

Written by DREW TEWKSBURY Photographed by YU TSAI

# ToPheR GRACE

The photos by Arrian for Opus are a collaboration with the photographer Yu Tsai. Styling: Kristina Wornan, Chicago Greening, Natalie Bussell for 777McGroom.com. Digital Tech and Equipment: Luis Jimenez and Wally Jo for 88Phases.com. Production: Geoff Clark and  
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Somewhere within the suspended, repetitive motion of syndicated television, Topher Grace will always be trapped in an artificial and prefabricated seventies, hanging out in the carport of a nonexistent Wisconsin town, living an unhappened reality of teen adventures that many, somehow, find identifiable, whether they live in Milwaukee or Moscow.

Caught endlessly in a Möbius strip of afternoon reruns and late-night rehashes, Grace is eternally young in the distorted mirror of the television screen. His young adulthood is crystallized in the seven seasons of *That '70s Show*.

But now, at 28, Grace does not ruminate on the rapid success that placed him in the palm of rising fame, or look forward to his impending status as Hollywood's new leading man. Instead, he envisions a different future: "Models. Lots of models swimming in champagne," Grace says. "It's just a vision I have. Come on up to my pool full of champagne and just maybe some elephants would be involved."

Grace's world now includes starring in the box-office record-setting film *Spider-Man 3*; working with seasoned, acclaimed directors like Steven Soderbergh, Paul Weitz, and Sam Raimi; sharing the screen, on equal terms, with leading men Michael Douglas, George Clooney, and Dennis Quaid. So the possibility of the *Indiana Jones*-meets-Lil Jon crunk-a-thons he jokes about is completely real.

In person, it is apparent that Grace is the opposite of the extravagance he pretends to espouse. He is subdued, self-effacing, and seemingly far more genuine than his characters, many of whom possess a withering range of irony. So his immense yet veiled talent is essentially the elephant in the room. How much more is there beyond his mastery of fragile insecurity and the undeniable believability of his characters? "Acting is just acting," he says, shaking his head nonchalantly, responding to complex questions about his vocation as if the art form were akin to waiting in line at the DMV or cleaning out dryer lint.

There's something about the casual openness of Grace that smacks of the suburban idealism that was slathered upon Eric Forman, his character on *That '70s Show*. But in reality Grace's formative years were quite different from his adolescence in the fictional Point Place, Wisconsin. He grew up in the small, affluent Connecticut town Darien, which was famously depicted as the robo-milf homogenenopolis Stepford in the novel *The Stepford Wives* and its film adaptation. Grace went to high school at Brewster Academy, an elite New Hampshire boarding school on the shores of Lake Winnepesaukee. From here, Grace's life reads like a page torn from the Aspiring Actor's Clichéd Guide to Serendipitous Happenstance.

During his first lead performance in a high-school theater production (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*), the parents of a fellow student approached him about a part in a show they were producing. The parents turned out to be Bonnie and Terry Turner, creators of *3rd Rock from the Sun* and the writers of the film *Wayne's World*. After his first year at the University of Southern California, where he "majored in drinking," he dropped out and began work on *That '70s Show*, with a cadre

of then promising young actors including Ashton Kutcher, Wilmer Valderrama, Laura Prepon, Danny Masterson, and Mila Kunis.

The sudden shift from directionless college life to the rigorous schedule of professional acting was likely abrupt and unsettling, but Grace describes it in a way that is typically self-effacing and light. During a visit to the school a few years after being called up to the pros, he remembers "going back to USC and I spoke at a screening of [*Traffic*], and there were girls in the audience who had literally turned me down for dates. They were in my class, but now they were seniors instead of freshmen. I previously had asked some of them out, no joke, and they started laughing. And now they were in the audience waving at me. 'Hey, do you remember me? Is the option still open to go out?' It was awesome by the way."

He mentions the "hot chicks" at USC, it seems, to create a neutral masculine space in which to buy time, divert attention, or put on the camouflage of camaraderie. Just as Freud said: There are no jokes, only defense mechanisms. And Grace wields them with a deft charm.

Grace was like the Kobe Bryant of acting, only without the finely chiseled deltoids or mean dunk, or, of course, a nefarious social life, which is quite amazing for a young star of Grace's achievements and profile. His face rarely ends up on tabloid covers and only seldom attracts the ever-watchful eye of celebrity-gossip blogger Perez Hilton. Even without the media hype, his laid-back demeanor, engaging eyes, and unassuming approachability can create that pang of recognition—like you've seen him before, or, even more, *met* him before. Yet not from his film and television roles.

Was he the manager at the 72nd Street Urban Outfitters, on the Upper East Side? Was he the maitre'd at that Chili's in Scottsdale? Was Grace the guy who dated your cousin's boyfriend's sister? It is in the white noise of media memory that the variety of recognitions Grace engenders highlights the expansive difference between notoriety from television and the familiarity that comes as a result of film. The television isn't just a glowing box in the corner. We orient our rooms, our lives, even our relationships according to the lives of those in the box. We watch it with our best friends or alone, when we're drunk, sad, or even, on those few special occasions, naked. Talk around the water cooler or the subway tends not to involve the scores of a child's soccer game or grades on a half-finished online degree. It leans for the emotionally neutral but shared experiences of those who populate our televisions. It is an intensely personal relationship one has with a TV show; it is one of the few things we can count on every week. Grace is embedded in a collective consciousness that came with sharing some of our most intimate moments with a budding television star. As he grows up, we share in his experiences and trace the arc of his emergence from awkward teen to the acceptance of adult responsibilities. We think he's our friend.

But he's just an actor, extremely gifted at manufacturing effortlessness. Grace first capitalized on his clean-cut image and untrained naturalness to create the privileged, smart-alec, drug-dealing private schooler for Soderbergh's *Traffic*, in 2000. Pulling from his experiences at

Previous spread: Mohair cardigan and leather lace-up boots by **Z ZEGNA**. Cotton-denim jeans by **IRON ARMY**. Opposite: Wool double-breasted jacket by **Z ZEGNA**. Wool Split Melange sweater by **CORPUS**. Cotton-denim Thanaz jeans by **DIESEL**. Leather boots by **JOHN GALLIANO HOMME**.







Brewster Academy, Grace constructed a dead-on depiction of trust-fund terror, which he discussed with Soderbergh during his audition.

"I remember saying to him, 'I know there's more famous people that want to play the role, but they just don't get that vernacular. There's this way of speaking that those kids have. They are talking a lot but they're saying nothing. And that eventually became our thesis for that character.'"

In *Oceans 11* and *12*, also directed by Soderbergh, Grace toyed with the imaginary relationship between an actor and the audience when he played one of his most difficult roles yet: himself. "The joke is that you're supposed to play the worst version of yourself," he suggests, "and I don't think too many people are comfortable with that. I never thought for a second that people were really going to think that's what I was like. I think that people will know that I was faking it in those movies. Well, I hope they do, 'cause I was such a prick!"

The hard-living, hyperbolized Grace of the *Oceans* films steals scenes from the high-wattage ensemble cast, a remixed Rat Pack, from whom Grace had the pleasure of gleaning acting advice, especially George Clooney.

"He [told me] about some movies that he passed on. First of all, he didn't have to be honest with me at all. He could have just blown me off, but we were having lunch one day and he opened up to us about being an actor. He was also the first one to tell me not to sign up for the extra year with *That '70s Show*, which was really smart. He didn't sign up for his extra year on *ER*. You have to trade a lot of money for freedom."

With his freedom established, Grace was discerning about the roles he chose, focusing more on the quality of the script than the money involved. "[Producers] were proposing me all this money, and they'd say, 'We're paying you to be in this movie, opposite this hot girl and this hilarious dude up in Canada, and it will be a great creative experience!' But I'd read the script and I just felt like this wasn't that good and I realized this wouldn't be a movie I want to see. It wasn't hard saying yes to *Traffic*; the hardest thing in the world was saying no to twenty other projects."

To understand Grace's quick success as an actor, and as a creative commodity, it's important to understand what he represents. Born in 1978, he is essentially a placeholder for the children of the Baby Boomers, arguably the first true television generation. "When I started on '70s, there was this huge thing for all the kids of the Baby Boomers. There was \*Nsync, Backstreet Boys, and *Titanic*. There was a lot of youth programming in all media," he says.

This youth programming was a response to the huge market of aging boomers, who both sought to regain their youth through media or by involving themselves in the lives of their children. In Paul Weitz's film *In Good Company* (2004), Grace, in his break-out performance, capitalizes on this youth envy and the fear of the younger generation devouring the old regime. Grace plays a 20-something business phenom who displaces an ad exec, played by an aged-looking Dennis Quaid, whose daughter, played by Scarlett Johansson, begins dating Grace's character. The film exposes a

great divide between those born in the age of irony, where sarcasm masks insecurity with feigned intelligence, and an ethic founded on honesty, integrity, and hard work.

"I don't like anything that you can just say, 'This is a comedy or this is a drama.' In *Good Company* is the first time I got to do that. I don't think you can really qualify what it is. I have no genre that I like, which I think is really freeing as an actor. Even within movies I like to play many roles, add a lot of layers. I think it's just boring otherwise. My nightmare as an actor is to lock into one role.

"There are no rules to how the world works and those layers really make the topography of the film more interesting," Grace says. "As I have gotten bigger roles in films, I just love playing different layers. Like how Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life* is all over the place. At the beginning, he's all young and spry, then he's down, then he's suicidal, then he's, well, whatever the opposite of suicidal is—high on life, I guess. I love that he was the glue of a lot of things that he was in."

Like Jimmy Stewart before him, Grace is a master of understatement and character detail. His characters possess a reflexive sense of insecurity—they know their shortcomings and manifest that self-knowledge in small actions. They close their eyes and raise a hand to the bridge of the nose, they smile nervously and look askance at someone asking a difficult question and, most of all, they sigh. This is not to say that he's out-Hugh Grant-ing the most vulnerable stutterer in the business, but he approaches a role with an appreciation for the diversity of emotion it requires.

For many actors who grew up on television, it is difficult to leave behind the archetypal image of childhood they create. (See also, Fred Savage, Candace Cameron, and Dustin Diamond, to name just a few.) But as Grace grows up, so do his characters. We watch him try to salvage a marriage in *In Good Company*, seduce the sexy Laura Linney in director Dylan Kidd's *P.S.*, and get covered by anger-augmenting space slime in *Spider-Man 3*.

Like his character Eddie Brock in *Spider-Man 3*, who, after an encounter with some irritable meteor juice, changes into Spider-Man's evil doppelganger, Venom, Grace is about to undergo a transformation of his own. Enjoying his part in one of the most lucrative franchises in film history, Grace is now faced with new, personally more significant options. But he has one dream that he plans to realize. "Have I cut a rap album?" he asks, rhetorically. "The answer is yes. I'm just waiting for it to drop," he says, making the universal Snoop-bounce motion with his palm.

In seriousness, he is approaching his future carefully, choosing projects that he trusts. He recently began shooting *Kids in America*, which is his first effort at acting, producing, and co-writing a film. He doesn't plan on becoming an actor-turned-anything. "I really hate when young actors get into this multi-hyphenated universe," he says. "I only did it because I had a certain idea with a friend of mine. We didn't push it really hard, but it caught fire and people loved the idea. It worked because it was a solid idea, but I've yet to have another one."

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Previous spread: Wool military peacoat by **DSQUARED2**. Knit cardigan by **MORPHINE GENERATION**. Opposite: Wool cable-knit sweater by **Z ZEGNA**. Cotton-denim Thanaz jeans by **DIESEL**. Leather boots by **JOHN GALLIANO HOMME**. Following spread: Linen and flax Kondora pullover and cotton Nauhi T-shirt by **DIESEL**. Cotton-denim jeans by **IRON ARMY**. Leather lace-up boots by **Z ZEGNA**.

Styling: MARTINA NILSSON  
Grooming: NATALIA BRUSCHI  
Location Vehicle and Equipment:  
QUIXOTE STUDIOS, WEST HOLLYWOOD  
Location: A-Z ANIMAL RESERVE,  
PALMDALE, CALIFORNIA

