

# DAN FOGLER BY ELVIS MITCHELL



## FROM THE THEATER WORLD, A BIG-SCREEN FUNNYMAN COMETH

It's only after speaking with Dan Fogler for a few moments that the immensity of his concentration emerges. Once he begins to answer a question, his focus on the response is thorough enough that he seems to be evoking an image in his mind, particularly when speaking about his life growing up and the circumstances surrounding the roles—a handful to date—that he's been seen in so far. Of course, his Tony award-winning turn in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* as William Barfee, a conception filled with an

almost mythic rage—he works through each letter as if aiming a harpoon at his own great white whale—is the most epic rendering of the intensity he can bring to bear, and the baleful becomes comic and powerful. And as the 31-year-old Fogler talks about his upcoming work and future plans, he could be conjuring it as he speaks.

**ELVIS MITCHELL:** How did you end up studying acting at Boston University?

**DAN FOGLER:** I grew up in Brooklyn, and I wanted a little space between me and my folks. [laughs] But still, Boston was close enough as a city. I needed city life. I went to all the conservatories when I was shopping around for colleges, and Boston University was the first place where they didn't ask me to lose 30 pounds.

**EM:** Did that happen at other places?

**DF:** All the time, man. Some of these conservatories are very strict. But when I got to Boston University, the guy who was showing everyone around was 30 years old and had a big beard and looked like Santa Claus. I was like, "You're a freshman?" He was like, "Yeah." So I was like, "They didn't ask you to lose 30 pounds?" And he said, "No, they took me as is." Then I looked around, and I saw all of these people of different shapes and sizes. So I was like, "This is the place I want to be. They're going to take me as is." I remember going on other auditions for conservatories, and they would be like, "We love you. You're fantastic. You're the next Nathan Lane." And I'm sitting there with my parents, going, "Great, great. So what does that mean?" It was like, "Yeah, we love you. Can you lose 30 pounds?" And this was in my *slim* years. So that's why I ended up at Boston.

**EM:** From seeing you onstage in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*—for which you won a Tony Award—I know that you're good on your feet. The way you moved in that play, it was like you were carrying all this angst and anger with you.

**DF:** That character, William Barfee, is very much me when I was a kid—a little bit of me and a little bit of my brother. He is all of my anxieties and awkwardness as a kid, under a microscope.

**EM:** Where did all the anger in the character come from?

**DF:** I don't know, man. I guess I've got an angry side. I don't know the whole psychology of it. As a little kid there were times when I was definitely grumpy or mad at the world or "Why am I not in the cool clique?" A huge theme that was put forward while working on that play was that the spelling bee is the place where these kids shine. Everywhere else they are misfits, and this is the place where they're able to express themselves. In this territory my character, Barfee, is the bully; whereas, in every other territory he's the one getting his ass beat.

**EM:** What about the nasally voice?

**DF:** I always stayed away from doing a Barfee kind of character. I thought it was sort of a cliché because it has its roots in the Gilda Radner—Lily Tomlin kind of stuffy-nosed-kid character.

**EM:** There aren't many guys who do that. It's almost endearing when it's a woman doing it, but a guy doing it is slightly creepy.

**DF:** Well, it's still endearing because Barfee is

Above: Dan Fogler wears a shirt by LEVI'S.



only 12. You have to understand he's like that for a reason. He's a porcupine. He's taunted every second of the day for being who he is, so he's got these walls up.

**EM: Was *School for Scoundrels* your first movie audition after you won the Tony?**

**DF:** Yeah, that was, like, the first major thing. I didn't audition; they offered it to me. *School for Scoundrels* was fun. It was basically three days of me beating up Jon Heder, putting his head in the toilet.

**EM: Watching *School for Scoundrels*, I just wondered, were you a John Belushi fan at all?**

**DF:** Huge John Belushi fan. I've been influenced by a lot of guys like that: Jackie Gleason, Zero Mostel, Jonathan Winters, Jack Black—all men of girth. But also Orson Welles, Marlon Brando, and Paul Giamatti.

**EM: How have you been influenced by**

**Orson Welles? Not many people your age bring him up.**

**DF:** I've stolen bits and pieces from all of my heroes along the way and incorporated them into what I do. But I feel like Orson Welles is sort of the foundation for a lot of what people are doing right now. He had a theater company that became a film company, and then he made *Citizen Kane* [1941], and the rest is history. Brad Pitt, Kevin Spacey, everyone is creating their own company so they can have more artistic control. That's what Orson Welles did, and that's what I'm trying to do as well. I'm creating my theater company, Stage 13: We're making movies; we're making plays. We've put up one show already, called *The Voyage of the Carcass*. I also just directed my first movie.

**EM: What's it called?**

**DF:** *Hysterical Psycho*. It's sort of a horror

movie. We went up to Maine and shot there for a little over a week, and then did some more in New York City. I'm editing it now. I make a little Alfred Hitchcock-style cameo. Actually one of the reasons I wanted to do it is that I am supposed to play Hitchcock in this movie called *Number Thirteen*.

**EM: When does *Number Thirteen* take place?**

**DF:** When Hitchcock is in his early twenties and making a movie called *Number Thirteen*, which gets "lost" because he's embarrassed by it. He is freaking out because it's supposed to be a comedy but the lead actor is terrible. So he makes it into a horror film. He hides it, basically. This kid Chase Palmer wrote it and is supposed to direct it.

**EM: You've got a bunch of other movies happening, too.**

**DF:** Well, there is *Balls of Fury*, which came out at the end of August. And then *Good Luck Chuck*, which is out now. Then in January there is one called *Fanboys*. The one I'm most excited about is *Kids in America*, which comes out next year. It's a coming-of-age movie with an ensemble cast. It's like *Dazed and Confused* for the '80s. It's set in '84 or '85 and takes place over the course of one night. It's one of those movies.

**EM: How much room do you get to improvise in these movies?**

**DF:** A good bit in all of them. Nowadays, being able to do that is an asset that young actors have to have.

**EM: Given your skill set, I'd think they would say to you—**

**DF:** "Play around?" Well, you'd be surprised. Maybe after these movies come out it will be a different story. But I'm in a really weird, precarious spot. People are working with me based on seeing some footage of me winning the Tony. They're suddenly working with me, and I'm the lead in their film. So there is a tentativeness. Theater is one thing, but being the lead in a movie is a whole new ball game. There are millions of dollars at stake. It's just a different animal. But 99 percent of the time, if the actors are having fun onstage or onscreen, that's going to come through. And the audience is going to have a good time, too.

---

Elvis Mitchell is *Interview's* special correspondent. Above: **Shirt by FLEXIBLE FIT CALVIN KLEIN UNDERWEAR. Jeans by GUESS? Skin products by MAC PRO. Styling: SAM SPECTOR. Grooming: SABRINA ROWE/Defacto Inc. Special thanks: SUN STUDIOS. Fashion details page 191. Photos: DANIELLE LEVITT.**