



Paul Reiser, star of the '90s hit *Mad About You*, finds his star ever rising, with projects on Amazon and Seeso as well as a role in the second season of Netflix's *Stranger Things*. "He's become the largest star in streaming television," says one exec.

A Fine Madness

BY **GRAHAM FLASHNER** • PHOTOGRAPHS BY **STEVE SCHOFIELD**

GROOMING BY **DILLON PENA** USING MAC COSMETICS
AND KÉRASTASE PARIS COUTURE STYLING

Paul Reiser eases into a back booth at one of his go-to hangouts, The Farm of Beverly Hills.

Comfortable in a black down vest over a navy V-neck sweater and T-shirt, he looks relaxed, ready to work the room. Lunching with Reiser is not unlike sitting among the comics in Broadway Danny Rose; quips and wisecracks abound. When one entrée arrives — an Ahi Tuna Three-Way Salad — Reiser inquires, "Did you wake up today thinking ahi one-way wouldn't be enough?"

Reiser orders a simple bowl of corn chowder. That seems like a light lunch, but he pats his stomach and confides, "I'm not underfed." In fact, his plate is suddenly quite full. After lying low since *Mad About You* ended in 1999, Reiser — actor, comedian, TV writer, author, director — is, as comics like to say, "killing it." His current work includes a starring role in the Amazon comedy *Red Oaks* and another role created specially for him on the upcoming second season of Netflix's sci-fi hit *Stranger Things*. He's also co-creator and writer-executive producer of *There's... Johnny!*, a *Tonight Show*-centric comedy for Seeso, NBCUniversal's comedy streaming service. All this while preparing to return to his first love, stand-up comedy, which he largely abandoned when his film and TV career took off in the '80s and '90s.

"He's become the largest star in streaming television," says Evan Shapiro, former vice-president of digital enterprises at NBCUniversal. "The idea that he had his first life in a mostly analog way on TV and is re-creating his career on streaming services is kind of amazing."

Mad About You, which starred Reiser and Helen Hunt as a married couple in New York City, earned a dozen Emmy Awards over its seven-year run. When the show concluded, Reiser stepped off the Hollywood merry-go-round. He spent time with his wife and two sons, now twenty-one and seventeen. He wrote and produced a number of pilots, most of which didn't see the light of day. He directed a pet project, *The Thing About My Folks*, with Peter Falk playing his father. He guest-starred on shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

In 2013, while appearing in the HBO Liberace biopic *Behind the Candelabra*, Reiser met producer Gregory Jacobs (*Magic Mike XXL*), who sent over the *Red Oaks* pilot he'd penned with co-creator Joe Gangemi. "That was the beginning of getting busy again," Reiser recalls.

Named for a fictional New Jersey country club and set among the big hair and synth-pop anthems of 1985, *Red Oaks* is an affectionate coming-of-age comedy starring Welsh actor Craig Roberts (*Submarine*, *Neighbors*) as David Meyers, a bright college kid trying to figure out his life while working a day job as the club's assistant tennis pro. To complicate matters, Meyers gets involved with the daughter of abrasive, cigar-puffing club president Doug Getty (Reiser), much to the latter's annoyance. The series will conclude with its third season, set to air in the fall.

Viewers who fondly recall the beloved Paul Buchman of *Mad About You* get to see a pricklier side of the actor on *Red Oaks*. "A friend was saying, 'Everyone thinks you're this nice guy — you're not that nice,'" Reiser recounts, laughing. "And I was like, 'Yeah, I know that.'"

Even so, Reiser had concerns when he read the pilot. "The character seemed limited," he recalls. "He seemed like a prick for the sake of being a prick. Then they sent me the second script. It had all this great stuff, and then I got it. I said, 'Why don't you take some of what you have in the second script and start that earlier?'"

What Reiser came to appreciate about Getty is that "He wasn't a cliché. He's a big fish in a really little pond; he's throwing his weight around a country club, but he's a good father and a caring husband."

The ensemble is vividly filled out by Gina Gershon (*Ugly Betty*) as Getty's no-nonsense wife, longtime Reiser collaborator Richard Kind and Jennifer Grey (*Dirty Dancing*) as Meyers's parents, and Alexandra Socha (*Royal Pains*) as Getty's daughter.

Gregory Jacobs describes the show as *Caddyshack* meets *The Graduate*. "We needed somebody who can be the heavy but also have these unbelievable comedy chops," Jacobs says. "Paul can go from deeply emotional to really funny and cutting very quickly."

A city boy who grew up in Manhattan, Reiser admits he was "never a country club guy." In season one, he and Roberts had to do a fair amount of serving and volleying on the tennis court. Reiser came to the realization that "I don't need a tennis coach as much as a good editor — none of my balls ever cleared the net." In season two, the producers got wise. "You'll notice every tennis scene begins with, 'Great game — we're done,'" Reiser says.

Red Oaks comes with a serious pedigree: Jacobs and Gangemi are executive producers along with Steven Soderbergh (*The Knick*) and director David Gordon Green (*Pineapple Express*). The show's stable of directors includes indie stalwarts like Green, Hal Hartley and Amy Heckerling. Yet, despite its incisive writing and stellar cast, *Red Oaks* remains largely under the radar.

"It's this really lovely show that nobody has seen," Reiser laments. "But that's the great thing about the streaming world: it doesn't have to be a hit; it'll always be there.... As a creator of content, I find it comforting. You put it out there; it can be enjoyed later."

NO ONE CAN SAY *STRANGER THINGS* FLEW UNDER THE RADAR WHEN NETFLIX PREMIERED IT IN JULY 2016. The show was an immediate internet sensation that everyone seemed to know about — everyone but Reiser. "It dropped on a Friday," he recalls. "I hadn't heard of it until my son told me about it on Monday. Literally minutes later, my agent calls: ever hear of this show? I was like, 'Yes, do I live in a cave?'"

Show creators Matt and Ross Duffer — professionally known as the Duffer Brothers — were mapping out season two when Reiser met them ("in the same booth we're sitting in now") to discuss his character, Dr. Owen. The role was so tailored to the actor that the brothers nicknamed the character "Paul Reiser" while still in development.

Responding via email, the Duffer Brothers explain: "We needed a new scientist to replace Dr. Brenner at the lab, and we immediately thought of Paul. We thought it'd be great fun to write to his voice, and we also thought his demeanor would help us humanize the lab, which is something we wanted to do this season." (Season two premieres this Halloween.)

Observant film geeks will take note of the callback to Carter Burke, the villainous bureaucrat Reiser played in James Cameron's 1986 film *Aliens*. It's a masterstroke of casting meant to fool audiences who trusted Reiser's good-guy persona.

The Duffer Brothers sound poised for a little misdirection of their own.

"Fans of *Aliens* will certainly be wary of Dr. Owen from the start, and we wanted to lean into that," they say. "This guy seems more reasonable than Dr. Brenner, but is he really a good guy? Or does he have a hidden, sinister agenda? That's a question that's not answered until the end of the season."

"He's got, like, eight different degrees," Reiser says of his character. "He's meant to be trusted, but whether it's earned or not, I don't know." As for the technical stuff and sci-fi jargon, Reiser jokes, "They have to explain it to me in idiot terms." Per the *Duffer Brothers*: "We're very thankful to Paul's son for making his dad watch the show — and for explaining all the sci-fi stuff that Paul didn't understand."

If *Stranger Things* is Reiser's walk on the, well, strange side, *There's... Johnny!* finds him squarely in his comfort zone. Co-created with *Mad About You* alum David Steven Simon and set backstage at *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, the eight-episode series weaves in actual clips from *The Tonight Show* and unfolds against the cultural and political upheaval of 1972, the year Carson moved the show to Burbank from New York.

Ian Nelson (*The Hunger Games*, *Teen Wolf*) stars as Andy, a wide-eyed young Nebraskan who lands an entry-level job on *The Tonight Show*. Jane Levy (*Don't Breathe*, *Suburgatory*) plays Joy, the assistant talent coordinator who takes him under her wing. Tony Danza (*Taxi*, *Who's The Boss*) re-creates the only real-life *Tonight Show* character, Carson's longtime executive producer, Freddie de Cordova. Reiser brought over David Gordon Green from *Red Oaks* to direct.

The show represents a grand NBC homecoming both for Reiser — back at the network for the first time since *Mad About You* — and for Carson, whom the show posthumously introduces to a new generation of younger viewers. *There's... Johnny!* premieres on Seeso later this summer — twenty-five years after Carson signed off in 1992 and fifty-five years after his *Tonight Show* debut. (Carson died in 2005.)

The show is produced in partnership with the Carson estate. To get access to the clips, Reiser had to secure permission from Jeff Sotzing, Carson's nephew, president of Carson Entertainment and gatekeeper of all *Tonight Show* footage. It turned out to be easier than anticipated. "We pitched the idea to Jeff and he said, 'That's my life story!'" Reiser recalls. Back in the late '70s, Sotzing's famous uncle gave him an entry-level job, and he rose steadily up the ranks.

Though *Tonight Show* fixtures like Ed McMahon and Doc Severinsen aren't portrayed as characters, body doubles and suggestive camera shots give the illusion they are there. "We'll see the back of a head, a shoulder, you might hear a voice — but it's very limited," Reiser says. "We didn't want to be imitating someone you know so well."

Looming large over the show's every frame is the image of Carson himself. In his heyday, the host united an entire country of late-night viewers in a way that's almost impossible to duplicate in today's fragmented culture. "Johnny was the mecca," Reiser observes. "For America, he was this comforting Rock of Gibraltar: he was there for us every night."

Reiser has his own special connection to the legend: he got his first break as a comedian on *The Tonight Show* in 1982 and made several guest appearances over the show's final decade. "Paul serves as the perfect bridge between the two eras," says Shapiro.

THIRTY-ODD YEARS AGO, AFTER REISER GRADUATED FROM SUNY BINGHAMTON, ACTING WAS THE FURTHEST THING FROM HIS MIND. He was a young comic on the New York club circuit, his sensibilities honed by the likes of Mel Brooks, Robert Klein and David Brenner. Comedians like Freddie Prinze and Jimmie Walker had already parlayed stand-up success into lucrative TV contracts. "I saw the blueprint," Reiser says. "You move to California at some point, get on *The Tonight Show* and you have a career."

Little did Reiser know it would be an unheralded feature comedy, not Johnny Carson, that would propel his career. In 1982, a first-time director named Barry Levinson cast him in *Diner* as Modell, the guy who famously drives Steve Guttenberg nuts angling for a taste of his roast beef sandwich. ("You going to finish that?") The film launched the careers of many newcom-

ers in the ensemble cast, including Kevin Bacon and Mickey Rourke.

Reiser continued to perform stand-up, but Hollywood beckoned: he scored subsequent roles in two *Beverly Hills Cop* movies, the aforementioned *Aliens* and a four-year stint on the sitcom *My Two Dads*. And then came the hit *Mad About You*, which, Reiser recalls, he and co-creator Danny Jacobson pitched to NBC as: what happens in a couple's private life "when you leave the party or the dinner and it's just you and your wife in the car."

The rigors of writing and acting in *Mad About You* proved too much to sustain the demands of a stand-up career. "Some guys could do it; I couldn't," Reiser says. Now, he's dipping his toe back in from a more seasoned perspective. "I was funnier at fifty than [at] twenty-four," says Reiser,



who recently turned sixty. "You know what doesn't work. You edit better, you write deeper, you discard more frequently."

Reiser confesses it takes a certain arrogance to go on stage looking for laughs. "Comedy is the only art form that gets hecklers," he says. "No one says to a singer, 'You suck.' Nobody yells at a painter. What's in my favor now is that the audience, they already like me from *Mad About You*.... I had never capitalized on that."

Still, it took him more than a year to get comfortable enough to start mounting shows. Reiser has tested material locally at venues like *The Comedy and Magic Club* in Hermosa Beach (where Jay Leno often holds court), and he's planning tour dates.

For now, he's ensconced in the production of *There's... Johnny!*, which finds him on the set by seven each morning — a schedule he calls "exhausting but invigorating." He leans back in the booth with a contented smile. "The fun thing," he says, "is not having to do things I don't love." ©