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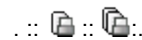
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Interviews

Jeff Daniels—*The Squid and the Whale*—10/17/05



Playing a role tailored to him, Jeff Daniels "broke out" as a stage actor in Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July*. Since making his film debut in Milos Forman's *Ragtime*, Daniels has split his time between steady film and stage work, including—since 1991—contributing plays to his own Purple Rose Theatre Company in his home of Chelsea, Michigan. When not forging memorable performances in films like James L. Brooks' *Terms of Endearment*, Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild*, Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Radio Days*, *Dumb & Dumber*, *Pleasantville*, *Gettysburg*, and *The Hours* or writing and directing Purple Rose films (*Escanaba in Da Moonlight* and *Super Sucker*), Daniels dabbles in songsmithery; his live performances at the Purple Rose Theatre have been collected on a benefit CD (www.jeffdaniels.com). I spoke to the multi-talented Daniels at San Francisco's Hotel Vitale on October 17, 2005.



Groucho: I'd like to start the interview with a question about interviews. I'm sort of a connoisseur of your *Late Show with David Letterman* appearances. Am I right to think that you play kind of a version of yourself there that's more laconic and world-weary than the real deal?

Jeff Daniels: Oh no, I've been accused of being laconic and world-weary my entire life, yes. I just don't get terribly excited about much of anything. I don't know why that is. Something in the parental genes I think. But it's always been kind of "What's the fuss about?"

G: Well, the fuss now, of course, is about *The Squid and the Whale* and your role of Bernard Berkman. He's a worn-down

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character. Can you explain your approach to his physicality?

JD: The role is based on Noah Baumbach's own father. And his own parents' divorce when Noah was a kid. Noah had introduced me to his father, Jonathan Baumbach, who's a writer. And the movie's based on Jonathan, but there's a lot of fiction in it too. And some of the external stuff, the physicality of Jonathan—there was some mannerisms that I kind of stole. But it was a problem because I was doing—I went right back into rehearsal and started doing an impression of him. So it was false. And so you've got to find things that you can relate to—that personalize it. You know, find some truth in you that you can connect. And then some of those other things will come along. And there were a couple things. One was the writer's mind. There's a fine line with writers between being completely absorbed with what you're writing about at the exclusion of everyone else, including those in the room talking to you, and, being completely self-absorbed. And Bernard, the character, doesn't make a distinction. So that helped. I understand that writers mind the focus and the shutting out of everything else. And then—I've been around a long time, and I've worked with a lot of people who made \$20 million a movie, and won awards and stuff. And it's not a big deal. I mean, I live in Michigan, and when you live in Michigan, you give up recognition. You give up a lot of appreciation and recognition. You just—art comes with living in the middle of the country where nobody cares about you. But there is an under-appreciated factor with me. So I took that and kind of poured gasoline on it and lit it. And then I had Bernard.

G: You've described him as oblivious, but he also has shadows of self-loathing, doesn't he, about his inability to change?

JD: I don't know. I don't know that I ever consciously thought that. Noah and I really focused on that he was the victim—that if it were up to him, the marriage would still be together. That it's not my fault. That his one scene—I get my kid a desk, and he complains that it's a left-handed desk, not a right hand. If we did the scene and kept going, Bernard would have said, "But I got you a desk. Don't miss the point. I got you something." His intentions are good, but he stumbles, fails miserably as a father. As an actor, you can't play pompous, or you can't play "in denial"; you can't play oblivious to how he is. You have to find those other things and let the script do the work.

G: The positive motivations. "I just want to be understood."

JD: Yeah, I mean all that stuff—"I want this, I want that"—that's what you have to play. So that's what we stuck to. I don't think he ever was really aware—there were a couple moments when, you know, the pain, the truth of how he is and what his life really is, hit him. But for the most part of the movie, he's completely in love with his ability and his self and his writing and thinks that the book that he did get published that was semi-successful—was last week, not fifteen years ago. He's still living in a false world.

G: As a theatre-loving actor, and theatre writer, rehearsal is a happy luxury,

right?

JD: Mmm-hmmf.

G: How did you use that here on this film?

JD: It was essential because we had twenty-three days to shoot the film. And every role in it is complex. I think we had about two weeks of rehearsal, which was unheard of, and we just used it and it allowed us to show up on day one of shooting, and then every day thereafter, knowing what we were doing. The director and the actors knew what we were doing, so that when take one happened, we were already there. You know, none of this kind of discussion-on-the-set crap. We didn't have time for it. Didn't have time. So it was hugely important, especially on a film like this where the characters are so complex.



G: What kind of directions do you find most useful as an actor?

JD: Five words or less. You ought to be able to say what you want me to do in five words or less. Find a way to do that. And that means you're going to have to pick your words carefully. Don't make me take a scene where I've got to listen to you expound on what the scene means. I don't care. Just give me a taste of it and I'll do the rest. And any actor who's been around – that's what they want.

G: Well, because you've done your homework.

JD: More of this or less of that, or try something where you wish she were understanding you better. I mean that's all an actor wants. You get to see what happens. But you've got that thing kind of riding you as you go through a take. It's fun.

G: Woody Allen has a reputation as a man of few words as a director, but I gather he was at least somewhat effusive with you, pushing you in a good way. Is that right?

JD: Yeah, he's a man of few words. But he's also – he was so nice as a director – I mean, he would – the first thing he said on *Purple Rose of Cairo* – first day of shooting was "Look, this isn't the Bible here." You could change a word here and there – make it your own. He said, "If I need you to do it as written, I'll bring it back to that. But kind of make it your own." And it was very freeing but also in the same sense, it made you want to do what he had written – you wanted to make that work all the more because he was giving you such leeway. I never

abused it. But there were a couple of scenes in *Purple Rose* – one was on a porch with Mia where I just wax on about stardom. And he just kept “Cut. All right, do it again. More. Just go more.” And I would do like two-minute takes of just rambling on about what this insecure actor thought stardom was and how it had affected his life, and I could see Woody out of the corner of my eye cracking up. It was fun.



G: You're in another great film this year: *Good Night, and Good Luck*.. How much research did you do to play Sig Mickelson?

JD: George Clooney had a ton of material on it, so you kind of go through that as it pertains to you. You don't read all of Murrow's stuff – my God. I'd still be reading it. But you kind of get a sense of what it was, and it's pretty self-explanatory.

The role I play – he's kinda the guy – he's outside of Paley's door. He's St. Peter. But Friendly and Murrow kind of trample over this guy to get to Paley. They go to him out of, kinda, politeness. But when they don't get what they want, Murrow can go right to Paley. And so, this guy tries to get these guys to calm down, try to, you know – “Do we have to do the McCarthy thing? We've got Alcoa Steel. We've got military contracts with our commercial – these guys write your paycheck, Murrow.” And they were just hell-bent to expose McCarthy. And so Sig is kind of the guy who is going “Can we just all get along?” And it doesn't work.

G: I have to get to your moonlighting career as a musician. I know you've been doing this for years at the Purple Rose Theatre. Do you – the songs are very amusing...[ed.: and available at www.jeffdaniels.com]. Do you see yourself as a musician, generally speaking, or is that just a kind of hobby?

JD: It was a hobby for years. And the only reason I kind of brought the guitar out on a stage was because we needed to raise money for my theatre company. And this was about five years ago. And Christmas week and New Year's week we were dark. We didn't have shows. And I'm thinking, there are tons of relatives in Michigan in town, and they're going “Go out on stage and we'll charge money and maybe people will pay to go see a train wreck.” And the first year, it was. And it got better and better. And I became kind of that folk-singer kind of storyteller in the tradition of kind of Christine Lavin and



Loudon Wainwright and Stevie Goodman and John Pride and Arlo Guthrie – all those guys that you like sitting on a stage listening to. And they're telling stories, and here's a song based on that. And because of the Hollywood career, I've got songs in there like "If William Shatner Can, I Can Too." "The Dirty Harry Blues," which is a song about the night – I made a movie with Clint Eastwood – the night Clint killed me, which for an actor is a great honor. And this very kind of "Alice's Restaurant"-inspired song called "Recreational Vehicle," which is a disastrous RV trip I took with my family when I gassed up at a truck stop in Erie, Pennsylvania, pulled on to the highway, and had forgotten my wife.

G: And you have an upcoming film that is called *RV*. Did you enjoy playing husband to Kristin Chenoweth?

JD: It was a great – Barry Sonnenfeld directed it – we had a great time making it. Robin Williams – I'd never worked with Robin before, and he was – it was like being in a three-month HBO concert with Robin. I mean, it was just – I loved listening to his mind, and where he would go, and how he could take anything and spin it into comedy. But we had a great time making the movie. It'll be out in March. Anyone who's ever been in an RV, I think, will appreciate what Robin goes through on his first RV trip.

G: *The Squid and the Whale* represents a leading man's second wind for you. What sorts of roles would you like to grab that you're perhaps not commonly offered?

JD: Good roles and good scripts. And I think part of what – you know, the last few years, the career, like *The Hours*, one scene but great, great script – great people. You know, Clooney's movie. There's like, I don't know, three scenes or something. But great script. Great people. *Squid* is a jump from that. *Because of Winn Dixie* – even though it's a family film, it was a good script and good part. So I'm just making choices like that again. And I think that in the future – I think because of *Squid and the Whale* and *Good Night, and Good Luck.*, we're already getting calls from the people that wouldn't have called before. I think part of it too was – you know, I did *Dumb & Dumber*. I'm glad I did and love what it does. It makes people laugh. And, actors say that, but the last time I looked, the Greeks were holding up two masks. And they should have equal value. Anybody who's done both knows they do. But you kind of lose your membership in the Serious Important Actors room when you do something like *Dumb & Dumber*. And so *Squid's* kind of bringing me back. It's allowing me back into that room.

G: What's the best advice you've gotten on acting or your career – or who is the best role model you've observed?

JD: Best acting advice ever got or ever heard – Robert Preston said this. He said you've got to be in the right place at the right time, but then you have to deliver. And you're gonna get two minutes. And it could be the first week you're in New York or L.A. or year ten, or whenever. But you'd better know it's your two minutes. And you better be great. And you better be great right now. And I can remember *Terms of Endearment* – that audition. And that was one example of "Be great right now. Deliver." And it's really true. It's not just luck. Right place at the

right time. But then the talent has to show up. Otherwise, there are five hundred guys that are on the list after you. So that was great advice.



G: If you ever consider it, how do you think your public sees you and how do you think movie business people see you?

JD: Ha, ha, ha. It's been interesting to kind of ride the reviews of *Squid and Whale*. You kind of get a sense at least of how critically – the critics have seen you. And it's been fun for me to kind of befuddle

people. You know, why would you live in the middle of the country? Why would you do something like *Dumb & Dumber* and *Pleasantville* or *Squid and the Whale* or *The Hours*? Get some focus, for Christ's sake. But that's been the method to the madness all along, is that I wanted to create a range. And there are guys that see that. There are people that see that. I'm going against the grain. I didn't create an image and play to that image movie after movie after movie. I wanted a range. And that's what I've done. And it makes no sense to people, and so I think, to some people, I've been dismissed. Or only remembered as, oh, *Dumb & Dumber* – well, okay, career over, fine. But then, there are other people who are going "Wait a minute. Wait a minute." This guy was – Richard Corliss, *Time* magazine, got it. He said, "If you think about it," and so it's fun to see some of these people catch up to what I've been doing.

G: Well, the performance in *Squid and the Whale* is a real filet.

JD: Filet, yes. Thank you.

G: And best of luck with that film and with Purple Rose Theatre. I'll send people to JeffDaniels.com...

JD: Thank you very much.

[For Groucho's review of *The Squid and the Whale*, click [here](#).]