

HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER AIRS
MONDAYS AT 8 P.M. ET/PT ON CBS.

Nikki Desmond
GOOD COP
DEAD COP
Coming Soon

Neil Patrick Harris
brings an interactive,
on-the-streets
mystery game to
Los Angeles



Accomplice: HOLLYWOOD

By JIM COLUCCI

It's just after 2:30 p.m. Pacific time on a Friday when I get the call. "This is Lizzie," spurts the young, panicked voice on the line. "I work for Nikki Desmond. She needs your help."

As Sherlock Holmes would say, the game is afoot.

At precisely 5 p.m. on Saturday, my co-workers and I meet Lizzie at the spot she's designated, right in the heart of Hollywood. (Don't tell her, but I never did destroy that paper on which I'd jotted this first location, despite how she had implored me to.) And so begins *Accomplice: Hollywood*, the new interactive theater experience launched in Los Angeles in May. Part mystery, part scavenger hunt, part comedic performance, *Accomplice* both entertains and challenges, tapping your brain even as it tickles your sense of humor.



BIRTH OF AN ACCOMPLICE

Accomplice is the brainchild of 39-year-old Tom Salamon, an erstwhile film editor who, while sightseeing in New York's Lower East Side a few years ago with his parents and sister, Betsy, "became really bored with our tour guide, and thought it would

be super cool if we could only see all the same things, but in a different context, more of a game," he remembers. And so, inspired also in part by "the element of adventure" in their favorite reality shows *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, the siblings soon scripted a story, hired actors, and turned downtown Manhattan's twisted streetscape into *Accomplice: New York*.

"I was surprised that no one had thought to do something like that—theater that would take place



out on the streets,” Salamon says of their unique creation, which proved so successful upon its debut in 2005 that two years later it spawned a sequel, this time set in the neighborhood of Greenwich Village.

It was then, just as the second show was about to start, that *How I Met Your Mother* star Neil Patrick Harris was out for a stroll through the Village, and chanced upon an *Accomplice* promo postcard as he waited for his sandwich at a restaurant. A self-avowed mystery buff and game fanatic—to the extent that his friends once concocted an elaborate scavenger hunt as a present for his 30th birthday—Harris was “the perfect guy to pick up that postcard,” Salamon marvels. “I don’t believe in fate much, but in this case I have to.”

The actor booked a block of eight tickets for Saturday night. By Monday, he was raving about

the experience as he guest-hosted a network morning talk show, suddenly bringing Salamon’s little, under-the-radar local show national exposure.

As Salamon remembers, within his first five minutes of hanging out with the show’s New York cast after the performance, Harris suggested transporting a new version to Los Angeles. And so the two checked out various pedestrian-friendly parts of town before settling on a perfectly touristy swath of Tinseltown. As they shaped *Accomplice: Hollywood*’s story of missing Lohan-esque starlet Nikki Desmond (named in tribute to *Sunset Boulevard*’s movie queen, Norma Desmond) Harris and Salamon walked the area’s rapidly gentrifying boulevards, combing through both seedy old shops and some of L.A.’s hippest new hot spots as they scouted locations in which to plant each actor bearing the next, all-important clue.

Accomplice: Hollywood sends its participants down the streets of Los Angeles in search of clues to the whereabouts of missing starlet Nikki Desmond. But after a while, everything you see looks as if it could actually be part of the game.



DESPERATELY SEEKING NIKKI

Before my Saturday rendezvous with Lizzie, I check out a video that had been recommended to me in a mysterious e-mail. The clip, in which *Entertainment Tonight*’s Mary Hart reports on Desmond’s disappearance, is slick, impressive and—as Harris rants away about the young actress’s drunken, unprofessional behavior and her surly pet howler monkey—funny. (See the clip at NikkiDesmond.com.)

As the actor would later tell me, that’s all to reassure folks like me who, having once been forced to dance with some random woman by a “bridesmaid” at off-Broadway’s *Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding*, may be leery about the concept of interacting with the show’s cast. Because each of *Accomplice*’s eight daily “audiences” is made up of at most 10 people, usually already friends, the show is designed to be “a smaller, more intimate experience,” Harris explains. Its actors were all chosen for their comedy and improv backgrounds; with every week, they become more and more skilled at tailoring their performances away from embarrassing the quieter members of the group, focusing instead on the obnoxious, Type-A personalities who fancy themselves expert detectives. (That, I was sadly about to demonstrate, would be me.)





A QUICK FLASH OF LIZZIE

The clues could be anywhere, treasure map to a person on the street. The trick is discerning what's real Hollywood and what's part of *Accomplice: Hollywood*.



minicassette recorder inside. As we all are distracted, leaning in and struggling to hear the recording, she disappears. Later, I would learn that her quick exit is all part of a well-choreographed, tag-team routine designed to keep the show's many moving parts and its simultaneous audiences spaced comfortably apart.

Not that there isn't the occasional hitch in the plan. On this particular Saturday, a concert stage has been erected and threatens to partially obscure a clue on the final stretch of sidewalk indicated on the kidnappers' map.

And then there was the day, only a few weeks into the show's run, when fans thronged to Michael Jackson's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame after the singer's sudden death, making much of *Accomplice's* area impassable.

At times like these someone, be it Salamon or one of the actors, has to come up with a workaround solution

to tweak the appropriate clue(s)—and fast. "It's crazy—it's a rush," Salamon says of the emergencies. "But the most important thing about running the show behind the scenes is maintaining the illusion for the audience that this is all happening spontaneously, only this one time."

At 5:05 p.m., Lizzie darts over, seemingly out of nowhere. I miss every third word Nikki's nervous assistant says as she frantically sips her iced coffee and races through a tale of kidnappers and ransom demands. She hands us a packet purportedly from her employer's captors, with a treasure map and



TIGER PANTS AND HOMELESS PEOPLE AND VAMPIRES

By 5:30-ish, we're all feeling pretty proud of ourselves for having decoded the kidnappers' map. Suddenly, a mysterious stranger approaches and whispers a warning: "Remember, we're watching you!"

The show's overall effect is to produce a sense of paranoia—and Harris loves hearing that. "It makes us endlessly thrilled," he later says with a laugh. "People will go walking down this touristy street where someone is handing out fliers that have





Clues or not, the people and places in Hollywood make for one heck of an entertaining ride.

nothing to do with our show. But they'll take the fliers anyway, thinking, 'Is that person in the show? Is that flier going to mean something? Am I supposed to do something with this information?'

And indeed, by sometime after 6, we're unknowingly well more than halfway through our search for Nikki Desmond—but by now, full-scale suspicion has set in. We spot a homeless man, sleeping on the sidewalk in tiger-striped pants. As we ponder whether we'd seen him earlier on a different street corner, we momentarily consider waking him until we get a good whiff of his authenticity. Then, I spy a beautiful Afro'd blonde and a man in a skintight French sailor suit and jaunty hat, looking ready for the runway as they sit in a parked car on a dead-end street. As I approach these "obvious actors" to ask about Nikki Desmond, the blonde reveals a set of bonded-on, porcelain vampire fangs and hisses in our direction.

Later we learn she's not part of the show, but just your average American girl who happens to have a permanent set of vampire teeth. This kind of random distraction, we come to realize, is why Harris and Salamon were wise to set their stage among the "Ripley's Believe It or Not" aesthetic of Hollywood. If she wanted to, Nikki really could get lost here.



ONCE IN A LIFETIME



By just after 7:30, exhausted, exhilarated and with our minds spinning in overdrive, we decipher our final clue and open a locked box. With that, the lights flash on, and the show's full cast bursts into the room bearing congratulations. As we all settle in for a drink together, bragging about our brilliance and laughing about our missteps along the way, we ask Salamon, "So, were we the fastest? The slowest?"

It's apparently what everyone wants to know. Some serious-minded sleuths want to have been the speediest, while others, like maybe a group of bachelorettes, want to hear that it's a good thing no one's rescue was truly left up to them. But in truth, Salamon says, the timing is all up to the actors, who can vamp as much or as little as needed until they get the word that the next clue is ready and waiting. In the end, *Accomplice* is not so much a competition as it is an experience enjoyed with friends. It may be a game played on foot, but ironically, it's all about the ride.

A few days later, I'm back in New York talking to Harris about the tiger pants guy and the vampire girl, and how the mere mention of her hiss still makes *Watch!* creative director Angelique O'Neil shudder and say, "And she wasn't even part of the game?!" Harris finds that hilarious. "I love hearing the stories of these random things happening," he says. "It's like having my child go to college.

"Everyone who sees *Accomplice* comes away from it saying, 'I don't know how to describe it, but it was one of the most fun times I've had in Los Angeles,'" Harris says. "It's not a huge money-making venture for us, because only 80 people per day get to do it. But I think it's great that people don't know what to expect, then have a couple of awesome hours. That's why I got on board. There are some things that are once-in-a-lifetime experiences—like getting to host the Tonys, or riding the Orient-Express. I love filling up my life with as many of those as I can, and in turn, I think it's great to provide them for other people."



Are any of these photos integral to the plot? We'll never tell.



Accomplice: Hollywood offers eight daily show times, for groups of up to 10 people. Groups depart every half-hour between 1 and 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. The \$65 ticket price includes drinks and snacks. Information: accomplicetheshow.com.