

RUTGERS

The Magazine for Alumni

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BEST

SUPPORTING

JIMMY PALUMBO **ACTOR**

AND THE ROLES OF HIS LIFETIME

He's Back! Eddie Jordan takes over Scarlet Knights men's basketball

Escape From Iran: How Rutgers helps scholars under siege

Health Matters: Introducing a new feature on the health sciences



BEST SUPPORTING

ACTOR



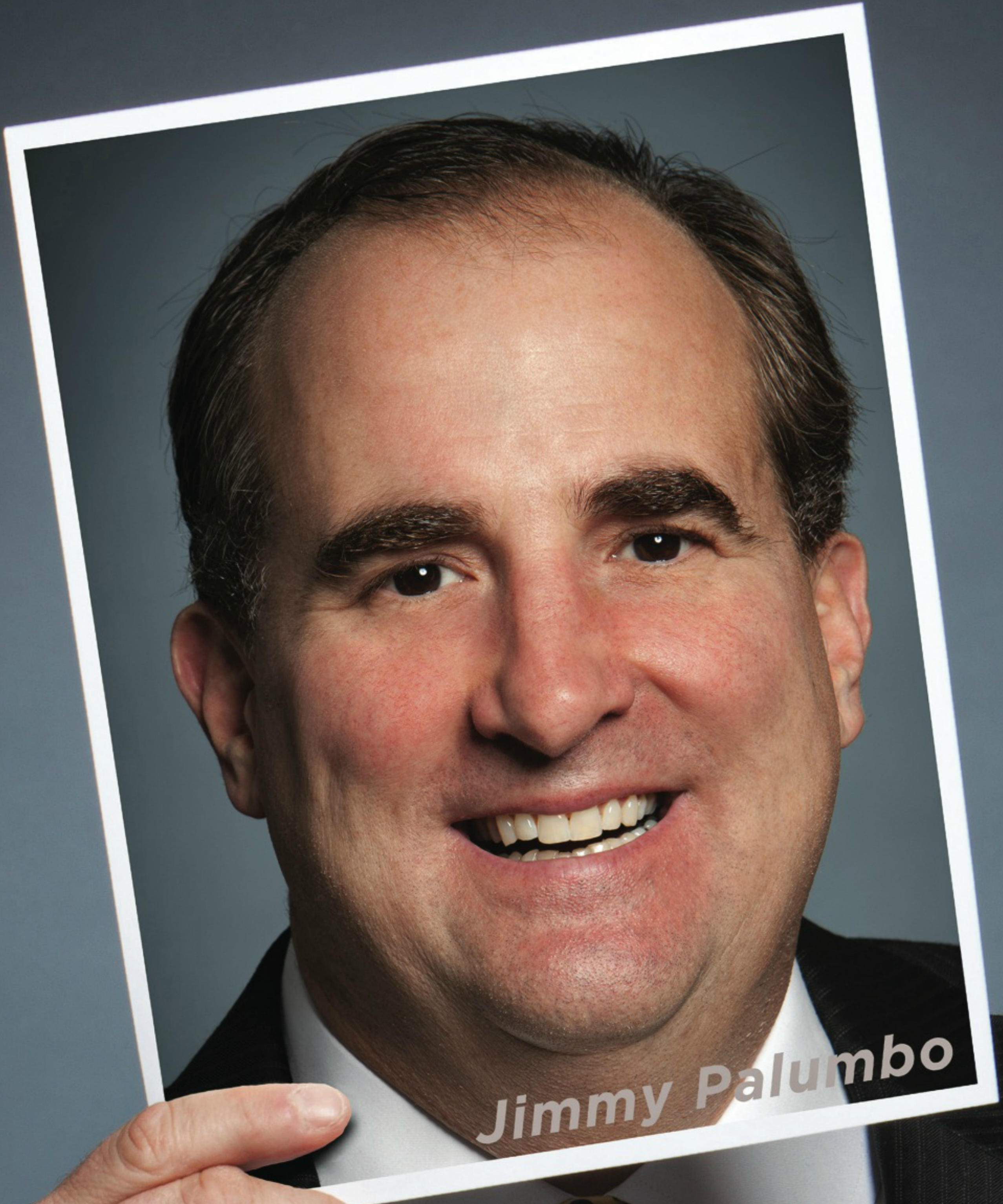
Here's the first thing you should know about Jimmy Palumbo: he lives and breathes New Jersey. Everything about him—the Rutgers diploma, the bring-it-on attitude, the role in the cult film *Beer League*—screams New Jersey. Spend time with Jimmy LC'87, and you can't help thinking he is more New Jersey than Frank Sinatra, or even Bruce Springsteen. There's no getting around this, no escaping it, and Jimmy, without a shred of a doubt, doesn't want to escape it. Even in the 1990s, when he was in his 30s and living in Los Angeles and appearing on *ER* and *Friends*, Jimmy would fly back to New Jersey for the summer and rent a house at the beach with his buddies. The Hamptons? Fire Island? Not for Jimmy. He got a house in Manasquan. The Jersey Shore.

Ever since discovering acting by accident, alumnus Jimmy Palumbo has played countless roles—on TV, in the movies, on the radio, in commercials—that add up to a lifetime of work. Yet, with his Jersey guy mien, he won't likely be playing leading man anytime soon. But that's OK with Jimmy, as long as he's working.

By Allan Hoffman Photography by Bill Bernstein

You're an actor in L.A., and you come back for a shore house? That's New Jersey. That's who Jimmy is, it's who he will always be, and there is something eternal, even devout, about Jimmy and Jerseyness.

Next you should know this about Jimmy: he is everywhere. You know the episode of *Friends*, when Rachel's in labor and there's a guy in the hospital room whose wife is berating



Jimmy Palumbo

him (“Don’t you look at her, you sick bastard!”) for glancing at this other woman? That’s Jimmy.

You know the Papa John’s commercial with a referee judging Peyton Manning’s pizza-making skills? That’s Jimmy.

And you know the Iams dog food commercial, where a bounding dog declares, “I’m a lean, mean flying machine.” That’s Jimmy, too. No, not the dog. Jimmy is the voice of the dog. A schnauzer.

The doorman, the cop, the firefighter—Jimmy’s done it all. Each day, when Jimmy gets the breakdowns—a list of roles up for audition—he scans the

would-be actors at his high school, he is not paying \$23 for a round-trip NJ Transit ticket into the city for an audition to play a doorman or be the voice of a dog or another Guy #1. No, he is far from New Jersey. Jimmy is in France. In fact, he is not just in France: he is at the Normandy estate of the film director Luc Besson (*The Fifth Element*, *La Femme Nikita*), who is considered, as the London newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* put it, “the most powerful man in French cinema.” If there is a throbbing hub of filmmaking in France, this is it.

He got there like this, in what he calls a “pure audition.” It wasn’t because he knew the casting director—though

walking down 23rd Street, having no real idea if he got the part in *Malavita*—that’s just the way it is with auditions—he gets a call from his agent and learns he did, in fact, get the movie role. One day of work, it sounds like. Maybe more. But then he gets another call, and then another, and soon both his agent and his manager get on the phone, which pretty much never happens. It turns out it’s not a day here or there, but six weeks in France. In a Luc Besson film with Robert De Niro.

This is big—really big. Jimmy ducks out of the rain into the Trailer Park Lounge on West 23rd. Orders a beer and fries. Tells the bartender he just booked a

“BECAUSE YOU DO THINGS ON STAGE THAT I CAN’T TEACH PEOPLE TO DO,” SHE TOLD HIM. “YOU JUST KNOW.”

characters, looking for ones right for him. Sometimes these roles have names, and sometimes they don’t. It may say DETECTIVE. Or CLEAN-CUT MALE. Or KILLER’S FATHER. Or YOUNG MALE WITH DREADLOCKS. Or GUY #1. And when Jimmy thinks he’s got a shot, he emails his agent, and at the audition he will go for it, he will bring it, no matter what the role.

Because that’s who Jimmy is: Guy #1.

Which is why this next scene—entirely true, though with elements of a fairy tale, for a guy from New Jersey—may not make sense. Go back about a year, and Jimmy is not scanning the breakdowns at the kitchen table, he is not heading down the turnpike to talk to

Jimmy’s pretty much been in front of every big-time casting director in the business. It wasn’t because someone got it for him. It was the breakdowns. His agent submitted him, for a role in a film then called *Malavita*, and Jimmy got the audition. The initial audition—a scene from *Goodfellas*, as it happens—turned into a callback with Besson in the room.

After the audition, Besson asks where Jimmy lives. “I live in Jersey,” Jimmy tells him. “It’s easy. You just go over the bridge, you get on the Garden State Parkway, you go to the end, and then you make a left.”

No laughter. And why would there be? Besson’s from France.

A few days later, Jimmy is in the city for another audition. It’s a miserable, rainy summer day, and as Jimmy is

major movie. The bartender says, “That’s cool,” and walks away. “It was like I just told her I made \$20 on a scratch-off ticket,” Jimmy says.

Yep, that’s New York for you.

And so here he is in France, driving in a tiny Fiat with Domenick Lombardozzi (Detective Thomas “Herc” Hauk from *The Wire*) through the middle of nowhere, north of Paris, on roads lined with hedgerows (“the troops came from Normandy on this road”). The film will eventually be called *The Family*, with Jimmy and Domenick playing FBI agents protecting a Mafia family under government protection. They’re traveling through a remote area (“like if you go out on Route 80 and make a right and go north, and there are deer”), and soon enough they’re in a courtyard at Besson’s

sprawling estate, some of it dating to the 13th century and now outfitted with bungalows, a recording studio, and a 100-seat theater. He'll be staying here, along with the rest of the cast.

Besson greets him—big hellos, hugging and kissing.

The next thing you know, there's Robert De Niro, who plays the mafioso.

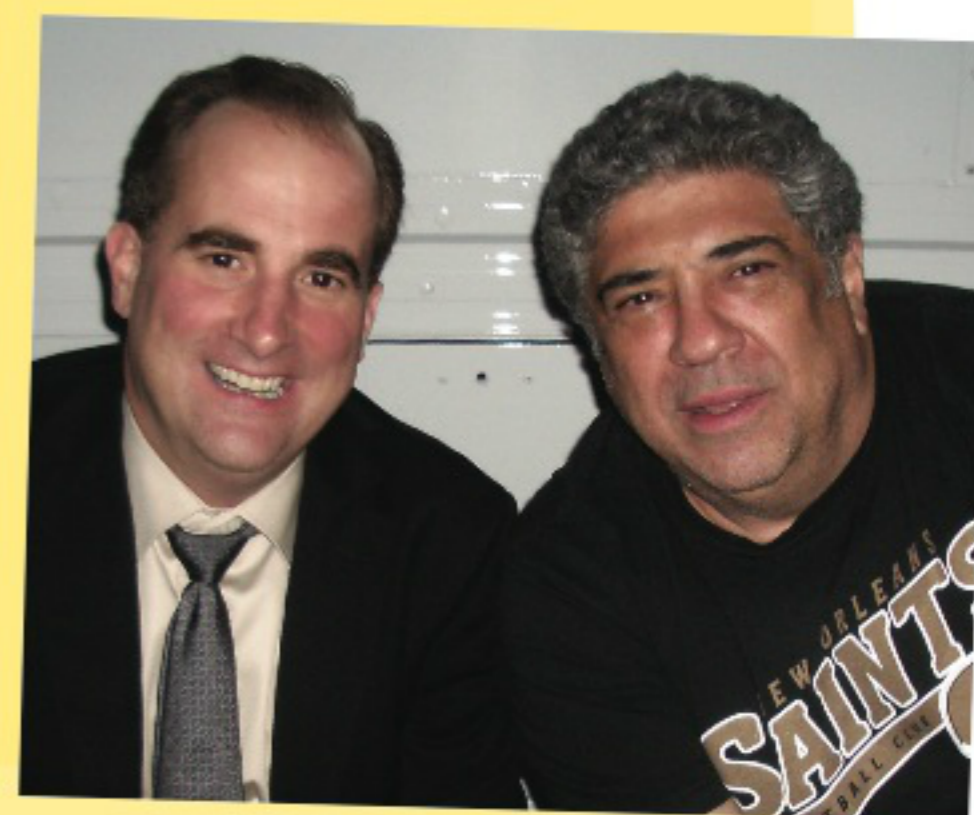
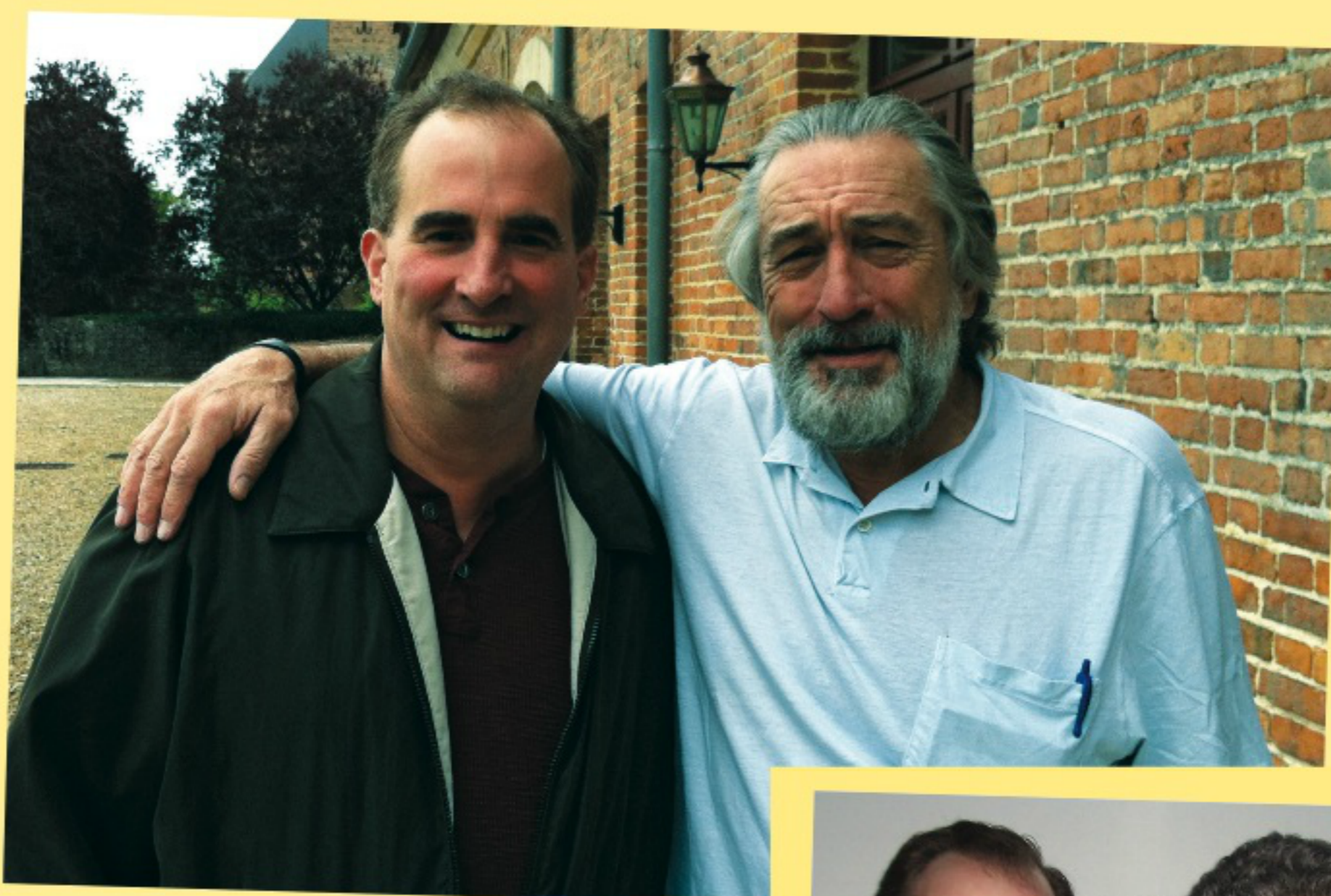
And then there's Tommy Lee Jones. And Michelle Pfeiffer. Diana Agron (from *Glee*). They're all arriving.

That's what it was like, those weeks in France. Jimmy could play things down, and just say it was no big deal, but it was. A local chef cooked for them each night. Wonderful French food and wine, served in an elegant and rustic room, the estate's original barn, with Besson, Pfeiffer, and the rest of the cast and crew. "I had dinner pretty much every night with Tommy Lee Jones," says Jimmy. "I had a man-crush on him."

Which is pretty good, for a guy who never planned to become an actor—he was a journalism major at Rutgers—and who got into acting almost by chance.

You might say Jimmy was discovered. Before *The Family*, before *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Entourage*, and *Boardwalk Empire*, and lots of other shows, before his roles in the films *Margin Call* and *Kissing Jessica Stein*, there was *Pancakes from Hell*.

He'd graduated from Rutgers in 1987, moved back in with his parents (in Colonia, New Jersey), and was commuting to a job selling computers in Princeton. One day a very pregnant lady walked into the store, and after he gave her his shtick—that's what he had, after all, not really knowing much about computers—she asked him if he ever did any comedy. The next thing you know, Jimmy's at her house, with a bunch of



During the making of the 2013 Luc Besson movie *The Family*, in which Jimmy Palumbo plays an FBI agent, the actor got to hang out with the film's stars, Robert De Niro and Michelle Pfeiffer, as well as other actors, including Vincent Pastore. Palumbo stayed at Besson's Normandy estate for much of the filming of the movie.

strangers, and they're preparing a sketch comedy show with the unlikely name *Pancakes from Hell*.

"Horrible," Jimmy says of it now. "My family went. They smiled through it. I didn't know what I was doing."

But whatever it was, people responded—they laughed—and Jimmy realized this might be something for him. One day he saw a newspaper ad for a casting call. Why not give it a try? He auditioned for *Play It Again, Sam* at Playhouse 22 in East Brunswick and landed a role. "Are you going to show up?" the director

asked him. "Everybody in the cast has acted. You've done nothing."

After opening night, Jimmy had a question for her. Everyone else in the cast got notes, with guidance on their performances, but not Jimmy. Why not? "Because you do things on stage that I can't teach people to do," she told him. "You just know."

Which is the sense you get from Jimmy: he just knows. You sense this in a laugh-out-loud scene with Tina Fey from *30 Rock*, you see it in that Papa John's commercial, and know it when



Jimmy Palumbo spends many of his days commuting into New York City from his New Jersey home to audition for character roles for television, film, and radio. He auditions for voice-over roles, too. In one Iams dog food commercial, Palumbo is the voice of the dog saying, "I'm a lean, mean flying machine."

he's in New York and chatting with the guy behind the counter at Dunkin' Donuts or dispensing advice to an actress struggling to figure out whether she should leave her two preschool kids for several months to take a stage role in a Chicago play. Jimmy? He just knows.

After *Play It Again, Sam*, Jimmy got other roles, and he acted in a movie, *Shoebus Blues*, made by a friend of his. He also got a new job, with Microsoft. Solid job, great company. But Jimmy left the job, eventually, to pursue his acting career. Soon he was auditioning for roles in New York, hanging out with the comedian Artie Lange (who would make it big on *Mad TV*) and appearing at comedy clubs.

Eventually, a comedy group was formed, *Live on Tape*. They started to get noticed. As a young actor, you're looking for a break—something to put you on the map—and this was it for Jimmy: *Live on Tape* got signed by NBC for a pilot.

A glamorous life, this being an actor, right? Dinner with Tommy Lee Jones, red-carpet movie premieres, auditions in front of all the big casting agents in New York and L.A.

Well, yes and no. *Live on Tape*? The show never made it anywhere. Yes, the cast members were represented by the William Morris Agency, and, yes, the show was signed to NBC and they shot a pilot at Rockefeller Center—30 Rock—but the show never got picked up. (Despite that, Jimmy did get a pretty sweet payday from it.) You go to his page at IMDb, that online hub for movie and TV arcana, and there's a lot to digest. Scores of roles. It's sort of an inside joke with actor friends: "When you go to my IMDb, you've got to scroll."

But even if your IMDb scrolls, the acting life isn't easy. One year's great, the next is so-so—or worse than so-so. And

for all of his credits, Jimmy has never been a regular. This wears on him. "I'm not the guy from," he says.

So here he is. It's a fall day in New York, and Jimmy's taken the train from his house in the Jersey suburbs, where he lives with his wife and young daughter, to a callback audition for a TV commercial. *The Family* has been released, but it didn't exactly set fire at the box office. The Papa John's commercial is airing. That's good, because when it airs, Jimmy earns residuals.

But today's audition is big. It's important. And Jimmy is ready.

He is going to talk to a cow.

The audition is at Telsey & Company,

called into auditions for TV shows, commercials, films. Auditions are under way for *Brigadoon* on Broadway. You can hear the singing.

Jimmy steps into the audition, and moments later—seconds?—he's back. If you didn't know anything about this, you might think something was amiss, like they called the wrong guy. But that's just how this works.

Jimmy steps out of the building into a brisk fall day, the caverns of Midtown. It's a part of the city with sound rooms, casting agencies, recording studios, and all the rest of the machinery needed to bring us everything from NBC's live version of *The Sound of Music* (cast right

through his career.

Take the movie *Artie Lange's Beer League*. Set in New Jersey, and starring Lange and Ralph Macchio, the film is a raunchy tale of a softball league, with Jimmy playing a guy aiming to bat .700 for the year. It is decidedly, undeniably New Jersey, and let's just say there's no way we'd print the movie's funniest moments in this magazine.

Even in France, New Jersey is his material. When Michelle Pfeiffer tells Jimmy she has a child who goes to school in New Jersey, he says to her, "If your kid goes to Rutgers, our relationship is taking on a whole new meaning." A little further down the road, she tells

"I MAY KID AROUND A LOT, BUT WHEN I GET INTO THAT ROOM, YOU GOTTA KNOCK ME OUT. I'M NOT GETTING OUT OF THE RING, BRO."

just about the biggest casting agency in New York City. At the elevator, others are waiting to go upstairs. Jimmy spots someone he knows and asks, "You here for Lactaid?"

Yes, he is. The competition. Like Jimmy, he looks familiar. You've seen him. You can't quite place him, but you've seen him, and you almost feel like you know him. Another Guy #1.

"You're gonna talk to a cow today," Jimmy jokes.

"I'll talk to anything, Jimmy," he says.

Except, as the "side" indicates—that's a one-page sheet with the blocking for the commercial—no talking is required for this 15-second spot. He is simply going to glance over at a woman in a supermarket aisle who'll be talking to a cow on a milk container. Or something like that.

Upstairs, actors wait around to be

here, at Telsey) to the movie *Margin Call* (also cast at Telsey, with Jimmy playing a security guard). You walk along these streets, and sometimes it seems like half the people you see are actors.

Jimmy's done this for years, and when he auditions—when he goes up against these guys, who are everywhere—he will bring it. A self-proclaimed "crazy, stupid, obnoxious die-hard Rutgers fan," he favors a basketball analogy: "Did I get a good look at the basket?" And today? With the lady talking to the cow? "So on this one," says Jimmy, "I got a good look at the basket."

Another thing you should know about Jimmy, if you haven't realized it already: he will make you laugh, and those laughs often come back to New Jersey. It's like the grand theme running

him, and Jimmy says, "Ah"—a big pause here—"your kid goes to Trenton State."

Jimmy knows the truth: Let's just say her kid goes to a university Rutgers beat, 6-4, in an 1869 football game.

For all the joking, Jimmy takes his career seriously. He auditions for pretty much everything: commercials, radio spots, voiceovers, even *Rocky* (the musical, that is). He's got spreadsheets tracking his work and what it means for his bottom line. Any day of the week, he can go to the mailbox and get a check with residuals from *Law and Order*, *Rescue Me*, or any number of gigs, all of these calculated by entertainment-industry algorithms you'd need a Ph.D. to understand—though Jimmy pretty much has it down. "I got a check for zero once," he jokes, though

(Continued on page 104)

Best Supporting Actor (Continued from page 53)

it's the truth. A check might be for \$1.50. For \$1,200. He never knows until he opens the envelope. "I still get checks for a 1996 gig on *Spin City*," he says.

And so today, after the Lactaid audition, Jimmy decides to stop by his agent's office to see if there's a check waiting for him, because that's where they're processed. He chats with the office assistants and the bigwigs ("How was Peyton?" one wants to know), and he commiserates with another actor waiting for an appointment. Wherever Jimmy goes, it seems, there're actors, like him, out on auditions. You may not know their names, but you've seen them. Guy #1s.

Out on the street, Jimmy opens the check: \$306. It's what's called a "lift." Jimmy had seven lines in a radio spot for Ford, and one of those lines was grabbed for another radio spot; in the complicated ways of show business, this is the session fee for that lifted line. When the commercial airs, there will be residuals, paid separately from the session fee, and at rates varying depending on the radio market. Jimmy knows all about this sort of thing. It's like when you're in a movie. You're paid for the movie, but the DVD release? You get paid for that. The Blu-ray? That, too. "Every time they sell

it, the actor's fee is part of that," Jimmy says.

But what's really on his mind now is this: Lactaid. He got a good look at the basket, but you never know, and the uncertainty can get to you. "There's days when I just say I want to dig ditches," he admits. "I want to wake up in the morning, go outside, and dig a ditch. And then come back inside"—and here this turns into what's almost a comedy routine—"and when someone says, 'What'd you do today?' you say, 'I dug that ditch.' 'What'd you get for it?' '\$10.' 'What you doin' tomorrow?' 'I'm digging a ditch over there.' "

Lactaid? He didn't get the gig.

But Jimmy isn't heading out to dig ditches. He's a fighter, and there will be other auditions. "I may kid around a lot," he says, "but when I get into that room, you gotta knock me out. I'm not getting out of the ring, bro." You get knocked around, sure. You go up against heavy hitters. "But it's a matter of hanging in that ring. You take punches. You take vicious hits." But you're in there, you're making it, you're in a movie with DeNiro and you're sitting a few feet away from Diane Keaton and Morgan Freeman (for a role in the forthcoming movie *Life Itself*). And your IMDb? It scrolls, and that's something for this Guy #1. •

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The Return of Fast Eddie (Continued from page 63)

really," Jordan says. "You know, you experience failure to get better."

It's a good lesson to keep in mind these days while Jordan tries to return the men's basketball program to those heady days of yore. The Knights opened their American Athletic Conference schedule with a solid win over Temple on New Year's Day, then hung with Louisville, the defending national champion, before losing 83-76 in front of a near-sellout at the RAC. But at Cincinnati a week later, Rutgers fell apart in the second half, going without a field goal for nearly the last 12 minutes of the game, a 20-point loss. "Patience is a key," Jordan says. "One of the biggest and most often-used phrases I'll have on my team is: 'Compete with composure.' You play with all your passion, play with all the emotion that's involved, but do it with poise and class."

This year's team motto is "Right Now." The message is clear. Rutgers might have gone through a dark period last spring, but Jordan won't use that as an excuse. He wants to win. He expects to win. Today, not tomorrow. But remember what he said on the day before his first official practice. *You experience failure to get better.* He was talking about Michigan, the Final Four, 1976. But he could have been talking about here and now. •