

How To Make It In America on HBO: “Anything is still possible”

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In the opening scenes of the pilot episode for HBO’s new show, *How To Make It In America*, Cam Calderone (Victor Rasuk of the 2003 film *Raising Victor Vargas*) happily rides on the back of a young Hasidic boy as the latter bicycles through the streets of Brooklyn’s Williamsburg district.

To someone familiar with the levels of interaction between these two specific communities, the moment may seem like a welcome (and unusual) stroke of authenticity. Latinos and Hasidic Jews have indeed co-existed in that neighborhood for many years; their degree of intimacy would even surprise some. Both have witnessed, with varying degrees of discomfort and dislocation, the “makeover” of the area by the forces of gentrification.

Unfortunately, however, a nuanced introduction to the players, and forces, that have shaped life in the city is not on the menu. The scene is representative of the show’s general approach: to use familiar, “authentic” images of New York City to sell a brand that is different (and of less interest) than it first appears to be.

Aspiring clothing designer Ben Epstein (Bryan Greenberg) works in retail at upscale Manhattan boutique Barney’s. The more streetwise Calderone avoids working for “the man” altogether by selling marked-up leather jackets out of a van in Soho. Both are in a funk—their line of skateboards has failed to take off—and the investor, Cam’s loan shark cousin Rene (Luis Guzman), has been released from jail and wants his money back, on threat of broken kneecaps.

The show follows Calderone and Epstein as they scramble to pay off Rene, and introduces us to the various characters that will inevitably help and hinder their rise to the top of New York City’s fashion

industry later in the series.

How To Make It In America is created by Ian Edelman, a first-time writer, and executive produced by Stephen Levinson, Mark Wahlberg, and Rob Reiss, the creative team behind HBO’s *Entourage*. That series similarly follows the ups and downs of a group of young people, as they maneuver among the glitterati of the Hollywood film industry. Given the pedigree of the new show’s creators, it is not difficult to work out the nature of their priorities. In any case, the first half hour of *How To Make It In America* is indicative of the show’s internal compass.

When Calderone—who until now has been depicted as not much more than famished for success—visits the Upper East Side apartment of one of Epstein’s former high school classmates, he utters, “Forget that downtown loft. It’s all about uptown luxury. I love all this limestone! I guess we know who paid attention in high school.” To which the successful classmate answers: “Oh, I barely graduated. But anything is still possible in America, even for some loud-mouthed Jew!”

In an interview, co-star Victor Rasuk was asked whether he thought “the show promotes a message of hope in times of recession?” Rasuk replied, “It definitely touches on that, for sure. It also touches on ‘Don’t give up on your dreams, no matter what city you’re in or how difficult the times are.’”

The feeling that “anything is still possible in America” loans the characters an uncritical vivacity. In another exchange, the cautious Epstein reprimands Calderone for his shady business methods. Calderone: “Shady or not, at least I’m not working for the man like you.” Epstein: “What are you, twelve? How long are you going to play screw the man for?” Calderone: “Until we *are* the man.”

And so on. The show aims to pack in as many clichés about New York City into the allotted time as possible. The effect is more like “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to New York” because the focus of the dialogue and drama is stuck on the superficial level of icons and symbols, rather than on the character of the social relationships.

No one can doubt that the fashion and design community in New York City suffers from a serious bout of desperate anxiety to succeed—the faceless malaise that the characters on the series would call “the complete terror of urban living.” By stating the obvious and doing little else, the show is largely redundant. A little scrutiny of the circumstances that created the current economic crisis would have been a good place to start. But this is not what the show is about.

Too much is glossed over in the same frenzy to sell products the show depicts with such approbation. A potential investor at a party tells Calderone, “Everybody’s got ideas, nobody wants to put in the work.” The show’s creators would do well to listen to their own advice in this respect.

In many ways, the series is a product of an era of antagonism towards the brashness of New York City-based television shows and the life-styles their characters lived. As situation comedies such as “The Goldbergs,” “The Honeymooners,” and “All in the Family”—all of which centered on distinctively working-class concerns and characters who lived in either Brooklyn or Queens—were pulled from the networks, working-class New York seemed to vanish from the television landscape. In its place came a television landfill of placeholders, mannequins, templates, and generalities—in short, “anybodies” who could embody “anything” regardless of their material conditions.

The new show’s saving graces are few. In one sequence, the fast-paced camera quickly pulls back to reveal Epstein and Calderone stuck in traffic. The protagonists are fleetingly juxtaposed against a JPMorgan Chase logo. But the shot ends quickly, and one is not certain whether this is a conscious artistic effort to place the characters within a larger context or merely a logistical byproduct of filming in New York! The predominant impulses, however, come across loud and clear.

When a young kid on the subway exclaims he’s not panhandling for charity but “I’m out here hustling for

my damn self,” the entrepreneurial Calderone and Epstein look on in a gleeful mix of encouragement and recognition. The boy’s actual social condition, and the larger situation beyond that, are irrelevant, because what the show wants to tell us is that the only thing worth celebrating is the individual’s ability to rise against all odds—because “anything is still possible in America.”

The boy enters the next subway car with a huge smile on his face, but with an empty can. The empty can—why it’s empty, how it got there, and what can be done about it ... none of that seems of much concern to the show’s creators and to much of the current entertainment industry.



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