

Ron Livingston, we presume?

The actor returns to New York with two new films **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

Sex and the City" may be filming in New York, but Ron Livingston isn't promoting the return of his character, average-guy writer Jack Berger, the guy who briefly won the heart of Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) during the show's run — and helped to turn the catchphrase "He's just not that into you" into a pop-culture touchstone. (Lots of fans still think Carrie should have wound up with Berger and not Chris Noth's Mr. Big.)

Nope, Livingston is calling from L.A., where he's filming "The Time Traveler's Wife" with Eric Bana and Rachel McAdams (a sort of "Somewhere in Time" for our time, based on the best-selling novel). And he's promoting two new labors of love: "Holly," opening Friday, is an unblinking look at prostitution and sex trafficking in Cambodia, and "Music Within," just out, is the true story of a real-life advocate for the physically challenged who didn't overcome his own Vietnam-war related deafness so much as ignore it.

As for Livingston, he can't ignore the fact that he recently turned 40.

"An actor's career doesn't feel like just one career to me," says Livingston, who was raised in Iowa by his Lutheran minister mom and engineer dad.

"It feels like about five or six. Because every six or seven years, you look in the mirror and you have a completely different product. All of a sudden, 'Oh, I guess I'm in this business now. Last I remembered, I was in the dashing young man business.' It always feels like you're at the beginning of some career you don't understand."

Luckily for Livingston, he's been trading in an everyman appeal his entire career to great effect, and turning the big 4-oh won't change that. He's still boyish enough to play the lead in "Music Within" at both 20 and in his 40s (thanks to a very adaptable haircut). And clearly understands something about acting.

His first big break came in "Swingers," a role in the 1996 film that launched Vince Vaughn and Jon Favreau which might have doomed a lesser talent to a lifetime of people saying "You're so money" to him. Wouldn't it be depressing if people always associated you with one role?

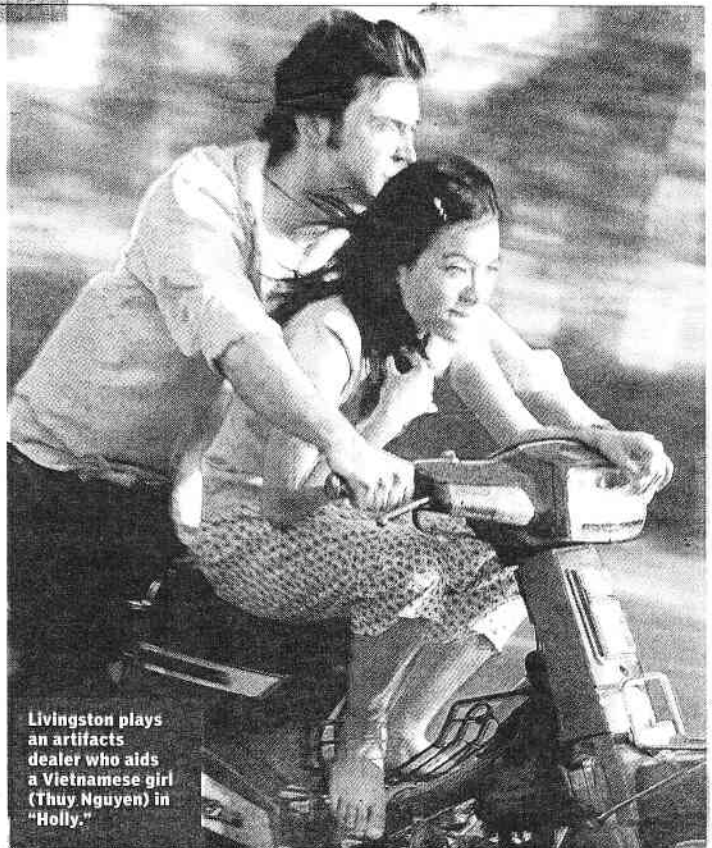
"If it was something I liked, I'll take one over none," laughs Livingston, who is single and doesn't mind the off and on nature of the business, because he says he enjoys being lazy as much as working.

Fortunately, he didn't have to find out what it was like to be associated with just one movie: 1999's "Office Space" is a cult comedy of such enduring popularity that Livingston's Buddha-like approach to getting ahead in business without really trying can be quoted at length by office drones all over the country.

And before that role could typecast him forever, he had his stint on "Sex and the City," not to mention a string of acclaimed roles in other projects, most notably his turn as an alcoholic in the Tom Hanks/Steven Spielberg World War II miniseries "Band of Brothers," one of the most popular HBO programs ever.

Throw in the prematurely canceled sitcom "Townies" (with Molly Ringwald and then-unknowns Jenna Elfman and Lauren Graham), his flashy turn as lawyer Alan Lowe in a multi-episode arc on "The Practice," an Off Broadway stint in Neil LaBute's "In a Dark Dark House," and two separate weaselly executives in "The Cooler" and "Adaptation," and clearly, Livingston hasn't had much chance to laze about.

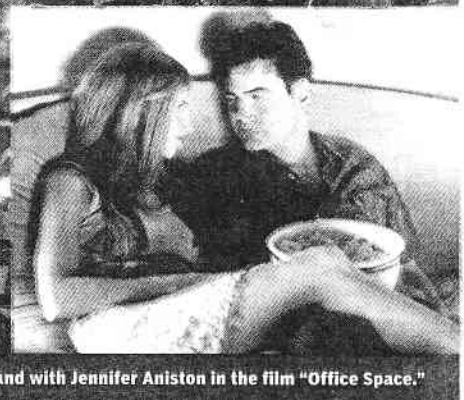
He hopes his two new films will actively get audiences into theaters. "Music Within" depicts the life of Richard Pimentel,



Livingston plays an artifacts dealer who aids a Vietnamese girl (Thuy Nguyen) in "Holly."



Livingston clicked with Sarah Jessica Parker on "Sex and the City" (l.) and with Jennifer Aniston in the film "Office Space."



who was the primary force behind the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act, a civil-rights landmark that opened the door (and built the ramps) for people living with physical handicaps.

And "Holly" shows the wrenchingly difficult problem of sex trafficking and child prostitution, via the story of a washed-up guy in Cambodia who becomes obsessed with trying to rescue a 14-year-old girl trapped in a brothel. (It was filmed on location in dangerous areas often controlled by criminals.) Neither film pulls its punches, but Livingston can see a sliver of light at the end of "Holly" despite its lack of heartwarming TV-movie-style resolution.

"A guy who was looking for a chance to redeem himself, redeemed himself," says Livingston. "And a girl who had no choices finally had some choices. We wanted the audience to feel that the story is not done yet, and it's time for the audience to get involved if they want the story to have a happy ending." ♦

Trading on an everyman appeal, to great effect.



Melissa George, Livingston and Michael Sheen co-star in the new 1960s-era drama "Music Within."