

FOR THE COMPLICATED GAVIN POLONE, SUCCESS IN HOLLYWOOD IS NOT ALL THAT COMPLICATED: IT MEANS KEEPING CONTROL OF A PROJECT AND WORKING HARDER THAN THE NEXT GUY. THE FORMER SUPER-AGENT HAS BEEN PUTTING HIS STRATEGY INTO PRACTICE AS A PRODUCER AND, NOW, AS DIRECTOR. TO HIS SURPRISE, HE IS ACTUALLY ENJOYING HIMSELF.

DRIVEN TO SUCCEED

BY GRAHAM FLASHNER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE SCHOFIELD

When one is about to interview a man infamously known as the “dark prince of Hollywood,” it’s easy to feel some trepidation. Especially when the subject, über agent-turned-producer Gavin Polone, strides into the waiting room of his Beverly Hills production company with a scowl, forgoes a handshake and tosses off a curt, “Let’s do this.”

But upon entering his surprisingly modest office, where there are a half-dozen framed photos of rescue dogs and cats, the first impression changes.

As it turns out, the greeting is nothing personal. In a town of air kisses and insincerity, Polone simply has no use for niceties.

It’s one of the many quirks — along with a strict, seven-day-a-week gym regimen (he hasn’t missed a workout in twelve years), a 2,000-calorie-per-day diet and a preference for animals over people — that make him who he is.

Get Polone onto the subject of his ABC Family series, *Jane by Design*, and he begins to warm up. It’s a series he not only executive-produces, but one in which he made his directorial debut. And directing, for the moment, has Polone enjoying a state of mind that for the better part of his forty-seven years, has eluded him — happiness.

In the series, high-school senior Jane (Erica Dasher) gets a job at a high-powered New York fashion house when she’s mistaken for an adult. Her school thinks she’s doing an internship; her work colleagues think she’s twenty-five. Jane must satisfy her demanding boss (Andie McDowell) while keeping her double life secret.

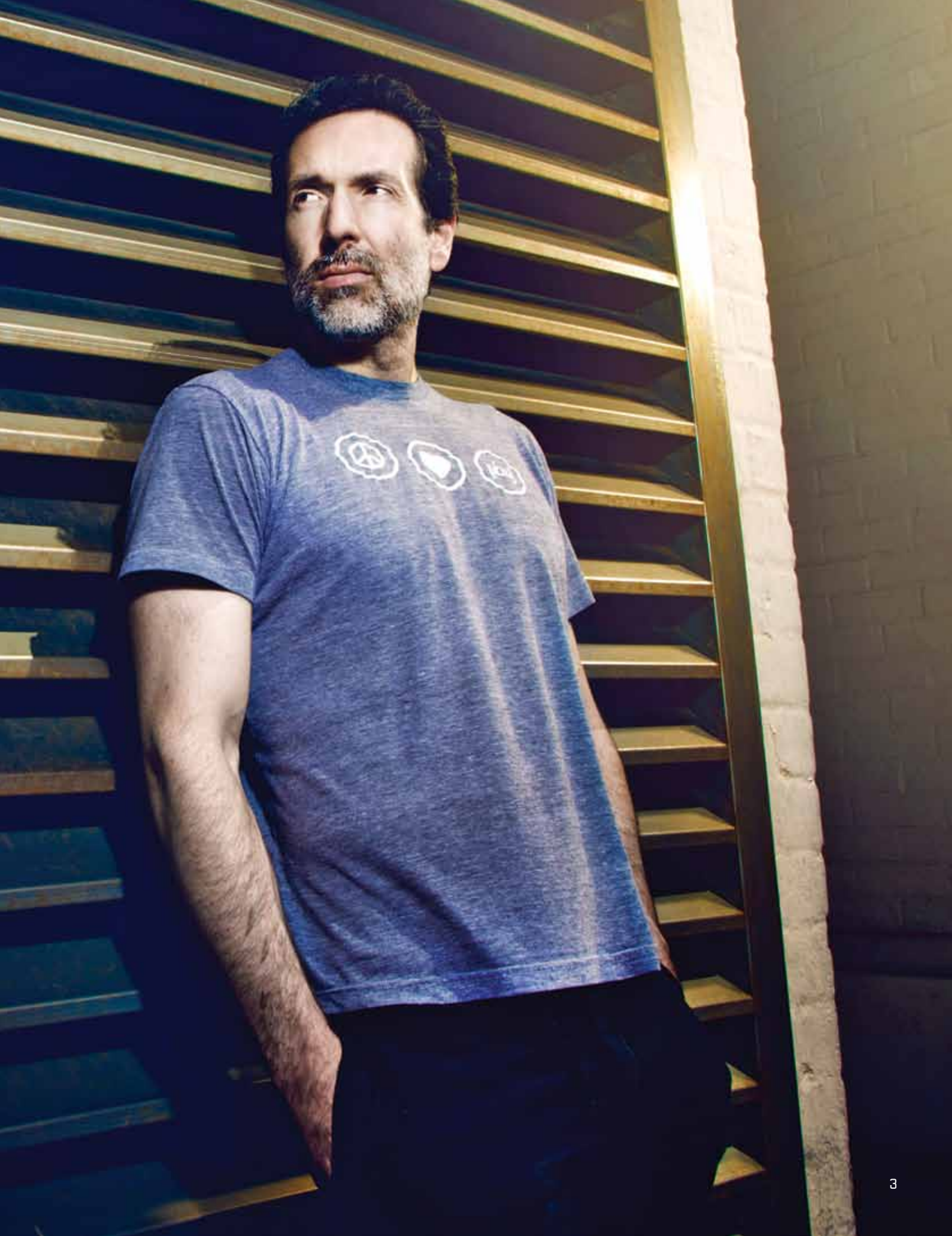
Polone dismisses the inevitable *Devil Wears Prada* comparisons. “What makes this show unique is that it’s about a girl in high school, not someone working for a terrible boss.”

The show was inspired by Polone’s own experiences with his girlfriend’s teen daughter who had, on more than one occasion, inflated her age to appear older. He brought the idea to a feature writer he’d teamed up with previously, April Blair (*Monte Carlo*, *Lemonade Mouth*), who created the show.

Selling it to ABC Family’s teen-friendly audience was a slam dunk. “They didn’t have a workplace show,” Polone says. “That appealed to them.” An initial ten-episode order was launched in January; eight additional episodes will roll out in June.

Polone was a wildly successful agent in the ‘90s before turning to producing, where he has been no less successful. He’s produced several TV series, including the WB and CW’s *Gilmore Girls* and HBO’s *Tell Me You Love Me* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. He manages Conan O’Brien. His net worth is said to be north of eight figures.

Most people would be at peace with such accomplishments, but Polone is not most people. His reputation — for being combative, angry, and litigious — precedes him. The



New York Times once said Polone's name was "synonymous with pitiless brinkmanship and pathological honesty." To those who've worked with him, he's also a brilliant talent and a ferociously driven perfectionist who doesn't suffer fools lightly.

Blair, who affectionately refers to Polone as "complicated but entertaining," says, "Gavin puts 100 percent of himself into every project. When he feels like he's getting less from people, that's when he gets frustrated. I don't really know that 'other' Gavin."

Since 2008, Polone had been flirting with the idea of directing; what finally pushed him over the edge was a disastrous experience producing the HBO movie *Cinema Vérité*, about the making of the seminal 1970s PBS documentary *An American Family*. Against Polone's wishes, the network hired a directing team that, in his view, wrecked a perfectly fine script.

"To have the project ruined because it was handed off to someone else — I didn't want to do that anymore," he says. Like all producers who want more control, directing was the next logical step. And despite ABC Family's policy against letting executive producers direct during the first season of a show, Polone was not to be denied.

"When you say you can't do something to Gavin, that becomes the only thing he wants in life," says Kate Juergens, ABC Family's executive vice-president of original series programming and development. "He has to be the exception."

Polone was given his shot on episode five, and he prepped obsessively. "Generally when you anticipate something, it doesn't work out as you thought," he says. "But directing was exactly as I imagined. If you do the work, you're going to do a passable episode. The people who fail at directing don't do the work."

Although *Jane by Design* is set in New York, it shoots in Santa Clarita, thirty miles northwest of Los Angeles. In episode five, Jane is summoned to Paris by her boss to deliver a top-secret fashion book. The network assumed Polone would handle the Paris locales the usual way, with green-screen shot on a backlot. As usual, Polone had bigger ideas.

Aided by a couple of French line producers, he discovered it was actually cheaper to shoot in Paris, thanks to relaxed union and permit rules. So the crew flew over for a whirlwind two-day shoot. "We did 102 setups," Polone says proudly.

"A lot of producing," he adds, "is about putting in more effort, rather than just going through the motions that everyone goes through and accepting what people tell you."

The network was impressed. "He prepped like nobody's business," Juergens says. "Something so ambitious had never been attempted before on an ABC Family show. I didn't think we could do it, and he proved me wrong."

Working harder than the next guy is nothing new for Polone.

Like *Jane's* titular heroine, he has felt like an outcast for much of his life and has overcompensated wildly. It's no accident that he named his production company Pariah.

Growing up in the L.A. suburb of Encino, Polone was a loner who felt disconnected from people — a feeling that persists to this day. "My parents paid very little attention to me, and I was a depressed child," he recalls. After his parents divorced, he lived with his father, a struggling real-estate attorney (his mother, Judy Polone, was a TV movie producer).

Polone was smart enough to graduate from UC Berkeley in three years, though he laments having minimal guidance and direction. "I wish my parents had paid more attention to my education," he says. "And later in life, I wish that somebody could've helped me understand that the purpose of life was to be happy."

He briefly considered a career in real-estate development, was rejected for a job at the CIA, and then, after a chance meeting at a party, accepted a job at ICM as an assistant. Though he wasn't enthused about being an agent, he soon discovered he had a natural gift for the hustle. Dismissed by ICM (bosses thought he was plotting to defect), he moved on to a smaller shop,

Bauer-Benedek, which eventually became UTA.

Ascending rapidly and ruthlessly, Polone became its Machiavellian leader. Determined to outwork and outmaneuver everyone in sight, publicly vowing that he would "kill" for his clients, he made Ari Gold, the alpha-agent of HBO's *Entourage*, seem warm and fuzzy by comparison.

Polone read thousands of script pages every weekend. He fought internally with his UTA partners and terrorized assistants. He poached clients with ruthless efficiency and fought studios so aggressively in contract negotiations that they openly complained to his clients.

"I would be really demanding about getting what I deserved and being validated," Polone recalls. "It all came from this place of insecurity and anger that stemmed from my childhood. And fear that I inherited from my father — that people would take advantage of me and I would be nothing but a bum."

Of course, Polone's writers were only too grateful to have an agent fighting so tenaciously for them. Says former client Mike Ferris (*The Game*, *Terminator Salvation*): "The reason most writers like him is that he has a healthy and undisguised contempt for the industry we're in."

Hollywood is notorious for rewarding bad behavior, and Polone was no exception. By 1995 he was making more than \$2 million a year. A year later, he plotted to start his own agency and UTA ousted him, charging inappropriate behavior with a female TV agent. Polone sued for defamation, triggering a three-year battle of lawsuits, countersuits and sordid revelations of depraved goings-on inside the agency.

By the time the dust had settled, Polone was virtually blackballed as an agent, and he figures it was just as well. "I had to make some kind of change," he says. "I had to let go of that anger."

Polone moved into managing, and in summer 2001 he launched Pariah to focus on producing. In addition to his TV series, he's also produced high-profile feature films like *Panic Room*, *8MM* and *Drop Dead Gorgeous*.

Upcoming this summer is the Paramount thriller *Premium Rush*, written by former client David Koepp. Polone is also producing the DreamWorks film *A Dog's Purpose*, based on the book by W. Bruce Cameron. And at press time he had two sitcoms in development at TV Land, *Lovebyrds* and an untitled Eva Longoria project; *Classless*, a half-hour animated show at Comedy Central; *Tallahassee*, a one-hour drama at ABC Family; and an untitled one-hour basketball drama at HBO with writer Jeff Nathanson (*Catch Me If You Can*).

Directing, however, is where his heart lies. Though Polone has an overall deal at HBO, he says he will stop selling television when his deal expires in 2013. "Being a producer is torture," he says. "I've just done it long enough.... Doing something new is always more exciting than something you've done over and over for years."

With two more episodes of *Jane* that he'll be directing, and two features he's attached to as director, Polone seems more content than he's ever been. He's also busier than ever.

"I tend to do too many things at once, which complicates my life," he says, and he's not kidding. He opened The Waffle, a restaurant in Hollywood. He plays poker regularly at L.A.-area casinos ("Though I suck at it," he admits) and has investments in numerous business ventures.

He also writes a highly entertaining weekly column for *New York* magazine's website, sounding off on everything from why the Oscars are a farce to how he would fix NBC. And he wants to become more active in animal-rights issues, having recently returned from a chimpanzee sanctuary in Shreveport, Louisiana.

"My pets are my number-one priority," says Polone, who has three cats and two dogs, all rescues. He has never married, has no children and no plans for either.

The supposed dark prince hasn't exactly mellowed, but Polone insists that he's at least gotten control of the anger that marked his earlier years. "I'm much more present now," he says. "I never used to enjoy things in life. Now I'm conscious of how insanely fortunate I am. To be in good health and to be financially secure in the United States of America — everything else is gravy." @

