

GOOD AS GOLD

Jeremy Piven returned to the screen as abrasive Hollywood agent Ari Gold last month. But, as he turns 50, he tells **AIR** that he's really a softie at heart

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Jeremy Piven wants to make one thing clear. He's nothing like Ari Gold, the foul-mouthed, hyper-aggressive agent-turned-studio head he plays in the new film version of *Entourage*. "When people meet me they are confused why I am not a rageaholic. This offensive, fast-talking, abrasive Hollywood agent," he laughs.

The film is the continuation of the US television series, which ran for eight years until 2011, about a foursome of actors and hangers-on forging their way through Hollywood, with Gold to guide them. "All the guys are very true to [their] characters. But Ari has evolved," says Piven, who turns 50 on July 26.

"For me, my character is a cautionary tale at this point in my life. What means the most in my life is a question I am asking myself, not just on screen these days, but in real life."

The role was a career-defining one for the American actor, who learnt his trade at the acclaimed Piven Theater Workshop, founded by his parents, Byrne and Joyce, in the northern Chicago suburb of Evanston, Illinois. After cutting his teeth in theatre in Chicago, Piven spent the next three decades appearing in small roles in films such as *Say Anything* (1989), *Heat* (1995) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001), and television series including *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Ellen*.

Then, in 2004, came *Entourage*. Though he wasn't the lead, he stole the show as the power-hungry, politically incorrect agent, and deservedly won a Golden Globe and three Emmys along the way. "I would blush when I read the lines in the script," he confesses. "I would actually on the day of shooting go to my colleagues and ask them if it's okay for me to say those lines to them."

His next television role couldn't be more different, finally taking the lead

in his own show in 2013, playing the eponymous Mr Selfridge in the British series about the life of Harry Selfridge, the American entrepreneur behind the London department store. After three seasons, Piven is clearly looking forward to returning to the set of the period drama for a fourth outing.

"It's a very different character than Ari Gold from *Entourage*. So I am living a schizophrenic life right now. At home I am treated like a fast-talking, aggressive Hollywood agent, and overseas I am this turn-of-the-century gentleman. And, to be honest with you, I prefer to be the gentleman in real life," he says.

When shooting Mr Selfridge in England, the actor lives near the famous store on Oxford Street. "They must think I am stalking them," he laughs. "I didn't grow up in London. When I get lost walking around, I just look for the flags of Selfridges and find my way home. It's kind of pathetic and heart-warming at the same time." He enjoys the anonymity of the capital, too. "In my real life I wear a hat and glasses [so I don't get recognised in London]."

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The British are very gentle and very respectful. They respect your space and they work, so they don't have that much time to harass you," he says.

The character of Ari Gold is largely based on executive producer Mark Wahlberg's agent, Ari Emanuel. According to series creator Doug Ellin, the real-life agent was adamant that Piven should play the role, even calling

up the television network from a plane in China demanding: “Jeremy Piven plays me, or take my name off it.”

Has he ever worked with an agent like Gold? “I couldn’t, and I didn’t. I am from a theater family and acting was always framed that we were [a] community. And I am just a softie,” he admits. “But it is true, there are yellers and screamers in our business. And folks that are not loyal and true to their word. But I didn’t know how to handle it, and I moved away from the Ari Golds of this world. We all need a shark in our life, but I am too sensitive.”

Did the role help him navigate the treacherous waters of Hollywood? “I think life has taught me how to deal with sharks. We are this beautiful dysfunctional family,” he reflects. “To go from eight years [in] *Entourage*, I was told by one of the producers, ‘whatever you did in England it helped make Ari Gold a better character for this movie’. And I loved that. Actors love two things, compliments and free food. We will take it all.”

The season finale of *Entourage* saw Gold quit Tinseltown to save his marriage. While relaxing on holiday, the closing credits show him receiving a phone call with a job offer as CEO of a film studio, making the movie a

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possibility for fans. “In the movie we are picking up six months later. He is in Italy with the wife, he [has] salvaged his life. But at this point he is no longer a part of this community, and we are asking how does he deal with that?”

“If you are in Italy and you don’t have WiFi, how can Ari Gold survive? As expected, he is starting to go insane. And his wife realizes that he needs his work. So, Ari takes a new job and goes back to his world,” Piven explains. Now in charge of an entire studio and a billion-dollar slate, “Ari is hitting on all fronts. He’s trying to hold it together.”

Part of Gold’s new persona is a tenuous commitment, at the behest of his wife, to finding inner peace. In one memorable therapy session, he punches a framed photo of a kitten. “The therapy scenes are so classic, and we wanted to put one in the movie,” says Piven. “Ari is a bull in a china shop. And I feel

lucky to navigate through that space.

We know he has an anger issue, how do we show that – what can be better than punching a glass picture of a kitten in the middle of a therapy session. I mean, come on, who does that?”

Piven puts his all into such scenes. “I’ll try everything I can so it looks real on film. That’s why prop guys hate me. I’ve broken more computers and phones than anyone.” How much of Gold’s cutting dialogue and epic tantrums were unscripted? “Doug Ellin is a great writer, and it’s our job to get everything on the page the best we can be. But my background is improv,” he says. “I want to make sure everybody likes the script, but then I work on the language a little bit. Sometimes things just pop out of me, and then they stick. If you are in character and nobody yells cut, you just keep going.” Like Ari Gold, Piven is on a roll that shows no sign of stopping.

