



Harris, Neil Patrick (b. 1973)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2009 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Neil Patrick Harris earned celebrity as a teen-ager for his starring role in the television series *Doogie Howser, M.D.* Unlike many child actors, he has made a successful transition to mature roles, showcasing his singing and dancing abilities along the way. Since coming out publicly in 2006, he has also spoken out on behalf of glbtq causes.

Harris was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico on June 15, 1973. His parents, Ron and Sheila Harris, are both lawyers, and his mother is also a writer.

As a fourteen-year-old, Harris attended a drama camp at New Mexico State University, where he met writer Mark Medoff, who was working on a project that became the film *Clara's Heart* (1988), directed by Robert Mulligan.

Soon Harris began his professional acting career with roles in Linda Shayne's *Purple People Eater* (1988) and Mulligan's *Clara's Heart*. His performance in the latter won him a Golden Globe nomination in the category of Supporting Actor.

In 1989 he became the star of the television "dramedy" series *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, which was about a precocious youngster who had become a doctor at the age of fourteen. In the opening episode, sixteen-year-old Doogie interrupted the road test for his driver's license to attend to an accident victim.

The show continued to play on Doogie's dual identity as a skilled doctor and a typical teen. The former provided the drama in the series as Doogie demonstrated his professional expertise, winning the admiration of initially skeptical adult colleagues. The comedy derived largely from Doogie's social interactions with age-mates, especially his somewhat eccentric best friend, Vinnie, and his girlfriend, Wanda. The teen-age romance ended unhappily, however, as Doogie and Wanda broke up, but not before losing their virginity.

Harris garnered three Young Actor Awards as Best Young Actor Starring in a Television Series (1990-1992) and also earned a Golden Globe nomination for Best Performance by an Actor in a TV Series—Comedy/Musical in 1992.

When the highly successful series ended its run in 1993, Harris was firmly cemented in the minds of many viewers as the winsome Doogie, but he managed to get beyond that image by playing against type in several made-for-television movies and in Paul Verhoeven's theatrically released science fiction film *Starship Troopers* (1997), in which he portrayed a gung-ho military officer.

Harris also began working in the theater, appearing on stage as the narrator in a Los Angeles production of Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1997). He briefly returned to television with a co-starring role in the situation comedy *Stark Raving Mad* (1999-2000), but the show was cancelled after only twenty-two episodes.

Harris debuted on Broadway in David Auburn's *Proof* in 2002, and the following year he stepped in as the



Neil Patrick Harris in 2008.
Photograph by Kristin Dos Santos.
Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.0 License.

Emcee in a production of *Cabaret* (book by Joe Masteroff, music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb).

His performance in *Cabaret* was especially well received, and he enjoyed the challenge of it, noting, "The whole idea of the Emcee's role is that he . . . defines transformation. He starts off very happy and charming as the 'Willkommen' man, and then he's an aristocrat flaunting his money, or a lovesick man falling in love for the first time. Sometimes he's a woman in a kick line. It's not until the final transformation at the end that you realize who he truly is."

Harris continued his work on Broadway in 2004, appearing in the double role of the Balladeer and Lee Harvey Oswald in Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*. He returned to the big screen later that year with a small but much commented upon part in Danny Leiner's comedy *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*.

The credits for *Harold & Kumar* list his role as "Neil Patrick Harris" rather than as "Himself" since the character was nothing at all like the real Harris or his well-remembered image as Doogie. He also appeared in the 2008 sequel, *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (directed by Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg) as the same character, described by Donna Freydkin as "a doped-up, egomaniacal, prostitute-loving, unicorn-riding narcissist wielding his own personalized branding iron."

Showing his sense of humor, Harris quipped, "They had [the character] wearing a really crazy tie-dye sleeveless vest with fur on it. I said if I have to dress like a crazy man on top of a unicorn, I just think I'll never hear the end of it. So I got to dress normally on top of a unicorn to save face."

Harris resumed his television career in the ensemble situation comedy *How I Met Your Mother* in 2005. As the womanizing Barney Stinson, he quickly became a fan favorite and earned accolades from critics as well, with Emmy Award nominations for Outstanding Supporting Actor in 2007 and 2008.

Like Dan Butler, who portrayed a lascivious sportscaster on the sitcom *Frasier* (1993-2004), Harris was a gay man playing an aggressively heterosexual character. As *How I Met Your Mother* began its run, however, he had not made any public statements about his sexual orientation. Perhaps because of his visibility as a result of the popularity of the new show, Harris drew the attention of bloggers on the Internet, Perez Hilton chief among them, who cited rumors about his being gay and who called upon him to come out.

Harris responded with a dignified statement to *People Weekly* magazine in November 2006, in which he declared, "Now it seems there is speculation and interest in my private life and relationships. So, rather than ignore those who choose to publish their opinions without actually talking to me, I am happy to dispel any rumors or misconceptions and am quite proud to say that I am a very content gay man living my life to the fullest."

Harris subsequently explained that before coming out publicly, he had not concealed his sexual orientation from friends, family, or people with whom he worked. "Someone once said that their life was an open book, but they just didn't want to read it out loud," he said, paraphrasing gay actor David Hyde Pierce, who played the lovelorn heterosexual Dr. Niles Crane on *Frasier*. "Everyone at work knew who I was dating, and I didn't try to pretend like I wasn't the person that I am."

Harris's partner is actor David Burtka. The couple has exchanged rings to symbolize their commitment to each other. In August 2010, the couple revealed that they were parents-to-be, expecting twins via a surrogate mother. The twins, Gideon Scott Burtka-Harris and Harper Grace Burtka-Harris, were born on October 12, 2010.

The couple alternate spending major holidays with Harris's family in New Mexico and Burtka's family in Michigan.

A flurry of media attention followed Harris's public coming out, but his career did not suffer. "The impact was minimal, and that in turn had great impact on me," stated Harris.

His continuing popularity even led to a job in an amusing television commercial for Old Spice, a maker of men's toiletries. The commercial, which spoofs television medical shows, begins with a serious-looking Harris opening a door in a hospital and announcing that "chronic body odor ruins lives." He then cites his credentials as "a former make-believe doctor" and begins strolling through the corridors of the hospital and extolling the merits of Old Spice, oblivious to the chaos reigning around him.

During the television writers' strike in 2008, Harris jumped at the opportunity to star in a 42-minute Joss Whedon film. "An Internet musical about a lovelorn would-be supervillain and the video blog he records in his home doesn't exactly scream surefire hit," wrote Adam B. Vary, "but that's just what *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* became in the wee hours of July 15." The hastily shot film became an Internet phenomenon, with 2.2 million views during its first week online despite the fact that the web site crashed at one point because of the volume.

Harris took part in another 2008 Internet production, Marc Shaiman's *Prop 8: The Musical*, portraying "A Very Smart Fellow" in the witty piece that Shaiman, as he said, wrote six weeks too late, after California voters had passed a measure against marriage equality.

Although upon first coming out publicly Harris said that he did not view himself as an advocate for glbtq rights, he has grown in that role. In addition to taking a stand against the insidious Proposition 8, he has been a strong supporter of The Trevor Project, a non-profit organization for the welfare of glbtq young people that offers an around-the-clock suicide-prevention hotline, 1-866-4-U-TREVOR.

In 2009, Harris was picked to host the Tony Awards. He did such a good job that he was nominated for an Emmy for his hosting duties.

In 2010, in fact, Harris learned that he was nominated for three Emmy Awards, one as best actor for his role in *How I Met Your Mother*, one for his stint as host of the Tony Awards Show, and one as guest star in a comedy for his appearance in *Glee*. He won the latter two awards.

In 2011, he was again asked to host the Tony Awards. Harris received very high accolades for his dazzling performance as host, especially his opening number "Broadway's Not Just for Gays Anymore" and an amazing duet with Hugh Jackman, each trying to outdo the other.

Bibliography

Freydkin, Donna. "Neil Patrick Harris Suits Up for Success; Actor Having Fun, Doesn't Take Things Too Seriously." *USA Today* (April 28, 2008): 6D.

Harteringer, Brent. "Neil Patrick Harris Lets It All Hang Out." *AfterElton* (June 17, 2008): <http://www.afterelton.com/people/2008/6/neilpatrickharris>.

Jensen, Michael. "Neil Patrick Harris Comes Out As 'Content Gay Man.'" *AfterElton* (November 4, 2006): <http://www.afterelton.com/people/2006/11/neilpatrickharris.html>.

Keith, Bill. "A Man's Man." *Out.com* (August 4, 2008): <http://www.out.com/detail.asp?id=2400>.

"Neil Patrick Harris: 'I Am a Very Content Gay Man.'" *People Weekly* 66.21 (November 20, 2006): 81.

Pastorek, Whitney. "Up & Out." *Entertainment Weekly* 923 (March 2, 2007): 38.

Santilli, Peter. "Life Is a 'Cabaret' for TV's Former Doogie Howser." *Star-Ledger* (Newark, New Jersey) (March 6, 2003): Today, 53.

Vary, Adam B. "The Doctor Is In." *Entertainment Weekly* 1004 (August 1, 2008): 30.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.