



THE GOOD FELLA

He made his mark on pop culture's psyche as *Breaking Bad*'s Jesse Pinkman, and with an unforgettable performance in this month's *Smashed*, Aaron Paul is officially Hollywood's hottest tour de force.

| By Andrew Myers | Photography by Brian Bowen Smith | Styling by Jessica Margolis at The Magnet Agency |

"Are you caught up?" asks Aaron Paul. He's talking about the serpentine storyline of *Breaking Bad*, AMC's meth-fueled hit now halfway through its fifth and final season. In it, Paul plays—nay, owns—Jesse Pinkman, a not-so-little lost boy, drug-dealing wingman who struggles with his moral compass. His portrayal won the 33-year-old actor an Emmy for outstanding supporting actor in a drama series in 2010. This month, he also stars in *Smashed*, which premiered last January at Sundance to excellent reviews. It's the story of a boozy marriage that dissolves once wife Kate (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) decides to go sober, changing the matrimonial terrain and ultimately leaving Paul's character, husband Charlie, high and, as he continues to quaff, not so dry. "I always thought of Aaron as a very intense actor; he has that gruff voice and brooding stare," says Winstead, whose own performance in *Smashed* is already generating awards buzz. "I was intimidated by him for a variety of reasons—not the least being the fact that he's totally brilliant."

But back to *Bad*. While giving me a spoiler alert (and I'm not sharing), Paul is being consummately considerate—as is his wont, according to colleagues and co-stars. Still, hearing his distinctive, deep and reassuring voice, I glance at his clear-

as-a-glacial-lake big blues, note the creaseless brow and face free of all disingenuousness, and think of that famously discomfiting query from Laurence Olivier's Dr. Szell in *Marathon Man*: "Is it safe?"

There's a difference between being simply complicated and complexly deceptive, and it's a testament to Paul's thespian skills that, talking over a cold glass of white while sitting in a cool corner of the lobby bar of the Chateau Marmont, the two seem to merge. But that's not how it is; not who he is.

Given the roles and shows with which Paul is most often associated—from Jesse to Scott Quittman, his recurring character on HBO's *Big Love*—it wouldn't be a stretch to surmise his family and childhood were Orwellian. Not so; they were actually more Rockwellian. Born the youngest of five children to a Baptist minister and his wife in Emmett, Idaho, Aaron Paul Sturtevant spent his first five years near Santa Barbara in, he says, "an area known for its cherry fields," before the family moved back to a part of the country known for its potato fields.

In Boise, his father Robert had his own church where—at age 6 or 7—Paul had his acting debut. "It was a church play called *Dinky the Donkey*," he says, modestly admitting that he

Plaid wool blazer, \$1,710, trousers, \$610, shirt, \$695, and washed leather boots, \$745, all by Alexander McQueen. Blazer, trousers and boots at mrporter.com. Shirt at Neiman Marcus.



Quilted corduroy jacket, \$1,595, by Burberry Prorsum and Max soft raw slim-fit jeans, \$230, by Acne both at mrporter.com. Cardigan sweater, \$695, by Burberry London at Burberry, Beverly Hills. Shoes, \$895, at Salvatore Ferragamo, Beverly Hills. Aaron's own white T-shirt.

was Dinky before conceding that his real (or at least reported) first performance was as baby Jesus in the manger. "It was super exciting to be in front of the congregation. I remember having so much fun," he says.

A series of performances—"church plays, always"—unfolded over the next six or seven years, much to Paul's delight. Then, as a freshman, he met that teacher, the one who goes above and beyond, and challenges a student. "Nancy Link, she was the high school drama teacher and I begged her to let me audition to be part of the advanced theater group," he says, noting that such a request was unprecedented at Boise's Centennial High School. Nevertheless, she did let him audition—in front of the entire theater group, which then deliberated en masse. Paul was admitted. "She saw the commitment I had," he says.

It's this commitment that distinguished—and continues to distinguish—Paul. Whereas other actors often need

and Talent Association competition (IMTA), a downtown cattle call for thousands of hopeful kids. "The IMTA is where Elijah Wood and Katie Holmes were discovered, or maybe that's information we were fed to believe," says Paul, who had scrimped and saved from multiple jobs to make the trip and meet expenses. At the competition, he realized his prepared monologue wouldn't cut it, so he returned to his room to improvise something new. "I'd just watched *The Basketball Diaries* and meshed it with [*What's Eating*] *Gilbert Grape*."

Whatever he did in that room caused a neighboring guest to call security. Once Paul had assured the inquiring agent that he was neither suicidal nor violently hysterical, "I went downstairs, did the same thing, and won first runner-up," he remembers. He also attracted a different kind of agent: the talent type. Paul was 17 years old.

A quick trip back to Boise, followed by a fast move to L.A., and Paul had a studio apartment and a job as a movie

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directing, he had direction from a very early age. First, he had a childhood passion—a penchant toward the artfully dramatic shared by his father, who had acted in college (and who spoke weekly from the pulpit). In his early teens, Paul became a self-professed theater geek. He didn't go to parties, he didn't drink a single beer, he didn't date. Rather, he learned the approach to acting he continues to use today. "I truly try to live through that person's skin. I draw on no personal experiences. I imagine living in the scene and transporting myself there, all as taught by Mrs. Link," he says. "For her it was always about honesty, not pushing, then letting truth happen."

He also threw himself into an accelerated series of in-school and correspondence courses to graduate from high school a year early. "I was totally focused, with a focus that seemed innate," he says, explaining that "my folks never had a doubt in their minds that I was making the right decision about acting, graduating early and moving away." Unlike most adolescents, however, Paul was less eager "to get out than to get started." Still, he sought counsel. "The acting business is brutal on those who have the dream of someday making a living at it, and Aaron asked me if I thought he should try," remembers Link. "I asked him a few questions, and based on his answers and knowing how tenacious he is and how passionate, I told him to go for his dream."

That start began in Los Angeles ("such a wonderful place to run to!" he says), specifically at the International Modeling

theater usher at Universal CityWalk. "Two weeks in, there was a film premiere and I saw Steven Spielberg; I thought I'd made it," he says, smiling, adding he hasn't seen him since. He also got jobs, a steady stream of pay-the-bills commercial gigs, among them the first Vanilla Coke campaign, Juicy Fruit gum, and his favorite, 1-800-Collect with Mr. T.

There were also TV guest appearances in what turned into a long roster of familiar titles: *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *The X-Files*, *3rd Rock From the Sun*, *Sleeper Cell* and *Ghost Whisperer*, as well as films such as *Whatever It Takes* and the MTV TV movie *Wasted*. That was followed by bigger fare: *Mission Impossible III* and *The Last House on the Left*. But it was his recurring role in *Big Love*, the HBO series in which Paul appeared in 14 episodes, that increased his public and professional profile the most—even if that recognition didn't translate to his paycheck. "I was the brokest I'd ever been," he says, explaining the economics of being a day-player on TV or premium cable. "My scenes would be grouped into one single day, and after taxes that means \$400 to \$500 an episode."

Paul underscores the enormity of his family's emotional support while explaining that financial support from his middle-class family was impossible. Not that he would have accepted such help anyway. "I'd always promised I'd do it on my own," he says. Eventually, he did what he'd vowed never to do and called his family for money. "It was the hardest phone call I had to make, and they paid my rent for three months. It was huge."



Then came *Breaking Bad*. "I had a pile of pilots; it was the fifth," he says, adding that when he reads prospective projects, he doesn't want to know the network, the studio or the attachments, but rather "just what's on the page." His verdict on reading the last line? "It was the greatest pilot I've ever read." Paul went in to test. "This was the studio and network all in one; there were three other guys reading, and Vince [Gilligan, the series' creator and show runner] thought I was the guy, but AMC and Sony thought I was too clean-cut." But Gilligan and his team fought for him, and ultimately won. "They waited two weeks to tell me—agony!" Paul says.

How, then, is he similar to his character, Jesse? A pause as Paul ponders, then: "A passion to try to keep things safe. Honestly, that's our only similarity." But he does offer up a surprising kernel: "I think Jesse's honest, I do."

Now, after receiving industry recognition, Paul is getting his share of acclaim. He's earned three Emmy nominations in addition to his win, plus a deluge of offers and options, including *Smashed*. "He has been just as talented and tenacious as I remember him and I am very proud of him," says Link. She adds, "The one thing that makes me laugh is remembering how he told me he was a comedic actor and just couldn't do serious parts. Obviously he figured it out."

Paul describes *Smashed* as a film about a couple "madly in love, but also in love with drinking." He adds, "It was such an honest story, I really wanted to do it." Starring roles aside, Paul seems resolved not to be a movie star. "I'm a character actor," he repeats. Currently, though, he is pursuing a new, high-profile part, that of fiancé. He and girlfriend Lauren Parsekian, the co-founder and co-force behind the nonprofit Kind Campaign, got engaged last Dec. 31. "Kind Campaign works to stop girl-on-girl bullying; after we met, after I checked it out, I called her instantly," he says. "I'd been planning to propose earlier, but I wanted to wait for Paris. It's been a storybook since I met her." And so, in Paris, alone in a square lit for Christmas with Édith Piaf crooning, he proposed between sips of Champagne while they danced.

Aaron Paul in a fairy tale? Makes sense to me. As for Jesse Pinkman's happy ending as *Breaking Bad* draws to a close? That's another matter entirely. ▣

Wool jacket, \$1,395 (for full suit), by Givenchy and navy biker jeans, \$1,105, by Balmain both at Barneys New York, Beverly Hills. White dress shirt, \$325, by Dolce & Gabbana at Saks Fifth Avenue, Beverly Hills. Black tie, \$195, and shoes, \$595, both at Giorgio Armani, Beverly Hills. Pocket square, \$40, at Brooks Brothers, Beverly Hills.

Grooming by Daniele Piersons at Aim Artists using Unite Eurotherapy