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Life Imitates Art

'Sopranos' teen nabbed in robbery

By Sean Gardiner
STAFF WRITER

Staying true to the son-of-a-mobster character he plays on "The Sopranos," 16-year-old Robert Iler and his pals yukked it up in the jail cell of a Manhattan police station after getting arrested on robbery and drug charges yesterday morning, police sources said.

Iler, who plays Anthony Jr. (A.J.) on the hit HBO Mafia series, was arrested around 12:15 a.m. along with three friends and charged with robbing two teens of \$40 on the Upper East Side. Police searching Iler after handcuffing him also found a small bag of marijuana and a water bong in his pockets, police said.

After their arrests, the four were taken to the 19th Precinct station house on East 67th Street and booked. While they waited in the precinct's lockup for their fingerprints to be run through the crime computers, Iler and his friends didn't seem overly concerned about charges that could land them in jail for up to 15 years.

"These kids were hooping it up in the cell," said one police source, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "They were having a grand old time. They thought the whole thing was funny."

Last night at state Supreme Court in Manhattan, Iler and his co-defendants pleaded not guilty. Iler and Alban Celimaj, 16, were ordered to observe a 10 p.m. curfew and were released on \$2,500 bail. Michael Cournede, 19, reportedly could not make the bail and was still in jail last night.

Assistant District Attorney Robert Wallack had asked Judge Matthew F. Cooper for \$7,500 bail.

A 15-year-old boy was released to his parents. His case will be handled in juvenile court.

Police were called to East 74th Street and York Avenue around 12:05 a.m. yesterday by two 16-year-olds.



AP Photo

Robert Iler, 16, above, in police custody after being arrested on robbery and drug charges. At left, Edie Falco, Iler and James Gandolfini in "The Sopranos."



HBO Photo

Those teens said they had stopped to use a pay phone in front of a closed deli on that corner when four other young men approached them.

"They surrounded them and just [said], 'Give us your money,'" a police source said.

Law enforcement officials said Cournede made the initial demand, then Iler, Alban Celimaj, 16, and the 15-year-old boy repeated, "Give us your money," and at least one of them

added the threat "You want to die?"

One teen handed Cournede \$30. When the other teen froze, Cournede allegedly dug his hand into the youth's pocket and pulled out \$10, officials said.

The officers drove around the neighborhood with the youths who had been robbed to look for suspects. At East 76th Street and Cherokee Place, the

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boys spotted Iler and his friends.

Police charged Iler, who lives at 1763 Second Ave. in Manhattan; Cournede of 103-13 53rd Ave. in Corona; Celimaj, 16, of 240 E. 58th St. in Manhattan and the 15-year-old, who is also from Manhattan, with two counts of robbery.

Iler also was charged with criminal possession of marijuana, and Cournede was charged with criminal possession of a weapon. Police said he was carrying a box cutter.

None of the youths has been arrested before.

Iler's attorney, Steven Mintz, said it's a case of "being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"He was with two friends and an older person, a 19-year-old, who he does not know that well," Mintz said. "They were walking down the street, and when he had his back to the group something happened . . . Robert never heard a demand for money, never saw any money exchange hands and didn't know anything had happened until he got arrested."

The two victims said Iler and the three other teens all took an active part in the robbery, other police sources said.

But New York's usually tough-on-crime mayor showed a soft spot for the arrested actor.

"To have something like this happen to a young person is a shame, and I feel very bad for him and his family," Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said. "I also feel bad for the people that apparently were victimized, which is also pretty rotten."

While awaiting her son's arraignment last night, Helen Iler said he is nothing like the troubled character he plays on "The Sopranos," describing him as "a good kid, very good kid" who has a midnight curfew during the week. When asked if he had ever been in trouble, she said, "This is the first . . . and it will be the last."

Iler was escorted out of court last night, flanked by his mother, his attorney and former "Sopranos" star Jason Cerbone ("Jackie Jr."), who declined to comment.

Iler was hustled into a waiting SUV by a burly companion, who knocked over a microphone stand and crashed into several photographers.

Iler is to return to court Monday with Cournede and Celimaj for a grand jury hearing.

Staff writers Joshua Robin, Mohamad Bazzi and Curtis L. Taylor contributed to this story.