

# CAS '06



THREE OVERACHIEVERS WHO MADE IT IN HOLLYWOOD BY TAKING COMEDY SERIOUSLY. THEY'RE NOT SLACKERS, THEY JUST PLAY THEM ON TV.  
BY RENÉE ALFUSO / CAS '06

**SEE THOSE JOKERS ON THE LEFT?** They make comedy look easy—but don't be fooled by appearances. Aziz Ansari's characters swagger and talk a big game, yet the actor himself is just a modest, small-town guy with a marketing degree. Aubrey Plaza expertly plays miserable, as if she doesn't want to be there, but being on camera is her dream come true. And though Donald Glover gained fame in the role of clueless man-child, he's actually a Renaissance man with a laser focus on his career. Yes, their alter egos may slack off for laughs, but these three young alums are some of the hardest-working and funniest new faces in show business.

**T**wo years at the South Carolina Governor's School for Science & Mathematics + four years at the Leonard N. Stern School of Business = a career in stand-up comedy? It may seem an unlikely equation, but it's how Aziz Ansari (STERN '04) got his start. "I grew up in this really small town and there wasn't much to do," he says of his childhood in Bennettsville, South Carolina, about two hours northeast of Columbia. "There were never any concerts or anything—there wasn't even a movie theater." So it wasn't until his freshman year

of college that Ansari saw his first show at the Comedy Cellar on MacDougal Street and discovered his true calling. With encouragement from friends, he took the stage at an open mic night and worked his way up to a regular gig at the Upper East Side's Comic Strip Live, where Eddie Murphy and Jerry Seinfeld started their careers. Ansari's jokes were sprinkled with pop culture references and, early on, focused on being the nerdy guy who never gets the girl.

His material evolved to include stories about shopping for

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# AZIZ ANSARI





THOUGH THEIR *PARKS* CHARACTERS ARE POLAR OPPOSITES, ANSARI AND PLAZA ARE FRIENDS OFF-SCREEN. "IT'S COOL TO HAVE A GUY ON THE SHOW WITH ME FROM NYU, BECAUSE WE HAVE THAT SPECIAL CONNECTION," SHE SAYS.

600-thread-count sheets, tipping at Cold Stone Creamery, and listening to a Kanye West album while hanging out in the rapper's house. In 2005—just one year after graduation—*Rolling Stone* named him the hottest stand-up act on its annual Hot List, and, a few months later, he won the Jury Award for Best Stand-up at HBO's 2006 U.S. Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen. But with only so many hours he could log on stage, Ansari found another outlet for his funny bone: the Internet. As one-quarter of the sketch comedy group Human Giant, he co-wrote and starred in a slew of self-financed viral videos, including the acclaimed short film series *Shutterbugs*, about a cutthroat talent agency for toddler stars. MTV discovered Human Giant on YouTube and offered them their own show, a cult favorite that ran for two seasons before the group decided to go their separate ways.

That's when Ansari landed a role on NBC's *Parks and Recreation* as the image-obsessed, wannabe entrepreneur Tom Haverford. But even after a long day of shooting, Ansari still goes out to perform stand-up most nights and tours between filming because it remains his first love. Splitting time between Los Angeles and New York City, Ansari admits that it can be diffi-

cult to balance his career, but he prefers it that way. "I'm a very workaholic-type person, so I never get too comfortable," he explains. "I just like to keep working hard so that I get to keep doing what I'm doing."

## ALL ABOUT AZIZ

**Age**  
29

**Hometown Population**  
9,069

**Twitter Followers**  
1.8 million and counting turn to Ansari for more than just jokes—as a passionate foodie, he frequently tweets restaurant recommendations for towns and cities across the country.

**Where You've Seen Him**  
After stealing scenes in films such as *I Love You, Man* (2009), *Funny People* (2009), and *Get Him to the Greek* (2010), Ansari scored his first major role in last year's action comedy *30 Minutes or Less*.

**On Feeling Out of Place at Stern**  
"I wasn't really aware of the whole finance culture, like I didn't know anything about Goldman Sachs and that stuff, so it was all kind of foreign to me. I remember there

was a class where the professor showed us something from that Talking Heads concert film *Stop Making Sense*, and, like, no one knew who the Talking Heads were. It was like, wow, I don't know if I should be in this school."

Ansari says that there were times he considered transferring to the Tisch School of the Arts or the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, but instead decided to pursue a comedy career on his own. "I'd been doing stand-up and was just like, I think I can do something with comedy, so I stayed with Stern because marketing was...how do I put this?...it wasn't too rigorous on the workload."

**Hitting the Streets**  
Trying to break into the city's comedy club circuit as an NYU undergrad, Ansari spent his Friday and Saturday nights in Times Square handing out flyers to passersby in exchange for stage time. "I think anyone who starts doing stand-up, you're kind of terrible for the first couple years," he says. "It takes a while before you really figure out what you're doing, but I was always very comfortable onstage so that definitely helped me out."

**Lesson Learned**  
"When I was first starting out,

I went to the Comedy Cellar one night and Chris Rock dropped in. He was working on new [material] and it didn't go that well, but he didn't care at all and it was awesome," Ansari recalls. "It was an important thing to see early on because it just made me realize that if I do a set and it doesn't go well...who cares? I'll just do another one."

**Selling Out**  
Last year, his 30-city stand-up tour sold 10,000 tickets in New York alone, adding extra dates to meet the demand. But the highlight for Ansari was performing for a packed house at Carnegie Hall. "I never thought that big," he explains. "I never thought about acting or anything when I started. I just liked doing stand-up and wanted to do spots in the city. Like, that would have been great in my book."

**Pawnee Pride**  
Created by the duo behind *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation* follows a group of offbeat government employees in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana. *GQ* named it "Sitcom of the Year" during its second season. Like *Mayberry* and *Springfield* before it, Pawnee is a character in its own right, with recurring faces on every corner. "It's really a dream job," Ansari says. "There are so few shows that I actually like on TV, so to just be on a show that I think is good, I feel super lucky."

**Up Next**  
Ansari is currently developing a comedy called *Olympic-Size Asshole*, in which he'll star alongside *Eastbound & Down*'s Danny McBride. This summer, fans can hear Ansari voice a prehistoric rabbit in the animated film sequel *Ice Age: Continental Drift* while he wraps up his latest national stand-up tour.

**W**hile most kids dream of growing up to be a ballerina or astronaut, Aubrey Plaza (TSOA '05) set her sights on Studio 8H. "*Saturday Night Live* was the motivation for me to get into comedy and to be in New York," says the now 27-year-old. So as soon as she could, Plaza left her hometown of Wilmington, Delaware, to take improv classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre while studying at the Tisch School of the Arts. And she did make it onto the *SNL* set—as an intern in the design department and a lowly NBC page—but quickly found herself unemployed and broke in Astoria, Queens, after graduation. Everything changed in one whirlwind week in 2008 when Plaza flew out to L.A. for three meetings. She auditioned for *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, the big-

screen adaptation of the best-selling graphic novels. She met with the creators of a new sitcom called *Parks and Recreation*. And she did a chemistry read with Seth Rogen for director Judd Apatow, who was casting the film *Funny People*. She landed all three. Today, Plaza has a slew of new films coming out, after using last year's *Parks* break to shoot five movies in six months. In *Safety Not Guaranteed*, which debuted at this year's Sundance Film Festival, the funnygirl got her first chance to act in a drama, which she hopes to keep doing. Plaza also has her first starring role in *The To Do List*, which reteams her with *SNL*'s Bill Hader and his wife, writer-director Maggie Carey, who once cast Plaza alongside Hader in an early Web series called *The Jeannie Tate Show*. "It was only supposed to be a one-off video but

then became a whole series," Plaza recalls of the gig. "That's how I ended up getting an agent, because once she contacted me I just kept, like, harassing her." Though Plaza may not have achieved her childhood *SNL* dream, her deadpan style has created a beloved character on *Parks and Recreation*. The only thing more fun than watching Plaza's

April Ludgate stare apathetically at fellow office workers is the rare moment when she smiles or gives in to a sudden, overly dramatic outburst. *NYU Alumni Magazine* spoke with Plaza about her career and the very unfunny stroke she suffered at age 20 that almost derailed everything.

**Who were some of your early comedy idols?**  
Adam Sandler (TSOA '88) was a really big inspiration for me growing up. *Billy Madison* is one of my favorite movies. Just watching someone like that go from *Saturday Night Live* to writing his own movies and making his own brand of comedy, then doing serious movies and dramatic roles...I really wanted to be like him. I also loved Tina Fey and Amy Poehler because to see female comedians as

# AUBREY PLAZA

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writers of *SNL* who then go on to make their own shows—they were really big heroes of mine. Now I get to work with [Poehler] every day, and that's always weird to me.

#### What did you do after graduating from NYU?

I was just hustling. I waited tables and worked at many temp agencies. I would show up at the temp agency at, like, seven in the morning and if they had a job for me they would send me out, and if not, they would give me 20 bucks. I pretty much just busted my ass in the city while taking classes at UCB.

Being broke is a great motivating force for someone who wants to be an actress because you just have to keep going. I decided I wasn't going to have a backup plan, so I said yes to most everything and just did as much as I could. But there were definitely times when I was, like, sitting on the subway after an audition that went terribly and writing in my journal that I'm a failure and I have to go back to waiting tables again. I have journal entries up until a week before I got cast on *Funny People*—which was the movie that kind of changed everything for me—but a week before that my journal says, "This is not going to happen."

#### How did you prepare for those first three Hollywood auditions?

At the time I didn't know what I was doing and I think that actually helped me because I showed up at those meetings in, like, ripped-up jeans and a T-shirt—not realizing how much it could change my life. I just didn't know any better.

#### Are you still getting used to success?

Yeah, it's totally weird. I mean I forget that I have, like, money now. Like, I wear the same clothes [and] I'm, like, oh, yeah, I can actually buy clothes now. But I'm so

glad that I had a [struggling] period—even though I know it's significantly smaller than most people's. I'm really grateful that I had that time in New York where I was just hustling with my friends; those are probably the best years of my life. I still look back on those as the best days.

#### Do you prefer working in film or on TV?

Well, I love doing movies so much; that's always what I wanted to do and I never really thought I would be on a TV show. But I really love working on the show. It's like I have this built-in family that I get to work with every day, and there's a stability there that you don't get with movies—movies feel like summer camp and then *Parks* feels like real life.

#### What's the best part about playing April on the show?

April is an awesome character because most of the time I can just pretend like I hate everyone and have zero energy and just kind of show up. Playing a character that is disinterested and doesn't want to be there is a fairly easy job, but the fun part for me is when she has these sparks of happiness—like when Andy [actor Chris Pratt] makes her smile or she shows an emotion. That's really fun for me because it means she has many layers.

#### April always seems so cool and confident. Does that reflect your own personality?

Oh, my God, I'm the most nervous person ever! Actually the first time I did *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* I almost passed out in the middle of the interview. If you watch it, there's a moment where I kind of pause and I'm just staring at the floor for a minute and I think people thought I was doing it to be funny, but I was really just trying not to pass out. So, yes, I have this false confidence that I guess is very convincing,

but on the inside I'm terrified and want to run away.

#### Like April, you're half Puerto Rican. Growing up, did that affect your sense of humor as the only "diverse" student in an all-girls Catholic high school?

Yeah, I think so. I was always kind of using my differences to make people laugh. I don't even look Puerto Rican, but there were only 40 people in my class, so it was kind of a joke to be like, "I'm the only diverse person," but I was the only diverse person. I actually got a Hispanic teenager of the year award. Every weird thing about me or anything I was insecure about, I always just tried to turn that into something funny.

#### Back in college you had a sudden, unexplained stroke that caused expressive aphasia. Though it wasn't life-threatening, what was that experience like, both personally and as a performer who relies on her voice?

I couldn't talk for only two days, but in those 48 hours I was imagining my life as a silent actress. I actually thought, well, thank God I'm in film school and I can just bang out some scripts now or something. It was really terrifying. I mean obviously I was concerned about a lot of other things in my life and not just my career, but that thought definitely did cross my mind and I was like, this is just the worst thing that could ever happen to me or to anyone, to just suddenly not be able to speak. But it does make me appreciate speaking for the rest of my life

# DONALD GLOVER



PHOTO © CHRISTOPHER OIBALZ/CEI SYNDICATION

Rapper, actor, writer, stand-up comic—at just 28, Donald Glover (TSOA '06) does it all. Here's a look at his unpredictable yet uninterrupted career trajectory.

In 2002, Donald Glover leaves his suburban hometown of Stone Mountain, Georgia, to attend NYU, majoring in dramatic writing with a minor in psychology.

Co-creates the sketch group Derrick Comedy with fellow NYU students DC Pierson (TSOA '07) and Dominic Dierkes (TSOA '05), who remain his writing partners today. Video shorts—such as "Girls Are Not to Be Trusted" and the wildly popular "Bro Rape: A Newline Investigative Report"—become a sensation on YouTube and have since been viewed more than 200 million times.

Still, Glover is cash-strapped as an underclassman. He gets by volunteering for experiments at NYU's psychology department while also working as an RA.

In early 2008, Derrick Comedy takes a break from viral videos to shoot their first feature-length film, *Mystery Team*, which they write, produce, and star in—with Glover also composing the original score. The goofy, self-financed indie comedy, which debuts at Sundance in 2009, rejoins Glover with Plaza, who plays his love interest.

Graduates in 2006 and continues to perform with Derrick Comedy. The group starts a live variety show in Queens that includes appearances by fellow alum Aubrey Plaza. "It's like we were all kind of helping each other," she recalls.

Catches his first big break during senior year when he's hired as a writer for a brand-new show called *30 Rock*. "I literally had my RA pager go off the first day of work," he told *New York* magazine in 2009.

In spring 2009, Glover decides to quit the Emmy-winning *30 Rock* after three seasons to focus on yet another of his many passions: stand-up comedy. Tina Fey, the show's creator and star, tells *The New York Times*, "Usually, when writers tell you they want to pursue performing, you want to tell them to keep their day jobs. But with Donald, I had to agree that his talent, youth, and handsomeness were not to be wasted sitting on my living room floor."

Today, Glover shows no signs of slowing amid his touring, acting, and script writing. He aims to launch a Childish Gambino clothing line and plans to write a book someday...when he has a few minutes to himself.

Months later, Comedy Central airs Glover's first hour-long comedy special, *Weirdo*, which he films during two sold-out shows in New York City's Union Square Theatre. In his act, Glover calls Home Depot the place where one's childhood goes to die: "The one day you walk into a Home Depot and you're like, *oooh knobs*—you're dead, you're dead inside. Bury your dreams cause you're not a kid anymore."

Glover moves to an apartment building in L.A., where he is unemployed for a grand total of six days.

Producers of the NBC sitcom *Community* cast him in the role of ex-jock Troy Barnes after seeing Glover in *Mystery Team*. He spends his rare free time, usually late at night, writing rap lyrics under the moniker Childish Gambino—which he got from a Wu-Tang Clan name-generator website.

After releasing four albums and two mix tapes for free download online, Glover debuts his first major label recording, *Camp*, for Island Records in November 2011. His subsequent live tour across 23 cities in 33 days combines hip-hop, comedy, and viral sketch video.