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Chasing Stardom, in No Particular Rush

By MELENA RYZIK

[Paul Dano](#) was a child actor, but you'd never know it to spend time with him. The precocious tics, the eagerness to please, the history of embarrassing commercials: these hallmarks are absent. Even as he was making his Broadway debut and first film, both before he was old enough to drive, he was careful to keep some semblance of regular life intact. It seems to have worked.

"Did you find your wallet? Do you have your keys?" Mr. Dano asked his girlfriend, the actress [Zoe Kazan](#), doing the normal supportive-boyfriend thing as she got ready to leave his Brooklyn apartment one recent Sunday. It was afternoon, but their day had just started; Ms. Kazan gathered the accessories of an indie couple's typical lazy weekend — coffee, paper, a rented documentary about Koko the articulate gorilla — and left in a flurry, after a good-boyfriend kiss and delivering a reminder not to smoke. (Bad boyfriend: Mr. Dano ignored the advice.)

He had been up until the wee hours on Saturday, shooting a movie, "[The Extra Man](#)," opposite [Kevin Kline](#). On the heels of critically lauded parts like the sullen brother in "[Little Miss Sunshine](#)" and the hypocritical preacher in "[There Will Be Blood](#)," Mr. Dano, 24, is now much in demand, with roles in coming high-profile projects like [Spike Jonze](#)'s adaptation of [Maurice Sendak](#)'s "[Where the Wild Things Are](#)" and [Ang Lee](#)'s "[Taking Woodstock](#)."

His latest film, "[Gigantic](#)," a dark, offbeat romance which he helped produce, opens the Gen Art film festival in Chelsea on Thursday and will be released in New York and Los Angeles on Friday. Lazy weekends may soon be harder to come by.

In his large studio, sitting cross-legged on his couch, or lying down, therapy style, Mr. Dano — surrounded by stacks of scripts and wearing a blue plaid shirt and oval wire glasses — displayed little of his on-screen intensity. But he was thoughtful about the way his career has unfolded, and about continuing to seek out unconventional parts.

"I don't want my learning curve to be stunted by just all of a sudden doing work all the time and not being careful about the work that I'm doing," he said. "Whenever I take a job, there's usually as much terror and fear as there is excitement, because it means you're going to have to figure this out."

[Jonathan Dayton](#), who directed "Little Miss Sunshine" with his wife, [Valerie Faris](#), found Mr. Dano to be unusually intuitive and savvy. "He's very aware of clichés of young male actors" — the overemoting, the easy role choices — "and he really wants to avoid them."

College was one way to put on the brakes. Mr. Dano enrolled at the [New School](#) immediately after high school, studying English. He took semesters off to perform — in 2007 he did an Off Broadway play, “Things We Want,” where he met Ms. Kazan — but spent the year between “Little Miss Sunshine” and “There Will Be Blood” largely as a student. “Gigantic” is his first film since those back-to-back successes.

“That was crazy, and I was so glad I was in college,” he said. “It kept me grounded, and it also allowed me to have an excuse not to just take all the opportunities that were happening, which I viewed as a good thing.” He made it through three years of studying. “I may yet still finish.”

Mr. Dano grew up in Manhattan and Wilton, Conn. He made his Broadway debut at 12 in [“Inherit the Wind,”](#) with [George C. Scott](#) and [Charles Durning](#), and a few years later appeared as a troubled teenager preyed upon by a pedophile (played by [Brian Cox](#)) in the film [“L.I.E.”](#) Despite the steady work, Mr. Dano wasn’t thinking about building a career. Acting was just fun, he said, on a par with other after-school activities, like basketball.

“Little Miss Sunshine,” released in 2006, was a turning point. The story of a misfit family’s road trip, it became the toast of Sundance and won two Oscars. Mr. Dano’s character, a misfit among misfits, doesn’t speak for most of the movie, yet manages to be a focal point in a cast including [Alan Arkin](#) and [Steve Carell](#).

Mr. Dano auditioned for it two years before it was made. “Sometimes when people don’t have a line, they want to mime the line or communicate too much, but he was good at holding it all in,” Ms. Faris said. “His silence was so much more intimidating, in a way, than other actors.”

Mr. Dano has an unusual physicality. His features have a stark, downward slant, angling from his forehead to his pinched-bridge nose to his recessed, dimpled chin. “He just has the most amazing face to photograph,” said [Shari Springer Berman](#), a director of “The Extra Man” with her husband, [Robert Pulcini](#).

“Gigantic” is another quirky comedy that seeks to benefit from his reserve and brooding screen presence. His character, a single mattress salesman obsessed with adopting a Chinese baby, is stoic in the face of repeated attacks from a homeless man (Zach Galifianakis). He meets cute with [Zoey Deschanel](#) (she falls asleep on one of his beds), but their romance is chaste; Mr. Dano has yet to play the good boyfriend on screen.

But “The Extra Man,” adapted from a novel by Jonathan Ames, will finally take him into dapper-leading-man territory, with a twist: he also wears lingerie. He’s in nearly every scene, and [Katie Holmes](#) plays a love interest.

“He just hasn’t had his chance to dress properly, but in this movie he wears a lot of suits — he’s going to have a lot of female fans,” Ms. Springer Berman said.

Though it is his highest-profile role to date, Mr. Dano doesn’t yet know what his next job will be after “The Extra Man.” And unlike other actors on an upward swing, he is not in a hurry to find out; regular life beckons.

“Sometimes you see an actor when they’re young,” he said, “and you feel like they have a moment, do you know what I mean? And that’s always something I’ve wanted to avoid, truthfully. Because I intend to do this for a while.”