

TV Sunday

Actor Jay Mohr is right — you don't actually hear the new Hollywood-skewering sitcom "Action."

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Jay Mohr doesn't know what all the fuss is about.

"People ask me how I feel about all the cursing in the pilot," says Mohr, who stars in "Action," the bawdy new comedy from Fox that debuts next month.

"I tell them: There is not one swear word in the pilot. They say: 'Yeah, there is; there's all that bleeping.'"

"Yeah — bleep. I didn't know bleep was a swear word. For all you know, I'm saying 'pancakes and flapjacks.' It's your mind that's putting the dirty words [in there]."

Of course, this behind-the-scenes look at a vain, arrogant, and ruthless Hollywood producer named Peter Dragon has a lot more than just the occasional stream of (bleeped) profanity.

"Action" also features a former child star turned prostitute (the terrific Ileana Douglas); Dragon's ex-wife, who is paired off with his closeted and well-endowed boss; and, most important, literate scripts with enough caustic insight to satisfy the most jaded insider.

Mohr plays Dragon, and perhaps some of that cocky self-confidence is rubbing off.

During the annual press confab for the new fall shows, the expected lovefest for "Action" never took place.

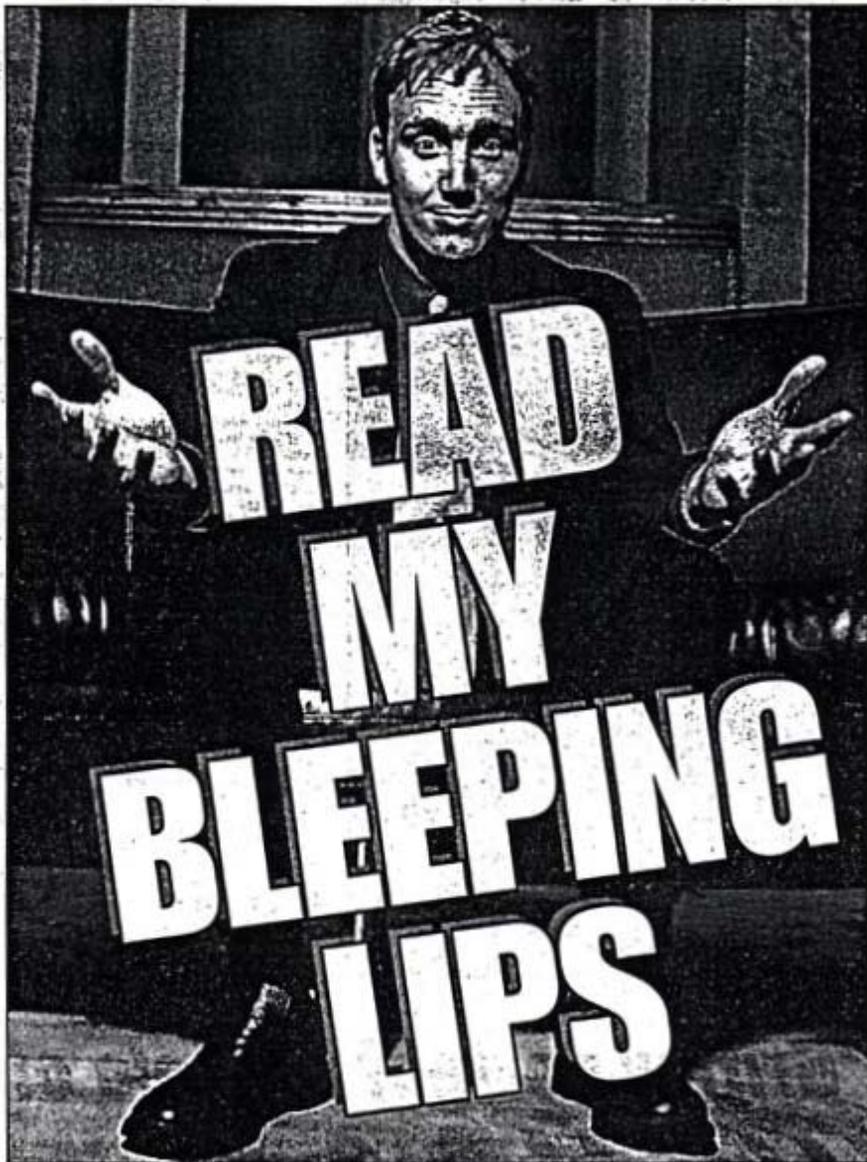
Though quickly deemed the cleverest, most promising half hour of the season, "Action" was lambasted for dragging the looser standards of cable onto network television.

Instead of laying low and making polite, PC comments, Mohr fought back.

"I just watched the British Open," he said at the time, noting that the networks not only showed Tiger Woods uttering an unmistakable expletive after a wayward tee shot — but then repeated the high-light footage for several days afterward.

"And if you watch 'Cops,' which is on at 8 [p.m.], guys are getting arrested and looking right down the barrel of a camera, saying [expletive], . . . So I'm confused as to where the line is drawn."

Most thought he made his case convincingly, but some reporters clearly preferred "Oh! Stars-to-



play humble.

That trial-by-fire hasn't dimmed Mohr's enthusiasm for "Action" or his desire to sing its praises.

"This thing's a comet," exclaims the New Jersey native, who talked by cellphone from the set. "If we get canceled, let's get canceled doing what got us here in the first place. The reason we have Jay Mohr

and Ileana Douglas — film actors — is because this is something really terrific. Let's go down swinging."

With the brilliant "Larry Sanders Show" — the obvious inspiration for "Action" — the sense of being a fly on the wall lent its characters' witty behavior a jaw-droppingly almost painful realism. But thanks to being on

broadcast network instead of HBO (which turned the show down), "Action" has to be clever instead of crude.

I humanize Dragon in subtle, smart ways: One scene shows him rehearsing a balmy, don't-screw-with-me speech with the help of his young daughter; another scene has the usually glib producer hem and haw when asking a prost-

tute if she'd like to spend the night.

— And those endless bleeps give the whole series a playful, mocking air.

According to Mohr — who's apparently soaked up enough of the ego-driven Peter-Dragon to refer to himself in the third person these days — the smart touches in the pilot are just the beginning.

TV Sunday

him say %#\$&*!! or even &*\$\$@#! in
If it's dirty words you want, he says...



ENTER THE DRAGON: Jay Mohr (left and above with co-star, Lisa Ann Douglas) plays an especially unpleasant Hollywood producer named Peter Dragon in the Fox series that performs vivisection on Tinseltown and its aggressive way of doing business (right).



"The second episode is twice as funny as the first one," the 28-year-old insists. "The third one is as funny as the second one and the fourth one is funnier than all of them."

Being in a good sitcom has been a life-long dream for Mohr.

When he was in high school, Mohr sent letters to all the networks asking to appear on one of their shows.

"I sent my school picture," remembers Mohr, who admits writing: "Dear NBC, I have blond hair, blue eyes, a space between my teeth and I think I'm funny."

Soon, he was begging his mom to drive him to comedy clubs so he could perform stand-up.

She had just two rules: Don't use the "f" word and no stand-up on a

school night.

Then came a series of frustrating successes.

Mohr landed a part on a sitcom... but he was stuck playing a second banana named Dorfman on the quickly cancelled "Camp Wilder."

That was followed by the obligatory stint on "Saturday Night Live," where Mohr's spot-on imitations of Christopher Walken and others garnered him an Emmy nomination.

But like so many other veterans of that show, Mohr had an unpleasant time amidst the backbiting and petty jealousy.

"SNL" led to more TV stints, including a brief gig on MTV hosting a lip-synch variety show called "Lip Service," and the highly touted "Jeff Foxworthy Show," which

never caught fire.

Finally, Mohr snagged the career-changing role of Bob Sugar, the oily agent who fires Tom Cruise, in "Jerry Maguire."

The movie hadn't even come out yet and Mohr was hot at last. Director Glenn Gordon Caron of "Moonlighting" wanted Mohr as the male lead in the romantic comedy "Picture Perfect," starring Jennifer Aniston of "Friends."

Unfortunately, Caron was the only one who wanted him. Twentieth Century-Fox was dead-set against Mohr.

"And I know for a fact, Jennifer didn't want me," he says. "I know she didn't want me even up to the point of the premiere, when she saw the film and said, surprised, 'You were very good.'"

"She was very professional, incredibly professional. But not happy with the casting of Jay Mohr in the lead," he says.

So Mohr garnered his first lead and the grudging admiration of his co-star, only to watch "Picture Perfect" die at the box office.

So have most of his other movies, ranging from the "Airplane"-style spoof "Mafia" and the talking parrot flick "Paulie" (which actually did okay) to a number of well-chosen smaller films.

"Playing By Heart" (in which Mohr nicely portrays a young man dying of AIDS), "Suicide Kings" and even the critically lauded "Go" (which co-starred Mohr with Scott Wolf as gay soap stars) all received good notices and a quick trip to the video store.

"She's All That" opens at \$20 million and "Go" flies in under the radar. Go figure, laughs Mohr, who admits the clutch of serious roles was a purposeful choice.

"For two or three years, I downplayed the fact that I was a comic because I wanted to be taken seriously as an actor," says Mohr, who still works the comedy clubs whenever he has a break.

"Now I'm a little more confident in who I am and I call myself a comic."

He's confident enough to relish the fact that everything is coming together on "Action," just as he always dreamed.

He's confident enough to marry his long-time sweetheart recently (instead of being asked when are they going to get married, now they're being asked when are they going to have kids).

And he's confident enough to welcome the pressure of starring in the most talked-about, most-anticipated new show of the season.

"This show is so good that we welcome the hype," says Mohr.

"When people tune in, most of them will say, 'This is fantastic!'"

About 26 percent of the people are going to say, "I can't believe this is on television!" But that's the 26 percent of the people we don't want anyway.