People desperate for respect

'Office' creator Ricky Gervais stars in 'Extras'

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NEW YORK (AP) -- Ricky Gervais is fascinated by how a camera can skew the flow of ordinary life.

On "The Office," his hilarious British "mockumentary" series, he explored the effect of a film crew on David Brent, the fame-lusting office manager who clowns it up as cameras occupy his dreary workplace for a TV reality show.

Now, on his new comedy "Extras," Gervais has turned his attention to actor manque Andy Millman and the show-biz obscurity of being an extra. Portrayed by Gervais (who also played Brent), Andy is what is called "background talent." His workdays are spent on London film shoots helping fill the frame with his unnoted presence -- and laboring to justify his marginal status.

Extras, as Gervais explains, "are just bodies. They're pushed in and told where to stand. It's like hanging drapes." He chortles with delight. "We try to show how Andy is desperate for respect."

On a recent episode (10:30 p.m. EDT Sunday on HBO) Andy's role was that of a nameless prisoner in a film about modern-day genocide directed by, of all people, Ben Stiller.

"If I find a little orphan child in a war zone, how do I help him?" poses Stiller, who's afflicted by severe high-pretension. His lofty solution: "Make this movie. Make people think. Change attitudes."

Meanwhile, Andy tries to wangle from Stiller a line or two of dialogue by approaching the bereaved war victim whose story Stiller is filming. Then he anxiously waits.

"I can't push it," Andy frets to Maggie, his chum and fellow extra. "I can't go up to him and remind him, 'Sorry to interrupt you again while you're thinking about your slaughtered loved ones, but that line -- you done anything about it?'"

"It might seem a wee bit insensitive, eh?" allows Maggie. Not that Andy can hold off bugging him very long.

Ashley Jensen is perfect as the dimwitted Maggie, while Stephen Merchant is a whiz as agent Darren Lamb who, after five years, has failed to score Andy a single speaking role. ("I'm as annoyed as you are," he assures Andy pleasantly.)

The character: 'The world owes him a living'

As it happens, Merchant is not only Gervais' co-star, but also his behind-the-scenes partner, having co-written and co-directed "The Office" and now "Extras."

They met eight years ago when Gervais, working at an alternative radio station in
London, took him on as an assistant.

Gervais must have needed help. The Reading, England, native was already a self-confessed sloth and budding late bloomer. After graduating from college in philosophy, he had performed in one rock band, managed another, and been a talent booker for a student union. Once they got around to it, he and Merchant created "The Office."

Wildly successful in Britain, "The Office" turned Gervais (pronounced jer-VAZE) into an unsuspecting star.

And as a cult sensation in the United States, it spawned an Americanized version for NBC last season that currently airs Tuesdays at 9:30 p.m. With Steve Carell playing a Yank equivalent of Brent, the U.S. edition operates independently of Gervais -- who has been plenty busy with his new series.

At first glance, "Extras" may seem overly similar to "The Office." But first impressions can deceive.

"Brent was essentially an idiot who wasn't that bad but just wanted to be popular," says Gervais, "whereas Andy has a different theme: The world owes him a living."

David Brent was a doughy bloke with a goatee and a cajoling grin. Andy Millman shares that gift of glib, often loutish, gab. But he has lost the foppish goatee and gained a measure of unrealized ambition. He craves stardom, and thinks he's entitled. Comparing Robert De Niro to himself, he thinks: not better, just luckier.

In short, he's ripe to be taken down a few pegs, and is, with regularity.

"He was born smart, and he can't let it go," says Gervais. "He'd rather make a joke than listen. He's clever, but he hasn't applied it as well as some other people."

Making matters even worse, Andy has a conscience. For instance, he just can't bring himself to fire that pitiable agent.

'What I love is the work'

Preparing to move Andy forward for a second season of six more episodes, Gervais remains fascinated by fame and how so many people chase it. But he disavows his own.

"It's the one thing I actively don't like: just being recognized," says Gervais, a 44-year-old chap who, casually dressed for this interview in slacks and sports shirt (shirttail out), gives the strong impression he is on no star trip.

"What I love is the work," he insists. "I get excited by the creativity, not because I think I have the best ideas in the world. I'm excited, because they're my ideas."

But having said that, Gervais, who is often given to reflective comic riffs, confides his fear that the sum of creativity allotted him might fail to be in synch with his lifespan.

"It's like Keats: 'When I have fears that I may cease to be, before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain ...' You don't want to die before you've got out all your ideas. But you don't want to run out of ideas before you die.

"You've got to time it right," he goes on. "It's like the perfect meal: You don't want to have toast left over, with no bacon. You've got to time it just right: 'The End,' " whereupon he plops his head on an imaginary writing desk. Then he cackles with laughter. No end in sight for his funny ideas.

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