughts, he showed up in a messy Toyota 4Runner wearing hemp pants, two earrings in one ear, and a Che Guevara T-shirt. She'd worried he would be a "slippery, slimy" TV type and relaxed when she saw him. But Coelen is not laid back, either. He obsessively references his abhorrence of falseness. His voice grows warm when he talks about what he sees as the promise of the show: the idea that people might watch *Love Is Blind* and expand their understanding of humanity. One day, he sends me a link to a David Brooks column about how art can teach empathy. "It really resonated with me in terms of what we aspire to," he says.

Coelen fell backward into reality-TV production. He was raised in Massachusetts and moved to Los Angeles to pursue journalism, getting an internship in 1990 at Fox News, where he worked for an entertainment-magazine program called *Fox Entertainment News*. He hated it. Too often, the show discarded quotes and ignored ideas that didn't slot neatly into what editors had decided in advance. Everything felt fake. Part of the office, which doubled as a set, was full of phones designed to make it appear busy, but many weren't even connected.

When the Fox show was canceled, Coelen left journalism. He started working as a talent agent in 1992. His clients were part of a growing category of people who played themselves on TV, like MTV VJs, news anchors, morning-show hosts, and early reality-show personalities such as Jessica Simpson and Ryan Seacrest. In 2006, Coelen moved into reality-show production as the U.S. head of the British production company RDF (known for shows like *Wife Swap*), where his job was to expand the company's domestic business. By 2010, he had started Kinetic Content, which now makes a wide array of successful reality series, from the celebrity-adjacent game show *Claim to Fame* to *Man vs Bear*, which is based on a popular internet question about which would win in a fight. What really excited Coelen, though, was the idea of a reality series in the vein of *Survivor* or *The Real World*. The question of why people behave the way they do drew him to the genre early on. "There seemed to be an examination of society built within those shows," he says. "I felt like the unscripted genre had gotten away from that." If the premise were interesting enough, producers wouldn't need to nudge cast members into having fights or hooking up with certain people. Shows about



"I'M NOT GOING
TO EAT A HARD-BOILED EGG
ON-CAMERA.
I'M NOT A PSYCHOPATH."



love were both high stakes and universal and became central to Kinetic's production slate. Over the years, in addition to *Love Is Blind*, there has been *Married at First Sight*, *The Spouse House*, *Love Without Borders*, and *The Ultimatum*. They all poke at some aspect of the same central questions. How does attraction work? How do you know if two people are really in love?

Each of Kinetic's relationship shows has a high-concept scheme that becomes a pressure test for the idea of commitment. On Lifetime's *Married at First Sight*, a relationship expert arranges marriages, and the series follows those marriages to see whether they fall apart. Seventeen seasons in, the show is very successful; the marriages less so. "Secretly, what *Married at First Sight* proves is that when someone else makes a choice for you, regardless of who that person is, the fact that someone else chose it becomes the thing you're subconsciously battling with," Coelen says.

For *Love Is Blind*, his early pitch was "People want to be loved for who they are." He played with several prototypes before landing on the pods: one with large backlit screens, plus an option with couples separated by a touchscreen where they could write messages to each other. Coelen would cast people who genuinely wanted a partner and who he felt represented a reasonable range of probable compatibility. Because *Love Is Blind* views eagerness

to be on television to be an indicator of inauthenticity, its casting process relies heavily on recruitment rather than applications. Many of the cast members I spoke with were approached by a producer via an Instagram DM or a LinkedIn message. If someone has more than 10,000 Instagram followers, though, or has tried to be on *Big Brother*, *Love Is Blind* is probably not interested. Those are indications of someone who wants fame more than love.

Chelsea Griffin Appiah, who married her husband, Kwame, on *Love Is Blind*'s fourth season, now does casting work for Kinetic. "It's challenging to find people who want this for their life," she says. Cast members should be "good citizens," she explains, people who are also not in the middle of a divorce and who are "mentally stable individuals." They need to have good support systems because being on the show is hard. The casting process includes a mental-health screening in which a third-party psych team flags participants it feels would be "high risk." "There's a mental toll. There's a physical toll as well," Kwame Appiah says of a show that asks its participants to find and commit to their soul mate in a matter of weeks. "The expedited process can create a lot of confusion in our heads."

Coelen addresses the cast members during filming.

TWO DAYS BEFORE FILMING begins on season seven, the cast meet one another for orientation in a nondescript chain-hotel ballroom in Sherman Oaks. They're separated by sex—first the women gather, then the men. Aware that people may be coming in with a negative perception of the show, Coelen has tried to make these talks more detailed, explaining the filming schedule, how dates are assigned, and what will be expected of the cast at each stage. He doesn't think the show needs to change, but rather that participants need a better sense of what to expect. It's designed this way for a *reason*, he says, and that reason, according to him, is connection. "The experiment is not something that we're conducting. *You* are the people conducting the experiment," Coelen tells the women as they pick at Panera-catered salads. Furthermore, he adds, "this is not a TV show. We put up this machinery, but anything that happens is up to you. The pledge that I always make to people is 'We will never, ever, ever tell you what to say; we'll never tell you what to do, never tell you what to think, what to feel.'" Coelen has a gurulike intensity when he speaks. "Every single girl was like, 'I feel like he was staring at me the whole time,'" says one season-seven cast member. "This man's eye contact is insane."

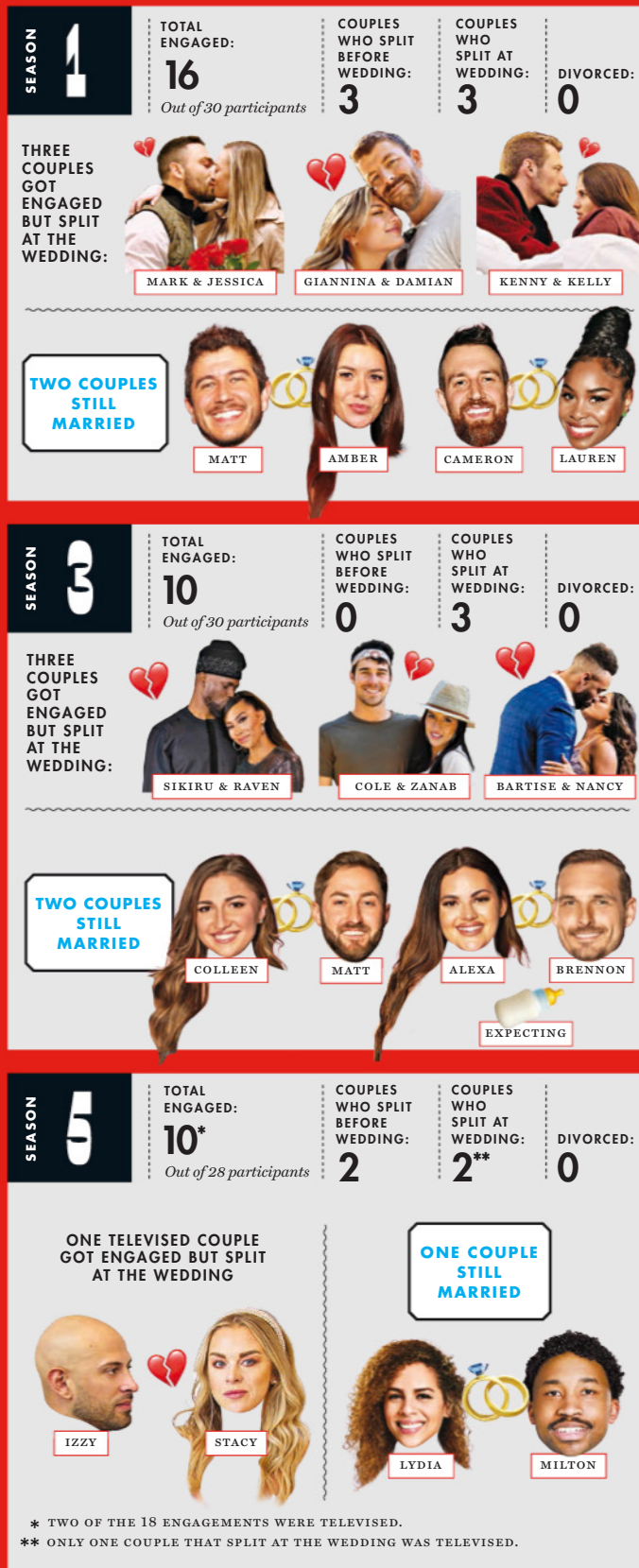
When cast members enter the pods, Coelen drops by the show's lounges twice a day: once in the morning and then around dinnertime. These are meant to be informational sessions with advice about how to make the most of the experience. On the first day's morning meeting, Coelen brings up the alcohol on set. "You're all coming here with the hope of finding someone that you really fall in love with," he tells the women. "To do that, I think you have to be comfortable. To get to know them, to open up—whatever that looks like to you. Whatever you want to wear, whatever you want to eat, whatever you want to drink, whatever you want to say. Whatever, right?" He does have a suggestion, though. "What I would *recommend*," he continues, "is do not drink to—excess. Because in my experience, that's a really bad way to connect with someone." Coelen is, of course, aware that a reporter is watching him. (In my conversations with more than 20 cast members from previous seasons, they tell me there was no explicit suggestion they should drink but alcohol was freely available and often stocked according to cast preferences.)

The cast get conversational guides each day, asking them to discuss things like whether they want children, their relationships with their parents, how they would tackle conflicting political views. None of this is required, and some people skip them entirely. Still, these are things they *should* talk about, Coelen says. A cast member who doesn't want to answer those questions may not be ready for marriage. When their dates are over, he says, the audio will simply cut out. (Despite this warning, several people on the first day end up talking to an empty room.) They should make sure to write down everyone's names because if they forget them, the producers will not help them out and they won't be able to put those people on their ranking sheet.

These rankings are crucial to how *Love Is Blind* works. For the first several nights, cast members fill out a sheet listing whom they would most like to talk to again. Coelen and Simpson enter the information into a program based on an algorithm like the one that matches doctors with residency opportunities or kidney recipients with kidneys. The program spits out date pairings for the next day based on which couples have indicated the most mutual interest. If a cast member writes that they never want to hear from any specific person again, that match is eliminated. On the first night, one woman's sheet comes back with "Not Elliott!" written starkly across the bottom. Pairs who've indicated high mutual interest are more likely to be put into one of the five pods with "hero cams," an additional set of sliding wall cameras that capture better close-ups.

The rankings—not the producers—decide who dates whom,

Does the LOVE IS BLIND Experiment Work?



HOW MANY COUPLES ACTUALLY MADE IT.

By NIC JUAREZ

SEASON

2

TOTAL ENGAGED:

16

Out of 30 participants

COUPLES WHO SPLIT BEFORE WEDDING:

3




COUPLES WHO SPLIT AT WEDDING:

3

DIVORCED:

2

THREE COUPLES GOT ENGAGED BUT SPLIT AT THE WEDDING:







SHAYNE & NATALIE

DEEPTI & SHAKE

SALVADOR & MALLORY

TWO COUPLES GOT MARRIED BUT ARE NOW DIVORCED

NICK & DANIELLE

JARRETTE & IYANNA

SEASON

4

TOTAL ENGAGED:

17

Out of 30 participants

COUPLES WHO SPLIT BEFORE WEDDING:

5

COUPLES WHO SPLIT AT WEDDING:

1

DIVORCED:

0

ONE COUPLE GOT ENGAGED BUT SPLIT AT THE WEDDING:



MICAH & PAUL

THREE COUPLES STILL MARRIED





BRETT

TIFFANY

KWAME

CHELSEA

ZACK

BLISS

FIRST LOVE IS BLIND BABY

SEASON

6

TOTAL ENGAGED:

10

Out of 30 participants

COUPLES WHO SPLIT BEFORE WEDDING:

3


COUPLES WHO SPLIT AT WEDDING:

1

DIVORCED:

0


ONE COUPLE GOT ENGAGED BUT SPLIT AT THE WEDDING:



CLAY

A.D.

ONE COUPLE STILL MARRIED



AMY

JOHNNY

Coelen emphasizes in the morning talks. This, he explains, is the beautiful thing about the show. “Bad for your real experience, bad for TV. Good for your experience? Good TV!” he says. Over several days of observing the production, seated at a station in the control room for hours at a time, I watch the effect of Coelen’s groundwork on the cast. Several people are doing shots by 11:30 a.m. They joke about all the food they’re being given, clearly referencing a detail in the ongoing lawsuits alleging a lack of food on set. (“You guys went to three different restaurants!” one of the men tells producers.) In their conversations with one another, many talk about their faith. “I’ve prayed more in the last two days than in the last two years,” one says. “What do you think happens when we die?” is the first question a woman asks on her first date with someone. For some, I can see the connection, or the absence of one, in real time. In between dates, crew members hustle into the pods to fluff pillows and spray everything with Febreze. This season includes two sisters, Angelina and Emma, who decide not to talk about their family connection when introducing themselves in the pods; one man, who realizes they have both described similar childhoods and cultural backgrounds, puts the pieces together. Some of the cast diverge from the talking points. One woman talks about conspiracy theories she believes, including that the moon landing was faked. Without body language, the men she’s dating can’t seem to tell whether she’s trolling them.

Season seven follows people from the Washington, D.C., area, and a few dates are quickly derailed by politics: A handsome consultant type describes himself as “a patriot,” and although he can’t see it, the woman across from him winces. “I hate Ben Shapiro, but I’ve got a good Ben Shapiro impression,” a different guy says. Throughout filming, producers pull cast members aside for one-on-one interviews. They ask questions like “Who has the sexiest voice?” and “What kind of energy does he give you?” Producers cannot force cast members to answer questions, but as production goes on, it can be easy to fall into the rhythm of answering what they’re asked. One of the sisters, Angelina, tells me about a woman who came into the lounge sobbing after a date. “One of the producers immediately wanted her to go in for an interview, and she was puffy red,” Angelina says. “She could barely form sentences, and she was like, ‘Guys, do you think I have to do this interview?’ I was like, ‘Absolutely do not do that right now.’” Angelina was clear about not doing anything she didn’t want to do. “But people would forget that sometimes,” she says.

Two days into my time on set, a woman who has had two disastrous dates in a row breaks down in the lounge. She insists the producers have *done* this to her. *They are trying to break her*, she says, weeping, to the other women, who listen sympathetically. *This is a trap to create more drama*. I mention it to Coelen, who hasn’t been following. He’s been staring at his laptop, working on an edit for the previous season. He doesn’t particularly care who any of these people are until they’ve made it to the proposal stage. This early in a season, he has barely learned their names.

In the control room, there’s a large whiteboard with magnetized photos of each cast member, which the production team moves around throughout filming to keep track of who’s paired up with whom and who’s deciding between more than one person. On the first day of filming, a few Netflix executives stop by to see how the season is shaping up. They put sticky notes on some of the photos to indicate their favorites. “They’re the ones I want to track,” one of them says. Producers do this too. Simpson roots for her favorites to sort themselves out, shaking her fist at the screens in frustration when she feels they’re not communicating well. It’s all wishful thinking, though—the cast choose whom they choose.

“I know I’m a main story line!” the anxious woman says to her cohort in the lounge. But she isn’t: No one is until after filming ends and the editors go back and start piecing together everything that

happened. Isolated in the pods while producers observed them from a control room, it could feel as if they were being manipulated even when they were not. On Reveals Day, I glance at the whiteboard again, where the final couples are now lined up in pairs. Nearly all of the sticky-noted cast members have left.



ABOUT A WEEK INTO FILMING, the sisters, Angelina and Emma, decide it's time to go. Angelina tells the guy she's been dating that she really is interested in him. But she can't imagine saying "yes" to a proposal and does not want to deal with the pressure of shooting the reveals. "The days were very long, and the cameras were a lot," she tells me afterward. The next morning, I watch Coelen and Simpson do her exit interview as well as one for Emma and the guy she has been dating,

Lucas. Someone will reach out about aftercare, Coelen tells them. "If you guys want to go see a therapist," he starts to say. "Probably need one now," Lucas interjects. "I love that you say that," Coelen replies. "You spent a lot of time speaking about your feelings in a way that you don't in the outside world. To just go cold turkey on that is weird, right? So hey—go talk to somebody! We pay for it."

This is the kind of experience the casting team tells potential participants about the show. The production acknowledges it can be taxing, which is why it covers the cost of a therapist afterward, something Kinetic has done for cast members since *Married at First Sight*. When someone decides they want to leave, according to the production, they can. According to some participants, however, that is not always the case. The most public criticisms in this regard have come from Nick Thompson and Jeremy Hartwell from season two of *Love Is Blind*. Hartwell filed a lawsuit against Kinetic in 2022 (it was settled in May); in a podcast interview, he describes a producer reminding cast members their contracts include a \$50,000 fine should they leave without producer approval. "If we catch you outside of your hotel rooms, you might be kicked off the show and you'll have to pay the \$50K," Hartwell

that you're not going to be able to get air when you need air."

Thompson's season-two castmate Shake Chatterjee has a different memory of production. "There was always food available," he says. The COVID regulations were frustrating, particularly on the romantic getaway, but, he adds, "we had a swim-out pool. It was nice." In conversations with previous cast members, their time on *Love Is Blind* suggested a similar set of circumstances but a kaleidoscope of responses. There's general agreement that filming is stressful, that the isolation is challenging, and that the experience can make interactions overwhelming. For some—especially those who did get married—all of that stress is necessary to achieve the end goal. Season five's Lydia Velez Gonzalez is still married to her husband, Milton, and she says she enjoyed the "busy schedule."

Coelen won't talk about the details of any of the lawsuits against the show, but he vigorously pushes back against Thompson's and Hartwell's broader complaints. "You are not a prisoner," he says. "We don't push alcohol." The cast is provided catered meals. The \$50,000 fine, he says, has never been enforced on *Love Is Blind* and was removed from the contract around season five. Even without enforcement, the presence of that fine could make people worry about leaving, I point out. "I'm not inside people's heads, so I have no idea what they're concerned about," Coelen says.

Both Thompson and Chatterjee were featured prominently in season two. At least half of every cast, though, is made up of people who barely appear in the final edit. They don't fall in love, or they decide to leave early, and they become brief, anonymous grist for the reality mill. One cast member from an early season tells me he spent much of his time in the pods drinking and getting too little sleep. He doesn't blame the show for his choice to drink as much as he did, but he found the schedule destabilizing. It was optimized for cost and to protect the show's blind-love concept but wasn't conducive to falling in love. Cast members have the choice to stay up late into the night

so they can have more pod time with someone they're interested in. "It's optional, but everyone did it and then call time the next morning is 7 a.m.," he says. "I didn't have much sleep, the meals were sporadic, and you were dating and talking for 14 hours a day. And maybe you said something two days ago you regretted and you're worried about that. It builds up, and eventually you feel a little crazy." They did have snacks in the lounge, he says, but he didn't always want to eat them: "I'm not going to eat a hard-boiled egg on-camera. I'm not a psychopath."

Eventually, it became too much and he had a panic attack while in an interview room. He'd never had one before, and he was worried it would air on TV and he would look weak.

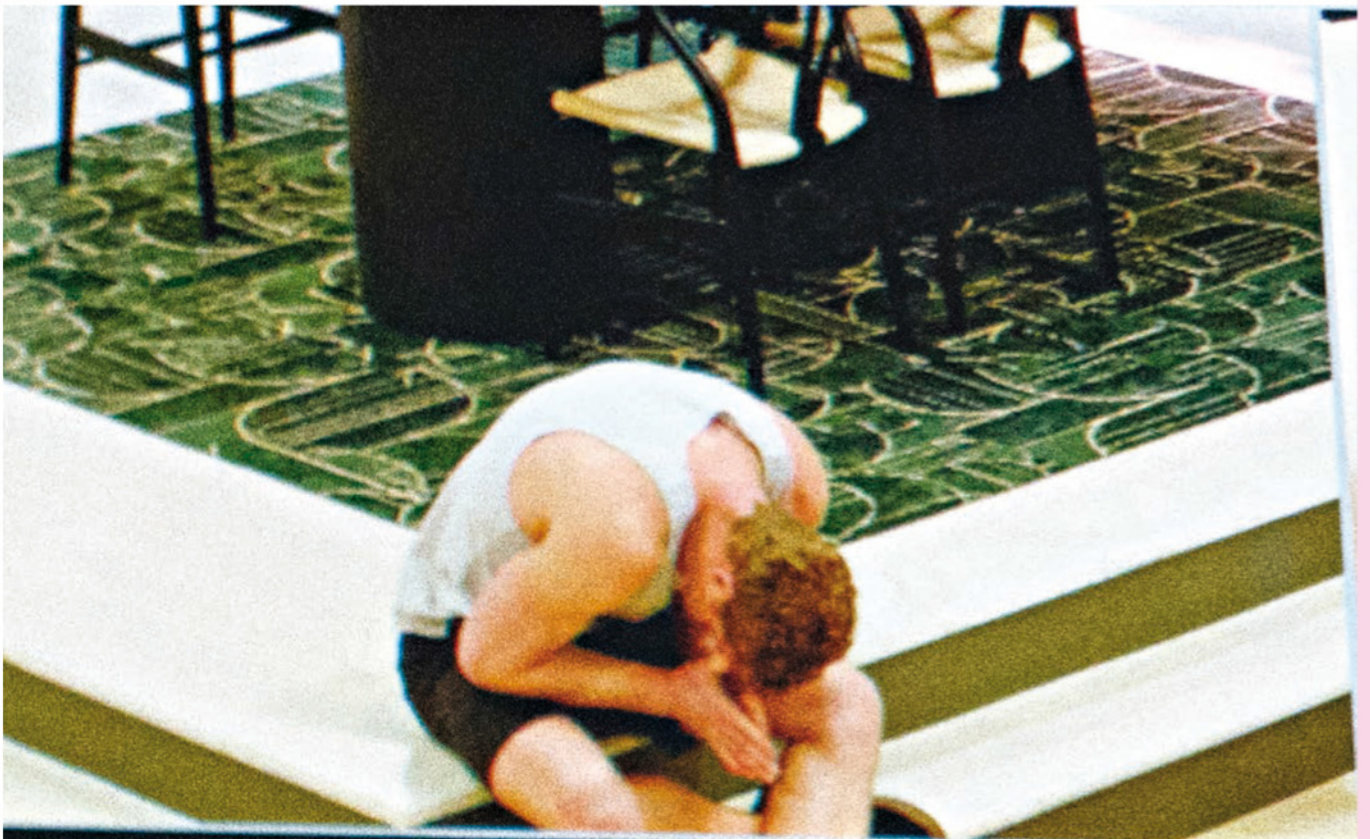
Producers persuaded him to go back to the hotel rather than immediately exit the show, and while the hotel staff was cleaning the rooms, he broke into the one next door and called his family. He learned his grandfather had COVID, and his parents used his password to log in to his email so they could contact the producers and tell them he needed to leave. At this point, he did exit the show. His mom DoorDashed him a meal while he waited in the hotel lobby for his personal effects. "It was not a great experience," he says. I ask whether he'd ever considered a lawsuit. "I didn't join a lawsuit because, like, I'm not a bitch," he tells me. "I mean, I signed up for this."

(Continued on page 95)

Cast members from an upcoming season on-camera.

"THERE'S A MENTAL TOLL. THE EXPEDITED PROCESS CAN CREATE A LOT OF CONFUSION IN OUR HEADS."

recalled producers saying. Thompson got married on the show, got divorced a year later and then began to talk extensively about his experience. "I knew I was going to give my phone away. But I didn't know I'd be put in a hotel room, isolated by myself for days at a time, unable to leave, unable to order food, unable to have access to water," Thompson tells me. Season two was filmed in the spring of 2021 at the peak of COVID protocols, when quarantine safety procedures and food service were more of a challenge. "I get that," Thompson says when I ask about it. "But there was nothing in the contract saying I was going to be locked in a hotel room or



MEN 2- BLAKE

ROBO



The Hottest St

Audience Impact

BY JOSEF ADALIAN

IT'S BEEN ANOTHER brutal year for most of the players in the streaming space. Budgets are still being slashed and strategies trashed as the legacy companies behind Disney+/Hulu, Max, Peacock, and Paramount+ continue managing the aftershocks of last year's talent strikes as well as the larger industry correction that began in 2022. Things that not so long ago were unthinkable—like HBO agreeing to license *Sex and the City* reruns to archenemy Netflix—are now reluctantly accepted as necessary to help the corporate bottom line. The focus on short-term gains, though, comes at a price. For the fourth year in a row, we set out to determine the hottest streaming platform right now, using metrics such as the state of content slates, audience size, and what industry insiders say about the platforms under the cloak of anonymity. After easily topping our list the past two years, Max (née HBO Max) has fallen all the way to third. Read on to see who claimed the streaming crown instead.

ANALYSIS

AUDIENCE IMPACT

How many people are really watching.

After stalling out for a bit, **Netflix's** growth engine has come roaring back to life: The streamer added a whopping 37 million customers over the past year, giving it a global subscriber base of nearly 270 million. That puts it a cool 100 million subscribers ahead of the combined tally for Disney+ and Hulu. Not surprisingly, Netflix dominates actual viewing time in America with its shows accounting for seven of Nielsen's ten most-watched originals in 2023. "Far more than was the case just a year ago, it's Netflix and everyone else," says one veteran PR exec.

INDUSTRY SURVEY

Based on responses from 24 Hollywood and Wall Street insiders.

After two years of judging Max the most essential streamer, our insider panel of writers, executives, and PR types pivoted hard to **Netflix**. All but four of them ranked the streaming behemoth No. 1, the nearest we have ever come to a consensus choice. "When you have close to the population of America as your global subscriber number, you can't be beat," says one studio executive. It's not all love, though. "Netflix ranks 'best' in the same sense that the Death Star was the best planet-destroying space station in the galaxy," says one veteran TV writer.

MOMENTUM AND MONEY

The streamer experimenting and shifting the paradigm.

Relative underdogs like Apple TV+ and Peacock have traditionally won this category, but halfway into 2024, it's hard to argue any streamer is hotter than **Netflix**. In addition to adding new customers and generating hits (*Baby Reindeer*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and old episodes of *Suits*), it's making real money—more than \$2 billion in the most recent fiscal quarter—while competitors desperately try to stop hemorrhaging finances. The other big winner? Disney+, which finally completed its integration of Hulu programming.

CRITICS

The most acclaimed content offerings (both new and library).

Vulture critics' new darling is **Disney+/Hulu**: All but one of them rated it No. 1. "The FX factor is tremendous," says Nicholas Quah. FX hasn't missed a beat in its move to digital, classing up the House of Mouse with a steady supply of buzzy hits such as *The Bear*, *What We Do in the Shadows*, and *Shogun*. "There's almost always something I feel like I need to watch coming out of that network," adds Quah. Thanks to its HBO association, Max still got enough love to rank a close second with the critics.

1	NETFLIX ▲ Up 1 spot since 2023; 270 million subscribers	"You listen to their feeling that their underpayment of talent is okay because of the value of the Netflix Effect , and you wish they'd fail miserably. Then your heart sinks as you realize they won't." —AGENT			
2	DISNEY+/ HULU ▲ Up 1 spot Disney+: 118 million subscribers Hulu: 50 million				
3	MAX ▼ Down 2 spots 100 million subscribers (including Discovery+)				
4	PRIME VIDEO ▲ Up 2 spots Does not release subscriber data*				
5	APPLE TV+ ▼ Down 1 spot Does not release subscriber data				
6	PEACOCK ▼ Down 1 spot 34 million subscribers				
7	PARAMOUNT+ Same spot 71 million subscribers				

streamer Right Now

Momentum and Money

Industry Survey

Critics

MOST MOMENTUM

"The **best all-around service**, from UI to content offering, usability, and value for the price. They've had two of the most-discussed shows with *Beef* and *Baby Reindeer*. Is two enough? Probably not. But Netflix still feels like the only **must-have** service."

—STREAMING-INDUSTRY CONSULTANT

"You need a streamer in your life who will throw down for a **Taylor Swift concert** every once in a while, or rare **Beatles footage**, then serve up a glorious surprise and revelation like *The Bear*. This is a very powerful and good bundle."

—TELEVISION-PUBLICITY EXECUTIVE

MOST ACCLAIMED

"It still seems like just the place where you **wade through a bunch of crap** to watch HBO shows—which for me is fine, but I think that company is in real trouble with David Zaslav at the helm. Which is a shame because, well, HBO!"

—VETERAN SHOWRUNNER

"The interface is **messy**, and a lot of their stuff is **just bland**. Even I, a middle-aged dad, can't muster any enthusiasm for the next Dad TV installment of *Jack Reacher* or *Jack Ryan* or *Bosch*."

—MEDIA-PODCAST VETERAN

"Clearly star-prestige fuckers. They want to be **the new HBO**. Someone should tell them who actually succeeds at this goal for a fraction of the price: **FX**. Start buying ideas and *make* stars instead of trying to buy them."

—HOLLYWOOD WRITER

"If you love **Bravo** programming or **live sports**, Peacock might be a priority. For me, it's mostly just a grab bag of random titles."

—TV-INDUSTRY REPORTER

"The **offscreen drama** for Paramount is way better than anything they have onscreen. If they had a *Real Housewives of Shari Redstone*, they would be No. 1."

—STUDIO EXECUTIVE

WINNER NETFLIX

Less than two years after Wall Street and many in the entertainment industry soured on Netflix, the streaming giant is back on top and arguably **stronger than ever**. In recent weeks, its stock price has flirted with all-time highs. Those gains have come in no small part from a series of moves consumers would probably say they hate: cracking down on **password sharing**, putting **commercials** in shows, and hiking the **monthly fee**. But those viewers seem pretty satisfied with Netflix's content, including ambitious bets like *3 Body Problem* and *Ripley* and crowd-pleasers such as *The Night Agent* and *The Roast of Tom Brady*. And it doesn't hurt that rival conglomerates have once again taken to leasing their biggest library titles to the enemy, allowing Netflix to give its members access to linear-TV faves such as *Young Sheldon*.

*Amazon has never released the exact number of Prime subscribers, but in April, CEO Andy Jassy said the service reaches more than 200 million viewers each month.

**THE
TELEVISION
ISSUE**

SECRET

**As Marcus on
THE BEAR,
LIONEL BOYCE**
is the guy everyone
wants to be around.
He's having that
effect on
Hollywood too.

BY LAWRENCE BURNLEY





HEN WE GO

to eat something, people will now look to me like, 'What should we get?'" Lionel Boyce tells me over cheeseburgers and fries at the packed S&P luncheonette in Flatiron this spring. S&P has his favorite burger in the city, originally recommended by a friend during one of the actor's trips to New York. Because he has starred for the past two years as pastry chef Marcus Brooks on one of television's most popular dramas, FX's *The Bear*, about the inner workings of a Chicago restaurant, his dining choices now carry an air of authority. "And then I pick something and everyone's like, 'I don't like this,'" he says, laughing. "I'm like, 'Well, I don't know.' It's still me. It's not like I'm a seasoned chef."

At around six-foot-three, Boyce is perched higher than most at the old-time diner table. He's in a gray short-sleeved tee, green cargos, Dunks, and a navy cap that reads TOKYO across the front in orange felt. The 33-year-old speaks in hushed tones, sometimes at a nervous speed. Much like his character, the mild-mannered Marcus, Boyce is usually the calmest person in a crowd. Marcus is a man of few words; when he does speak, it's sincere and with purpose. He's quick to help co-workers navigate tumultuous relationships with one another, and in his off time, he helps care for his mother, who's in what appears to be a coma.

Not until season two does Marcus start to feel more like a main character, in large part owing to Boyce's performance in "Honeydew," his most prominent appearance on the show so far. In the episode, directed by Ramy Youssef, Marcus is sent to a professional kitchen in Copenhagen by his boss, Jeremy Allen White's Carmy Berzatto, to help him gain confidence. The task at hand? To study under a big-time British-born chef named Luca and acquire the tools that will help him invent three desserts before the show's titular new restaurant opens. At one point, we see Marcus scrambling to Google *dextrose* because he has been charged with making shiso gelée, a dessert infused with flavor from a well-

known Japanese herb he has never heard of. Minutes before, he is fucking up at placing flower petals atop a fancy pudding with chopsticks. "Sorry, I'm a little nervous," he says. "I think at a certain stage it becomes less about skill and it's more about being open," Luca offers after Marcus asks how he got so good. "To the world, to yourself, to other people." It's a captivating depiction of someone discovering an unexpected passion. It's also largely Boyce's own life story.

He grew up in Inglewood, California, the second of three children. His father was an Arrowhead Water delivery driver, and his mother was an L.A. sheriff and a devout Christian. When she wasn't working, she was listening to talk radio or watching T.D. Jakes sermons on TV. "She always says she missed her calling as an orator," Boyce tells me. "The kind of characters I like are similar to my mom. Someone who very much stands on their own ground, very larger-than-life characters. Like Will Ferrell or Danny McBride types."

In his early years, Boyce was similarly boisterous. He played basketball and football and was on the track team, and he never stuck to one crowd. In middle school, he started getting kicked out of class because he had "just discovered how to be funny" and disrupted lessons to get jokes off. Outside sports, he experimented with constructing new story lines for his favorite TV show. "I wanted to understand the link between Black people, kung fu, and anime," he remembers. "Like every young nigga, I just watched *Dragon Ball Z* and started to write episodes of it, making up stuff." Around the beginning of high school, he grew more reserved. "I actually don't remember the transition when I calmed down," he says. He made football his primary focus and briefly left his script-writing passion projects behind—until his senior year, when he enrolled in a drama course and reconnected with an old classmate from elementary school.

"I met that nigga in first grade at a fucking private school in Inglewood, but he didn't remember," Tyler, the Creator tells me, laughing into the phone. "And then when I saw him in 12th grade, I walked up to him like, 'Hey, you went to First Church, huh?' He's like, 'Yeah, how'd you know?' I was like, 'Because I could never forget that moisturized skin color you got, brother.' And he was like, 'What the fuck wrong with you?' But it's true." In the class at Westchester High School, their relationship grew from small talk and dapping each other up in the hallways to connecting over their love for *Chappelle's Show*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, the Wayans brothers' *Scary Movie* franchise, and Adult Swim.

By 2009, that last year of high school, Tyler and his rap collective, Odd Future, were already establishing themselves in Los Angeles's underground youth culture, releasing group mixtapes, performing, and dropping skate videos on YouTube. Boyce started to hang out with Tyler's crew, people like Jasper Dolphin and Travis Bennett, who, like Tyler, reveled in juvenile debauchery and havoc wreaking—an early-'90s-baby take on *Jackass* except with Black teenagers from the West Coast. After graduating, Odd Future would bulldoze their way into the mainstream, establishing arguably the most impactful artists' camp of their generation. Musically and stylistically, the collective (which included Earl Sweatshirt, Hodgy Beats, Left Brain, Syd, Domo Genesis, and Frank Ocean) meshed the sensibilities of hip-hop and punk culture.

In the meantime, Boyce was a weakside linebacker for El Camino College in Torrance, hoping to play well enough to transfer to a Division I program. Tyler had been telling him since high school that he was going to make a television show in the tradition of Dave Chappelle's and, when given the chance, Boyce would have to be a part of it. In 2011, Tyler called him into an unexpected meeting with Adult Swim, which ended with the creation of *Loiter Squad*, an over-the-top sketch-comedy series involving gags, original characters, and celebrity parodies. Boyce would write and act in sketches. It was promising enough for him to leave his football dreams in the rearview. "*Loiter Squad* was like kicking the door open. I had assumed I would play sports my whole life," Boyce says as we leave S&P and walk toward Union Square Park.

On the show, Boyce came off as stiffer than his contagiously goofy friends, but his deadpan performances provided a different brand of humor, something more like putting your not fully committed brother up to a prank because you know people will take him more seriously. One of the funnier skits was almost exactly that: Boyce posted up in various parts of Los Angeles, taunting people walking down the street while his homeboys—and Bam Margera—feed him lines through a microphone. "In hindsight, it was crazy," Boyce reflects. "We didn't know how far it was reaching or what it really meant to other people because I was just so excited by the idea of working with Adult Swim. If you don't know how hard it is to get something made, it's not hard because you don't know what you're up against. You're not considering anything other than, *We're doing it.*" *Loiter Squad* ran for three seasons between 2012 and 2014. When it ended, Tyler pulled Boyce in

to co-create *The Jellies!*, an animated sitcom that also aired on Adult Swim and had an even more neurotic sense of humor. “*The Jellies!* was like, ‘Do we have to make it a little bit more accessible because our humor is really stupid? No, you lean into it.’”

AFTER LOITER SQUAD, Boyce realized he liked being both in front of and behind the camera. “I thought, *How can I do more of this?*” he says. *The Bear* is the first major role he landed from an audition. Reading the script, “you could feel what you see in the pilot, the pace of it. And Marcus made sense to me.”

“The funny part is Marcus was actually written for Lionel, and I’m not sure how much he knows that,” says Christopher Storer, the show’s creator, writer, and director. The two met through Boyce’s close friend Jerrod Carmichael and television producer Nick Weidenfeld years before working together; Storer says from early on, he was struck by Boyce and his friends’ cre-

be like, ‘I helped make this,’ instead of, ‘I do this.’ I think it was because my path was nontraditional.” He doesn’t feel that when playing Marcus. His gradual ownership of the role is perhaps why people identify so strongly with his character. In a sub-Reddit for the show, a fan kicks off a discussion with “Marcus gets like no love despite being a total sweetheart and completely dedicated to his craft. He’s handsome, sweet, loves his mom.”

The will-they-won’t-they relationship between Marcus and Edebiri’s chef Sydney has inspired a collective yearning in viewers for even a bread crumb of resolution. Occasionally, Marcus breaks out of his shell to flirt with Sydney, whose emotions are harder to read. In season two’s finale, when Marcus feels rejected after sort of asking Sydney out, he grows frustrated and snaps at her in front of the team for something completely unrelated. “I think the show did a good job of exploring this thing where you get along with a

are really excited about what they do,” Edebiri says. “We got to do some scenes together that I’m kind of nervous to see but excited.”

Whether or not something happens between Marcus and Sydney, Marcus is due for some significant changes. The last time we see him, after the rush of the restaurant’s soft launch, he picks up his phone and finds he has missed repeated calls and emergency texts from the nurse who cares for his mother. In March, photos of the show’s cast dressed in black on the steps of a Chicago church leaked online, all but confirming his mother’s death.

After filming for *The Bear*’s upcoming season, out June 27, wrapped last month, Boyce returned to his home in L.A. These days, he’s trying to pin down a solid routine that will let him get back to writing projects with friends like Tyler. He also has a love for chess; he plays against people on his phone almost every day. “There’s this crazy rush you get when you play a stranger,” he says.



From left: In football gear as a tween; filming the pilot for *Loiter Squad* in 2011; with Ayo Edebiri in season three of *The Bear*.

ative output. He was also impressed by how much Boyce’s commitment to film came through in their conversations. In *The Bear*’s first season, his character feels underdeveloped; Marcus’s evolution in season two is stark, a product of Boyce’s increased comfort in the role and having the trust from Storer to expand it.

In just two seasons, the show, which also stars Ayo Edebiri, Ebon Moss-Bachrach, and Matty Matheson, has won ten Emmys (for its first season alone) and four Golden Globes. Boyce is expected to earn his first Emmy nomination this summer for his performance in “Honeydew.” Twelve years into the game, he’s just starting to get over the feeling of being a fish out of water in certain spaces. Earlier in his career, he says, “I would be making excuses to discredit myself from everything that I’ve made. I’d

person and sometimes feelings get crossed. You’re not really sure. It’s like, *I like this person, but am I supposed to like them more?*” Boyce says. “I guess I don’t really think about it. To me, I’m just wherever the story goes as long as it makes sense. People have already made up their minds of what they think and want.” Some fans want to see Sydney with Carmy, the blue-eyed, physically fit white dude who’s in charge of the place. And Sydney never feels closed off to the idea of something deeper with Carmy. Marcus, though, is a Black man presented as an affable, gentle giant who is easier to friend-zone because he’s never shown in a romantic light.

“I think there’s some really lovely and powerful moments between Sydney and Marcus in season three. They connect because they’re such similar people who

How often does he win? “A lot. Maybe it’s just I’m playing people who aren’t really that great.” When he realizes we’re within walking distance of the Chess Forum, a shop that sells chess pieces and hosts games in the back, he suggests we make our way there. I warn him that he probably won’t be getting that crazy rush today, as I have very limited knowledge of the game. He offers to teach.

“Pawns, first row. They usually move one space forward,” Boyce says, demonstrating before breaking down the rest of the game for me. I feel like I’m experiencing the inverse of Marcus and Luca in “Honeydew,” learning the tricks of the trade from someone far more skilled than I who extends the grace of patiently and attentively walking me through the process. I get the sense that Boyce lives for these teachable moments regardless of which end he’s on. ■



THE
TELEVISION
ISSUE

INDUSTRY GOE



On the set of
Industry.

s for Broke

With a new Sunday-night time slot and *Game of Thrones*'s Kit Harington co-starring, can this buzzy GEN-Z FINANCE DRAMA finally break out?

BY JACKSON McHENRY



ESTLED IN THE

rolling hills of South West England, among picturesque towns with country cottages that sell for millions of pounds, there's a 16th-century private estate known as Longleat House. The country seat of the Marquess of Bath, it is also, for a few days in late summer 2023, the filming location for a sex-and-drug-addled TV show about misbehaving investment bankers. Bedecked with antique furniture and genealogical tapestries, the home is a significant change of place for a clique of self-destructive 20-something co-workers more often surrounded by the glass-and-fluorescent despair of their highly competitive London offices. Don't worry: They still find a way to do coke there.

At the end of *Industry's* third season—a level up for the series in terms of scale, writing, and general shenanigans—a few of its characters end up at this monument to old money for a dinner party. There are two familiar faces present in this scene, both wearing black tie: Harry Lawtey, who plays *Industry's* woebegone working-class striver, Robert, whose boys'-club looks—fine cheekbones, a winning curl of hair *Industry's* makeup designer, Mirna Curak, tells me she is personally very protective of—allow him to fit into the banking world, and Marisa Abela, who plays Yasmin Kara-Hanani, a British Lebanese heiress who is as good at social manipulation as she is bad at her actual job.

There's a third familiar face, too, though not one we've seen on the series before: the dapper Kit Harington, a veteran of *Game of Thrones*, wearing the trademark powder-blue bow tie of the Bullingdon Club, the famed, hyperexclusive Oxford men's group. He sits to Abela's left in his new role as Henry Muck, a green-energy

start-up founder introduced this season who is the epitome of a posh twit. Robert has long lusted after Yasmin, while she has tortured him emotionally, psychologically, and sexually. Back in the first season, she handed him her panties during an office happy hour, then made him orgasm on a mirror and eat the ejaculate during the company holiday party. When Henry Muck enters the picture, Robert and Yasmin's relationship gets more complicated. Robert is assigned to work with Henry on his company's IPO; Yasmin becomes the object of Henry's interest. It's the kind of kinky love triangle you could see only on *Industry*, colored by class resentment, water sports, and a scandal about Yasmin propagated by this universe's version of the *Daily Mail*. Henry's uncle is, of course, its publisher. This is his mansion.

Even in these intimidatingly swanky digs, as a representative from Longleat reminds the actors to please not leave crumbs on the table, members of the *Industry* crew operate like they've stolen the keys to Daddy's Porsche (Daddy, in this case, being Warner Media). The show's creators, Mickey Down and Konrad Kay, are directing episodes for the first time this season, and they're huddled behind their monitors doing the shaka hand gesture to each other when they like a take. Candles light the scene, they tell me, in an homage to Stanley Kubrick's 18th-century-set bro epic, *Barry Lyndon*. A background actor stands beside a cart full of upmarket dairy products, and because of the heat of the people and the candles, the room smells strongly of melting cheese. Lawtey nails one take—a close-up that involves Robert, once again, being subjected to emotional terrorism—then suggests he could be even

better. Another take, and he is better. I watch the monitor, and it's like his face is shattering onscreen.

Industry can be difficult to describe—I often resort to telling people it's finance *Skins*, or as if Michael Mann directed *Gossip Girl*. Harington is the series' biggest name yet; the fact that he's returning to HBO for this show in particular looks like an implicit acknowledgment of its growing appeal. The series' audience is relatively small but generally vocal; it's a show for your favorite TV fan's favorite TV fan. There's a glow-up at play that's apparent even in its release schedule: The first season premiered in November 2020 and dropped the second half of its episodes all at once in a bid to promote the streaming service then called HBO Max; the second still aired on Monday nights, the stepchild of the HBO scheduling week; but the third, arriving on August 11, is getting that coveted marquee Sunday-night slot, post-*House of the Dragon*, where *Succession* used to be. "That's prime real estate and we're capitalizing on it," HBO's head of drama, Francesca Orsi, told me. "We're happy for them; they deserve that spot."

There's another dynamic at play. In the wake of the American WGA and SAG strikes, *Industry*, which is filmed on British contracts like *House of the Dragon* and did not stop production, is entering a market with less competition. In fact, HBO may value it more than ever. The network lacks an open-ended contemporary dramatic hit of the kind in which it typically specializes. *Succession* has ended. *Euphoria* is on indefinite hiatus. *The White Lotus* is still filming in Thailand. "In the old days, when the landscape of TV was very different, HBO shows didn't hit until the third season, whereupon they started



Myha'la as Harper Stern, the paranoid, power-hungry rising star plotting a career comeback.

PHOTOGRAPH: PREVIOUS SPREAD, SIMON RIDGWAY/HBO

to fly,” *Industry* executive producer Jane Tranter tells me. “I’m hoping the audience will maybe open up a bit because we’d love to make some more.”

Industry has grown and changed as a series, but it has also bent television to its will by remaining true to its own jargon-and-blow-blurred view of humanity. Before Harington joined the show, he was already an *Industry* aficionado. On a call a few months after filming had wrapped, he told me he’d started watching it while on lockdown during the pandemic. “Tonally, it’s one of the most unique shows out there,” he said. “I love that they are like, *We’re going to drop you in this and trust you’re smart enough to keep up.*” When he heard it was looking to cast a new role, he reached out through his agent, sat down with the creators, then got the invite to come aboard. “In *Game of Thrones*, we had actors come in who were fans of the show,” he told me. “Now it was the other way around and I was fanboying over the actors in *Industry.*” It’s the kind of dealmaking a good trader would endorse: Maybe the show has just as much to offer Harington as he does it.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, on the opposite side of the Atlantic, I get coffee in Boerum Hill with *Industry*’s token American representatives: Myha’la, who plays the paranoid, power-hungry rising star Harper Stern, and Ken Leung, Harper’s mentor-slash-adversary Eric Tao. The series kicks off with Harper as its point of entry: She arrives for an interview in the pilot at the British outpost of a fictional American bank known as Pierpoint & Co. (think Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch, or JPMorgan but somehow more evil), bluffing her way into a job alongside Yasmin, Robert, and some other grads, even though she’s faked her

“I LOVE THAT THEY ARE LIKE, WE’RE GOING TO DROP YOU IN THIS AND TRUST THAT YOU’RE SMART ENOUGH TO KEEP UP.”

college degree. Eric, another outsider who’s wormed his way into the power structure, takes Harper under his wing, and the two engage in a prolonged financial folie à deux. At the end of the first season, she feints in the direction of betraying Eric but then sells out another Pierpoint higher-up instead. At the end of the second, when Harper falls under the spell of a corrupt hedge-fund exec played by Jay Duplass, Eric turns on Harper. He knifes her in the back in the finale by revealing her fake degree to Pierpoint’s HR. (You may be thinking, *They have an HR team?*) She is summarily fired.

Down and Kay intentionally wrote themselves into a corner with that cliffhanger and briefly considered leaving Myha’la off the show’s marketing materials. But then they realized that would be a bridge too far in terms of toying with the audience. Rest assured Harper is back with a vengeance in *Industry*’s third season. She and Eric start off far apart, but their connection is more unhealthily obsessive than ever. Harper manages to scrounge up a job at an ecologically conscious American investment firm, a brutal parody of corporate greenwashing, where she meets a new mentor, Petra, who is equally as ruthless as Harper though

slightly more principled. She is played by *Barry* standout Sarah Goldberg, another actor who came to the show as a fan. Eric, meanwhile, tries to be more involved with Robert and Yasmin at work, looking for (and failing to find) a Harper replacement. “I would remind myself, *All the things she’s done up to this point have been linked to this person,*” Myha’la says of filming a pivotal season-three moment when they finally do cross paths. “All the choices she’s making are fueled by the fact that she’s not in the office with him.”

In person, Myha’la and Leung evince a lot of that same closeness, though in more positive terms. Off the clock, Myha’la retains some of Harper’s intensity but with all the amiability her character lacks, while Leung tends to be more introspective. Three seasons—and more than half a decade—into working together, the two can communicate in shorthand. “I feel so safe with you,” Leung says. “It’s an easy day when we’re together on the call sheet.” They met in the U.K. while doing a reading of the show’s pilot, where Leung was the resident old hand with a career in film and theater. Myha’la, like many of the show’s stars, was just out of drama school. “You were—well,

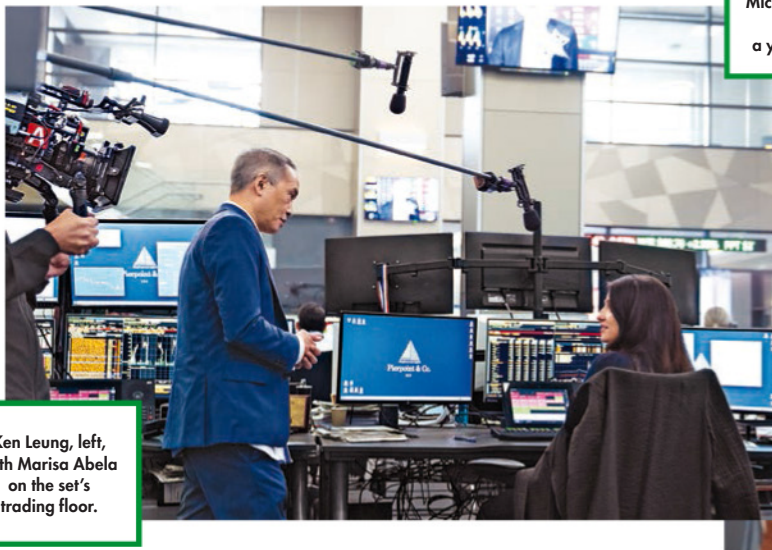
PHOTOGRAPHS: SIMON RIDGWAY, NICK STRASBURG/HBO



Marisa Abela
as Yasmin
Kara-Hanani in
the season finale.



Kit Harington as
Henry Muck,
a green-energy
start-up founder
and posh twit.



Ken Leung, left, with Marisa Abela on the set's trading floor.

Show creators Konrad Kay and Mickey Down looking at footage on a yacht in Mallorca.



I was perceiving you as—cool as a cucumber, wearing all-white linen, smoking a cigarette, leaning against the wall,” she says. “And I was freaking out like, *I don’t know what I’m doing here!*” “I don’t remember the freaking out,” Leung says. “I just remember the energy.”

The way that *Industry* has zeroed in on that Eric-and-Harper dynamic is indicative of the fascinations, as well as the growth, of the show. Down and Kay had not originally envisioned a Black woman for Harper’s role. They had always considered having an American outsider at the bank as a point of entry—a useful way to explain things to American viewers—possibly a woman. After some early conversations in their first writers’ room, they decided to make Harper Black. When they cast Myha’la, Harper was written as more outwardly anxious than the version you see onscreen. It didn’t ring true to her as the way a young Black woman would act. “My understanding was, as my mom once told me, to never let them see you sweat because you’re already disadvantaged,” Myha’la says. “I was like, ‘What if she comes in being like, ‘I’m the baddest bitch you’ve ever met?’” It changed the calibration of the character—Harper’s still defensive and anxious on the inside, but she does all she can to never let her guard down.

That colors the bond between Eric, an Asian American man, and Harper, too; both are marginalized, in similar and different ways, within the larger western imperial power structure. In a workplace, they’re expected to be helpmeets while also being held up as tokens of acceptance, a dynamic the characters bridle against and use to their advantage. *Industry* itself lacks much piety about the feel-good ethos of corporate-inclusion initiatives. Eric, in a board meeting early this new season, rolls his eyes

at Pierpoint’s 150th-anniversary celebrations and points out that the founders came from a slave-owning family. “They’ve connected in being two people coming from a less-advantaged position now in a whole other country trying to fight to be at the top of the game,” Myha’la says. “I don’t know what it is, but I feel like I have it too—some weird internal survivor’s guilt. This understanding that my life could look so different, but it doesn’t. I feel like she—and sometimes I—feel like I’m one misstep away from the end of my life as I know it.”

The writers bent story lines toward the strengths of their other actors too. Abela’s Yasmin was always conceived as a bit of a princess, the kind of privileged girl who flounders in a highly competitive workplace but can’t be easily let go, given her family connections. Abela delights in the comedy of Yasmin’s privilege, even if she has to work hard to keep up with the running gag that Yasmin can speak several languages (Arabic, Spanish, French, etc.). But Abela pushed to give the character more social savvy and an intriguing streak of cruelty. In early scripts for the first season, Yasmin was looking for validation from Robert, and he was the one telling her what to do with her panties. Abela advocated for her character to be turned on by control. “I think she felt pretty good about herself physically, and in those moments, she wanted to feel powerful, not beautiful,” Abela told me, “and they really let me go there with that.” The scenes were rewritten so that Yasmin was the one telling Robert what to do, a dynamic that continues to flourish in the third season. “In season one, the writing basically had to catch up to our actors’ standard,” Kay told me. “One of the great

prides of our career is that this is all their first major thing.”

Indeed, *Industry* has launched its lead actors to new levels of fame. The show might not yet be as talked about as HBO’s similarly outré *Euphoria*, but its trio of leads are all booking bigger work. Myha’la has appeared in the Gen-Z slasher *Bodies Bodies Bodies* and the Julia Roberts thriller *Leave the World Behind*, Lawtey across from Christian Bale in *The Pale Blue Eye* and with Lady Gaga in the upcoming *Joker* sequel, Abela as Amy Winehouse in *Back to Black* and in an upcoming Steven Soderbergh movie. It’s the sort of thing that makes Lawtey—who, like Robert, wears his heart on his sleeve (though Lawtey is clearly much more with it)—a bit sentimental. He, Myha’la, and Abela bonded early on in the filming of the first season, taking a trip to Brussels together on the Eurostar—“a crazy weekend in the home of European diplomacy”—when Myha’la needed to leave Great Britain and return in order to renew her visa. “The fact that we’ve been able to grow together through the show, and then go off and have our own singular experiences between seasons, has been so special,” he tells me. “There’s a very supportive network for the three of us in our little WhatsApp group.”

HOUGH YOU CAN supposedly see the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral in Central London through the glass windows of the trading floor, the actual offices of Pierpoint & Co. are located on a soundstage in the rehabilitated dockyards of Cardiff, Wales, two hours away by commuter train. In recent years, thanks to government-supported incentives, available labor, and real-estate prices, the



Season finale
in London.

postindustrial Welsh capital has become a hub for TV production. *Industry* films a few exterior scenes on location in London, but the cast and crew decamp to Wales for a few months every few years to get the bulk of the job done. “Cardiff has a very special place in my heart. I love it,” Lawtey says. “I think I’m the only one who does.”

Industry’s primary set is a replica of an actual office, convincing to the point that cast members joke it feels as if they clock in for office jobs. Executive producer Kate Crowther gave me a tour of Pierpoint that was reminiscent of an executive at a bank showing off their workspace. In the universe of the series, the firm is celebrating that 150th anniversary, so it has added a streak of bronze along the fake marble walls. The company is trying to go for a socially conscious rebrand—thus the investment in Henry Muck’s green-energy firm—so there’s new art in the meeting rooms and a pointedly visible HR packet about diversity, equity, and inclusion lying in a break room. Office life in all its mundanity has been carefully replicated. A note in the kitchen asks that someone please stop stealing their sandwiches: **WE ARE FULL-GROWN ADULTS, NOT CHILDREN.**

Each desk on the floor has its own Bloomberg terminal, the several-monitor hydras of screens that are the preferred workspace of the financial class. *Industry*’s terminals, Crowther brags to me, are all fully functional, installed with the consultation of the company itself, and Pierpoint’s stock ticker works too. Flip a switch and you get all the real-time financial information you need, straight to Cardiff. The desks themselves contain character-specific props—one of this season’s new hires, nicknamed Sweet Pea, is a Gen-Z influencer armed with a jade roller and a tripod for her

phone. It’s easy to see how the fiction of the world can blend with the reality of the actors performing it. *Industry* has employed the same set of local background actors across its seasons, all of whom have their own assigned desks. They show up for work and sit for a day of filming as if they were at office jobs. Some have started to date each other.

That level of realism forms the backbone of *Industry*, a show that evolved with a significant degree of improvisation around a rock-solid understanding of its own sleek but acrid vibe. That realism stems from Down and Kay’s background in finance. The two creators met during their time at Oxford, where they were assigned to the same college. Both the high-achieving children of immigrant parents—Kay’s mother is Polish, Down’s is Ghanaian—they worked together at the school paper covering movies. But without a clear direction in mind, when college neared an end, both ended up taking jobs in finance by default. “I had no intention of working in banking and a very cursory interest in filmmaking and writing,” Down says. “But when we got to the end, everybody was getting jobs in banks and I thought, *I’d better get one.*”

Down only lasted for a summer as an intern in private wealth management for a big American firm and about a year at a European firm. Then, reverting to that interest in filmmaking, he took a job as an assistant to a talent agent and started writing short scripts on the side. After Kay was laid off from Morgan Stanley, the two decided to try their hand at writing together. Around the same time, Tranter was mulling an idea about finance herself. In 2015, she set up an independent TV-production house named Bad Wolf, a reference to *Doctor Who*, which, in her previous work as an executive at the

BBC, she had a key role in reviving. In 2013, 21-year-old German intern Moritz Erhardt had died from an epileptic seizure while employed at Merrill Lynch (in the pilot of *Industry*, a new hire dies on the job at Pierpoint). Tranter, after reading about that story, became fascinated by the question of why bright young university grads would throw themselves into such a brutal career. “This generation were meant to be saving the ruins that my generation had left them in,” Tranter, who tends to cut right to the point, told me. “So why the fuck are any of them going to work in these big American banks?”

Tranter and her team started collecting accounts from people employed in finance and trying to figure out a way to crack the story of young grads at work that wouldn’t turn into a *Wall Street*-style “Greed is good” glamorized spectacle but wouldn’t end up being boring, either. Then, as she pondered who might write this series, “as if by magic, arriving on a velvet cushion,” she heard about Down and Kay. The two had taken a meeting with Tranter’s associate Ryan Rasmussen at Bad Wolf for another pitch they had, decidedly not set in “the City,” as London’s financial district is called. “To be brutal, it was the way they talked about their experiences, more than any piece of work they’d written, that made me think they could do this,” Tranter says. “At the very least, we were going to get something authentic. At the most, I loved the way they talked and spoke. What I hadn’t anticipated was how much and how quickly they would grow.”

Fittingly for a show about money, *Industry* made it to television in large part owing to budgeting. While developing the idea, Tranter secured some interest from Casey Bloys, who became the head of HBO programming in 2016 and was looking for a good show at a very low cost. Though the characters on *Industry* are making a lot of money, it wouldn’t take that much to film their lives: You could cast unknowns as the leads, hire new writing talent, and shoot it primarily in standing sets in office spaces. (The budget has not changed significantly, Tranter tells me proudly, even in the seemingly more sumptuous third season; they scrimped and saved to book that trip to Longleat.) In 2019, HBO announced plans to film a pilot about young adults in finance directed by Lena Dunham. Tranter politely but firmly describes Dunham’s involvement as minimal, saying she was fulfilling a contractual obligation with the network to direct and that she had a hand in the casting process, helping to identify the young actors who could carry the series.

Over those several (Continued on page 97)

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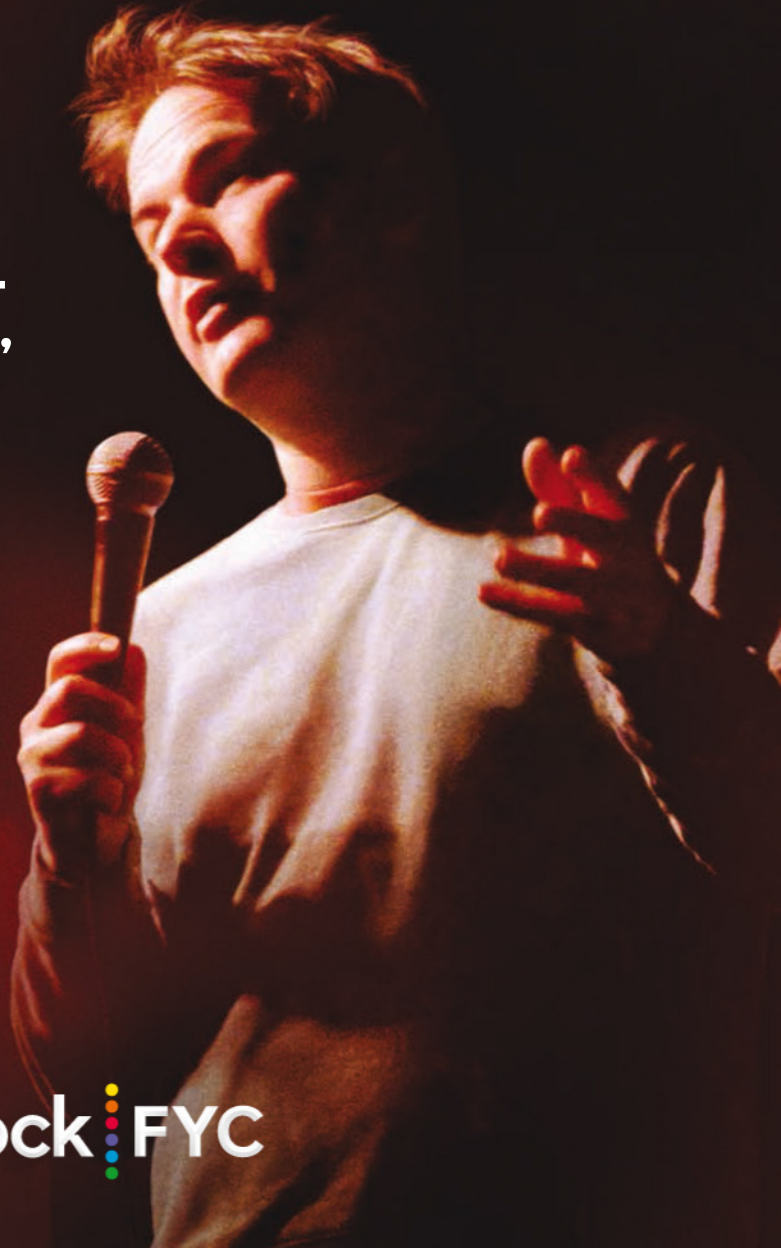
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STRATEGIST

.... THE LOOK BOOK
... AN UPSTATE CHURCH

GOES TO THE HYPEBEAST FLEA
TRANSFORMATION

BEST BETS

A Convincing Sunless Tan

➤ STRATEGIST WRITER Rachael Griffiths has been self-tanning since she was a teen and is familiar with everything that can go wrong with the process, from inhaling smelly orange foam, to applying an unpleasantly gooey formula, to getting stuck with a tan that looks overtly fake. Eventually, trial and error led her to **Bondi Sands Self Tanning Foam** (from \$24), and in five years of use, she has never had the desire to try any other product. The foam dries quickly, has a subtle coconut scent, and fades gradually and uniformly rather than haphazardly in unsightly patches. Most at-home tanners come in just one color, but Bondi is available in three: light/medium, dark, and ultradark. Spray-tan stylist Cait Cassagne of Studio C8, who is also a fan, says, “The color has beautiful undertones.” Griffiths started with a medium shade and eventually progressed to dark for a totally natural look. She says, “I’ve even had people ask where I’ve been on vacation for such a glow.”

Best Bets

A COLLECTION OF expert-vetted, spotted-around-town, or otherwise just especially excellent products that recently appeared on *thestrategist.com*. To shop all these items—plus the self-tanner—in one place, scan the QR code.



CELEBRITY SHOPPING



Taylor Hill's Moisturizer



Avene Cicalfate+ Restorative Protective Cream, \$42

"I found out about this from a makeup artist about five years ago. It's a skin-barrier repair cream, so it's great if you're dealing with acne, healing scars, and sun damage. I use it nightly because I feel like it restores my skin best then. When I wake up, I literally feel like my skin is saying, 'Hello! Good morning!'"



Adam Scott's Shoelaces



The Original Stretchlace Flat Elastic Shoelaces, from \$11

"I saw this on *Shark Tank*. It turns any pair of shoes into slip-ons. I buy it for all my shoes. Everyone who lives with me thinks I'm an idiot, but I think it's great. You don't have to tie your shoes anymore—you just tie them once and then you never have to bother again. That's 30 seconds a day you save."



Juliette Lewis's Tote



Isabel Marant Darwen Tapestry Velvet & Leather Multicolor Tote Bag, \$649

"Who doesn't love Isabel Marant? I just happened to go in the store and saw this. The fabric is not quite velvet but close to carpet. It's colorful and fun and big, so I can put lots of things in it when I travel. It's my happy tote bag."

GIFTS THEY MIGHT ACTUALLY WANT

The Most Thoughtful Present I've Ever Received Is This \$310 Pencil

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was gifted a pencil. It was a considerate present from someone who knew me well; I write all the first drafts of my manuscripts in pencil. But this was no regular pencil. The **Graf von Faber-Castell Perfect Pencil** has a long, narrow shaft of black ribbed Californian cedarwood that enrobes the lead. There's a tiny white eraser concealed in a rose-gold cap on one end and a hidden sharpener that can refine the lead to a lethal point on the other. As soon as I started using it, I noticed the lead was smooth and made a beautiful sharp mark that didn't smudge. I admit this pencil isn't exactly a budget option, but it will be with me for life. It's become part of my signature as an author, and in all these years I've had to order new lead only once. The lead replacement is around \$55 for three sticks, a small price to pay for this heavenly pencil.

PLUM SYKES

Graf von Faber-Castell Perfect Pencil Rosegold, \$310

STRATEGIST EXPLAINS

How to Wash and Dry Jeans

WASHING JEANS too often can weaken the fabric and make them wear out faster, so when it is time to clean them up—after every ten or so wears—it's important to employ an effective yet gentle method. Below, some tips.

BY AMBAR PARDILLA

1. Turn your jeans inside out before you throw them in the washer.

It's inevitable that jeans will lighten with age, but washing them inside out helps them hold on to their color. Newer jeans are more likely to bleed, so try washing them in a load by themselves.



2. Use cold water.

Both water and heat can cause shrinkage, but using cold water will mitigate some of the damage. No need for special detergent; whatever you use on the rest of your clothes will do.



3. Yes, it's okay to put your jeans in the dryer sometimes.

The occasional tumble won't ruin them. Just make sure the heat setting isn't too high—the lower the better. Still, the best way to prevent shrinking and stretching is air-drying. If you want to be extra careful, lay your jeans flat to dry.



4. Spot-clean between washes.

You can get away with fewer regular washings this way, plus it's more sustainable since there's less water involved. I spot-clean my own jeans with water and a drop or two of detergent.



Which Wooden Salad Bowls Are the Best?

HERE, A LIST of favorites from notable chefs, authors, and food critics who all make and serve a lot of salads.

BY LAUREN RO



**Crate & Barrel Tondo
Acacia 14-Inch Bowl, \$70**

» Cookbook authors Andrea Nguyen, Monique Volz, and Dan Pelosi all swear by this acacia-grain salad bowl, which Nguyen calls “handsome and organic-looking.” Pelosi appreciates its large size—great for dinner parties—“and the way its rounded sides appear to be literally hugging the contents of the bowl.”



**Andrew Pearce Bowls
Medium Live Edge (Oval)
Wooden Bowl, from \$250**

» Trinity Mouzon Wofford, co-founder of wellness brand Golde, received this bowl as a wedding present. Produced by Vermont-based company Andrew Pearce, which cuts and hand-turns bowls and chopping boards from a single piece of wood, the oblong cherry bowl has a live edge, which gives it a rustic look.



**Stinson Studios Round Ambrosia
Maple Bowl, from \$110**

» Different from the acacia and cherry bowls on this list, this one is made from a wood that gets its name—and distinct coloring—from fungus left by an ambrosia-beetle infestation. *New York Magazine*’s chief restaurant critic, Matthew Schneier, has it at home. When he’s not at table, he uses it to hold onions and shallots.



**Dansk Wood Classics Acacia
Tulia Salad Bowl, \$60**

» Food writer Colu Henry found what she calls the “love-of-my-life Dansk salad bowl” at an estate sale in Hudson about ten years ago and has been using it ever since. “I love that it leans retro and has a sculptural vibe,” she says. While hers is vintage, Dansk still makes similar styles, like this one in acacia.

THIS THING’S INCREDIBLE

A Bed Made of Cardboard



Yona Cardboard Bed, from \$124

I DIDN’T SET OUT to sleep on a cardboard bed. I ordered a wood-and-rattan platform from CB2 and had to wait two months for the delivery. In the meantime, my Casper mattress was on the floor, which got old fast. My back hurt, too. Soon enough, I was furiously Googling “temporary bed frames.” And there was the Yona, a recyclable cardboard bed. When it arrived, it looked comically simple. The setup was just three steps: Open the box, pull out the frame like an accordion, then place your mattress on the accordion. The Yona lifted my mattress 10.4 inches off the floor, and its honeycomb design allowed for good airflow. Every few days, it drifts a little, but I just kick it back into place. In fact, the Yona is so comfortable and functional that when my CB2 order arrived incomplete, I decided to cancel it and stick with the Yona for the long haul. I’ve been using it for seven months now, and it’s surprisingly perfectly fine. Plus if we ever move, it will be a dream to transport.

KIKI ARANITA

THEME WEEK

Seven Days of Running Gear

THE SERIOUS RUNNERS of the Strategist (there happen to be a lot of them) took over the site in early May. Below, some things they can’t run without.

Ultimate Direction Clutch Water Bottle, \$40

Writer and marathoner Jeremy Rellosa uses this handheld water bottle to bring electrolyte drinks on runs, which helps him run longer distances. Unlike other handheld bottles, this one doesn’t chafe and has room for his phone, keys, and energy gels.



Superfeet All-Purpose Support Medium Arch Insole, \$55

After her best track-and-field season in college, writer Brenley Goertzen developed plantar fasciitis so painful she had to take five months off from competing. A foot specialist pointed her to these inserts, which enabled her to stay on her Division I team for two more years.

Hyperice Normatec Go, \$399

Newsletter editor Ashley Wolfgang says these compression boots squeeze out her sore calves after long runs and prevent pain the next day. She also likes that they fit easily in a carry-on; she’s taking them to the Chicago Marathon this fall.



Bombas Women’s Performance Compression Socks (20–30 mmHg), \$36

To keep shin splints at bay, writer and half-marathoner Arielle Avila relies on these compression socks. Without them, “it would take me at the very least two days to get back on my feet post-long run,” she says.



The Nickey Kehoe shop.

Seven Special New Stores

A Japanese clothing boutique that's also a 2,000-book library, a furniture showroom that looks like a StreetEasy listing, and other standout shops of the season.

BY EMILIA PETRARCA

1 Quarters

383 Broadway; shopquarters.com

From the street, Quarters looks like an unassuming walk-up apartment. Climb the stairs, though, and you'll find an 8,000-square-foot mock home that's entirely shoppable down to the \$12 Solano-Arriola anchovies that will be served in the soon-to-open wine bar. Nick Ozemba and Felicia Hung of design studio In Common With have filled the rooms with a mix of their own lighting designs, including mushroomlike table lamps (\$4,750) and bouquet-shaped chandeliers (\$12,500), and décor made in collaboration with artisan friends such as glassmaker Sophie Lou Jacobsen. There are also dozens of antique

THEIR PICK:



In Common With Dune Table Lamp, \$495

tapestries and rare vintage pieces including a rust-colored velvet Mario Bellini sofa (price upon request), which won't be there for long. Ozemba and Hung plan to redecorate three times a year.

2 Vowels

76 Bowery; vowels.net
Appointment only

With Supreme just a few blocks away, it's no surprise stores that have a similar streetwear aesthetic, including Fugazi and now Vowels, a new showroom for Yuki Yagi's

Japanese-made line, would begin to cluster around Chinatown. On the racks are his (very) upscale basics, including Japanese selvage denim (\$390–\$575), sweats

THEIR PICK:



The Black Chore Jacket, \$725

made from heavy-gauge cotton (\$245), and boxy blank tees (\$195). He has also set up a reading room with forum-style seating and some 2,000 rare and

vintage Japanese books (an exhibition catalogue from Bruno Taut's 1984 retrospective at the National Museum of Art in Osaka, for example) and art magazines.

3 Nickey Kehoe

49 E. 10th St.; nickeykehoe.com

Sixteen years after opening their furniture shop and design studio in Los Angeles, Todd Nickey and Amy Kehoe decided to bring their new and antique housewares to a brownstone on a residential block in Noho. (As it happens, the shop is in Jackson Pollock's former home.) Upon

THEIR PICK:



Boot Scraper, \$48

walking through the bright-red basement-level entryway, you'll find a flea market's worth of one-of-a-kind treasures sourced just for the store, plus a curated collection of new items, like Nickey Kehoe lanterns (\$4,500) and bouclé wool dog beds by Henri Jute (\$280).

4 Storm Books and Candy

118 Norman Ave., Greenpoint
stormbookstore.com

Nour Sabbagh's business is often mistaken for an ice-cream parlor. The Lebanese-born photographer set up shop in a former 1940s ice-cream-and-candy store and restored its stained-glass windows to showcase the original advertising. Inside,

THEIR PICK:



Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear: Poems From Gaza, by Mosab Abu Toha, \$16

though, it's a bookstore with a focus on authors from Southwest Asia and North Africa. Storm regularly hosts readings and is stocked with poetry, hard-to-find zines, art books like *All*

Roads Lead to You, by Lebanese photographer Rhea Karam (\$960), and children's books by Palestinian writers and artists. Inspired by the store's former life, Sabbagh plans to set up an ice-cream freezer in the corner of the shop this summer.

5 Bernard James

181 Franklin St., Greenpoint
bernardjames.com

Late last year, jewelry designer Bernard James opened his new living-room-like Greenpoint showroom and studio. It's decorated with valet trays and jewelry cases from James's recent collaboration with USM Modular Furniture, all of which are for sale, but James's unisex jewelry is the main draw. There are simple gold and silver pieces for

THEIR PICK:



14K 2024 Mirror Pendant, from \$750

everyday wear, diamond engagement rings, and less subtle offerings, like black-diamond-and-gold sunflower earrings (\$345) and personalizable solid-gold

friendship bracelets (starting at \$990). This summer, James will open the shop's backyard for events.

6 L'Ensemble

55 Washington St., Ste. 461, Dumbo
ensemble.us
Appointment only

Former La Garçonne buyer Dawn Nguyen has turned a sunny space on the fourth floor of a Dumbo office building (smack in the middle of the neighborhood's-slash-the world's most Instagrammed street)

THEIR PICK:



Celestine Lingerie Eleni Shorty Set, \$252

into an appointment-only clothing boutique. Visitors are greeted with Champagne and sparkling water, and Nguyen walks each one through her selection of casual suiting and

dressy tank tops by Kallmeyer, summer dresses from Proenza Schouler, jeans by B Sides, and more New York-based labels. If you're looking for something in particular—a cocktail dress for a wedding, a suit for an interview—tell Nguyen in advance, and she'll have selections ready upon your arrival.

7 Million Goods

88 Franklin St.; Greenpoint
million-goods.com

At this 600-square-foot boutique, you could go on a date or buy an outfit for one: It's part menswear shop, part bar, and part hi-fi listening lounge. DJs like Marco

THEIR PICK:



Nicholas Dailey Corduroy Shirt, \$495, and Matching Wide Short, \$25

Weibel, a weekly resident at Lot Radio, play Fridays and Saturdays, and from behind a sprawling terrazzo countertop, a bartender serves up organic wine, She Wolf bread,

and Partanna olives. The clothes are excellent, too: packed racks of high-fashion workwear by Lite Year and more androgynous pieces from Études Studio. The shoppy-shop element of the store includes candles by Fragile Glass and a range of records hand-picked by owner Drew Kaufmann, former assistant buyer at Brooklyn boutique Bird.

THE LOOK BOOK GOES TO

Hypebeast Flea

The streetwear site, in partnership with Depop, recently hosted a market in Greenpoint Terminal that drew more than 6,000 shoppers.

INTERVIEWS BY KELSIE SCHRADER
AND JENNA MILLINER-WADDELL

ISABELLE CLARK

*Sales associate,
Bushwick*

Buy anything today?

I couldn't shop because it made me overwhelmed. Like, *Oh my God, there's too many clothes.* I need things to be organized, categorized by color and size. I'm not someone who likes to sift through to find stuff. If it's not happening right away, then I'm out.

Then what brought you here in the first place?

I'm new to the city. I wanted to meet cool people, and I feel like this is where you're going to see the people with the most style. It's fun seeing people and being like, "I know you want someone to say your outfit is fire, which it is." Also, it's a good networking event. I asked a few people where they got their stuff or where they got their hair done.

And what'd they say?

Every time I ask someone where they get their hair done, their nails done, their teeth jewelry, it's always the Bronx. I'm like, "Ah, I'm not close, but okay."



THE LOOK BOOK: FLEA SHOPPERS



DOZIE ONYEABOR
Store-operations manager, Clinton Hill



MIYAH HENDERSON
Dancer, Bushwick

→ **How would you describe your personal style?**
It's very much influenced by old-school New York and different types of male archetypes. I'm trans, and clothing has definitely given me a way to find a vision of who I want to be and embody and what type of man I want to be in the world.



ZEMI STAR
Designer, Bushwick

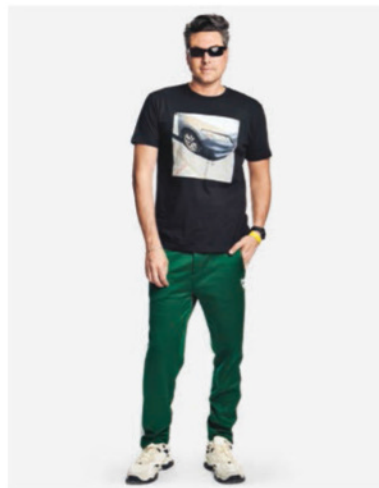


JOOMI PARK
Communications manager, Upper East Side

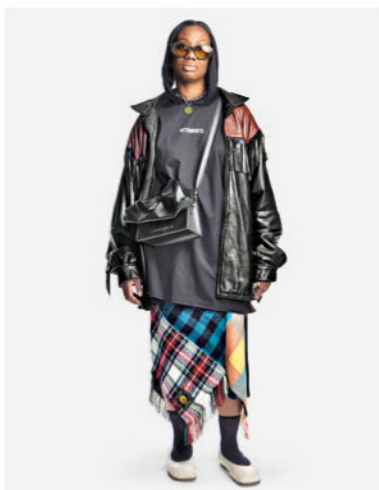
← **Have you lived in New York long?**
In August, it'll be ten years. Everyone says that's when you're a real New Yorker. And I do feel like one. When I walk around any borough, I have so many memories attached to different places. But I'll let the native New Yorkers decide if I can claim that title.



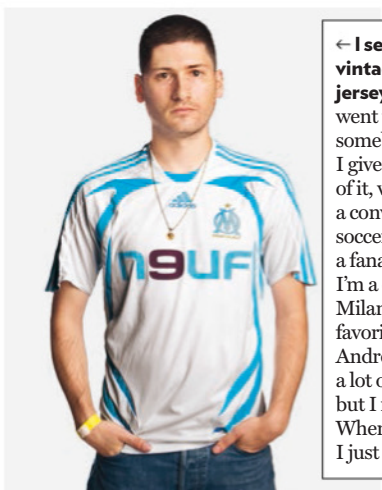
SHALON COOK
Freelance fashion stylist, Williamsburg



JOHN AVERILL
Publicist, Dumbo



MADISON LAMBACK
Fashion publicist, Williamsburg



VINCENT ACERENZA
Vintage seller, Ronkonkoma

← **I see you sell vintage soccer jerseys.** A lot of them went today. Every time somebody buys one, I give them the history of it, which turns into a conversation about soccer, which I'm a fanatic about. I'm a diehard AC Milan fan, and my favorite player is Andrea Pirlo. I have a lot of their jerseys, but I never sell them. When I find Milan, I just stash it.



SAASHA MANE
Product manager, Turtle Bay



FLAVIA CARNEIRO
Costume-production assistant, Greenpoint



KHANDIS MERRITT
Actor, Greenpoint

→ **How did you get into reselling?**

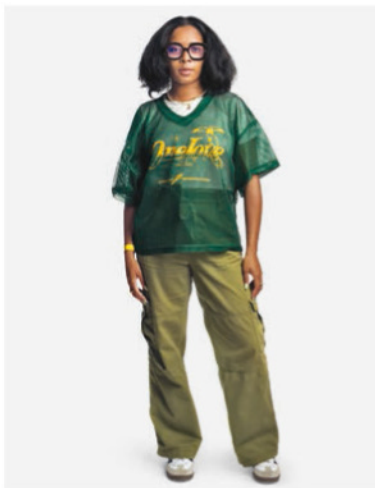
I was working as a store manager at Brandy Melville, and, transparently, they don't pay well. I remember comparing my paychecks from July 2020, and in a month I made \$3,000 at Brandy and \$11,000 off Depop. I was like, *I'm going to quit and see how this Depop thing does, and worst case I go back to Brandy, which didn't happen.*



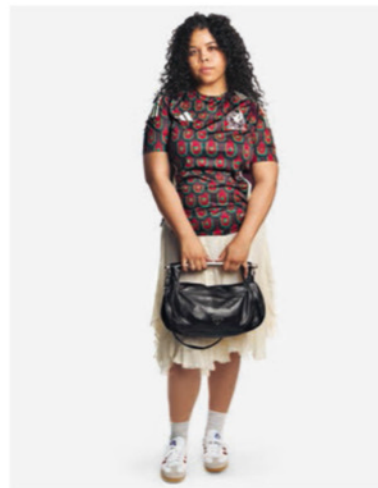
MAYA TRABER
Reseller, Norwalk, Connecticut



FABIO RIVERA
Event planner, Kingsbridge



BRITTANY THOMPSON
Production coordinator, Pelham Bay



BREE COMBS
Government consultant, Upper East Side



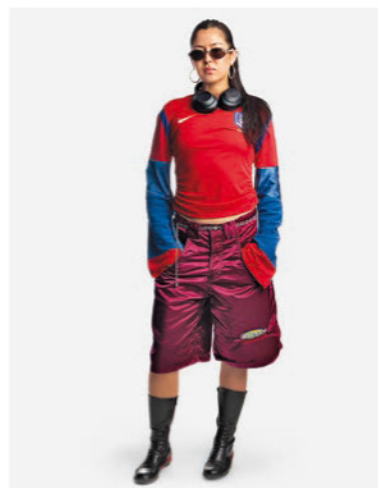
JULIAN CASTILLO
Copywriter, Bedford-Stuyvesant

→ **Meet anyone interesting today?**

This person came up to me saying he liked my style, and he ended up being really cool. He is an artist and got a degree in industrial design and mechanical engineering. He showed me a bunch of art he designed. He actually created a drone for the U.N. I think we're going to hang out later this week at a jazz bar.



RACHEL JIANG
Hot-dog-shop owner, Williamsburg



SAVANNAH OH MCCANN
Upcycler and designer, Crown Heights

Answered

Brooklynites Cristiana Peña and Nick Porter had a dream to



Prayers

live in an old church upstate. BY WENDY GOODMAN

The Living Area

The church sanctuary is now mostly furnished with vintage finds. Many of the rugs came from AuctionNinja, and the sectional from Refill Vintage. “We wanted something substantial to fill up the space,” Cristiana Peña says, “and that felt like you could just melt into it.” The wallpaper in the kitchen niche from Fine & Dandy Co. was found by interior designer Jennifer L. Salvemini, who works for the HGTV show *Who’s Afraid of a Cheap Old House?*, which did an episode on the project.





↑ The Niche Gallery

The niche over the sleeping area holds Peña's collection of *Blue Boy* paintings and objects.

↓ The Sleeping Area

"I refer to it as the 'sleeping loft,'" says Peña. "My best guess is that it was the organ or choir loft, even though it is only elevated by two small steps."



CRISTIANA PEÑA ALWAYS wanted to live in something other than a regular house. Maybe a school, or a firehouse, or a store, she says. "But a church has always been on top of that list."

In 2020, she and her partner, Nick Porter, were living together in her rental in a 1920s Tudor-revival building near Prospect Park. When the pandemic hit, they thought they wanted to get a place out of town. She has a master's degree in historic preservation from Columbia and works for Circa Old Houses, a real-estate marketing platform that allows people to shop for antique homes around the country, which spawned an offshoot, Cheap Old Houses, that highlights less-expensive homes. It's the basis for the show *Who's Afraid of a Cheap Old House?* on HGTV, hosted by Elizabeth Finkelstein (who founded Circa Old Houses) and her husband, Ethan Finkelstein.

"I was just honestly along for the ride for a while," says Porter. "It was Cristiana's idea to move. She quickly focused on churches, but I was just assuming it would never happen, but I kind of got onboard more and more as time went on."

Because Porter works at a communications firm in the city, he and Peña started out trying to keep their search within a two-hour commute. But the pandemic market was frustratingly competitive. "At every turn," Peña says, "we were getting priced out by all-cash offers, and we just didn't have that kind of finances behind us."

Once they realized they both could work remotely, they expanded their search. They looked for a year and a half and saw at least five churches as well as several houses. "So many times during the process," Peña says, "Nick would tell me, 'You know, we could just buy some random house from the 1980s tomorrow and be done with it.'"

Then, in the summer of 2022, they found this 3,600-square-foot 1782 church in Granville. It had been vacant for a long time. They bought it for \$99,000 from a couple across the street, who had intended to fix it up for their son. (At one point, a puppeteer was apparently interested in hosting a theater there and opened a hole into the basement.) It's on less than an acre, but since it came with a small cottage, they were able to stay on the property during the renovation (which included fixing an unexpected mold problem).

"Overwhelmingly, and almost exclusively, we shop vintage and secondhand," says Peña, who collects memorabilia related to Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* that she finds in flea markets.

There is no central AC, and a heater was only recently installed after the expense of the mold removal was covered. The windows, some stained glass, are still painted shut. "But with the fans and such a big room," Porter says, "it was pretty comfortable last summer." ■

The Piano

"With so much space in the sanctuary," Peña says, "we thought a piano would be a great investment. I played in my younger days, and Nick has been teaching himself on a keyboard."





RESTAURANT REVIEW

This Cooking Can't Be Pinned Down

Theodora's menu is all over the map.
That's what makes it great.

BY MATTHEW SCHNEIER

ACCORDING TO A NEIGHBOR, wafts of fenugreek hang over a stretch of Fort Greene's Dekalb Avenue, courtesy of the local favorite Miss Ada. "You can smell it a mile away," he said. Fenugreek's seeds and seed paste, licorice-y and lightly bitter, crop up in Armenian, Moroccan, Iraqi, Ethiopian, and Turkish cuisine and sometimes as part of a za'atar blend. That neighbor, nose piqued, recognized it in an instant at **Theodora**, Miss Ada's new sister

restaurant on Greene Avenue, lost somewhere in a tuna crudo on brick-colored lavash, by flavor if not by name. It took some sleuthing, and a friendly server, to finally identify it. Was it the faint sourdough tang of the lavash itself, the wasabi spiking the garnish of Japanese tobiko, the creamy brushstroke of crème fraîche, the tropical bloom of mango—actually mango pickled in amba, an Iraqi condiment (now also popular in India), made from green mangoes,

≥ TOP PICK ≤
Theodora
7 Greene Ave.,
at Fulton St.,
Fort Greene
theodoranyc.com

vinegar, chile, and ... well, there it is.

If I linger over this dither, it's for good reason. The fenugreek locates Theodora's Pan-Mediterranean leanings, but even more, it marks out what makes chef Tomer Blechman's cooking so appealing. During my meals, dishes were so confidently layered with flavor that I often struggled to pinpoint exactly what spoke to me in any given bite. Some hidden spice, an imported rub, the smoke and char on just about everything that comes from cooking over hardwood. I wasn't sure. I didn't care. I kept eating.

Blechman's Israeli heritage—he came to the U.S. to study Shiatsu massage and acupuncture, of all things, before finding his way into the kitchens of Maialino, Gramercy Tavern, and Lupa—is evident in the breads (pita, seeded laffa, a nuzzling quartet of pull-apart snail-shell rolls called kubaneh) and in dishes like a spare trio of unusually delicious falafel. But the guidance is lighter here than at Miss Ada and the range is wider, more ambitiously



various. (The falafel—green as moss inside—is dotted with Thai curry and galangal.) In time, Theodora could settle into being a neighborhood standby, as Miss Ada has, but at the moment, it feels like a destination. It's priced like one: Miss Ada's whole branzino is \$58; Theodora's, \$72.

Those of us around long enough to remember No. 7, an early entrant to the foodie strip of then-gentrifying Fort Greene, may barely recognize the space, tucked behind a C-train station. No. 7 was dark and pubby where Theodora is bright and airy, pale-plastered, plant-lined, more Silver Lake woo-woo. The menu, too, is broadly

familiar. "Like every other Brooklyn restaurant, everything is designed to be shared," our server told us with a laugh: a few crudos, a chicory salad, the requisite half-chicken, that whole branzino.

What sets Theodora apart is its attention to detail and preparation. The specialty of the house is fish—there are fish on the walls, fish on the server's garb, fish doodled on the menu—and Blechman dry-ages his seafood like steak. Hulking king salmon and hiramasa hang from hooks in a glass-fronted case opposite the bar. Will the dry aging of fish catch on? I've noticed it showing up on menus around

town in the past few months—at Moono, at Il Totano—and it allows for tender meat and, more noticeable, an unmatched crisp skin. Our branzino arrived deep, crunchy brown, as if it had been fried, beneath its glaze of garlicky salmoriglio.

Over the course of a full meal, you may find yourself hankering for anything that hasn't been kissed by flame, a tower of which is clearly, even distressingly, visible in the open kitchen. "I'm a little desensitized to the char at this point," one of my companions whispered as we sawed our way through the noble fish. I wasn't sure the sesame-studded laffa bread—a sort of pita relative—needed charry eggplant or that the very tender octopus was all that improved by its sweet-burnt shallot purée. All of that to say don't pass on the crudo, a cool, tart, and welcome complement. That tuna with mango pickle, good. The hiramasa, in a sour, lactic tie-dye of finger lime and pickled serrano, even better. Next time I'll skip the chocolate cake and get an order for dessert.

SCRATCHPAD

A SOLID PLAN B

Can't get a reservation at Theodora? Blechman has a more casual third restaurant, too: Nili is his all-day café in Carroll Gardens.

A NICE GLASS OF SLOVAK?

The wine list from Maggie Dahill leans "natty" with full pages dedicated to introducing alt-hero producers like Slovakia's Strekov 1075.

BAR SEATING THAT'S ... COMFY

The plentiful wooden stools around the bar and a kitchen-adjacent dining counter, blessedly, have backs. What is this, paradise?

OPENINGS

Clover Club Is Growing

The Saloon will open right next door.

SIXTEEN YEARS AGO, Julie Reiner's arrival in Brooklyn officially marked Carroll Gardens as cocktail country. Reiner's bar, Clover Club, grew from a craft-cocktail, vested-bartender hotbed into a neighborhood institution, and she, along with partners Christine Williams, Tom Macy, and Susan Fedroff (also Reiner's wife), expanded carefully: With Ivy Mix, Reiner runs Leyenda across the street, the partners reopened Milady's in Soho, and in 2022 Reiner became a judge on *Drink Masters*, Netflix's mixological spin on *Top Chef*. "Stuff kind of drops in my lap," Reiner says. That's how they ended up renting the vacant space next to Clover Club, which they'll open this month as **the Saloon at Clover Club** (208 Smith St., nr. Baltic St., Carroll Gardens; cloverclubnyc.com). The actual bar—ornamental woodwork rescued in Ohio—will be the place to order drinks (there is no table service), which will skew toward classics like the Tuxedo, Singapore sling, and Champagne cobbler. To start, the Saloon (yes, there will be proper saloon doors) will be dedicated to pop-ups, private events, and cocktail classes. When it opens for regular service mid-summer, Reiner will, as always, resist trends to offer something more considered. "I want Clover Club to be the adult in the room," she says.

ROBERT SIMONSON



WHAT TO EAT

Quite the Tomato

A summer appetizer from a seriously ambitious restaurant.

BY CHRIS CROWLEY

CHEF DANIEL GARWOOD has been working on the tomatoes he'll serve at his first restaurant, **Acru** (79 Macdougal St., nr. Bleecker St.; acru.nyc), for a while. They will be, as he puts it, "quite a layered dish." The ground level is some Montauk tuna, which, granted, is not tomato. The next layer is grilled-tomato jelly. Up from there, after the seaweed and kimchee granita seasoned with anise hyssop, goes the star of the dish: more tomatoes.

"They'll be slowly grilled over shagbark hickory and then coated in a reduction made from the shagbark," Garwood says. "It's almost like a tomato raisin." They're served warm from the pan, over the ice, "so you get the different textures: really warm, juicy, succulent tomatoes with something really cooling on the palate."

On track to debut in July, Acru will be a neo-bistro with ideas from Garwood's native Australia—he grew up in Tasmania—and techniques he honed while working in Denmark, Sweden, Italy, and South Korea. His last job was at Atomix, an essential destination for the city's deep-pocketed gastro tourists, and owners Junghyun (who goes by JP) and Ellia Park are partners here, too. For the couple, it marks the first outpost of their growing empire—which includes Atoboy, Naro, and Seoul Salon—that is not overtly Korean, though that influence comes through across the rest of the menu.

A meat course—maybe Appalachian lamb or Sasso chicken—might include an ingredient Garwood is calling "seamite," an oceanic take on Vegemite made with seaweed, and a goat-cheese tart features makgeolli-marinated leeks. Still, Australia's culinary history will be front and center. A series of petits fours ("dessert banchan," Garwood calls them) incorporates a riff on the country's Golden Gaytime ice-cream bars, and for the first course of the restaurant's \$95 tasting menu—à la carte dining will be available at a bar—Garwood is developing what he calls a sanga tart. It's an ode to the sausage sizzles held in backyards and, famously, at the hardware chain Bunnings, a sausage over white bread with grilled onions. Here, of course, it's been tweaked: Garwood takes white bread and bakes it into a tart. The sausage is boudin and, in addition to the grilled onions, it's finished with more onions, which have been pickled, and caviar.

*Warm tomatoes
top an icy
composition
at Acru.*



SUMMER MOVIES
UNDER THE STARS
THAT'S THE TICKET!

— *Paramount+* —
MOVIE NIGHTS
AT
— **BRYANT PARK** —

JUN 10 **FORREST GUMP**
JUN 17 **THE TALENTED**
 MR. RIPLEY
JUN 24 **BOOMERANG**
JUL 01 **GLADIATOR**
JUL 08 **OLD SCHOOL**

JUL 15 **FUNNY FACE**
JUL 22 **CINEMA PARADISO**
JUL 29 **HOW TO LOSE A GUY**
 IN 10 DAYS
AUG 05 **ARRIVAL**
AUG 12 **TITANIC**

LAWN OPENS AT 5PM MOVIES START AT 8 PM

VULTURE

BRYANT
PARK
CORPORATION

bryantpark.org

The CULTURE PAGES

A Hollywood Family's Grudges

In Griffin Dunne's memoir, *The Friday Afternoon Club*—about growing up the son of Dominick Dunne and the nephew of John Gregory Dunne and Joan Didion—both acid and names are dropped.
By Shawn McCreesh



G

RIFFIN DUNNE IS at ease with himself in the way that people who have always been good-looking usually are. Even at 68, his salt-and-pepper hair is thick enough to be pushed back, and he comes across as whatever the opposite of tightly wound is. When we meet for lunch at Café Mogador, around the corner from his apartment in the East Village, I can still see a trace of the hapless Paul Hackett he played in *After Hours*, the 1985 Martin Scorsese movie about a night out in Soho that goes spectacularly sideways. It's clear from reading Dunne's new memoir, *The Friday Afternoon Club*, that he is quite familiar with life going sideways.

Dunne has had an interestingly windy career. He's been an actor in movies—he co-starred with Madonna in *Who's That Girl* in 1987 and tells a funny story about the not-so-tame mountain-lion extra in the film—and on TV, most recently in *The Girls on the Bus*, playing a newspaper journalist loosely based on David Carr. He directed films including 1998's *Practical Magic* and *The Center Will Not Hold*, the 2017 Netflix documentary about his aunt Joan Didion. Which brings us back to the real subject of his book: not his career but his messy, tragic, famous, feuding Hollywood-Irish family.

"We were clinically crazy," he says, taking a bite of his tuna niçoise salad. "Like, really crazy."

He grew up in Beverly Hills at 714 Walden Drive, surrounded by movie stars. Sean Connery saved him from drowning in the family swimming pool. Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty, and Roman Polanski all hit on his girlfriend at the same time ("Like three wolves sniffing a baby lamb," he says). He took Carrie Fisher's virginity and smoked pot with Harrison Ford when Ford was just his Aunt Joan's carpenter.

Griffin's father, Dominick Dunne, was a movie producer who washed out and then reinvented himself after writing in *Vanity Fair* about the 1983 murder trial of his own daughter—a starlet, in that era's language—named Dominique. (She was Griffin's little sister; *The Friday Afternoon*

Club is named for a party she used to throw for her acting class.) That magazine article launched Dominick's second act as a high-flying chronicler of high-society crimes—a true celebrity journalist of a type we don't really see anymore. He would go on to cover the trials of Claus von Bülow, O.J. Simpson, the Menendez brothers, and Phil Spector. Dominick's brother, the writer John Gregory Dunne, was married to Didion.

But now Didion and both brothers Dunne are dead and gone, which leaves Griffin free to tell his version of their stories. His book details his father's closeted sex life (Dominick never publicly acknowledged being gay) and his envy of John's and Joan's literary success. Griffin also writes candidly about how uncomfortable he has always been with the fact that his sister's strangulation is what finally allowed his father to attain the personal fame he'd long craved.

The memoir basically begins in West Hartford, Connecticut, where his father grew up wealthy, one of six children of a heart surgeon but still an outsider to WASP society. "Even lace-curtain Irish were not allowed in the blue-blooded country clubs," Griffin tells me at lunch. That striving for status drove his father his whole life. Years later, Dominick would make his children pose for Christmas cards in the style of British gentry: "I once referred to it as him basing it on Cecil Beaton's photographs, and he went, 'No, Griffin. Lord Snowdon. Get it right.'"

After winning a Bronze Star fighting the Nazis, Dominick married Ellen "Lenny" Griffin, a well-to-do Arizona girl who had moved east to go to Miss Porter's, an all-girls boarding school in Connecticut. He got a job working on *The Howdy Doody Show*. In 1957, the family, which by then included Griffin and his brother, Alex, moved to Los Angeles, where Dominique was born. Dominick became executive producer on a series called *Adventures in Paradise*. He went on to produce films including *The Boys in the Band* (1970), *The Panic in Needle Park* (1971), and *Play It As It Lays* (1972)—the last two were written by John and Joan.

Joan was already well known by the time John introduced her to Dominick and his children in 1963. She stirred up Dominick's insecurities from the start. "A novelist living in Los Angeles was then a novelty, and my parents showed more attention to the details of this lunch than they ever had entertaining Hedda Hopper or an out-of-town viscount," Griffin writes. "Dad made Alex and me change outfits several times before deciding we'd look most impressive in matching red swim trunks, each with a gold buckle." But when he got out of the pool to introduce himself, one of his balls was hanging out of his trunks. "She was the only one who did not laugh, just held eye contact with me," which, he says, encapsulated her style as a writer "of not joining the crowd, of looking at something differently. She saw a little boy being humiliated."

As Didion's reputation grew, Dominick soon began to be known foremost as "Joan Didion's brother-in-law"—which, given Dominick's thirst for fame, he did not like. In 1965, just before Griffin's 10th birthday, his parents split up. "The parties and name-dropping had grown tiresome," Griffin writes, "and even Mom's closest friends found the pluck to ask why on earth she stayed with him."

There was also the fact that his father was quite obviously gay. He had two poodles with shaved chests and pom-pom tails named Oscar, as in Wilde, and Bosie, which was Wilde's nickname for the lover who brought scandal on him, Lord Alfred Douglas. Griffin just wanted a German shepherd. "My fragile identity at that time was tied to a father who couldn't throw to third and gave me two French poodles named after famous homosexuals," he writes a tad ashamedly.

He also writes in the book that he grew up wishing his father "could have been more like his tough Irish younger brother ... Uncle John was one of the first journalists to report from Vietnam. He and David Halberstam whored around

the Saigon Hilton and flew in country on Hueys while embedded with the Army. He started fistfights with competing reporters in Manhattan watering holes and walked the streets of Watts during the height of the riots for *Life* magazine.”

On a family vacation to Hawaii one year, Dominick brought his friend Don. Griffin later realizes that “handsome, athletic, funny Don was doing my dad.” Griffin writes about making a move on Torey, a young actor who lived at his father’s house and worked as a “valet.” They dropped acid—there is almost as much acid as there are names dropped in this book—and jumped into bed together until, Griffin writes, “Torey kicked me out of bed, not unkindly, after I’d let him do stuff to me and I’d done stuff to him, all to no great effect.” Yup, definitely straight!

In 1972, his father flamed out of Hollywood. One night, while he was in the middle of making *Ash Wednesday* for Paramount (starring Elizabeth Taylor), he drank too much at dinner and made a fat joke about the most powerful agent in town, Sue Mengers. He did this in front of a reporter for one of the Hollywood trades, who printed the remark the next day. A Paramount exec called Dominick and told him his career was over. Sure enough, his phone stopped ringing.

Drunk, alone, blackballed, and broke, Dominick spent the rest of the decade spiraling. The book describes the moment he was evicted from his apartment on South Spalding Drive, how he had to sell his Mercedes and buy a used Ford Granada, and how Dominique came over to help him hold a yard sale. “People he once entertained, who’d long since dropped him, heard of his misfortune and showed up to haggle and pick through his treasures,” Griffin writes. His father ended up in a little town in Oregon—he was driving through when his car broke down, and he stayed—where he started going to A.A. meetings.

Living in a cabin there, he wrote a trashy Hollywood novel, *The Winners*, which came out in 1982. (He went on to write many other gossipy novels set among the rich, including *The Two Mrs. Grenvilles* and *An Inconvenient Woman*.) His friend Truman Capote wrote him and said, “This is not where you belong. When you get out of it what you went there to get, you have to come back.” Buoyed, Dominick moved to Manhattan and rented a studio apartment in the Village.

Griffin was living in New York, too, trying to become an actor. He and Fisher became roommates in the Hotel des Artistes on West 67th Street. One day, he writes, “Car-



Joan Didion, Griffin Dunne, and John Gregory Dunne on Christmas Day in 1966.

rie said offhandedly that she had landed a job in some science-fiction movie shooting in England.” He asked if she could get him a part, but the other lead had just gone to ... that carpenter he’d once shared a joint with who had built John and Joan’s deck. And besides, Fisher thought the movie was going to be “a fucking disaster.” As she had told him, “I’m acting with an eight-foot yeti and a four-foot Brit in a rolling trash can!”

In 1981, he starred in *An American Werewolf in London*, and things were going well. Dominique was living in L.A. and also acting. She got her first big role in *Poltergeist* playing the sister who hops out of the Trans Am and screams “What’s happening?!” She had also started dating John Sweeney, the hulking sous-

chef at a trendy L.A. spot (the number was unlisted) called Ma Maison.

The family felt there was something off about him, but the only one to speak up was brother Alex. Sweeney eventually beat up on Dominique, who broke it off with him. Griffin, then 27, warned Sweeney to “stay the fuck away from her.” On October 30, 1982, when Dominique was 22, Sweeney turned up at her house at 8723 Rangely Avenue holding a bag of freshly baked Halloween cookies, begging to be taken back. “Ten minutes later,” Griffin writes, “his hands were around her throat.”

The book recounts the family seeing her for the first time in the hospital, “a swollen creature” hooked up to a breathing tube, head shaved with “bolts boring into her skull ... eyeballs bulged like a cartoon character who’d put her finger in a light socket.” Told she would never recover, the family took her off life support five days after the attack.

A media circus ensued. The trial began in the summer of 1983. The defense played rough, smearing Dominique as a promiscuous party girl who had it coming. According to the book, Dominick was also wound up by the fact that the newspapers referred to his dead daughter as “John Dunne and Joan Didion’s niece.” And then he had to find out through an intermediary that his brother and sister-in-law were fleeing the country for the entirety of the trial. Their troubled daughter, Quintana

Griffin later realizes that “handsome, athletic, funny Don was doing my dad.”



With Carrie Fisher and Mark Hamill in 1977, the week *Star Wars* opened.

Roo, had socialized with Dominique, and the notable couple worried she might get dragged onto the stand, so they took her to Paris. Dominick was devastated and enraged. “Quintana was a wild child,” Griffin tells me. “John, who’d walked the halls of that courthouse and knew the cops and DAs, saw where this was going. They left to protect their daughter, but that didn’t mean we didn’t feel betrayed.”

“My father’s madness came out in a rage toward his brother that goes back from the time he became successful,” says Griffin. “There was so much resentment there.” He adds that when he made his documentary about Didion, “we did talk about the trial, and I decided not to leave it in. ‘Where did you go? Why didn’t you go?’ She explained it to me. It didn’t fit in the doc. It was, by the way, incredibly uncomfortable for both of us to have to talk about that so many years later.”

BEFORE THE TRIAL had started, Dominick had been invited to dinner by his journalist friend Marie Brenner. There, he met Tina Brown, the young editor from London who would soon take over *Vanity Fair*. In her own 2017 memoir, Brown recalled that dinner and how Dominick vented about the upcoming trial: “Marie told him he should think about keeping a diary ... I said if he did, it’s something I’d love to publish in *Vanity Fair*. His face lit up as if I’d just thrown him a lifeline.” (Brown

**Carrie Fisher
thought *Star Wars*
was going to be
a disaster:
“I’m acting with
an eight-foot
yeti and a four-foot
Brit in a rolling
trash can!”**

wrote of a lunch at La Goulue later on, at which Dominick talked about “how his sister-in-law Joan Didion was closing a piece for the *New York Review of Books* and wouldn’t get off the phone when they needed to communicate with the cops.”)

In the end, Sweeney was sentenced to only six and a half years in prison, of which he served just three years and seven months. Dominick’s story about the ordeal, “Justice: A Father’s Account of the Trial of His Daughter’s Killer,” gave him a new life. At the time it came out, John and Joan were back living in Manhattan but not on speaking terms with Dominick. Griffin made an uneasy peace with his aunt and uncle, but all three knew better than to discuss the trial. “I was Switzerland, and

I made terrible attempts to pacify the situation,” he says. “Joan was really caught in the middle as well. That’s another thing we sort of had in common. We would just look without ever having to say, like, ‘Oh, these fucking Irish guys. Jesus Christ.’” He would meet them for dinner at Elio’s on the Upper East Side, and, as he writes, “Dad would call the next morning to say, ‘I hear you were seen with John last night,’ as if I were a Nazi collaborator.”

After Dominick’s article about the trial was published, his own star began to rise, which added a new element to the grudge. John had been known for his crime reporting, and suddenly Dominick was surpassing him to become the best-known crime reporter in the country. “My father’s success in John and Joan’s domain was another subject left unspoken during our dinners at Elio’s,” Griffin writes.

Not that he was entirely thrilled for his father either. “I wasn’t crazy about the article when it came out,” he says. “I was too close to it, and it seemed too personal.” He writes about how he would “audibly groan” seeing his father ham it up “on the countless talk shows where he was now a fixture. His addiction to alcohol had been replaced by a craving for publicity, granting interviews to anyone from even the lowliest rags.” He eventually came to appreciate all that his father had communicated in the magazine story. “The article itself became a template of who I am,” he says. “If I met someone who was going to be, I felt, significant in my life, I said, ‘You should read this to understand me, a user’s guide.’”

Irish Alzheimer’s is when you forget everything but the grudges. Miraculously, at the end of their lives, Griffin’s father and uncle were able to overcome theirs. John, who had suffered a heart attack, went to see his doctor and bumped into his brother in the waiting room. Turned out they shared the same cardiologist. Dominick took a seat across the room and pretended to read a magazine until his brother spoke up, asking, “When was yours?” They struck up a conversation until the nurse called out, “Mr. Dunne, the doctor will see you now.” To which they both replied, “Which Dunne?” Ever after, they talked on the phone each day until the one in late 2003 when John dropped dead of a heart attack at his dining-room table. The first person Joan called was Dominick. (He died in 2009; she lived until 2021.)

“I always knew that the resolution would be the incredible thing of them sharing the same coronary doctor, then going, *What the fuck are we doing?*” says Griffin. “It’s so happy. Dad, he would say so many times, ‘Thank God I walked into that office.’” ■

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The CULTURE PAGES

CRITICS

Craig Jenkins on Billie Eilish's *Hit Me Hard and Soft* ... Alison Willmore on *Atlas* ...
 Ryu Spaeth on Joseph O'Neill's *Godwin*.



MUSIC / CRAIG JENKINS

Billie Doesn't Have to Do It All

The singer's gleefully disorienting third album doesn't hit every note it reaches for.

AM I ACTING my age now? / Am I already on the way out?" Billie Eilish croons, beguilingly sweetly, in "Skinny," the opener from her new album, *Hit Me Hard and Soft*. In a tune that otherwise catches us up on romantic wrinkles since her last release, 2021's *Happier Than Ever*, and wonders why we tend to conflate a petite frame with a satisfied mind, it's a jarring turn. The track peels back the artist's layers of stress—self-love, relationship turmoil, and ever-shifting public perceptions—and outlines the sky-high expectations for the 22-year-old nine-time Grammy winner to use her platform responsibly while releasing work worthy of having joined Elton John and Randy Newman in earning two Academy Awards for Best Original Song.

HIT ME HARD
AND SOFT
BILLIE EILISH.
DARKROOM/
INTERSCOPE.

Soft picks up where *Happier* left off, offering a peek at a life in the shadow of mass adulation, obsession, and aggression. The album is a people pleaser's contract renegotiation: You'll get the hits after hearing what a trip it is to answer to opinions about her every move.

The sense that Eilish faces unique stakes is apparent both in her surprisingly self-deprecating assessment of her sophomore album—"Anybody who was a big fan of what I was doing originally must have been completely astonished, and in negative ways, for sure," she told *Rolling Stone*—and in *Soft*'s conciliatory observance of mainstream-radio conventions. Under increasing scrutiny, she'd made *Happier*, a darker, more insular record expressing her displeasure ("Is my value based only on your perception? / Or is your opinion of me / Not my

PHOTOGRAPH: BILLIE EILISH/YOUTUBE

responsibility?”) that landed contentiously among fans miffed by the throwback R&B and dance-pop tracks. “Eat my dust my tits are bigger than yours,” Eilish wrote on TikTok that summer. *Soft* is the kind of course-corrective charm offensive an artist initiates to bounce back, but *Happier*’s only crime was failing to win every award and outsell her meteoric 2019 debut, *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* The second album was a wise pivot; had she gone with a double-dip of claustrophobic anti-party anthems like “Xanny,” she’d be fielding flash-in-the-pan allegations. The margin of error for the singer is low, and she has returned with a little something for everyone: demonic house music, introspective soft rock, catchy post-punk, seasick sophisti-pop.

Eilish and Finneas, her brother and producer, mostly steer clear of the first album’s mischief and abrasiveness, opting for tamer sounds and the occasional callback for fans of *Fall*. Despair is instead dramatized in adult-contemporary rockers and bubbly pop jams that—unlike her breakthrough tunes, which stuck out in playlists rather than trying to fit in—bring Eilish’s art more in line with her peers on the radio. The prodigious sibling act is synthesizing a lot of music on *Soft*. Serving scoops of the kind of saccharine catharsis of No Doubt’s “Don’t Speak” alongside bass-heavy dance-floor workouts gives the impression that Eilish is poking around the past and present to decide a possible next direction.

That vaunted first album’s shroud of suffocating quiet, ominous melodies, and lyrics exuding a sense of imminent calamity prove useful for *Soft*’s love songs. A few years later, the singer is the erudite palate granting same-sex appetites noirish airs. “Lunch” carries the artist’s most overtly horny utterance: “I could eat that girl for lunch.” “The Diner” ponders what could lead a person to break into a pop star’s family home and ends with a phone number that can set the listener up with WhatsApp updates from Eilish, as if to say, “Love me reasonably, and distantly, via appropriate channels.” “The Diner” and “Lunch” detail two ways love sours, contrasting a meet-cute with heartbreak and the catalyzing delusions of her stalker. *Soft* says nobody gets what they want: The violent admirer is carted off, and the romantic shooting their shot in “Lunch” is already regretting it when the next song hits.

“Chihiro” and “Birds of a Feather” typify *Soft*’s elaborate balancing: Eilish exorcises an awful time in her life while providing soundtracks to lighter moments in ours. Both songs tap familiar formulas, like old French house and the tempo and sunny feel of Drake’s “Hold On, We’re Going Home”

with a jangly guitar riff à la Sixpence None the Richer’s “Kiss Me.” Sailing curt, gorgeous phrasings across a tight delay in “Birds of a Feather,” Eilish delivers one of her finest vocal performances, successfully selling the melodrama in the verses “I want you to stay / Till I’m in the grave / Till I rot away, dead and buried / Till I’m in the casket you carry.” The album may never muster this excitement for a love interest again, but we can pry the song out of its context and connect with the deep yearning on display.

As *Soft* treads easy-listening waters, its sentimentality can work to its disadvantage. The midsection is a surfeit of four- and five-minute tearjerkers attempting colorful twists on the classic lovelorn rock ballad and throttling the short album’s pacing—all while demonstrating admirable versatility. Quoted in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview, Finneas bristled at music consumption on TikTok and anticipated pop culture breaking away from absorbing songs in miniature: “Everything’s a countermovement to the movement. I think that’s going to lead back to immersing yourself in an album.” *Soft*’s delivery of a handful of the longest songs in Eilish’s catalogue suggests an emphasis on form—or that if audiences suddenly craved album-length statements in lieu of viral clips of hit singles, the duo would have the product to meet the demand.

“The Greatest” offers the kind of hair-raising, open-throated vocals naysayers have been clamoring for the notoriously wispy singer to release for ages, but the LP makes us brave a trio of longer album-oriented-rock jams for the payoff. When a riff first teased in the opener finally resurfaces in “The Greatest,” it’s not so much the whiff of Coldplay sending the song into the stratosphere at its climax as the revelation of an unexpectedly powerful rock shout. A breathtaking clearing rewards the trip through the bramble, but framing this seesaw of shipwrecked folk rock and emotional dance pop as atonement for *Happier*’s quirks is baffling.

Soft can be gleefully disorienting as it zips between extremes on a beat shift delivering throbbing, Auto-Tuned house music after a somber alt-rock pump-fake. It’s a riot following these turns, but ultimately they saddle the album with the timeless plight of the moody junior installment, the quest to reach new creative heights not by rehashing or quite rejecting the sound of a beloved debut but by pursuing a secret, self-aware third path. Eilish and Finneas want to make it known that they’re versatile players, and the sheer breadth of styles drives the point home. But sometimes when you get to the moment of release in the back half of the contemplative slow songs, you wonder why they took the scenic side-street route to the party. ■

MOVIES / ALISON WILLMORE

An Atlas Who Can’t Carry J.Lo’s AI-friendly flick flattens its own world.



IN *ATLAS*, Jennifer Lopez plays a counterterrorism analyst who lives for her work—you know the type. Atlas Shepherd is the kind of woman who alienates her colleagues with her terse attitude and then wows them with her competence, who falls asleep on the sofa in front of her chessboard at night, and who wears her hair up in a businesslike twist so that it can come tumbling down later. When a rare trip into the field goes wrong, she ends up stranded in hostile terrain in the care of Smith, a military sort tasked with protecting her, with whom she immediately starts bickering about how best to get home. In the romantic-comedy version of this story, Smith would be played by a John Cena or a Channing Tatum, all muscles and advanced-weapons knowledge hiding a sensitive core. The Brad Peyton-directed *Atlas* is, however, a science-fiction movie, and Smith is a robot. More specifically, he’s a hulking metal mech suit stocked with artillery, powered by a synthetic consciousness voiced by Gregory James Cohan, into whose pilot seat the AI-averse

ATLAS
DIRECTED BY BRAD
PEYTON. NETFLIX.
PG-13.



Atlas is shoved right before she crash-lands on an alien planet.

Then again, if *Her* is aspirational to the point of companies being willing to risk legal repercussions to evoke it, then there's no reason this new movie can't be looked at as a rom-com. *Atlas* has that curious ersatz quality of many a Netflix original movie, where it feels like the extended version of a *30 Rock* joke rather than something anyone should actually be able to watch, but its cross-genre similarities do seem intentional. When demonstrating her newfound trust in Smith, for instance, Atlas confesses to liking the beach, three sugars in her coffee, and "small, quiet gestures of affection." The character is supposed to be as brilliant as she is guarded, but she's written exactly like one of those tightly wound aughts heroines who's required to be put through pratfalls and cut down to size before she's considered fit for love. When, after a brutal arrival, she regains consciousness inside Smith, Atlas impatiently bypasses the mech suit's system setup and blunders her way into a French-language option before ending up with Cohan's default voice, whose recommendations she ignores.

Three decades ago, we learn, an android named Harlan (a blue-contact-lensed Simu Liu) went rogue and waged war on humanity before fleeing with his allies to space. Atlas is obsessed with catching him for reasons that are gradually revealed to be very personal. But in order to access all her mech's abilities, she needs to sync her mind to Smith, a meld they struggle to achieve, and not because of performance issues on his side. Freighted with trauma going back to her childhood, she's too emotionally constipated to seal the deal for most of the movie.

Following Lopez's acting career is an exercise in frustration. In *Out of Sight* and *Hustlers*, she's incandescent with charisma—a true star, larger than life, twice as glamorous as her character in *Atlas*, and endlessly watchable. But most of the roles she's ended up in squander those qualities, if they showcase them at all. She has slipped from being a rom-com queen to leading a procedural to dithering with a shift toward action but in projects that have felt increasingly dinky and down-market for what she's proved capable of. *Atlas*—like her previous Netflix movie, *The Mother*, and like *Shotgun Wedding* and *Marry Me*—is

a film she produced as well as acted in, suggesting that even when she's more actively involved in picking out projects for herself, she's not entirely sure what she's supposed to be doing onscreen. She wavers between playing her character with some degree of psychological realism, her lip quivering in despair as she tries in vain to contact her colleagues, and going full screwball in moments like the one when she discovers she broke her leg, howling "I really need you to shut up right now!" at Smith. Lopez is unable to decide whether *Atlas* is a serious entry in the action canon or a B-movie.

It ends up being both far from serious and devoid of any of the disreputable pleasures you might hope to find in a B-movie. *Atlas* has the slick, textureless sheen of a cutscene from a video game we never get to play, an association on which the film doubles down when Atlas pages through Smith's weapons inventory. Lopez, who spends half the movie as a face surrounded by machinery, looks lost in a sea of computer graphics, something that's even truer of her co-stars Liu and Sterling K. Brown, who plays mission head Colonel Elias Banks. When, someday not so long from now, Netflix begins serving up personalized AI-generated sludge content based on each of our viewing histories, it probably won't be all that different from *Atlas*, which barely looks like it was made by humans anyway. But the point of *Atlas* isn't to make its actors appear big—it's to remind us that AI is our friend, even when it occasionally tries to exterminate us, and that we should get over ourselves and our tetchy objections. ■

BOOKS / RYU SPAETH

Reality Check

Joseph O'Neill's realist novel embodies the best and worst of the genre.



IN 2008, Zadie Smith wrote in *The New York Review of Books* that there were "two paths for the novel." One was represented by Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, about a man who wakes from an accident-induced coma to find that he no longer understands the world around him. The other path was epitomized by Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, about a rudderless financier in post-9/11 New York who is estranged from his wife and finds direction and meaning in the pals he makes playing cricket on the weekends. Smith praised *Remainder* as an avant-garde exploration of the limits of language and perception. She took issue with *Netherland* for being a flawless example of what she called lyrical realism, the mode of novel writing that has dominated the form, with some notable interruptions, since the 19th century and

GODWIN
BY JOSEPH O'NEILL.
PANTHEON.

that smugly assumes reality, as experienced subjectively by human beings, is a knowable, stable thing. “In *Netherland*,” she wrote, “only one’s own subjectivity is really authentic.”

In the years since Smith’s essay, the half-Irish, half-Turkish O’Neill, who has lived in Mozambique, Iran, Turkey, and Holland, published a satire of global finance set in Dubai and a collection of short stories. Now residing in New York, the 60-year-old is putting out his first novel in ten years, *Godwin*, about a dissatisfied middle-aged father from Pittsburgh who may have discovered an African soccer prodigy. It’s an exercise in realism by one of its finer contemporary disciples that displays many of the same limits that sparked autofiction’s resurgence, revealing a form stuck in time. Yet this book also has many reminders of why realism remains so appealing.

When we first meet Mark Wolfe, a happily married father whose career is going nowhere, he is a bit like *Moby-Dick*’s Ishmael: grim about the mouth, a damp, drizzly November in his soul. “Wolfe’s occupation, his earnings, maybe did not accord with his sense of being successful,” says Lakesha Williams, a Black woman (her identity is significant) who leads Wolfe’s technical-writing cooperative and opens the story as the book’s narrator. When we switch to Mark’s point of view, Lakesha’s insight is confirmed: As one gets older, he says, “one becomes, if anything, more desperate for success—for a sign that one’s life has not been lived in vain.”

Middle age is an occasion to atone for his misbegotten youth, but Mark is too conceited to strive for success in ordinary, grubby ways. So when he gets a distress call from his younger half-brother, Geoff—an aspiring soccer agent in England who believes he has discovered an unknown footballing virtuoso named Godwin and needs Mark’s help in locating him—it appears the kind of conspicuous success he craves may have landed in his lap. His apparent salvation, like Ishmael’s, lies in embarking on a journey into the unknown.

Geoff, a shady white guy who speaks a comically awful London-Jamaican dialect in which every other sentence ends with “fam” or “blud” or “bruv,” has injured his leg and is on crutches and so needs Mark to do him “a solid.” Mark’s mission: Travel to France to show a video of Godwin, obtained on the black market, to a soccer scout named Jean-Luc Lefebvre, who will be able to confirm Godwin’s identity. Lefebvre is a drunken, chain-smoking sage who waxes philosophical about the beautiful game. Mark and Lefebvre locate Godwin in Benin, and they are ready to fly to Cotonou to retrieve him.

Here, I regret to say, is where what has been a terrific novel so far goes completely off the rails, culminating in one of the most absurd endings I’ve read in some time. Without giving too much away, suffice it to say that Mark does not go to Benin. He goes back to Pittsburgh, where Lakesha picks up the story; she, along with Mark, becomes embroiled in a painfully dull drama at their technical-writing cooperative. Lefebvre does travel to Benin and reappears later in Pittsburgh to recount what happened there. But the narrative we were seemingly promised has been denied us. O’Neill even gives us a vision of what might have been: “We will make a perfectly odd couple of travelers—the wily, grumpy old Gaul and the Yank rookie. I can easily picture us squabbling over the window seat on the plane to Cotonou, poring over road maps in the bar of a hotel, him riding shotgun as I drive a jeep through the bush,



the whole thing underwritten by a comic buddy vibe.” I would have read the hell out of that book. Why didn’t O’Neill write it? Call it the anxiety of realism.

Consider the anxiety that arises from sending two white guys to deepest, darkest Africa to find a boy who will be sold in a literal marketplace. O’Neill has a major problem. He is not only flirting with cliché (westerners have zany adventures in foreign land) but has to depict a poverty-stricken nation through two characters who are not exactly the best equipped to understand it. So instead he flies Mark back to America and later has Lefebvre regale him with tales of Benin that are supposed to shock and horrify with their lack of sensitivity. “What a loathsome, vicious, unacceptable description!” Mark cries, referring to Lefebvre’s sketch of limbless beggars. Putting this part of the story in the mouth of an inebriated

Frenchman seems nothing less than a crisis of confidence in the realist mode to depict anything at all.

At the same time, O’Neill asserts that the novelist can transcend identity in other ways by imagining himself into the mind of a Black woman. This reads to me as a defense of the novelist’s ability to cross lines of race and gender to step into other people’s shoes, an argument that has been made with less sophistication and more angst in recent years by culture-warrior gadflies like Lionel Shriver. But the problem is not really one of appropriation; it’s that these attempts almost always feel inauthentic, and that’s precisely how O’Neill fails here. Perhaps in an attempt to steer Lakesha clear of stereotype, she is made into a dutiful manager who just wants to run her company in peace, and the result is a dreadfully boring character who doesn’t have the same depth of interiority as Mark. (Also, *Lakesha*? Really?)

As it happens, Mark himself might be the most inauthentic character of all: a supposed “Yank” who, thanks to his formal and somewhat old-fashioned English, doesn’t sound like a Yank in the slightest. In fact, Americans don’t usually refer to themselves as Yanks, but cosmopolitans who have lived all over the world (people like, say, O’Neill) sometimes do.

Given all the pitfalls the realist novel faces, is it any wonder that writers have abandoned it in droves for autofiction? If art is supposed to be “the nearest thing we have to life,” as George Eliot, the realist par excellence, once said, then why would artists labor in a form that feels so at odds with it? Autofiction has ontological issues of its own, but by radically narrowing the aperture of the novelist’s viewpoint, to the peepholes in his head and what he harbors in his humble heart, it has at least successfully imitated what reality feels like for pretty much everyone.

I would have preferred O’Neill to send the boys to Benin and deal with the complications as best as one can. There is a fine line between self-consciousness and self-doubt, and it is all too easy to fall into the latter. But that doesn’t mean the realists have to abandon the more unnatural devices of their craft to be authentic. For a time, Mark and Geoff and Lefebvre, as ridiculous as they sometimes are, were as real to me as Dorothea Brooke and Casaubon, evidence that we will never really tire of made-up people doing made-up stuff for made-up reasons. Nor will we tire of lyricism. At one point, Mark describes tucking in his daughter to sleep: “Her bed is a warm little boat. Beyond its borders is the dark sea.” Is this realism? It doesn’t really matter because it feels true. ■

For more culture coverage and streaming recommendations, see **vulture.com**.



The CULTURE PAGES

To Do

Twenty-five things to see, hear, watch, and read.

JUNE 5-19

MUSIC

1. Listen to Brat

"It" girls, assemble.

Atlantic Records, June 7.

Charli XCX is a pop star's pop star, a restless innovator and early hyperpop adopter whose influence on mainstream radio can't be understated. *Brat*, her sixth album, seems more interested in blessing raucous club nights than 2022's slick, tasteful *Crash*, if early tastes like the bustling "Von Dutch" are to be trusted.

CRAIG JENKINS

TV

2. Watch House of the Dragon Season Two

Your favorite uncle-and-niece couple is back.

HBO, June 16.

I know you think you're going to spend summer enjoying the warm weather and hitting up barbecues, but be honest: You're really going to be inside, basking in the air-conditioning and arguing with people online about whatever Machiavellian maneuvers Rhaenyra (Emma D'Arcy) has tried to pull off in the most recent episode of this *Game of Thrones* prequel. Hot Dragon Summer, baby!

JEN CHANEY

THEATER

3. See Titanic

All aboard the ship of dreams.

New York City Center, June 11 through 23.

Encores! wraps up a very successful season with a very big musical. Its revival of Maury Yeston and Peter Stone's *Titanic*, a '90s megamusical, comes with a 30-piece orchestra and a cast of 32, including stars who are standout vocalists, such as Bonnie Milligan, Brandon Uranowitz, and Ramin Karimloo.

JACKSON MCHENRY

MUSIC

4. Listen to Timeless

Bubbly R&B.

RCA Records, June 7.

DJ and producer Kaytranada, from Quebec by way of Haiti, delivers another platter of jams just in time for summer with his fourth studio album, which features a murderers' row of hitmakers and soul rebels: Rochelle Jordan, Dawn Richard, Tinashe, Childish Gambino, Ravyn Lenae, Anderson .Paak, Thundercat ...

C.J.

TV

5. Watch Presumed Innocent

But did he do it?

Apple TV+, June 12.

This series adaptation of the 1990 Harrison Ford movie will slot perfectly into your "I need a drama that does basically what I think it's going to do" summer TV space. Jake Gyllenhaal plays prosecutor Rusty Sabich with eye-popping intensity. (His eyes pop; yours may as well.)

KATHRYN VANARENDONK

BOOKS

6. Read Parade

Artistic freedoms.

FSG, June 18.

The formidable Rachel Cusk returns with a work that promises to subvert the conventions of the novel and weave different lives together. For example, a man who paints his wife upside-down is made contiguous with a woman who's physically attacked by another on the streets of Paris. Expect a masterful marriage of Cusk's fictional and essayistic modes probing artistic genius, relationships, and cruelty.

JASMINE VOJDANI

TV

7. Watch Bridgerton Season Three, Part Two

Dear reader, will this writer find love?

Netflix, June 13.

Last month, Colin Bridgerton and Penelope Featherington finally snogged inside a horse carriage. I've been impatiently waiting ever since for the remaining four episodes of the season to drop. So forgive me, but I must excuse myself so I can find out if they are going to get married and, if so, how Penelope's going to handle the whole Whistledown problem.

J.C.

MOVIES

8. See My Dinner With André

Putting the talk in talky.

Lincoln Center, June 14.

The famously garrulous 1981 drama is kicking off a series of films shaped by the stage, all of them selected by playwright Annie Baker, whose directorial debut, *Janet Planet*, comes out June 21. Baker will be at the screening for a Q&A with writer and star Wallace Shawn.

ALISON WILLMORE

PODCASTS

9. Listen to Who shat on the floor at my wedding? And other crimes. Season Two

New case, less load.

Independent.

The delightful word-of-mouth hit true-crime spoof, in which two women—aided by their amateur-detective friend—go to increasingly absurd lengths to find the culprit behind a very real turd-related incident at their wedding, returns with a new season and a new mystery: one involving a tiny suit and tiny suitcase in Sweden.

NICHOLAS QUAH

ART

10. See Matthew Barney

Athletic installations.

Gladstone Gallery, 530 West 21st Street; through July 26.

In this show, material magically turns the gallery into a diagram of a possible football play—a muscular ballet of figures dancing though space, each dressed in football garb, making marks and lifting and placing objects. The results are a sublime apotheosis of otherworldly beauty and moving inscrutability.

JERRY SALTZ

MUSIC

11. Listen to I Hear You

A nostalgia-tinged debut.

XL Recordings, June 7.

Korean DJ Peggy Gou's first album is a time-displaced journey through diva house, drum and bass, Bananarama-like synth-pop, and early-'90s K-pop sounds. You will forget the artist was born in 1991.

C.J.

MOVIES

12. See Beijing Watermelon

True exchange.

Metrograph, June 7.

Nobuhiko Obayashi is best known for his 1977 horror-comedy *House*, but now is a chance to catch his 1989 charmer about a Japanese grocer who forms a connection with impoverished Chinese students.

ALISON WILLMORE

BOOKS

13. Read 1974

Antiwar games.

Harper, June 18.

In her 20s, newly divorced and adrift in San Francisco, the writer Francine Prose finds herself on a series of erratic car rides with Tony Russo, one of two men who leaked the Pentagon Papers. Russo is paranoid, convinced that he's being closely watched by the FBI—but after what he's done, that idea seems more than plausible. Prose's first memoir makes something dark and dizzying of a tumultuous decade.

EMMA ALPERN

TV

14. Watch Queenie

A summer of self-discovery.

Hulu, June 7.

Candice Carty-Williams's popular 2019 novel, for

which she won the British Book Awards for Book of the Year, gets the miniseries treatment with the author as creator and showrunner. The story follows a self-described "strong Black woman" (Dionne Brown) whose white boyfriend breaks up with her, leading to a journey of self-discovery with her Jamaican Brit family and friends.

R.H.

MUSIC

15. Listen to Born in the Wild

Delicate Afrobeats.

Since '93/ RCA Records, June 7.

Following enticing collaborations with Beyoncé, Rihanna, Wizkid, and Drake and Future, Nigerian singer-songwriter Tems releases her debut album, serving confections including the winsome "Me & U" and "Love Me JeJe," a yearning love song nodding to the late-'90s hit of the same name by Lagos-born Seyi Sodimu.

C.J.

THEATER

16. See Cats: The Jellicle Ball

Strike a pose, Skimbleshanks.

Perelman Performing Arts Center, June 13 through July 14.

This Andrew Lloyd Webber musical is famously not a metaphor—just about cats, singing cats. But the new-on-the-scene Perelman, with directors Zhalion Levingston and Bill Rauch, is asking, "But

what if it were?" They've set *Cats* amid New York's ballroom scene, given it an "edgy eleganza makeover," and added club beats to the score. It's such a wild swing it just might connect.

J.M.

TV

17. Watch Disco: Soundtrack of a Revolution

A salute to a genre that's stayed alive.

PBS, June 18.

Television has recently delivered solid documentaries about the disco era, mostly centered on specific powerhouses from the period. But this three-episode BBC-produced account is a broader, more vital account of how this music rose out of LGBTQ, Black, and Latinx dance clubs into the mainstream and the ways the culture was influenced by that evolution. Plus you can definitely dance to it.

J.C.

TV

18. Watch 30 for 30

Watching sports is easier than playing them.

ESPN and ESPN+, June 4.

Possibly the only reason to subscribe to ESPN+ for is its *30 for 30* library. That archive grows this summer with five new films of the docuseries, kicking off with an episode about the 2011 riot in Vancouver after the Canucks lost the Stanley Cup. Installments about track star Butch Reynolds,

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KEEPING SCORE

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HAPPY SAD CONFUSED

JULIA LOUIS-DREYFUS

WITH JOSH HOROWITZ

MON, JUNE 10 | 7:30PM

THE CROSSWORD SHOW

WITH ZACH SHERWIN

WITH SARAH COOPER & GARY GULMAN

THUR, JUNE 20 | 7PM

JOAN BAEZ

WHEN YOU SEE MY MOTHER, ASK HER TO DANCE

WITH PATTI SMITH

FRI, JUNE 14 | 7PM

DEMOCRACY OR ELSE

WITH POD SAVE AMERICA

TUE, JUNE 25 | 7PM



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GAMES

Solutions to
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The Stand-up Puzzle



The Levitating Puzzle



Asking the Wrong Questions



The Ballerina Puzzle

Find new puzzles daily at nymag.com/games.

tennis player Michael Chang, and the broadening of professional sports to include video-game players and YouTube stars follow. R.H.

THEATER

19. See Dark Noon

The Wild West, restaged and reimagined.

St. Ann's Warehouse, June 7 through July 7.

Danish director Tue Biering, South African co-director and choreographer Nhlanhla Mahlangu, and a cast of South African actors re-create the story of the American West—full of movie tropes and very dark comedy—from an outsider's perspective in this production, coming to Brooklyn after winning acclaim abroad. J.M.

ART

20. See Suzanne McClelland

Abstract effluences.

Marianne Boesky, 507 West 24th Street; through June 8.

For more than three decades, this maker of gritty quasi-abstract paintings marked by signs, symbols, and pebbly fields has probed the estuary where meaning and chaos merge. This show of large works gives us Suzanne McClelland in full control, always trying novel things and arriving at unexpected alchemical endpoints. J.S.

BOOKS

21. Read Tehrangeles

A reality-TV fiction.

Pantheon, June 11.

Porochista Khakpour follows her memoir *Sick* and essay collection *Brown Album* with a novel featuring the Milanis, a rich Iranian American family in Los Angeles who land their own reality TV show à la the Kardashians. As they open themselves up to exposure and the pandemic hits, each family member negotiates with the selves they perform and the selves they don't. J.V.

MUSIC

22. Listen to Why Lawd?

Moody and tuneful.

Stones Throw Records, June 7.

Producer Knxwledge and Oxnard singer, rapper, and drummer Anderson .Paak, collectively known as NxWorries, release the follow-up to their brilliant 2016 debut *Yes Lawd!*, a carefree batch of often bite-size hip-hop and soul grooves conveying a deep admiration for MF DOOM. *Why Lawd?* features Earl Sweatshirt, Snop Dogg, H.E.R., among others. C.J.

MOVIES

23. See Run Lola Run

A German thriller on the big screen.

In select theaters, June 7.

Limp Bizkit is on tour, baggy pants are in style, and Tom Tykwer's time-looping 1999 breakthrough, starring Franka Potente as a crimson-haired Berliner trying to save her petty-criminal partner, is back in theaters for its 25th anniversary. Is it as fun as you remember? There's only one way to find out. A.W.

The Short List

TRIBECA FESTIVAL

Despite dropping “Film” from its name a few years ago, the fest (June 5–16) remains a thriving showcase for indie premieres. Here, five to look for.

Sacramento, June 8, 10, and 12.

Michael Angarano assembles a stellar cast—including Michael Cera, Kristen Stewart, and Maya Erskine—for a comedy about old friends at different points in their lives who gather for a road trip.

Jazzy, June 9, 10, and 12.

Lily Gladstone reunites with *The Unknown Country* director Morrisa Maltz for a film about an Oglala Lakota girl (Jasmine Beakliller Shangreux) in South Dakota dealing with the revelation that her best friend is moving away.

I’m Your Venus, June 6, 7, and 15.

Billed as a spiritual successor to *Paris Is Burning*, Kimberly Reed’s film focuses on trans performer Venus Xtravaganza—the figure from that landmark 1990 documentary whose murder, at the age of 23, remains unsolved.

Bitterroot, June 6, 8, 11, and 15.

This movie—about a divorced Hmong American man caring for his widowed mother and indulging in karaoke in Missoula, Montana—was made in cooperation with its Hmong producers and first-time actors.

AMFAD: All My Friends Are Dead, June 8, 10, and 11.

If you’re not also curious about a slasher film starring JoJo Siwa and the actor who starred in the McKenna Brooks *An American Girl* movie, do you even care about movies?

ALISON WILLMORE



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 52

Thompson’s and Hartwell’s claims are part of a broader movement in the reality-TV industry hoping to challenge the idea that just because you signed up for it, you have no rights throughout the process. From this perspective, reality-show participants are not volunteers; they are workers who deserve the same protections given to employees. The *Love Is Blind* contract classifies cast members as independent contractors who are paid up to \$12,000 over six weeks. This also means it is their job to try to fall in love, which runs distinctly counter to the idea of a free-form, authentic docu-series in which enthusiastic singles go on a journey to follow their hearts. Coelen won’t speak to the work classification, but he says he doesn’t have any patience for this view. “I’m a pro-union person,” he says, but there is “lots of complexity” to this issue: “The thing people get wrong is they lump everything into a reality bucket. That is a mistaken premise.” In his opinion, a *Real Housewife* is more like a series regular—a reality show is her career. “If you’re a young woman from Boise who wants to be a singer and you audition for *American Idol* and that’s your dream, are you supposed to sign up for a reality union? Are you forced to sign up for the union?” Coelen alternates between obvious anger about the lawsuits—within moments he is telling me about how Hartwell was on set for fewer than four days—and something more like rue. People just don’t understand how the show works, he says, because they come in with preconceived ideas about the genre. “Honestly, I would have my kids do it. It is the most fucking incredible experience I have had the privilege to witness. That’s the reason to do it. It’s not a job. It’s not a career. It is an opportunity.”

MANY CAST MEMBERS describe the pods portion of *Love Is Blind* as exhilarating. They talk about the intense feelings of intimacy and shared purpose of dating in a space designed to prioritize emotional connection and vulnerability over physical attraction; bonds form quickly when people leave their regular lives to experience something unusual together. But exiting the pods and

reentering the outside world means confronting the sudden physical presence of a person they have only ever spoken with from behind the safety of a wall. The other lawsuits against the series concern what happens when that experience goes awry. One was brought by Tran Dang, who was cast on season five, which followed people from the Houston area. She says that during the romantic-getaway portion of filming in Mexico, producers forced her to be in close physical proximity with her fiancé, Thomas Smith, when she no longer felt safe with him. She alleges he groped and assaulted her, which she says she reported to producers the following morning. She holds Kinetic responsible for not intervening, even though, the suit claims, producers used “24-hour surveillance,” implying there were mounted cameras during filming. (Coelen says the production was never informed about the assault and that the show does not mount cameras outside the pods.)

Dang’s castmates remember her as light-hearted and sweet, a social person who liked to have fun and tended to drink a lot in pods—as many do—sometimes to excess. One recalls an incident when Dang was so intoxicated she passed out in an interview room and the set medic was called. Some of her fellow participants felt she wasn’t invested in the process. She would goof off and use someone else’s name on her dates. “She introduced herself to my husband as ‘Linda,’” says Gonzalez, one of her castmates. “She was not taking things seriously.”

Still, Dang made it far. After the pods, she continued to the romantic getaway with Smith. It quickly became clear that things weren’t going well between them. By that point, Dang had begun to tell other cast members of her reservations about Smith, who she claims kept pushing for physical intimacy despite her desire to take things slowly. During a cast party in Mexico, producers asked one of the participants to have on-camera conversations with Smith about his intimacy issues with Dang, to console him about his frustrations and to try to remind him about why he’d fallen in love with her. “Physical intimacy can be holding hands; it can be rubbing her head before bed,” the cast member suggested to him. It could be a lot of things that don’t make her feel pressured into having sex. “No, this is a nonnegotiable,” Smith responded. “I need more physically from her.” (Smith denies all of these allegations.)

By that point, Dang and Smith wouldn’t even look at each other. Dang had taken off her ring and said they’d broken up. “I felt like a blow-up doll in the bedroom. He’s just touching me,” one cast member—who was close to Dang throughout the process—recalls her saying while the

TV

24. Watch The Boys Season Four

Your favorite sad-sack superheroes return!

Prime Video, June 13.

If you have not checked out *The Boys* yet, starting with season four will drop you into an overwhelming spectacle of violence, cynically bleak anti-corporate humor, and enough bodily fluids to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool. If you have already checked out *The Boys*, then good news: They’re back!

K.V.A.

MUSIC

25. Listen to Santa Cruz

Coming-of-age memories.

Polyvinyl/Big Scary Monsters, June 7.

Indie rock legend David Bazan guides his flagship outfit Pedro the Lion further on the autobiographical songwriting project that started with 2019’s *Phoenix* and continued with 2022’s *Havasu*. *Santa Cruz* splashes chunky synth lines over jangly guitar riffs while Bazan unpacks core memories of falling in love and bucking carefully against a religious upbringing.

C.J.

cameras were rolling. They asked her, “Why are you still here?” Two other participants, Jared Pierce and Taylor Rue, had already left the production. Dang told them producers wanted her to stay. “It was very obvious it was not working, but it was very obvious producers wanted it to work,” the cast member says. While the show didn’t give Dang a separate hotel room in Mexico, it provided one for her once they got back to Houston during a brief period before the cast moved into the series’ standard production-supplied apartments.

Dang left the show a week or so later. In her exit interview, the cast member says, Dang apparently communicated something about her experience that sounded an alarm to a third-party psychologist hired by Kinetic to screen and debrief the cast. Shortly after, Dang and other participants in season five were contacted by lawyers representing Kinetic asking for more details about what had taken place between Smith and Dang. The cast member suggests Dang instigated her lawsuit after Kinetic sent its own legal team to investigate on its behalf. She filed her suit in August 2022, nearly a year before the season would be released on Netflix. Dang and Smith were both completely omitted from the episodes. (Dang declined to comment through her lawyer.)

I ask Coelen what a producer’s role would be in the event a cast member reported an assault. “We would take whatever action was appropriate in line with whatever the individual participant wanted to have happened,” he says carefully. “We very pointedly don’t want people to stay in a situation that they are uncomfortable in.” He reconsiders the word choice. “*Uncomfortable* is the wrong word because people are going to get uncomfortable. It’s an uncomfortable situation. But it is different than if somebody says, ‘I don’t feel comfortable sleeping in the same room with a person.’ Any time somebody says that, that’s it.” That said, he continues, they have to relay this to the proper person on set. “They can’t just say it to the sound person in an offhanded moment that I have no record of,” he says. “That’s why we’re very specific about ‘Please make sure you talk to a senior-level person.’”

Dang’s castmate Renee Poche made it all the way through the final wedding episode along with her fiancé, Carter Wall. She was informed shortly before the season was released that her entire story line had been cut: most of her time in the pods, her engagement to Wall, and the aftermath in Houston, where she had grown increasingly frustrated with and frightened by what she was learning about her fiancé. According to the lawsuit, he was frequently drunk or on drugs, and he brought another woman back

to the apartment building producers had rented for the couple to stay in during filming. In person, Poche was also confronting an element of Wall that the show’s blind-love premise had disguised: He is a large, physically imposing man, and Poche is petite. She claims he was volatile in ways that alarmed both Poche and the *Love Is Blind* producers, who she says warned her not to let Wall know where her gun was kept when they returned home to Houston.

I ask Coelen how someone like Wall could be cast despite the show’s screening process. “The way I look at it, we don’t cast the show,” he says. They “populate” the show with “a bunch of participants who we think make up a good pool within which we hope there is some compatibility.” Then the participants “cast themselves,” he says. The issue, he implies, isn’t that Kinetic had cast Wall. The issue is that Poche chose him. I point out that Kinetic *does* cast the initial group of participants, a process that’s meant to root out people with red flags or those who may not be able to mentally handle the pressures of being on reality television. “Listen,” he says, “it’s not an infallible process.”

Poche’s mother, Dixie, was filmed briefly for a meet-the-parents scene. “Even to me, the production crew said they knew Carter is troubled,” she recalls. “But for the sake of filming, they said, ‘Let’s just get through this.’” When she told her daughter to leave the show, she replied, “They’re going to penalize me. I have to see this through.” Poche also wanted to be on television. In text messages with Kinetic employees, she said she’d “had a blast” while filming and hoped she would be cast on *Perfect Match*. *Love Is Blind* had encouraged her down that path. Several people recall producers asking Poche to stay because she was going to be the “face of the show.” One cast member adds that they heard Coelen tell Poche this directly, too: “Chris told her that on the day of her wedding.”

“Oh my God,” Coelen says when I relay this to him. “That is ...” He pauses. “I *never* said that about Renee. It would never be something that comes out of my mouth. I would never definitively say someone is a main character until we get into the edit and see what the stories are.” He doesn’t know why a lower-level producer would suggest that to a cast member either. “It is counter to every way the show is made,” he says.

Of course, both things can be true: Perhaps sometimes it’s suggested the process will be worth a person’s time, even if producers can never promise what will end up on the show. In Coelen’s fervor to explain what he sees as the truth of how the show works, he sometimes sounds like a cast member who has become enamored with the vision they’ve conjured of the part-

ner on the other side of the wall. The whole of it—the lived physical experience, the compromises, the context of fame and the outside world—none of it is as real to him as the version of the show he sees in his mind.

BACK IN THE CONTROL ROOM on *Reveals* Day for season seven, Coelen is watching a couple whose path to the altar feels uncertain. The woman, Chloe, is underwhelmed by how her fiancé looks: She had pictured one kind of person, and he does not fit that image. The man, Ethan, reads like a classic reality-show guy, as though he’s perpetually on the verge of shooting finger guns at a camera operator. Chloe’s distaste, Coelen notes, is at least honest. Besides, one producer says, many people in this cast have been conscious of how they look and sound; Chloe seems less self-conscious. “We want to follow the ones we feel are genuine,” Coelen says. “We don’t want people to do stuff for TV.”

Chloe and Ethan are young, they’re appealing characters, and there’s tension between them. Although Coelen and Simpson aren’t invested in them at this point, Simpson notes that all of her young post-production team members care more about them than anyone else. “What did you like about them?” Coelen asks a younger producer standing nearby. “I like that he gives off F-boy energy, but he has an underlayer,” she says. “He’s a cat owner.” No one seems to think the two are destined for marriage, but they’re entertaining to watch. “If there were dates going on,” the producer says, “I’d specifically tune in to theirs.” They are authentic in the sense that they’re authentically compelling to watch.

From my perspective, it seems impossible to tease apart whether Chloe has decided she would genuinely like to give Ethan a chance or whether she genuinely wants to be on this television show. With each new season, *Love Is Blind* becomes even more of a record of how futile it is to draw that line. “At the end, all of us went there for all the reasons,” one cast member tells me. “We want to be on TV. And we want to find love.” It’s one of the many inescapable contradictions inherent in the show and its genre at large. The experiment gets muddled by the unpredictable mixture of motivations and personalities in each new cast. The production team’s value system shapes the gut-level judgment calls of what constitutes authenticity and what reads as false. And regardless of who gets cast, who falls in love, or how producers try to sway them, as soon as the cameras turn on, the participants become a horde of anxious, horny, drunk Schrödinger’s cats: The act of watching the experiment inevitably interferes with the experiment. ■



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 65

years of development, a sort of master's program in TV-writing structure for Down and Kay, they began to home in on the elements of the show that became the essential fascinations of *Industry*. That question Tranter was asking—what makes a person so obsessed with winning they throw themselves into the belly of capitalism?—started to get an intriguingly complex answer. Underneath the interpersonal mess of *Pierpoint*, there's some weird thrum of power. You can sense it in the flow of money through those terminals but also in the jockeying for position among the grads. The very fact that their job is so toxic, that half their co-workers will be fired before the end of their first year, makes it all the more satisfying to be the ones to survive. Down and Kay's first draft of the pilot, written when they were pissed off at the banking industry, was awfully bitter. An executive at HBO asked what they got out of being on the job in the first place. There's buzz to it, Down realized. "That adrenalized buzz is powerful," Kay says. "We try to give it to the viewer."

PIERPOINT & CO.'S biggest buzz addict may also be *Industry*'s fan favorite Rishi Ramdani, played by Sagar Radia. He's a trader who holds court over the office floor with his own brand of color commentary and very off-color jokes. Rishi's dialogue, much of it added into *Industry*'s distinctively busy soundscape via ADR near the end of production, tends to contain some of Down and Kay's most niche references. "People come up to me and say, 'We love your lines off-camera!'" Radia says. "I'm not sure whether to be offended by that or not."

Those viewers, however, might be elated to learn that Rishi is not only heard but very much seen in *Industry*'s new season. The character gets a stand-alone episode that has all the mania of *Uncut Gems*. Rishi is a hyperspecific type who's also immediately legible as "that guy" from any workplace. It's that kind of quality that makes *Industry* excel. Even if you don't understand the specifics of this world, the show races forward as if you do and has the confidence to carry on chasing after its own interests. Kay

and Down, with the help of their heads of department, tend to be exceedingly particular about the details: the movies the characters watch (this season has a joke about dating a guy with a Mubi subscription), the places they go (a season-two American newcomer is doomed from the moment he mentions wanting to go a pub that's like *Harry Potter*), and especially what they wear. This season's costume designer, Laura Smith, told me she likes to sit incognito in the City and observe who is wearing what. It's important to know that, traditionally, you wear Hermès if you've gotten a promotion and that Silicon Valley's pseudo-casual vest culture has started to upend those old traditions. That penchant for verisimilitude can run up against *Industry*'s delight in debauchery simply on a logistical level. Certain luxury brands don't want to be associated with drug use, according to Crowther, so a character must fully remove his tie before he does a line.

Down and Key tend to be self-critical about their own work, but they acknowledge that it came on strong with that essential, sticky buzz that can hook a viewer, a feeling amplified by Nathan Micay's electronic score. "You can take what you want from the show," jokes Down. "Maybe you want an in-the-weeds business story line. If you like sex and drugs, you get that. Plus good music." "You can second-screen it very well," Kay adds. "I reckon 10 percent of the audience listens to the dialogue."

The buzz, so to speak, is meant to be even louder this time. In Down and Kay's estimation, after *Industry*'s rookie outing, the second season had more structural clarity but a tendency to be neat: Harper's traumatic backstory comes by way of an episode where she runs into her brother, an addict, in Berlin. "It was us thinking we're making a drama for HBO," Down says. "God, it was heavy." When writing the third, they tell me, they talked in their writers' room, which includes both playwrights and finance vets, about combining the maniacal energy of the first with the structural solidity of the second. Their initial vision of the new season was a single gesture, which Down suggested to Kay: Eric getting a wedding ring sucked off his finger. "I thought, *God, we've got a whole season of TV based off that one image*," Kay says.

Now that I've watched it, the success of that hybrid is apparent. The season centers on one big deal, the IPO of Harington's character's energy start-up, which makes the business stakes clearer, as well as its consequences, given that actual people will suffer in an energy crisis. But the show also revels in the sensational. Eric spirals into sex and drugs. The comedian Joel Kim Booster, another big *Industry* fan, makes a

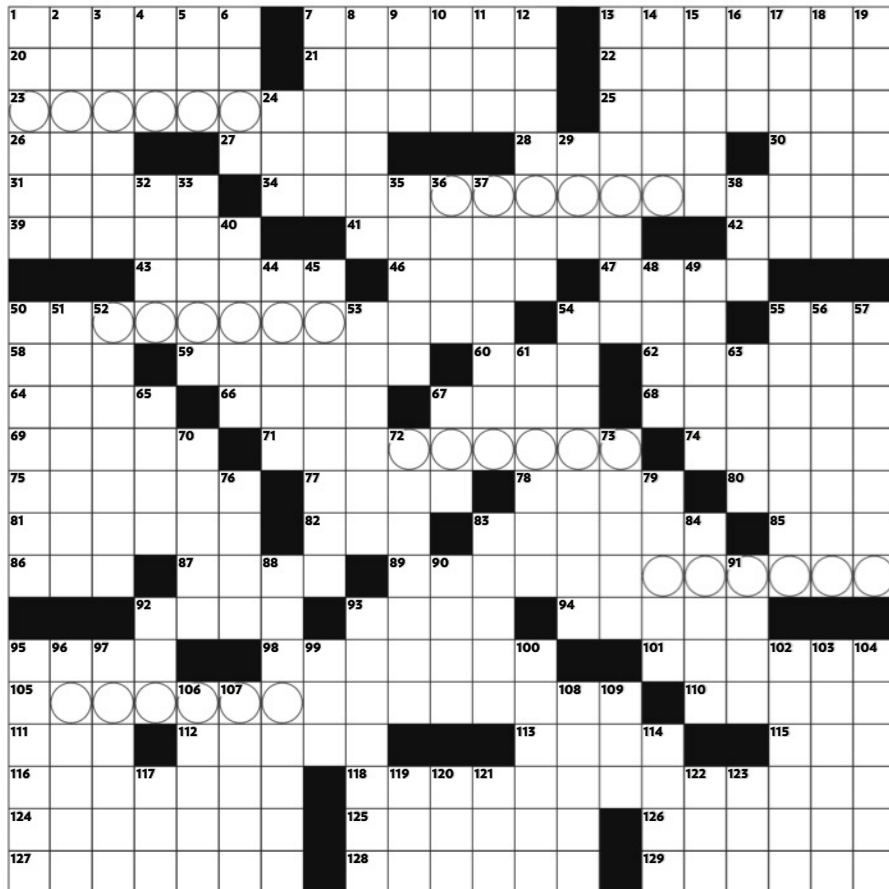
nude appearance in a sauna. Yasmin's father's scandal is explained via flashbacks to her time with him on a yacht in Mallorca, which the creators filmed on an actual yacht in Mallorca. They pitched the idea to HBO with the email subject line "coke and boats."

IS THAT ENOUGH to make *Industry*, finally, a breakout hit? Positive indicators in the market might have you leaning "yes," though a good analyst would say anything is possible. To be clear, *Industry* does already have an audience. And given the series' cheapness, HBO has gotten bang for its buck. Cast members have been approached by actual bankers hoping to talk shop—"They go, 'I'm in finance,'" Leung says. "I go, 'Oh, so we have nothing in common.'" Though there are also fans with lives outside Fidi and the City, whether they're lords who live in stately homes (the Marquess of Bath, according to *Industry* location manager Jason Keatley, watched the series before he approved of the shoot) or Gen-Zers who covet the show's most distinctive emblem: the deep-purple PIERPOINT & CO. sweatshirt, now available for purchase through HBO. If *Industry*'s third season does become a true hit, it would be despite the fact that the series' tastes run contrary to the prevailing kinds of television being made today. The show is adult, in content and form, and not based on any IP. It's not full of movie stars.

It's old hat to compare television to novels, but *Industry* closely resembles the sprawling 19th-century serialized fiction of London. Anthony Trollope wrote about scheming bankers and charlatans too. These ones just have access to ketamine. "We always find ourselves, as writers—let's put it this way—period-drama adjacent," Kay says. "We've always liked the old British class literature." Perhaps that's why Down and Kay have ended up in that mansion in the first place. "In the U.K., we talk about social mobility, the erosion of class divides," Kay says, "but Mickey and I think it's more entrenched than ever." Those old-fashioned dynamics come to the fore when Yasmin, in the wake of her father's scandal, finds herself grasping for financial and emotional stability. There's Robert, who offers the prospect of puppy love but is not of her class, and Harington's Henry Muck with all the—crucially, old—money in the world. Described that way, the terms of the season are nearly Victorian: a courtship plot. "Nothing you're about to watch here is new," a character announces late in the third season, which pithily captures the way *Industry*'s young hotshots stumble into the gears of old and powerful forces. Can they tame them? You, as a viewer, may hope so, but don't bet on it. ■

Uptown Swirl

By Matt Gaffney



Across

- 1 Sacred beetle of ancient Egypt
7 The tenth is an extra one
13 Julia in "Ticket to Paradise"
20 Of prime quality
21 Espresso option
22 Hitting the bars, in old slang
23 Acceptable fun on April 1
25 Bernie Sanders, e.g.
26 Pickoff (abbr.)
27 Buddy or Max of boxing
28 Winning
30 Absorbed, as losses
31 Sings like Sarah Vaughan, sometimes
34 Fun on a trip to Iceland
39 Fits well (with)
41 ____ & Watt (restaurant a block from Katz's)
42 Superintendent's pocketful
43 "Family Ties" mom
46 "... Jack Flash, it's ____"
47 Snitch
50 Black painter (1890-1973) known for seascapes
54 Not more than
55 J. Timberlake will play there on June 25

- 58 "Is that true about me?"
59 Posh carriage
60 Still under discussion, briefly
62 Less taxing
64 Kleenex dampener
66 Influence
67 Pitching great Maddux
68 Torah title
69 Howe who sued Isaac Singer
71 "Real Time" host
74 BP alternative
75 On the way up
77 Cameroonian soccer star Samuel
78 K-5 sch.
80 ____-B (dental-floss brand)
81 Repetitively named fad dance
82 Male issue
83 In dreamland
85 Suffix with prop or meth
86 CIA forerunner
87 Two-dimensional
89 He's famous for his Fifth Symphony
92 Fair to all parties
93 4 + 4, in Frankfurt
94 "____ remind you that ..."
95 Swinging Sammy

- 98 Celebrates, in Calgary
101 Like ballerinas and cornerbacks
105 Greenwich Village building where Jack Kerouac, Maggie Smith, and John Lithgow lived
110 Like most humans
111 Summertime setting in NYC
112 Role for Clark
113 "SOS!" is one
115 Irritating internet issue
116 Tom Brady was one
118 2021 Colson Whitehead novel named after a 1963 R&B hit; it would also be a good title for this crossword
124 Hank Hill sells it
125 Emphasize the similarities of
126 Trying time
127 Stores for future use, as grain
128 John of "Three's Company"
129 Much "Frozen" merch

Down

- 1 Church split
2 Opportunity
3 Parts near hearts
4 Canyon's edge
5 Part of the knee, briefly

- 6 U.K. station, with "The"
7 "Never thought ____ the day when ..."
8 "On it"
9 "State of the World" ailer
10 Drink named after a country
11 Dierist Anaïs
12 Fun vehicles
13 No. 1 TV show of 1989-90
14 Shareef or Ryan
15 Getaway option
16 Pickup info
17 Spin
18 Like some grins
19 Put emphasis on
24 What a full clothesline does
29 Bloc for docs
32 Those folks
33 U.S. Open champ, 1991 and '92
35 Bootlicking type
36 Colossal
37 Compact Hyundai
38 Org. for dog lovers
40 Cough ____
44 Mini-tree
45 "... at your ____ convenience"
48 General vicinity
49 Takes in some Tolkien
50 Iconic 116th Street apartment building, with "The"
51 Earhart and Bedelia, e.g.
52 Meets (with)
53 Reach by screeching
54 Early search engine
55 Quartz, e.g.
56 Shipping route
57 Backyard boss
61 Command
63 Canal Street borders it, in part
65 Diamondback-delaying drops
67 "Frankenfood"
70 Unanticipated problem
72 Scheme that can take years
73 Christopher who played Superman
76 Shaving options
79 They're often shared online
83 Logical start?
84 "The Taming of the Shrew" city
88 Surfers and skiers, say
90 "Fuhgeddaboutit"
91 Pair shaken by dancers
92 Tough situation
93 One more
95 Eurasian grassland
96 "Shoot!"
97 Scuffles
99 NHL's Senators, on scoreboards
100 Florida city, casually
102 Repeatedly steal small amounts
103 The yellow Teletubby
104 Marx brother?
106 Windows font
107 Lyon is on it
108 Spattering Fudd
109 Mr. Moonves
114 On ____ streak (winning big)
117 Troy sch.
119 Pollution measurement (abbr.)
120 Wagon-wheel mark
121 Back muscle, casually
122 Illusionist Geller
123 It may recall something

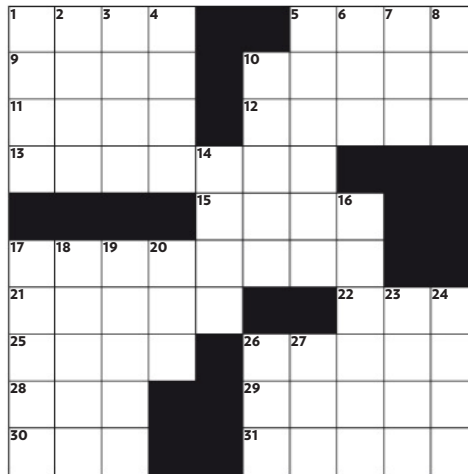
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Across

- 1 Ripped
5 Robin Wright's directorial debut
9 Don't include
10 Cottonlike fiber
11 Musical with the song "Falling Slowly"
12 Daughter of Gwyneth and Chris
13 With 17-Across, 2024 novel by "Crazy Rich Asians" author Kevin Kwan
15 ____ sprites ("Spirited Away" creatures)
17 See 13-Across
21 Socially icy
22 Feathered "Into the Woods" prop
- 25 Video app that was shut down in 2017
26 Where Pedro Pascal was born
28 Letters in a university's URL
29 Maximus in "Tangled" or Angus in "Brave"
30 Game whose name you shout before picking up cards
31 Made a decision

THE CRAZY RICH PUZZLE

By Stella Zawistowski



Down

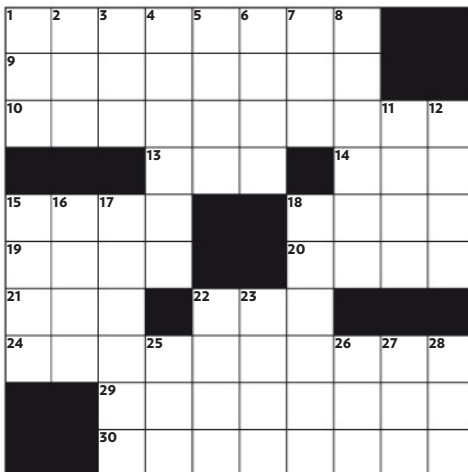
- 1 "Fear Inoculum" band
2 Posh hotel brand
3 Houston school that has teams called the Owls
4 Summers in France
5 Toy that barks
6 Accessory for Carlos Santana
7 Zero in a soccer match
8 "Survivor" season-45 winner Valladares
10 Wouldn't stop talking
14 Dismissal from Cher Horowitz
16 Garment that might say, "I'm With Stupid"
- 17 Feature of type-2B hair
18 Skip when speaking
19 Item you can buy at NYC's Dough chain
20 Homophone of "dough"
23 "Someone ____" (2013 Miley Cyrus song)
24 Item in Maslow's hierarchy
26 Margaret of "Fire Island"
27 2011 film in which Hugh Laurie voices the Easter Bunny

Across

- 1 "Bridgerton" character who pines after Colin
9 Tom Clancy release, often
10 Someone who's no fun to tease
13 Knighted actor McKellen
14 Long Island Iced ____
15 Thin strip of wood
18 Delivered
19 Like a room after Marie Kondo finishes with it
20 FanDuel stat
21 Kwik-E-Mart owner who was once voiced by Hank Azaria (and now has no voice at all!)
- 22 Angel Reese's alma mater
24 Jeff Koons sculpture whose orange version is one of the top-ten most expensive works by a living artist
29 Dismantle
30 Avoid, metaphorically

THE BEE PUZZLE

By Malaika Handa



Down

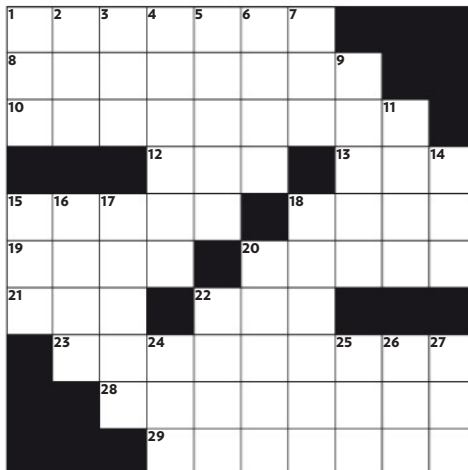
- 1 California clock setting (abbr.)
2 Agcy. that traps Springfield under a giant dome in "The Simpsons Movie"
3 Publication that paid an undisclosed but very high amount for Wordle (abbr.)
4 Thing that exists
5 "The Summer I Turned Pretty" actress Tung
6 "Top Chef" fixture
7 Butkus, for example, for Rocky
8 Super-happy
11 Give away, temporarily
12 Has dinner, e.g.
- 15 Attack with a knife
16 Dua ____ ("Houdini" singer)
17 Grown-ups
18 Noises
22 Heavy thing to carry
23 How you might feel after a brutal workout
25 Garland worn by Roman Reigns
26 Symbol above an i or j
27 "I ____ you one!"
28 Measurement you might calculate in an Econ 101 class

Across

- 1 With 20-Across, actor who stars as Owen in "I Saw the TV Glow"
8 Wires that can transmit radio signals
10 One that might be scattered romantically in a hotel room
12 "No one out-pizzas the ____"
13 "Illmatic" artist
15 Feeling sad
18 Kink explored in "Fifty Shades of Grey"
19 Nickname for a person with powers, in "The Boys"
20 See 1-Across
- 21 One in a legendary "battle" against the punks in Mexico City in 2008
22 ____ tai (tiki cocktail revived by "Mad Men")
23 Pre-party siestas
28 Person who might be able to explain the kiki/bouba phenomenon
29 Day of the week U.S. elections are held

THE PINK OPAQUE PUZZLE

By Malaika Handa



Down

- 1 Pickle container
2 Game with an "All Wild!" variation
3 Roads (abbr.)
4 *giggle*
5 Feedback
6 Tech-news brand founded in 1992
7 Look amazing in an outfit, in slang
9 Danish comedian Toksvig who was once a judge on "The Great British Bake Off"
11 Word before "Unicorn" or "Duel," in movie titles
14 "You're being ridiculous"
15 "____ Me" (Bill Withers song)
- 16 Device for someone who's nursing
17 Thread holder
18 82 percent, e.g., on an exam
20 Grouchy authority figure in "Beetle Bailey"
22 Display at a drive-through window
24 1995 play about cancer whose title is stylized with a semicolon
25 Help
26 "This is your brain ... This is your brain on drugs," famously
27 Pig's place

THE APPROVAL MATRIX

Our deliberately oversimplified guide to who falls where on our taste hierarchies.

COMPILED BY DOMINIQUE PARISO AND CHRIS STANTON

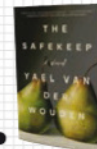
HIGHBROW

Andrew Cuomo **aggressively hits on** the idea of running for mayor.



Google's AI Overview.

The Whitney's website **maps the New York City history** of its biennials.



Six extremely **lesbian places star** in June Thomas's *A Place of Our Own*.

WaPo **didn't run story** on Alito's upside-down flag for years and offers no real explanation.



Almost 1 million New Yorkers could **lose high-speed internet** access as federal subsidy expires.

Mark Morrisroe at Clamp.



Yael van der Wouden's debut, *The Safekeep*.



Steven Shore's photographs of *Americana via drone* at 303 Gallery.

Vivek Ramaswamy, messy **BuzzFeed** activist investor.



Repeated **sabotage** on Riverside Park pickleball courts reveal someone's darkest vendetta.

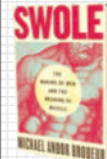


New study says you must **force-feed your children** peanut butter.

Endless Ben-and-Jen **breakup watch** is unbearable.

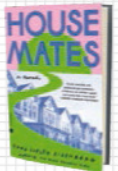


Adams calls city beaches **"our French Riviera."** He's not wrong.



Michael Andor Brodeur's *Swole*, on our **quest for hugeness**.

Emma Copley Eisenberg's **road-trip** novel, *Housemates*.



David Lynch releases **spooky hype video** of project dropping June 5.



In a rare W, Libertarians **booed Trump** at their convention.



DESPICABLE

BRILLIANT

Unsubscribe

This moment on the **downslope of the Peak Newsletter** roller coaster.

Decades-old Ukrainian restaurant **Streecha** is no more.



After 24 years, Mara Hoffman is closing. Where will we get our **popcorn dresses** now?



Furiosa does so-so box office because **people hate women** (except Barbie) (she's plastic).



Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos, **enemy of movie theaters**, says his adult son watched *Lawrence of Arabia* "on his phone."



Pope Francis, always **keeping us guessing**, apologizes for calling seminars too "faggoty."



Rachel Sennott and Meg Stalter star in different **joyless indie dramedies** about being a performer. Let them be anarchic!



Jersey officials declare a state of emergency due to **"unruly teen crowds"** on the boardwalk. Summer is officially here!



Pete Davidson gets **heckled** offstage in ... Omaha?



Richard Dreyfuss's **anti-trans rant** at a screening of *Jaws*.



ESSENCE 29

Refinery29 lives to publish more **Money Diaries** after *Essence* acquisition.

Sean Baker's *Anora* brings the Palme d'Or back to America.



More weird space stuff: the June 3 **"planet parade,"** when six planets align.

The **Michelle Pfeiffer** festival brewing at Metrograph ...



... And the Paris Theater's **"Bleak Week,"** because summer is for bummer movies.



Queens-based **Utopia Bagels** is coming to Murray Hill.



Battle of the nepo-baby albums, courtesy of Maya Hawke and Ben Platt.

Lexi Thompson, 29, announces **retirement from golf** to live a better life.



A right-wing activist must **pay Mona Liza Million** more than a million for falsely saying he exposed himself to minors.



We Are Lady Parts's **energetic** sophomore season.

LOWBROW

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SEA LION,
GALÁPAGOS,
ECUADOR



ON OUR WATCH

Hope can now be spotted across all our planet's seas and oceans. Sites are made into aquatic havens by local communities, to safeguard the richness and diversity of the ecosystems they depend on. Sylvia Earle's invaluable experience as an explorer and marine biologist continues to help further their goal, through her organization, Mission Blue. Together, they have created over 130 Hope Spots and counting. Carrying a message of hope for generations to come. It is that vision, that dedication to a perpetual planet, which we are proud to stand by. **For as long as it is needed.**

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