

Los Angeles Times | ENTERTAINMENT

LOCAL NATION WORLD BUSINESS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT LIVING TRAVEL OPINION MORE

MOVIES TELEVISION MUSIC CELEBRITY ARTS & CULTURE COMPANY TOWN CALENDAR THE ENVELOPE HOT LIST

IN THE NEWS: USC-OREGON | UCLA-OREGON STATE | HILLARY CLINTON | DEDE SCOZZAFAVA | HEALTHCARE | JON CORZINE

GNP^{Premier}

Greater Newport Physicians - #1 in Orange County

Choose Greater Newport Physicians

- Access to Hoag Hospital
- Get the most from your HMO coverage

Call us today: 1-888-249-2043

GREATER NEWPORT PHYSICIANS

HOAG HOSPITAL
In Newport Beach and Opening in Irvine Late 2010

Ted Danson is hip again

Roles in 'Damages' and 'Bored to Death' have given the actor a new twist on his career. Writers seem to love giving the 'Cheers' star a chance to show the dark side of his good-guy persona.



"Most of my humor is how totally ridiculous I am," Ted Danson says. (Ken Hively / Los Angeles Times)

Hot List: Find Events

Restaurants | Theater & Stage | Nightlife | Festivals | Concerts | Galleries & Museums

What Where

advertisement



By Gina Piccalo
October 18, 2009

E-mail Print Share Text Size

RELATED



'Bored to Death'

Ads by Google

\$199 Website SpokesPerson
Superior Quality, Payment Plans, to Connect and Engage your Visitors
www.videospokespeople.com

Sketchworks Theatre
Atlanta's premiere sketch comedy troupe since 2001 - Hilarious!
www.sketchworkscomedy.com

Ted Danson strolled along Santa Monica Beach, a bit overdressed among the sneaker-and-sandal crowd in his crisp button-down and dark blazer draped elegantly over one shoulder. As he studied the horizon, an incognito Dave Chappelle caught his eye and Danson deftly sidestepped a clutch of oncoming tourists to present himself before the comedian.

"How are you?" he asked, offering his hand and tilting that closely cropped snow-white head of his. "You are like a hero in my family."

Chappelle, dressed for a jog, looked braced for Ashton Kutcher and the "Punk'd" crew. It's not every day that "Cheers" bartender Sam Malone steps into your path with an "atta-boy."

For Danson, the encounter meant something else entirely. "Wow," he said, dryly, as they parted ways. "That was cool." He sensed an opportunity to self-deprecate. "That was my claim to hip right there," he added. "That's my only claim to hip."

Actually, Danson is hipper now than he's been in years. He's the chief scene-stealer on HBO's new Jonathan Ames-created comedy "Bored to Death," starring opposite Jason Schwartzman and Zach Galifianakis as a desperately hedonistic magazine editor based loosely on the late George Plimpton and writer Christopher Hitchens. The show landed a second season after just three episodes. He'll appear again as himself with wife Mary Steenburgen in two episodes of Larry David's "Curb Your

The Latest | news as it happens

Andy Pettitte weathers shaky outing to put Yankees ahead in World Series
- L.A. Times - Sports
11/01/2009, 12:00 a.m.

Kareem Rush gets chance to contribute
- L.A. Times - Sports
10/31/2009, 9:41 p.m.

Galaxy, Chivas USA are rivals, but friendly, too
- L.A. Times - Sports
10/31/2009, 9:26 p.m.

MTA's rail-car contract falls apart at last minute, scuttling hundreds of jobs [Updated]
- L.A. Now
10/31/2009, 9:14 p.m.

Oregon hangs record-setting loss on USC
- L.A. Times - Sports
10/31/2009, 9:11 p.m.

MOST VIEWED | MOST E-MAILED

1. Qian Xuesen dies at 98; rocket scientist helped establish Jet Propulsion Laboratory

Enthusiasm." And early next year, Danson returns for his third outing as the delightfully despicable billionaire Arthur Frobisher, Glenn Close's nemesis on FX's drama "Damages."

A few years ago, not many people would have guessed that Danson would be so positioned at this stage of his career. Sure, he's a TV stalwart, a bit of pop culture lore with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. But that sitcom persona beckons from another era and doesn't share much affinity with TV's most fashionable paradigm, the Age of Moral Ambiguity.

Yet that's exactly why he's suddenly so popular with TV writers. There's something satisfying for them about casting one of America's sweethearts as a character choking on his own charisma, consumed by breathtaking ego and crippling self-loathing. Perhaps most surprising is Danson's own enthusiasm for these kinds of roles. He has taken to them with such ferocity that his co-stars, writers and producers describe his performances as if they've been left blinking in the afterglow of a rocket launch.

Larry David, a friend of Danson's for a decade, was gob-smacked by Danson's take on "Bored's" George Christopher. "You didn't know that guy was inside of him," he said. Ames was "just blown away" by Danson's "pathos" and "honesty" the first time he saw him in character. "Damages" co-creator Daniel Zelman recalls that Arthur Frobisher "just kind of exploded out of him." Perhaps these are the perks of being underestimated.

"I was trained that the play was the thing, that the writing, the writer, was the thing," Danson said, his patrician mien drawing glances as he meandered along the beach. "Attach yourself in any way you can to good writing. In my case it happened first with 'Body Heat' and 'Onion Field.' I'd say in life, in general, if I can't find the humor in the tragedy of life, I'd be in trouble. But at the same time, if the comedy doesn't have any nod to how sad life is, I'm not interested."

A character at first

Born Edward Bridge Danson III, he's the son of an archaeologist, the product of a Connecticut prep school and Stanford University who earned a graduate degree in acting from Carnegie-Mellon University. Early on, Danson was known as a character actor, playing the doomed L.A. detective in "The Onion Field" (1979) and the smarmy, soft-shoe-dancing D.A. in "Body Heat" (1981).

Then came "Cheers" in 1982 and suddenly Danson was on the cover of Playgirl. Sam Malone was an ex-relief pitcher, a ladies man whose breathtaking density was always good for a chuckle. Danson played him with an athletic grace, sleeves pushed up to the elbows, that prominent brow setting up the perfect deadpan. He was part of the hunky 1980s trio in "Three Men and a Baby." And for the two decades that followed, he became the handsome guy with the formidable hairline, a bounce in his step and the snappy one-liners. To this day, he signs autographs "Cheers, Ted Danson."

There were moments of fearlessness. Remember him in 1984, cast against type as the incestuous dad in ABC's Emmy-winning TV movie "Something About Amelia"? And what about when he stripped off his hairpiece for the "Cheers" finale in 1993? Then there was that unfortunate performance in blackface at the Friars Club roast of old flame Whoopi Goldberg, which Danson recently called "a graceless moment in my life."

At the time, those risks looked like anomalies. But considering the arc of Danson's career lately, they seem to reflect a more nuanced talent, an actor groping for more depth and emotion. Even the years he spent playing the misanthrope doctor on "Becker" now feel like a compromise; he could be grouchy and sour and very un-Sam Malone-like, but it still got the studio audience laughing.

"I can't lay claim to plotting," he said. "My entire career I've pretty much done what has been set in front of me next."

Danson says he's not as ambitious as he once was. He'd just as soon spend less time on the set and more time with his wife and adult children on his and Steenburgen's 9-acre citrus and avocado farm in Ojai.

Indeed, when "Damages" creators Glenn and Todd Kessler and Daniel Zelman pitched him the part of Arthur Frobisher, Danson didn't rush into anything. Now, he's quick to acknowledge "without a doubt, 'Damages' helped make me viable again."

His charm and optimism were the perfect cover for the "Damages" brand of villain. Danson brought so much to the role, in fact, that the producers amplified his presence in the show, doubling his scenes.

"He was willing or eager to overturn every expectation an audience might have had for him," said

2. Clinton in Pakistan encounters widespread distrust of U.S.
3. Trojans are knocked defenseless
4. New Jersey story: Governor race heats up
5. Brett Favre is back in Green Bay
6. California to withhold a bigger chunk of paychecks
7. Marijuana growers upend hard-luck California town
8. Reader questions on House healthcare bill
9. USC President Steven B. Sample to step down in August
10. 'Puzzlers' reassemble shredded Stasi files, bit by bit

Mexico Under Siege »



The drug war at our doorstep.

Glenn Kessler, also a co-executive producer. "By the second episode, [Frobisher has] put a hit on an innocent woman, he's been doing drugs in the back seat of a Cadillac Escalade with a hooker. And that's not Sam Malone. He's taken it even farther than we'd even hoped for. He had absolutely no vanity."

'Old school elegant'

Danson settled gingerly on a grimy concrete bench in the shadow of the Santa Monica Pier. It was the only shade in sight and he was starting to develop what he called "a sheen." At 61, he still possesses a nonchalant, brainy sort of sex appeal that makes him believable as the skirt-chasing aesthete on "Bored" or the womanizing champion of industry on "Damages."

He's the kind of man who makes a concerted effort to walk curbside when he's accompanying a woman. And he's the sort of friend that even Larry David concedes is "old school elegant." In fact, he opened his Martha's Vineyard guest house to the comedian for two summers after David's marriage fell apart.

"He's got a lot of moves," David noted with uncharacteristic sobriety. "He's like a basketball player. He gets the ball. He fakes left when he's going right. He's very smooth. And he completely captures your attention."

Schwartzman sounded a little star-struck recalling a dinner party at Danson's house years ago. It was a huge affair, one of Danson's occasional gatherings of "creative people." And though Schwartzman knew Danson's daughters socially, the party was the first time the two really met. "Every time he would leave the room, I would follow him to the next room," he said. "I just wanted to hang out with him."

During the filming of "Bored," Danson showed up on the set every day for three months, sometimes traveling an hour there and back just to sit at the monitor and applaud his costars. "He'd come over in the middle of takes," said Schwartzman.

"Ted is like this incredible mix," said Ames, the show's creator. "He can play widely confident and then widely insecure from moment to moment. Like his character, he's very game and adventurous."

It's easy to envision Danson the man enjoying languorous dinner parties at his summer haunt in Martha's Vineyard, trading quips with longtime friends the Clintons. But Danson casts himself as a bumbling, self-serious sort.



"Most of my humor is how totally ridiculous I am," he said. "I can find endlessly funny things about me or our life. The grand statement followed upon stepping in the pile of poo."

When a German tourist thrusts a tour book in his face, spilling over with praise for "Cheers," Danson grabs a pen.

"Make a note," he joked. "I'm very, very famous. Which means the pile of poo is coming around the corner." He handed the book back, adding, "I'm probably sitting in it."

calendar@latimes.com

Copyright © 2009, The Los Angeles Times

 E-mail
  Print
  Digg
  Twitter
  Facebook
  StumbleUpon
  Share

In Case You Missed It...



Inside the world's biggest cruise ship



Remodeling a 1924 cottage in Eagle Rock



The joys of clay pot cooking



Street Fashion: Santa Monica promenade



Forbes' top earning dead celebrities

CHASE  Open a new account **IN JUST MINUTES.**  [GET DETAILS](#) 

News	Entertainment	Living	Multimedia	Top Blogs	More
Local	Television	Travel	Video	L. A. Now	Corrections
Nation	Movies	Health	Photos	Celebrity	Readers' Rep
World	Music	Food	Data Desk	TV Show Tracker	Print Edition
Business	Arts & Culture	Home	Your Scene	Politics	Contact Us Help
Technology	Celebrity	Image	Times on Twitter	Gold Derby	About Us
Sports	The Envelope	Magazine	RSS	Company Town	LATMG Media Kit
Opinion	Calendar	Books	Newsletters	Technology	Digital Media Kit
Columnists	Company Town	Autos	Kindle	Music	Subscribe
Obituaries	TV Listings	Hot List	E-edition	Travel & Deals	Manage My Account
	Movie Listings	Horoscopes		Health	Site Map
	Tickets	Crosswords			

Coastline Pilot | Daily Pilot | Huntington Beach Independent | Valley Sun | Burbank Leader | News Press | KTLA | Hoy | Brand X | LA, Los Angeles Times Magazine | Baltimore Sun | Chicago Tribune | Daily Press | Hartford Courant | Los Angeles Times | Orlando Sentinel | Sun Sentinel | The Morning Call | Terms of Service | Privacy Policy | Los Angeles Times, 202 West 1st Street, Los Angeles, California, 90012 | Copyright 2009

A Tribune Web site