



Ty Burrell can't possibly be anything like the character he plays on the hot new sitcom *Modern Family*. He can't try so hard that he bumbles into dorkdom. He can't be sweet to the point of obliviousness. Right? Right?

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BY VICKI GLEMBOCKI '93, '02 MFA LIB

Ty Burrell was telling the story again.

IT'S THE STORY THAT people start asking you to tell when people suddenly know who you are. When they know your face. When they know that, every Wednesday night, you'll make them fall off the couch laughing as one of the stars on *Modern Family*, the hot new family sitcom on ABC. It's what happens when people start stopping you on the street in Los Angeles to tell you they "loooooove the new show," that it's "hilaaaaarious," that you are "hilaaaaarious"; when men driving by yell out the name of the character you play—"Phil Dunphy!"—the painfully well-intentioned father of three who thinks he's "the cool dad" because he knows all the dance steps to *High School Musical*, and calls his daughter's boyfriend "playa," and texts. (Texting acronyms, as Phil Dunphy explained on one episode, are "LOL: laugh out loud; OMG: Oh, my God; WTF: Why the face?")

It's what happens when *Entertainment Weekly* names you "this season's breakout comic actor."

This time, in October, **Burrell '97 MFA A&A** was telling the story on *The Bonnie Hunt Show*. Hunt asked what everyone's been asking: How did a guy who grew up in middle-of-nowhere Oregon end up being an actor?

Burrell, 42, described the moment: He was an undergrad at the University of Oregon, in his first-ever acting class, devoted entirely to Shakespeare, standing in front of the room, on a box, alone. His assignment? To make up a Shakespearean character. He named his "Leonthes," and Burrell-as-Leonthes improvised a poem: "Dost thou like my hair?" Burrell looked into his audience of classmates and saw one thing: blank stares.

"It was awful," Burrell said. "But I loved it."

"You loved it?" Hunt asked.

"I loved it, and no one else did." Burrell laughed. Hunt laughed. The audience laughed.

But Burrell's buddy Steve Wilson didn't laugh. **Wilson '97 A&A**, who'd gone through Penn State's MFA program in acting with Burrell, was watching *Bonnie Hunt*

that day and wanted to pick up his phone, call the show, and tell Hunt, "Don't you believe anything he says about being a no-talent hack who's just gotten lucky."

Wilson knew better. Luck didn't land Burrell a leading role off-Broadway in *Burn This* opposite Edward Norton and Catherine Keener, or parts on smart but short-lived TV sitcoms like *Back to You* with Kelsey Grammer, or in films like *Dawn of the Dead*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and, alongside Nicole Kidman, *Fur: An Imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus*. And, now, he was on a TV show heralded for "reinventing the family comedy."

"You don't trip and fall into the kind of success he's enjoying now," Wilson says. To start, there's Burrell's talent, which Penn State theatre prof Barry Kur describes as "an innate ability to deliver lines with a sense of truth." Add to that years of training, and auditions, and rejections. Then, hooking up with the right managers and agents who got him in front of the right directors to land the right parts. And then there's the work itself—strong, imaginative, sincere performances, whether he's the nasty boss in *In Good Company* or a vain, womanizing plastic surgeon in *Out of Practice* or a nerdy guy who wants more than anything to be the best dad he can be.

To Wilson, though, the reason Burrell has become successful is that Burrell is still the same guy he was 14 years ago, when they'd sit on a bench outside the Arts Building at University Park, talking about maybe, actually, someday making a living doing this acting thing.

"Ty," says Wilson, "has a real, live, beating heart."

IT DIDN'T TAKE MORE than a couple days on campus for Steve Wilson to figure out that his fellow MFA candidate, Ty Burrell, was ... different. The fall semester of 1994 had just started. Their class was still in the "getting to know you" stage. And one rainy morning, on the first day of their first literature class, Burrell was MIA.

Then, the classroom door opened. Everyone turned to



find Burrell standing there, dripping, dressed head-to-toe in bright yellow rain gear, including the hat, as if he'd just pulled up in a lobster trawler.

A LOVABLE DORKY DAD: Burrell plays Phil Dunphy, arguably the most popular character in the most popular new TV sitcom, ABC's *Modern Family*.

In truth, he'd ridden there—like that—on his bike.

Burrell thought they were laughing because he was late. "I was, like, 'OK, guys. It's funny. I'm little late,'" Burrell says. "And they were, like, 'No, dude. You look like you just came from a nuclear power plant.'"

But, seeing his classmate-turned-Gorton's Fisherman, Wilson thought to himself, *I love this guy*.

Ty Burrell had been getting laughs for being Ty Burrell as far back as he could remember. He was 4 years old when he told his first official joke. During a dinner party at his home in Ashland, Ore., Burrell listened as

his aunt told a story about being in a bathroom stall next to someone who kept pulling at the toilet paper roll. Burrell said, "Maybe there was a prize at the end of it." When everyone at the table laughed, a little light went on in his head. He describes the feeling as "a love-bath," and he swears he's spent his life trying to recreate it.

So he and his little brother Duncan, whom Burrell recruited into his funnyman routine, watched every 1970s sketch comedy they could tune into, listened to every comedy album they could get their hands on—from Jonathan Winters to Richard Pryor to Whoopi Goldberg.

But, other than the little playlets he and Duncan put on in the garage, he had no outlet for his talent. There was no such thing as "theatre" in his high school, plus he was far too busy with sports.

"His senior year," Duncan says, "he was voted Best Looking, Best Personality, Most I-Want-You Guy."

Burrell headed off to the University of Oregon in 1985 telling everyone that he was going to play football. The truth was, he had no clue what he wanted to do with his life. He didn't even really want to go to college. He only made the football plan because he had to tell people *something*.

"I went to one of the first walk-on practices, and everyone there just scrapping to be on special teams was twice as big and twice as fast as I was," Burrell says. "I thought, 'Holy crap. This is not going to happen.'" So he blew off football. Then, he blew off classes. Eventually, he dropped out. For more than a year, he did a "whole lot of nothing," and ended up bartending at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. He

joked around with the actors hanging out at the bar, letting that garage comic out in public for, really, the first time. As the actors got to know him, they encouraged him to check out acting for real.

It sounded cool, but he wasn't sure, and he opted to keep floating. Then, out of nowhere, his father was diagnosed with cancer. Nine months later, in 1989, he died. "It clarified a lot of things," Burrell says. "Not what I wanted, but it clarified that I wanted *something*. I wanted to make something of my life." Within months, he re-enrolled at Oregon and signed up for that now-infamous Shakespeare acting class.

"It was like trying to do trigonometry before you even know how to multiply," he says.

His first show at Oregon—his first experience as an actor on stage—was in a musical version of Aristo-

phanes' play *Lysistrata*. (Says Burrell: "The show's called ... well ... it's Greek. But, in English, it's called "Train Wreck.") Burrell played a singing and dancing Keystone Kop-esque character. On opening night, he could hear his little brother in the audience, unable to stop laughing at what Duncan describes as "one of the funniest things I've ever seen."

"He was not laughing at the content of the play," Burrell explains.

His family could see, though, that Burrell had landed in his comfort zone. His mother urged him to check out Southern Oregon University, which was a much smaller school with a much more prestigious theatre program. He transferred there, graduating in 1993. He was 25. And he was terrified.

"I was very, very nervous about having to audition and make a living," he says. Yet, in order to go to grad school, he *had* to audition. The University Resident Theatre Association auditions were hardcore: Faculty from theatre departments all over the country came to interview wanna-be MFAs. It was extremely competitive. Burrell agonized over his audition monologue—a scene from *The Bean Trees*, a novel by Barbara Kingsolver. He needed it to be perfect. He needed everything to be perfect.

In fact, on the weekend before he flew to the auditions in New York, when his family went to Lake Tahoe to ski, he opted to stay off the slopes. Sledding, he thought, would be safer. Unfortunately, when he threw out the sled to jump on it, a friend's bullmastiff thought Burrell was playing fetch. The dog dove at the sled. Their heads collided. And, the next day, when Burrell met the three faculty members from Penn State for the first time, he had a gigantic shiner.

"I thought it was the worst thing in the world," he says. "It turned out to be the greatest conversation piece ever. It was such a lesson in auditioning; it's so much better to have something wrong with you."

When Burrell walked into the room, Jane Ridley, now head of the MFA program, didn't think there was anything wrong with him. He had exactly what they had

prayed they'd find—that presence that emanated from people who were naturally wired as actors, an energy and ease that couldn't be taught. "We all just looked at each other and grinned," she says.

Burrell knew immediately he wanted to go to Penn State. He could tell that these people had serious knowhow and a real point of view about theatre: that actors use their own intuition to create authentic characters. And he knew there were dilettante profs in the theatre world, teachers who'd merely put you through a few movement exercises and send you on your way.

"It was such a room of substance," he says.

Burrell arrived at Penn State in 1994 with his rain slicker, his black van, and the lead in the department's fall play *Grapes of Wrath*. The show was a technological wonder—it actually rained on stage. But Burrell thought it was tough. He felt in over his head—a guy with hardly any experience carrying such a complicated, serious show. Even though his friends thought he was great in the part, he didn't enjoy it. At all. It totally shook his confidence.

"I had no idea that I knew nothing about acting until I came to Penn State," he says. "I kind of licked my wounds about it for a while." Eventually, he eased back in, did a two-person show about AIDS called *Lonely Planet*, then did *Tamer of Horses*, then performed in the ensemble for the intro-to-theatre class, THEA 100. He spent two summers doing shows at Pennsylvania Centre Stage, the theatre school's professional arm, saving

money by living in his van, showering in the basement of the Arts Building, sneaking through the breakfast buffet at the Nittany Lion Inn.

When theatre professor Helen Manfull held auditions in 1996 for Thornton Wilder's classic *Our Town*, she struggled to find someone to play the lead role—the role of the stage manager. Everyone who read for the part delivered the opening line—"This play is called *Our Town*"—with too much bravado. Then Burrell came in. He was thoroughly unaffected, as if he really was the stage manager, as if he wasn't acting at all.

"I thought, 'Thank you, Jesus,'" Manfull says.

"Helen makes you feel like you don't need to be anything other than yourself," Burrell says. "Yourself is totally enough." That was, at essence, the goal of Penn

Burrell spent two summers acting in Pennsylvania Centre Stage, saving money by living in his van, showering

in the Arts Building basement, and sneaking through the breakfast buffet at the Nittany Lion Inn.

State's theatre program. And it was what Burrell took to heart when he put together his monograph—the performance equivalent of a thesis paper. Instead of producing work by someone else, Burrell and his brother Duncan wrote a one-person play called *Babble*. The piece was set in a beat-down comedy club in Beaverton, Ore., on a night when a local guy who'd gone on to become a big-shot comic came back to do a set, and got heckled, viciously.

"It was almost as if he was writing a little cautionary tale for himself," says Steve Wilson, who's gone on to have quite a theatre career himself, most recently starring in the national tour of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. "Don't believe your own press. Don't lose sight of who you are and where you came from." Burrell and Wilson were grappling with those issues themselves as they prepped to go out into the real world, wondering where their careers might go, wanting to make sure that if they got even a little bit successful, they wouldn't end up all self-important like the guy in Burrell's play.

"The stakes were so high," Burrell says of that one-person play. "[Duncan and I] cared so much." His mom flew in from Oregon to see his opening night. All of the theatre faculty came. Bowing at the end, Burrell felt like he'd come to the end of something big—"the end of the greatest adventure of my life."

"I'm never going to equal it," Burrell says today. "Maybe there are moments that will equal it. But I'm never going to surpass the feeling of doing that play. Nothing. Ever. Ever."

TY BURRELL SITS IN a café in West Hollywood in mid-November, dressed in plaid, sipping coffee, explaining why his friend Steve Wilson was wrong.

"A big part of all this has been luck," he says. Of course he does. And that means Wilson, actually, was right. Burrell hasn't changed. He hasn't started believing his press. He hasn't forgotten where he started. It's no wonder that, whenever his name comes up these

days in the Penn State theatre department, everyone just sighs—"Awwww ... Ty"—as if he's still sleeping in his van in the lot behind Old Main.

Outside the restaurant, Burrell's car is packed with his stuff. Today marks the start of a four-week hiatus from filming—his first time off in six months—and he's beyond

ready to get in that car and drive back to Salt Lake City, where he lives with his wife, Holly, an actress-turned-pastry chef. They met after he got his MFA, during his first professional job—*Twelfth Night* at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. They've been married for nine years, and are now in serious family-planning mode. "I guess if Phil Dunphy can have kids, anyone can have kids."

Awwww ... Phil. He always gets the short end of the stick, even from the guy who plays him. But that's why Phil is lovable—because Burrell loves him. Sure, he loves the show, and the cast, and the writing, and the fact that, underneath all the humor, this family—the dad and his trophy wife, his gay son and his partner, his

daughter and her husband Phil—actually cares about each other. And, certainly, Burrell loves being on a show he's so unabashedly excited about that, when people stop him to say, "The show's so smart," he can't help but answer, "I know! I know!" And then there's that Phil.

"Phil really cares," Burrell says. "It's a lovely trait." And it is a lovely trait, in Phil. But it's only in Phil Dunphy because it's also in Ty Burrell.

Just then, it happens.

"I hate to interrupt," says the woman sitting at the table next to Burrell's. "But I am going to interrupt to say that the new show is hilaaaaarious."

"Oh," Burrell says. "Good. I'm really glad."

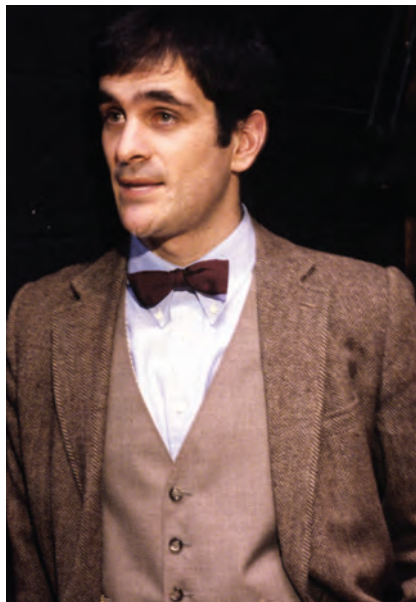
"Sorry to interrupt."

"No, that's fine," he says, and turns his chair so he's facing her more directly.

"The writing is hilarious and the acting is superb. It's amazing."

"I will definitely pass that along," he says. He starts to turn back to his table, but hesitates. "I'm Ty," he says, then reaches out to shake her hand. ▀

Vicki Glembocki is the author of the memoir *The Second Nine Months*, and writes regularly for *Reader's Digest*, *Parents*, and *Philadelphia Magazine*.



LEADING MAN: As an MFA student at Penn State in 1996, Burrell played the lead in Thornton Wilder's classic *Our Town*.