



Dan Fogler Grabs Hollywood by the *Balls*

BY MELANIE KIRSCHBAUM PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL SCHEFZ GROOMING AMY CHANCE FOR SOLOARTISTS.COM/MAC

“If the roles aren’t available to you, then make ‘em. Shout really loud and hope people come see you.” Thus begins Dan Fogler’s story. Originally from Brooklyn, Fogler is an inarguable example that it is possible to break into the biz without having come of age in the shadow of the Hollywood sign. “You take many different paths to get there if you’re not born into it, or have family in the industry, or grow up in Hollywood where it’s all around you. I grew up in Brooklyn so I had school plays, stand-up comedy, improv, and theater. Now here I am!” he exclaims.

A self-described awkward kid, Fogler found assurance in the creative world. “I really got into the sciences and responded to visual stuff. The arts were what mostly fascinated me,” he explains. That fascination spawned a sizeable dramatic talent that did not go unnoticed. Fogler was tapped to participate in an improvisational show based on an elementary school fixture, the spelling bee. It was those improv performances that birthed the play “C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E,” which then morphed into the Tony Award winning musical, “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.” Fogler’s endearing portrayal of William Barfee, the nasally-challenged, academic elitist with the magic foot and peevish personality spelled success for him at the 2005 Tony Awards when he nabbed a statue for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical. He was also honored with the Outer Critics Circle, Drama Desk, and Theatre World Awards for his role. Pretty I-M-P-R-E-S-S-I-V-E for a kid from the borough.

Fogler successfully segued to the big screen, landing the lead in the currently playing *Balls of Fury*, where he portrays Randy Daytona, a washed-up ping-pong player recruited by the FBI to capture a notorious table tennis master named Feng (a deliciously contemptuous Christopher Walken). His next turn is later this month in *Good Luck Chuck*, starring alongside Dane Cook and Jessica Alba in the comedy about the luckiest— and unluckiest— guy on earth. His upcoming films include *Fanboys*, *The Marconi Bros*, *The Golden Tux*, *Kung Fu Panda*, and *Horton Hears a Who*. Among his previous credits are the feature *School for Scoundrels*, and stage productions “The Voyage of the Carcass,” “Bobby Gould in Hell,” and “Joe Fearless.” In the brief moments Fogler is not contracted to add his wit to a film set, he’s busy slaving

away on his own work (feature film *Hysterical Psycho*, play “Elephant in the Room,” and his band, 2nd Rate).

Venice nabbed Fogler during his whirlwind press tour for *Balls*, and though the film includes his groin’s repeatedly meeting the end of someone’s foot, he has nothing but good things to say.

Venice: Is it true that “Spelling Bee” began as an improv exercise?

Dan Fogler: Yes, it was from the improvisations of The Farm, the original troupe that put this together, that the play “C-R-E-P-U-S-C-U-L-E” evolved. It was an hour and a half production, very similar to what you saw, but instead of music we had dance numbers and videos. It was kind of the anti-musical. The action would stop onstage and you’d see these little Christopher Guest-esque clips of the kids dealing with their families, then cut back to the bee. It wasn’t until Bill Finn came on board that it morphed into a musical. I wish we had maintained some of that stuff as it progressed to Broadway, but what are you gonna do, right?

What was the moment when you realized you had something really big on your hands?

After the very first show we did Off-Off-Off Broadway, there was a lot of buzz. At each level there was encouragement to move up to the next one. My thought was our final destination would be a nice venue Off-Broadway, but when we reached Off-Broadway it seemed like the show had the momentum to make it all the way. And now there’s still a possibility of making a movie out of it.

Is William Barfee based on one specific person, or bits of various personalities?

Mostly he’s an amalgamation of all of the awkward times I had while growing up, and all the times when I didn’t feel so cool. Then I used aspects of my brother’s allergy problem; he had a deviated septum. I put all of these little things together from my own childhood and then turned the dial up.

Were you a spelling bee enthusiast when you were younger?

No. I had some form of ADD, one of those three letter things, and I wasn’t the best speller or mathematician. I really got into the sciences and responded to visual stuff. The arts were what mostly fascinated me.

Where is your Tony Award displayed?

At first I thought I might walk around with it around my neck like Flavor Flav, but then I figured that might be too much, so I gave it to my mother for safe keeping. She’s making a little shrine for me in one of the hallways of her apartment; it’s getting ridiculous already. Everyone is very proud of me.

How daunting is the transition from stage to screen?

You take it one step at a time and prove yourself at each juncture. The budgets are bigger, but the rules are basically the same. With the accomplishment of each day I become more confident, and prove to myself that this is not such an impossible thing. It’s very tangible.

Did you always know you wanted to progress from one medium to another?

That was always the ultimate goal, to get into film. You take many different paths to get there if you’re not born into it, or have family in the industry, or grow up in Hollywood where it’s all around you. I grew up in Brooklyn so I had school plays, stand up comedy, improv, and theater. Now here I am!

You’re a testament to the fact that there is not one specific formula to follow.

There are many different formulas to follow to get to the same goal; you just have to keep trying. But it is possible to get paid for your work by creating work for yourself. I think that’s really important. If the roles aren’t available to you, then make ‘em. Shout really loud and hope people come see you.

And it’s apparent that your strategy works by your number of upcoming films. Let’s talk about your current one, *Balls of Fury*. Were you an avid ping-pong player prior to filming?

I used to play as a kid in Brooklyn with my friends and my dad, but I wasn’t a real enthusiast until the movie. Now I’m a ping-pong ninja, went to ping-pong boot camp and everything.

Was it physically wearing on you?

On the ligaments in my shoulder, my right arm was held on by a string! But look at someone like Harrison Ford who does action movies, and broke every bone in his body on *Indiana Jones*. That guy is held together by glue and bubble gum. [pause] I think Harrison Ford would scoff at my ping-pong injuries.

Your character in *Balls* is a rabid Def Leppard fan. Do you share his affection for the band?

Yeah, I was a real glam rock dude, definitely. I was pleasantly surprised to hear a lot of familiar songs in the movie. When I was a kid I loved "Pour Some Sugar on Me," and my karaoke version of that song is included on the film's soundtrack. It's pretty good.

What lessons did you learn by starring alongside *Balls*' comedic talents? Did they offer you any advice?

I learned a little something from everybody. I was surrounded by people who have been doing this for years— George

Lopez and James Hong, that guy is a legend! And then you have Maggie Q, who is flying around the world making big budget movies with Bruce Willis. I think the one person who most influenced me was Walken. His work ethic is amazing, and he is so professional and on the ball. He was rarin' to work, that's his thing. And I believe it was on "The Actor's Studio" when he said that he inherited his father's work ethic: Be prolific, keep working, keep putting it out there, and don't stop until you're dead.

In *Balls* you get kicked in the crotch quite a bit.

Good segue.

I don't know how you segue to groin, so I figured I'd just throw it out there.

Yeah, my crotch gets kicked at least 59 times in this movie. And speaking of balls—

Smooth.

There's actually one poster of me where I'm spread-eagle, crazy like, doing some insane backhand, the wind is in my hair, and it actually says at the top, don't let the tiny balls fool you. I did not approve that! There is not even one ping-pong ball in the photo! Just me and the tiny balls slogan! So, I've been walking around the city and drawing little ping-pong balls on the poster just so people don't get confused.



Would that be one of the items you'd like to be left off your hallway of fame?

They should have put up the Maggie Q poster. She's doing an aerial split, something threatening like she's coming to get you and beat you down. And mine is, [falsetto] "don't let the tiny balls fool you." That's not cool.

You also wrote the play "Elephant in the Room," based on Ionesco's "Rhinoceros." What was it about the play that spoke to you?

I did the play when I was in high school; it had a real effect on me. Now it's so applicable to the current political climate. I was so disenchanted when Bush was reelected. I mean, who wasn't? And this is my response to that. My play takes place in modern day Manhattan and everyone, instead of becoming Rhinoceroses, becomes Elephants. It's about times changing and scary things happening all around the world. It seems as though even Mother Nature is against us. We have all of these things going wrong, and we're seemingly spiraling towards chaos. And the question on everybody's collective unconscious is, what are we gonna do about it? This play is begging for someone to step up to the plate and lead us out of this fucking darkness. I'm just

an artist, I can only comment on these things. I'm not the one who's going to start the revolution; I can only coax it along.

There are plenty of things we as individuals can do. Numerous options have been presented to us, but we still elect the wrong people and make environmentally harmful decisions.

People are content with how it is now, and in general they don't want change, but hopefully this will stir some stuff up

Can you tell us a little bit about *Hysterical Psycho*, your own film that you're working on.

I just finished a director's cut and I'm really psyched about it. It's our first film from Stage 13, our theater/film company, and it's been blossoming over the last year. What we are able to do with limited special effects on a small budget is pretty fantastic, and it's really funny. It centers on a bunch of friends who travel to this lodge in the middle of the woods, and the place is haunted. When they arrive, one friend, who already has some psychotic problems of his own, snaps. He becomes a psycho killer and starts killing all of them off.

Sounds hilarious.

It's a very dark comedy, along the same lines as *Dr. Strangelove*. The cast is made up of all the Stage 13 ensemble players and we've already had some interesting bites from studios. I just want to get it done and out on the festival circuit to see what other people think, but those who have seen it, and who have no connection to me or my friends, really dig it.

I hear you also play in a rock band, 2nd Rate.

Yes, with my buddy Law Tarello. At the beginning of our performances we actually come out and say, we are not Tenacious D and in a second you will see why we...are 2nd Rate! We put ourselves down, that's part of the comedy of the band, but we're actually really good. We play everything from hard rock to speed metal to hip-hop and ballads, and we also have funny "Flight of the Concordors" kind of stuff. We've only played a handful of times, and the first two times blew, but with the last couple performances all the elements were in place, and the crowd really enjoyed it. We were elated! We're planning to put out a record at some point and see what happens with that. ▼

Balls of Fury are flying everywhere. Good Luck Chuck is in theaters September 21.

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