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Will Arnett's Very Good Year

With *Is This Thing On?*, an Oscar contender about the breakup of a marriage and the solace of an open mic, Will Arnett finds himself center stage for the first time. Here, the actor talks the unlikely road — from Amy Poehler to Bradley Cooper to *SmartLess* and back again — that brought him to this moment.

By Daniel Riley
Photographer Tyrell Hampton
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First, of course, is the voice: Will Arnett's raspy baritone carrying across tables and chairs and through a dining room wall at this Hollywood hotel, the voice of Gob Bluth and BoJack Horseman and Batman in the *Lego* movies and commercials for every 21st-century product from peanut butter cups to pickup trucks, and, of course, for the past five years, one third of *SmartLess*, the weekly audio-only-no-video podcast he does with Jason Bateman and Sean Hayes, that has at times been among the most popular podcasts on the planet. That's the voice mixing it up with Hollywood executives, somewhere over there, expressing incredulous due at Disney putting Jimmy Kimmel in the penalty box, a temporary banishment that transpired just hours ago.

The voice, notably, is the instrument by which Will Arnett seems to most readily travel between his various roles as a performer—an actor, a comedian, a pitchman, a talk show host, of sorts. And it is the instrument that delivers the vulnerability, pathos, and gravity of the man-in-midlife-crisis at the center of *Is This Thing On?*—the comic drama Arnett cowrote with Mark Chappell and Bradley Cooper about a guy who secretly stumbles into stand-up comedy when his marriage falls apart. Arnett's is a performance, he's perfectly willing to admit, that is really the first of its kind in a career filled with steady voiceover work and some occasionally great comedic walk-ons.

"Other than the podcast, certainly, I wasn't doing the stuff that I wanted to do. Which was leaning on...."

Acting.

"Yes. *Acting.* I'd done lots of other stuff, but nothing....," he says, settling into the truth of it. "I used to make the joke on the podcast that if it wasn't for bad movies, I wouldn't have made any movies at all."

Arnett, in person, is as large as his voice is low, and tan as a chestnut that spends its summers in East Hampton. His hair is as free as his financial security. He is a bit of a natural host first, actor/comic/pitchman/whatever next. It's why the scenes in the comedy club in *Is This Thing On?* are magic. (And why the magic scenes in *Arrested Development* are magic.) He's gravitational at center stage, where things can be held together with charisma and laughter or fall apart, with shame, in an instant.

Arnett grew up in Toronto—which he describes, hilariously, not as "a clean New York" but "a dirty Winnipeg"—and was "asked not to return" to his boarding school for, among

other things, being a wiseass, before descending on New York in the early '90s. Where Arnett mapped onto the New York performance scene at that time was tricky—not funny enough for the funny crowd (he wasn't part of *SNL* or UCB), too funny for the serious crowd. He made his bread in voice work. But as an actor, the in-between-ity carried on for decades—that is, until he reconnected with his old pal Bradley Cooper.

GQ: Where does your relationship with Bradley Cooper begin?

Will Arnett: We met through my ex-wife, through Amy [Poehler]. They were good friends. They'd just done *Wet Hot American Summer* together. And Amy and I started dating, and she wanted to introduce me to a couple of friends. What I didn't realize at the time is that I was being vetted: *Could this be somebody I date?* And so we met at McManus, which was the bar I frequented for years on 19th and Seventh.

This was in your drinking years. You've said that you used to go to that bar and play Golden Tee for hours.

And I knew all the guys there for years. So she said, "We'll meet at McManus, we're going to go meet Bradley and Janeane Garofalo." So the four of us sat down at a table at the back, and I'd never sat a table in the back. Because I was always playing Golden Tee [*laughs*]. And I was like, Oh, they've got a room back here?! And we just sat and chatted and it pretty quickly dawned on me, like, Oh, I'm being vetted.

Anyway, Bradley and I became friends from that. We sort of got along pretty instantly. Cut to: Amy and I started dating, and Bradley and Janeane were people who were around and part of our social circle. A couple years later I was doing *Arrested Development*, so I had to spend time in LA, and I rented a place in LA...and there was this house in the back of this house, split into two apartments that had a shared area. Bradley was in one, I was in the other. The doors faced each other.

Like a sitcom.

Literally like *Three's Company*. One staircase up the outside and then it overlooked Dennis Hopper's place. So we lived like that for a couple of years. Anyway, so we were friends, but what happened is he came on our podcast and it was great. He was really revealing about his life and we had this great conversation and talked about our friendship and a lot of other very personal things.

Not long after, he and I flew back to New York together. He was on a break from *Maestro*. And he said, “What are you working on?” And at this point, we’d already set the movie up, but I said, “I’d love your thoughts on the script.”

Is that something you normally would do? Ask someone like that to read your script?

No. But we have enough of a shorthand. And at that point, we’d been working on it for a few years and were feeling, What can we do to heighten this? We weren’t stuck, but it wasn’t...we didn’t have it. And about a week later he FaceTimed me and he said, “Hey, I think that if you’ll let me, I want to direct this.”

Hey, that Mexican F1 driver, Checo Pérez, is behind you! The good news is you’re recording so you’ll be able to get some of their conversation and translate it later.

I just heard him say in Spanish: “Is that Gob Bluth?”

I think if you even played it for him right now they’d be like, “Who the hell is that guy?”

You’d be surprised. Those F1 drivers spend a lot of time on private planes watching TV and movies: “I recognize your voice from the Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups commercial.”

I remember the call with Bradley because of the time of year, and the time of year reminds me of that F1 race between Hamilton and Verstappen [the 2021 Abu Dhabi Grand Prix], with the restart, when Pérez helped Verstappen to victory. I was in the lounge at LAX watching on my phone. People were screaming. The outrage I felt! There’s nothing greater than justifiable outrage. I was so mad. I started referring to Verstappen as Max-sterisk. It didn’t really catch on.

After *A Star Is Born* and *Maestro*, why do you think Bradley Cooper wanted to direct this movie you wrote?

I don’t want to put words in his mouth, but I think that once Bradley had been listening to *SmartLess* more and he read it, he was sort of like, “You’re a funny guy and you’re a talented guy and you maybe haven’t had the opportunity to show it.” And it was certainly something that I felt. Not that the fucking world owed me anything. I was just kind of in a, other than the podcast, certainly I was in a place where I wasn’t doing the stuff I wanted to do. Which was leaning on—

Acting?

Yes. *Acting*. I'd done lots of other stuff, but nothing.... I used to make the joke on the podcast that if it wasn't for bad movies, I wouldn't have made any movies at all. I made some choices early on coming off of *Arrested Development* that I might not make again. At the same time, everything conspired to bring me to where I am today, so I can't really question it.



Courtesy of Searchlight Pictures

Was it just that the movies were goofier or something like that?

Yeah, I kind of fell into doing stuff. People would say, Oh, he always plays the asshole. And then my contention was almost like: No, I play these guys who have issues. Think about Gob—he wasn't an asshole, he was a fucking sociopath, but he was also unloved. By the way, we see a lot of people in positions of power, and I don't just mean in the executive branch of our government, I'm not even suggesting that, but just in the world in general, these people who run the planet all probably could have used a hug from their dad. And it was something that drove me with a character like Gob.

So maybe I wasn't deserving of better parts, and I did a lot of different shows that I tried. I did a multicam sitcom we tried for a couple of years at CBS that was really fun to do that Sean did with me called *The Millers*. I loved that experience. And I loved the experience on the show I made, *Flaked*. I loved *BoJack Horseman*. I was just kind of doing stuff and I don't know what standard I felt like I wasn't meeting, but there was a certain feeling of dissatisfaction.

Were you feeling the need to do work that wasn't satisfying just to pay the bills?

Yeah, of course. I mean, I love when people say you do a commercial and they go, "Man, I can't believe he just did it for the money." I remember we announced SmartLess Mobile, and they go, "Man, you're selling out!" And I'm thinking: Did you go to work today?! Did you collect a check from your boss? Are you selling out? The fuck are we talking about?

Before *SmartLess*, which you started in 2020, there's this funny run that spring when you go on Conan O'Brien's podcast and Dax Shepard's podcast and you're basically like: *I'm gonna go start my own podcast—and it's gonna be way better than yours.*

The bar was so low with Conan.... No, I love both those guys and—I said last night, strangely, I was talking about this podcast I've been listening to, I was saying at dinner, I said, "You know I'm not really into podcasts." And my son and my girlfriend, a couple of people laughed and I go, "No, I know what you mean, but I'm not a habitual listener." But you're right, I went on those shows within a month of each other and it occurred to me, like, Hey, maybe I should do something like this. And I say that to Bateman, and Bateman has dinner with Sean and he says, "Willy's doing a podcast, we should do it with him." So they call me and they go: "We're going to do it with you." And I legitimately say, "No! Fuck off! I'm doing it on own!" They're like: "No, no, no, we're doing it together." Here in LA, our world shuts down on Friday, March 13th for COVID. Three days earlier, we'd had a meeting at Sean's office about our podcast.

But what made you say I want to do this?

I've always enjoyed, if I'm being honest, the talk show experience.

As a guest? Not something all guests feel.

No. And not because I necessarily enjoy talking about myself, even though I'm sure somebody might think that. I just grew up revering Letterman. And being able to converse in a way that's freewheeling, despite doing a pre-interview, what you're able to do in the conversation and be witty, I think, for me, is funny and exciting. So when I watch a guy like Charles Grodin come on, or whomever, and be able to go back and forth with Dave in a way that was with and felt impromptu.

And I would imagine trying to make Dave laugh was the biggest thing you could do.

One of the most satisfying moments of my life, and it's captured, I have a photograph of it, framed—I can admit I framed it myself. Well, I didn't actually *build* a frame, but I screen-grabbed this photo of doing *Letterman* one time where I was doing this stupid bit, which we had not talked about, and I was talking about quitting smoking and I was just giving various instances of smoking, running into people, and putting out a cigarette. I'm sitting on the edge of my chair and Dave's at his desk laughing.

The greatest compliment for me, and again, that's one of those things I'm sure if I were to say that to him he'd probably be embarrassed by that. *Give me a fucking break*. It's just the way it is. I grew up with the guy. One time, he let me get behind his desk when he was using Twitter and I tweeted from Dave's computer to Fallon as he stood by. I'm like, the fucking *dream*. This is the greatest. I'm not suggesting that I think I'm funny, but to be able to be there and laugh with somebody in that way, just to laugh along with him, is the greatest. So with the podcast, the fact that we are able to laugh together scratches the deepest of itches for me.

And now *SmartLess* has been on for five years. Over 275 episodes. How have you changed as a host and as an interviewer in that time?

[Laughs.] What's so funny is I've read the comments less and less as we've gone along, but certainly early on, people would say these guys are the worst interviewers, and those are the ones you focus on. You can have 11 people say you're great. The 12th person says you're a shitty interviewer, I'm a shitty interviewer. And so I'll bring it up and then I'll get various things that Jason will say: *Don't even read it*. Which he legitimately doesn't. But sometimes it's unavoidable, and we're all human, and to suggest that people are impervious to any sort of...it's absurd. But I don't think we're necessarily interviewers as much as it's you coming on and the four of us are talking to each other.



Vintage boots from Gator's Vintage.

Okay, granted, but after 275 episodes, do you find yourself realizing: “Oh, I’m actually using this to answer my curiosity about how these other people do it”?

Certainly. I feel like I ask a lot of the same questions. The responsibility to get into certain areas is much more incumbent upon you if it’s your guest. *[On SmartLess, Arnett, Bateman, and Hayes switch off who brings the secret guest, so two of the hosts are in the dark when the episode begins.]* And so the freedom when it’s Jason or Sean’s guest for me is fantastic. They’ll say the same thing, because you just get on and just roll with it. Generally, if it’s a performer, it’s, what was the first time you performed? Why did you think you could do it? And I think that we have the luxury as fellow performers that it’s not just an interview. It’s like, I have my story, what’s your story? It seems so simple. And yet what it does is it usually opens up other areas and they reveal something that they did and something interesting. And I think that because we have a little more time, we have an hour, we then start to find nuggets or things that amuse us that they did or whatever, or it brings up something that Sean did that might be an opening to jab at him or Jason. None of this is by design. We’ve never discussed what we do. *Ever*. The fact that I’m doing this with you now, I’ve never really articulated this in any way and it seems a little absurd to do it and it seems a little self-serving, to be honest, and embarrassing in a certain way. Again, I’m not being precious about it, but it’s true.

Has doing *SmartLess* changed you as a dinner-party guest or a person on a date?

I don’t think so because I’m just as bad as I was then. Consciously, no. But I suppose subconsciously it may have occurred, if you can believe it, because there are a lot of people who talk about how much we interrupt each other.... Well, I interrupt in conversation all the time. It’s also three people and I grew up in a family of interrupters. I mean, that’s just the way it goes. But, believe it or not, I think I’m a better listener. Which people might say, *Wow, you must have been really bad*. But I think I am a better listener now. I *think*. If I can say that. I’m not entirely sure, but maybe.

The most steady work you’ve had all these years is voice work. How would you describe your own voice?

You mentioned to me earlier that you heard me coming in. What I think when I hear you say that is that I was loud and obnoxious.

This dining room was silent. You could hear a pin drop.

Yeah, it was deathly quiet. I would describe some of the people who were eating here earlier as simply cadaverous. But I don't know how I would describe my own voice. Obviously, to me, it's just my voice. But I know—I had a girl wait on me at a table in Long Island about three weeks ago, and she said to me, she was probably 20 or 21, and she goes, “Do you do animation?” I was eating with my young son, Denny, and I go, yeah. She goes, “Are you BoJack Horseman?” She had no idea who I am, which was delightful. But, yeah, it's a weird thing, I have had people turn around in line at a grocery store when they hear me talking, and I never think about it in that way.

But when you were younger, did anyone say this is distinctive and you can use this?

No, I grew up in Canada, and we're short on compliments. To even have thought like that, it's like don't get too big for your britches, don't refer to yourself, don't have an opinion on yourself. Oh, you have an opinion on yourself? How self-serving.

I heard that you started smoking at 13. Did that contribute to the voice?

I mean, I would imagine there's a correlation. There has to be. In a certain way, my dad has a sort of deep voice. It's probably not as raspy, deep and raspy, which is a weird combo.

When you do voice work, do you have a rider of things you must have in the booth?

[Laughs.] No, no. Because I generally record at home now. I built my first home booth in 2017, which was kind of late in the game. I am just kind of dumb that way. I used to always drive to the studio two or three times a week to service GMC, or whoever, all these years. So I had the booth made and I got one in Long Island at my house and it totally changed the game.

After growing up in Canada, you moved to New York. Why?

I moved to New York because I wanted to be an actor and I would've gone into sketch or comedy had I known how to, but I didn't have the wherewithal, I didn't have any connection to that. Not that I had any connection to what you refer to as I guess straight acting either. But I moved to New York and I remember my agent suggesting I go and read for sitcoms during pilot season, and I had the audacity to think that that was

somehow going to be beneath me. I wasn't doing fucking *anything*. The joke of that is, and the absurdity of that is, and I was dumb enough to think that I wanted the world to take me seriously.

After years in New York, you moved to Los Angeles—but filming *Is This Thing On?* brought you back. Years after hearing the story that inspired the movie, writing the script, and waiting for the green light, it's here. What are you feeling the day before principal photography starts?

Well, I simultaneously appreciate the weight of it and also just try to ignore it and just try to experience and be in the moment of it as much as I can and not, I sort of let go of the idea of having a predetermined notion of how it was going to go. I trust Bradley implicitly on how he wanted to go and his vision, and I really, again, I had enough life experience, not just career experience, but life experience to understand that I don't know how everything's going to go and I'm at this. It was kind of a perfect point of fuck it and really *surrender*. As stupid as that sounds....

What just happened there?

When I hear it and I judge it back?

Are you seeing it on a website?

Yeah. I say it, and then I go and listen to myself. But here's the thing: It's not like all of a sudden I think of myself as this *actor* and now I'm going to start speaking it. Do you know what I mean? I don't know what I'm talking about. That's the truth.

I think that because I've spent so much time on this movie and I think that we got close to accomplishing the vision of what it could be, that feels really good. At the same time, I haven't done something *important*. Do you know what I mean? I've got to remind myself: I've made a movie.



All clothing and scarf by Tom Ford. Vintage boots from Gator's Vintage. Pocket square by Turnbull & Asser. Eyewear by Jacques Marie Mage. His own watch by Rolex.

This reminds me of something I've heard you say before: In Hollywood, God forbid they catch you trying.

Yeah. Well, the other thing is if you do something, if you have a conversation on a show or a podcast, tone can be inferred. When you see something in black-and-white and somebody can rip a quote and put it out there, you're like, you need to look at my face when I say that. It's why I hate text.

You mean *texting*.

Sorry, yes, *texting*. I don't despise *the written word*. A good example of potentially a quote being taken out of context.

Media everywhere is experimenting with video. Why don't you guys do video on *SmartLess*?

We are the only ones who don't. We could get a lot more money if we did video. We are leaving a lot of money on the table. But I think it takes away from the conversation, the video. One of the great things about the podcast, the reason it became popular is because you listen to it and you really focus on it. Once you add the video element, and I get the commerce of it, I understand, but it becomes something else much more performative. It has to just by, there's no way around it. People are a lot less forthcoming when they're being videoed, and they're much more aware and self-conscious of the way they look. Of course you are. We all are. I spent *a lot* of time primping for this interview.

A lot of *Is This Thing On?* takes place in Greenwich Village, near where you used to live. What was it like being back in your old neighborhood?

And all of a sudden I was walking in the West Village, walking my old haunts. And simultaneously, my son, my five-year-old's mom moved back to New York. And so it was also a really good time to be there because he was newly moving back and I was going to have to split my time, which was the universe taking care of everything. The timing of it was immaculate. I do have a reignited love affair with New York and I'm really excited about it. Once my big kids are graduating high school, I'm going to live in New York again full time, I think.

Preproduction started in January. And you shot, edited, and released the movie all in this calendar year. It really seems like a year where the endpoint is different for you than where it started.

This movie took so long to get off the ground and then we made it so fast. It's all entirely in '25. This experience has been so condensed and so intense in the first part of the year. Making the movie and being in New York and everything has made it feel heightened. And I said to Bradley recently, I've learned more in the last nine months in 2025 than I have in the last 20 years, and I don't mean about making movies—I just mean about life. And I realize you have a lot of wisdom and experience, but at the same time, how little I do actually know and how surprising life can be.

You seem very open to it.

I'm at the most open point in my life. I'm on the verge of getting emotional about it. I am. It's been a deeply moving year.

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