



# THE Awakening

*As a star and mainstay on *The Good Wife*, actor Matt Czuchy '99 is perhaps one of the most recognizable faces in school history. His breakout performance last season on the critically hailed drama staked his claim for being one of the top talents in this new golden age of television.*

WRITTEN BY MARK BERRY : PHOTOGRAPHY BY JÖRG MEYER

# Epiphanies

are rare. They happen in a flash, like a lightning strike on the psyche. They occur anywhere, anytime - on a bus, in the shower, along the road to Damascus. For those lucky enough to experience them - to truly have the scales fall from their eyes and a once hazy future now appear in pristine, high definition - that moment is nothing less than life altering.

For Matt Czuchry '99, his moment of before and after happened backstage in Sottile Theatre his senior year at the College. His lightning-bolt shock wasn't religious in nature, but it did show him the way forward: unveiling a path that was wholly unexpected. At least to most.

Maybe there was somebody in the audience there in 1986 in East Tennessee, where Czuchry spent half of his childhood. Maybe that somebody saw a glimmer of star power in the 9-year-old boy performing as a California raisin for local school and church groups around Johnson City. Maybe that discerning audience member recognized something more, getting past the white gloves, the oversized shoes, the tights, the round, paper-filled trashbag body grooving mostly in time to "I Heard It on the Grapevine." Maybe. But not likely.

There was one person, however, who did see his acting potential well before Czuchry did. Not in the audience of his childhood, but in his Introduction to Theatre class. Professor Joy Vandervort-Cobb, a talented actor and director in her own right, has for years helped shape and expose students to the power of the stage. Known for her melodic voice and offbeat sense of humor, students have flocked to her because, as her first name suggests, joy is at the heart of theatre - the joy of human expression.

"In one of the first projects of that semester," Vandervort-Cobb recalls, "I noted that Matt had tremendous talent and presence. Whenever I bump into those kids in this non-major humanities class, I try to encourage them to come play in the Department of Theatre and Dance."

Unfortunately, Czuchry couldn't come to play. All of his "playtime" was dedicated to the men's tennis team. But Vandervort-Cobb's encouragement did not go unnoticed.

On his final paper for the class, Vandervort-Cobb jotted a line, "saying I should change my major to theatre," remembers Czuchry, who was already double majoring in political science and history at that point. "However, her note stuck with me, deeply. But it went beyond that. She had a huge impact on me because as a person, she has an incredibly infectious, positive personality and generous spirit. So, her being so beautiful as a person made me associate acting with light, goodness and embracing who you are as an individual."

But his epiphany would have to wait a year or so.

## *The Beautiful Game*

"Put a shirt on, freshman!"

Czuchry heard that a lot from his teammates when he came to play tennis for the College. Casey Van Valkenburgh '97 was one of those upperclassmen rolling his eyes at the new kid, who seemed unable to keep his shirt on during practice or, really, anywhere.





He looked like some kind of catalog Adonis - a better fit for *Beverly Hills 90210* than the upstart Cougars of the mid-'90s.

"He was ripped ... and we were flabby," laughs Van Valkenburgh, a former roommate and one of Czuchry's closest friends.

The seniors repeatedly told Czuchry that college life would eventually catch up with him. His chiseled physique would round out, they said, softened from some good-old Southern food and Charleston's many distractions.

They didn't know Czuchry well enough then to realize that they were simply feeding a fire. They didn't know that he lived to prove people wrong. That this supposed poster child for good genes and privilege actually had a chip on his shoulder that even the Incredible Hulk would balk at.

Czuchry has always narrowed his eyes at such offhand, know-it-all predictions. His workout regimen never slackened. Even as he acclimated to Charleston and the school's everyday routines - the softness they predicted never happened.

Czuchry liked to push himself, to do things that didn't come easy. As a younger athlete, he excelled at soccer and basketball. His quickness and hand-eye coordination allowed him to stand out on almost every team on which he played. When he decided to focus on tennis in eighth grade, however, he wasn't some kind of prodigy. Frankly, tennis was the hardest thing he had ever attempted. And he was playing a bit of catch-up to many kids who had already played the sport for years and were more comfortable with the racket, now fine-tuning their forehand, backhand and footwork.

"I chose tennis because it was the most challenging sport for me personally," Czuchry says. "I wanted to conquer it."

For most, conquest is a violent urge. Not so for Czuchry. Yes, he wants to win, whether it's at ping pong, pool, video games or a tennis match. But, for him, it's about pushing himself to whatever limit it takes to outpace his competitor. It's actually not personal against someone else; rather it's personal with him: Is he performing at his best, is he rising to the task at hand?

"Matt was never going to give up," says Patrick Burns '99, a fellow Cougar teammate and also one of Czuchry's best friends. "He was going to outlast you. You had to hit through him: You had to make your shots. He might lose the first sets, but his tenacity would eventually get to you."

That competitive fire is what most impressed Angelo Anastopoulo, who coached both the men's and women's tennis teams during Czuchry's playing days.

"Matt exceeded my expectations," Anastopoulo admits. "His game wasn't the most powerful, the most strategic. Stroke-wise, he was OK. He relied on his quickness, his being in great shape and simply wearing down his opponent. More importantly, Matt had so much heart. While he was a great gentleman and sportsman on the court, he always wanted to win."

And he did win. In 1996, he claimed the deciding match to top then-regional powerhouse Furman University, the first time the Cougars had beaten the Paladins and a major steppingstone in the program's history.

"I also remember trying to coach him in a match against UNC-Greensboro," Anastopoulo says. "We were in the conference tournament and we needed Matt to win for us to advance. As I walked up to him, he stopped me and said, 'Coach, I've got this.' I could look into his eyes and just see it. He did have this. Matt always came through big for the team."

Czuchry, who served as team captain his junior and senior years, relished that particular burden: "I liked being the last one on the court - when everything depended on me. All six singles matches go on at the same time. In some cases your match might take longer to finish. The tension builds as your teammates complete their matches. There is a feeling of things whittling down to you. And then you are the last one on the court. And at that time, the win for your team is all on your shoulders. I enjoyed that aspect of pressure."

Maybe like there was an invisible spotlight on him. Everyone watching each stroke, each lunge. The audience searching his face for weakness, for strength, for any kind of emotion. All eyes on him. The court as his stage.

### *Best in Show*

Czuchry stood backstage in Sottile Theatre, waiting for the show to begin.

He could feel the rising energy - the expectant crowd members finding their seats, the muffled voices and laughter on the other side of the curtain. Soon that buzz would go silent as their attention turned to the stage.

Like in his tennis matches, there was a whittling-down feeling. *All eyes on him.*

He looked around at the other guys backstage who were participating in this Saturday-afternoon charity event: the Mr. CofC Pageant. For most of them, this was a big joke. The contestants were mostly the stars, the funny guys of weekend parties and this was simply a bigger stage for them to act goofy and garner some more laughs. Czuchry, who had been sponsored by the sorority Delta Delta Delta and the tennis team, smiled and enjoyed this light moment of camaraderie. The energy was loose among them, maybe a few nerves and butterflies here and there as the crowd noise grew louder.

Czuchry spotted a sheet of paper and picked it up. On it was a list of prizes the winner would receive after the day's competition. One thing stood out: free acting lessons.

It was like a flash of lightning. Everything seemed to converge at this one moment. It all made sense now.

Before then, Czuchry had wanted to go to law school. In fact, the last three years of college seemed like a straight pathway to the legal profession. He had assiduously followed the usual game plan: leadership and talent on a varsity team, a double major in political science and history and exceptionally good grades, which would later garner him the Bishop Robert Smith Award - the highest honor given a student at spring commencement. Czuchry was doing everything he needed to position himself for the next step.

But one thing had knocked him back: the LSAT. Earlier that year, he began preparing for that dreaded test - the gatekeeper exam that weeded out the wouldn't-be's from the would-be's. Although he wasn't the best standardized test taker, Czuchry knew if he worked hard, he would do fine. He always did. Because he always worked hard.

So, he hit the books and began preparing. He enrolled in a Kaplan LSAT preparatory class - checking yet another box in his lengthy to-do list to be ready. As his former roommate Burns remembers, Czuchry even hedged his bets a little by eating tuna for three weeks before the exam (he had read that it helped bolster memory and brain activity) and took a good luck charm



with him to the test site - a small, teddy bear keychain that Van Valkenburgh had carried with him when he passed the LSAT and three subsequent bar exams.

But for perhaps the first time in his life, Czuchry failed at something. Of course, he'd had defeats before, but this was something different. Those had been micro fails. He knew that this one was a macro fail. *Why? Why? Why?* he continuously questioned. He had done everything he could to be ready. He was smart and capable, had done the prep work, had made so many sacrifices of his time. His mind - like his body - had not gone soft. But that low LSAT score begged otherwise of his efforts. The dream of law school, of a life as an attorney and the opportunities it might bring, were now gone. It was like a shot striking the net: The point, the match, the game, unfortunately, were not his.

So, there in Sottile Theatre, Czuchry had been facing an uncertain future. And now, looking over that paper list of potential prizes, he experienced a pure moment of clarity. Those free acting classes were something worth winning. He knew then and there that he was going to conquer the Mr. CofC Pageant and become an actor. The young men around him had no idea that behind that gentle smile lay an awakened lion. The competitor in him took over.

Now, the details of the actual pageant are somewhat hazy. His friends remember him taking off his shirt and flexing excessively for the crowd. But perhaps these former teammates are overlaying and mixing up memories. Czuchry, for his part, denies it; he just remembers being in the moment.

"After I saw that list, it all became so very clear," Czuchry says. "This was an opportunity, and I embraced it. I remember being confident and loose and just interacting with others on the stage. It was all very organic, and I contributed to a scene. The emcee was Nina Sossamon [a local TV anchor] and we had a good banter. I think for the audience, they felt they were witnessing something real and they were with us."

One person in particular took notice. And it was the one person who mattered most: Susan Manseau Green '79 was a judge that day. The owner of Charleston's Millie Lewis Models and Talent Agency, she knew she was seeing something special.

"Matt had that spark," Green recalls. "Of course, there was the physical beauty. But there are a lot of good-looking guys out there. He was different. He had a presence about him. He was likeable ... just a natural on the stage."

And, of course, he was crowned Mr. CofC. Epiphanies aren't wasted on the timid.

### *Birth of a Star*

With a new career goal in his sights, Czuchry approached acting like he did law school. Intense preparation. Intense focus. As a student-athlete, he knew there was always an element of luck in determining any outcome, but the best athletes make their own luck with their dedication and will before and during a game.

Now was the time to get down to work.

Someone like Malcolm Gladwell might snicker at Czuchry's audacity to change course and expect success, especially in light of having logged so little time against Gladwell's 10,000 Hours of Practice Rule. Or maybe, Czuchry had already anticipated Eric Ries' The Pivot, the now much-used business conceit of abrupt change leading to greater success.

Actually, Czuchry thought nothing like this. Trendy corporate-speak aside, since his first freshman class, Czuchry's liberal arts and sciences training had reinforced the concepts of versatility and flexibility. It wasn't naiveté that led him to pursue acting; rather, it was the confidence of a critical mind readied to learn new things and try new paths.

This particular path had him traveling back and forth on I-26 to Green's office in North Charleston, where he was instructed in the Meisner technique, in which actors don't rely solely on their personal memories in a scene, but rather use their imaginations to fully inhabit their characters.

In those free classes, he was learning acting alongside children as well as much older students - all of them hoping to be discovered and to break into the entertainment world.

"The classes were pretty basic," Czuchry recalls, "but I was so raw. I didn't know what I was doing, and they did help me a lot. Those first lessons have stayed with me even today."

And, finally, it was graduation day, in more ways than one. At the College, after Joy Vandervort-Cobb read his name to cross the Cistern stage to receive his diploma (the universe does love symmetry), Czuchry was ready to pursue a career in acting, but really had no idea on next steps.

Again, the Cougar connection played out, as Green advised Czuchry to attend the Actors, Models & Talent Competition (known as "convention" in the trade), which she believed would open the right doors for him to make it. The convention itself was something of a competition, where would-be actors performed monologues and scenes.

During that same time, Czuchry served as an extra in *New Best Friend*, a movie partially filmed in Charleston, and broke scene etiquette by chatting up Edmund Kearney. The veteran actor was impressed with Czuchry's interest about how the scene was constructed, and the two talked.

"Ed asked me to come back to the set the next day," Czuchry says. "He showed me around the sets, what it looked like behind the monitor. He even invited me to Wilmington, N.C., where they were finishing the filming, to help me with my monologue for the talent convention. He was a great teacher. He saw something in me and was impressed by my courage to go up to him."

That expert coaching on how to deliver his monologue helped Czuchry reach the finals at the convention. While performing in front of a few thousand people in a hotel ballroom in Orlando, Czuchry attracted the attention of the people Green had hoped he could meet. Namely, Christian Kaplan, a casting director for 20th Century Fox, who also saw something special in the aspiring actor and suggested he go to Hollywood to audition for a few roles he had in mind.

What happened next for Czuchry was a whirlwind of unlikely success. He moved out to Los Angeles and landed an agent almost immediately, something that many would-be actors struggle for years to accomplish, if at all. Through his connection with Kaplan, he also secured a holding deal, meaning he was under contract with 20th Century Fox for potentially being a part of a Fox TV pilot. Although that contract did not result in a role on a show, within his first 10 months in Los Angeles, he had a line or two in the cult classic *Freaks and Geeks* (the launching pad for James Franco, Seth Rogen and Jason Segel), a recurring role on *Young Americans* and played a major character in the movie



*Eight Legged Freaks* (trivia fact: his love interest in the film was Scarlett Johansson).

Perhaps the cruelest fate for a young actor is a taste of initial success followed by ... nothing. After a consistent string of work, Czuchry suddenly had trouble landing a single role. A lesser spirit might give up. But that isn't in Czuchry's character. While living off the combination of a family loan and unemployment support services, he auditioned like mad. But, for nearly a year, nothing.

All the while, he continued taking acting lessons, now with Lesly Kahn: "With her, I learned a great deal. You figure out that you're a product. It's the truth, unfortunately. And that in this industry, there is the art of it and the business side of it. The business is a fundamental part of it, and usually trumps the art of it."

As a product to be marketed and sold, Czuchry knew he had to make some modifications. Namely, his much-lauded physique. "I had to lose a lot of muscle and lean out," Czuchry explains. "When you look physically bigger, you're going to get cast in certain types of roles - like the jock I played on *Freaks and Geeks*. I wanted to broaden the roles I could play, so I stopped lifting weights and focused on cardio. I changed my diet and eliminated carbohydrates."

More importantly, he kept working at better understanding the process of acting: "Through Lesly's incredible gifts as a teacher, I began to learn the intricacies of the craft of acting. I started seeing how the combination of changing my wellness (the business side, if you will) and gaining new skills and experience in my craft (the art side) would impact my career opportunities."

The makeover - physical and artistic - worked, and Czuchry rebounded with a number of smaller roles in shows such as *Jake 2.0* and *Hack*. However, it was his time on *Gilmore Girls*, starting in 2004, that proved to be his real breakthrough. Almost overnight, Czuchry became a nationwide teen heartthrob - a face that launched a thousand blogs, earned three Teen Choice nominations and received cover treatment on numerous magazines, including *TV Guide*.

But, as Czuchry knows firsthand, it's an up-and-down business. And gravity eventually wins out. His role as Rory's boyfriend Logan Huntzberger finished after three seasons when *Gilmore Girls* ended its seven-year run. Once again, Czuchry was back in the audition cycle.

"That process can be brutal," Czuchry says. "For *The Good Wife*, I had five auditions. The last two were with studio executives and network executives. It gets down to eight actors, then five and then three. Usually, you're sitting in a room with those other actors waiting your turn. Funny, I had just found out earlier that day before my final audition that I had not gotten another big role. So, in a matter of hours, I had to stop the mourning process for something I didn't get and realize that the next opportunity was right there in front of me. Just like in tennis, you have to quickly forget your defeats and move on."

And in his last audition, the studio and network executives huddled together and agreed that Czuchry was the right fit for their vision of Cary Agos, the foil to the show's main character.

### *The Craft*

To fully appreciate how far Czuchry has come as an actor, you only need to watch five seconds from season six of *The Good Wife*.

It's a particular five-second clip - the closing moments in episode 10, "The Trial," in which Cary Agos is about to change his plea in a startling turn of events. The scene, which serves as the midseason cliffhanger, hinges on very simple blocking: Czuchry in a courtroom, alone in the shot, looking directly into the camera.

"That surprisingly was one of the most difficult scenes I've ever done," Czuchry says. "The version you see on TV is either the fourth or fifth take we did. In my line, 'Yes, your honor, I would like to plead guilty,' I wanted to convey so many different emotions: confusion, vulnerability and strength. In the version you see in the final cut, I added this small breath, a real moment where my character is trying to gather himself. That moment is the culmination of everything for me in that episode."

For Czuchry, like all of the best performers, acting is a craft - an experience that goes much deeper than just knowing and delivering your lines. His initial preparation is fairly simple. After he receives the episode's script, usually just a few days before shooting, Czuchry secludes himself in his apartment in New York's West Village. He sits on his couch and reads it through. Again and again. Then, he breaks down his own character's arc, envisioning the episode in three acts. He is always narrowing his focus, homing in on the emotions he needs to convey.

Then, he turns down the lights to eliminate distractions, perhaps burns some incense, and transforms his living room into a faux set, creating the scene in his mind. The room must be absolutely quiet.

On some occasions, he'll walk the streets to memorize his lines, saying them out loud and testing his delivery, how the phrasing sounds. Once, early in his career, while out in Los Angeles, a homeless man came up to him and said, "Man, are you all right, you're freaking me out."

Czuchry, caught off guard, took a second to respond: "What?? Oh, yeah. Nah, nah, I'm fine. I'm just going over my lines for an audition."

So much of acting is a struggle locked away in the mind, and Czuchry works hard to find the proper headspace to fully embrace his roles.

"I just want to do justice to the character and the material," he says. "I want to be authentic at the highest level."

For his breakout performance last year in season six, he pushed himself to new limits.

"That period of time was taxing, not really fun," Czuchry admits. "While I really enjoyed the challenge, it took an emotional toll on me. I wanted the audience to believe that here was a guy facing career ruin and a long prison sentence. I wanted people to feel what it is like when the jail door slams, when their clothes are exchanged for the orange jumpsuit and they are left there, stripped of their identity. I did some heavy immersion for this story - in my research on prison life - but I really focused on the raw emotions of the moment."

"During that time, I went inward. I isolated myself from friends and family. On set, I distanced myself from everyone, as much as possible. I needed to feel absolutely alone in order to convey that emotion honestly on screen. I'm not one of those actors that can be laughing and joking with the crew one minute and then flip a switch and do a dramatic take. That's not my gateway into a scene."

For these intense moments, Czuchry made playlists for each episode, songs that would transport him and set a mood. For "The Trial," the songs are slow, sad and dark - ranging from Bon Iver's "Blood Bank" and Bootstraps' "Sleeping Giant," to Coldplay's "The Scientist" and Radiohead's "Nude." But the one song that transported him during that five-second internal, emotional war was Gregory Alan Isaakov's "Master and a Hound," a song of wistful nostalgia and heartbreaking loss, a dirge for the soul.

But all of that pain had a purpose: to create a real moment on television that would connect with people. And Czuchry achieved that. Fans responded to his portrayal of a lawyer framed and shamed. They felt the rawness and honesty that Czuchry had meticulously woven into his portrayal. They could register the agony in his eyes because in many ways, it was real.

Many television critics penciled in Czuchry's name on their short lists for an Emmy nomination for best supporting actor. Over the summer, *The Hollywood Reporter* featured him in its Emmy contenders' photo shoot, which included actors Nikolaj Coster-Waldau (*Game of Thrones*), Ben Mendelsohn (*Bloodline*) and Theo Rossi (*Sons of Anarchy*). Although Czuchry did not hear his name called that July morning among the six Emmy nominees, all was not lost.

"I was in the conversation," he says. "I was close. But we all know that there were certainly more than six great performances on television this past year. All the stars have to align just right for something like that. It's not just who you are as an actor. It's the storyline, the writing, the performances. I'm proud of what we achieved this past year on *The Good Wife*. These nominations basically ask if you're in the zeitgeist. And I absolutely believe that as a show, we were and we are."

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Indeed, Czuchry was in the mix for one of the industry's highest honors this year, and - depending on the alignment of those stars - he will be in the zeitgeist again. His evolution as an actor is simple proof - each minor and major role serving as building blocks in elevating his work, each moment helping to shape his meticulous approach to his craft.

"In terms of an actor, it's an exciting time to be on television," Czuchry says, "with all of these great stories to tell, all the great material and different ways to access those stories through TV, DVR and streaming services. There are so many great stories, so much great art - that's what keeps me watching."

And for his audiences, whether in Sottile Theatre nearly two decades ago or in living rooms today, Matt Czuchry - an artist in the truest sense - always delivers something worth watching. ■

