



Actors Anonymous

This story isn't about Nicole Kidman. It's about the guy next to her. Ty Burrell. Drawing a blank? Don't worry. If you like movies, he's definitely worth reading about.



UP TO THIS POINT, 39-year-old actor Ty Burrell has had one thing over his *Fur* costars Nicole Kidman and Robert Downey Jr. We had no idea who the hell he was.

"I think actors are most exciting for audiences when they are discovering them for the first time," says Edward Norton, a friend of Burrell's, whom

he first met when they were both in the 2002 Broadway play *Burn This*. And although we're talking about Burrell, Norton might as well be speaking about his own brilliant debut in 1996's *Primal Fear*, when he, seemingly out of nowhere, rocketed to recognition. "It is a very particular kind of excitement," he says. "There is no sense of the artifice. That's what's really thrilling."

I am always hoping for pure moments when I watch a movie: those times when my disbelief is so entirely suspended that I forget that I'm watching one. Going into a theater, I often feel overwhelmed with baggage—who the main actor slept with last week, how the director mortgaged his house to get the movie made, and how the production designer only used three shades of green on the set. It even bugs me that once I like a director or an actor, I expect something from him or her, and so the work has an added layer of self-consciousness. When the lights go down, it's hard to wash the slate entirely clean and just watch.

That's why my eyes tend to drift toward the margins for something surprising. And, often, I see it in an actor whom I know nothing about, and who brings something deeper and richer to his character even though he may have just two minutes of screen time. This may seem random (and that's the point), but do you remember in the Will Smith movie *Hitch*, which I just caught on DVD, that there's this misogynist asshole who is, well, such an asshole? Actor Jeffrey Donovan gets it just right. (Who? Exactly.) That's the kind of performance I'm talking about. It can sometimes be a lead role, like in 2003's *Sylvia*, when Daniel Craig gives a stirring portrayal of poet Ted Hughes while the camera is drowning in Gwyneth Paltrow's dewy sighs, but, more often, it's in bit parts, like almost anything Paul Giamatti inconspicuously did in the 20-plus movies he was in before *American Splendor* made him a shlub star.

Burrell has cranked out three such performances for me. First, he was hilarious in his spot-on turn as a smarmy rich guy who dies a zombie's death in 2004's *Dawn of the Dead*. Then, without remembering I had seen him before, I loved watching his pitch-perfect scenes as the other ambiguously heterosexual guy in this year's *Friends With Money*. And last, he smoldered in his intense, troubled depiction of Diane Arbus's estranged husband in *Fur*, which is out in theaters now. And for scoring that hat trick, and at the risk of diminishing the impact of his future anonymity, I'd like to tip my cap to him—and the nameless ranks from which he sprung.

THERE ARE ROUGHLY 120,000 ACTORS registered with the Screen Actors Guild. Of those, only 3 to 5 percent make more than \$100,000 a year. That's fewer than

6,000 actors, and I bet most of us recognize maybe a quarter of their names. Which is to say if you're not in an "elite" 1,500 or so, you're living in oblivion.

"Whether I'm in the top 30 percentile or I'm in the top 1 percentile, I know that I'm incredibly lucky," Burrell says over a breakfast of eggs and black coffee in a nondescript Manhattan diner in midtown. "I can go through my head right now and think of 30, 40 actors who I think are really, really good who can't find work. I can't believe that I'm employed at all."

Burrell makes modest comments like this often—"I can't believe that they're paying me to act" and "After all these years, I don't know if I think of myself as an actor." But, considering his performances, and knowing he has plied the trade for more than ten years, I think it's fair to say that he is an accomplished journeyman actor.

He's tall, dark, and better-looking than he appears onscreen. He's got the firm handshake and unaffected air you'd expect from a man raised in Oregon and descended from ranch hands and homesteaders. His father and mother, respectively, were a social worker and a teacher who also owned a country store.

"I was on my way to a life of pouring Slurpees," says Burrell, who now lives in Queens with his wife. "And I was delusionally thinking I was going to be an athlete." He dropped out of college in Oregon, then reenrolled and, on a lark, took an acting class.

"I was desperately in need of something that I could do," he says between sips of coffee. "I was a pretty undisciplined guy. I just wanted something to focus on that I cared about."

He was soon doing regional theater in places like Utah, Mississippi, and Washington, D.C., and making up to \$500 a week, which he was thrilled about. "I already felt like the luckiest man in the world," he says.

BURRELL DOESN'T DISPLAY MUCH

actor's angst, something he admits could have changed if he were still doing regional theater. For that less plucky perspective on the marginal actor's life, allow me to digress and turn to a Juilliard graduate who's been acting professionally for more than 10 years. This is a guy—let's call him Anonymous Actor because he'd prefer to not be outed as the exemplar of the struggling actor (not exactly a good way to get more jobs)—who has been in many films and TV shows. You can catch him in a Woody Allen movie and one of the prestige pictures that came out this year. He had some heat on him a few years ago, when he had two movies at Sundance. I grab a drink with him after he finishes a day of doing the voice-over for a book-to-audio series.

"Your job is looking for gigs," says Anonymous Actor, who's in his forties. "It

NOTES FROM THE DREAM FACTORY



THE TYS THAT BIND: Burrell, as Mr. Diane Arbus, with Nicole Kidman in *Fur*; on a man date with Simon McBurney in *Friends With Money*; bleeding for his craft in *Dawn of the Dead*.

performances so much partly because they're graced by a pureness that stems from anonymity, he understands. "I feel the same way

feels like it could disappear at any time because every job you get is a temporary job. And I worry that it's going to start to get a lot harder."

I talked with a casting agent who knows Anonymous Actor and describes him as "really good" and "extremely well-trained," but AA's got stories that make my heart sink. When he was the male lead in a Broadway musical, he'd be taking curtain calls in front of a thousand people, and then 45 minutes later—because his wife was the managing agent of the building they lived in—he'd be cleaning up dog poop and taking out his 60 neighbors' garbage.

He pieces together meager salaries—\$15,000 for the lead role in an indie film; a few thousand for the Woody Allen movie—but he says he doesn't want to again resort to the degradation of doing an industrial, those short films created by companies for in-house use (he did one for then-new product Viagra). He says he manages to sometimes cobble together about \$100,000 a year—one year, he scored a commercial voice-over gig for a national retailer that paid in the low six figures—but he still has to hustle to support his wife and two young children. And this is someone doing a lot better than the almost 80 percent of actors who don't even make the \$13,790 necessary to get health insurance. (So, if you live in L.A. or New York, tip your waiter big!)

"Of my classmates at Juilliard, I am in a really small percentage of actors who actually still make a living as an actor," Anonymous Actor says. "There are thousands of people who probably think, 'Wow, he really made it big.' Now sitting here, do I feel like I've made it big? I'm not sure that I do."

"I certainly am not an A-list actor. I'm not even B-list. Is there a C-list?" he asks.

IF THERE IS, I'D SAY THAT BURRELL has slowly crept from C to B-minus. Six years ago, on the strength of being cast in a small role for a New York City production of *Macbeth*, he landed an agent at Endeavor, which was the key to opening doors, including his first film role, as a bad-guy general's lackey in 2001's *Evolution*. From

2001 to 2004, Burrell estimates he was making about \$100,000 a year doing plays, television work, and parts in *Black Hawk Down*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *In Good Company*. Like most actors, he spent a lot of time auditioning for bigger parts (he got "very far" in the process toward winning the Giamatti role in *Sideways*), to no avail.

He says that it took a "perfect storm" in 2005 for him to get cast opposite Kidman in *Fur*. The key components, as I see it: He clicked with director Steven Shainberg; Kidman is close to six feet tall, and they wanted someone taller than her (Burrell is six feet); and it was perhaps preferable that he be unknown, because Downey Jr. had already been cast and his name could adorn the posters alongside Kidman's. Playing a hard-working 1950s father discarded by a woman following her muse, Burrell embodies creative repression and the responsibilities of family with subtle intensity. That said, I don't think this is Burrell's moment to become a household name. (Norton, however, is happy to take advantage of even the limited success of his friend: "It means he can buy the rounds of beers for a while," he says with a laugh.) And that might just be fine with Burrell.

"I really enjoy where I am now," he says. "I don't think I would want the kind of recognition that would impact every social experience that I have." He's not alone: Remember that guy from *Hitch*? "I've been very fortunate to be a very successful unknown actor," Jeffrey Donovan says. "It's an aim, by the way."

When I tell Burrell that I've liked his

while watching certain actors," he says. "The first few times you see them, you have no imprint on your brain. It really is pure." That's partly why he isn't pressing to immediately capitalize on *Fur* with another film role. In fact, he is flying off to do theater in London for three months. "There's real value to trying to preserve that experience," he says. Indeed.

AS AN ENDNOTE, I'LL PROVIDE A

contrarian position, which comes from Ms. Kidman. When I speak with her about Burrell, she praises his "generous" and "beautiful" performance. But, as for my purity-from-anonymity theory, she isn't buying it. "I hope not," she says. "When you're very well known, what you hope for as an actor is that if there's that distraction for the first couple of minutes, your talent is strong enough to draw the audience into a character. And then there's a believability there."

I hear what she's saying. That's what movies are about, after all—suspension of disbelief. And I look forward—for his sake—to one day seeing Burrell become part of that elite group of working actors who earn their distinction by being recognized, even if it's by a small section of the audience. But, for me, that will be a different thrill from watching the legion of Anonymous Actors slipping quietly, and sometimes brilliantly, in and out of the margins of the screen. ●

What unknown actors make the most of their screen time? Send your e-mails to dreamfactory@hfmus.com.



MAKING MARGINAL MEMORABLE: Left, Giamatti (with Howard Stern) in *Private Parts*; Donovan in *Hitch*.