

Teen Actor's Story Remains Unresolved

Prosecutors still investigating robbery charge

By Bobby Cuza
STAFF WRITER

The television cameras were rolling outside Manhattan Criminal Court, and even a new character was introduced, but the real-life drama involving "Sopranos" star Robert Iler went on a brief hiatus yesterday morning — to be continued next week.

Iler's case was put over until July 18 while prosecutors continue to investigate the Upper East Side robbery in which he and three friends allegedly shook down two teenagers for \$40.

Iler, 16, wore a dark suit and did not comment to the hordes of media who swarmed around him as he left the courthouse on Centre Street. His mother and father also attended the proceeding.

"He's feeling the same way any 16-year-old would — he would like this all to go away," said Steven Mintz, one of Iler's attorneys. "But he understands that there's a process."

Speaking to reporters, Mintz introduced a new addition to Iler's legal team: attorney Michael Bachner, who recently helped bodyguard Anthony "Wolf" Jones beat gun possession charges in the Sean "Puffy" Combs case.

Mintz and Bachner said that during a meeting before yesterday's hearing, prosecutors agreed the case required further investigation. Barbara Thompson, a spokesperson for the Manhattan district attorney's office, would not comment on whether a grand jury had been empaneled.

"We are more confident than ever that Robert, at the



Photo by Sharon Stapleton

"Sopranos" actor Robert Iler leaves court yesterday

end of the day, is going to be completely exonerated," Bachner said.

Iler, who plays Anthony Jr. (A.J.), son of mafia boss Tony Soprano, on the HBO hit series, was arrested Wednesday along with Michael Cournede, 19, and Alban Celimaj, 16. All three have pleaded not guilty to two counts of second-degree robbery.

Iler also pleaded not guilty to a drug possession charge; police said they found a small bag of marijuana and a water bong in his pockets.

Iler and Celimaj appeared together before Judge Judith Levitt. But the two teens, both of whom live on the Upper East Side, arrived separately, sat three rows apart and did not speak to one another in court.

Meanwhile, Cournede, the only defendant who did not post the \$2,500 bail, remained in jail yesterday morning and appeared separately before Levitt. But his attorney, Mel Sachs, said he expects Cournede to be released by early today, adding that Cournede's family is helping him with bail money.

When they return to court next week, the three youths will likely learn whether a grand jury has delivered indictments on any of the

charges.

While Iler's attorneys said they were "very, very pleased" with yesterday's postponement, Sachs said nothing should be read into the delay, including the notion that prosecutors don't yet have a strong case.

"It really doesn't have any significance, the fact that it's being put over," Sachs said. "It truly isn't an advantage to either side."

July 10, 2001