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Lighting up Jeff Daniels, he of dark characters

Inside Bay Area

JEFF DANIELS looks like something the cat dragged outside and left lying in the sun.

Even his hair seems exhausted.

The breakout star of "The Squid and the Whale," Daniels has been promoting the dickens out of the dysfunctional-family ode that opened Oct. 21.

With apologies to Dr. Seuss, he's traveled here, he's traveled there, he's traveled almost everywhere.

Now he's mid-jaunt; he flies to L.A. next for daylong interviews, then it's on to the next frontier.

Don't worry, he tries to reassure me and a photographer: He will get it together when we're ready.

I believe him. Even though Daniels doesn't appear to have even an ember left in his body, I have faith he'll come through.

I have faith because there is something in his on-screen persona that telegraphs "nice guy." Each performance seems natural and effortless, like James Garner's work.

Like Garner, Daniels fleshes out his characters' humanity even when they're bad guys.

Highlights include roles in "Terms of Endearment," "Arachnophobia," "The Purple Rose of Cairo," "Something Wild," "Gettysburg," "The Hours," "Blood Work" and "Dumb & Dumber."

Smart and smarter, Daniels decided in 1986, when he was near the top of his game, to move back to Chelsea, Mich., the city where he grew up. "A bold choice," he says. He wanted to raise his children in normalcy instead of Tinseltown. It cost him some money and a few roles, he admits, but he says it's been worth it.

That's another reason I have faith in him — which he justifies.

We're sitting in a suite in the Vitale Hotel in San Francisco. We've just finished shooting pictures on the roof.

Posing wasn't his first choice in life, but he's a professional and did everything asked without even one qualm.

Now he expects the hard stuff — the kinds of "Squid" questions he hears in his dreams. (This is poetic conjecture on my part.)

Instead, I ask him about family — his wife Kathleen, whom he knew in high school, and their three kids — then we navigate through his childhood.

And he starts to perk up.

In sixth grade, Daniels says with a grin, on days when his teacher didn't want to teach, young Jeff stood in front of the class and did skits.

He improvised one bit around a politician giving a speech with his pants down. He ad-libbed for 10 minutes. His teacher was so impressed that he told Jeff's parents the boy had talent and they should let it evolve, Daniels recalls.

They did. Keep in mind this was a traditional city. His mother was a housewife. His father operated a lumberyard, which Daniels was expected to take over. "I was supposed to be third generation," he says.

But they stood behind him from the get-go. Years later, when a New York director told him to skip his senior year of college, come to the Big Apple and work at his Circle Rep theater as an apprentice, he consulted his father.

"He looked at me and told me, 'You should go,'" Daniels says.

He looks amazed at the recollection.

Growing up with that kind of encouragement helps him support his children's passions.

"Chase it," he tells them when they have a dream. Try it out, see how it feels, learn.

That same philosophy contributed to his agreeing to accept the challenging role of Bernard, the unlikable, pompous head of the family in "The Squid and the Whale."

When the chance to play the crass character was first offered, Daniels realized, "I didn't know how to do it. I knew it was a great role and it would probably go to someone else. It was a real chance to fail."

Always a lure, he says.

So, too, was Laura Linney's casting as his wife. "With Laura Linney in it, I knew I would really have to bring it."

He does. It's a striking performance, his best yet.

Enough about the movie. It's time for some fun.

So I ask him about his CD and he lights up like a low-key Christmas. On the disc, he sings, he plays guitar, he chats, he ad-libs.

Proceeds go Chelsea's Purple Rose Theater Company, which Daniels founded.

"It was a chance to make money for the theater company," he says. "They thought people would pay money to watch a train wreck."

They were right. Available on <http://www.jeffdaniels.com> and on iTunes, "Jeff Daniels Live and Unplugged" raises about \$500,000 a year, he says.

But then who wouldn't want to hear him sing songs such as "If William Shatner Can, I Can Too," "You Can Drink A Ugly Girl Pretty" and "Recreational Vehicle" — about a road trip during which he stopped at a gas station, was mistaken for Jeff Bridges, then drove off but forgot his wife.

Another cut, "Dirty Harry Blues," "honors the night Clint Eastwood killed me (in 'Blood Work')," Daniels says, picking up his guitar and moving to the bed to play a sample. "It's a great honor to be killed by Clint."

Daniels strums some chords. And we leave him happily singing about Dirty Harry and the blues.

I may buy the disc.

Oh, the horror ... The 2nd Annual Alameda International Film Festival hosts Halloween Film Night beginning at 10 p.m. Monday at the Central Cinema, 842 Central Ave., at Ninth Street, Alameda. Tickets are \$5.

The program consists of an array of short horror films bearing titles such as "Confederate Zombie Massacre," "Alex, Vampire Slayer" and "Dead Shift."

The festival concludes on Nov. 11 with a 6 p.m. Directors' Party followed by a 7:30 p.m. Final Show/Awards Presentation at the Auctions by the Bay Theater, 2700 Saratoga St., on the old Alameda Navy base. The shorts program will include narratives, animated films and a documentary.

For more information, visit <http://www.alamedafilmmfest.com> or send e-mail to info@alamedafilmmfest.com.

New on DVD ... "Bewitched," "The Brooklyn Connection," "Darling Lili: Director's Cut," "Dragons: Metal Ages — The Movie," "Dominion: A Prequel to the Exorcist," "The Escape Artist," "The Flesh Eaters," "Gallagher: The Smashing Watermelon Collection" and "Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo — Chapter One."

Also: "Gus Van Sant's Last Days," "Herbie: Fully Loaded," "House of Wax" (Paris Hilton version), "Jerry Lewis: 'The Legendary Jerry' Collection," "King of the Corner," "Melinda and Melinda," "My Friend Irma/My Friend Irma Goes West — Double Feature," "Nothing" and "On the Go: Riding, Sailing, Soaring."

Plus: "Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills," "Rated R: Republicans in Hollywood," "Rize," "Save the Tiger," "Single White Female 2: The Psycho," "Sword of the Beast," "Terror Beneath the Sea," "Titanic: 3-disc Special Collector's Edition" and "Wet Asphalt."

Mail your movie-related questions, answers or insights to The Movie Guy, c/o Bay Area Living, 4770 Willow Road, Pleasanton, CA 94588. Faxes can be sent to

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