

# Jay Duplass Doesn't Want to Be a Coen Brother Anymore

The director-actor-writer-producer talks about uncoupling with his brother and creative partner, his role in Season 2 of the HBO drama "Industry," and his most ambitious project yet: "a comedy relationship movie, thriller-action movie, mystery, coming-of-age story."

By [Naomi Fry](#) July 17, 2022

*Photographs by Ryan Pfluger for The New Yorker*

Jay Duplass is a busy man. When I visited him recently at the comfortable but unostentatious home in the East Los Angeles neighborhood of Eagle Rock where he lives with his wife, Jen Tracy-Duplass, a social worker, and their two children, it was during a rare lull between projects. Duplass, who was wearing Vans and a shawl-collared cardigan ("my wife calls it my Mister Rogers sweater"), is forty-nine. He is best known for the work he has done in [collaboration with his younger brother](#), Mark—writing and directing movies such as "The Puffy Chair," "Cyrus," and "Jeff, Who Lives at Home," as well as the HBO series "Togetherness." In the

past few years, he has also been increasingly recognized for his late-blooming acting career, which began in earnest in 2014, when the showrunner Joey Soloway handpicked him to play the tortured fuckboy Josh Pfefferman on the Amazon series "[Transparent](#)."

A few years ago, the brothers Duplass decided to branch out and work on separate projects. They still run a production company together, continuing to release, at a quick clip, documentary projects—"Wild Wild Country," "Sasquatch," "The Lady and the Dale"—as well as scripted fare, from the HBO series "Somebody Somewhere" to small-budget movies like "7 Days," which recently won an Independent Spirit Award. In their production work, the Duplass brothers operate a commercially viable endeavor that still seeks to retain the indie impetus which has guided their work from the start, when they were living in Austin during the nineteen-nineties. (They are both U.T. grads.) " 'Togetherness' was a standard studio-TV-budget show. There was nothing forcibly discount about it," Duplass said. "But we do believe in a model of making things as cheaply as possible." To that end, the brothers often ask for a lower-than-usual budget from studios and streaming platforms. "Our movies are made so efficiently that we often do return back end not just to us—but we also have a system where, normally, every single person who works on a film has a piece of back end," he said.

In the past couple of years, Duplass has focussed on acting, with roles verging from the comedic (a self-involved,

guru-ish theatre director on HBO Max's "Search Party") to the sympathetic (a cancelled, self-doubting professor on Netflix's "The Chair"). On August 1st, he will play his most dramatic role yet: an American-in-London hedge-fund manager with murky intentions, on the second season of the HBO show "Industry." Between shooting "The Chair" in Pittsburgh and "Industry" in Wales, he also managed to direct several episodes for the first season of "Somebody Somewhere" in Illinois. (He is currently shooting the show's second season.) But, more than anything, Duplass is excited to write and direct his own material. "Over the last several years, with uncoupling from my brother, with becoming an actor . . . I guess I was, like, coming to terms with, 'Oh, I do really want to direct, I really want to tell original stories,' " he told me. "Now I'm like, 'O.K., what would I actually like to do as me, as an older man, as an original filmmaker?' " Our conversation, which took place over the course of several hours, has been edited and condensed.

**I mentioned to a friend that I was interviewing you, and she was, like, "What are you going to talk about? Every second he has a project."**

I'm kind of, like, director first, actor second, writer third, producer distant fourth. That's the least of what I do. Even from the beginning, with me and Mark, Mark was always going on to locations and making deals for a hundred dollars to shoot in their parking lot, talking to agents and talking to press and stuff like that . . . I was always more

internal. He's the more type-A, outward-facing personality. I'm the more nerdy perfectionist, directorially detail-oriented person. I'm the person who's, like, talking to the actors and the crew and needling the script endlessly the night before we're going to shoot. I just sent a movie script to somebody that I wrote with a friend of mine. I really want to come back to direct movies. The last one I directed was "Jeff, Who Lives at Home," in 2011. And I directed it in 2010, so it's been twelve years since I directed a movie. And, because of the pandemic and this accidental acting career I fell into, I haven't directed and written an original piece of art that I've come up with since "Togetherness."

So many things have happened since "Togetherness." I became an actor, my brother and I consciously uncoupled as a writer-and-director team. And that has taken a while, not only to process that and move through it but also for me to figure out, well, who am I as a writer-director without my brother? My whole dream from the very beginning was, I just wanna be the Coen brothers. Ever since I saw "Raising Arizona"—it was the first awareness that I had as a writer-director. I was fourteen, maybe. Then I saw pictures of them, and they weirdly looked like me and Mark. One of them is, like, pointy and nosy and black curly hair, and the other one has a blond fro. When I first saw a picture of them, it was like white lightning shooting through my body. Like, Oh, my God!

**Yeah, it's like seeing a picture of Steely Dan or something in, like, 1978, for the first time.**

It's funny that you say that, because Steely Dan is the band that influenced us the most. A similar pairing of two guys whose partnership is greater than the sum of its parts. Which probably doesn't bode well for my solo directing career. [*Laughs.*]

I wanted to be [the Coen brothers]. I just loved the work that they did. I thought they were so funny and so poignant, and they made the most anticipated movies of the year. They were everything to me, and the fact that they were two brothers who looked like us, who seemed inseparable, and also Mark and I grew up in the suburbs of New Orleans. We had no connection to the industry, and so it always just felt—we felt like immigrants to the landscape of movies. No point of entry whatsoever. It was gonna take everything we had. We came from immigrants in New Orleans, not our parents but our grandparents; they lived in row houses next to each other. We're, like, French and Italian and Jewish and German.

**So you have some Jewish roots. Interesting.**

I do.

**Because you play Jews, on "Transparent" most famously.**

And everybody thinks I'm Jewish. I did my 23andMe, and it was, like, minimum fifteen-per-cent Ashkenazi Jewish.

**I like those odds.**

We know for a fact that our great-grandmother, Irene Stein, whose nickname was “the prune”—she lived to ninety-six and was smoking in the hospital at the very end—we know for a fact that she was a hundred-per-cent Jewish. But there’s more on my dad’s other side, too. It’s interesting to me, because now I’m, like, “Would it be O.K. for me to play Josh Pfefferman now, in today’s climate?”

**I think, speaking as a Jew, I don’t really mind if the show is good.**

Dude, I feel that way, too. If you do a good job . . . I mean, look. It’s different, too, because Joey Soloway anointed me, in a way, so it’s really like their—it has more to do with their choice, I guess. People ask me to play Jews all the time, all the fucking time. And I tell people all the fucking time, “Hey, I’m not culturally Jewish.” Except for the fact that I was raised Catholic, which is incredibly similar to Judaism. [Laughs.]

**Catholics are the Jews of Christianity.**

Totally. It’s rooted in guilt and anxiety and food.

**O.K., circling back, so you wrote a screenplay—**

With a friend. A Jewish friend. [Laughs.] The idea of it was, I think over the last several years, with uncoupling from my brother, with becoming an actor, with coming to terms with the fact that we’re not gonna be the Coen brothers, I guess I was, like, coming to terms with, Oh, I do really want to

direct, I really want to tell original stories. We started in this very small way, where Mark and I were making fun of how desperate and pathetic we are onscreen, and now I'm, like, "O.K., what would I actually like to do as me, as an older man, as an original filmmaker—what would I like to do?" And it took a long fucking time to figure some of that out. And it's taken a few screenplays—

## **How many?**

Maybe seven.

## **Seven? How quickly do you write?**

Well, it's been seven years, and they're still not done. Also, I'm scared that none of them will get made. Mark said this one time: if we ever split up—I mean, we still run a company together and support each other—but if we ever split up, he said, of himself, "I would probably make a shit ton of mediocre things that'll probably make pretty good money." And he said, "And you would make, like, one movie every four years, and it'll probably be the best movie that's made that year." And I amended it, and I was, like, "That's very nice, but every four years I'd make the best movie, and then the next four years I'd make a total flop—or I'd, like, scrap it completely, because I'm so perfectionistic." In terms of my process, I just try to share my stuff with people along the way as much as possible, even before I'm finished: I have an idea for a movie, do you have twenty minutes and I can tell you the story orally? I see the light in your eyes light up, I

see you get bored, I can see whether this is working for you. . . .

### **Is that a vulnerable place for you?**

No, it's exciting. It's vulnerable, but I don't mind being vulnerable. I have a baseline of confidence.

### **Was it that way from the beginning?**

No. Because I failed miserably in my twenties, and I had the opposite. I had an "I don't know if I'll ever pull this off." I was definitely having that experience of, O.K., now my friends are done with grad school, now my friends are getting great jobs, now my friends are getting married, now they're having kids and buying houses, and I'm still making fucking sixteen thousand dollars a year.

### **Did you feel like a loser?**

Yeah, totally. And every year that went by I just got more and more tense. It was nothing that you could start a family with, remotely. It was mostly eating peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and bringing a flask to a bar and buying a 7-Up for a dollar and spiking it in the bathroom. The hardest part was getting older and being afraid I would never amount to anything.

I personally feel like I'm not close to what I want to accomplish. I want to win the Oscar. [*Laughs.*] You know what I mean? Not because I want to win a trophy—trophies



are cool—but I want to make a movie that really reaches people and gets under the skin of culture.

**It's interesting. You seem to be a combination of very well adjusted with a sense of nagging dissatisfaction.**

Deeply, desperately, anxiously attached to creating very significant art for people. It really comes down to the fact that some of the peak emotional experiences I've had in my life have been in movie theatres. When I saw "Raising Arizona," it changed my life. It lifted me up, it helped me lift up out of being a fourteen-year-old, and I want to create that experience for other people, and I expect that of myself. I just gave my screenplay to my first actor. This is a personal script. I can't talk about it yet. Oh, God, I wish I could. It's basically the new me. It's taken me a long time to get to this place. Like, "Who am I as myself? Not with Mark. And what is it that I uniquely have to offer, and what am I interested in?" There's allegory to it—it's not a small domestic dramedy, which is what I've done almost exclusively.

*"I didn't dream in a million years that I could make a living making a film," Duplass says. "I thought I was going to be a psychology professor-researcher and a psychologist on the side."*

**So you play a sixteenth-century knight—**

[Laughs.] I'm not acting in it as far as I know. It's a swing for the fences. I'm scared. I'm not going to say this movie is like "Tootsie," because I wouldn't dare, and I'm sure people

have a lot of problems with "Tootsie." I would say the movie is like a comedy relationship movie, thriller-action movie, mystery, coming-of-age story.

**Wow.**

I'm trying to return to the days when movies could be everything. Of which I would say—on the big scale, I'd say "Tootsie" and "Romancing the Stone" had all those things, "Raising Arizona" had all those things: a baby kidnapping movie with, like, hellfire and Biblical applications. And a sweet relationship film, how much you root for them to make it. But also hard laughs every minute.

**It's like "Jackie Brown."**

Yes, like "Jackie Brown." Amen. A fucking masterpiece. I also like "Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood." Tarantino is a genius. He's amazing. "Once Upon a Time" might be the last great movie-theatre experience I've had. That, and "Parasite." Those two movies stick out in my mind—I'm in a movie theatre in fucking heaven. I thought it was so powerful and so fun. It's one of the few modern-day movies that can do it all. It's a thriller, there's romance, knee-slapping comedy in it, there's action. It's got everything. Yes, it's about white males, but they're fucked up and toxic.

**You're a white, hetero guy in your forties who makes stuff and acts in stuff. Could there be another perspective for you besides the perspective of a white, hetero male?**

If you try too hard and if you go too far, you're co-opting other people's stories. The one thing I can say about the script that I just handed over is that it is about a forty-nine-year-old white, straight, cisgender man, and I'm both making fun of him and also asking for empathy. The way I sort of think about it is, We have a company and we are pretty good at pipelining women and *BIPOC* people toward getting into the industry—by signing their waivers into the Directors Guild of America, for instance. I've come to realize that that is how I can contribute to empowering other people in the best way possible. In the last few years, I feel like I need to stay in my lane for what I'm deputized to do, and that is write about my experience. And it feels risky. It feels weirdly risky and unwanted. Which is how women and *BIPOC* people have felt for the history of humanity!

I've definitely felt at times, Ooh, this is a weird time to, like, suddenly get famous as an actor. The other thing that I do have nerves around is the fact that my whole directing career kind of shut down seven years ago, and now I'm, like, completely reinventing it, and the timing is not ideal to be coming out as a straight, white, cisgender, middle-aged man. . . .

### **Why did the directing career shut down? Because of the acting?**

It was more that Mark and I were just sort of, like, individuating from each other, turning into middle-aged men with our own tastes and hopes and dreams, our own

levels of priorities that diverged—and we're not the kids that need to stick together to get something made anymore. It's not like an all-hands-on-deck-necessary experience like our grandfather did with his two brothers to start a dry cleaner's so they could have food. But also, yeah, becoming an actor, being an inward, shy person. I always hated the theatre kids in high school, because they'd bust out of the schoolyard bursting into song, and I would be, like, "I'll never be that." But, as we grow older, we learn that some of our best actors are the most inward people—I just got a lucky opportunity that Soloway saw that in me and wanted to share it. So that was great. I think uncoupling from Mark as a director was pretty traumatic.

**You and Mark wrote a [book](#) together in 2018.**

The book was part of separating. Like, "This is what we did together!" Because we could feel that it was ending. There was no fighting, just getting our feelings hurt and feeling sad and not wanting to be left behind. Not wanting to be . . .

**Like, "Is he more successful than I am?"**

Yeah. Or I make a movie and it sucks and it's, like, everybody is gonna say, "Oh, Mark was the special sauce." Those fears are in both of us. But just for me, personally, Mark is the busiest person in the world. He's busier.

"Togetherness" was a response to that—that all I was doing in my life was writing and directing. But he was producing, writing, directing, acting. He's in the world,

meeting people; he'd go act on a movie and become the producer of the movie. There were two things that happened during that time. I wanted to make a movie, and he didn't have literal space in the calendar to make a movie that year. Or even maybe the next year. He was on "The League," he was acting in many movies, he was producing. So he was full up. And I was, like, "Well, this means I just have to wait until you have a window where you can make a movie?" Directing alone was never a thing. We're just two kids who came out of a cave and made shit together. And so I just asked him, "Would it be crazy if I directed this movie on my own?" When I said that, he had a meltdown, because he perceived it as, I'm trying to break up with him. And I was, like, "I'm not trying to break up with you, I just can't . . ." I was in a position where I was, like, "In order for me to do what I love to do, I have to wait until you're ready to do it. You know my list of priorities: directing is up there, then acting, then writing, and producing is down here." For Mark, it's writing, producing, acting—and directing is down there. At that point, we were still writing everything together. So we let that movie go. I didn't even question it. I was just sad for two months.

**That sounds like a younger brother thing, but you're the older brother.**

Mark is definitely more alpha. He functions more like the older sibling. That kind of happened when I was in college and I kind of fell apart and he took over. We switched.

## What happened?

New Orleans is a very small place, very immigrant-y, very neighborhood-y. I was the only person of my whole group to go away to college, at U.T. Austin. Everyone, including my girlfriend, went to L.S.U. and just continued their life, and I didn't land well—mainly because I was, like, baked in an environment that was insanely specific, small town. Not that Austin is a rough place, but U.T. is fifty-two thousand people, and the kids come from schools of a thousand graduating in a class. So they don't need any friends. All of these people had all of these friends, and it didn't happen for me for, like, a year and a half. So I kind of went to school and fell apart.

So that's when my brother kind of became my big brother. He started taking care of me, because I was in a full emotional breakdown for the whole year. And my parents didn't know—my father was the first person in his family to ever go to college, and he went to Tulane. Nobody knew anything. I went to U.T. because it was the best school I got into with a full ride.

I did a psychology degree, and I was in this program for basically Ivy League kids who didn't want to go into debt. There were small classes taught by graduate-level professors. In the course of the year, I figured out I had a lot more in common with these people in Austin than my friends in New Orleans. And in Austin I weirdly luckily landed in the birthplace of American D.I.Y. filmmaking.

[Richard] Linklater is there, and Robert Rodriguez is there, and they've just made these, like, twenty-thousand-dollar movies. Nineteen ninety-one was my first year. "Slacker" was in the midnight theatre at the Dobie, and you'd be walking around and people would be, like, "That's Rick Linklater." And he's wearing jeans and a T-shirt—he looked and dressed like me. Even though I couldn't have mustered twenty thousand dollars at that time, that was a fathomable amount of money for me, and I'd always loved movies. So much. Growing up in New Orleans, I never dreamed that that could be a career. The only creative career you can think about growing up in New Orleans is being a fifty-five-year-old Black rhythm-and-blues musician—which my brother and I tried to do. [*Laughs.*]

### **As a teen-ager, were you pretentious?**

No, I was very unconfident and very shy. I was confident in myself as a person, but I didn't dream in a million years that I could make a living making a film. Never in a million years. I thought I was going to be a psychology professor-researcher and a psychologist on the side. My mentor in psychology—she was a social psychologist, and I was helping her do her research, and she was awesome, and I had a big crush on her. She was a graduate student, that whole thing. I was graduating, we were walking up the quad, and she was, like, "Hey, I wanted to tell you something."

**"I love you." [*Laughs.*]**

[Laughs.] "Please say, 'I love you!' " That did *not* happen. No, she said, "You know, you have perfect grades, you're a perfect student, but, even if you go to Harvard and you nail it there, you're probably just going to end up where they take you. You are going to end up in rural Nebraska, and you're going to feel lucky to be there." She said, "I know that you love movies the way that you'll never love this." The white lightning came through my body, and I literally hugged her and said, "Thank you," and I went to the bursar's office, and I said to them, "Would you guys renew my scholarship if I wanted to go to school for one more year?" They fucking said yes. I needed that nudge. If it's not for Camille Buckner, I would have been a psychology professor in rural Nebraska.

And my fifth year is when Mark came to U.T. and we became students together for one year. And we were making movies and doing bands, and it was, like, "O.K., we're going to live here in Austin. We're going to do a thing. Together." Because he was the actor in all of my movies that first year of doing film.

**So that's how it started. But we were talking about the breakup, the uncoupling.**

So I was sad silently, and then I was, like, "I want to make a TV show with Steve Zissis"—my best friend who went to our high school. He had nothing to do and I had nothing to do, and I was, like, "Let's make a Web show." I told Mark, "I'm just going to make a thing." This was 2012 or 2013. I



just want to make a small show about the shit we're going through as young parents, the trappings of domestic bliss. So I wrote the first episode of a show that I was going to shoot at my house. My kids were four and one at the time. Now we have a thirteen-year-old girl and a ten-year-old boy. I gave it to Stephanie Langhoff, the woman who was running our company then, to read, and she was, like, "Dude, that's an HBO show." And I was, like, "But Mark's calendar." She was, like, "Let's send a script to HBO," and they were, like, "We're going to green-light this." But I still wanted to do something small.

### **How does this stand vis-à-vis your current desire to do something big, that would stand as art?**

This was not that at all. This was, like, "I have to make something or I'm gonna die. This is what I uniquely have to offer, the suffering of being parents with young kids." And then my friend Steve being single and completely devastated and staring down the barrel of impossible loneliness and us being jealous of each other. I was, like, "Do you know how much I'd give to see a movie by myself?" And he was, like, "Dude, I'm in a movie theatre by myself and I'm crying because I'm so lonely." So HBO green-lighted "Togetherness," and it took us a while to learn how to become TV makers, and we cast my brother in it—which was interesting, 'cause I was kinda gonna play that role? Even though I'd never acted before. But he was, like, a semi-famous actor, and that was our relationship. I shoot and he acts. And that was weird for a while, but then I

got cast in "Transparent" right on the heels of that.

## **Do you think the acting stuff hastened the breakup?**

I don't know if it hastened it, but it was definitely the first time I did anything creative that wasn't tied to my brother. And it felt really good. It felt really good to be just, like, "I created this character, I did this thing, all these people laughed or cried or whatever." And it definitely emboldened my confidence. Because confidence hasn't really been my strong suit; it was more Mark's strong suit. Mark has the blind confidence, I have the critical eye that can be too critical. So it kind of helped to build my confidence a little.

**Your most recent acting project is the second season of "Industry," which premieres August 1st, on HBO. You play a hedge-fund manager who made a killing during COVID, and who is morally ambiguous at best. Did you watch the first season of the show before they offered you the role?**

No. I didn't know about it. I think it's a hard show to exist at the same time as "Succession." 'Cause it really is, like, a rigorously vérité version of that on some level. I think it offers something completely different from "Succession," but "Succession" is so splashy, I think it's hard to exist in the shadow of that. But it's so good and it's so true and it's so honest.

I was offered the role, and I was, like, "What is this show? I'm going to watch it." And for the first three episodes I

wasn't totally sure, and the fourth episode got me. And then, after the fourth episode, I said yes, even before I watched the rest: I could tell the rest had arrived. Then I talked to the guys ["Industry" creators Mickey Down and Konrad Kay]. I thought the show was really good, but I was curious what their take on the second season was. I felt like it could have more emotionality and fluidity.

**You don't just come to this as an actor. You were probably also looking at it from the perspective of a director and a writer.**

And "Do I want to be in this show? Will I be proud to be in it and talk about it after?" The first thing they said was, "We're very proud of Season 1, but we can do better." And as soon as they said that, I said, "I'm in." Because they weren't drinking the Kool-Aid about it. They had made a very good show—it's very hard to make a very good hour-long. They were pretty green—they come from the finance world rather than the filmmaking world—but they're so nice, and so smart, and so specific, and they also were, like, "We want to do better. We want to step it up." They were, like, "We're hiring this woman from Denmark to direct." I looked at her reel: fucking cool. They were challenging themselves. I also did have conversations about what exactly my relationship with Myha'la's character was going to be. [Myha'la Herrold plays Harper, an ambitious younger banker.] And I had a lot of opinions about it. My story line was, I'm coming to reconnect with my son. That's really why I'm there. And it doesn't go good. And Myha'la becomes a

stand-in child for me. She also comes, for shorthand, from an immigrant-y mentality, like my character. My son is a millionaire, and will always be a millionaire, and I don't have anything in common with him, but I have everything in common with her. It's a power dynamic.

**My criticism of the first season was that it's very hard to marry the kind of brutal outlook of the show, which is almost abstract—**

It feels like brutalist art, for TV.

**Yes, even just the color palate, the transactionality between the characters, and how their specificity doesn't really matter. It shows, even within the banking industry, constant winners and losers. But I found that it was really difficult trying to merge that with gestures toward emotionality.**

Yes. Like, suddenly we're supposed to care about this? I felt the same stuff. With my character, we have someone post-success. What I really want to show is how my personality actually moves the money and the scenarios. I'm not just evolving this character for my taste—I'm reading all the scripts and the ecosystem of the universe of it. But I definitely was interested in, "Let's see under the hood that it's actually the personalities driving the money in these situations." That's what unwinds for my character. He unwinds quite a bit, and the sloppiness of his operations becomes somewhat revealed, but, because he has so much

money and so much power, you can kind of still bulldoze something, like Bezos does.

## **Or Elon Musk.**

Yes. His operations start with a sort of puerile, like, "What if I take over Twitter!" That's exactly what my character ends up doing in the season, and you get to see through it. A little bit.

**As I was watching the episodes they sent me, because it's you playing him, I was thinking, Maybe he's going to be revealed as sensitive? Because usually you play . . .**

I usually play, like, the female role. I'm the emotional foil to whatever it is that's going on. I don't do that in this. It's me in it, and I did push to reveal every once in a while. . . . It is my son that I'm after, and that's a big fucking deal, and I'm a shitty dad and I know it, and I don't have anybody in this world. That's what's clear. So I tried to let in on that stuff.

**In your work, you went from an interest in failure to being interested in frustrated, self-doubting early middle-age, and now a desire to do something—**

Bigger, yeah. Someone told me, "Stop making eighty-eight-minute movies, give people more time to invest in your characters." I come from the eighty-eight-minute format of a comedic relationship movie—that's canon to me. But there is something to saying "Give people time to really invest and care about your characters." I would like to

maintain my very rigorous storytelling inside of a more expansive narrative. ♦