

Suit, price upon request, at Berluti, Beverly Hills; T-Christo shirt, \$195, at BOSS, Beverly Center; ribbed cotton socks, \$28, by Falke at Bloomingdale's, Beverly Center; Curtis cap-toe oxford, \$225, by Florsheim Imperial at J.Valentin, DTLA.

# MAGIC MAGIC

*With a new movie, a children's book, a TV game show and a second season with Netflix all coinciding, the perennially charismatic Neil Patrick Harris can't be boxed in.*

BY SAHAR KHAN / PHOTOGRAPHED BY NINO MUÑOZ / STYLED BY JAMES AGUIAR





Velvet suit jacket, \$598, and suit pant, \$248, both at [toddsnyder.com](http://toddsnyder.com); sweater, \$460, at Etro, Beverly Hills; Bondfield cognac shoe, \$450, by To Boot New York at Nordstrom, The Grove.

# NPH

Patrick Harris is Skyping me from his home in New York. Dressed in a white T-shirt, he sits in front of bookshelves jumbled with knickknacks, antique cameras and family photos. Before we begin, I tell the actor that my childhood crush was Doogie Howser—the prodigy doctor whom Harris so notoriously played in the early '90s. “Ahhh, that’s why you wanted a Skype interview,” he jokes. “So now I can tell you that I’m not wearing pants.” He points to his bottom half hidden under a desk.

And we’re off. That well-known Harris wit bounds right out of the gate. I’ve been watching Harris’ oeuvre—a stoned spoof of himself in *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*; an obsessive ex-boyfriend in *Gone Girl*; the wisecracking host of the Tony Awards, Emmys and Oscars—to decipher what it is that makes NPH, as he’s nicknamed, so irresistibly likable. His easy sense of humor—equal parts bawdy and

silly—plays a large part. But I suspect there’s more beneath the slick charisma and easy grace that allows him to make you feel enamored and comfortable all at once, whether onstage, through a screen or even over a static-ridden Skype connection.

During our interview, Harris, 44, reveals he’s home for the weekend with husband David Burtka and their 7-year-old twins, Harper and Gideon. He packs a tight schedule these days—filming on set in Vancouver Monday through Thursday and taking a red-eye home most weekends. During a recent three-week break, Harris squeezed in more work, filming a new game show for NBC and a commercial in Los Angeles before zipping off to Rome and the

French Riviera with family and friends. “I [took] a couple of weeks off to get a tan,” Harris says. He sticks out his arm as evidence, then makes an incredulous face at its paleness.

It was a well-deserved vacation for one of Hollywood’s most in-demand actors. This month, he plays a miniaturized human in *Downsizing*, a social satire about a man who tries to improve his life by shrinking himself. The movie stars Matt Damon and Kristen Wiig as leads, and Harris and Laura Dern—who plays his wife—act as salespeople for the smaller way of life. Although the part is a bit more minor than we are used to seeing for the actor, Harris signed on because “anytime I can work with a director like [Alexander Payne] and

a solid cast, my interest is piqued.”

But while he played it “small” for the part, he’s mostly been playing the big personality of Count Olaf for *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the Netflix show based on the popular series of books by Daniel Handler, who writes under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket. The gothic tale of three wealthy orphaned children returns for its second season this coming spring.

Count Olaf is an aspiring actor who employs increasingly maniacal schemes to swindle the kids of their fortune. Given that his character uses a plethora of disguises, the role requires major transformations that range from prosthetics to wigs. “I had never acted in prosthetics,” Harris says. “This is a character

Knit sweater, \$1,150,  
Salvatore Ferragamo,  
Beverly Hills

Grooming by Susan  
Reilly Lehane



“THEN THE NPH APPEAL I’VE BEEN TRYING TO DECODE DAWNS ON ME: HARRIS IS THE RINGMASTER AND HE IS THE SHOW.”

who is a fully realized person and looks nothing like me, so I had to figure out how to make my face move in human ways, even though I’m wearing latex on top of my actual face.”

The director of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Barry Sonnenfeld, best known for the *Men in Black* franchise, says the role of Count Olaf requires realism and theatricality, and Harris brings both. “I can’t imagine anyone else playing Olaf,” Sonnenfeld tells me. “Neil is real; he’s scary; he’s funny. In fact, at the table read where we first read all of the first season’s scripts with our cast—this was months before we started filming—he already had his voices for Olaf, Stephano, Captain Sham and Shirley [the personas Count Olaf takes on], all of which were hilarious.”

Harris says it’s fun to try to make someone as mean as Count Olaf into “an actual person.” I mention to Harris that he manages to infuse Olaf with his trademark charm, despite the character’s unsavory qualities. “I think if Olaf is horrible all the time, then it gets redundant,” Harris explains. “Rather than trying to make him redeemable at all, which he isn’t, it seems like it was better to have him think he’s the most handsome man and have him think he’s the best actor. He’s the Wile E. Coyote—he’s constantly failing but thinking he’s succeeding.”

Does he give pointers to his co-stars Malina Weissman, 14, and Louis Hynes, 16, who play Violet and Klaus Baudelaire on the show? “For the kids, my advice tends to be encouraging them to value the technical side of things and get better mastery of knowing where the marks are”—he gives a quick laugh—“Louis and Malina are supergifted as talents, but you gain experience by experiencing. I want to make sure they trust their instincts and yet give the editor good shots to use for the show.”

Harris’ own experience acting as a child is also quite well-known. The theater-loving kid from rural New Mexico started his career in 1989 playing a teenage doctor for four seasons. After *Doogie Houser, M.D.* wrapped in 1993, the then-20-year-old Harris stepped away from acting for a few years, and within that time, he came to terms with his sexuality. He also managed to avoid the child star’s curse of being typecast and went on to perform in onstage revivals of *Rent* and *Sweeney Todd*. A comedic turn as a drug-addled, car-stealing, womanizing version of himself in the 2004 stoner hit *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* added a rebelliousness to his image.

His performance landed him the caddish role of Barney Stinson in *How I Met Your Mother*. While he played the consummate lady’s man—the show even released a book based on Barney’s rules of “bro”-appropriate conduct—Harris came out publicly as gay after reports of his relationship with Burtka began circulating.

The announcement didn’t harm his standing as a top Hollywood actor. He remained America’s sweetheart. Harris told *Rolling Stone* in 2014 that he lucked out with timing because Ellen DeGeneres had already come out and made it easier for other entertainers to do so as well. But as with everything involving Harris, there remains that ineffable something else.

So, things are going well for Harris. In November, he released *The Magic Misfits*, the first in a series of four books he wrote about a group of children who each master a skill in a singular type of magic. “[The book does not feature] otherworldly magic, planets and people who can float, but [introduces] real magic and illusion,” he says. The book ties in Harris’ lifelong fascination with the art of magic and serves as a love letter to his own children. “I feel that since Gideon and Harper are now starting to read, it’s a good opportunity for me to write something that can entertain them and hypothetically teach them a thing or two,” he says. That includes magic tricks readers can learn to perform; although his twins may be too young to master those just yet. “I show them magic tricks, and they think I’m actually magical,” he says, cracking a smile. “They think I can actually produce coins.”

This spring, Harris will host *Genius Junior*, a game show on which contestants between ages 8 and 12 compete for prizes over increasingly complex quizzes. He’d also like to try his hand at directing theater. “I think that would be fun because then you get to be less like Barnum and more the ringmaster,” he says, referencing P.T. Barnum, founder of the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Barnum is also, Harris once said, the historical figure with whom he most identifies.

Then the NPH appeal I’ve been trying to decode dawns on me: Harris is the ringmaster *and* he is the show. We are his captive audience, and he dispenses our disbelief through the legerdemain of his performances and his personality: the gay man playing a skirt-chaser to whom straight men pay homage with high-fives on the street; the ignoble swindler whose edges he softens with comic relief; the singing, dancing and punchline-delivering awards show master of ceremonies. He is all things in one—actor, singer, magician, host—in essence, the consummate entertainer.

And, then, through a series of my own unfortunate events—namely a new apartment with a terrible Wi-Fi connection—I inadvertently hang up on Harris. Before we’re cut off, I ask if there is a thread that runs between the characters he chooses, and he gives it a long thought. “There’s a slight level of challenge accepted-ness—a fearlessness that I’ve been excited by in what I’ve been doing,” Harris says. “Yeah, a level of fearlessness. I like doing stuff—I like challenging myself.” ■