

Creating *Entourage*

An Interview with Doug Ellin,
Creator and Executive Producer, *Entourage*

EDITORS' NOTE A native New Yorker, Doug Ellin moved to Hollywood in 1990 intent on becoming a stand-up comedian. While working the circuit at such comedy club mainstays as *The Improv* and *The Comedy Store*, Ellin also took a position in the mailroom of New Line Cinema. It was through a connection to New Line Production Head, Michael DeLuca, that Ellin's career was able to take off, albeit in a different direction. After seeing Ellin's stand-up routine, DeLuca partially funded Ellin's comedic short film, *The Pitch*, which he wrote and directed, starring David Schwimmer, Ernie Hudson, and Jonathan Silverman. The film went on to air on Showtime. Following this, Ellin was accepted as a director into The American Film Institute's prestigious Conservatory program, which he attended from 1991 to 1992. Ellin next wrote and directed another comedy short, *The Waiter*, starring David Schwimmer, Jon Cryer, Paul Gleeson, Laraine Newman, and Allen Garfield. In 1996, Artisan distributed Ellin's low-budget independent film, *Phat Beach*, which starred Jermaine Hopkins, Brian Hooks, and Coolio, among others. Ellin's follow-up film, *Kissing a Fool*, once again starred David Schwimmer, along with Bonnie Hunt, and a cast of up-and-coming stars including Mili Avital, Jason Lee, and newcomer Judy Greer. Universal bought and distributed the film in 1998. While continuing to write and develop feature film and television projects, Ellin joined forces with Mark Wahlberg and Steve Levinson to create *Entourage*, which is loosely based upon their shared Hollywood experiences. Ellin is a graduate of Tulane University.

Was the entertainment industry of interest to you early on? How did you get into the business?

I went to Tulane and the plan was to go to law school, which I was rejected from. I moved to L.A. to pursue stand-up comedy, which my parents were not very excited about.

I did that for two years as I worked in the mailroom at New Line Cinema. While working in the mail room at New Line, I did a stand-up show to raise money for a short film I wanted to make. I invited everyone from New Line to the show. The Vice President of New Line at the time, Mike DeLuca, wrote me a check. We sold it to Showtime and it got me into the American Film Institute, and things went from there.



Doug Ellin (left) and Mark Wahlberg (right)

Where did the concept for *Entourage* come from?

Mark Wahlberg and Steve Levinson. Steve was my friend from college and he represented Mark. They came to me and said they wanted to do a show about Mark and his friends. This was the whole concept at the time.

We mixed and matched so I could bring my own thing to it, and made it using Mark's life as a model, and mixing in my friends and my life so I could relate to it. This is why we moved it to New York from Boston, but it's where it started.

At what point during the creative process do you realize something will work?

I'm a very negative guy, so I never think it's working. Even when *The New York Times* said we were the best show on TV in 2004 as we started the second season, I was convinced they were cancelling us – it was at the dawn of TiVo and ratings seemed to be much lower than they were expected to be, though everyone was happy.

We were shooting an episode in Las Vegas and the cast walked out to the pool at the Hard Rock Hotel and people went crazy for them. It's the first time I realized we were having an impact.

When I'm writing, I'm very critical, so I tell myself it isn't working. Eventually, you let it go and hope people relate to it.

To what do you attribute the success of the show?

Everyone thinks it's a Hollywood show but I think it's a friendship show. The great thing is when kids come up to me and say, I know a Vince, an E, a Drama, or a Turtle. In a lot of ways, it's male wish fulfillment, and I don't just mean the women in the show; those high-school friendships don't usually last into

adulthood like that. To get to live like you're in high school for the rest of your life is a fantasy a lot of men have, as well as to have the toys and ability to do whatever they want and do it with your best friends — people relate to that.

In terms of casting, those on the show seemed to have almost been lifelong friends. Were you surprised at how that worked?

It was very important to me that the four guys, not including Jeremy who was the agent, were real New Yorkers, and the day they got together it felt like they knew each other for years.

Can you talk about the process of working on the *Entourage* movie? What can people expect?

The TV show was always one of the bigger half-hours on television. We would shoot live at the Cannes Film Festival, Laker games, or Yankee Stadium, so it always had a filmic look and a cinematic quality. The biggest challenge was turning it from a half hour into an hour and a half.

But we did it, and people can expect to see a fun, larger version of the show.

With the success of the show comes opportunity. How do you decide what's next?

I like doing things that are personal to me. I did another show for HBO called *40*, which is about my life. I did a show with Mike Tyson. I also just produced a documentary called *When the Garden was Eden* about the 1969-72 Knicks.

What advice do you give to young people who are trying to work their way up as you did?

The one thing about this business is that you have to love it more than anything else because it's a brutal life of rejection. It's not a stable lifestyle. The people who have made it are those who have stuck with it. I have a friend who directed his first movie at 46. So if you keep with it and you have some talent, and if it's something you love, it becomes about perseverance.

Is quality writing still out there today?

Television used to be frowned upon but today, there are so few movies being made, and they're only trying to make franchises and sequels. The best writers are going to television, and the shows that are on the air today are some of the best in the history of television. ●