

CULTURE

# HOW DANIEL RADCLIFFE OUTRAN HARRY POTTER

He was the world's most famous child star. Then he had to figure out what came next.

*The Atlantic*

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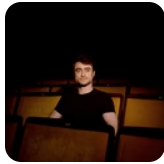
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**O**N AUGUST 23, 2000, after an extensive search and a months-long rumble of media speculation, a press conference was held in London. There, the actor who'd been chosen to play Harry Potter in the first movie adaptation of J. K. Rowling's best-selling novels was unveiled, alongside the film's other two child leads. According to the on-screen caption in the BBC's coverage of the event, this 11-year-old's name was "Daniel Radford."

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Until the previous year, Daniel Radcliffe, as he was actually known, hadn't had any acting experience whatsoever, aside from briefly playing a monkey in a school play when he was about 6. When he'd auditioned for a British TV adaptation of *David Copperfield*, it was less out of great hope or ambition than because he'd been having a rough time at school and his parents (his father was a literary agent; his mother, a casting agent) thought that the experience of auditioning might boost his confidence. For an hour or two, the idea went, he'd get to see a world that none of his classmates had seen. Instead, he found himself cast as the young Copperfield, acting opposite Maggie Smith and Bob Hoskins. And now this.

At the press conference, wearing the round glasses that his character needed but he did not, Radcliffe explained with evident nerves how he had cried when he'd heard the news. (He had been in the bath at the time.) The answer that seemed to charm everyone was when he allowed, hesitantly, "I think I'm a tiny, tiny bit like Harry because I'd like to have an owl." Asked how he felt about becoming famous, he replied, "It'll be cool."

If those words channeled the innocence of youth, a boy blessedly oblivious to all that would soon be projected upon him, such obliviousness wouldn't last very long. Less than a day, in fact. The following morning, an article appeared in the *Daily Mail*: "Harry Potter Beware!" Its notional author was Jack Wild, a former child star who had played the teenage lead in the 1968 movie-musical *Oliver* before his life and

career were derailed by alcoholism and financial mishaps. The article's closing lines, addressed to Radcliffe, were: "And, above all, enjoy fame and fortune while they last, for they can be fickle. I know, I learned the hard way."

There would be plenty more like this. Radcliffe's other professional role, between *David Copperfield* and the first *Harry Potter* film, had been a smallish part in a John Boorman movie, *The Tailor of Panama*. When Boorman was asked about what the young actor was now doing, his answer was at best unguarded. "I think it's a terrible fate for a ten-year-old child," he said. "He's a very nice kid, I'm very fond of him ... I was astonished that he was going to spend the next four years or so doing Harry Potter, it's really saying farewell to your childhood isn't it?" Boorman's conclusion: "He's always going to be Harry Potter, I mean what a prospect."

"I remember being a little upset about that," Radcliffe says now. "Just the phrase *terrible fate* ..." As his time playing Harry Potter progressed—as one film turned into two, then ultimately eight, and as four years stretched into 10—Radcliffe became accustomed to endless iterations of this narrative. "There was a constant kind of drumbeat," he recalls, "of 'Are you all going to be screwed up by this?'"

From early on, Radcliffe was aware of two competing drumbeats—two inevitable destinies, usually somehow intertwined, that were being predicted for him: "You're

going to be fucked up' and 'You're not going to have a career.'" He decided that he would do everything he possibly could to defy both.

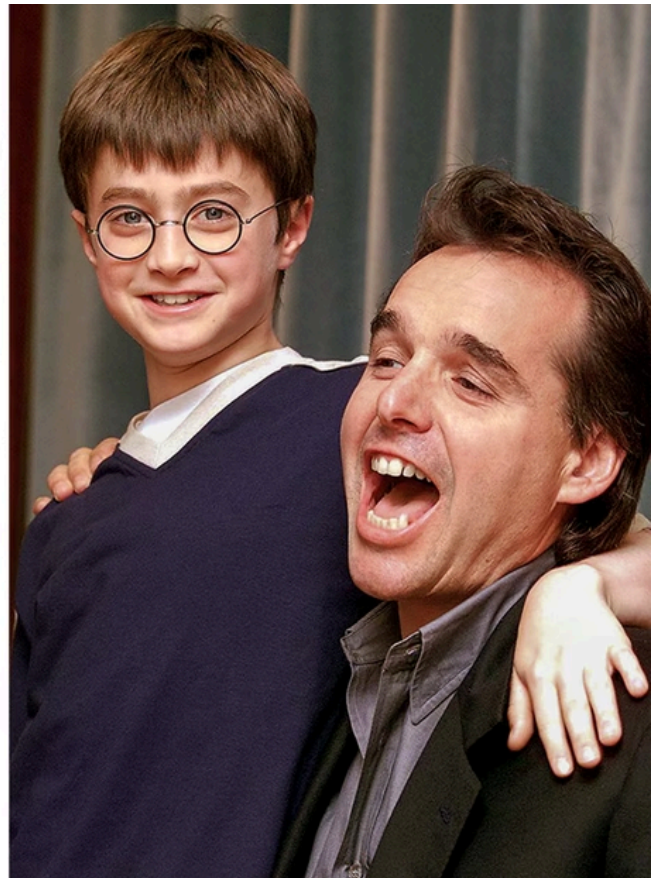
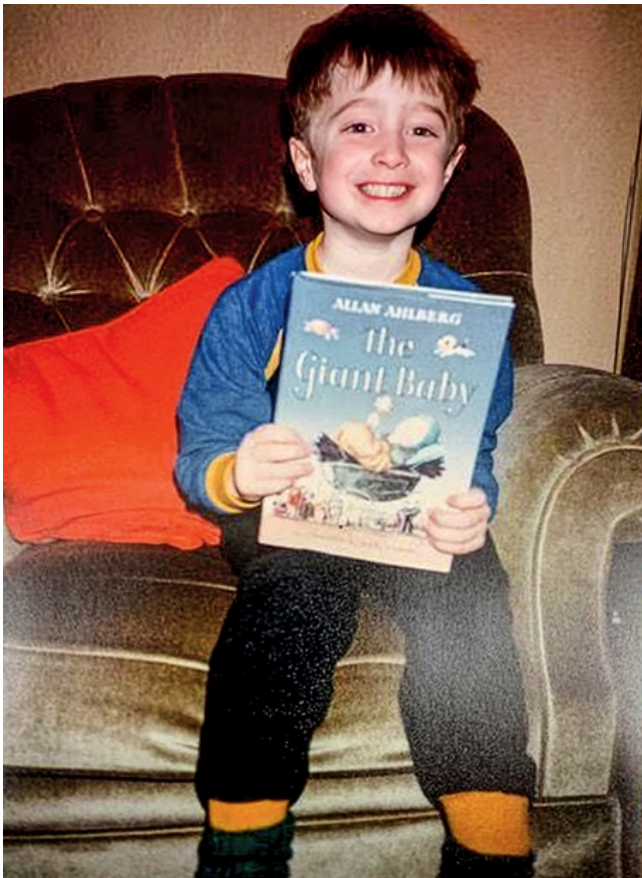
"Looking back," Radcliffe says—and he is offering these words at the age of 34, backstage at the Broadway theater where he is co-starring in the Stephen Sondheim musical *Merrily We Roll Along*—"I'm quite impressed with 13-, 14-year-old me's reaction to those things. To really, actually use them. To internally be going: *Fuck you, I'm going to prove that wrong.*"

**W**HEN SUCCESS comes so young, even the person at its center can wonder exactly what it is that they have for all this to happen. Radcliffe says he's fascinated that, among the first four roles he played, three of them are orphans: David Copperfield, Harry Potter, and a boy called Maps, who lives in an orphanage in a 2007 Australian coming-of-age story called *December Boys*. Even now, Radcliffe is not sure why this might have been. "I've had, in many ways, the most stable home life a person can imagine," he says. His actual parents are "an incredibly loving couple." But no matter—when people looked at him through a camera lens, they apparently saw something. Something he wasn't aware was there.

Chris Columbus is the director who cast Radcliffe as Harry Potter. "I remember having long discussions with Jo Rowling," Columbus told me, "and one of the words that continuously came up about who Harry should be was *haunted*. Harry had to have a haunted quality." Columbus described how, quite by chance, he turned on the TV in his hotel room at the end of a long day's preproduction and stumbled across *David Copperfield*. He saw Radcliffe for the first time, and there it was: "that haunted quality on-screen." Columbus wanted to meet him.

Radcliffe knows that this is the story. He says that he always had a good imagination, and that, as an only child, he spent plenty of time within it. "But the idea of me having this sort of haunted quality or this darkness inside, I definitely don't think I did when I was a kid," he says. He's grateful, of course, that this is what people perceived, but he hypothesizes that it might all have been an auspicious quirk of biology. "I've always said, 'I've just got big eyes,'" he tells me. "I think that's a ton of the reason for my success."

Columbus insists otherwise. He points out that he saw 800 to 1,000 boys, in person or on video. After watching Radcliffe's screen test—"This was a complex kid, even back then"—Columbus, Rowling, and the producer David Heyman believed they'd finally found the actor they needed. Problem was, the studio disagreed. "They were pushing for this other kid who I felt just was a typical sort of Hollywood kid, even though he was from the U.K.," Columbus said. "And his acting wasn't naturalistic or believable. We just fought and fought for Dan." When I mentioned Radcliffe's theory about his eyes, Columbus dismissed it out of hand. "Ironically, the kid with the bigger eyes was the one the studio was fighting for at the time," he said. "This kid had big eyes, but he had absolutely zero complexity."



*Left: Radcliffe as a child. Right: Radcliffe and the director Chris Columbus, who cast him as Harry Potter, in 2000. (Courtesy of Marcia Gresham; Hugo Philpott / AFP / Getty)*

Radcliffe's original screen test is now online, and it makes for fascinating viewing. First he banters convincingly with Columbus, who is off camera, about dragon eggs, and then they transition to a much darker, heavier scene, in which Radcliffe must say

things like “If you heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn’t forget in a hurry.” He manages all of it with a remarkable, unshowy, charming intensity. Radcliffe himself watched the audition for the first time a couple of years back, and even he noticed something in it. “I cringe whenever I watch any of my early acting,” he says. “But the thing I did see when I watched that was, *Oh, I’m very good at being still.*”

**I**N THE EARLY days of his new *Harry Potter* life, Radcliffe was largely sequestered from the public. The films would shoot through most of the year, and even before falling in love with acting, Radcliffe fell in love with being on a film set, and with the people he was surrounded by, particularly the crew. He’s often noted that one thing he’s grateful for, which he thinks may be specific to British film culture, is that, however central the young actors’ roles may have been, they were treated as kids, rather than as child stars.

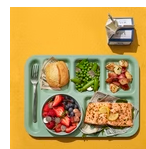
David Holmes, who was Radcliffe’s stunt double for nine years, became one of his closest friends and the accessory to all kinds of tomfoolery. “Just two kids having fun,” Holmes, who is five years older than Radcliffe, told me. “I’d let him do all the things an insurance company wouldn’t let him do: jumping on trampolines, swinging around swords, jumping off of the top of a Portakabin roof onto a crash mat.”

Radcliffe lived at home with his parents and attended school as much as he could, though more and more of his education came from tutors between breaks in filming. Only intermittently would he

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find himself face-to-face with what all of this was coming to mean in the outside world, and how strange and uncomfortable it could be.

“I remember really well the physical feeling of the first film’s premiere,” he says. “You can tell a kid as much as you like, ‘There’s going to be tons of people there,’ and they did tell us, but getting out and feeling it, and feeling that noise hit you, and the kind of knowledge of, *Oh, something is expected of me now*. I remember looking at my hands and they were very still, but inside my body, it was like I could feel my whole body vibrating. I don’t know if you’ve ever hyperventilated, but it’s a similar feeling. When you’re just about to pass out, but don’t.”

The apogee of this sensation came when he flew to Japan in December 2002, to promote the second film. “I think there was something with privacy laws at that point,” he says, “where you could just phone up the airline and say, ‘Is Daniel Radcliffe on this flight?’ And they’d say yes.” Before he and his parents got off the plane, a flight attendant let them know that 100 security people were ready at the airport. That seemed a bit much. It wasn’t. “It was 100 security barely managing to hold back 5,000 people,” he says. Fans, and press too. “I remember there was a woman cleaning the floor, and she just got mowed down by this pack of photographers and journalists,” he says. Radcliffe mentions that he has long wanted to find footage of this melee. I wonder aloud how much the TV cameras would have been filming the surrounding chaos, and how much just him. “At a certain point,” he responds, “me and the chaos became inseparable.”

Two snapshots from that day are stuck in Radcliffe's mind. First, the moment, going through the crowd, when a toggle of his mother's duffle coat got caught on the button loop of another woman's jacket. "And they just stood there," he says, "having to free themselves from one another for a second." Next, when they finally got in the car, the way his parents reacted: how they started laughing and said, "Wasn't that crazy?" Looking back, he thinks that it was how his parents, and the other adults around him, set a tone at times like that—"That was weird; let's go to the hotel"—that helped make what might have been overwhelming into something that, for all its otherworldly strangeness, he could deal with.

It was around the third *Harry Potter* film when Radcliffe realized that acting was what he wanted to do as a career. With that came more self-consciousness about his performances, and even though the films became more and more successful (cumulatively they would gross close to \$8 billion), his satisfaction did not always grow in proportion.

One period that stands out to him in particular was around the sixth film, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. He had some ideas about how his character might be shut down from the trauma he'd suffered—near the end of the fifth film, Harry witnesses the death of his godfather, Sirius Black, the closest figure in his life to a parent—but looking back, Radcliffe finds that what he did as a result is stiff and wooden. This was compounded by standard teenage awkwardness: "I didn't want my face to do anything weird. Like, I used to hate smiling on camera, because I hated my smile."

At the end of January 2009, just before the seventh film was to begin shooting, his real world was shaken in a most brutal way. His stunt double, Holmes, and another friend had just visited Radcliffe in New York. Upon his return to England, Holmes started prepping for the forthcoming shoot. While rehearsing what is known as a “jerk back” stunt, in which Harry would be seen flying backwards after being attacked by a giant snake, something went wrong. Holmes’s body, propelled on pulley-rigged wires, rotated unexpectedly in midair, and when he hit a padded vertical wall as intended, he broke his neck. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

To begin with, Radcliffe struggled to process what had happened. “Even when you see him in bed in the hospital with all the tubes and stuff coming out of him, looking like he looks, your brain still goes, *Well, you’re going to get better—they can do anything nowadays.*” “It’s coming to the understanding,” he adds, “that some things cannot be helped.”

He and Holmes remain close—at one point Radcliffe tells me, “Dave’s story is kind of the biggest thing from *Potter* that has gone on having an effect in my life”—and a few years ago, Holmes finally agreed to Radcliffe’s suggestion that his story be told in a documentary. Radcliffe began shooting interviews with Holmes and others. Then he looked at what he had.

“I don’t know why I thought that I would be able to direct a documentary,” he says. The biggest issue, he says, “was how shit I was at being the interviewer.” He realized that when it came to speaking with Holmes or anyone else he was close to, “I found asking the really hard questions virtually impossible.” He stepped back, and their filmmaker friend Dan Hartley, who’d worked as a video operator for the *Harry Potter* movies, took over. (The powerful result, *David Holmes: The Boy Who Lived*, came out last fall.)

When I mentioned to Holmes what Radcliffe told me—about Radcliffe’s difficulties in discussing the hardest stuff—Holmes at first seemed to agree. But then he corrected himself.

“Actually, no,” he said. “In the lockdown, we had a Zoom call once or twice a week. At the time, I was losing neurological function on this arm”—Holmes indicated his right side—“and my pain levels were going through the roof.” Because of COVID, Holmes said, the usual hospital resources weren’t available to him. He realized that Radcliffe “was one of the only people where I was like, ‘How does a quadriplegic without arms or legs kill himself without putting another person in some sort of trauma?’ That’s a hard conversation to have. It’s not an easy thing to hear a human being say, but it’s a reality.” Radcliffe was someone he could discuss this with: “Logical, emotionally intelligent enough, and also had enough of a sense of ‘I get it, Dave.’”



Radcliffe at the Hudson Theatre, in New York (Lila Barth for *The Atlantic*)

“Me and Dave go to very heavy places,” Radcliffe says. “Also, and there’s no way of reading this and not some people getting the wrong impression, but also there’s a huge amount of humor in those conversations where he’s devising essentially some kind of Rube Goldberg machine so that he can still be the person who does it.”

Radcliffe offers another example. “I remember one of the funniest voice messages I ever received was from him on safari in Africa, talking about what a brilliant time he was having. And also, how wonderful would it be to die at the horn of a rhinoceros. He went into very graphic detail. So yeah, it’s dark, it’s weird, but these are the conversations you have with friends in really specific situations. Knowing Dave, it forces you to think about a lot of stuff.”

**W**HEN RADCLIFFE EMERGED from the *Harry Potter* chrysalis, he did not want to stop working. He knew that some things were immutable —“*Harry Potter* is going to be the first line of my obituary”—but if that was the context in which his life would now continue, it needn’t limit it. “I wanted to try as many different things under my belt,” he says, “knowing that it was going to be the accumulation of all of those things, rather than one thing, that would actually sort of transition me in people’s minds.”

A key moment he identifies in his evolution was *Kill Your Darlings*, a movie he made in 2012, the year after the final *Harry Potter* film was released, in which he plays a young Allen Ginsberg. It was directed by John Krokidas, who gave him an education in ways to think about a script and his performance—one that Radcliffe, in his former life as a cog in a relentlessly focused franchise, had never had before. “I’d always just been: *I learn my lines and I come to set and I follow my instincts.*”

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When Krokidas asked him, “What’s your process?,” Radcliffe had to explain that he didn’t have one. So the director taught him. “Incredibly basic stuff,” Radcliffe says. These were techniques that most actors would consider “Acting 101,” but it was all new to him: “It was just, like, breaking down a script by wants. So rather than thinking, *I am going to try and effect this emotion*, thinking, *What am I trying to do to the other person in the scene?*” In the film they made together, Radcliffe portrays the young poet in a persuasively natural way. If this was a product of what he had just learned, the lessons stuck quickly and well.

There were also other, more specific ways in which Krokidas’s direction was different from what Radcliffe was used to. During a scene where Ginsberg is picked up in a bar and sleeps with a man for the first time—just a passing moment in the movie, although predictably it would later become a disproportionate part of the film’s public profile in a “Harry Potter has gay sex” kind of way—Radcliffe has recalled that Krokidas shouted at one point: “No! Kiss him! Fucking sex kissing!” As Radcliffe explained in an interview ahead of the film’s release, “The things that directors have shouted to me in the past usually involve which way I have to look to see the dragon.”

That film holds additional significance for Radcliffe. In an earlier scene, Ginsberg meets a librarian at Columbia—they disappear into the stacks, where she kneels down and fellates him. When Radcliffe’s infant son is older, Radcliffe acknowledges, “he’s going to find that film an awkward watch”; this scene is from the first few days when

Radcliffe was getting to know his future partner, Erin Darke. Krokidas made Radcliffe and Darke do an acting exercise in which they stood “a foot from each other, and made eye contact and said things that we found attractive about each other or said things that we liked about each other. And I was so immediately aware that I was going red because I was like, *Oh God, there’s no way for this girl not to find out that I really like her in this moment.*”

For a decade, he and Darke have kept a low profile. They have appeared on red carpets together only a handful of times. “I have learned so much from her about my own boundaries,” he says. “Very occasionally, people will come up to me in the street and be very weird or rude or something like that. And she has given me a sense over the years of: *You don’t have to just be nice to everyone when they’re weird with you.* She’s given me some sense of my own autonomy, I guess.”

I mention to him that I heard his and Darke’s rare joint appearance in 2021 on *Love to See It With Emma and Claire*, a podcast about reality dating shows. The couple keenly engage in a 100-minute discussion of the most recent *Bachelor in Paradise* episodes.

Radcliffe has a long-held affection for various strands of reality TV. He proceeds to explain the strange impromptu role he has occasionally played on the edges of that world. His friend Emma Gray, who co-hosts the podcast, has an annual Christmas



party, where Radcliffe sometimes runs into cast members from the *Bachelor* universe: “I always find them fascinating to talk to. I say I always want to do fame counseling with them, because I’m just like, ‘I’ve had a lot of practice at this now—you guys have just been shot out of a fucking cannon.’” He repeatedly finds himself wanting to ask them, “How are you? Are you okay?”

**B**ACKSTAGE AT New York’s Hudson Theatre, Radcliffe leads me into his small dressing room just up a metal gangway, stage left. As he does so, he politely offers a preemptive apology. “I might conduct a little of this interview with my trousers around my ankles, I’m afraid,” he says.

For the past four months, Radcliffe has been playing one of the three leads in *Merrily We Roll Along*, the famous Stephen Sondheim flop that is belatedly enjoying its first successful Broadway run. (In April, the role will earn him his first Tony nomination.) As he takes a seat, he lets his trousers fall. This afternoon, when he stood up to leave the home he shares with Darke and their son, he realized that he’d somehow tweaked his knee. That’s why he is now in his underwear, pressing an ice pack to it.



Radcliffe at New York's Hudson Theatre (Lila Barth for *The Atlantic*)

Radcliffe has been doing theater for half his life now, and onstage was where he made his first bold break from expectations. When he was 17, between the release of the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* movies, it was announced that he would be appearing in

London's West End as the lead in a revival of the 1970s play *Equus*, playing a disturbed teenager with a predilection for mutilating horses by blinding them—a role that, among its many other tests, required him to be fully naked onstage for several minutes.

He wasn't trying to shock; he was just trying to stretch the boundaries of who he might become. He'd been taking voice lessons for 18 months in preparation for the challenge of appearing onstage. When the reviews came in, their surprise showed. "Daniel Radcliffe brilliantly succeeds in throwing off the mantle of Harry Potter, announcing himself as a thrilling stage actor of unexpected range and depth," *The Daily Telegraph* assessed.

Since then, other theater roles have followed, including in Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, along with 10 months as the lead in a Broadway revival of the musical *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. And now *Merrily*, Sondheim's told-backwards tale of three friends.

For Radcliffe, the role seems a natural fit. Although interviews he gave in his *Harry Potter* years tended to be punctuated with overexuberant declarations about '70s punk albums and his latest indie-rock discoveries, another world of song has always run through him. His parents, who met doing musical theater, used to play Sondheim productions while they were driving. It took Radcliffe years to understand that not all

childhoods were like his in this respect. “I thought everyone listened to show tunes in the car,” he recently said. “I thought that was road-trip music.”

As he performs, you can see two kinds of delight—in sinking into the unshowy togetherness of an ensemble, and, now and again, in stepping forward and commanding all eyes in the theater to follow his every move and breath.

Two days a week, Radcliffe has both a matinee and an evening show. One afternoon, following a matinee, I find him in his dressing room chewing some beef jerky. He says that somebody asked him the other day what he does between shows: “I said, ‘I eat jerky and I sleep.’”

Even outside the demands of a two-show day, his diet is somewhat unconventional. He mostly doesn’t eat during the day and has one huge meal at night. “I find there’s, like, a switch in my brain that if I start doing something, I can’t turn it off.” If he starts eating anything, he says, he’ll keep craving more. He is, he acknowledges, prone to such habitual behaviors. “I’ve got a very addictive personality.”

Emerging from his teens, Radcliffe did quietly skate a little too close to one part of the prophesized tragic-child-star narrative he’d been hell-bent on avoiding. He started to drink, because it was something he thought he should become good at. “I had a really romanticized idea of all these old actors who were always on the piss, and there were all these stories about them and they were really funny,” he explains. Committed

intoxication was also part of the British-movie-set world he loved. “I was like, *I’ve got to be able to keep up with all these hardened film crews,*” he says.

He took to it well enough, but that’s not to say he was good at it. He would black out all the time. “There’s so much dread that comes with that,” he says, “because life is a constant sense of *What have I done? Who am I about to hear from?* I’d say it’s in the last few years that I’ve stopped getting some sense of internal panic whenever my phone rings.”

I ask him about something that had belatedly struck me: The sixth *Harry Potter* movie, the one in which he’d said he doesn’t like his acting, was filmed around this period. (It was released when he was 19.) Is that a coincidence? Not entirely, he says. “I can’t watch that film without being like, to myself, *I look a bit, like, dead behind the eyes,*” he says. “And I’m sure that’s a consequence of drinking.”

After a time, he realized that he needed to stop. Partly, he didn’t like the sense that he was fulfilling a trope expected of him—“I was like, *Oh God, I’ve become a real cliché of something here*”—but mostly he wanted “to stop getting in trouble and feeling fear.”

He also received some stern encouragement. “As a friend, I realized that he wasn’t really taking care of himself,” David Holmes told me. “One day when he came and visited the hospital, he just looked tired—bags under his eyes, skin wasn’t too good. And I’m lying there in a bed with a neck brace on with a feeding tube up my nose. Of course, Harry Potter’s on the ward, so we’ve got loads of attention, but we put the bed curtain around and I just said to him, ‘Look, mate, you’ve got to look after yourself with this. I’m not lying here the way I am watching you piss this away. So please know, if I could get up right now and give you a hiding, I fucking would.’”



Radcliffe with Jonathan Groff and Lindsay Mendez, his co-stars in *Merrily We Roll Along* on Broadway, 2023 (Matthew Murphy)

Somehow, Radcliffe's drinking had slipped under the radar of the British press, but after he first cleaned up—he later wobbled for a while, though he's now been sober for more than a decade—he decided to share in an interview a little of what had been going on. Part of his rationale was inoculation—“something might come out about it anyway, so I wanted to try and get ahead of that”—but he also had a notion that closing the gap between reality and the perception of his life “would make me happier or feel less ill at ease in the world.” That didn't work as he'd hoped. “I learned that the more information you give,” he says, “it just raises more questions for people.” In the celebrity universe, the truth doesn't always set you free. Sometimes it just feeds a relentless hunger for even more truth.

**R**ADCLIFFE MOVES THROUGH many of our conversations like a whirlwind —“I know I talk at a million miles an hour and go off on weird tangents or whatever,” he'll note while doing exactly that—but on one particular subject, everything slows down. There are long pauses and pained sighs. He sees the sense in the questions, but it feels as though, deep down, he has little faith in the worth of answering them.

First, some context. Radcliffe has long been a public advocate for the Trevor Project, an LGBTQ suicide-prevention hotline and crisis-intervention resource he was introduced to back in 2009, while performing in *Equus*. He explains that, having grown up in his parents' world, surrounded by their gay friends, it was baffling to

discover the wider world's prejudice; here, he saw a specific opportunity to help. "If there was any value in a famous straight young actor who was from this film series that could be useful in the fight against people killing themselves, then I was just very keen to be a part of that," he says. Along the way, he became aware of a particular symbiosis that he hadn't anticipated: "I did have a realization of a connection to *Harry Potter* and this stuff. A lot of people found some solace in those books and films who were dealing with feeling closeted or rejected by their family or living with a secret."

Then, in June 2020, J. K. Rowling wrote a series of tweets that set off a media hullabaloo. She began by sarcastically commenting on an article that used the term *people who menstruate*, before doubling down in ways that many criticized as anti-trans.

A few days later, Radcliffe issued a personal statement through the Trevor Project. "I realize that certain press outlets will probably want to paint this as in-fighting between J. K. Rowling and myself, but that is really not what this is about, nor is it what's important right now," he began, before moving on to say: "Transgender women are women. Any statement to the contrary erases the identity and dignity of transgender people and goes against all advice given by professional health care associations who have far more expertise on this subject matter than either Jo or I."



He expressed hope that readers' experiences with the *Harry Potter* books needn't be tarnished by this, and argued that what people may have found within those books—for instance, “if they taught you that strength is found in diversity, and that dogmatic ideas of pureness lead to the oppression of vulnerable groups”—remains between readers and the books, “and it is sacred.”

“I'd worked with the Trevor Project for 12 years and it would have seemed like, I don't know, immense cowardice to me to not say something,” Radcliffe says when I raise this subject. “I wanted to try and help people that had been negatively affected by the comments,” he tells me. “And to say that if those are Jo's views, then they are not the views of everybody associated with the *Potter* franchise.”

Since those June 2020 tweets, Rowling has proclaimed, again and again, her belief in the importance of biological sex, and that the trans-rights movement seeks to undermine women as a protected class. Radcliffe says he had no direct contact with Rowling throughout any of this. “It makes me really sad, ultimately,” he says, “because I do look at the person that I met, the times that we met, and the books that she wrote, and the world that she created, and all of that is to me so deeply empathic.”

During the blowback, he was often thrown in together with his *Harry Potter* co-stars Emma Watson and Rupert Grint, who both also expressed their support for the trans community in response to Rowling's comments. In the British press particularly, he

says, “There’s a version of ‘Are these three kids ungrateful brats?’ that people have always wanted to write, and they were finally able to. So, good for them, I guess.” Never mind that he found the premise simply wrongheaded. “Jo, obviously *Harry Potter* would not have happened without her, so nothing in my life would have probably happened the way it is without that person. But that doesn’t mean that you owe the things you truly believe to someone else for your entire life.”

Radcliffe offered these carefully weighted reflections in the early months of this year, before Rowling (who declined to comment for this article) newly personalized their disagreements. In the second week of April, Rowling wrote a series of posts on X in response to the publication of a British-government-funded report that notes, as just one of a wide-ranging series of findings, that “for the majority of young people, a medical pathway may not be the best way” to help young people “presenting with gender incongruence or distress”; Rowling touted this as vindication of her views. When one of her supporters replied on X that they were “just waiting for Dan and Emma to give you a very public apology,” further suggesting that Radcliffe and Watson would be safe in the knowledge that Rowling would forgive them, she leaped in: “Not safe, I’m afraid,” she wrote, and characterized them as “celebs who cosied up to a movement intent on eroding women’s hard-won rights.” In response, Radcliffe told me: “I will continue to support the rights of all LGBTQ people, and have no further comment than that.”

**R**ADCLIFFE HAS LONG had a passion for word-crammed, tongue-twisting songs. Sometimes these have been rap songs—he says that he has mastered four or five Eminem songs (“when ‘Rap God’ came out I was like, *This is my Everest*”), and in 2014, he improbably appeared on Jimmy Fallon’s *Tonight Show* to perform Blackalicious’s “Alphabet Aerobics” with the Roots. But at a young age, through his parents’ influence, he also picked up a sustained, much less fashionable passion for the works of Tom Lehrer. In 2010, on the British talk show *The Graham Norton Show*, sitting on a sofa next to Colin Farrell and Rihanna, Radcliffe performed Lehrer’s “The Elements,” in which the periodic table is rhythmically recited at great speed, for no obvious reason other than that he wanted to, and could.

A while afterward, a fellow Lehrer aficionado came across the clip on YouTube. “I just thought at the time that was the nerdiest possible thing a person could do,” Al Yankovic told me. “That’s such an alpha-nerd thing to do. I thought we would get along very well.” Later, when Yankovic was looking for someone to play him in the 2022 movie *Weird: The Al Yankovic Story*, his thoughts returned to Radcliffe. “We needed to cast somebody that really understood comedy and appreciated comedy, but also who could pull off the part without winking. We wanted somebody that would treat this like it was a very serious Oscar-bait drama.”



Radcliffe as “Weird Al” Yankovic in *Weird*, 2022 (The Roku Channel / Everett Collection)

That is one part of the backstory to *Weird*, Radcliffe’s most recent movie, which masquerades as a Yankovic biopic but is actually a savagely pinpoint parody of every other musical biopic, particularly in the ways it unscrupulously and ludicrously reshapes history into a series of vainglorious fables about our hero. It was also an unlikely triumph, and Radcliffe, who committed to a sincerity unruffled by all that surrounds it, was nominated for an Emmy.

Although Radcliffe makes clear that, post-*Harry Potter*, he's not averse to big, mass-market movies—he recently played the villain in the action-adventure movie *The Lost City*, with Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum, which made nearly \$200 million—his filmography is scattered with fascinatingly eclectic choices.

Some of them are the kind of challenges you might expect an ambitious actor to take on—an FBI agent as an undercover white supremacist (*Imperium*), a South African political prisoner (*Escape From Pretoria*)—and some of them are ... stranger. In *Horns*, he plays a man with a murdered girlfriend who grows real horns. In *Guns Akimbo*, he wakes up to find that he has had guns surgically attached to both hands. By now, word has clearly spread that if you have a good role of compelling oddity, Daniel Radcliffe might consider it.

The finest example of this is the 2016 movie *Swiss Army Man*, written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, better known as the Daniels. When the Daniels approached Radcliffe, long before the success of their 2022 movie, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, they were two pop-music-video makers who had never done a full-length film, and the movie they proposed was a surreal, absurdist story about a suicidally lonely man who befriends a flatulent corpse. They wanted Radcliffe to play the corpse.

Scheinert took me through the thought process that led to their approach: “We wanted someone who could sing, because it’s a little bit of a musical; someone with a weird sense of humor, because it’s a weird movie; and someone who didn’t feel like they needed to look beautiful all the time. Weirdly, there’s a lot of actors who are concerned with their image.”

Much later, when Radcliffe was promoting the film—a movie he would himself refer to, perhaps both in acknowledgment and parody of some people’s reactions, as “the Daniel Radcliffe farting boner corpse movie”—he would be routinely asked how on earth the Daniels had persuaded him to get involved. But that was never an issue. From the moment he turned the script’s first few pages—in which Hank, played by Paul Dano, is distracted from killing himself by the sight of a corpse washing up onto his desert island, expelling air from its rear, and soon is riding the corpse across the ocean like a Jet Ski, propelled by the corpse’s farts—he was in. (The “boner” part, by the way, comes later, when Hank learns that the corpse’s erections function as a compass.)

For a movie with such a high-wire premise, *Swiss Army Man* does an impressive job of finding, within its absurdities and grotesqueness, something more. The film plays out in a zone somewhere between reality and the hallucinations of broken, lonely people

with good hearts. “I’ve realized over the years,” Radcliffe says, “that if there’s a sweet spot to be found between deeply fucking weird and strange and almost unsettling, and kind of wholesome and earnest and very sincere, then that’s the stuff I really love doing.” Anything, he tells me, “that says something kind of lovely about human beings in spite of ourselves, in spite of how bad the world is.”



Left: Radcliffe and Paul Dano in *Swiss Army Man*, 2016. Right: Radcliffe in *The Lost City*, 2022. (A24 / Everett Collection; Paramount Pictures / Everett Collection)

**R**ADCLIFFE RECOGNIZES THAT, in making career decisions, he now faces an unusual predicament. From the *Harry Potter* films, he has banked more money than most actors will ever see in their lifetime, and there are no signs that he has been frittering it away.

“I’m in a weird position where I don’t have to work,” he tells me. “Not to sound like an asshole about it—I’m sure people reading this will be like, ‘For fuck’s sake.’” His point is just that it’s difficult to explain how he decides what he does and doesn’t do without acknowledging that one of the usual impetuses is absent. “I go to work,” he says, “because I love what I do.”

“I think he’s one of those special cases where he started as a child and it actually is what he wanted to do and it’s how he’s wanted to spend his life,” Jonathan Groff, his *Merrily* co-star, told me.

*Merrily We Roll Along* runs until July. After that, Radcliffe initially tells me, he is looking forward to appearing alongside Ethan Hawke in a film called *Batso*, about a true-life mountain-climbing feat in Yosemite in the 1970s: “Any acting job where there’s some physical thing that goes alongside it, I tend to really enjoy, just because I think it takes away self-consciousness.”

But then in April, several weeks after *Batso* is publicly announced, the project is put on hold. Radcliffe seems to take this, too, in his stride. He’d been planning a long break anyway, and now the chance will come sooner. “We’re just going to be a family for a bit,” he says, “and I’m very, very excited about that, to be honest.”



When the *Potter* movies ended, Radcliffe says, “I got to feeling like people were watching to see if we just flamed out or actually managed to go on to do something. And I didn’t know the answer at that moment, and not knowing the answer to that question made me feel like a bit of a fraud, I guess. I think I just carried that all around with me in a way that was just very present in my day-to-day life and thinking. In a way that it’s thankfully not as much now.”

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