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Henry Winkler's new memoir reveals how playing 'The Fonz' started a lifelong journey to find his inner cool



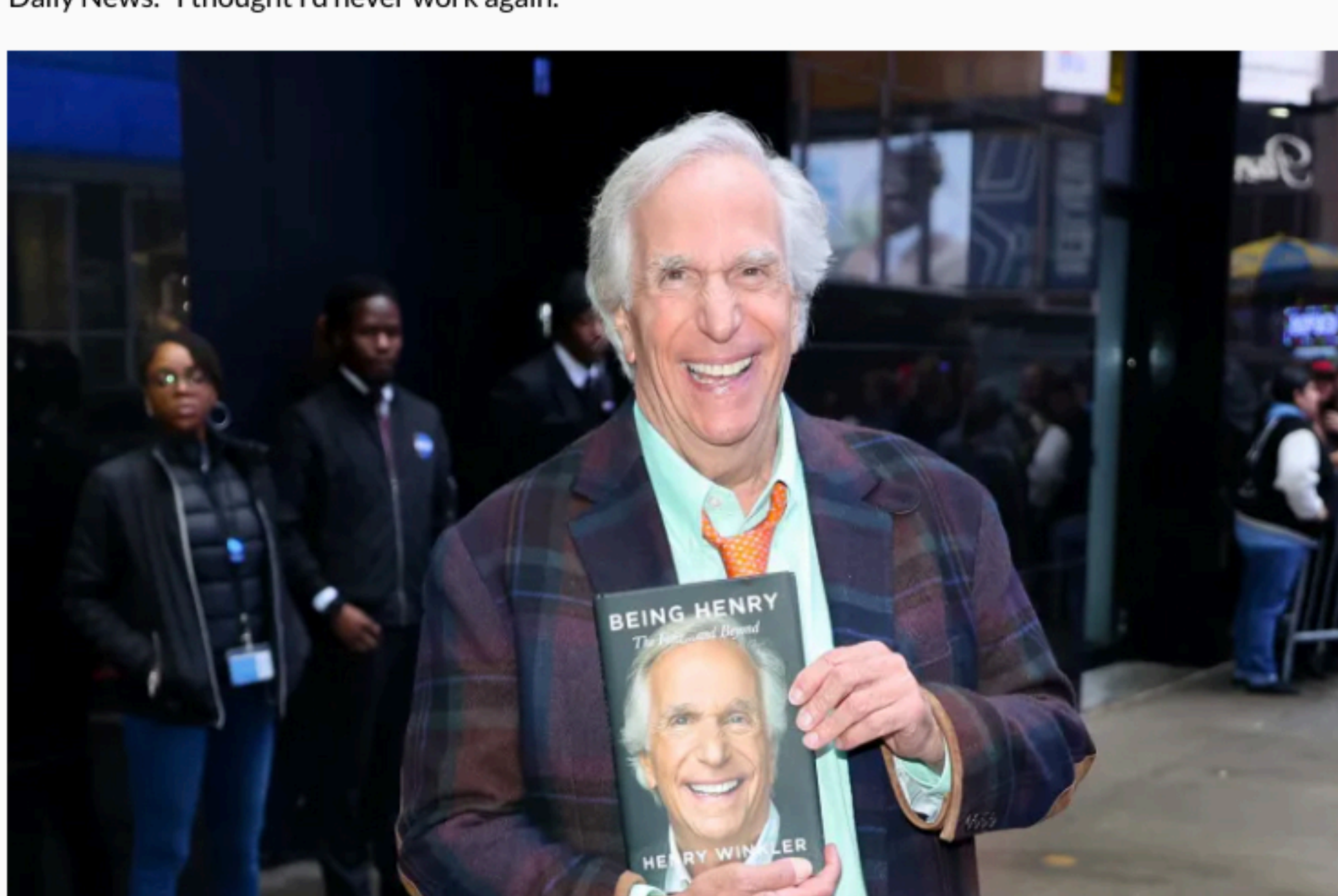
Henry Winkler is pictured as "The Fonz" on 'Happy Days' in 1977. (Photo by Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images)

By **RANDY MANILOFF** | New York Daily News
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On March 11, 1973, Henry Winkler, three years out of [Yale School of Drama](#), made his Broadway debut in ["42 Seconds from Broadway."](#) The play was aptly named. It closed after one performance.

A New York Times review — calling the acting "indifferent" and the writing "silly" (three times) — made certain of it.

"You can't quite wrap your brain around that you are a failure," Winkler said in a recent interview with the Daily News. "I thought I'd never work again."



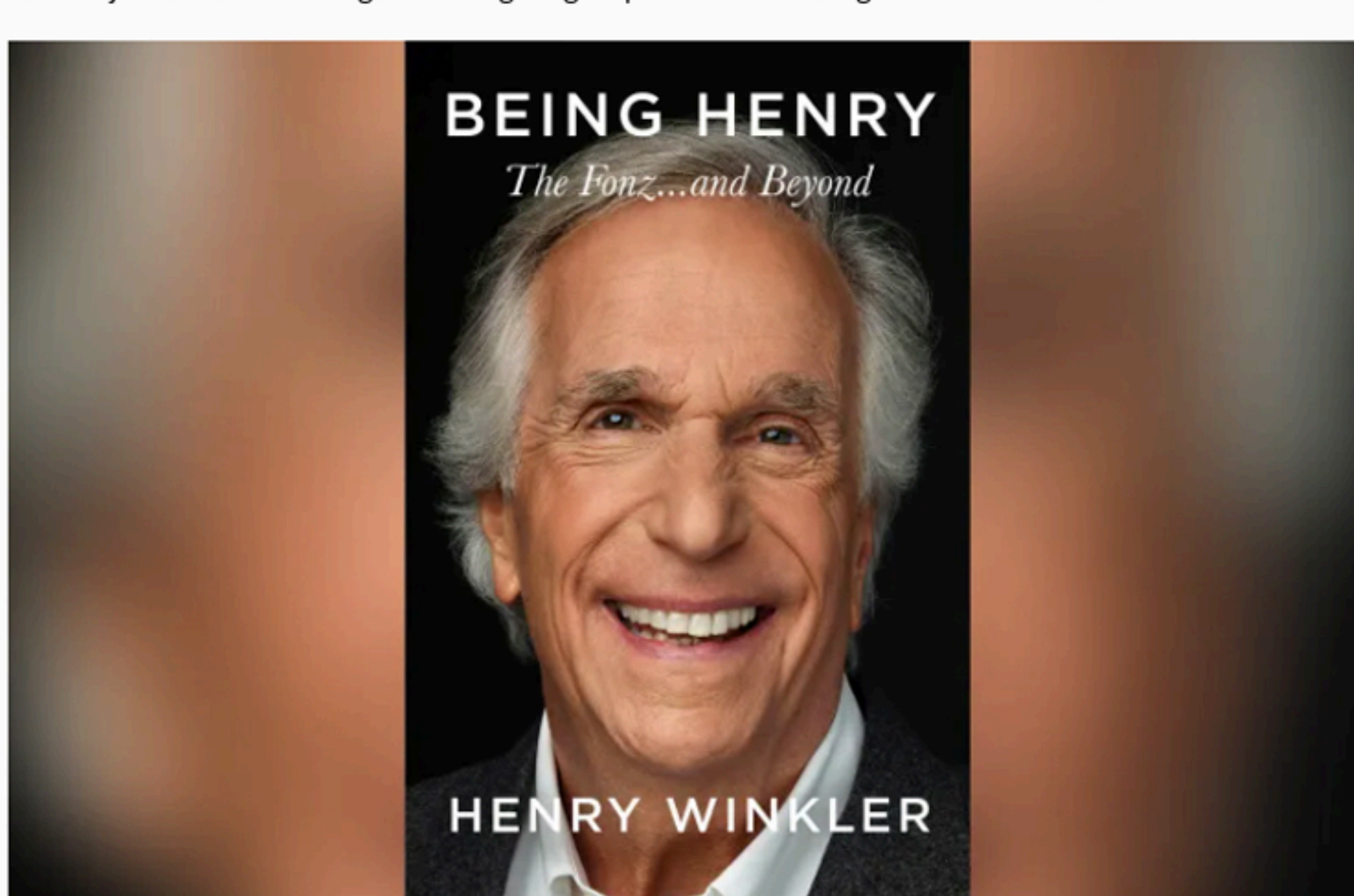
Henry Winkler is seen arriving at "Good Morning America" on October 30, 2023 in New York City. (Photo by Jose Perez/Bauer-Griffin/GC Images)

Six months later, Winkler took his acting aspirations to Los Angeles. Not long after, he was a rising star on what would become an iconic sitcom.

Yet Winkler couldn't shake the feeling that failure was just around the corner.

In his new memoir, ["Being Henry: The Fonz ... and Beyond,"](#) on sale Tuesday, Winkler, 78, recounts his time growing up on the Upper West Side and his long and diverse career on both the small and big screens.

Winkler has much to say in his autobiography about his signature role of Arthur Fonzarelli on [television's "Happy Days,"](#) which ran from 1974 to 1984. The Fonz, a motorcycle-riding high school dropout in a leather jacket was the renegade amongst a group of wholesome high-schoolers in 1950s Milwaukee.



This cover image released by Celadon Books shows "Being Henry: The Fonz...and Beyond" by Henry Winkler. (Celadon Books via AP)

The Fonz defined "cool" for millions. Winkler's book, he told The News, is his journey to defining that term for himself.

Winkler's parents were German refugees who fled the country in 1939. Their immediate families stayed behind and were murdered by the Nazis.

Winkler couldn't read or spell or know how much change he should get back when he bought a slice of pizza. He was dyslexic. But nobody knew what that was.

To his austere parents, there was a simple explanation for his Ds and Fs at Public School 87 and later the private McBurney School for Boys on W. 63rd St.. They nicknamed their son "dummer Hund" — German for "dumb dog."

Winkler's learning disability, failing grades and humiliation took its toll. While the Fonz was confident, "a guy," Winkler said, "who could make things happen with a snap of his finger," this was the "diametric opposite" of who he was.

But there was one exception, Winkler says. "When I was on stage, playing someone else, I was transported to another world, one where pretending made you successful."

After failing geometry four times and passing with a D-, Winkler made it to [Boston's Emerson College](#) — one of two schools out of 28 that accepted him — where he studied acting. He then auditioned his way into the Ivy League.

"Dumb dog just got into Yale!" Winkler recalls telling his parents.



American actor Henry Winkler as Arthur 'Fonzie' Fonzarelli in 'Happy Days', circa 1975. (Photo by Silver Screen Collection/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Winkler landed the part of the Fonz almost immediately after arriving in California. But despite being desperate for work — he went out West with only enough money to last a month — he almost didn't audition for it.

"The Yale School of Drama was in my head: 'You've been trained for the theater. You can't do a series,'" Winkler recalls telling himself. "But I went in, and it changed my life."

But Winkler had one condition for his character before taking the role. He wanted to show the Fonz's emotional side. "When he's home and takes off his jacket, who does he have to be cool for?"

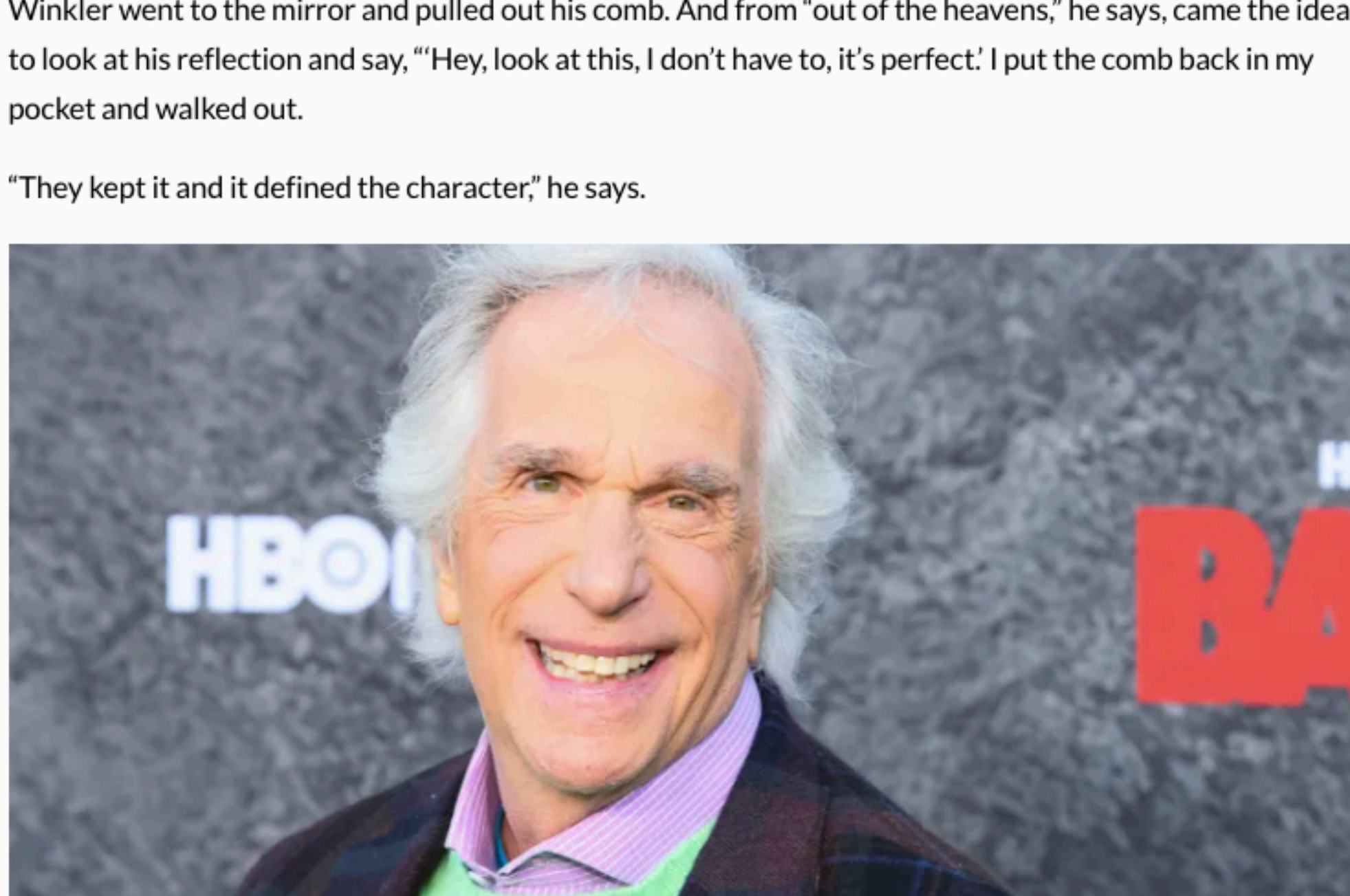
This was something Winkler learned at Yale: "If you are going to play a human being," he said, "there has got to be a full circle. I can't just say 'Ayyy' for 30 minutes."

Winkler has very high praise for the "Happy Days" writers, but says that, owing to his theater and improv experience, much of the Fonzie character was of his making.

He recounts that the pilot script called for him to comb his hair in the mirror. But [he couldn't bring himself to do it.](#) "Everybody has combed their hair that has ever played this part."

Winkler went to the mirror and pulled out his comb. And from "out of the heavens," he says, came the idea to look at his reflection and say, "Hey, look at this, I don't have to, it's perfect." I put the comb back in my pocket and walked out.

"They kept it and it defined the character," he says.



Henry Winkler attends HBO's original series "Barry" Los Angeles Season 4 Premiere at Hollywood Forever on April 16, 2023 in Hollywood, California. (Photo by Rodin Eckenroth/Getty Images)

Winkler had a second chance at Broadway in 2000, appearing for nearly a year in Neil Simon's play "The Dinner Party." He'd made a promise to himself, after his initial failure, that he'd get back.

"I have to make that right. Even if it's only once."

Winkler just wrapped up four seasons starring in HBO's critically acclaimed and [multi-E Emmy Award winning black comedy "Barry."](#) He took home the statuette for outstanding supporting actor in a comedy series in 2018.

Winkler says that when he arrived in Los Angeles, he wanted to be an actor like Spencer Tracy or [Robert De Niro.](#) "They were able to be who they are," he explains. "I was 'Henry,' who I thought I should be. Who I thought everybody wanted me to be."

But he had it wrong. "I have said for years that I finally defined 'cool.' 'Cool' is being organic. It is just being authentic. And that's magnetic."

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