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Inqlings | 'Real World' cast had ample space to practice jump shots

By Michael Klein
Inquirer Columnist

Details are dribbling out about the century-old Old City building occupied for nearly four months by the cast of MTV's *The Real World*.

Dribbling because the 10,000 square feet of space - built around a marble atrium with olive tree - includes an indoor basketball setup. The seven castmates, who are about to move out, also had an indoor spa with two hot tubs, personal-training equipment, and pool table.

Producers also cleverly played off the building's roots as a financial institution. The "confessional" - where cast members talk to the camera - is set up inside an old bank vault in the basement. The vault was installed by Union Bank & Trust Co., which occupied the building at its completion in 1902.

Union Bank & Trust went bust in a scandal, says Downingtown author **Parry Desmond**, who is writing a book about a character named **Max "Boo Boo" Hoff**, a South Philly wiseguy who hobnobbed with Roaring '20s gangsters.

A grand jury investigation in 1928-29 found that a bootlegging syndicate headed by Hoff had used more than a dozen fictitious accounts at Union Bank & Trust to launder more than \$10 million. Bank president **John McCulloch** was accused of using money-laundering proceeds to buy several blocks of real estate along the Atlantic City Boardwalk. McCulloch resigned; Hoff was never indicted.

In 1929, Union Bank & Trust was absorbed by the Corn Exchange National Bank & Trust Co.

The building's pre-*Real World* occupant was the Philadelphia headquarters of the Seamen's Church Institute, a destination for sailors. Current owner **Michael Yaron** has not disclosed his post-*Real World* plans, but, by contract, he cannot exploit the building's connection to the show.

Hoff, by the way, died broke in 1941 at age 48. (Have info about him? Contact Desmond at Parry37@aol.com.)

A film mystery

Drama is still unfolding over **M. Night Shyamalan's** movie *The Village*.

Two weeks ago, literati noticed similarities between the film - which the Gladwyne auteur shot in Chester County last fall - and *Running Out of Time*, a 1995 children's novel by **Margaret Peterson Haddix**. Both were about a 19th-century village, surrounded by monsters, that employed a tomboy to get help.

The "children's book" similarity is not lost on the film buffs who are talking about a purported *Village* script making the rounds. One scene describes a fence that the character Ivy encounters in her journey: "The weed-covered wall goes on for as long as the eye can see. It stretches out till it disappears into the horizon, like some painting in a children's book."

Also thickening the plot is the lawsuit filed in Los Angeles in August 2003 by **Robert McIlhinney**, a Bucks County filmmaker. McIlhinney alleges the screenplay for another Shyamalan movie - the 2002 hit *Signs* - employed elements (including descriptions of the monster) from McIlhinney's unproduced script called *Lord of the Barrens*.

In court papers, McIlhinney describes *Lord of the Barrens* as "an original story about a mythical creature that roams the vast wilderness that surrounds a primitive 18th-century village. The people of the village are bound to the creature by way of an inherited curse placed upon their ancestors. The screenplay contains material relating to the mythical creature getting caught in a trap."

An observer might see elements of *The Village*. And *Running Out of Time*, for that matter.

McIlhinney lawyer **William Goldman Jr.** of Doylestown - and the legal team at Simon & Schuster, which published *Running Out of Time* - say they are weighing their options.

When the *Running Out of Time* issue surfaced, Disney's Buena Vista Pictures, which distributed *The Village*, said in a statement: "Whatever claims are being made of similarities between the book and the movie have no merit."

On brighter notes:

S&S is featuring *Running Out of Time* on the front page of its SimonSaysKids.com site.

And Variety reports that *The Village*, approaching \$100 million at the box office, just opened at No. 1 in Poland.

Shortly noted

Tom Jacoby, who runs Philadelphia Reads, is due to turn up between 8:30 and 9 this morning on *Good Morning America* (Channel 6). He'll talk up Book Drive America, which promotes donations of new and gently used children's books to organizations such as Philadelphia Reads, which funnel them to community groups and schools.

Les Ballets Africains, the national ballet of the West African nation of Guinea, was due to perform at the Mann Center on Aug. 8 but had to cancel only hours before curtain when half the troupe couldn't enter the United States because of post-9/11 visa-tightening. All 20 now have their papers in order, and the show will go on as planned Monday night.

Fur fun

Why 30 corporate and sports mascots - Swoop, the New Jersey Devil, Socceroo, etc. - were spotted aboard a Ride the Ducks vehicle in Center City on Tuesday: They were on their way to a LOVE Park rally where the Phillie Phanatic picked up a lifetime achievement "Golden Silly String Award." **Dave Raymond**, whose 16-year run as the Phanatic ended in 1993, organized the "Where Is the Love?" rally to pay homage to fans. "It's tongue in cheek," says Raymond, who runs a mascot agency called Raymond Entertainment Group and appears as Reggy, its 7-foot mascot. (Even Ride the Ducks has a mascot: Phil E. Duck.)

Shore stuff

Luke Palladino, chef/owner of Ombra, Risi Bisi and Specchio at the Borgata in Atlantic City, got a personal invite to prepare an Italian feast in Bill Cosby's hotel suite Saturday night. The menu included speck and prosciutto with Borgata Farms lemon doll melons, heirloom tomato salad, eggplant caponata, peppers alla nonna, cheeses, linguine aglio e olio, penne arrabiata, grouper with peperonata, lobster with cioppino, and a Jersey peach crostata dessert. Diners were Cosby, friends and **Bill Boyd**, chief executive of Boyd Gaming, which owns half of the Borgata.

The Travel Channel has a crew in Ocean City, N.J., now to film Weird Contest Week, which includes today's wet-T-shirt-throwing contest. The show is to be shown in March.

Harry the K

Listeners to WMMR-FM (93.3) late Monday afternoon heard the voice of Phillies broadcaster **Harry Kalas**: "The Phillies have forfeited the rest of the season." Wasn't Kalas. It was morning-show mimic **Joe Conklin**, warming up the crowd at the news conference announcing Twisted Sister frontman **Dee Snider** as the station's new evening host.

The Broadcast Pioneers of Philadelphia will honor Kalas (not Conklin... yet) as its person of the year, and at a Nov. 19 scholarship dinner at Bala Country Club will add names to its hall of fame: **John Carlton**, **Frank Ford**, **Tom Moran**, **Vernon Odom** and **Marciarose Shestack**, as well as the late **Gunner Back**, **William and Dolly Banks**, **Pete Boyle**, **Jerry Donahue**, **Chief Halftown**, **Jocko Henderson**, **Jack Jones** and **Phil Sheridan**. Details: 856-365-5600.

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