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- [World](#)
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B. J. Sigesmund / Newsweek

Calista Flockhart on the red carpet at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles

Letter from L.A.: Camouflage on the Red Carpet

At the Emmys, everyone looks important—even goofy reporters. Ours gets an inside peek at TV's most high-maintenance night.

By B. J. Sigesmund
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

September 11— Having to dress in black tie for awards shows may be a hassle, but it has one major advantage: you completely blend in. In a monkey suit, you can act like mole. And for a reporter, that's pretty exciting.

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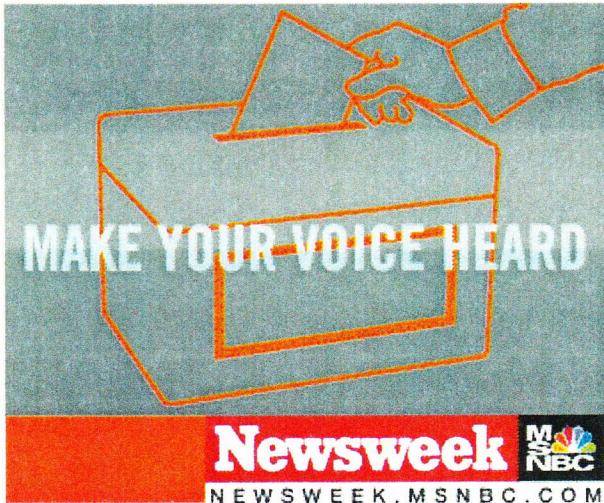
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B.J. Sigesmund
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

OF COURSE, YOU PRESENT YOUR press pass only when absolutely necessary. In all other instances, you keep that information to yourself. When milling about the place, you're seen as just one of the hundreds of well-dressed men and women in dark sunglasses. People don't know if you're a hotshot executive, a producer on one of the ubiquitous tabloid shows, security...or Cher's personal assistant.

I got to the Shrine Auditorium around 2 p.m. Sunday, a full hour before the first "talent"—that's the folks you and I call stars—were scheduled to arrive. Mild L.A. was steamy hot this afternoon. Water bottles were everywhere. Shrubs full of roses were continually spritzed to keep them looking fresh. People paced up and down the red carpet—which the cleaning staff kept vacuuming—wiping their brows with one hand and yakking into cell phones with the other.

At 3 p.m., I took my spot among the paparazzi. Behind us lurked bleachers full of excitable fans, who'd been camped out for hours and whose sometimes-deafening screams fluctuated with the status of celebrities who began entering the arena. Over the next two hours, the photographers and cameramen around me fought to get the exact same footage of the arriving actors and actresses. First came "minor" stars like the kids from "The Sopranos" and the old guy from "Frasier." Each had a publicist who discreetly leaned into the throng of photographers and reminded them, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Actress X from Show Y."

But as showtime drew near, the big shots showed up in quick succession. David Schwimmer. Kelsey Grammer. Julianna Margulies. Michael J. Fox. Calista Flockhart. James Gandolfini. As you've heard, the

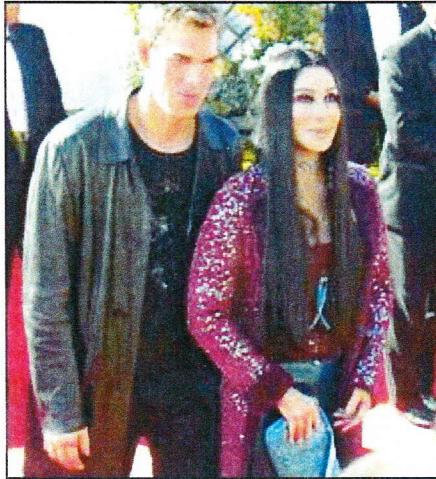
"Have you seen Cher? She's missing in action."

paparazzi is fearless. "Turn to your left, Ms. DeGeneres!" they'd shout out. "Halle Berry, a wave please!" they'd demand. One shutterbug near me screamed repeatedly, "Sarah Jessica Parker! Sarah Jessica Parker! Sarah Jessica Parker!" in order to get her to look into his lens. He did get a look, all right—but it came from her disgusted companion, husband Matthew Broderick. When Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt entered the fray a few minutes before curtain, the continuous flashbulbs and high-pitched squeals for the newlyweds to pose in various degrees of coupledom reached a surreal climax.

Exhausted, and a little ashamed, I walked right into the Shrine—and wasn't even asked for my qualifications. I didn't know I'd achieved anything particularly remarkable until I was inside, when it became fairly clear that flashing my press badge would have gotten me turned away.

I may not have had a seat in the main auditorium, but there was plenty to watch in the lobby. There was Brian Dennehy, sitting alone on a bench. Three of the "Survivors"—Stacey, Joel and Sonja—were in line for the bar. Calista Flockhart stood sipping a drink with a friend.

Cher with makeup artist Kevyn Aucoin



B.J. Sigesmund / Newsweek

In one far recess of the first floor, I found the pen of "seat fillers." They're the dressed-up ordinary folks who watch the show on a monitor and wait for the commercial breaks, when they might get a chance to take the spot of some starlet while she goes to the

ladies' room. In the opposite corner of the Shrine, I came across an enormous, darkly lit room, where a staff of waiters and waitresses fussed over the immaculate table settings for the Governor's Ball (the post-show dinner for the members of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences).

Not only did I appear as though I belonged, I guess I looked like someone else entirely. Standing at the foot of a staircase, an exasperated blond woman came running up to me. "Oh, there you are," the stranger said. "Have you seen Cher?" I nodded no, confused. "She's missing in action." I laughed, reflexively. "I'm serious,"

she continued. "Her part's coming really soon. If you see her, let me know." Before I could answer, she'd disappeared into the crowd.

I spent the remaining time wandering around the lobby, which grew more and more packed with restless attendees as the evening labored on. I star-gazed; I interviewed a few folks; I even considered at one point coughing up \$7 for a plate of three hors d'oeuvres.

But during the last hour, I kept retreating to the seat fillers' area, where they had monitors showing the awards. There, with the other well-scrubbed hoi polloi, I could actually *watch* the program that I've enjoyed so much over the years—just sitting on my couch, frozen yogurt in hand, in jeans and a T-shirt.

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