

● REALLY BIG SHOW

Skin

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call it Romeo & JulieXXX

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THIS summer, Fox caught lightning in a bottle with "The O.C.," the prime-time soap set in the upper-class enclave of Orange County, California. Now the network hopes to raise temperatures even higher with "Skin."

Set in nearby Los Angeles, the serial focuses on two star-crossed young lovers — Adam (D.J. Cotrona), the son of the district attorney (Kevin Anderson), and Jewel (Olivia Wilde), the daughter of a porn king (Ron Silver). Faster than you can say "Romeo and Juliet," their parents are at each other's throats in an epic legal struggle as the lawyer tries to put the pornographer out of business. Needless to say, the teens are forbidden to see each other again.

Does Cotrona think that makes their attraction even more exciting?

"Totally," says the 22-year-old Connecticut native, who had all of one acting credit (a guest spot on NBC's "Law & Order: SVU") before landing this series. "A good percentage of why Adam is hung up on her is because from the start everyone is telling him he can't," he says. "It's human nature."

Still, Cotrona hopes guys won't take any cues from his character's obsessive pursuit of Jewel, which he describes as more like stalking than flirting.

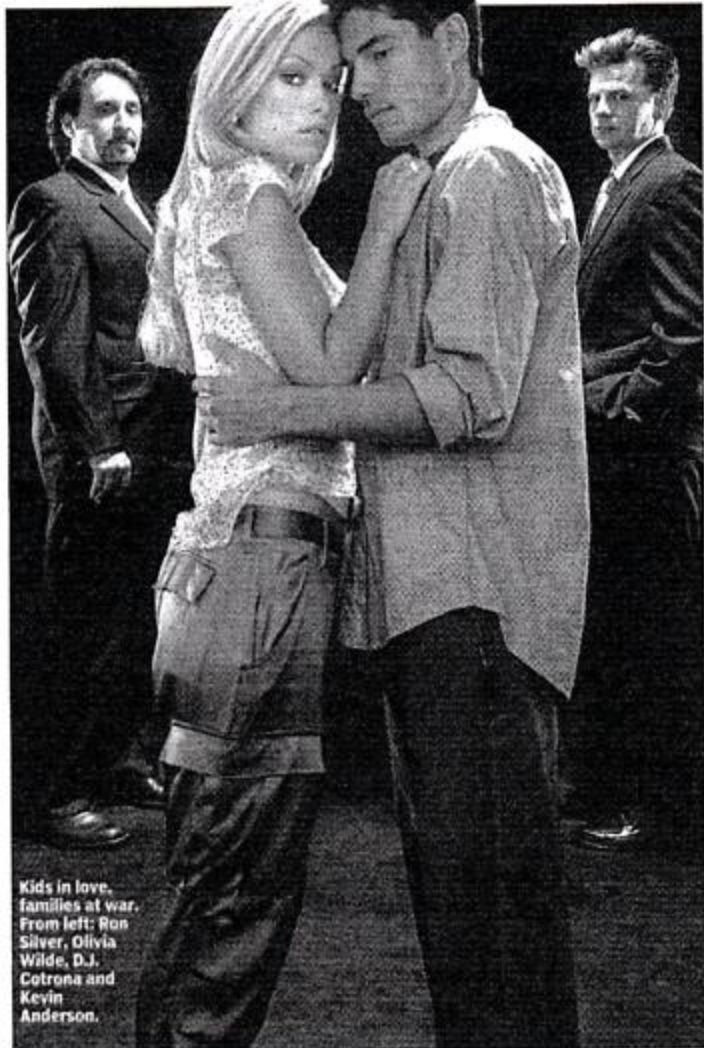
"I would never conduct myself the way he chases this girl around," says the actor, with a laugh. "Because it wouldn't work in the real world. Happily, [on TV] you run around with a flow-y shirt on and hound after a girl and she loves you for it. In the real world, please."

And in the real world, actor Ron Silver, 57, says being a "porn peddler" ("Why do those two words always go together?" he wonders.) isn't necessarily more morally questionable than a lot of other, more respectable jobs. Ask him if he could be a good father while selling pornography, and Silver adroitly answers with a question of his own.

"If I were the head of GM and wanted to protect my bottom line and make sure my profits stayed at a certain level, and I said no to seatbelts, even though I knew they would save hundreds of thousands of lives, and I went home to my family, do you think I could be a good dad and still make that decision?" asks Silver, the father of a 16-year-old daughter and a 12-year-old son. "Any CEO that makes any decision — even something like all this merging where they protect their bottom line by firing 18,000 people — can he be a good father at home?"

You're quickly reminded that Silver, who was studying law when he fell into acting, has often been politically active, whether through the Creative Coalition, a Hollywood advocacy group, or working as head of the Screen Actors Guild. Often associated with liberal causes, Silver recently created a stir by publicly siding with President Bush on Iraq.

You're also reminded that Silver, who has played everyone from Henry Kissin-



Kids in love, families at war. From left: Ron Silver, Olivia Wilde, D.J. Cotrona and Kevin Anderson.

ger to tennis star Bobby Riggs, is famously in love with doing in-depth research for a role.

"Certainly, doing my due diligence for this part was a lot more fun than a lot of the other characters I've played, I must tell you," he says with a laugh.

Cotrona's preparation for "Skin" was way more intimate. His first love scenes with Wilde fulfilled all the clichés about how awkward those situations can be.

"It's creepy as hell," he admits. "When you're watching, you think, 'Oh, that lucky son of a bitch.' But especially the first time, it's really intimidating, to be quite honest. There are so many people

[around] and we barely knew each other. We'd both be like, 'What the hell are we doing here?' But Olivia's such a cool girl. We just laughed at the entire thing and kept that attitude."

Of course, now thanks to endless — and sexy — previews showing the two of them cooing at each other under an angelically lit white bed sheet, Cotrona knows he'll be seeing that image for years to come. "That sheet is going to haunt me for the rest of my life," he says.

Skin
Monday, 9 p.m., FOX