For most aficionados of film noir, the name Dan Duryea conjures up the image of a menacing and sleazy bad guy, alternating between sneering, smirking, and sniveling in his distinctive, almost nasal tenor, and ready to backhand a woman at any given moment. This iconic persona, however,
represents only a fraction of Duryea’s actual artistic output, and was strikingly opposed to his demeanor in his personal life. The versatility of his work is attributable to what he brought as a man and an actor to his roles, and his flexibility allowed him to prosper and grow artistically with the radical changes in the entertainment market in the fifties and sixties. Duryea described his acting process in a 1954 interview: “I try to make the parts I portray new and different. I endeavor to get myself within the character. I try to imagine his thoughts and fall in with him in his plans, and then let myself go.” This process of letting go and inhabiting the character completely—or maybe letting the character inhabit him completely—enabled Duryea to create a multitude of believable characters radically different from himself.

Duryea combined two types of acting that dominate the film world. Some film actors convey a star persona: the actor plays different roles but brings his or her own personality to each one. Their appeal is in the continuity of their personality across roles. Alan Ladd and Joan Crawford are examples of this type. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the actor who plays a range of roles but melts into them too well, so they never garner an independent identity with the public, such as Wendell Corey and Albert Dekker. Duryea negotiated a unique hybrid of the two. He had the ability to play a character completely on its own terms, so that the audience saw the character and not the actor. However, he also had name recognition and box-office pull. Duryea could be believed in any type of role, but also built in the audience a desire to see him on the screen.

HE WAS BORN, NOT IN THE SEAMY underbelly of a heartless city, but in White Plains, New York to textile salesman Richard Hewlett Duryea and his wife Mabel. Duryea’s interest in acting started early: he belonged to the drama club at his high school, and while majoring in English at Cornell University, he served as president of the drama society. After he graduated from college in 1928, his parents encouraged him to join the world of advertising; “It was pointed out to me that the average income of an Equity actor in New York was less than $400 a year. Even the most unsuccessful ad salesman made twice that much, so the choice was easy.”

Besides bringing in a regular income, advertising brought Duryea together with the love of his life. Duryea commuted daily from White Plains to New York for his job selling ad space in small newspapers for N.W. Ayer. One day, a commuter acquaintance introduced Duryea to his daughter Helen Bryan, and sparks flew. The pair married in 1932 and remained devoted spouses for 35 years. However, advertising also brought an enormous amount of pressure to bear on Duryea, and he had a heart attack in 1934 while running N. W. Ayer’s Philadelphia office. The attack, which laid him up for ten months, presented a crossroads: his doctors encouraged Duryea to find a less stressful career. Duryea decided to pursue his earlier dream of acting. “I had to make a living, but the advertising world was too rough for me, so I tried the theatre. That was the easiest work I could think of.”

Despite the inevitable struggles involved in establishing himself as an actor, pursuing his true ambitions proved less stressful and infinitely more fulfilling than advertising. Helen worked for five dollars a day at a dress shop to support Duryea as he worked to build a career on stage. Duryea began earning small roles in summer stock, eventually making his Broadway debut in 1935 with a series of walk-on roles in the play Dead End, written by former Cornell classmate Sidney Kingsley. Near the end of the run, he assumed the lead role of Gimpty, which marked the end of his time as a struggling actor. In his own words: “From that time on, I never had to worry about a job.” After the show closed, Broadway came knocking again several times. In 1938, he landed a role that foreshadowed both his bad guy roles and his work in Westerns, the infamous Bob Ford in the play Missouri Legend, the “dirty little coward” who gunned down Jesse James. The year 1939 brought two more pieces of good fortune: the birth of his first son Peter and a signature role that ultimately led to Hollywood.

In 1939, Duryea was cast in Lillian Hellman’s play The Little Foxes. The show became a critical and financial success due to the quality of the writing and production, a legendary performance by star Tallulah Bankhead, and a superlative supporting cast. Duryea portrayed Leo Hubbard, the lazy scion of a dysfunctional Southern family embroiled in a bitter struggle for power and money. Hubbard
is easily manipulated by others, due to both his lack of mental and emotional intelligence and his moral laxity—character elements Duryea would bring in differing combinations to several of his later film characters. He played Leo throughout the show’s long run and on the national tour. He later recalled the experience fondly: “I wish I could once again have Lillian Hellman’s words come out of my mouth. I haven’t had words like those or scenes like that since then. As for Tallulah Bankhead, she is fantastically the greatest woman I have ever known.”

Despite rave performances for her portrayal of Regina on Broadway, producer Sam Goldwyn replaced Bankhead with Bette Davis for the film version. Duryea, however, reprised his role in the 1941 film, directed by William Wyler, one of Davis’ favorite directors (and her one-time paramour). The film, like the stage play, succeeded both commercially and critically. The move to Hollywood and film work proved permanent for Duryea. Goldwyn put him under contract for a short time, and then Duryea freelanced. For the next few years he played a varied series of supporting roles in films: among them a gangster’s goon in Howard Hawks’ comedy Ball of Fire (1941), a cynical sports writer in the baseball drama Pride of the Yankees (1942), and a brave and determined G.I. under Bogart’s command in Sahara (1943). He and Helen also had a production of their own in 1942—a second son, Richard.

A small, but memorable part in Fritz Lang’s Ministry of Fear (1944) proved the turning point in his film career. It led directly to a role that started his path to film noir, the slimy blackmailer Heidt in Lang’s The Woman in the Window (1944). Heidt puts the squeeze on two victims of circumstance, respected Professor Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) and kept woman Alice Reed (Joan Bennett); the pair has concealed Wanley’s accidental killing of Mazar, Alice’s patron and Heidt’s employer, from the police. When Lang read the script for Woman there was only one thing that he disliked: all the male characters in it were old, including the role Duryea ultimately portrayed. “I’d liked Duryea’s handling of the scene with the scissors in Ministry of Fear so much that I was able to persuade the studio to let me bring him in; that was the only way I could introduce someone relatively youthful into the cast.” Lang’s faith in Duryea was well placed, and Duryea brought more than youth to the picture. Duryea’s characterization provides real menace to the film, making the stakes feel high. The ruthlessness, cunning intelligence, and sexual menace that Duryea convincingly displays as Heidt encourages sympathy for Richard and Alice even as they cold-bloodedly plot to murder Heidt.

What else can they do?

In his next outing with Lang, Bennett, and Robinson, Scarlet Street (1945), Duryea played an even more despicable character than Heidt: Johnny Prince, the pimp/boyfriend of Kitty (Bennett), a not-too-bright but cunningly manipulative prostitute. Johnny persuades Kitty to put the bite on the naïve cashier and Sunday painter Chris Cross (Robinson), whom they mistake for a wealthy artist. The pair
bleed him, Chris embezzles from his firm to support Kitty lavishly, and in turn they steal his paintings and pass them off as her work. Although the first time we see Johnny he backhands Kitty, his real hold over her is sexual. She will do anything he asks simply so he’ll keep sleeping with her. His interest in her in return is blatantly financial and he gleefully exploits her at every opportunity. Duryea’s ability to convey sexual attractiveness in an unsavory villain was unique; it’s not the dangerous attractiveness of the virile bad boy, but rather a weapon of manipulation usually wielded in noir by the femme fatale.

In the end, Chris murders Kitty in a fit of jealous passion when she humiliates him during a marriage proposal; but in a miscarriage of the criminal justice system, Johnny goes to the chair for Kitty’s murder instead of Chris. Remarkably for the times of the Hayes code, neither the audiences nor the censors nor the critics had a problem with Johnny’s execution for the crime Chris committed. Lang remarked on this reaction in a 1975 interview, “But the reason that no one commented on it is possibly not because they were aware that he had done a lot of other things that would have justified his death, but because they simply did not like his character. If this is so, one wonders if the morals of the average moviegoers have eroded over the years.” Rather than eroding morals, it is Duryea’s ability to portray a despicable character for whom the audience feels no sympathy. As an actor he was able to completely eschew sympathy when it suited the character.

DURYEA’S COMBINATION OF VERSATILITY and box office draw didn’t go unnoticed. In 1945, after his critically lauded and publicly-loved work in Scarlet and Woman, Universal-International signed him to a seven-year exclusive contract. He was quickly cast in another noir, Roy William Neill’s Black Angel (1946), but this time not as the heavy. This was the first of his beautiful loser roles, flawed but sympathetic men with a deeply romantic nature masked by a protective cynical shell. He would create further memorable variations on it, most notably in World for Ransom (1954) and The Burglar (1957).

In Black Angel, Duryea plays the tragic Martin Blair, a talented pianist and songwriter brought down by years of alcoholism triggered when his wife Mavis leaves him. When Mavis is murdered, her married lover Kirk Bennett is convicted of the
crime. Bennett's wife Catherine (June Vincent) enlists Marty's help in discovering the real murderous. As they try to solve the crime, Marty falls in love with Cathly and stops drinking, evolving into a better man.

In a complete reversal of his earlier noir roles, Duryea displays a deep vulnerability. Marty continues to aid Cathly's efforts to clear her husband, even though it will mean losing the woman he loves. Duryea delicately portrays Marty's growing feelings for Cathly; it's simply in the way he looks at her.

When their prime suspect is cleared, and it looks like Kirk did kill Mavis, Marty proposes to Cathly, but she rejects him. She still believes her husband is innocent and, furthermore, for her there is no other man. Duryea makes Marty's hurt palpable, wordlessly expressing his deep despair. He goes on an alcoholic bender, which causes him to remember what really happened on the night of the murder.

Duryea's business acumen, as well as his ability to convincingly portray a wide gamut of emotions, expanded his opportunity to play men of differing stripes in the late forties and early fifties. Duryea renegotiated the terms of his contract with Universal in 1948. He would star in one picture each year for the studio, and would otherwise be free to choose his own roles for other producers. He essentially had the best of both worlds: the security of a studio player and the artistic freedom of a freelancer. While playing notable heavies in film noirs like *Criss Cross* (1949), *Manhandled* (1949), *Too Late for Tears* (1949), and *One Way Street* (1950), he also added morally ambiguous characters to his repertoire. In *The Underworld Story* (1950), he plays Mike Reese, an unethi-
versatile talents. He proved as equally convincing in a Stetson as in a fedora, despite his slightly New York-tinged voice. In Westerns, as with his noir roles, he ably played outright villains in films like Winchester ’73 (1950) and Silver Lode (1954). However, he was also able to create another variation on his antagonists: the charismatic bad man. Despite his self-admitted lack of matinee idol looks, Duryea was more than able to compensate with what all true movie stars possess: screen presence. There is something of a new freedom that he finds in these roles: these characters are likeable despite their actions. They have done and continue to do bad things, but they’re so magnetic and charming, the audience is drawn to them in spite of themselves.

In a series of Westerns teaming him with real-life WWII hero turned on-screen cowboy hero Audie Murphy, Duryea portrayed a series of charismatic gunmen with varying potential for moral redemption. While in Night Passage (1957) Duryea’s Whitey Harbin is irredeemable, his Whitey Kincaid in Ride Clear of Diablo (1954) and his Frank Jesse in Six Black Horses (1962) carry the seed of a better man within them. As in The Underworld Story, the tension in the films emanates as much from the moral struggle of his characters as from the plot and action. “Will he or won’t he do the right thing?” takes precedence over “Will the hero triumph?” As with Black Angel, the sympathy invoked by Duryea adds a bittersweet quality to the justice demanded by the Hays Code (the demise of his morally flawed characters).

Duryea in one of his many Westerns, Night Passage

WHEN THE STUDIO SYSTEM BEGAN to decline in the fifties, independent film production grew. As with the reinvention of the Western, this change expanded Duryea’s opportunities rather than constricting them. He was a name that brought in an audience without the hefty price tag of a movie star, an alluring prospect for a small-budget producer. In 1951, Duryea played the favorite role of his career in an independent production, the lead in Chicago Calling. In a 1965 interview, the actor summed up the financial and artistic outcome of the film: “I took no salary but just a percentage of any profits. There weren’t any, but I have no regrets. The role made my wife cry, and [that] was a tremendous compliment from one whose judgment I revere.”

Helen had good reason to cry: Duryea gives a tremendous performance as failed photographer and alcoholic Bill Cannon. Cannon’s wife (Mary Anderson) is leaving with their daughter Nancy (Melinda Plowman) to relocate, possibly permanently, with her family in the East. She has lost any hope that Bill will ever quit drinking. In fact, she has lost faith in him. Cannon cannot take responsibility for his actions. And because he is not honest with himself, he cannot be honest with others regarding his drinking or his economic and artistic failures. His wife loves him, but she can’t accept him on those terms. The scene in which she tells him why she’s leaving is excruciatingly painful to watch. Duryea successively exudes charm, manipulativeness, desperation, and self-loathing as his character tries to convince Mary to stay. Duryea also successfully portrays an intense love of his wife and daughter counterpoised with the self-pity and weakness that hold Cannon back, making Mary’s decision to leave emotionally difficult but utterly justified.
Mary and Nancy leave the next morning; Mary and Nancy share a car and head East. After a heavy night of drinking, Cannon returns to his empty home to find a telegram from Mary. It tells him Nancy has been injured in a car accident and that Mary will call from Chicago the next morning to let him know the results of their daughter’s surgery. Unfortunately, the phone has just been shut off for non-payment of a $53 bill. Cannon wanders L.A., desperately trying to raise the cash to have his phone reconnected. Along the way, he encounters a series of people who help, hinder or take no action in response to his predicament. Interestingly, no matter how badly treated he is, he never loses his temper. There is only intense despair. His quest brings him into the life of an emotionally-abused boy named Bobby (Gordon Geber) whom he meets when Bobby runs over Cannon’s dog with his bike. As the pair bond and Bobby learns about Cannon’s daughter, he offers to give the $50 he’s saved from running errands to Cannon. He struggles with the ethical dilemma of whether to accept it. Things become even morally grayer when Bobby steals $50 after realizing that his sister has hidden his savings pass book.

Cannon’s interactions with each of the children in the film highlight the depth and complexity of Duryea’s performance. While Cannon displays a true and deep affection and a protective instinct for each child, he still uses them for his own ends. In the opening scene of the film, he affectionately comforts his daughter after a scrap with a neighboring child while pumping her for information about her mother. With Bobby, he truly connects with him, initially displaying a fatherly affection the boy desperately needs, but then agreeing to take the stolen money. As with his morally ambiguous roles in noir and Westerns, the tension lies not just in his quest to raise the money to restore phone service, but in how he will raise it.

THE RISE OF TELEVISION IN THE FIFTIES proved fruitful for Duryea both artistically and financially. He appeared in roughly 70 television guest spots in a multitude of decades; no one else managed to so deftly balance a remarkable double life even while delivering a vicious double slap.

“SLAP ‘EM, DAN-O!”

In studying the contrasts of Dan Duryea as he moved through life both on- and off-screen, it’s clear life did not imitate art.

The man who may have abused more women on film than perhaps any actor in cinema history was, in real life, a scoutmaster in his two sons’ local troop. He was an easygoing guy who liked gardening and oil painting. He was a member of his local PTA. He was a well-spoken Ivy Leaguer who enjoyed tinkering with his sailboat.

So what turned this family-oriented, mild-mannered, upstanding citizen to crime and female punishment as “Slapper Dan” on the big screen? There’s a pretty easy answer: it was steady work for good money.

“These roles not only pay well, but it seems, fortunately or not, that the audience remembers the killer a lot longer than the hero,” said Duryea. “I’ve hit more than a dozen actresses and the parts keep rolling in. My fan mail goes up every time I tee off on a girl!”

The heel with sex appeal, as he was often labeled, knocked around some of the best dames in Hollywood: Joan Bennett (several times), Lizabeth Scott (a forehead/backhand special) and Dorothy Lamour (sucker punch). He got a few men, too, including King Donovan in One Way Street (1950) with the back of his hand while wielding a gun. And of course, some of the women eventually slapped back, most memorably Scott in Too Late for Tears (1949).

Duryea maintained in interviews he had to psych himself up before he could haul off and belt a woman.

“At first it was hard because I am a very even-tempered guy,” he said. “So I thought about some of the people I hated in my early as well as my later life. Like the school bully who used to try and beat the hell out of me at least once a week … little incidents with trade people who enjoyed acting superior because they owned their business, overcharging you.

“Then, the one I used when I had to slap a woman was easy! I was slapping the overbearing teachers who would fail you in their holier-than-thou classes and enjoy it.”

Duryea’s on-screen persona so concerned him in real life, however, that he made an extra effort in pursuing community involvement to demonstrate he wasn’t the bad guy he portrayed so often in film noir and Westerns. And he wouldn’t let his sons watch his movies for years.

“I don’t want them to get any wrong ideas,” he said.

Word still got around to his children, though.

“You know, other kids at school often say to my boys, ‘I know your daddy. He’s a bad man,’ ” he once recalled. “It bothered me a lot. Everyone thought of me as a degenerate, depending on which movie they had seen me in. My wife and I actually overdid it to correct things.”

He also made fun of his violent on-screen characters. Duryea was so well known for slapping women in his movies that he actually spoofed it as a guest star on the The Jack Benny Program in 1955 in a hilarious skit called “Death Across The Lunch Counter” or by alternate title, “He Died Sunnyside Up.”

Bank robber Duryea makes a menacing entrance into a roadside diner run by Benny, who tells him he doesn’t want any trouble. When he suggests possibilities from the menu, Duryea slaps him at the offering of a green salad.

“I don’t like salad,” Duryea sneers.

Even though such a moment could never exist in a “real” film noir, it’s a fitting reminder of the often-blurred line between the movies and real life. Duryea remained squarely on that line for more than two decades; no one else managed to so deftly balance a remarkable double life even while delivering a vicious double slap.

—Carl Steward
“Blatz is Milwaukee’s Finest Beer...

It’s Milwaukee’s favorite beer,
I lived in Milwaukee,
I ought to know!”

says

Dan Duryea

Famous screen and stage star,
now appearing in “Chicago Calling,”
a United Artists release

“Blatz tastes so good that it’s Milwaukee’s favorite and finest beer. This fact, in my opinion, makes Blatz America’s finest beer,” says Dan Duryea, relaxing aboard his “Minalec,” after a sail on Lake Arrowhead.

“No matter where you live you don’t have to travel further than your refrigerator or favorite tavern to learn why,” adds Dan. Blatz is first in Milwaukee’s favor, because it’s first in flavor. Why not try Blatz, today!

Today, taste

Milwaukee’s finest beer!

© 1953, Blatz Brewing Co., Est. 1851 in Milwaukee, Wis.
genres, alternating science fiction, comedy and drama with roles in crime and Western entries — all while still appearing in films. These roles also ranged across the moral spectrum from the morally irredeemable to the heroic. In 1952, Duryea starred in his own action adventure series, set in Singapore, *The Adventures of China Smith*, which ran for 26 episodes. Although clearly well-acquainted with the seamer side of life, China was undisputedly the hero of the piece. The series was cheap, but as with all his outings, Duryea applied his art with the usual level of dedication and professionalism. The series returned two years later under the title *The New Adventures of China Smith* for another 26 episodes.

*China Smith* led to one of Duryea’s most sympathetic roles: Mike Callahan, a WW II veteran eking out a living in Singapore in *World for Ransom* (1954). The film employed the same production team and sets as the series, and many of the same supporting actors as well as the star, but with the talented director Robert Aldrich helming. At the behest of his old flame Frennessey March (Marian Carr), Callahan tries to disentangle Frennessey’s husband, and his old friend, Julian (Patric Knowles), from a complicated scheme to kidnap a prominent nuclear scientist and sell him to the highest bidder. Callahan agrees because Frennessey asserts that she still loves him and wants to be with him. But they have to extricate Julian from the mess he’s gotten himself into before they can start a life together. Duryea plays the knight-errant beautifully: inspired by his love for her, he’s willing to risk personal danger to save her husband, as Marty did in *Black Angel*, but with the expectation of having her for himself.

Callahan navigates a number of perilous situations involving the criminal conspirators, gangsters, the police and the army, and manages to track the scientist down to the kidnapper’s hiding place. However, he can’t save Julian from the consequences of his own base nature. Callahan gives Julian the chance to turn on his conspirators, turn himself in, and let Callahan rescue the scientist. Julian shoots his conspirators to keep them from killing the scientist. But then he turns his gun on Callahan, so he can be the hero that rescues the scientist. Callahan is forced kill Julian in self-defense.

When Callahan returns to Singapore to tell Frennessey of Julian’s death, she brutally destroys all his illusions. She rejects his explanation of self-defense and his contention that he ever loved her. She informs him that she had been a prostitute and that Julian knew it and married her anyway. Then she really lays into him: “You weren’t in love with me. You were in love with some goofy eighteen-year-old, a lily-white doll in your own mind. Well, Julian loved me.” She accuses him of killing Julian for her and ends their encounter by repeatedly slapping him and calling him a murderer.

While she’s wrong about Callahan deliberately killing Julian, she’s right that Callahan loved a woman who didn’t exist. Unlike Marty in *Black Angel*, who at least has the satisfaction of restoring his lady love’s happiness with his self-sacrifice, Callahan is left to wander the streets of Singapore alone, but not without hope. Mai Ling, who sells lottery tickets in the streets, offers her friendship to him after his tumultuous ending with Frennessey. Callahan responds with “Maybe tomorrow.” He’s disillusioned but not destroyed. While Duryea credibly acquits himself as a man of action in the film, he also raises the material considerably with his vulnerable portrait of a man deceived by romance.
Duryea benefited from another change in entertainment production during the fifties and sixties: a trend for overseas film producers to employ well-known but inexpensive American actors in their films in order to distribute them successfully in both their home and American markets. Again, Duryea’s built-in box office appeal, his ability to play the good, the bad and the in-between, and also to either take the lead or a supporting role, made him highly marketable in this new business model. He played the hero with only 36 hours to exonerate himself from a murder rap in the Brit noir Terror Street (1957), and an amoral but almost sympathetic kidnapper-turned-killer in the downbeat English crime drama Do You Know This Voice? (1964). He even appeared in a spaghetti Western, The Hills Run Red (1966), as a mysterious stranger coming to the aid of the revenge-minded protagonist.

Meanwhile, Duryea also continued playing a wide variety of roles in American film and television productions, keeping remarkably busy for an aging actor—the benefit of having successfully mediated the space between movie star and character actor. In 1963, he almost went back to Broadway after an absence of over 20 years to appear in A Case of Libel. Artistic differences with director Sam Wanamaker caused him to quit the show during rehearsals, which belies his later statements that he only wanted to do the play to make himself more bankable in films. The sixties also brought him the opportunity to co-star with his son and fellow actor Peter in two Westerns, Taggart (1965) and Bounty Killer (1965).

Nineteen-sixty-seven proved a fateful year in the actor’s personal life. Duryea’s beloved wife Helen died suddenly from a heart attack on January 21, only a few months before their thirty-sixth wedding anniversary. Later that year, doctors discovered and removed a tumor from Duryea. After recovering from the operation, Duryea continued to act, taking the role of con man Eddie Jacks on the soap Peyton Place and starring in the “B” science fiction film The Bamboo Saucer (1968). The film proved to be Duryea’s final big screen outing. He collapsed and died at home on June 7, 1968, a victim of cancer.

Duryea and Helen left behind two sons who found success on their own terms, an indication of how the couple managed to create a stable home in the often-narcissistic world of Hollywood. Peter eventually left acting but found another vocation. He is the founder and chairperson of the Guiding Hands Recreational Society. The Society’s mission is “to educate people about the value of nature and outdoor recreation, to teach individual responsibility for conservation, ecological awareness and sustainability.” His younger brother Richard pursued a successful career in entertainment management, representing The Beach Boys among others.

Duryea also bequeathed the world a rich film legacy. Although he considered himself a “bread and butter actor,” the performances he gave, both in and outside noir, reveal a talented and compelling actor of immense range. Viewers who explore his roles beyond the well-remembered heavies will find a host of characters, fully human in their vulnerabilities and weaknesses; sometimes overcoming the worst in themselves to become greater, but sometimes bitterly and humanly failing. Duryea’s ability to make acting choices based on how he felt the character would behave imbued his roles with authenticity, the hallmark of a true artist. He did it consistently, no matter the genre or the quality of the production. He was much, much more then the “meanest SOB in the movies.”

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Toughness Stirred Fan Mail
—in Real Life, He Aided Community Activities

HOLLYWOOD, June 7 (AP)—Dan Duryea, famed for his movie and television portrayals of the sex with style of Leo, the shivving nephew of the greedy Hubbard family. The actor never again appeared on Broadway.

He quickly gained a reputation with the public as a tough guy with a penchant for beating up women, a penchant that many feared was accurately translated into sex appeal. He told a reporter once that “my tam-ma goes up every time I see off a girl.” His salary was the lowest, and in 1950 it was reported that he was earning more than $100,000 a year.

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