

Photography: Kai Irm Styling: Dione Davis

1883

magazine

DAVID
HARBOUR

1883

DIGITAL COVER

1883MAGAZINE.COM

WITH THE
RETURN OF
**STRANGER
THINGS,**
EVERYONE'S
FAVOURITE
PSEUDO-FATHER IS
RESURRECTED.

DAVID HARBOUR

PHOTOGRAPHY KAT IRLIN STYLING DIONE DAVIS

When the third installment of *Stranger Things* dropped on a hot, sticky Fourth of July back in 2019, no one could anticipate how long audiences and the cast would have to wait for its return. In the 1,058 days that would pass, everything quite literally turned upside down — the world broke down, transformed, and was resurrected. It's something that, in a way, mirrors David Harbour's life and career as an actor so far. With a resume full of stage work and a filmography that includes supporting roles in films like *Brokeback Mountain* and *The*

Equalizer, Harbour's career has stretched across decades and genres.

But, before *Stranger Things*, he wasn't exactly known as an obvious choice for a lead role. He wasn't even the first pick the Duffer Brothers, the creators of *Stranger Things*, had in mind. After 15+ years in the business, he found himself choosing between two options: he could either sit comfortably with where his career was or revisit what it means to be an actor. As an actor that is a true lover of his craft, he chose the latter. This decision would eventually land him the lead role as Jim Hopper in the cult classic show *Stranger Things*.

When it premiered in the summer of 2016, his role as the town's police chief would eventually become a fan favourite. Within a few weeks, viewers were feverishly tweeting their obsession with the character, obsessing over Harbour's delivery of snarky lines and Hopper's pseudo-father traits. It's safe to say that on one of the many lists of "favourite TV dads" that float around the internet, there's more than a handful where Hopper would fall somewhere between Danny Tanner and Ron Swanson.

When fans last saw Hopper, he was in a state of acceptance. He made peace knowing that, to save the town, his love, and the kids he was so desperate to protect, he needed to die. And that's what he did, causing fans like myself into a tizzy. 7 months later, right before the pandemic would hit, Netflix teased a shot of him being put to work in Russia. Now, Hopper's return is serving as a resurrection; he's a new man and so is the actor that is portraying him. It seems cliché to use the phrase "art imitates life" but, in a sense, Harbour and Hopper have become two sides of the same coin. As his character took in a child and learned how to be a father again, Harbour would eventually follow suit, becoming a step-father and discovering a new definition of the word "family."

While chatting with Harbour, you really do feel like you're being enveloped in a warm embrace. He's quick to make a joke at his own expense and quicker to speak about his acting process and methods — a topic he could likely speak for hours on if he had the time. When perusing through comments on previous interviews, there is a thread tying them all together.

"David brings another level to acting," reads one. "So thoughtful and articulate, he makes everyone around him better," reads another. For an actor that didn't get his big break in Hollywood until he turned 40, it's clear the years of pursuing his craft and approaching every project with a deft and dedicated touch have paid off.



Coat Greg Lauren,
Saks 5th Avenue Beverly Hills
Shirt Isabel Marant
Trousers Vintage Ralph Lauren
Full Look Mami

In conversation with 1883 Magazine's Editor Kelsey Barnes, David Harbour discusses season 4 of *Stranger Things*, why Jim Hopper has been an instrumental part of his personal and professional growth, his return to the theatre, and more.

Prior to *Stranger Things* you said you were stuck being number 6 or 7 on the call sheet. When you look back from that time as an actor to your career now, how would you describe your growth as an actor? I was really stuck in this place of supporting roles and not being taken very seriously. Back then when I was stuck being number 6 or 7 on the call sheet, I thought I was a victim of circumstance. Looking back, I realize I got to a place where I was lazy; I wasn't growing and wasn't taking the initiative to get to that next step. I reinvested in acting classes and tried to approach acting with a new sense of purpose and clarity. Doing that helped turn the tide, in regards to learning my craft and growth even in terms of my interest in telling stories. All of that eventually helped me get *Stranger Things*.



Coat and Blouse Willy Chavarria Pants Maryam Nassir Zadeh Boots Vintage Sunglasses Talen't Own

Big and with plenty of white space.
: increasingly bobular. For best effect it should be
c 2502-2611 letter, based on FTT.2 'Washington',

I would say that speaks to you as an actor because in other industries—like medicine or education—you always need to be on top of your education. You recognizing that something isn't working and revisiting your craft is something that many might not think to do. Yeah, it's a very interesting profession because, as you say, we perform at the level of an Olympian. The budgets are in the multi-millions, there are huge TV and film departments involved, and yet people are not even trained at all. Olympians have coaches and teams of people advising them on their technique — actors should do the same. If you aren't training and developing as an actor, you can't grow. A lot of friends who are very talented and creative found their careers stalled because they refuse to try out new things that are uncomfortable to grow. That was something where I had to humble myself.

You're vocal about your love for story-telling and during the lockdown, you connected with people through a community-based app and talked with people to learn about their stories. Is that need to learn about others' stories something that's always driven your work as an actor? I've always been fascinated with human beings, human psychology, and what motivates people to do a typical behaviour. I've always loved the idea of two characters sitting in a beautiful restaurant for candlelit dinner and they are just saying I love you to one another. Those people don't love each other. The ones that are complaining are the ones who love each other, they are just showing it differently. I'm interested in the way people express themselves in ways that might not be as literal. I'm always interested in individual stories as well. What happened in someone's life that led them to have certain instincts? Or to have a certain voice, body shape, or thinking process? I think how we become ourselves is a lot more nurture than nature; they develop out of trauma experiences. Those are the things I'm interested in unlocking.

Speaking of traumatic experiences — let's chat about *Stranger Things*. I went through a lot of emotions back when I thought Hopper was dead. Despite him not dying, he did accept that as an outcome which changes things — he has a bit of a resurrection. Where is his mindset at the beginning of the show? I think it's very smart that you picked up on that. He does have a resurrection. While he doesn't actually die, he does accept death. He sacrifices himself so, in a way, he is being resurrected. His arc is shedding the layers of gunk he's developed as a result of traumatic events happening to him and that starts by being resurrected. At the beginning of the season, he's in the darkest place we've ever seen. That suave, smart aleck, Harrison-Ford personality that everyone loves Hopper for is gone. He's in prison, he's being abused, and he's dealing with the external threats of a harsh, cold environment and this monster in the prison.

Then, on top of that, he's realizing that he has limitations that don't allow him to be the man that he needs to be. Those are internal demons that he's struggling with; he's carrying a lot of guilt that is weighing him down. Reflecting on those guilts and figuring out how to live despite them will give him the inner freedom he needs to be the man and the warrior to fight whatever is coming his way.

Yeah, Hopper has always been a character that's dealing with physical threats, but a lot of internal struggles, too. The show is getting into new territory in regards to psychological horror. You mentioned that you deal with a different Demogorgon in the Russian prison — what type of psychological terror is Hopper dealing with? You catch it at the end of season 3 where the guards in Russia say "Not the American," and they feed a prisoner to the Demogorgon. We learn that if something happens here, something else happens in the Upside Down. There's a connected chaos theory to the Upside Down; if a butterfly flaps its wings here, there's a hurricane there. Everything impacts everything else. The new villain Vecna is seemingly more calculated than the Demogorgon; he's a little more advanced in terms of plotting to hurt people. Demogorgons feel like sharks in the ocean because they base everything on instinct and gut.

Hopper is dealing with those sharks and tigers while in Russia. It's a very physical season for him. He's dealing with prison, but there is this outward terror he's grappling with. He's essentially just waiting to die. He's asking himself, How do I get out? How do I fight? Can I even fight? We see him in places in despair that we've never seen him in before. Out of that, he finds this newfound will. Although he's not dealing with the threat of Vecna, he's dealing with the bear-baiting of the Demogorgon.

In the first three seasons, we see Hopper grow from someone that has created a schtick to survive to someone who takes on a lot — from taking in Eleven to accepting death for the sake of the town. I know some critics were slamming Hopper for toxic masculinity, but I read it as the opposite — he's still trying to figure out how to deal with trauma. How has it been exploring the depths of that as an actor? It's one of the things that we're always playing with when it comes to him. We always want to poke at why he's behaving a certain way. The letter he wrote for Eleven in season 3 is only as powerful as it is because of his actions throughout the season. If he's always sensitive and kind, the letter doesn't mean much. It only works because he's been rejecting that sensitivity and we see what he's been covering up in that letter.

I like your take on it. It's nice to allow people their idiosyncrasies. At the end of the day, Hopper does die to save the children. He's made that choice. There's this interesting thing in our culture that honours a certain image and portrayal of a subject. Alexei [Harbour's *Black Widow* character] is this sweet Russian that everyone fell in love with, but that dude is literally building a weapon to kill your children. Hopper has this paradox to him; he may be grumpy and aggressive, but when push comes to shove he will make the right choice. That's a very beautiful thing about what we're trying to do with this resurrection. We want to scrape off that gunk and uncover that there is a simpler, more direct way that he can be with other people and express those feelings he had in the letter.

Full Look Marni Shoes Vintage

Shirt Marni

If he died, the people he loves wouldn't have known what he felt. I think he regrets that a lot. One of the images he carries with him while in prison is when he thinks he's seeing Joyce's face for the last time. Here is this woman who he has always cared so deeply for, and spent the last three days getting annoyed at and bickering with, and he was never able to express how he feels to her or just experience what it's like to just be with her. I know that haunts him. Hopefully, moving forward, he's learned that lesson. That's the exciting thing about seeing someone's full story; we get to see them learn those lessons and come out the other side.

I agree! I watched the final episode of season 3 again before this. Oh amazing, how did it hold up?

Just as great as the first time I saw it. I actually had chills in that scene with Eleven staring at Joyce and realizing Hopper is gone. God, we have to cut you off! You're going to have a heart attack! [Laughs]

Clearly! I love that you brought up Hopper's letter to Eleven because he talks about her getting older and growing up. It might sound like an odd question to pose, but does it feel like you've grown with Hopper while portraying him? Absolutely, 100%. I am not the man that I was when I started this journey 7 years ago. My view has changed completely. I was a bachelor that liked living alone. I was committed to this nomadic lifestyle and had problems with relationships and intimacy and all sorts of things. Not that I don't still have problems with intimacy! [laughs]

Coat Greg Lauren,
Saks 5th Avenue Beverly Hills
Shirt Isabel Marant
Trousers Vintage Ralph Lauren

Don't we all!
Exactly, don't we all? But I've grown so much since then. I have a family now, I have a wife and two stepkids. I do understand family in a way that I never understood before. That growth never would've come without Hopper in my life. My art and my life have always been conflated to an extent, but who knows if another character would've prompted these feelings. I do believe Hopper was an instrumental part of that change.

Since Hopper has helped you so much, let's help him — if you could give him some advice, what would it be? That's a hard question. The advice I always have for him is you have to let go. He's a cop at his core; he believes in fighting for good. He believes in black and white, he believes in good and evil. I think he sometimes even sees himself as a bad guy. But I think he needs to let go completely of the black and white definition of the world. He needs to start seeing the shades of gray and live within it.

A few months ago I spoke with Sadie [Sink] about how the show has been a coming-of-age story. She's so good, isn't she?

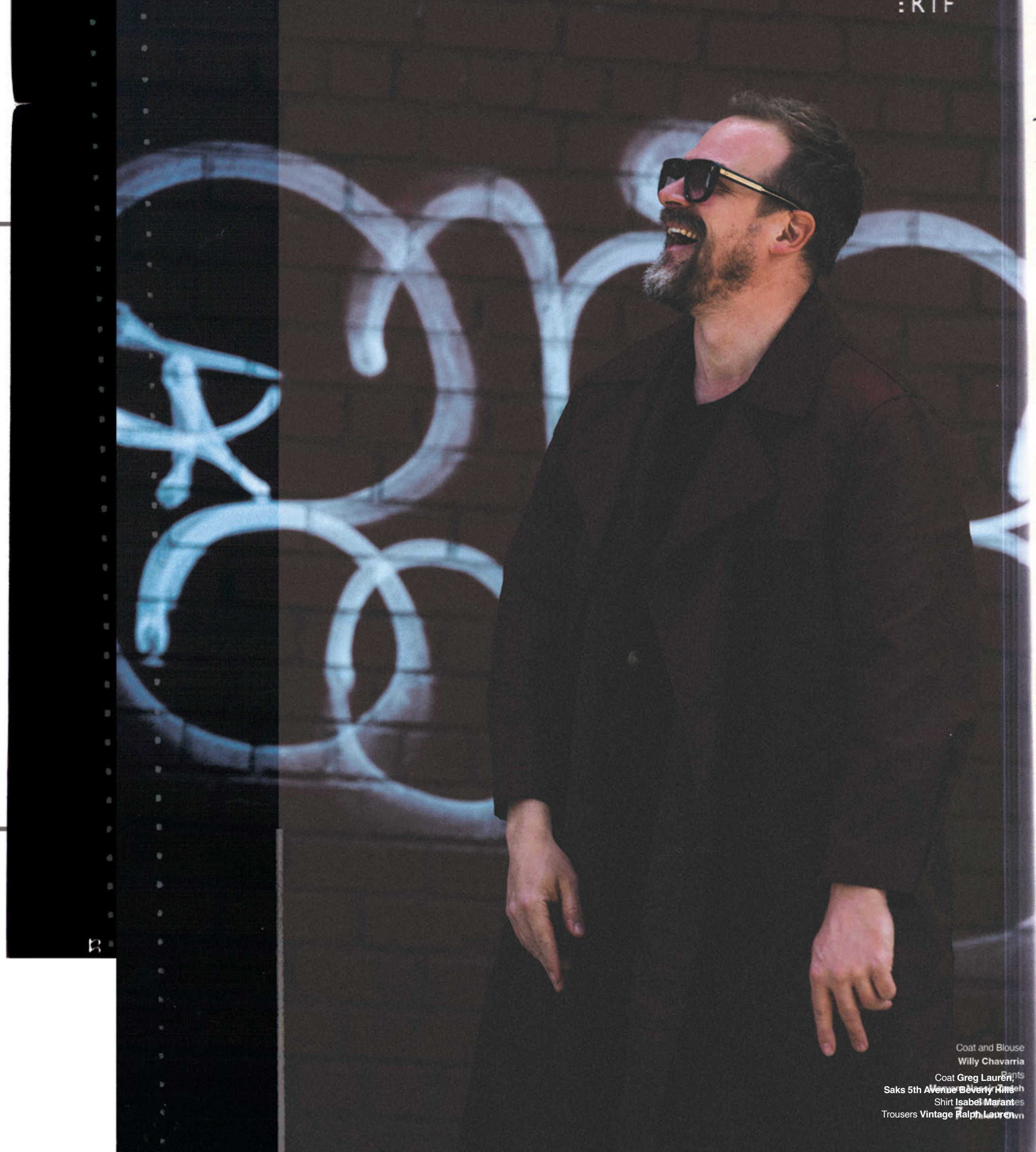
She's the best.
I'm so impressed with her. I'm blown away by her performance in this upcoming season. She's such a smart, talented actress.

As we enter the second last chapter of the story before it wraps up with season 5, how would you describe your experience in *Stranger Things*? The best way to describe it is transformational. This season in particular was a real experience in transformation — my whole body is transformed, my head is shaved, I was in Lithuania and it didn't look like *Stranger Things* or feel like *Stranger Things*. This season is all about transforming into the other guy and every day it felt like diving into one question: what aspect of transformation are we doing today?

Speaking of Sadie — what was it like to be reunited with the kids after such a long period? Just seeing the premiere photos has been a huge reminder of how much they've grown.
It is a huge reminder of how they've grown. It's the feeling of being a parent. It's a wonderful yet horrific thing. When my friends get older and we reunite, we might look a little different with a unique haircut or more wrinkles, but we haven't changed too much. I met some of the kids when they were 10 and now they are 18. I've seen their minds grow and change.

It's not something every older actor gets to experience, either. You quite literally became their on-set dad just by being the experienced lead actor on the show.
The fun thing about it is that we still have a bit of that dynamic we've had since the very first day. I'm still this older actor that they don't quite know what to make of. They're a little bit afraid of me, but also incredibly respectful. It's fun to see them buck that dynamic as they start to grow, but also seeing them come into their own is very sweet. I knew them when they were not stars at all — just little kids — and I think that's something unique to our relationship. We share that experience and not many people get to say that.

Speaking of the premiere, it would be a crime for me to not bring up the incredible suit you wore to the premiere. What was it like working with Union Western on the look? It was amazing. They came up with several designs. They got the season 4 poster before anyone else had seen it! They just created this brilliant, beautiful piece of art. My wife is a rock-n-roll gal so she recommended them. A lot of the time premieres can feel a bit like a fashion show and I just wanted to bring a different energy. I wanted something that truly expresses my inner nature and was a little wacky. It also showcases my pure love of the show in a great way.



Coat and Blouse
Willy Chavarria
Coat Greg Lauren
Saks 5th Avenue
Shirt Isabel Marant
Trousers Vintage Ralph Lauren

You want to auction it off for charity, too. What a great idea. I'm figuring out the best way to do it because I certainly can't wear it again. Union Western is going to give me the sketches so I'll put those in a frame to remember it by. I think it would be so funny to see a parent wearing it to their kid's field trip one day as a way to embarrass them. I just love the thought of that.

Let's chat about your upcoming play *Mad House* — its world premiere is coming up later this June. You've brought your talent to the stage before — you've done several plays and been nominated for a Tony. Firstly, how excited are you to return to the stage? I'm really excited. I forgot how hard the stage is so I'm exhausted, but my whole body is vibrating with excitement. I had forgotten how much of a stage animal I am. I've been doing theatre since I was a kid. My big, lumbering body was built for the stage. I love learning how to move it around in a specific act. I just get to play around a lot more, you just never really know what could happen. That sort of electricity and spontaneity is something I thrive on.

Shirt Marni
Belt The Row
Pants Vintage

It's a dark comedy about a group of siblings who converge on their dying father's home with one eye on divvying up his inheritance. What attracted you to the project? I've seen Theresa Rebeck's plays over the years and I love her style. It's difficult to describe, but the best way to describe it is a dark comedy. What attracted me to it was my character being in an asylum at some point in his life. Now, he's trying to take care of his father and attempting to deal with what it means to be a caretaker and yet have this mental illness. I think there are a lot of misconceptions about what it is to have a mental illness and I believe we're delving into those things. It's something very personal to me and I want to see it more. We keep talking about wanting to have a conversation about mental health, especially after shootings which is an entirely different topic that has very little to do with mental illness in my opinion.

This is a great conversation starter about mental illness because if you don't have it yourself, you probably know someone that struggles with it. It's important to see different perspectives and the ramifications of the situation. We get into it and that's exciting for me because it's something that I feel like I can speak about because I do really understand it. I want it to open more conversations around it.

Especially in the format of a play where it's already such an intimate, vulnerable place to perform as an actor. I think exploring mental illness on-stage might be the best place for it. Given how exposing theatre work can be, was that ever daunting to you or is it just something that you're embracing because it is the perfect avenue to explore it?

Yeah, I think you're right. The 2-hour format of a long narrative is where you tell the full story to a group of people is the best way to do it. At first, when I read Teresa's play, I thought it would be daunting. Then, as we get closer and closer and as I'm really diving into it, it just feels like it's done so well. The humour, the darkness, and the exuberance... There is so much colour to it. I feel all of that from the writing and I just feel like I can breathe. Honestly, it doesn't feel daunting at all; I just feel like I'm standing on a beach getting ready to jump into a deep blue ocean.



Is there anything specific you like to do to get into character? Does it differ from screen to stage? Once you learn your instrument, there's a lot of relaxation. Since you're playing for 2 hours, your body knows what to do and you don't want to overthink it. For me, a lot of the prep happens in rehearsal. Once you understand your arc, you let your body give into the spontaneity of theatre work. I'm not trying to fix things or overthink them, I'm just trying to let it come out and see what happens on any particular night.

I read a comment posted on one of your interviews that read "if you pay attention to David's work, he makes the actors around him better. So many of his co-stars strongest performances are with him." I know you're quite self-deprecating, but after 2 decades in the industry, do those comments feel validating in any way? Aw. No, that's quite beautiful actually. I don't want to blow my own horn, but that's what I'm trying to do. My focus is to always seem better and not for it to be so aggrandizing for my characters. I want it to be focused on the story we're telling and how can I make the story more vivid for an audience. I think it does involve being provocative with other people that you work with by really trying to do something between the two of you. That thing needs to exist; it needs to breathe and live and the audience needs to feel that through the screen. So, hearing that people are seeing that means a lot. It's my exact intention. I'm proud of that and won't be shrugging it off! I'll take that to the bank! [Laughs]

As you should, David! Lastly, if there is one thing you could manifest for yourself this year, what would it be? Oh god, you're going to hit me with this one at the end? I would manifest my renovation getting done on time so my kids can move into their new home. Let's just keep it simple! All I need this year is that. Everything else feels really great. I have a beautiful family, I have a great career, I have a variety of work lined up that's in secret. I'm feeling pretty good. We just gotta get them into that house — I'll manifest that by yelling at my contractor!

Sweater
Marni

Stanger Things Season 4 is on Netflix

Interview Kelsey Barnes
Photography Kat Irlin
Styling Dione Davis
Grooming Walton Nunez