

'WHO GIVES A SHIT ABOUT THESE RICH MOTHERF**ERS?'

BY
SETH ABRAMOVITCH

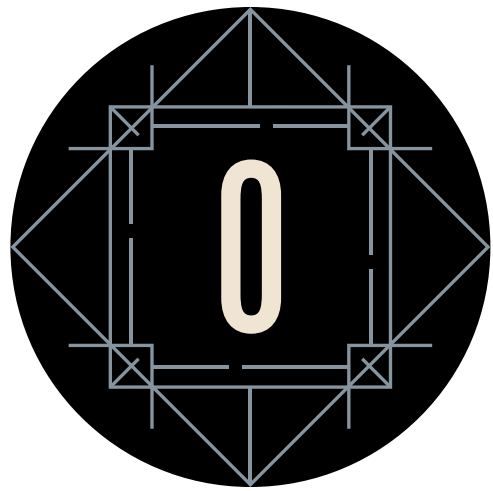
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
DAVID NEEDLEMAN

IT TURNS OUT MORE PEOPLE THAN EVEN HBO ANTICIPATED AS *THR* GOES ON THE SET FOR SEASON TWO OF EMMY-NOMINATED *SUCCESSION*, THE TRUMP-ERA FAMILY SAGA THAT'S WOWED THE COASTAL ELITES, LIT UP SOCIAL MEDIA AND MADE THE MURDOCHS SEEM (ALMOST) RELATABLE



From left: Sarah Snook, Kieran Culkin, Matthew Macfadyen, Brian Cox, Nicholas Braun, Jeremy Strong and Alan Ruck were photographed July 7 at Weylin in Brooklyn.

Styling by Jason Rembert
On Snook: Zae Posan dress, Rina Casovilla shoes, Bulgari earrings, Cartier and Piaget rings. On Culkin: Saint Laurent suit and shoes, Piaget lapel pin, Bulgari watch, Tiffany & Co. rings. On Macfadyen: Ermenegildo Zegna suit, Thom Browne shoes. On Cox: Brioni suit, Christian Louboutin shoes. On Braun: Thom Browne suit and shoes, Tiffany & Co. bracelet and ring. On Strong: Brunello Cucinelli suit, Gianvito Rossi shoes. On Ruck: Giorgio Armani suit, Christian Louboutin shoes, Cartier watch.



One day last summer, a bleary-eyed Brian Cox was fetching a morning latte at a shop near his London flat when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see a bearded gentleman in line behind him. “I just want to say, I’m really enjoying the show,”

the stranger told him, referring to *Succession*, the Emmy-nominated HBO dramedy on which Cox, 73, plays Logan Roy, a cantankerous media titan not at all unlike Rupert Murdoch. “My wife, on the other hand ...” the man continued, “she finds it hard to watch.”

“Really?” said Cox. “Why is that?”

Turns out the man was Keith Tyson, the British artist married to Elisabeth Murdoch, daughter of Rupert and sister of Fox Corp. CEO Lachlan Murdoch.

“Oh, I see,” Cox said.

“But you are going to go easy on them?” Tyson pleaded.

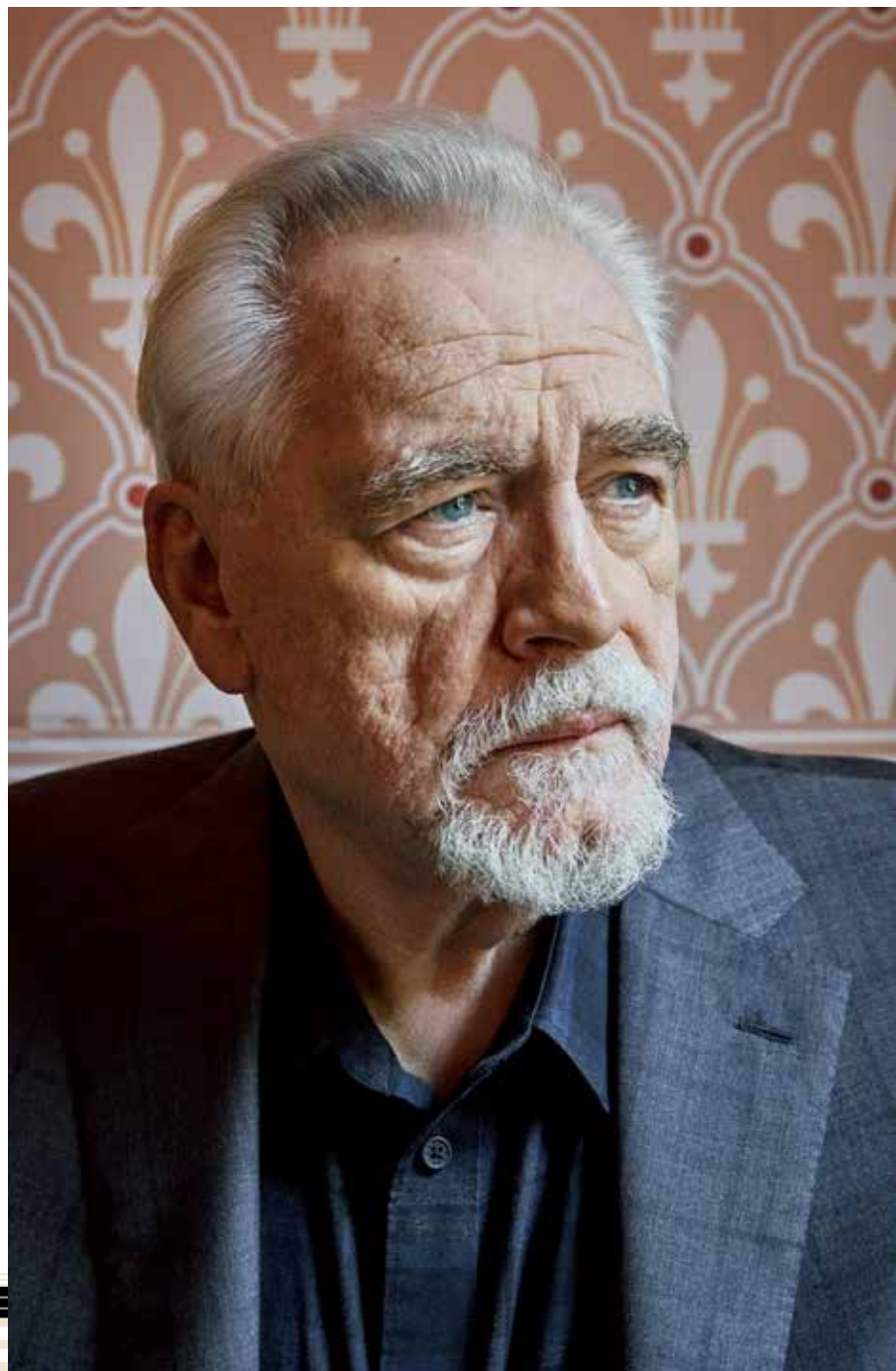
“Oh, yes,” Cox replied. “They’ll be fine.”

Actually, with *Succession*’s season two set to begin Aug. 11, Elisabeth may want to stock up on merlot from her dad’s Bel Air winery — or perhaps something stronger. With plotlines seemingly ripped from Murdoch family headlines (plus a dash of the Redstones and the Kennedys), HBO’s media empire saga will pick up exactly where it left off in August — with Logan’s eldest son, Kendall (Jeremy Strong), stumbling through a Chappaquiddick-like accident involving ketamine and a dead waiter, while Logan’s other son, the smart-mouthed Roman (Kieran Culkin), faces possible corporate manslaughter charges after rushing the launch of a satellite rocket that exploded in a deadly fireball. At least Logan’s

baby girl got a happy ending: Shiv (Sarah Snook) married Tom (Matthew Macfadyen), her scheming fiance, minutes after admitting that she’d been unfaithful.

Yes, it’s a slow-motion limo wreck, and while it hasn’t yet yielded *Game of Thrones*-style numbers — HBO says *Succession*’s first season averaged 4.3 million viewers an episode across all platforms, including HBO Go and HBO Now — critics love it and the media and entertainment industry is obsessing over it (five Emmy nominations plus a Golden Globe nom for Culkin in December). A rep for Rupert, Lachlan and James Murdoch couldn’t confirm if they have seen the show, but it’s known that Rupert’s fourth and current wife, Jerry Hall, is a big fan, and she’s got plenty of company: Everyone from Murdoch critic Judd Apatow to *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat (who recently complained that “nothing else on TV seems any good”) has been tuning in. “It’s a morality tale,” says Cox, theorizing

Cox on his character Logan: “He’s probably pretty right wing, but he doesn’t give a shit. That’s the thing. He’s got this lack of care.”



“BRIAN COX ONCE YELLED AT ME IN A SCENE. IT WAS SO MEAN, I CRIED.”

JEREMY STRONG

his approach to this type of storytelling. “So you just need that distance. If we look at it head-on, it’s like looking at the sun.”

Nonetheless, *Succession* began with a film script Armstrong wrote nearly a decade ago called *Murdoch*. Before that, he’d made a name for himself in the U.K. writing TV comedies like *In the Thick of It* and *Peep Show*, developing his biting style, which is mostly about terrible people having terrible things happen to them. At some point, he was approached by a producer to make a Rupert Murdoch biopic, so Armstrong spent

a year researching the family and tapping out a screenplay that depicted the mogul attempting to broker a deal to give his two young daughters with then-wife Wendi Deng future voting rights in News Corp. “It was a fictionalized future imagination of an event,” Armstrong says. “And it has informed the show somewhat.”

That unproduced screenplay landed on the Black List, where it drew the admiration of Frank Rich, the columnist turned HBO consultant. A few years later, Rich and Armstrong met on the set of *Veep*, where Rich was an executive producer and Armstrong was writing an early episode. Rich suggested Armstrong to HBO for a project called *The Imperialist*, about two 20-something American bros who open a coffee plantation in Africa. Filmmaker Adam McKay loved the material and agreed to direct the pilot. But after several years of retooling and development, McKay turned

on why a show about a bunch of amoral one-percenters has struck such a chord in the Trump-era zeitgeist. “It’s saying human beings are basically ludicrous. They’re ludicrous in their desires, they’re ludicrous in what they get and don’t get and, in the end, they never even know what they want.”

JESSE ARMSTRONG, THE SOFT-SPOKEN

47-year-old British TV writer who came up with the idea for *Succession*, is sipping a cup of tea in an oak-paneled Wall Street men’s club, where on this steamy July afternoon the cast and crew are about to shoot a scene for a season two episode. With a scruffy gray beard and eyeglasses

propped on his forehead, he looks a bit like a cuddlier Steve Jobs. “I’m uncomfortable with the word satire,” he says, bristling a bit when asked to categorize his show. “In the U.K., there’s quite a bit of sledgehammer weight to that word, which is the antithesis of the subtle approach I strive for.”

Despite all the winking similarities to the Murdochs (sometimes verging on the prescient — an episode last year had the Roys gathering for a group therapy session on a family ranch, months before *The New York Times Magazine* published an exposé revealing that the Murdochs actually had done a therapeutic retreat together at the family ranch in

Australia), Armstrong insists any resemblance between the Roys and the Australian clan is mostly coincidental. He cites other inspirations as well, like the chaos unleashed over control of Viacom amid Sumner Redstone’s decline. “There’s a very slightly ineffable line you have to walk,” he says of



“Last September, Jesse asked me what I want for Shiv,” says Snook, seen here consulting with Armstrong (left) and Macfadyen. “I was like, ‘Obviously I take over the company.’”

his attention to another project, adapting Michael Lewis' Wall Street exposé *The Big Short*.

Armstrong, meanwhile, moved on, expanding his research — reading books about Redstone, Michael Eisner and British-Canadian press baron Conrad Black — and studying the ongoing shifts in the media climate. "I guess Breitbart was starting to bubble up around then," Armstrong says, "and Cambridge Analytica, and some of the Sinclair deals. And you start to think, 'My goodness, this is starting to feel like a singular situation.'"

In 2015, he began pouring it all into a TV script called *Immediate Family*, about four damaged siblings vying for an equal vote on the board of their father's company, a multi-tentacled media leviathan. That script caught the attention of Casey Bloys, who had just taken over as HBO's head of programming. "I really wanted to do a modern-day family show," Bloys says. It also impressed McKay. "I think within five minutes of reading it I called Jess and said, 'Oh, I'm completely in. This is amazing,'" recalls McKay, who ended up producing via his Gary Sanchez Productions and directing the pilot episode.

About the only thing nobody liked was the title. But after it was rechristened *Succession*



Snook on Shiv: "The casting breakdown said, 'Think Ivanka Trump.' It could have easily said Elisabeth Murdoch."

("Succession moments are always dangerous for democracies," notes history buff Armstrong), Bloys greenlit a pilot and McKay and Armstrong began looking for actors.

Casting Cox as the patriarch was an easy decision: McKay, Armstrong and casting director Francine Maisler (up for an Emmy for her work on *Succession*)

all had his name on their wish lists. Other pieces fell into place almost serendipitously. Alan Ruck, 63, who plays the dippy eldest half brother, Connor Roy, nearly blew off his audition to take his son to a music class but ended up showing up at the last minute after insistent calls from his agent. He improvised a scene at McKay's house and was hired on the spot. ("That's only happened to me once before, in the '80s," he says.) Culkin, 36, also was going to skip the audition

after he learned he was up for slacker cousin Greg — a comic relief part that ultimately went to the awkwardly amusing 6-foot-7 Nicholas Braun. Instead, Culkin ended up taping an audition in his Lower East Side apartment for the obnoxious Roman, who was much more his speed, and sent it to L.A. "In the room, Jesse, Francine and I were like, 'Oh, we have to cast him,'" recalls McKay. "Like, you never do that. For a series regular? But that's how frickin' good he was on tape."

BILLIONAIRE LESSON NO. 1: NO OVERCOATS

To help the cast and creators understand the ins and outs of being a contemporary 1-percenter, HBO hired expert consultants

LEAD BUSINESS AND FINANCIAL CONSULTANT

Former *Wall Street Journal* reporter **Merissa Marr** serves as the main expert on all things business-related on the show. When a plotline involving \$3 billion in debt arose, she advised on how to proceed.

TV NEWS CONSULTANT

The former executive producer of Fox News' *Lou Dobbs Tonight* and CNN's *American Morning*, **Jim McGinnis** gave tips on several season two broadcast news sequences, including a talking-head appearance Logan forces Kendall to do.

MEDIA AND SOCIAL CONSULTANT

Author and host of *CNN Style* **Derek Blasberg** offers tips on how New York rich act and dress, i.e., they don't wear loads of outer clothes because they go directly from the chopper to the limo.

WEDDING CONSULTANT

The epic, three-day nuptials at a Scottish castle that closed season one were overseen by **Sarah Haywood**. She pulls from her own experience mounting weddings for the likes of the son of Indian billionaire Mukesh Ambani.

POLITICS CONSULTANT

Democratic campaign consultant **Douglas Schoen** is a talking head for Fox News. He helped craft the storyline involving Shiv working as a strategist for a Bernie Sanders-esque candidate (Eric Bogosian).

CULTURE AND SOCIAL CONSULTANT

Tracey Pruzan is the author of two books on interior decorating and the wife of investment banker Robert Pruzan. Together they mount charity galas like the "sad sack WASP trap" of season one. —S.A.



From left: Snook and Macfadyen play newlyweds in season one; Eric Bogosian as Gil Eavis, a presidential candidate.

The cast met in New York for its first table read on Nov. 8, 2016 — also known as Election Day. The read went well. Then McKay invited them back to his pad in Tribeca for dinner, drinks and what was supposed to be a Hillary Clinton victory party. That went less well. By 9 p.m., it became clear that Donald Trump was going to win. "We starting passing some whiskey around and drinking it straight out of the bottle," says Braun, 31. "That was kind of an interesting initiation." Adds Snook, also 31: "A pal settled over the party. I think Adam said, 'Well, we're making the right show.'"

AT THE WALL STREET CLUB, ARMSTRONG

is chatting with director Mark Mylod, who also worked on *Game of Thrones* (he sees them as similar in that "they both explore family and power dynamics") as 100 dapperly dressed extras take their places for a party scene that appears late in season two following the Roys' grueling testimony in front of a Senate committee hearing. The season kicks off with Kendall forced to grovel to his father after his accident and failed coup while sister Shiv positions herself for a promotion. Roman gets into trouble overseas, Tom is given a powerful job at Logan's Fox News-like cable network ("He's aware it's a right wing thing, but he's very pleased to be shimmying up the greasy pole," notes Macfadyen) and two new faces are brought into the fold: Holly Hunter and Cherry Jones play CEO and owner, respectively, of a rival liberal-leaning media dynasty in the vein of the Sulzbergers, who have controlled *The New York Times* since 1896.

The look of the show adheres to the template forged by McKay on the pilot (which earned him an Emmy nomination for directing). HBO won't reveal the show's budget, but its lavish locations — last season's wedding was filmed at Scotland's Eastnor Castle; this

"PEOPLE GO, 'YOU'RE ON THAT SHOW?' I GO, 'YEAH.' THEY SAY, 'YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE.'" KIERAN CULKIN



season features locales as far flung as Iceland and Croatia — suggest it takes money to depict money. McKay plays down the spending. "They don't live like the characters on *Entourage*," he says. "It's much more understated, not as flashy and sparkly." Still, there

were certain luxuries McKay insisted on, like shooting the series on film. "It just needed that old-school elegance and warmth," he says. To keep things real, several consultants were enlisted to advise on how the ultra-rich dress, dine, do business, even

enter and exit a helicopter (see sidebar, opposite page). "They told us, 'You wouldn't duck,'" Culkin recalls. "Because we grew up getting out of helicopters, you just walk right the fuck out."

During shooting, scenes are only vaguely blocked out

Watch the *Succession* cast play an unfiltered and uncensored game of Fishing for Answers at THR.COM/VIDEO

HOW FACT BECOMES FICTION

Succession creator Jesse Armstrong is coy about his inspirations, but some similarities to the Murdochs go way beyond coincidental

and improvisation is encouraged. The camerawork is just as freewheeling, with three roving camerapeople capturing the action in “great, long takes,” notes Macfadyen, 44, adding that the freedom is both a blessing and a curse: The actors never know what their scenes will look like until they see the final edit. “You sort of have to leave it to the camera operators,” says Braun. “They’re really good at feeling a dynamic shift.” Between those great, long takes, Armstrong huddles with his actors — right now, for instance, he’s conferring with Strong and Annabelle Dexter-Jones (half sister of music producer Mark Ronson), who plays Kendall’s love interest this season — and drills deeply into their characters’ motivations, like a psychiatrist doing rounds.

On the set today, as season two grinds toward its final couple of weeks of shooting, there’s a whiff of both calmness and excitement, as if the cast and crew have relaxed into a comfortable routine but also are buzzing to unveil a show they believe has hit its stride. Although season three hasn’t yet been greenlit, there’s a high degree of confidence they’ll be playing these parts for a while, which is quite a change from this time last year, when no one was sure if anyone would like *Succession*, or hang around

Braun on Greg: “Sometimes everybody is scheming in a scene, and I feel uncomfortable. Like, ‘Oh, man, maybe I should be brooding.’” On Braun: Christian Dior suit.

until they did, not even HBO (the network lavished more marketing love on *Sharp Objects* only to see social media instead light up on *Succession*). “It took a few episodes for some people to figure out the idiosyncratic tone, but I think people really get the show now,” says exec producer Rich. Culkin agrees. “Somewhere around filming episode five or six, I started to think, ‘You know, we actually

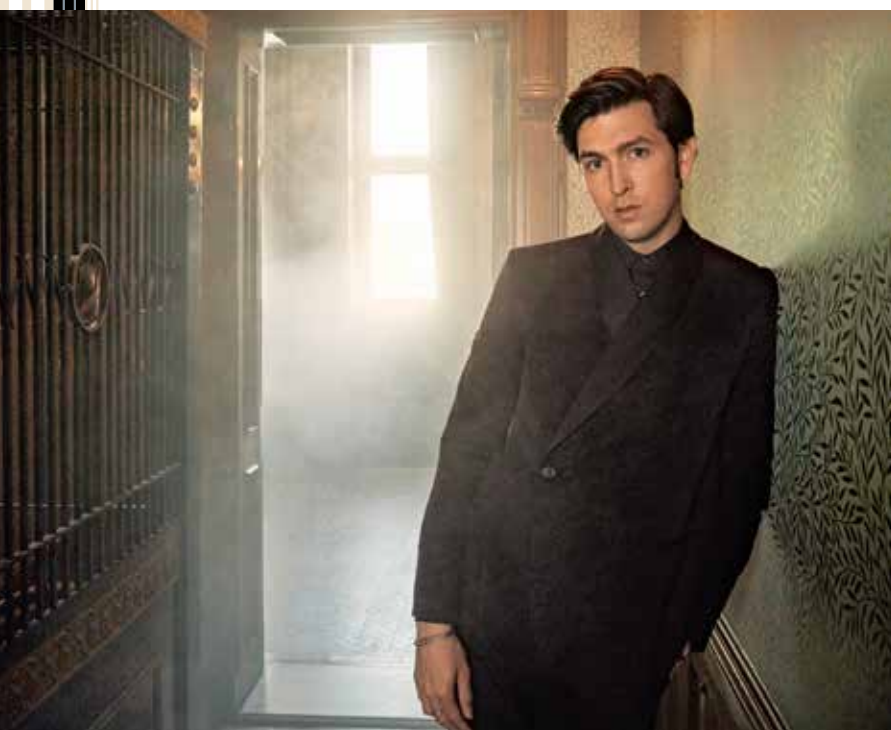
have something here,’” he says. “For some reason I started to give a shit about these people. Before that, I was worried it was going to be like, ‘Who gives a shit about these rich motherfuckers?’”

IN MAY, MURDOCH — THE 88-YEAR-OLD real-life one — gathered some of his top News Corp editors (including Rebekah Brooks, the disgraced editor at the center of the company’s hacking scandal) and took them to a Broadway show. The play was *Ink*, a devastating stage portrait in which actor Bertie Carvel (who won a Tony for the role) portrayed Murdoch as “a Mephistopheles ... drawn with Dickensian relish,” as *The New York Times* described the performance. Murdoch evidently loved the show and even met with the cast after the performance, telling the performers how much he’d been tickled by the characterization. He mentioned the possibility of bringing the

production to Australia, according to someone who was there.

In other words, there’s a decent chance Murdoch has seen at least one episode of *Succession* (it’s probable he’s seen Simon McBurney’s portrayal of him on Showtime’s *The Loudest Voice* as well). Rich, for one, knows for a fact that Rupert’s wife is a fan. “I’ve found out from someone who shall remain nameless that Jerry Hall loves it,” he tells *THR*. And McKay is pretty certain Rupert’s eldest son, Fox Corp. CEO Lachlan, couldn’t resist checking out the show. McKay describes a recent meeting in which a “prominent Hollywood executive” all but hushed the room into awkward silence by gushing at length about the show while Lachlan was in listening range. Armstrong, though, is more skeptical about the Murdochs obsessing over their portrayal: “I don’t think they give a fuck about any of this,” he says.

SERIES	SITUATION	REAL LIFE
	Logan Roy still runs his media empire at 80 and plays his children (Kendall, Roman and Shiv) against one another. Rupert Murdoch, 88, remains Fox Corp. chairman after his kids wrestled for control (Lachlan is exec chairman of Fox Corp., James left the company and Elisabeth is a media exec in the U.K.).	
	In episode one, Logan has a brain hemorrhage after his birthday celebration and his children rush to his bedside. In January 2018, a few months before his 87th birthday, Murdoch fell on Lachlan’s yacht, resulting in broken vertebrae and a spinal hematoma. His children rushed to his bedside.	
	In episode seven, Logan arranges a group therapy session with his children and their spouses at a ranch in New Mexico. It does not go well. Several years ago, Murdoch arranged a group therapy session with his children and their spouses in London and a retreat at the Murdoch ranch in Australia.	
	In season two, episode two, Kendall tries and fails to persuade his dad to hold on to properties like the <i>Gawker</i> -esque <i>Vaultier</i> . In 2015, James Murdoch tried and failed to persuade his father to take News Corp in a more digital direction, a plan Rupert rejected in favor of brother Lachlan’s vision for the company.	



Ruck (above) on the Roy family: “It feels like anybody’s family, except there’s billions of dollars involved.”

Some of the actors embrace the comparisons between their characters and real-life figures. Cox, for instance, is happy to discuss Logan’s similarities to Rupert, although he does note one key difference. “Rupert already had those five little papers [inherited from his father],” he says. “Logan is self-taught and self-motivated — he’s creating his own privilege.” Culin, on the other hand, is less thrilled to discuss the subject. “Pffft,” he says. “And you can quote me on that.”

And yet, part of the show’s fun is the parlor room guessing game about which plotlines are based on fact and which are wholly fiction, and that’s not just limited to the Murdochs. Remember that “no confidence vote” in episode six, when Kendall loses his boardroom bid to wrestle control of his dad’s company? That, Armstrong insists, was based in part on Michael Eisner’s 2004 ouster from Disney, although Strong, 40, says he’s drawing inspiration for Kendall from a different source.

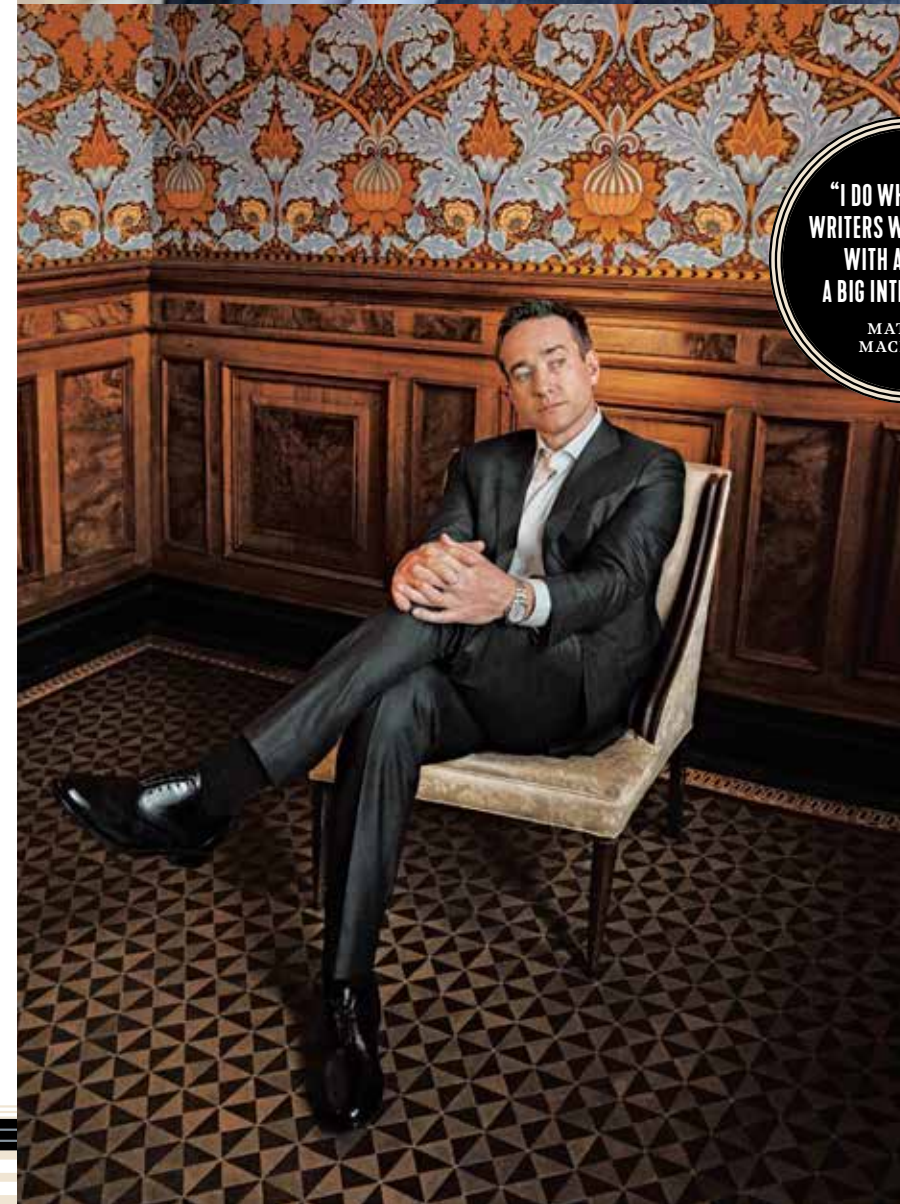
“I just read Michael Ovit’s new autobiography,” he says. “There’s something sort of mythic about these guys that has nothing to do with intellectual savvy. It has to do with a primitive force of will and the ability to steamroll over anything in your way.”

Even more of a tease is how Armstrong seems to make up fictional plotlines that later turn out to be true. In the show’s first two episodes, for example, Logan suffers a medical scare that sets off the family feud for his throne. Nine months later, the Murdoch exposé in *The New York Times Magazine* — the one that described the family therapy session — revealed for the first time that Rupert himself had a

near-death experience in 2018 after a fall on Lachlan’s yacht. Asked about his flair for clairvoyant plotlines, Armstrong laughs it off. “Our research is comprehensive,” he says, “but sometimes you get lucky hits. People credit you with more prescience than you actually have.”

Most of the plotlines in this coming season, prescient and otherwise, were cooked up last summer and in early fall, when the nine-person writing staff — a mix of Americans and Brits, men and women, comedy writers and dramatic playwrights — convened for a group think in a space not far from Armstrong’s London home. They certainly had plenty to think about. In the few years since Armstrong conceived of and wrote *Succession*, the Murdochs have all but installed a hotline into the Oval Office while billionaires have been running amok in the Capitol and Fox News has been blanketing the airwaves with its pro-Trump agenda. In other words, McKay was spot-on with his election night pronouncement — they are making the right show. “After taking a backseat for about 50 or 60 years, inherited wealth and nepotism seem to have come back with a vengeance,” he says of the show’s topical resonances. “And media conglomerates are increasingly becoming the microphones of oligarchs.”

While Armstrong concedes his foresight has paid off creatively (“It’s not a particularly happy thought, but yeah”), the show’s challenges going forward remain the same: finding just the right balance between comedy and horror and, above all, ensuring every note of it rings true. “Right now, the world feels extraordinarily primarily colored and vivid and rather terrifying in its absoluteness and its almost grossness,” he says. “But at the same time, the interactions that human beings have are as fine textured and subtle as ever. And so in that contradiction, I guess, is the show.” **THR**



“I DO WHATEVER THE WRITERS WANT ME TO DO. WITH A BIG GRIN. A BIG INTERNAL GRIN.”

MATTHEW MACFADYEN