



Actor Paul Ben-Victor got more than he bargained for—including several new rooms—when he began renovating his Santa Monica home. BY ROBYN FLANS

DETAILS, DETAILS



PAUL BEN-VICTOR MAY NOT BE A HOUSEHOLD NAME, BUT HE'S CERTAINLY A HOUSEHOLD FACE, courtesy of a resume that includes roles in more than two-dozen movies and upwards of 30 TV shows. Over the past few years, HBO alone has cast him in four of its series—*The Wire*, *John from Cincinnati*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Entourage*. This season he'll appear in several episodes of *Everybody Hates Chris* as a deranged high school coach, and on *In Plain Sight*, the USA cable drama starring Mary McCormack as a U.S. Marshal attached to the Federal Witness Protection Program, he plays Stan McQueen, head of the program's Southwest region.

"I love to work," Ben-Victor says. "To me, the most relaxing place to be is in my trailer."

Which is a good thing, since *In Plain Sight* shoots in Albuquerque, New Mexico, meaning he's away from home for long chunks of time. In fact, right before the holidays, he was gone for months on location, which made the prospect of

spending time off with his fiancée, actress Julie Austin Felder, and his family in New York for the season, especially sweet.

"We do the Hanukkah/Christmas party with the family—lots of gifts, and we play pin the tail on the clown, and we sing songs, and my sister heads a game of Simon Says. We have a great time," says Ben-Victor.

His family is a talented bunch. His father, acclaimed photographer Victor Friedman, has a book of his images coming out next year, and his work is the centerpiece of Ben-Victor's home, a Santa Monica condominium that he and Felder share with their dog, Cowboy. The actor's mother, Leah Kornfeld Friedman, is a painter "of a lot of naked ladies having babies," he says. "My sister recently came over and said, 'And you wonder, for one second, why we're so f---ed up.'" And among the prized books in Ben-Victor's library loft is *Total Leadership: Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life*, written by his brother, Stewart D. Friedman, a management

A man with thinning hair, wearing a black V-neck sweater and dark blue jeans, stands on a modern staircase. He is leaning his left hand on the metal handrail and looking down thoughtfully. The staircase has a light-colored carpet and a thick, polished wooden handrail. The background shows a white wall with a framed picture and a white door.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHARLES BUSH
GROOMING BY **GEORGIE EISELL** /EAMGMT.COM/DERMALOGICA
FLORAL DESIGN BY **RAMBLING ROSE FLORAL**





Ben-Victor designed all of the kitchen cabinetry. “I wanted the room to be one big space to entertain in. And I knew I wanted a bar,” he says, pointing to the bar separating the living room from the kitchen space. “A lot of the homes do something at the counter level, and I debated with the designer about the counter space. She wanted it to be counter level, and I said, ‘No, I want a bar. I like to go to a bar, I like to sit at a bar.’ She also didn’t want to have the corner office space in there, but I wanted that. I like the nooks and crannies, and Julie ended up adopting that space when she moved in.”



professor at University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School.

Ben-Victor’s artistic parents encouraged creativity by example—sometimes to their children’s chagrin. Growing up in Brooklyn, “We used to go to Coney Island every weekend—rain, snow, sleet, no matter what,” he recalls. “And we would pray that my father wouldn’t see something interesting to photograph on the way there or on the way back. He always had his camera, and he’d pull over and it would be, ‘That’s a shot, that’s a shot.’ We’d have to sit in the car and he’d approach some strange-looking person who you didn’t know what the hell they’d do to you. And my sister and I, usually, and sometimes my brother, would wait in the car with my mom. My mom was fascinated with all of this, but we were, of course, miserable.”

Today, however, Ben-Victor is grateful for the freedom he and his siblings had to explore their creative impulses. As a youngster he took up drumming and continued playing until high school, when he gravitated toward the theater and became consumed with building sets. So much so that he attended Carnegie Mellon University for set design and production work, “hanging out in the shop with my tool belt by day, and hanging out by night with the dramats, as they called the actors,” he says.

On one production, when the student director needed someone who could do a Puerto Rican dialect, Ben-Victor gave it a shot and nailed it. “I grew up around Latino guys, so I had that feel, that thing: ‘What’s happening, Papi?’”

From there, he caught the acting bug. “I love to draw light plots and hang electrical equipment and build sets, but this was just easier,” says Ben-Victor, who eventually auditioned for the department and after graduating returned to New York, where he scored a number of high-profile commercials, including a Pepsi spot with Cindy Crawford, a huge McDonald’s campaign and another for IBM. A trip to Los Angeles for a Dodge spot turned into two years of commercials, which eventually led to television and movies.

The shift to performing clearly worked out for him, but judging from his home, Ben-Victor probably could have distinguished himself as an architect or a designer. “This place was

Over the bed are three photographs his father took in Nova Scotia.



a disaster when I bought it,” he says. “But it was perfect for a person who likes to remodel, which I do.”

Although he had previously overhauled a home in Encino, he found himself drawn to the Santa Monica area. After moving near the beach, he spent three years redoing everything in his new digs, including knocking down two structural walls in the front of the house, which opened up the entry to include the kitchen and the living room to create a great room.

While the work was being done, Ben-Victor was occasionally out of town—including a stretch in Australia, where he made the TV movie *The Three Stooges*, in which he played the most notorious member of the comedy trio, face-

slapping Moe Howard, and in Baltimore, filming his role as Greek gangster Spiros “Vondas” Vondopoulos in *The Wire*.

When he came home, he would live amid the construction mess. “I’d walk in and God knows what I was breathing in,” he says. “It was craziness. I slept on an air mattress, but it was a lot of fun and lots of good times all through it.”

A turning point came when he began to explore the upstairs, and he made an intriguing discovery. “I’m a fanatic for finding things,” he explains. “I’ll bang a hole in the wall to see if there’s space and if there is, I’ll cut into it and build a nook. Why waste four inches if you can stick a candle in it? So I cut a hole in the wall in the upstairs bedroom because I wanted to know what was behind it. The con-





“Pottery is my other love because I like to surround myself with things that I pick up when I’m on location. I like to get things from a local artist when I’m away. I have several pieces from the south of France, Antibes, where these potters are from, when I was doing the movie *Maximum Risk*. When I was in Australia, I got a beautiful piece of pottery, and in the loft there are some bark paintings from the traditional Aboriginal artists and some stuff from New Mexico and wherever I go.”





tractor came with a ladder, and when we looked inside he said, 'Whoa! You've got to take a look at this.' Sure enough, there were tons of rooms up there, but with a jungle of duct work—no floor, just space.”

With that, the renovation immediately expanded. “We put a floor in, water heating, a steam unit for the shower, and all kinds of things are housed up there, secretly and tucked away,” he says. “We gained a whole other apartment up there. We added the library, new doors and windows everywhere, and I put in half-inch cork sound proofing under the living room floor because there’s a

nice neighbor I’m trying to be considerate of.”

The space is now so immaculate that it’s hard to believe the chaos Ben-Victor transformed into beauty, the areas he discovered and revealed in unearthing. His eye for detail and talent for design and remodeling could almost become a new career if he weren’t so fulfilled by his gig on *In Plain Sight*.

“I’ve done a lot of television, and I’ve attracted some wonderful roles,” he says. “But to be on a series where I’m just doing that, it’s fantastic. And I absolutely love the clothes I get to wear. Gorgeous shoes.”

Did we mention that he revels in the details? ☞