

Not guilty, says Soprano Actor, 16, denies any role in upper East Side holdup

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The young actor who plays the troubled son of TV Mafia don Tony Soprano said yesterday he was wrongly arrested for robbery, telling the Daily News,

"I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Actor Robert Iler, 16, denied any role in taking \$40 from two teenagers on an upper East Side street Wednesday night.

Reached by phone at his father's home in Rockland County, Iler blamed the media for blowing the case out of proportion. He said he was doing "better than last night, I guess," referring to his overnight day in jail.

Iler and three other teens were charged with second-degree robbery for allegedly taking money from two other youths at York Ave. and 74th St. after they were threatened with the words: "You want to die?"

Actor James Gandolfini, Iler's fictional mob dad, and other 'Sopranos' cast members phoned Iler today with words of support, said the teenager's manager, Jeff Mitchell.

"Robert is a really great kid, I'd be proud to have him as my son," said David Chase, creator and executive producer of the HBO series. "As it is, he's a

friend and a colleague. If he says he didn't rob anybody, then he didn't. It's as simple as that for me."

HBO spokeswoman Tobe Becker said, "We look forward to Robert joining us when 'The Sopranos' resumes production in the fall."

Iler, whose TV character A.J. Soprano is a kid sliding fast into juvenile delinquency, said later in a written statement that he was "terribly embarrassed," by the arrest.

"I never, ever would or did rob anybody in my life," Iler said. "I know that the events of the past 36 hours have been extremely difficult for my family and friends, and for that I am deeply apologetic."

One of the teens arrested with

Iler backed up the actor's story yesterday. Alban Selimaj, 16, of Manhattan, who also professed his innocence, told The News that Iler "had nothing to do with the robbery."

"Three of my buddies stopped behind while Robby walked ahead talking to a girl," said Selimaj, of Manhattan. "He didn't realize what had happened until the cops picked us up."

"I don't know why the media is saying he robbed these kids, he doesn't need the money," said Selimaj. "They are making it much bigger than it really was."

Iler also was caught carrying a bag of marijuana and a pipe to smoke it, said police.

After Iler's arrest on Wednesday, his defense lawyer sought

to shift blame for the crime to Iler's co-defendant, Michael Courmede, 19, of Queens. Attorney Steven Mintz said the actor barely knew Courmede, having met him only two weeks ago.

Courmede was still in jail yesterday, unable to raise the \$2,500 bail.

But at the apartment he shares with several roommates in Corona, Queens, his pals said he was getting a bum rap.

One man who said he was Courmede's "best friend" insisted the Iler was hanging out with Courmede as far back as last summer.

"He's a movie star, and he's trying to pin this on my best friend," the 20-year-old fumed. "That kid Rob is no angel."

With Mark Becker and Yael Kohan



ON CAMERA Actor Robert Iler, 16, who plays A.J. Soprano on TV, is taken from Criminal Court Wednesday night. He was charged with robbery of two teenagers on upper East Side.

Let's not judge a TV character

Americans have come to know Anthony Soprano Jr. pretty well since he first appeared in public in January 1999.

He's the younger of two children and the only son of Carmela and Anthony Soprano Sr., a mid-level organized-crime boss. A.J., as the 16-year-old is called, enjoys the privileges of upper-middle class life in the northern New Jersey suburbs.

He has started getting into trouble at school and at home. Under stress, he suffers panic attacks and fainting spells. And he is not very bright.

But the most important thing we know about Anthony Soprano Jr. is this: He doesn't exist. He is a fictional character in a TV series made up by a writer sitting at a computer keyboard.

That little detail may be worth keeping in mind as a real-life, 16-year-old actor named Robert Iler makes his way through the criminal justice system of New York City.

We know very little about Iler. We know he was talented and lucky enough to get a job playing A.J. Soprano in HBO's "The Sopranos." We know that, on screen, he says and does things written and devised for him by writers, producers and directors.

And we know that Iler and three other teenagers, one of

them a juvenile, were arrested in the early minutes of the Fourth of July in the tony upper East Side neighborhood where Iler lives with his mother. All four were charged with two counts of robbery for allegedly taking \$40 by force from two other teenagers. Iler also was charged with possession of marijuana and drug paraphernalia. He pleaded not guilty.

Because this dumb alleged conduct seems so much like something A.J. would do on the show — and because "The Sopranos" has been so successful at creating a believable reality — it's tempting to blur the distinction between the two.

But that would be equally dumb.

The cold truth is, nothing the fictional A.J. does matters. It affects no one, hurts no one, changes nothing in the real world.

What the very real Robert Iler does, on the other hand, matters a great deal — to himself, his family, friends, professional associates and to the other real people he encounters in the course of living a real life.

If we fail to maintain the separation between actor and character, we trivialize the reality of Iler's actions and their consequences. Isn't that exactly what we blame TV for doing?

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