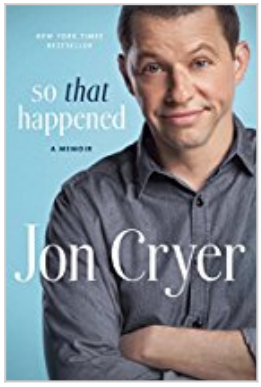

So That Happened: A Memoir

By Jon Cryer

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If it can happen in show business, it's happened to Jon Cryer. Now he's opening up for the first time and sharing his behind-the-scenes stories in a warmly endearing, sharply observed, and frankly funny look at life in Hollywood.

In 1986, Jon Cryer won over America as Molly Ringwald's loyal and lovable best friend, Duckie, in the cult classic *Pretty in Pink* in a role that set the tone for his three-decade-long career in Hollywood. He went on to establish himself as one of the most talented comedic actors in the business, ultimately culminating in his current turn as Alan Harper on the massively popular sitcom *Two and a Half Men*.

With the instincts of a natural storyteller, Cryer charts his extraordinary journey in show business, illuminating his many triumphs and some missteps along the way. Filled with exclusive behind-the-scenes anecdotes, Cryer offers his own endearing perspective on Hollywood, the business at large, and the art of acting.

Cryer has worked with some of the biggest and most provocative names in the business, and here, for the first time, he details his experiences with Charlie Sheen, John Hughes, Robert Altman, Molly Ringwald, Demi Moore, Judd Nelson, and Christopher Reeve, among many others. He shares the intimate details of his friendships and relationships, pays tribute to his mentors, and explores the peculiar combination of heart, talent, and wisdom it takes to survive not just the bad times in a notoriously fickle industry but even the good times.

In this revealing, humorous, and introspective memoir, Cryer offers readers a front-row seat as he reminisces about his life and experiences in showbiz over the past thirty years.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review
“Completely entertaining. Cryer addresses Charlie Sheen’s fall from grace to the reader’s satisfaction, but the real gems are the insightful, self-deprecating tales from Cryer’s own career, from *Pretty in Pink* to *Two and a Half Men*’s twelve-year-run.”—*GQ*

“A wry, self-deprecating and funny memoir that covers [Cryer’s] thirty-five-year career.”—*The Hollywood Reporter*

From the Trade Paperback edition.

About the Author
Jon Cryer is an Emmy-winning actor, screenwriter, film director, and film producer, best known for his work in John Hughes’s *Pretty in Pink* and as Alan Harper on CBS’s *Two and a Half Men*. He lives in Los Angeles.

A Note on the Use of Profanity

When I started this book I truly believed that I did not curse very much. That I added a dash of salty language to a slab of comedic irony only when it was urgently necessary. For flavor. But the process of writing it has brought me to the realization that what I tend to offer up is actually a sodium-packed canned ham of expletives of dubious necessity. For that I’m desperately sorry. I’ve endeavored to reduce their use wherever possible, but I’m afraid many remain. If you purchased this book hoping it’d be appropriate to read for your “Family Showbiz Bio Reading Night,” I suggest you take this moment to reconsider.

Prologue

“Goddammit.”

“Cut, cut, *cut*!”

The director yanks off his headphones and wearily barks, “I’m pretty sure doves don’t shit sideways! Am I right? Anybody?!”

The special-effects guy (Allen, I think) is at a loss for words. Really, how does one respond to that question? The cast, dressed in tasteless formal wear for a mideighties suburban American wedding, break character and start to mill about restlessly.

There is a moment of tense silence while some of us consider a reply to the director’s odd dove query. But fortunately, our fearless leader breaks the tension by answering himself. “That’s what I thought.”

We are shooting outside a wedding chapel in Phoenix, Arizona, during the summer of 1983, and it’s

incredibly, unbearably, fucktastically hot. My white polyester tux is sodden with sweat and adhering to every contour of my body. The reason Bob, our director, is asking about the physics of bird ejecta is because in this particular shot, the animal wranglers were supposed to release some doves, and when those doves flew over the wedding party, they were supposed to shit on us as we exited the chapel. Sadly, the actual doves, ignorant of their cue, indifferent to the wishes of the director, as well as unconcerned about their chance at screen stardom, did not cooperate and empty their bowels upon us.

So the special effects guy (ninety-five percent sure it's Allen), ever resourceful, had jury-rigged an elaborate backup system of pressurized containers to squirt fake dove poo on the wedding party from either side of the camera. But no matter how he tried, said poo would rain onto the partiers with a noticeably wide arc. This made Bob unhappy. Apparently he felt any discerning moviegoer would immediately notice the crap's flight path, and their sense of cinematic verisimilitude would be forever compromised. Bob was turning out to be the Stanley Kubrick of turd-trajectory perfectionists.

Not that Bob is being an asshole about it. He seems irritated, yet kind of amused. The Bob in question is actually a Robert: Robert Altman, the acclaimed director of *MASH*, *Nashville*, and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. So if any director has earned the right to be an asshole about doves shitting on people, it'd be him.

The movie is *O.C. and Stiggs*, and it is intended to be Bob's subversive take on American suburban torpor dressed up as an accessible youth comedy. The story is about how the two titular teenagers abuse, accost, and generally annoy an atrociously clueless nouveau riche family, the Schwabs. I play Randall Schwab Jr., idiot scion of the brood, while Jane Curtin of *Saturday Night Live* fame and Paul Dooley from *Breaking Away* play my parents. Also in the film are Dennis Hopper, Cynthia Nixon, and Ray Walston.

This is my first day of shooting on my very first movie role.

In a fucking Robert Altman movie.

I am quite literally vibrating with excitement, anticipation, and abject terror.

The scene we are shooting is Randall's sister Lenore's wedding. Pretty much the entire cast is in it. So on my first day I get to work with both a director I revere, as well as performers I've admired for ages. I'm in the big leagues. I'm getting my chance to find out how the actors who've made it ply their trade. To discover exactly how one of the all-time great directors makes his genius manifest. It's going to be amazing. If only they can figure out how to get this bird-shit thing to work.

The crux of the scene, as Bob imagines it, is that the Schwab family emerges from the chapel, followed by the auspicious release of a flock of doves, signifying to all that our clan is the gauchest of the gauche in terms of egregious displays of suburban American wealth, at which point—big joke!—the doves would poop on us. Take that, richies!

But as I said, this guano business is easier said than done. So after Bob's minor outburst, he emerges from his trailer, where he's been watching us on video monitors, with a certain if-you-want-something-done-right-you-have-to-do-it-yourself determination. He confers with his special-effects guy (it's possible it's Steve), who runs off and hurriedly gathers a large yellow mixing bowl and several ingredients easily found in a refrigerator or pantry. He throws the assortment into the bowl and mixes fiercely. Meanwhile Bob motions to one of the grips, who grabs a ladder and rushes in. The special-effects guy (thanks, IMDb, definitely Allen) hands Bob the bowl and Bob sighs.

With filmic reality on the line, it is now evident that someone will have to go vertical and rain this new faux poo from a proper angle over the assembled wedding guests. And that that someone will be none other than

five-time Academy Award–nominated director Robert Altman himself.

Imagine, if you will, this master American filmmaker—the man behind *The Player*, *Short Cuts*, and *Gosford Park*—climbing a rickety aluminum ladder, perching his shall we say portly frame on the top while a crew member nervously holds the ladder in place, and, as his actors step out from flung-open chapel doors, hurling down on us healthy dollops of *very* realistic-looking ersatz bird feces (see the Appendix for the recipe) with steady, consistent authority.

As cameras roll, Bob lobs bogus excreta with the artistry of Jackson Pollock. Or perhaps Georges Seurat is a more appropriate comparison: Like Seurat's pointillist masterpieces, not a blob is out of place. But I start to notice a curious phenomenon. I haven't been hit and, for lack of a better description, I'm feeling left out. My gut tells me the audience will really enjoy seeing my character get nailed. So I begin jockeying into position to put myself in the line of poop fire, much the same way an outfielder adjusts to get under a fly ball. I look around and realize that all of the actors I was looking forward to working with, the ones I truly respected, are doing it too! There's Jane Curtin gliding sideways to snag a faceful of avian dookie, Paul Dooley expertly catching some on the shoulder, and future *Sex and the City* star Cynthia Nixon animatedly yakking with a background performer as she stealthily positions herself to receive an admirably viscous splotch in her hair.

Looking around at this surreal scene, I could not help but marvel at the caliber of performer hoping to get shat on by Bob Altman. I thought, *Welcome to showbiz, Jon.*

And as it turned out, this wouldn't even be the weirdest day of my career.

Not even close.

Chapter 1

I don't remember the first time I was on television.

If that sounds a little strange, it should. I grew up during a time when an appearance on TV was a fairly exotic, noteworthy occurrence. I also don't remember even wanting to be an actor then, which should have made it all the more bizarre.

For your perusal, I submit this:

This is me circa 1969. Clearly I was looking down the barrel of a future already limited by my glaring failure to master the arcane arts of the common hairbrush. As you can see, I had no earthly reason to expect a career in the entertainment industry.

Yet I was blessed. Blessed with moxie, stick-to-itiveness, spunk, an off-kilter grin, lousy posture, an anxious nature, discolored teeth, zero muscle tone, asthma, an assortment of vocal tics, low self-esteem, a muffin top (before they even called it that), and dandruff. As well as the two things that made up for almost all of it: an appreciation for the surreal, and a near-delusional ignorance of my own limitations.

All I needed was fate to throw some happy accidents, odd occurrences, and utter fiascoes my way, and I'd be off and running.

The first of them is the one I can't even really remember.

You can decide if it means anything in the larger scheme of things. I've had to rely on my mother for a lot of the details, since she was there for it.

Actually, I like starting with a story involving my mother, because she's an amazing woman. This was the late 1960s in my hometown of New York City, when my parents—Gretchen and David Cryer—were still together. The estimable Gretchen Cryer was, in fact, a double threat—actress and playwright. A triple threat soon after, if you count having to raise two kids, a daughter and a son, after my parents divorced.

At any rate, playing moms in television spots certainly helped pay the bills, and one day she landed a commercial for a multivitamin called Zestabs, an over-the-counter brand aimed at families that would now be called "vintage." Although not the way wine is so judiciously labeled. In other words, if you find a dusty bottle of Zestabs in your grandmother's medicine cabinet, do not decant it and serve with lamb chops. Sell it on eBay to some hipster who wants it for his apothecary table.

Anyway, Zestabs not only wanted Mom for their commercial; they wanted her for the whole campaign, too, so this was a real score back then. TV! Print ads! Store displays! The bottle label, too! Mom would be the new face of vitamins. And maybe also . . .

She was asked, "Do you have any kids?"

"I sure do," she said. "Two. A girl and a boy."

"Great," said Zestabs. (I don't have a person for this part of the conversation, just a faceless brand, but hey, corporations are people, too, apparently.) "We need two kids. They don't have to say or do anything. You'll just stand there and say the copy, with your arms around each of them."

Mom came home to our apartment on the Upper West Side, brimming with enthusiasm about the offer. First she probably had to get my sister, Robin, then six years old, to stop beating the crap out of her younger brother (I was four at the time). I picture my mother excitedly throwing open the front door to reveal my sister in a prepunch tableau, eyes wide, holding me up by my collar, fist clenched and arm cocked. But once she pried me out of my sister's freakishly-strong-for-a-first-grader grip and the proper admonitions were taken care of, she laid the news on us.

"Kids, we have this wonderful chance to be in a commercial together! Want to do it?"

At the same time I said, "*Yes!*" Robin began screaming and crying and bolted for corners of the apartment unknown, which necessitated a peacekeeping mission on Mom's part to reassure her that children aren't taken from home against their will and forced to hawk products, as though Madison Avenue had its own version of the child catcher from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

But me? Make me a child-labor slave for Zestabs! Give me a new sister, too, while you're at it! (I got one, in fact, a nice blond girl they hired for the commercial, named Jennifer.)

My first salaried job, people. And really, what did I even know of the business then? I knew my parents had something to do with performing. I'd hang out backstage sometimes during the original run of the Broadway musical *1776*, which both Mom and Dad were in, and marvel at the fact that adults were deeply involved in the act of playing and pretend. Women wore big hoop skirts, bizarre undergarments, and tall wigs; men wore tons of makeup and fancy old-timey suits; they sang and spoke loudly, then walked offstage and briefly turned into normal people again, drinking Cokes and swearing and bumping into one another before

scurrying back onstage to pretend again. It was like being on another planet, one that seemed way more fun than this one.

I don't know if at the age of four I could have put all that together as part of what being in a commercial was, but my saying yes so insistently meant the desire to perform was in me somewhere.

I was so excited about the commercial, in fact, that the morning of the shoot, as a special gift for everyone, I showed up with giant red blotches all over my face and skin. Yes, my four-year-old body—overwhelmed by the mixture of nervousness, anticipation, and enthusiasm coursing through it—turned me into a Dr. Seuss creature. Had we been shooting a commercial for a skin-rejuvenating soap, I'd have made an incredible "before" picture.

But this was a vitamin commercial in the 1960s, and all I was supposed to do was look happy and say nothing next to my mother—plenty of training in the bag there—and yet somehow already this neat little opportunity had taken an unforeseen left turn.

Luckily everyone was, according to Mom, very accommodating and understanding, and after a sufficient period of calmness the blotches subsided. We shot the commercial, everything went smoothly, the ad aired, and children everywhere got their recommended daily doses of vitaminy goodness because I looked clean, cheerful, healthy, and not in any way like this vitamin gave you shingles. With my paycheck, Mom started a bank account for me instead of blowing it all on hats, which was smart, I thought. Plus, when we'd go to the drugstore, I could go to the vitamin aisle and see a display-stand version of myself and Mother and some random blond girl staring back at me, which even then I thought was a little peculiar. I'm sure Robin kicked the cardboard me every chance she got.

And yet I wouldn't call my Zestabs experience the Bug. You know, the "acting bug" you always read about in interviews, which equates the desire to play characters with, of all things, a presumably incurable disease. That particular infection happened years later, when I was persuaded to go to a summer camp for the performing arts. But the Zestabs commercial certainly let me know that even when something sounds smooth and fun and exciting, you'd better be ready for splotches.

Zestabs, meanwhile, with their sights now directly on the young, went on to make chocolate-flavored vitamins and to use Mighty Mouse in its ads and labeling, eventually inspiring the Flintstones brand of chewable vitamins, before fading as a relic of cartoon-inspired marketing of over-the-counter drugs to children. Zestabs retired to Arizona, married a discontinued breakfast cereal, and lived out its days on a ranch.

But me, I was just beginning. . . .

Chapter 2

In the 1960s, nobody wanted to live above Ninety-sixth Street. But one of the Bob Fosse dancers in the musical *Little Me* told my mother, who had a five-line part in the show as Miss Hepplewhite, that an apartment was opening up for rent in a building on One Hundred Third Street. Mom was pregnant at the time with my older sister, Robin. She and my dad needed more space, so they moved in. I was born two years later. I couldn't tell you if any of the friendly winos who frequently peed in the mailroom area of the building sent my mother flowers in the hospital or anything. I assume not.

It was pretty action-packed on our block, crime-wise. One time a prostitute jumped off the roof. We knew a

kid who got shot in a building down the street. There were bullet holes in the Plexiglas front doors. Elevator muggings were known to happen.

Most grimly colorful of all was what occurred next door with friendly Mr. Green, a septuagenarian who enjoyed bringing over pots of oxtail soup for Mom, on whom he undoubtedly had a crush. Mr. Green liked to season his specialty with rosemary, and he also liked to pay for sex, hosting the occasional hooker from time to time. (Not sure if oxtail soup was offered to those ladies—I'd like to think he saved that delicacy for Gretchen Cryer.)

One night Mom heard the unmistakable pop of a gunshot next door. She ran out the door in time to see a woman fleeing down the stairs. Mom called the police, who arrived to find Mr. Green tied to his bed, quite literally holding a smoking gun, and a dead man on the floor. It seems one of Mr. Green's regulars had brought along her bruiser of a boyfriend, under the impression that this little old client had money hidden somewhere. Boyfriend tied Mr. Green up and started taking the place apart. While this was happening, even with his arms tightly bound, Mr. Green managed to reach under his mattress and find his gun. Then, from arm's length, using only his wrist to aim, without even being able to see down the barrel, he squeezed off a single shot. Boyfriend caught it right between the eyes. From then on, even though Mr. Green was as warm and jovial as he had always been during his oxtail-soup deliveries, all of our interactions acquired an (I'm sure unintentional) air of menace.

"Tell your mother she shouldn't use too much salt."

"Y-y-y-yes, sir, I'll tell her," I'd stammer.

Getting to P.S. 75 each day without getting threatened for lunch money involved some planning, especially if Mom needed me to pick up groceries on the way home. My scheme was: The twenty for the groceries went into my shoe, while a small amount of money was split between the upper pockets. Sure enough, my mother recalls coming home once and finding her already chipper son in a further state of unnatural exhilaration, so described because I was blurting out, "Mom! Mom! I got mugged! I got mugged!" What made me happy? The older kids who robbed me got only the fifty cents in my pocket. Suckas! The shoe twenty was untouched! Chicken for everyone tonight, thanks to my crime-fighting ingenuity.

* * *

The neighborhood was rough, but in our building there was a sense of community, especially because it was full of artists. It was a real bohemian enclave. Opera singers, jazz musicians, writers, and actors enlivened the faded grandeur of the prewar apartments. The place was also full of young male dancers, a good two-thirds of whom perished during the AIDS crisis. This was a devastating time for everyone in the building. Even then I was dimly aware that this was what it must have been like to live through the plague.

Two stories above us was a Jewish family, the Dennises: Robert Dennis, a composer who wrote for dance companies, collaborated on the music for the notorious nudie revue *Oh! Calcutta!* His wife, Marsha, was an opinionated, smart, lefty intellectual. Their three sons were Gary, David, and Eric, and I was close with the whole family. Though I'm not Jewish (or a Republican, Wikipedia!), so much of their New York Jewish sensibility informed my sense of humor—the fatalism, coupled with irony, wrapped in a sturdy shield of toughness—that I like to say I was raised by a pack of wild Jews.

As building babies, David Dennis and I knew each other from birth. We even shared that clichéd moment in which we sized each other up as toddlers from behind our mothers' legs. As we grew up, we were always either at his family's place or mine, and if not there, the park. I felt so comfortable with the Dennises, whose door was always open, that at dinner I was known to get up and help myself to more food without ever

asking for seconds. (I learned many years later that this breach of etiquette was a source of amusement for Bob and Marsha.) Outside the building, David and I would hang at Riverside Park, maybe run wild in the art deco apartment building facing the park, or make our way to the roof, where fireworks lit inside launched paper airplanes made for cheap thrills. Closer to the ground, we'd hurl water balloons from my family's first-floor window, a choice vantage point not only for accuracy, but for gauging reactions.

As a child I was forever working against a lack of confidence, a sense that I was never truly comfortable in social situations. I really was a dyed-in-the-wool nerd: easily paralyzed by nervousness, lost in my own thoughts, unsure what to say, embarrassed when I did say something because of the vocal tics I had, and likely to be punched in the face by Puerto Rican girls for saying something I didn't realize was an insult.

When fourth-grade Vanessa from P.S. 75 started peppering me with slaps and small punches seemingly out of nowhere, her face coiled in anger, I barely knew what to do, and certainly my brain wasn't functioning well enough to tell my limbs to get in front of my face, or my lungs to breathe. I could only retreat to a corner of my mind in which I endlessly repeated, *How did this happen? How did this come to pass?* I can now shout into the past at my ten-year-old self: *You said something to piss her off, dummy*. Add another characteristic to the list of nerd qualities: situational unawareness.

It made David a strangely inspiring friend to have around. He was more athletic than I was, a terrific ice-skater, with a wall adorned with champion emblems: patches, medals and the like. He accomplished this, though, in spite of the fact that he was born with a birth defect: One leg was shorter than the other, and one of his feet was thinner and had only three toes. Even after David had an operation at twelve to prevent the onset of scoliosis by surgically extending his leg—an excruciatingly painful process that involved stretching his leg half a millimeter a day with a racklike apparatus—he could still beat me at footraces. I'd make Bionic Man jokes. My well-used comic excuse at the time was, "My leg hurts too!" David always appreciated that I never treated him differently because of his leg, which eventually required use of a cane. Then again, that kind of humor came directly from him and his family.

David and I were inseparable. My older sister, Robin, and I, on the other hand, nearly always needed to be separated. She and I had a pretty contentious relationship from very early on. She has been known to flat-out state, "Things were wonderful before you came." We were at each other's throats on a regular basis, and it drove Mom crazy; you could tell that at times she feared for our lives. Dinner was a barrage of insults, starting with my sister's pet name for me, King Uh-huh, a dig at an involuntary little laugh I occasionally add to the end of sentences. At any rate, I grew up with a sibling who could be counted on to crush any sign of confidence I ever showed, or just remove Mom's huge antique wrench from the wall and hurl it at me. Mom openly took my side, too, which I'm sure didn't make things any better for me in Robin's eyes.

Two things positively altered my and Robin's relationship, though. One was the time Sis had me pinned, ready to whale on me, when I somehow managed to bite her hard on the arm. It was a nasty mark, too, a real tooth tattoo. The mouse had roared, it seemed. I'd finally drawn a boundary. The second was just the natural course of adolescence. She began socializing outside the home, which took higher priority in her to-do list than tormenting me.

Key to that was her close friendship with a girl named Shelly, who eventually moved in with us. Robin and Shelly had that us-against-the-world kinship that made them love Aerosmith, Cheap Trick, and Yes more than anybody else, spurred them to dye their hair similarly, and probably (because I have no confirmation on this) get high together. When Shelly's free-spirit single mom wanted to marry a Trinidadian and move to his homeland, Shelly balked because she really wanted to attend the High School of Music & Art, which had accepted her. She asked my mother if she could live with us, and Mom loved the idea. There was plenty of room—we had four bedrooms—and maybe more important, when Shelly was around, Robin was less

inclined to treat me like a detainee in a black-ops site.

I still remember Shelly's simple and gently spoken, cruelty-defusing words, and how they transformed the air, turning our home into a land of peacemaking and harmony: "Robin, don't do that."

Shelly was also pretty, and often traversed the apartment scantily clad, which made her a welcome guest in my eyes. Our building was so old that it still had keyholes on doors, and I may have, a time or two in front of Shelly's room, incurred a crippling injury that required me to stoop and turn my head in the direction of her door's keyhole, whereupon I might have seen some things I wasn't supposed to. The problem with getting caught and claiming injury, of course, is that you have to fake that pain for at least forty-five minutes afterward.

Ultimately Shelly was the UN to our Serbia and Croatia, which really brought unity to the household. But Robin also changed. She became less confrontational, and began to look at me as a fixer-upper instead of a punching bag. Perhaps realizing her little brother was entering pubescence with a target on his back—I was the definition of nerd-in-training: nonathletic, smallish, generally timid, and quick to spout know-it-all information as a defense mechanism—she actively worked at helping me socially. She even took me to my first concert, the Thompson Twins at the Ritz, and dressed me to boot in teen-hipster duds from the clothing store where she'd started working. Although she still enjoyed making fun of me, my early teens were marked by a lasting détente at Chez Cryer. War crimes would not be prosecuted. Trade talks were negotiated. The occasional diplomatic slight was forgiven.

Of course, much of the reason Robin and I had a trial by fire as fractious siblings was because as latchkey kids, we often had the run of the house. We became particularly independent during my preteen years, when Mom began to taste success with the musical *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road*, which Mom wrote the book and lyrics for and starred in, with music by Nancy Ford, her longtime collaborator.

It's worth taking a moment to note that it's no small feat to make a living in New York as a playwright, much less a female one, and Mom's been at it for more than fifty years now. The 1970 rock musical she wrote with Nancy, *The Last Sweet Days of Isaac*, won multiple theater awards, and in 1972 they opened a show on Broadway called *Shelter*.

Getting My Act Together was autobiographical for Mom. It told the story of an actress approaching middle age who finds new life singing songs about female liberation, and in 1978 the legendary theater producer Joe Papp put it up at the Public Theater.

When *The New York Times* panned it in a truly rotten, dismissive review, I vividly recall finding my mom crying by herself in her darkened bedroom. She'd worked so hard on it, it was such a personal story, and we had been enduring some lean financial years for a while. I remember Mom sitting us all down at the table and giving us the grim news that there would be no allowance for a while. My dad, who by that point had moved to Los Angeles and was a struggling actor with a new family, didn't have the money to pay child support, so it was all on our single mom. In that light, knowing that the *Times*' influence was enough to kill a show outright, the news did not look good for our getting out of financial straits. But Joe Papp, unbowed and perhaps reminded of how much preview audiences loved it, let the show run for six weeks. By the end of that run, *Getting My Act Together* had found itself a passionate audience. The show was selling out on word of mouth alone, and would go on to run for almost three years off-Broadway, one of the longest such runs in that era.

The success, though, meant that Mom's show and, because she starred in it, Mom were in demand around the country. She acquired a manager—well, *acquired* is not exactly accurate. *Getting My Act Together*'s lighting designer, an affable, bearded, beret-wearing mensch by the name of Marty Tudor, approached her

one day and said, “Hey, can I be your manager?” Mom replied, “I don’t know; I’ve never had a manager before.” He replied, “That’s cool; I’ve never been one before.” Marty, who used to design light shows for concert acts like Barry Manilow and had done enough tours with megastar Meat Loaf to refer to him simply as “Meat,” was tired of the rock-and-roll life and was ready for a career change. My mom was willing to take a chance.

Where money was concerned, there was finally some breathing room, but she was also away a lot: to Los Angeles to meet with interested movie people, to Chicago to star in the show for three months, then to other cities that wanted to run *Getting My Act Together*. When I look back on that stretch of my youth, when I was fifteen and Robin was seventeen, I never equated Mom’s extensive traveling with the frowned-upon notion that as a parent she “wasn’t around,” or that she was being irresponsible. She was doing what any self-respecting, hardworking man or woman would do when the fruits of his or her labor met with success: They worked at growing it. If you were a playwright, the chance to see your play done all over the country was what you lived for. It’s there in the title of her show, for Christ’s sake—she took that act on the road!

It couldn’t have been easy on her, leaving two kids alone while she got another child—her show—up on its feet. But as I said, in our building there was a sense of community, of neighbors looking out for neighbors. Then again, this wasn’t always soothing to Mom. By the time she was off to Chicago, I was looking to make my own money, so I started working down the street at the Equity Library Theatre located in the Master Apartments building, one of New York’s oldest theater companies and a union-sponsored house that specialized in revivals and showcases for young actors. I began as an usher, and for a fifteen-year-old kid with a burgeoning interest in acting, it was a great education in various plays and musicals. Well, an education in first acts, at least. By intermission I was officially off work, so I’d usually leave, which means that as far as I know, Willy Loman becomes salesman of the year and retires with a gold watch. I should really find out someday. Anyway, I liked the job and wanted to work more so I could have more money. So one day while Mom was in Chicago, I decided to plead for more hours from the theater’s house manager, Russ. This conversation happened to take place on the sidewalk outside the theater, and apparently within earshot of a concerned twelfth-floor tenant.

The next morning, Mom was woken up early in Chicago by elderly Norma Vogelstein from upstairs, who related in her most judgmentally alarmed old person’s quaver, “Dear, we’re very worried about Jonny. He’s been seen on the street begging for money and jobs.”

That’s right: To Norma Vogelstein’s Depression-era ears, Gretchen Cryer’s kids were abandoned, starving urchins, to the point where one was openly beseeching people on the street for sustenance. Naturally, I soon got a call from my mortified mom, terror on the edges of her voice, wondering what was up with the public supplicating. I eased her fears, explaining that I was just asking for more hours, and that all was fine.

Robin, though, who was entering a rebellious phase of her independence, decided to quit high school while Mom was gone, which only deepened the guilt Mom occasionally felt about being in another city for work. But she had a sense of humor about it, too. During her stint in Chicago, she appeared on the *Phil Donahue Show*. At one point, a guy in the audience stood up and said, “How can you be a good mother when your children are in New York and you’re working in Chicago?”

Rather than get defensive, Mom went the dark-humor route. She said, “Well, to tell you the truth, I just got a call that my son was begging for money and jobs in the street, and my daughter just quit high school.”

Fortunately, TV’s resident champion for women interceded, and stood up for Mom. Phil asked the guy if he’d ever say that to a man who had to go out of town for work to support his family. If Mom ever needed any more reasons to give voice to struggling women through her show, that asshole in Phil Donahue’s

audience was surely one of them.

* * *

Now, did great freedom at an impressionable age mean I was a responsible kid? Well, not always, if David Dennis was around. For an awkward lad lacking in perceived ability, and self-conscious to a fault, David was a bracing pal to have in one's corner. Blessed with a gregarious nature, oodles of charisma, and the ability to bend you to his wishes through sheer force of personality, David was dangerously fun. I was his conscience, but he was my excuse to be naughty. Whatever unsafe, time-wasting activity might be proposed, I could be counted on for a meek, "Are you sure we should do this?" But I never really meant it.

Enthusiasm was David's currency, and it didn't matter what the catalyst of the enthusiasm was—it could be hearing there was a guy dressed as a chicken in front of the Burger King, at which point David made running down to meet him and get his picture a worthwhile mission. The point was to care about something; it filled your life in a valuable way, I learned.

Nevertheless, our teenage years were chock-full of the kind of imaginatively stupid—but enthusiastic!—shenanigans that make me incredibly fearful now for my own children's adolescence. We did stuff that would curl your hair, especially when the third member of our posse, a Cuban-born charmer named Artie, was around. Artie was strikingly handsome, sporting a preposterous pompadour inspired by the Stray Cats, and a slight lisp that gave a winning cuddliness to anything profane or macho he said.

I always joke that the dynamic of our group was along the lines of Leopold and Loeb, but with the capacity to harm turned toward ourselves. Don't get me wrong: Kids in our neighborhood played all the wholesome-looking games that movies about New York have always depicted—stickball, handball, ringolevio—but our playtime often took a different turn. We had games like "Overzealous Security Detail," "Prison Snitch," "Careless Gas Station Attendant," and, one of my all-time faves, "Fraudulent Pot Bust." That last one goes like this: Two of us would pretend to be cops who, upon stopping the third in his tracks and rifling through his pockets, would stuff a plastic Baggie in his pocket, pull it out, and then growl, "What's this, *marijuana*?" and proceed to pummel him repeatedly. Pretty much all our "games" ended with someone getting pummeled, or merely tortured, or farted upon, or all of the above. Score was never kept.

Then there was the time our fondness for lighting fireworks-laden paper planes and throwing them out the window—a "game" I titled "Nightmare in MiG Alley"—went a bit awry. I know, I know. How is that possible? Well, David lit a firework, and as he was preparing to launch, it went off by his ear. He shrieked, because he was in pain. Artie and I laughed, because we were those kinds of friends.

David started screaming, "Do I *still have my fingers*?"

"Yes," I said.

"What?" said David.

"I said *YES*!"

"Do I still have my fingers?"

"YES!"

"WHAT?!"

At which point Artie or I probably checked to see if what David was missing was an ear. (He wasn't.)

One time David and I participated in a séance at the Equity Library Theatre, in the hopes of contacting the ghost of a dead Russian. The Master Apartments building, which then housed the Equity Library Theatre and still stands as a beautiful art deco monument on the Upper West Side, was built in 1929 in part as a showcase/haven/command center for a guy named Nicholas Roerich. He was a Russian-born artist who attracted a worldwide following to his brand of Eastern-influenced mysticism and philosophy. Roerich believed, for instance, that during the years of Jesus's life the Bible skips over, Jesus traveled to Asia and studied Buddhism. He was a controversial dude, to say the least, and the Master building had a museum dedicated to the guy's art. It was also thought that Roerich's ghost haunted the place.

Well, those of us who worked as ushers at the Equity Library Theatre—which used to host Roerich's lectures—had to find out. One night, we waited till everyone left after the show, and set up our spirit-calling circle of chairs onstage. Someone took down the portrait of Roerich from the lobby and put it in the center of the circle, his bald-headed, wizard-bearded mug staring into our souls as if he knew this day would come.

Shit got quiet. Then the chanting began. First his name.

"Nicholas Roerich . . . Nicholas Roerich . . . Nicholas Roerich . . ."

Not everyone knew exactly how to say it, so some pronounced it "Row-ritch," while others of us—the smart ones—said "Roarick."

Pretty soon we just started saying all kinds of weird stuff, just because we were in the mood. Some of us got up and moved around, the way you make fun of interpretive dance.

Then all the red lights in the theater turned on at the same time.

The simultaneous shriek that detonated from that group of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds was like a hydrogen bomb of adolescent panic. It had to have burst an eardrum or two. The dash for the exits would have impressed a crack team of firefighters. David turned to me and kept saying, "Give me my cane! *Give me my cane! Give me my cane!*" As if he needed it, he was out of there so fucking fast.

My brain, meanwhile, went into shock, and then decided to update my reservoirs of accepted wisdom, as if adapting to the sudden proof that ghosts were real. Like a catastrophic data loss followed by a high-speed upload, I began believing in everything my supposedly rational teenage brain always thought wasn't true. Bigfoot? *Obviously*. Loch Ness Monster? *Of course.* UFOs? *Fuck, yeah*. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*? *Documentary.* That money under my pillow when I was five? That *was* from a goddamn tooth fairy!

The sad part is that this was still coursing through my consciousness as we were all in the lobby catching our breath and house manager Russ emerged from a connecting door, laughing his ass off. He'd stayed behind to fuck with us, as anybody with a sense of humor would have, and must have loved the psych-out carnage on display. But it took the rest of the night for me to decompress, which was weird. It was like I had to personally shove each myth back into its hole in the newly revived skeptical part of my brain.

I grew up surrounded by the theater, which looked fun, but also seemed to me an oddly unattainable world, something beyond my reach. Perhaps this was because I surmised that stage performers needed to have an actual skill, like acting or singing or dancing, or all three, and I possessed not a one. I couldn't even do a card trick.

Television, on the other hand, was this warm, funny, comforting babysitter, and from around the age of about eight on, I was pretty obsessed with it—*The Carol Burnett Show*, *Barney Miller*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *The Bob Newhart Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The*

Jeffersons. I know the Golden Age of television is often referred to as the 1950s, but the 1970s were right up there in my opinion. I mean, *The Facts of Life*, people. You watched it. Don't deny it. You cared when Jo shed that rebel pose and let her soft side show. You loved it when Mrs. Garrett got off a zinger. And you knew, deep down inside, we are all Natalie. (If you are under thirty, I apologize for this series of words and names that make no sense. I hope in the future that you continue to think this book is "tight.")

But it never occurred to me that performing on the tube was something to aspire to, maybe because when I heard those immortal words "Live from Television City in Hollywood!" it sounded like television was a commuter destination or a tourist spot, not a magical land of art.

That's where movies came in. A darkened theater is where my showbiz aspirations really began.

I came of age in the dawn of the blockbuster, after all, when Steven Spielberg and George Lucas inspired moviegoers with their mixture of old-fashioned storytelling and eye-popping visuals. Event movies like *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* were just about my favorite things on earth.

Unlike today's special-effects behemoths, the movies of that era couldn't be so overly hyped in advance. Back then, we didn't know what we were in for when we stepped inside the theater. When *Star Wars* first appeared at the Loews Astor Plaza in 1977, I remember going with my mother, her then-boyfriend Tony, and Tony's son, whom I got along well with, and while Tony's son and I were excited to see it, we weren't crazy-excited, because we'd seen only a couple of commercials. There was no Internet to tease and spoil the discovery of it. All we knew was that we thought it looked cool, so we gave it a chance.

For two unspoiled, blissfully unprepared sci-fi-loving kids, then, that first shot in *Star Wars* was a real declaration of wow. A tiny ship shoots into view from the top of the screen, taking fire from something, which we learn moments later is an enormous spaceship whose undercarriage (is there a better word for it?) hovers over our view ominously. It also seems to go on forever, the massiveness slowly dawning on everyone in the audience, and I recall Mom's boyfriend Tony bursting out laughing at the audacity of the movie's opening. As soon as that Imperial Star Destroyer passed by in full, showcasing its gigantic burners, Tony burst into applause and more laughter. Then I did, and so did nearly everyone else in that theater. Nobody had seen an establishing shot of grandeur like that before, and ever since, whenever a movie floors me with something completely unexpected and awe-inspiring, I hoot and clap. This is why we go to movies, no?

I had to be a part of moviemaking after that. It changed everything for me. At first I wanted to direct movies, as evidenced by the painstakingly crafted Super 8 films I made at home featuring the Japanese-originated line of toys sold in America as Micronauts. I would have been happy in any behind-the-scenes capacity, actually: special-effects technician, production designer, even an errand-running assistant. Whatever was going to get me close enough so I could observe cinematic brilliance as a Spielberg or a Scorsese creates that jaw-dropping moment that makes someone like me hoot and clap.

I had also grown to love the idea of "Hollywood," to the extent that when I was a grade schooler visiting my dad after he moved there to kick-start a movie career as an actor, I could stand on the Walk of Fame on Hollywood Boulevard completely starstruck by a name in brass on the ground and ignore what a disaster the neighborhood around it had become. I distinctly remember at nine years old idling on the sidewalk outside of C. C. Brown's (an old-school ice-cream parlor that had seen better days), staring at Mary Tyler Moore's name and imagining that if I waited long enough, I was sure to catch a glimpse of her as she stopped by regularly to properly care for her star, conscientiously scraping the gum off the charcoal terrazzo.

By then, the old Hollywood studio system lay in tatters, torn to shreds by filmmakers like Arthur Penn, John

Schlesinger, and Robert Altman, who ushered in the modern era of adult-oriented drama, then later by the independent film world, which upended the studios' entire business models. None of the old rules seemed to apply. I was fascinated by showbiz news. I loved the often farcical stupidity of the town, the ridiculous, unnecessary drama, the myopic greed, the insane genius, the venality, the tasteless vulgarity, the wasted millions, the wasted actors, and the wasted lives. It was all wildly entertaining, often more so than the movies themselves.

David Dennis's brother Gary, who had an encyclopedic knowledge of film, showed me a copy of Kenneth Anger's groundbreaking pictorial history of tabloid Tinseltown, *Hollywood Babylon*. I was transfixed by its mix of real regard for the artistic accomplishments of its denizens as well as lurid interest in the unseen dark side of their personal lives.

The seventies had unleashed the sexual revolution on cinema as well as on the people who worked in it. And as I started to understand the concept of sex, it also occurred to me that this place I'd heard of called the Playboy Mansion was somewhere near this so-called Hollywood town. And that meant that, by extension, Bo Derek was nearby as well. Because I was sure she lived there.

I pictured the mansion as sort of the Pentagon of nooky, the world headquarters of this campaign of carnality, replete with scantily clad female generals gathered around glowing strategy tables planning indecence on a global scale.

Hollywood took on a patina of alluring decadence. If the theater was another planet, then Hollywood was a galaxy far, far away. But one where I hoped one day to live, preferably in a reasonably priced studio apartment. Near the Playboy Mansion.

Performing was certainly one way to dip my toe in the showbiz waters and get me closer to my celluloid dreams, so I made some tentative steps in that direction in my early teen years through the most convenient venue: school. It started at Simon Baruch Junior High—commonly referred to as 104—where I had a chorus teacher named Bob Sharon, a gifted musician and admirably stern taskmaster. (I picked chorus as an elective not because I thought I could sing, but because my sister, Robin, was in it.) Mr. Sharon expected a lot out of his kids, and therefore got a lot from them. We were in a public school, but under his tutelage we might as well have been in the most elite conservatory. He inspired devotion and hard work to the extent that acceptance into the highest-level chorus—called the madrigal society—earned you a goofy yellow hat that looked like a four-cornered throw pillow on your head. It was a truly ugly piece of headwear, and yet people strived for the privilege to wear it as if it bestowed magical powers.

A plum assignment for a student in Mr. Sharon's chorus was performing at old-age homes, partly, of course, because it meant getting out of school. My education in Jewish culture got a further boost because we had to learn lots of Jewish folk songs. To this day I know a lot more of that music than most Jews I know. During a play recently about an elderly Jewish woman, the character started singing "*Rozhinkes mit mandlen*," and I instinctively turned to my wife and began whispering, "It means 'Raisins and Almonds,' and she's singing how she'd give that as a gift, even though they're very expensive. . . ." My wife was only somewhat surprised to discover that her husband had suddenly become a Talmudic scholar.

Though the only reason I was in chorus, as opposed to the drama department or the art department, was because of Robin. When Mr. Sharon began casting the school's production of *West Side Story*, he plucked me from the chorus, and I got a one-line role as a Jet known as Big Deal. It was my first exposure to this great musical—that fantastic Leonard Bernstein score, and Stephen Sondheim's witty, soaring lyrics—and to be a part of it felt pretty cool. And because this was New York, we had actual Puerto Ricans as Sharks, and truly white Jets.

Come showtime, facing an auditorium packed with hundreds of kids and parents, I had my line down cold, and in my mind I was a pantherish Russ Tamblyn type with a voice as booming as Ethel Merman's. Make way, everyone. The first act is about to go nuclear. . . .

"But the gym's neutral territory!"

I'd been a nervous wreck until my big moment halfway through the first act, and the sense of relief that washed over me after I brought the thunder is something I still remember. Now I could blend in with the chorus, and if I screwed up the choreography a bit, who would care, right? Only later, upon hearing the vinyl recording they made of the show—yes, vinyl, that's how elderly I am—and seeing a primitive videotape of it, did I realize how I actually came off: as a distracted pudge ball with a vaguely disturbing zombie stare who got maybe half the choreography right, barely moved when I did the steps anyway, and whose big line had all the impact of a mouse sneeze.

"But the gym's neutral territory!"

And because this is a junior high school production, everybody else is screaming their lines at the top of their lungs with absolutely no variation. That aspect of the show was hilarious enough, but at least you heard them. Then I came along, sounding as if I'd been in a locked box off to the side of the stage. I can only imagine the epidemic of quizzical glances and utterings among the audience members.

"Something about a chimp?"

"Did they let a hamster onstage?"

"Is that little girl okay?"

Of course, at the time of the performance, I was blissfully unaware of all this. Being involved in that *West Side Story* was actually quite fun, and for a brief, shining moment made a nervous, timid boy with a suitcase full of anxieties feel connected. I felt a part of something artistic, even if it wasn't a movie, and I could sense a performance seed in me sprouting. Pursuing acting might just be worth my time, I realized, which made the summer looming ahead all the more intriguing.

Chapter 3

Before *High School Musical* and *Glee* made ham-bone high schoolers breaking into anything other than pimples a cool thing, theater camp was definitely way down on the list of places you'd want to go to if you were a kid with confidence issues. Or if you were a kid who thought acting was fun, but *studying* to act sounded foolish. I was both: lacking in confidence, but suspicious of theatricality as a way to solve that problem. I loved movies, enjoyed theater, and had gotten a kick out of doing *West Side Story* in junior high. But a performing-arts camp sounded . . . odd. And yet, what convinced me at the naive and emotionally tender age of fourteen to spend my summer at one? My best buddy, David Dennis, was going, too. How could it not be fun with David?

The camp was called Stagedoor Manor, and it was located a few hours out of New York City in the Catskills Mountains. In 1979, my first year there, Stagedoor had been in operation only three years, but its reputation was growing as an arts-oriented summer camp for the age-ten-to-eighteen set. Calling it a camp, though, is probably an insult to people who actually pitch tents, urinate outdoors, fish for dinner, build fires, and don't scream like a bingo winner every time a fly buzzes their ear. Sure, I'd been on a few family trips to the state

park on Fire Island during sweltering summers past—miserable, ill-advised excursions that tested my endurance levels for sun exposure. But I was already in the process of trying to erase those memories. Stagedoor Manor, on the other hand, was housed in a former Borscht Belt resort, and that meant staying in air-conditioned hotel rooms with real beds, functioning showers, and catered meals. It rapidly warped my view of camping. Years later, I dated a girl who wanted to show me a cabin she had in the mountains.

“You went to camp, right?” she said.

“Yes, I went to camp!”

“So you’ll be fine.”

We got there and I noticed that there were no windows on the cabin, just square holes in the walls.

“Where are the windows?” I asked.

“You said you went camping.”

“Yeah, well, we had windows. And maid service.”

Stagedoor may have been more civilized than the usual “camp” experience of roughing it, but there was no mistaking that you were entering another world: that of theater-geek subculture. This was where the schoolkids who had no hope of being popular in their everyday public schools could rise to the top of the food chain on talent and an encyclopedic command of the works of Stephen Sondheim alone. (Alumnus Todd Graff’s 2003 movie *Camp*, which features a cameo by Sondheim, was inspired by his experiences there.)

Immersion starts immediately. If you take its legendary bus there, kids sing the entire way. It’s a show-tunes rager for the entirety of the New York State thruway, so by the time the bus drops them off, the sheen of polite-society otherness is gone, and they’re already like Shriners with secret handshakes in the form of two-part harmonies and knowledge of all the numbers cut from *Dreamgirls* during its Boston tryouts. Freak flags are at full mast.

Before you judge, though, consider the alumni: Robert Downey Jr., Natalie Portman, Zach Braff, Lea Michele, Amy Ryan, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Josh Charles, Mandy Moore, Michael Ian Black, and countless accomplished composers, writers, and directors. Nothing to sneeze at there.

In 1979, though, it was mostly just a place to spend the summer and maybe have some fun.

I wasn’t privy to the traveling-chorus bus experience. My mother drove me to Stagedoor that first year, so it took arriving there to realize how ill prepared I was for the gung ho nature of it. I had an interest in acting, no doubt, but not enough to take seriously the clearly stated requirement that I have a song and monologue already prepared. The reason the camp holds auditions right off the bat—what, no orientation mixer with soft drinks and name tags?—is because there’s no messing around at Stagedoor. Not only were your days filled with classes in everything from vocal technique and stage combat to movement and dance and seemingly anything related to theater, but afternoons and nights were rehearsal time for the many shows in the process of being staged. Back then, stints at Stagedoor were two months, composed of a pair of four-week sessions, with one show every two weeks. Sound intense? It was. Throw in the requisite festival-week production, and you had nine shows in eight weeks. (They eventually changed it to three three-week sessions, with one show per session, so it’s infinitely more manageable than when I was there.)

In that respect, Stagedoor *is* camp: *boot* camp, for whipping a stage show into shape.

So auditioning that first day is really just to show the camp's directors what you've got so you can be placed in a show, since every attendee has to go somewhere. The kids who know this, and care about snagging plum roles—the ones with full-on stage dreams who sing cast recordings in their sleep—bring their A games. Nothing brought home more to my newbie eyes the seriousness of the venture for many campers than watching this kid named Michael crank up a vigorous *"Willkommen,"* the famous opening number from *Cabaret*, for his audition in the camp's Playhouse theater. Michael had his sheet music for the pianist. He had a top hat and cane. He had tap shoes. He also wore bright green Lycra dance pants—*interesting*—and sported noticeably big prescription glasses, which admittedly kind of undercut the flamboyant Weimar Republic decadence he was after.

I was impressed, puzzled, and appalled. What had I gotten myself into? I was there to hang with David, and indulge the acting thing a little. I didn't have anything like that ready, so I sang "Happy Birthday" and read from a book of monologues I hastily borrowed from a fellow camper. I was terrible, which I guess made me perfect as a nameless street urchin in the chorus of my first show that summer, *Oliver!*

When I started taking classes at Stagedoor, I initially bristled at the amount of deep study being applied to acting. It all seemed like a parody of thespianic pretension, and frankly it seemed a little dumb to me. Per the wishes of the camp's artistic director, Jack Romano, a man for whom digging deep was everything, the director of our *Oliver!* wanted everyone to come up with a backstory for the characters we played. I remember thinking this was a bit silly, especially for someone like me, who wasn't even officially a character in the show, just a lowly chorus member. But that was the idea: Everyone's important! The show works only if each person onstage is fully committed to being a flesh-and-blood person with a name and a past and a present.

It's the kind of exercise that naturally brings out the theatrical in some, so I watched as the urchin crowd around me morphed into a collection of humpbacked, one-legged, or one-eyed orphans. Everyone else's elaborate character work seemed to manifest itself in bodily injuries and deformities. Even Charles Dickens would have eyed this crowd and thought, *Yikes! Too much. I mean . . . um. Wow.* (For some reason, I picture Bob Newhart playing Dickens.) For my street ragamuffin, I chose the name Toby, and while I gave him a suitably grim history in which his parents died of cholera, I also made him able-bodied. It's the first time I can remember making a calculated acting choice based on setting myself apart: *Everyone's doing one thing, so I'll do something different.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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