

"Looking" for Daniel Franzese

George De Stefano (February 23, 2015)



A Brooklyn-born actor breaks through the Hollywood closet

Daniel Franzese was frustrated by the movie roles he was offered after he had made a big splash as Damian, the outspoken gay teenager in Tina Fey's 2004 hit comedy [Mean Girls](#) [2]. Casting agents called him for parts that he says were stereotypical and insulting. Moreover, because Franzese, who is gay, had played Damian so convincingly, he found it hard to get other, non-gay roles.



Then came [Looking](#) [3]. It turned out that the creators of the HBO comedy-drama about a group of gay friends in San Francisco were looking for someone just like him.

"We're coming to a time of gay acceptance in media, but we have had exploitation, with characters who weren't really well written," says the thirty-six-year-old, Brooklyn-born Franzese. "The characters didn't have arcs, with things happening in their lives. They were there for comic relief. And a big guy would be a completely sexless clown."

Franzese, at six-foot-three and over two hundred pounds, definitely is a big guy. Big and bearded, he is what in the gay community is known as a "bear." On *Looking*, his character "Eddie" is meant to represent that hirsute subculture, but he is much more than that. Eddie, HIV-positive but thriving, is a big-hearted social worker who protects and counsels homeless gay and transgender youths in the drop-in center he runs. He is also the object of desire of one of the show's three main characters.

"I'm an 'out' gay actor playing a bigger guy love interest on a gay show," says Franzese. "I haven't seen anything like that before, which was one of the things that made me really excited to do it. My character is HIV-positive and living healthy with HIV. And the fact that he also works with gay and trans homeless youth – I think it's pretty innovative."

Looking, now in its second season, focuses on three friends – Patrick, Augustin, and Dom – and their romantic, social, and professional lives. Augustin, whose life is in disarray, falls for Eddie and finds purpose in working with him at the homeless center.

In an interview before the new season began, Franzese revealed that the show's creators, Michael Lannan and Andrew Haigh, developed the part of Eddie with him in mind. When he heard that HBO would produce *Looking*, he contacted the casting director, whom he knew from a previous project. "I said I'd love to be on the show if you ever need a different kind of dude." He says Lannan and Haigh responded well to his ideas about the character, which just happened to coincide with their own conception of Eddie. "I was so happy they wanted to do it with me," he says.

Franzese acknowledges that some have criticized the show for not depicting a more representative cross-section of gay male society. "But it's impossible to represent everyone in the community," he says. "This is a story about three people who live in San Francisco. It's their story. It's not the gay story; it's about them and their extended network."

The show's quality, however, has been uneven, with sharply written episodes alternating with dull ones. The second season thus far has been an improvement over the first, and Franzese has had a lot to do with that. Eddie – funny, strong, and passionate – often is more fun to watch than the three lead characters.

Franzese, a third-generation Italian American of mainly Neapolitan origins, was born in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. When he was eight years old, his family moved to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where he experienced culture shock. "I went from being in an elementary school where everyone was Italian, including the teachers and the principal ... and then going to a place where in my high school I was one of only three Italians in a graduating class of 900 kids."

"The attitudes are different in the South," he says. "I had a teacher call me a 'greasy meatball.' I thought, hmm, there's a little bit of racism here. People were confused by my last name and they made fun of it, and my New York accent."



After studying acting at the Florida School of the Arts, Franzese returned to New York to pursue a career in theater. He appeared in plays, including a touring production of *Tony and Tina's Wedding*, which led to his first film role, in *Bully*, by director Larry Clark. He was twenty-three then; three years later, as "Damian" in *Mean Girls*, he convincingly played a character ten years younger than he.

But if Damian didn't try to hide who he was, the actor who played him wasn't as forthright. Franzese says he kept his sexuality a secret because "there was a lot of pressure from everywhere" – from actors and other industry people, and his family – "to not say anything."

"I lied to a lot of people and did a lot to cover it up," he admits. But the furor over Proposition 8, the 2008 California ballot initiative to ban same-sex marriage, as well as the "It Gets Better" LGBT anti-suicide campaign, changed all that. "When everybody was making the 'It Gets Better' videos, it didn't feel right for me to do it because I was closeted," he says. Franzese began to attend rallies against Proposition 8 and photographed them for the video production company World of Wonder and Paper magazine.

When he decided to come out publicly in 2014, he chose a surprising but apt approach: he wrote a letter addressed to Damian, his *Mean Girls* character, on the tenth anniversary of the film's release.

"I started to receive triple the amount of fan mail I'd gotten over the years because people were discussing the film again," he says. "News articles were popping up and interviewers were asking me to reminisce about it. I was receiving letters from people saying how much the role affected them in a positive way. It really touched me deeply. Because growing up as a chubby gay teen, I wished I had had somebody like that who would have made me feel cooler and more confident and comfortable in my own skin."

"A lot of the letters began with, 'I don't know if you're gay or not, and it doesn't really matter, but you helped me.' I thought, 'it does matter,' and I should let them know. I felt the way I did it, as a letter to Damian, was the most approachable way for anyone to understand how I was feeling and why I hadn't come out and why it was important I did."

In the letter, Daniel tells Damian that part of the reason he didn't come out after *Mean Girls* was that he felt he was hitting a "gay glass ceiling" in Hollywood. Although he wanted to play a range of parts, including macho, heterosexual Italian Americans, he kept being offered "flamboyant, feather-boasting stereotypes that always seemed to be laughed at because they were gay."

"One time I wanted to audition for a supporting character in a low-budget indie movie described as a 'doughy, blue-collar lug of a guy.' I figured I was perfect for it. But they said they were looking for a real 'man's man.' The casting director wouldn't even let me audition."

Daniel tells Damian that back then he felt the character had "ruined his life." But when the actor realized how important Damian was to the gay men who contacted him, he began to feel differently. "I had the perfect opportunity in 2004 to let people know the REAL Daniel Franzese," he wrote. "Now in 2014 – ten years later – looking back, it took YOU to teach me how to be proud of myself again."

Italian Mom (and Dad)



Franzese likes to quote the famous line from the Robert De Niro/Chazz Palmintieri film, *A Bronx Tale*: "There's nothing sadder than wasted talent." "That resonated with me," he says. "It made me realize if I can do something I should do it, and do it the best I can. So anything I have the ability to do, I'm gonna do. I'm not really afraid of failure. I'll give anything a shot if I think I can do it. In the past five years, I've really tried to stretch myself."

His projects have included [Jersey Shoresical: A Frickin' Rock Opera](#) [4], a parody of a certain, now-defunct MTV "reality" show portraying the booze-fueled antics of a group of young Italian Americans. Wearing a muscle suit, Franzese played "Ronnie" in the production, which he co-wrote with his friend Hannah LoPatin. The show was a hit of the 2011 New York Fringe Festival (its ensemble received FringeNYC's Overall Excellence Award) and went on to have an off-Broadway run at the Players' Theater.

Franzese says he thought the anti-defamationist backlash against *Jersey Shore* was "heavy-handed." "I didn't see the show as representative of Italian American culture – but I do know a lot of people on Staten Island who are like that," he laughs. "Besides, anyone who says 'muzzadell' on TV can't be all bad."

Several million YouTube visitors have seen another Franzese project, his ["Shit Italian Moms Say"](#) [5] videos, in which the actor, in drag and five o'clock shadow, portrays "Italian Mom." The videos broadly, but lovingly and yes, hilariously, send up familiar tropes of Italian American ethnicity and family life. Franzese and his friend Lisa Mastroianni have written and produced two "Italian Mom" videos and an outtakes reel. "I would love to make more," Franzese says. "But they cost a lot. I could do some sort of crowdfunding and I think it'd do pretty well because people want to see more. But I'd have to shave my beard which is definitely a problem because everything I'm booking right now requires me to keep it."

"All of our Little Italies across the country are dissolving," Franzese added. He says he made the "Italian Moms" videos to "celebrate Italian American cultural references and laugh about them."

How does Franzese's own Italian mom (and his other family members) feel about his success as an openly gay actor? "My mom and grandmother are very supportive; they've been like rocks for me through all this. I don't know if it's as easy as for my dad. I don't know if my dad's going to be able to watch *Looking*." When Franzese and I spoke in January, his father had not yet seen the show.

Franzese's upcoming projects include the film comedy *Mind Puppets*, in which Franzese plays a gay Italian American man. In the fall, he begins production as a series regular on the new ABC Family show, *Recovery Road*. He also appears in parody music videos that don't require him to shave his beard – ["Please Go Home."](#) [6] a spoof of British pop star Sam Smith's mega-hit "Stay With Me," will entertain anyone who is put off by, or just tired of, the lachrymose ballad.

And this year, Franzese received some recognition he surely couldn't have imagined when he was a lonely, "chubby gay teen" – the national gay magazine [Out](#) [7] listed him as one of 2015's Most Eligible Bachelors.



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