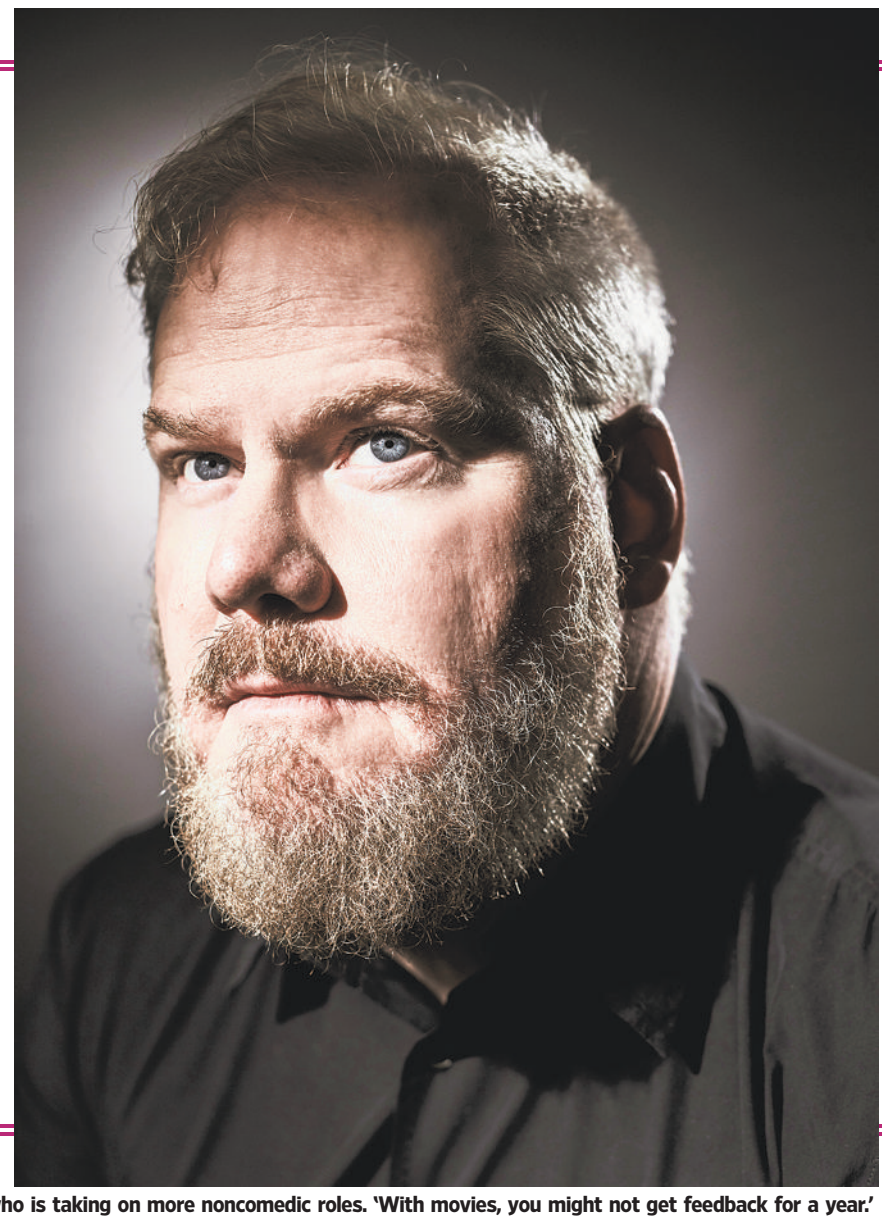
LIFE & ARTS





MAARTEN DE BOER/CONTOUR/GETTY IMAGES

'Stand-up is grounded in meritocracy. You either get the laughs or you don't,' says Jim Gaffigan, who is taking on more noncomedic roles. 'With movies, you might not get feedback for a year.'

FILM

Jim Gaffigan Gets Serious

BY JOHN JURGENSEN

Montreal

ON THE SET of the coming movie "Gut Instinct," in which he plays a lowlife police informant, Jim Gaffigan was assuring the French Canadian director that the script captured the nuance of a word he never utters onstage during his clean comedy sets.

"That's the right way to say it: 'They were f—ing.' It's cruder, too," he said.

You may be seeing more of this Jim Gaffigan in the year ahead. In addition to "Gut Instinct" and his recent performance as a U.S. attorney in "Chappaquiddick," he is taking on more serious roles than ever before. They include a bitter ride-share driver ("American Dreamer"); a member of a religious snake-handling sect ("Them That Follow"); a single dad who helps his misfit daughter form a scout group ("Troupe Zero"); and a man mourning the loss of his wife in a plane crash ("Light From Light").

It is a sharp turn toward drama for one of stand-up comedy's most successful acts. The 51-year-old has anchored six solo comedy specials, and his live performances generate an average $400,000 in ticket sales, all driven by his onstage persona as a pasty, slovenly father of five who pines for bacon and doughnuts—a subpar version of himself.

Mr. Gaffigan knows that not all of these films will be widely noticed. That is, in part, why he is working on so many of them.

He hasn't abandoned comedy. In "Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation," out July 13, he voices the monster-hunter Abraham Van Helsing. Earlier that week, his latest stand-up special, "Noble Ape," is scheduled for release in theaters, on-demand and as an album, a broad distribution plan designed in part to bypass the glut of comedy specials on Netflix.

The list of comedians who have done respected turns in drama is short, including Steve Carell, Jim Carrey, Jamie Foxx, Mo'Nique and Robin Williams. Mr. Gaffigan's move into weightier work, part of a strategy to diversify his acting career, coincided with tumult in his life.

Last year, his wife Jeannie Gaffigan was experiencing headaches, dizziness and hearing loss in one ear. Doctors found a brain tumor. It was benign, but after a successful surgery to remove it, she developed pneumonia that required a tracheotomy and feeding tube.

Ms. Gaffigan, who has largely recovered but is still in rehabilitation therapy, is also her husband's writing and producing partner. Together they created "The Jim Gaffigan Show," a semi-autobiographical comedy series about a couple raising five children in a tiny New York apartment. It aired for two seasons on TV Land, but the work of running a family sitcom took too much time away from the real-life Gaffigan family, the couple said.

Ms. Gaffigan also co-wrote, produced and directed her husband's stand-up specials, including "Noble Ape." In it, Mr. Gaffigan riffs on doctors comparing tumor size to fruit, a pear in Ms. Gaffigan's case. ("Did he go to med school or a farmers market?")

Of his domestic status after his wife's recovery, he says: "The tumor is gone, along with my ability to ever win another argument."

There was no household debate over mining personal matters for laughs. "Jeannie is the kind of person who comes out of an MRI and says, 'Write this down. This is a funny bit,'" Mr. Gaffigan said over lunch at a Montreal deli. Staying true to his brand, he snapped a photo of his smoked-meat sandwich for his 368,000 Instagram followers.

Born in Illinois and raised in Indiana, Mr. Gaffigan played college football and worked in advertising before getting his break in standup on David Letterman's show in 2000. He landed TV and commercial work before making another leap with his 2006 comedy special, "Beyond the Pale."

It was a dorm-room favorite thanks to the joke that became his biggest hit: an extended bit about the hazards of Hot Pockets frozen snacks. More than a decade later, he still does Hot Pockets variations as a crowd-pleasing encore to his live shows.

"The main responsibility is to have the people walking out of the theater saying, 'When he comes back, I'm coming back,'" Mr. Gaffigan said. "There are some shows where I'm like, damn glad I've got that Hot Pocket thing."

Casting director Mary Vernieu, whose Hollywood credits include "Silver Linings Playbook" and "Star Wars: The Last Jedi," helped shift perception of Mr. Gaffigan by casting him in "Chappaquiddick," along with "Gut Instinct" and "American Dreamer."

Mr. Gaffigan has long been compared with Philip Seymour Hoffman because of their similar features, but he also aspires to the late actor's skill, artistic decisions and range. Mr. Gaffigan said his Broadway debut, in a 2011 revival of the Pulitzer-winning drama "That Championship Season," came about after Hoffman passed on his role.

Diving into drama is a way for Mr. Gaffigan to take on creative challenges, yet it's also a strategic play coordinated with his agent, manager, publicist and creative partner. "There's always an eye on the future," Ms. Gaffigan said. "The more employable you are, the more longevity you have."

Mr. Gaffigan, who was No. 7 on a Forbes list of highest-paid comedians last year with estimated earnings of $30.5 million (just behind Kevin Hart), isn't doing indie films for money. And leaving home in New York for movie shoots and tour dates added stress on his family.

"That's a big ask. 'Hey, I know you had brain tumor and we have five children, but I'm gonna go shoot a movie in New Orleans for two weeks.' But if you're known as a comedian who wants to act more, how do you turn down an opportunity to work with Viola Davis and Allison Janney?" he said of "Troupe Zero."

Mr. Gaffigan thinks of his acting and comedy work as separate, he said, even if there's occasional spillover. On the set of "Gut Instinct," he was in costume, wearing the slicked-back hair, gold necklace and yellow-tinted sunglasses of a small-time heroin dealer in 1989, when someone drove by and yelled, in a French Canadian accent, "Hot Pockets!"



ALLISON MICHAEL ORENSTEIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

'I'm playing with being the person people expect, performing that on paper,' Parker Posey says of her memoir, 'You're on an Airplane.'

BOOKS

OVERSHARING, UP IN THE AIR

BY ELLEN GAMERMAN

PARKER POSEY was racing through Newark's airport in April, late for her flight to Los Angeles. Distracted by her dog's health problems at home in Manhattan, the actress got to her first-class seat in tears. She began to talk to the stranger next to her, a fellow dog owner, and quickly discovered that their pet-minders were related.

That moment of in-flight intimacy was just what she had in mind while writing "You're on an Airplane." In the memoir, coming out July 24, she examines her past from 35,000 feet.

"If you open up enough, you're going to realize that you're connected," Ms. Posey said. "We think something is chaos, and it's really order."

Earlier this summer, the first-time author sat on a bench in a Manhattan park with her 14-year-old dog Gracie—"my soul mate, my constant, my protector"—in a canvas bag at her feet. She has recently learned that the bichon frise-poodle-Maltese mix suffers from dementia, and in conversation seemed to link the bad news with the coming publication of her book.

"When you create something, something dies with it," she said. "It's just a natural balance."

A self-described "impish woman-child," the 49-year-old known for playing off-kilter characters in cult movies such as "Dazed and Confused" and "Best in Show" has in her new book brought together her upbringing in Louisiana and Mississippi, the ups and downs of her career and other adventures.

Ms. Posey always thought she would play the funny friend in romantic comedies, like her neurotic career woman in 1998's "You've Got Mail." But with the rise of bromance franchises like "The Hangover," she describes getting sidelined.

"They don't know what to do with me out here," she writes.

Ms. Posey wrote the book to create opportunities for herself outside movies and TV. But a few weeks after she turned in

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