

## Profile of an Actor



*Note: The name of the actor has been changed.*

Dan Ferguson has been an actor in New York City for eight years. He started out in the theater, appearing in small off-Broadway plays. A few years later he graduated to television, landing roles in popular shows like “Law and Order” and “Suits.” And in winter 2013, he strode across the screen in his feature-film debut, *Labor Day*, directed by Jason Reitman, son of the legendary director Ivan Reitman.

Has his rapid ascent through the highly competitive acting ranks gotten to his head?

“Not at all,” says Ferguson, a handsome 31-year-old with the strong jaw and furrowed brow of a classic leading man. “In fact, I’m worried that this is the end of my career. As an actor, you come to realize that every role could be your last.”

Such is the fate of even the most successful actors. Gene Hackman and Dustin Hoffman, who found success early in their careers, were known to express similar complaints. Actors cannot just depend on their talent and work ethic to earn success; they depend chiefly on luck. They audition constantly in the hope that they fit the description of a character. Whether they are great actors or not is often less important than whether they “look the part.” For working actors like Ferguson, this is one of the toughest parts of the job.

“I don’t want to sound mean, but a lot of the actors you see on television aren’t very good at acting,” he says over lunch at a restaurant in downtown Manhattan. “But they *are* good-looking, which counts for a lot. The Casting Director probably sized them up when they walked through the door and thought: ‘Yep, this is the guy we’ve been looking for.’”

Of course, Ferguson has benefitted from the same kind of typecasting. In fact, his manager once told him that he landed the part in a recent television series based mainly on his headshot. When he came in for the audition, his performance simply confirmed he was the right one for the role.

Ferguson said that two things keep most actors going: the possibility of fame and the possibility of making a lot of money.

“Without those two things,” he says, “I think 80 percent of the people in the Screen Actors Guild”—that is, an American union for on-camera actors—“would be doing something else.”

The money is, of course, an obvious draw. Most actors, in addition to trying out for TV shows and films, attend commercial auditions. Few actors want to be identified for life as the face of major brands. But the money that goes with such gigs can’t be easily shrugged off, Ferguson notes.

“I know people who get one commercial and they’re set for the year,” he said. “If you star in a commercial that gets played during the Super Bowl, millions of people see it. The more people tune in, the more money you make in the form of royalties.”

He added: “You can wind up making \$100,000 or even \$200,000 from a single 30-second commercial that took half a day to film. That is why, even after years of getting no roles, people will still show up to commercial auditions.”

The fame that comes with being a successful actor is more complicated. Being a major movie star, seeing your image 50-feet high on a billboard, is something a lot of children dream about. But it’s not always easy to be a famous actor. Actors, Ferguson reminds me, are famous for pretending to be other people. Unlike popular comedians or musicians or socialites, they are not popular for being themselves.

“I’m definitely not famous yet,” Ferguson says with a laugh, though he admits people have recognized him on the street. “But hanging around on the sets of TV shows, I’ve met a lot of famous actors. And I can tell you from experience that they are not always the happiest people.” He goes on to say that fame is not all it’s cracked up to be. Being recognized by strangers on the street can be a jarring, uncomfortable experience. “People feel like they know you, because they’ve seen you on TV or in movies,” he says. “But of course, they have no idea who you really are. You want to be friendly, but at the same time, you want people to leave you alone.”

For some famous actors, going out in public is all but impossible. Celebrity photographers, thirsty for photographs to fill the pages of their glossy magazines, can be too aggressive. In England, they are known to tail celebrity actors in cars, taking photographs through the back windows. As a result, many famous actors prefer not to go out much. This can take a toll on their health.

As much as he wants to be successful, Ferguson is grateful he is not Tom Cruise.

“I can’t imagine what it’s like to be that famous,” he says. “He causes a scene whenever he steps out in public. It’s hard to imagine him going to the grocery store, buying light bulbs, doing things normal people do. After a while, you must start to lose touch with reality a little bit.”

After dwelling on the many pitfalls of acting, Ferguson allowed that there are other perks to the career. Being on the set of a show, for example, has always been a personal thrill of his. A social guy who grew up playing team sports, he loves interacting with others and contributing to the success of a project. Acting is a deeply social activity. You can’t easily act alone. You require other actors, a director, a producer, a cameraman. The sets of movies and TV shows are forever bustling with life, which Ferguson thoroughly enjoys.

“For me, being on set is what makes it all worth it,” he says. Always a curious kid, he likes learning about how make-up designers create their effects. During a lull in the shooting on his last project, he spent five hours talking with the stuntman who played his body double.

“Whenever I think I’ve got it bad, I think about what stuntmen have to go through on a shoot,” he said. “This guy’s daily life consists of getting hit by buses, falling down flights of stairs, plummeting off buildings into dumpsters filled with trash. That’s one thing I would definitely not like to do for a living!”

As a boy, Ferguson did not dream of becoming an actor. If anything, he thought he might become a professional athlete. He played soccer and lacrosse in high school before studying history in college. Classmates had always found him funny. They told him: “You should be an actor!” But he had never considered it until he took an acting class his senior year.

“I had finished all my credits for my major, and I thought, ‘What the heck, I’ll take an acting class,’” he recalls with a laugh.

He was a natural. His teacher, who had appeared in several Broadway shows, encouraged him to give it a go in New York City. And so, without any real career plans after graduation, he decided to move to Brooklyn.

That was eight years ago. For the first few years, he had to take extra jobs to afford the rent. “I worked as a gardener, an administrative assistant, a furniture mover, a building manager,” he says. “About the only thing I didn’t do was to wait tables. I thought: ‘That’s what out-of-work actors do.’”

Luckily, he is now a full-time actor. His new film might make him famous, he says, but he’s not counting on it. Instead, he is looking forward to landing his next role, whatever it may be.

“That’s the blessing and the curse of acting,” he says, signaling to the waiter for the check. “You never know what’s going to happen next.”