

# Stage Might

The multitalented  
*Neil Patrick Harris*  
switches gears, trading Hollywood  
for Broadway, while making time  
for his most demanding but  
rewarding role: dad

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY



Trading one character (a buff womanizer) for quite another (a lipstick-and-stiletto-wearing transgender singer) is no easy task, especially when both roles are fan favorites.

Just ask TV, film, and theater star Neil Patrick Harris, who recently shed Barney Stinson, his *How I Met Your Mother* small-screen persona, after nine seasons to don drag for the role of punk rocker Hedwig on Broadway in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

The rock musical first garnered acclaim back in 1998 when its creator, John Cameron Mitchell, performed the title role off-Broadway. He also starred in and directed the independent film version in 2001, which quickly earned cult classic status. Now, with Mitchell working behind the scenes, *Hedwig* just recently hit the Great White Way and has already earned eight Tony nominations, including one for Harris as Best Leading Actor in a Musical.

### Stage Coach

While Harris certainly has the Broadway chops—his résumé includes turns in *Cabaret*, *Proof*, and *Assassins*, and he's won three Emmys for hosting the Tony Awards—Hedwig requires a kind of feminine gauntness he can't simply emote. This former child star shot to fame more than 20 years ago as a scrawny kid doctor in *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, but he's 40 now and stands a strapping 6 feet tall.

Under the direction of a trainer, Harris, who is also starring in the recent release *A Million Ways to Die in the West*, spent “the last four months restructuring my body to have less bulk and more softness, which is a pretty intense workout change, from lifting weights to doing hot box yoga, stretching, and cardio.”

As of press time he'd lost 20 pounds for the role. “I've been trying to curb and change my cravings,” says the actor, who's repeatedly declared his enduring love for L.A.'s In-N-Out burgers, chips and guacamole, and Red Bull. “I used to be able to eat burritos at 11 or 12 at night,” he laments. “Now, I stop eating at 7 p.m., my main meal is lunch—and it's a salad.”

Healthy weight loss is just one challenge; there are other, more nuanced requirements to master if he's to

pull off Hedwig's waifish physique. “My trainer has been spending time with me on core flexibility and scapular retraction” for the shoulders, Harris says. “As the more macho Neil”—he's referring to his character on *How I Met Your Mother*, and also to himself, off-screen—“I tend to have my shoulders forward, almost in a boxer's stance, which isn't great for my posture. I need a long feminine neck [for Hedwig], and I need to keep my back down so that my shoulders are deep in their sockets, with my belly and butt tucked in. ... I need a lot of length.”

Acquiring length may be easy compared with performing in custom-made heels. “I'm not just walking in them,” he says. “I'm spinning and dancing and kicking in them, too! I don't want to blow out my ACL!”

What has surprised Harris most about the training process is how much healthier he feels. “I had to be in good shape for *How I Met Your Mother*, because I never knew if I'd be sunning shirtless or sitting in a hot tub or killing it in laser tag. It was in my best interest to be in shape, but it was more about looking fit, as opposed to being fit. It's easy to do crunches and have a nice outer frame, but for Hedwig I have to be in shape, inside and out. My posture, my core, my flexibility—right now I'm in the best shape of my life.”

As for his dismissal of junk food? “Detox is good as a lifestyle choice—and for a drag queen,” he jokes.

### Pitch Perfect

The character of Hedwig is both angry and lovelorn; she belts out her heartache loudly in song. Harris knows that, above all, he must protect his vocal cords (even if shredding them might add realism to the role). With seven shows to do each week—four of them every weekend—the



## Neil's Deal

The triple-threat actor offers his healthy living tips

#### Get enough sleep.

Harris is a big believer in catching his eight hours. “Thankfully, I have the genetic code to sleep anytime,” he says. “I can drink a full Red Bull, put my head on the desk, and be asleep in 20 seconds.”

#### Encourage creativity with your kids.

“David [Burtka] and I create a positive environment for Harper and Gideon, filled with fun, immersive, educational things. Imagination is everywhere. We play at all times.”

#### Strike a balance.

When it comes to the push-pull between home and work life, Harris doesn't “think my circumstance are unique. I'm busy a lot, but millions of couples work and have families. You have to reassess your time and make choices that are effective for your family.”

#### If you can partner with someone who cooks, do.

Burtka, Harris' partner for the last decade, is a theater actor who once trained at legendary cooking school Le Cordon Bleu, and who also ran his own L.A.-based catering company. “David's palate weaned me off processed foods,” Harris says.

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# Surrogacy:

## Tips for hopeful parents

Using a surrogate to start a family, as Neil Patrick Harris and his partner, David Burtka, did, can be a complicated process. For starters, every state has its own rules about the legal rights of surrogates and intended parents, and many differ on whether payment can be exchanged for the service. Judy Sperling-Newton, director of the American Academy of Assisted Reproductive Technology Attorneys, and a member of the board of The Surrogacy Center in Madison, Wis., suggests a few tips for intended parents seeking a surrogate's help.

### Gestational surrogacy is less risky than traditional surrogacy.

Sperling-Newton is not a proponent of traditional surrogacy, where the surrogate carrier is also the biological mother. "If she changes her mind at any point, before or after the child is born, she's the mom," Sperling-Newton says. Regardless of signed contracts, "no state in the country will terminate a biological mother's rights." She advises pursuing gestational surrogacy, where the egg comes from a donor collected by a surrogacy center, and the surrogate is a third party. (Harris and Burtka chose this route to have their two kids, 3-year-old twin half-siblings, Harper and Gideon.)

### Use professionals who know the law.

"Both Washington state and New York criminalize compensation for surrogacy. In countries like France, Spain, and Japan, surrogacy is illegal," says Sperling-Newton. This is why it's so important, she says, "to use experienced, legitimate professionals" when pursuing surrogacy. "Don't go to the Internet looking for a match! There are many programs and services out there without any regulation or standards."

### Discuss every possible outcome—before conception.

What happens if the fetus has major birth defects? What if the intended

parents wish to terminate a pregnancy and the carrier does not? What if the carrier is in an accident that leaves her on life support? While no state would force a carrier to terminate a pregnancy she didn't want to end, "there are major issues that need to be resolved before anybody signs anything," if only to prepare "for every possible circumstance," Sperling-Newton says.

### Work out all the emotional details, too.

Do intended parents get to attend pre-natal doctor visits? If so, how many? How about being in the delivery room? Can they dictate nutrition and exercise? What about the carrier's existing children? Will they be involved in any way? Sperling-Newton says: "Talk about it now and get on the same page, before conception."

For more information, visit [surrogacycenter.com](http://surrogacycenter.com) or The National Infertility Association at [resolve.org](http://resolve.org).

performer is doing everything he can to strengthen his instrument.

"Cracked notes and gravel are not a bad thing when you're a rock 'n' roll singer," Harris muses. "That frees me a bit about tone. [But] people are paying to hear me sing. I can't rely on the idea 'bad singing is good' for this show."

With this in mind, he turned to Liz Caplan, the go-to vocal coach for theater, television, film, and recording stars including Olivia Wilde, Stephen Colbert, Sara Bareilles, The Goo Goo Dolls, and a roster of Broadway regulars.

Harris has chosen to forego the use of an understudy, which adds to the pressure to stay healthy. "My face is the image on the poster," he says. "To have a Plan B is not fair to audiences. It would give me an escape clause that I don't need mentally. I won't be 100% all the time, but I imagine that a certain percentage of the audience would just get up and leave [due to his absence], and then I'd feel bad for the understudy. Plus, I need to be in Hedwig's headspace. If I'm sick, then for that show Hedwig is under the weather and carrying on—that's in her spirit and

Harris and Burtka each fertilized an egg from the same anonymous donor. Both successful embryos were implanted into a surrogate, a woman they knew and trusted, who carried the siblings to term. Harper and Gideon are therefore twin half-siblings, sharing the same biological mother but different fathers.

"Surrogacy allowed us unequivocal rights for the future," the actor says. "Our surrogate is an amazing woman. My one regret? She lives in a different city, and we missed those wonderful months before the babies come, when you put hands on belly, speak into the skin, and brace yourself for what's to come. We got a lot of emails. That was a little strange, but not a bad thing. We recorded ourselves reading children's books and asked her to put speakers to her

*"A theater structure gives me more quality time with the kids and will calm me down regardless of how crazy they're being."*

"The first thing was to make sure he's healthy overall," Caplan says, which means "nutrition, hydration, exercise, sleep, and maintaining good blood sugar levels to keep his energy up. Neil needs to be thin for the role, but I told him he shouldn't look like a photonegative. I advise him to eat small portions of protein throughout the day. And to make up for all that sweating on stage, to drink at least two quarts of water—this could include tea or coconut water—each day."

Caplan also counsels Harris to avoid dairy products like milk and cheese, which she says can coat the vocal cords. And she bans acidic foods—tomatoes and citrus fruits—because they can cause reflux. "Acid kicks back from the stomach onto the larynx and vocal cords," she explains, "which, much like mucus, leads to a constant clearing of the throat. The cords really take a beating. Lemons are the citrus exception; they have alkaline to soothe the throat, so I recommend lots of water with lemon in it." Fish oil supplements, too, can add much-needed moisture, she says.

nature. My ailments will be terrific character choices for any given performance. I have to embrace the imperfections."

### Play Time

With two toddlers at home, Harper Grace and Gideon Scott, both 3, Harris won't spend his time off stage doing much, if any, relaxing.

"The kids have a lot of energy, yes!" he says. "But it's calming energy. I'm looking forward to having time at home. I've spent six years in a car rushing from meeting to voiceover recording to audition to taping to filming—and it keeps me away from my family. A theater structure gives me more quality time with the kids and will calm me down regardless of how crazy they're being."

When Harris and David Burtka, his partner of 10 years, decided to start a family in 2011, they chose gestational surrogacy, an approach using an anonymous donor egg fertilized with the intended father's sperm, then planted in a surrogate carrier who is not the biological mother. (In contrast, with traditional surrogacy, a man supplies his sperm to fertilize a surrogate's egg; the carrier is the biological mother.)

belly so the kids could hear our voices."

As Father's Day approaches, he and Burtka are definitely enjoying the milestones. "Their vocabularies are exploding; their sentence structure is complex; they're more self-sufficient," Harris beams. "This morning I was on a conference call, and they were able to create a fort under the table with flashlights and growl like tigers for an hour and a half. A wonderful thing to bear witness to—or, should I say, 'tiger' witness to."

He continues to proudly gush: "Harper is the extrovert who likes to sing. Gideon's creativity is expressed more in imaginative ways. For example, he'll demand we call him 'Tony' for four days. He simply won't respond unless we call him Tony." He laughs at the thought. "So, he's the storyteller, she's the songsmith. He can write the songs and she'll sing them."

Harris admits to tackling "a massive learning curve" for parenthood. "For the first couple months, you worry [if any little thing goes wrong] they're forever broken. But by age 3, they crack each other over the head with the fireplace poker and you know they're fine. They recover and right themselves with remarkable precision."