

INTERVIEW | By Maya Sweedler

Jeff Daniels's Dream Part

The 63-year-old actor says he never wanted to do Hamlet, but Atticus Finch is 'role of a lifetime'

MAARTEN DE BDER/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES



Jeff Daniels is set to return to Broadway and portray Atticus Finch in Aaron Sorkin's 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' a new play based on the 1960 novel by Harper Lee.

Don't ask Jeff Daniels to bet against Aaron Sorkin. The actor, musician and playwright is set to return to Broadway in Mr. Sorkin's "To Kill a Mockingbird," a new play based on the 1960 novel by Harper Lee. Mr. Daniels, 63 years old, will portray Atticus Finch, one of the most recognizable and revered characters in American literature.

In the three years since Mr. Sorkin asked Mr. Daniels to take on the role, Mr. Daniels has seen nearly two dozen drafts of the script, one legal challenge from Ms. Lee's estate and skepticism from critics that the beloved novel isn't suited for the stage.

But Mr. Daniels said he didn't hesitate to sign onto the production. "You go back to, well, what are the roles you've always wanted to play and wish you could, and I never had an answer for that. I never wanted to do Hamlet or King Lear, I just don't have the experience with Shakespeare," he said last month. "But when Aaron said, would you like to play Atticus, I had a feeling it might be the role of a lifetime."

"To Kill a Mockingbird" reunites Mr. Sorkin with Mr. Daniels, a Broadway veteran whose most recent turn on stage resulted in a Tony nomination for best actor in 2016 for his role as a tortured sex offender in "Blackbird." The pair previously worked together on the television series "The Newsroom" (2012-14), for which Mr. Daniels won an Emmy Award, and the 2015 biopic "Steve Jobs."

It was during a Screen Actors Guild screening of "Steve Jobs" in December 2015, Mr. Daniels said, that Mr. Sorkin approached him to let him know he was adapting "To Kill a Mockingbird" and to ask if he would like to play Atticus.

Being attached to the project since the beginning afforded Mr. Daniels a unique view of Mr. Sorkin's writing process. Mr. Daniels, who came up through the Circle Repertory Company in the late '70s, compared it to watching the company's resident playwright, Lanford Wilson, continuously refine his work. He said that about half of the "Mockingbird" script's first draft remains in the most recent, 22nd version.

Mr. Daniels described the reading of the original draft as electric. "You could feel it, you could see where it was headed," he said. "Just getting that book up on the stage was monumental. It wasn't just a first draft, it was a heavy lift."

That reading took place in November 2017, followed by workshops in January and May of this year.

In between the workshops, Ms. Lee's estate sued the show's producers, alleging the play altered characters. According to the complaint, Ms. Lee's estate didn't like that Atticus initially was a passive observer of racism and eventually became a heroic moral crusader. The idea that Atticus is at any point comfortable with systemic racism departs from the essence of the book, they contend. The producers countersued. All parties agreed to dismiss the case in May.

Mr. Daniels, for his part, said the Atticus of the play is ultimately the same hero of the book, as he leaves his "comfortable little lawyer existence" to take a stand against racial prejudice. Atticus's faith in the justice system and insistence on finding the good in everyone emerge directly in the action of the play, rather than through the perspective of the book's narrator, his daughter, Scout.

Performing "To Kill a Mockingbird" live on stage creates both a challenge and an opportunity to make Ms. Lee's story more immediate and more current, Mr. Daniels said. Although he is aware the cast will have to fight past audiences' preconceptions of the book and the Oscar-winning 1962 movie adaptation, the story touches on themes relevant to a modern audience.

"It's also fascinating to see how Aaron doesn't have to change a thing," said Mr. Daniels, who spent time studying the Jim Crow South to prepare for the role. "All of a sudden, you hear Charlottesville, all of the sudden you hear...what's going on in the news every single day with Trump."

Still, the production will emphasize the original setting. "We don't want you to sit there with a copy of the book and follow along," he said. "We want you to feel what that was in '35 Alabama, we want you to hear it and see it and feel it."

New Productions on Broadway and Beyond

"Collective Rage: A Play in 5 Betties": Jen Silverman's comedy looks at five very different women named Betty. Cast includes Dana Delany and Lea DeLaria. Opening Sept. 12, MCC Theater (off-Broadway).

"Girl from the North Country": Created by Tony Award nominee Conor McPherson, this musical takes the songbook of Bob Dylan to tell the story of a Minnesota community in the 1930s. Opening Oct. 1, Public Theater (off-Broadway).

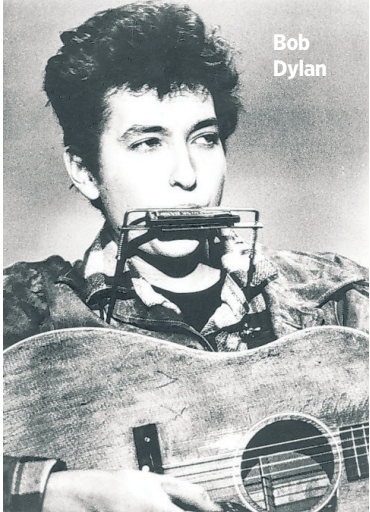
"The Ferryman": Jez Butterworth's play, set in rural Ireland in 1981, was the talk of London's West End last season. Opening Oct. 21, Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre (Broadway).

"Waiting for Godot": Productions of the Irish-born playwright Samuel Beckett's classic, comically tinged existentialist work aren't so rare in New York. But this one comes with a certain stamp of authenticity: Ireland's own Druid Theatre is presenting it. Nov. 3-10, Lincoln Center's White Light Festival.

"King Kong": The big ape makes his way to the big stage in this musical version. The show's website bills the affair as "an innovative mix of animatronics, puppetry, music and stagecraft." Opening Nov. 8, Broadway Theatre (Broadway).

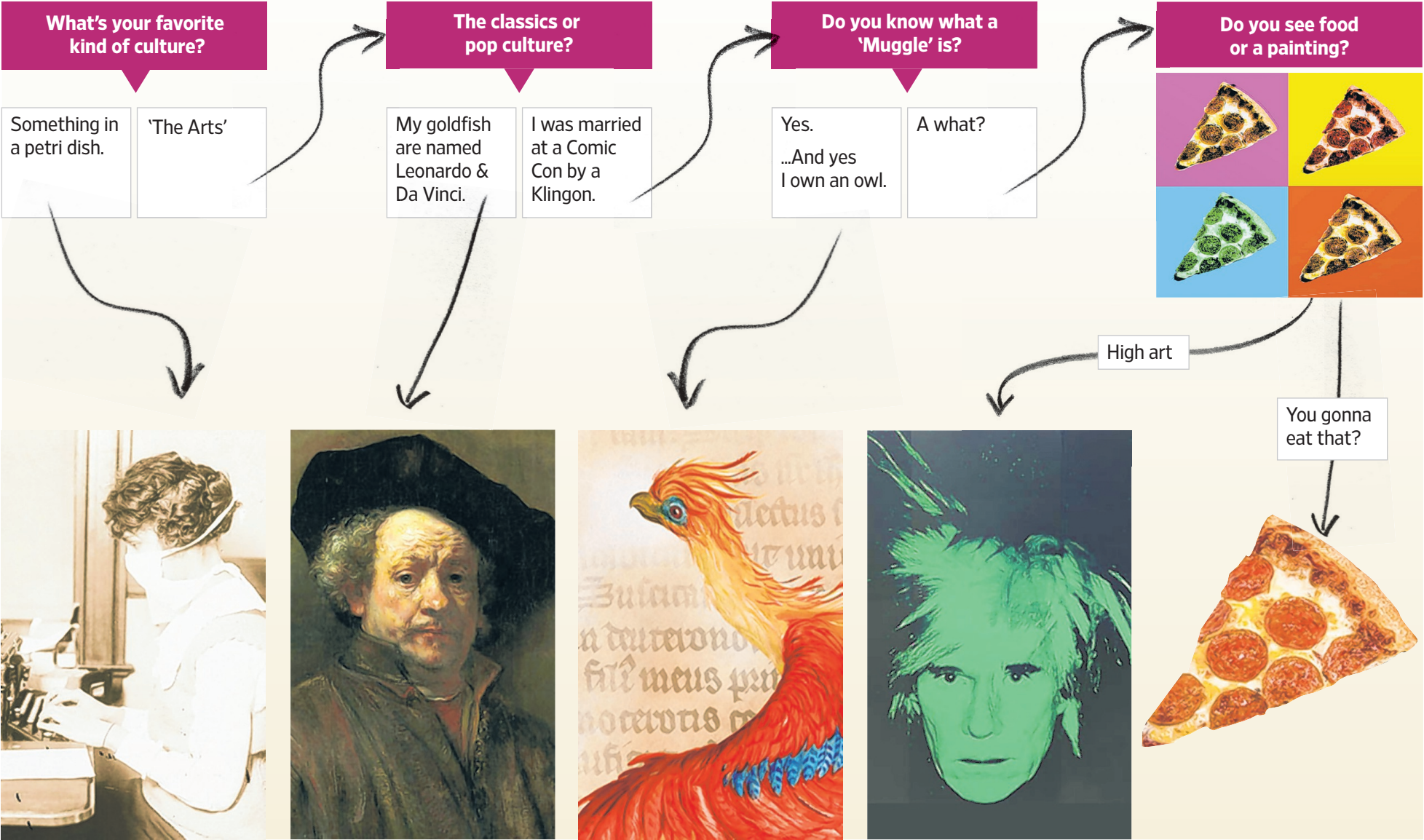
"The Cher Show": It wouldn't be a Broadway season without a bio-musical. Now, pop diva and Oscar winner Cher gets the theatrical treatment. And Bob Mackie, long associated with the fashion icon, designed the costumes. Opening Dec. 3, Neil Simon Theatre (Broadway).

Note: All productions have a preview period.



Museum Matchmaker

Don't know which exhibit to visit this fall? Use the flowchart to find your perfect match.



Germ City Museum of the City of New York Sept. 14 to April 28, 2019 Billed as a 'fascinating look at New York City's battle against infectious disease,' this exhibition examines the social effects of disease and features historical artifacts alongside contemporary artworks.	Dutch Masters Metropolitan Museum of Art Oct. 16 to Oct.1, 2020 The Met will feature its collection of paintings from the Dutch Golden Age, including works by Rembrandt and Lairese. The exhibition is designed to orient visitors to key issues in 17th-century Dutch culture.	Harry Potter New-York Historical Society Oct. 5 to Jan. 27, 2019 This exhibition expands on the world created by J.K. Rowling by showcasing rare books, manuscripts and magical objects from the collections of the British Library and New-York Historical Society. Visitors will also get a look at original Harry Potter manuscripts and illustrations.	Andy Warhol Whitney Museum of American Art Nov. 12 to March 21, 2019 The Whitney is taking a new look at the iconic works of Warhol, diving into the complexities of the artist's career in the hopes of introducing 'a Warhol for the 21st century.' The exhibit features more than 350 works of art, many assembled together for the first time.	Museum & Pizza Museum of Pizza Oct. 13-28 Not quite your traditional museum, this pop-up experience touts itself as a 'space to bask in multi-sensory, psychedelic pizza joy.' Exhibits will range from a pizza fun house to a pizza beach, plus an interactive history of pizza.
---	---	---	---	--