THE FUNNIEST MAN ON TV

Joel McHale's takedowns of televisual idiocy on *The Soup* have made him a cult favourite with thinkier viewers. Now he's a mainstream star in his own right with the sitcom *Community*. By Michael Adams

"That's the thing," Joel McHale says from the back of a car in Friday afternoon Los Angeles traffic, "for this awards show – for TV and Hollywood's 'The Stahs Ah Spahkling Tonaht!' night – I had the lines: 'Baby, this town will *rip the bones from your back*/It's a *death trap*, it's a *suicide rap*.'" The italics are his intonation, his incredulity, both that the lyrics fit the cynical comic persona for which he's best known and that he was part of the Emmy Awards opening song-and-dance sketch in the first place, doing Bruce Springsteen's 'Born To Run' with Jimmy Fallon, Tina Fey, Jon Hamm, the *Glee* cast and reality TV star Kate Gosselin. He pauses, adds: "It was so funny."

McHale snarling The Boss's lyrics with a smile was indeed fitting – and just a little ironic. Until recently he's been best known as the anti-celebrity celebrity, thanks to his role as sardonic host of *The Soup*, E! channel's weekly round-up of the worst moments in television. Each Friday night (Sundays in Australia), the lanky 38-year-old actor and comedian mercilessly lampoons reality-media buffoons with names like Snooki and The Situation and chronicles the flame-out of stars such as Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears. But in the past year McHale has also become a bona fide celeb himself as leading







McHale with Community*'s cast.*

man of *Community*, in which he plays Jeff Winger, a disbarred lawyer forced to return to community college. That the sitcom was this year a surprise hit – regularly drawing five millions viewers and garnering three Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Comedy Series and Best Actor for McHale – was all the justification NBC needed to put him up there on the NOKIA Theater stage with some of the biggest names in television.

"I was like, Wow, I wonder how many people dropped out before they asked me," McHale continues with that familiar mixture of showbiz cynicism and easy self-deprecation. But beneath that there's also the truly grateful actor made good. "Jimmy Fallon – that was his idea from start to finish and he's always been very good to me and for that I really owe him. It was one of those things I couldn't believe and I was so happy. I was really, really excited."

So, did he get nervous?

"It was this crazy day where you didn't get a chance to let it sink in and think, Hey, this is going to be the opening of the Emmys! You're more like: 'I keep fucking up this dance move and if I fuck it up on stage I'm going to look like a fool.' Believe me, I'm not known for my live, onstage choreographed moves."

Of course, McHale didn't fuck it up. (Had he, he would've been duty bound to mock himself on *The Soup*.) Rather, his Emmy appearance announced that he'd arrived, no longer just a "basic-cable clip show host", as he's always piss-takingly referred to himself, but now a network TV A-lister fit to dance shoulder-to-shoulder with Don Draper, Liz Lemon, and, er, Kate Gosselin.

And, as if any further proof that McHale

has made it is needed, we're talking just as he's driving away from taping a guest slot on *The Tonight Show* – his second such appearance in the past six months.

"Oh, it was disastrous, I was very racist," he says with a self-disgusted sigh when I ask how his chat with Jay Leno went. "When I get nervous, I just fall back on that – it was as bad as you can imagine."

McHale's kidding – he was actually too weary to be nervous. "I haven't slept in about six months," he says. "I'm really freaking tired. When I get tired I don't get nervous because I'm focused on just trying to stay awake. I tend to do well then."

It's not surprising that he's a little exhausted. McHale shoots *The Soup* each Thursday and usually plays a different American city each weekend as part of his ongoing comedy tour. (He only took to stand-up in 2008 but is already so popular he's playing Carnegie Hall on November 5). Meanwhile, *Community*'s first season stretched to 25 episodes – with cast and crew regularly putting in 70 hours a week – and they're already five weeks into shooting the second. He also found time to take supporting roles in two movies – *What's Your Number?* and *The Big Year* – now in post-production, and he has just signed on for Robert Rodriguez's *Spy Kids 4*. Then, of course, there's his wife, Sarah, and young sons Eddie and Isaac to factor in. Busy doesn't cover it.

Is he, I ask, trying to emulate Ryan Seacrest by having 700 careers at once?

"He sleeps like a bat, hanging upside down, with his arms crossed and I've noticed that's a much better way to rest," McHale quips of Seacrest, his E! stablemate and butt of a thousand or so good-natured jibes on *The Soup*. "I'm trying to get as many jobs as he has and it's just not possible. He's like a superhero – a little petite superhero."

Surely, I suggest, he's just not trying hard enough. Why not get a radio show going, like Seacrest, in those wasted early morning "sleeping" hours?

"Yeah! What the hell? I'm a slacker!" laughs McHale. "There are a lot of pictures of me and I can just put *The Soup* or *Community* on and my wife'll be like, 'That's your daddy!'" He sighs at the grain of truth in the joke. "Actually, one of my kids named this large stuffed toy golden retriever 'Daddy Dog.' "I was like, 'Awesome, yeah.'"

"I always dreamed of being on a show that was on for more than two episodes."

Not that McHale's complaining. Doing *Community* represents a lot of what he wanted. "I always dreamed of being on a show that was gonna be on for more than two episodes," he says. It's a comment born from seeing his pilot for an American version of *The IT Crowd* not picked up a few years back. The same fate met the US adaptation of Aussie show *Thank God You're Here*, on whose pilot he guested.



The Soup's *Mankini, aka Dominic DeLeo, McHales' BFF.*

"The next, bigger dream was that it'd be a show that was good and decent. Not decent as in upstanding but decent as in a high-quality show. And I feel it's both those things."

McHale was born in Italy in 1971, the middle of three brothers. His dad was Dean of Students at Loyola University's Rome Center, and his mum's family was also in Rome because her father was working for the United Nations. The McHales soon moved back to the US, settling in Mercer Island in Washington state. Not long after, first-grader Joel was bitten by the performance bug when he appeared in a school play called *It's A Small World*.

Acting came first, comedy second, though in the latter regard he had constant mentor in his father. "He basically taught me the art of smart-assery," McHale says. "He did it all through his life and I think he's probably pleasantly surprised that I found a way to make a living doing it."

While he'd make his name with smart-assery, McHale says he wasn't the funny one at school. "I don't think anyone would go, 'Oh, that guy was the class clown.' I had clown-like tendencies but, no, I was best friends with the real class clowns." He's talking about Ethan Sandler, an actor and writer best known for *Crossing Jordan*, and Dominic DeLeo, one of *The Soup*'s writers and a frequent on-screen presence as pervy minion "Mankini". The three have been best friends since they all went to Mercer Island High School together and taught themselves the art of pop-culture

comic riffing by watching *Mystery Science Theater 3000* after hours.

As a young chap, McHale also wore out the records of Monty Python, Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor, and he adored Bill Murray, Steve Martin, *Kids In The Hall* and *Saturday Night Live*. Even so, comedy now ran *third* to his true passions, which, deadlocked as they were, makes him sound like a sensitive jock character out of *Glee*. "I was always confused," he says. "I knew I wanted to be an actor but I also loved playing sports. I played a lot of sports. Probably too much. I should've focused on one thing but I never did."

Having been into swimming, baseball, soccer, basketball, rowing and football while at school, McHale was tapped to row crew when he went to University of Washington to study for a Bachelor's Degree in history. "I hated it in college because they had all these crazy hazing policies for freshmen like having to shave your head and eyebrows and put all your hair into a pillow," he told *Washington Magazine* earlier this year. Opting out of the sort of douche environment he'd later mock in *The Soup* riffs on reality TV petri dishes like *Big Brother* or *The Bachelorette*, he instead played football for two years.

Fearing a knee blow-out, McHale's love of performance won out when he quit the team and enrolled in a Master of Fine Arts in the UW's Professional Actors Training Program. It was a rigorous dramatic course, under theatrical giant Jon Jory, where he honed his chops on the classics. But during the 1990s, McHale also got his first taste of TV comedy as a cast member of *Almost Live!*, a Seattle skit show, where he found another mentor in radio and television personality Pat Cashman.

Ferreting out *Almost Live!* clips on YouTube is to see a confident young performer whose natural affability softens edgy material. McHale is having fun learning the ropes with a silly Vegetable Rights song or doing a bit where he suggests Yuletide gifts such as a bumper sticker that reads "My teenage daughter's a virgin – just like Jesus' mom!" (In some eps, he's rocking some pretty amusing grunge-era long hair, too.) YouTube trawling also turns up ads he did around then for Washington Lottery's Lucky For Life – in which he sports a Snooki-style fake tan as a game show host.

McHale wasn't the class clown, but rather a jock who wanted to be an actor.

After McHale graduated UW in 2000, he and Sarah, who had married in 1996, moved to Los Angeles, where he trod the well-worn path of the jobbing actor. His auditioning paid off with dramatic guest roles on *CSI: Miami*, *The Fugitive* and *Diagnosis Murder* and and gained him "that guy" profile with ads for Burger King, Nutrigrain and IHOP. He also scored a memorable walk-on as a comically mean bank manager in *Spider-Man 2*.

But before Sam Raimi's blockbuster even hit cinemas, McHale's career had taken a superheroic leap when he landed the gig fronting E!'s revival of its popular comedy-clip show *Talk Soup*, whose best-loved host Greg Kinnear had gone on to become an A-list, Oscar-nominated star. The revamp was originally to be called – saints preserve us – *What The... ? Awards* – though saner minds prevailed, maintaining the link with the past in *The Soup*. McHale brought Sandler and DeLeo on as writers and they turned their wise-assery on the dimmest wits entertainment has ever had to offer.

In the six years since, McHale and *The Soup* team have had an embarrassment of embarrassing riches with which to work. Whereas *Talk Soup* focused on chat shows, its successor's remit is the ever-proliferating, ever-weirder world of reality TV and the fame-whore celebrities it creates, celebrates and chews up.

McHale bears more than a passsing resemblance to Max Headroom as he passes acidic judgment on this post-apocalyptic pop culture that's always sinking to new lows but never seems in danger of hitting bottom. The show is as funny as it is freaky, a safe, reliably hilarious way of surveying a medium that's exploring the outer limits of morality on the way to total madness. Amid the horror-show clips, McHale and his team have also created a series of so-bad-they're-good in-jokes to delight regular viewers. There's the uber-macho opening graphic for a segment called "Gay Shows", the crying plasticine children of "What The Kids Are Watching", pop-up videos of a screeching Whitney Houston, a throaty white-trash voiceover to announce anything to do with Miley Cyrus and various atrocities inflicted on/by Lou, the show's mascot Chihuahua. McHale also gets in the on the act, having appeared as a surrealistic version of Rainbow Brite and as the sleazy draggy "Mail Nurse", among many others.

Early on, McHale had to trawl through towers of TV tapes but nowadays the terrifying task mostly falls to his writers and interns. The poor saps spend hours and hours enduring the effluvia of *The Tyra Show, Toddlers & Tiaras, Jersey Shore, The Biggest Loser, America's Got Talent, The Real Housewives Of New Jersey, For The Love Of Ray J* and dozens more to find the alluvial comic gold of particularly egregious temper tantrums or moments of gob-smacking self aggrandisement.

"I'm kinda surprised there isn't a show called *Ow! My Balls!* yet."

Shared *schadenfreude* and sniping at such celebrity silliness is a spectator sport enjoyed from sofas the world over. What makes McHale so good at it – beyond the sharp writing – is that he can somehow deliver the blackest of judgments without

seeming mean. And that's no mean feat when you're implying "exhausted" starlets are merely coke whores, that exploitative parents are serving their television tykes up for the entertainment of paedophiles or that entire ensembles of reality shows are infected with sexual diseases.

McHale gets away with it because he's so damned likable but also because typically whichever punchline he serves up has been roundly earned by the clip that precedes it. We also side with him because he sides with us against the intellectual pollution pumped out elsewhere on E! network. Called on to cross promote *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, he unfailingly referred to ur-Kardashian Kim as being "famous for having a big ass and a sex tape". He similarly tainted Denise Richards' reality show by continually enunciating the show's title in full as "Denise Richards' Colon It's Complicated". What's really funny is that *The Soup* now outrates all but two of the other shows on E!

McHale is always asked whether he's been confronted by many of his victims. It's surprising that, with the notable exceptions of Tyra Banks and David Hasselhoff, who snarked back, he hasn't, especially given that many of his killer takedowns are highly personal and aimed at the most egotistical and image-conscious people in history, who also happen to be his neighbours and sometimes even workmates.

Were you worried, I ask, about having to spend a day working on the Emmy opener



Joel McHale's clean-cut affability sweetens the acidic takedowns delivered against the tyranny of TV idiocy.









McHale and The Soup*'s mascot Lou.*

with Kate Gosselin? For those not in the know, she's the reality star who got famous in the octupletsploitation hit *Jon & Kate Plus Eight* and has since been a frequent punching bag on *The Soup*. "When I first met her I was like, 'Oh, boy, she's gonna hate me,'" McHale says. "I have to say she was nothing but lovely. Very cool, really nice. I was like, 'Wow, when I make fun of her next time I'll feel a little bit bad.'"

In the language of tabloid news, why *don't* his victims speak out?

"People who are on reality shows – who became famous for being crazy – they pursued getting on those shows," he explains. "They signed the releases, they auditioned, they worked hard so they could get on those shows and drink and be stuck in a house together. That takes a person who wants to be famous for any reason and so any press is good press as far as they're concerned. And as far as celebrities, my MO is we never go after anyone who hasn't done something ridiculous. If Lindsay Lohan walked up to me and said, 'How dare you say those things?' I'd be like, 'Well, you probably shouldn't have done cocaine again when you got out of jail. What do you expect?' I was introduced to Hasselhoff at a fundraiser and he called me 'sleazy.' Then I made fun of him right back to him. If that's the worst I get, great." He laughs. "But I'm sure someone's gonna walk up and punch me one of these days."

But back to the subject of Lohan, who just earlier today has Tweeted that she failed a drug test, and may now be headed back to jail. Her spiral seems now more that of a sad addict than a spoiled brat. Does McHale ever think he and *The Soup* ought to give her a break?

"Yeah, oh, yeah," he says. "When Britney started going really crazy – not crazy, but when she was really having some problems – we'd lay off. With Lindsay… I don't know if it's gonna get to that point. It might. But who knows? She clearly has a big huge problem and has to deal with it. Hopefully we're not being too mean and just funny and not harsh."

"I'm sure someone's gonna walk up and punch me one of these days."

It's a fine line, but sometimes the harshness served with *The Soup* doesn't seem harsh enough. That's because increasingly the clips featured resemble nothing so much as excerpts from Mike Judge's *Idiocracy*. In this satire, America's population in the year 2505 is borderline retarded, product-obsessed and totally enthralled by a TV show called *Ow! My Balls!,* which is comprised entirely of a guy's testicles getting traumatised.

"I'm kinda surprised there isn't a show called *Ow! My Balls!* yet," McHale says. "I'm very surprised by that. And now," he says with a laugh, "I'm gonna pitch that. In a way, it *has* gotten to that point. There's a show called *Pants-Off Dance-Off*, which

is just people dancing in front of their favourite videos and taking their clothes off for $200. That's the entire show. I'm sure there will be live executions. With the number of channels they're going to add in the future, it'll just become so splintered they'll do anything. They're doing anything for ratings now and there are so many niches of entertainment. Who would've thought there'd be a show called *Ice Road Truckers*? It's a really good show. I like that show, but who would've thought that 10 years ago?"

For McHale, though, American television is soaring to new peaks even as it plumbs new depths. Maybe in some odd way the price we have to pay for having *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *30 Rock* and *Glee* on our screens is also knowing the schedule is littered with turds like *Bad Girls' Club*, *Celebrity Fit Club*, *Swift Justice With Nancy Grace* and *Steven Seagal Lawman*. "Television is polarising itself," he says. "There are better shows on TV than there have ever been on in the history of television. And there are shows that have never been worse."

So, what is the worst for the man who's made his career out of seeing and mocking it all?

"I can't stand shows like *Big Brother*, where people just whisper and conspire to eliminate each other. I just find it so tedious. It drives me out of my mind. I feel like my personal hell would be someone saying, 'Hi Joel, we're just going to lock you in this room with a bunch of people and you're just going to *slowly* tear each other apart verbally.'"

On paper, that's what *Community* might look like – a bunch of misfits often stuck together in the same study room. Happily, the cast is bright and talented and share a terrific chemistry and the writing and direction are fast and funny. It's a show confident enough in its pop culture literacy to do an episode-long riff on *Goodfellas* but not so cool that it's afraid to tug heartstrings with its romantic tangles and characters' epiphanies.

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Community showcases McHale's talents as an actor in a role that's still familiar in its smart assery. It's also making stars of ensemble members like Gillian Jacobs as spunky love-foil Britta and Danny Pudi as pop-culture savant Abed. Thankfully, it has also helped rescue McHale-hero Chevy Chase – who plays weirdy senior citizen Pierce – from crap like *Zoom* and *The Karate Dog*.

The show's pinballing wit, freewheeling vibe and emotional accessibility makes it the closest we've come to John Hughes, with the bonus being that the kids in this school are adults – at least in terms of their age. It's no coincidence the pilot episode was dedicated to the creator of



The Breakfast Club and *16 Candles*.

"*Community* was hands-down the funniest script I had read in years," McHale says, whose growing popularity with *The Soup* has seen him considered for a lot of pilots. "I was reading it on a plane and the guy next to me was watching the movie *What Happens In Vegas* and I was laughing out loud and interrupting his romantic comedy so much he got pissed at me. I thought, Wow, this is pretty good.' There are so many pilots that you read that are about a thirtysomething guy who cannot find love. This was so new and fresh and so not that."

Part of the appeal was that *Community* was created by Dan Harmon. While he most recently scored as co-creator of *The Sarah Silverman Show*, Harmon also has cult cred up the wazoo as the co-comic genius behind 1999's *Heat Vision and Jack*, one of the most famous not-picked-up pilots in history, which starred Owen Wilson and Jack Black. "Dan's just one of the most creative people I have ever met in my life," says McHale.

The *Community* concept was loosely based on Harmon's own experiences, but he has said the show's success rests largely on the casting. And McHale fits Winger like a glove – or is it the other way around?

"Dan said early on to all of us, 'I'm going to write to all of your strengths.'" says McHale. "That's why Danny's [*Indian*] character Ahmed now speaks *Polish*! Because Danny's half Polish, was raised in a Polish neighbourhood and he speaks fluent Polish."

Community's momentum is still building and in the week after we speak, the first season will become a bestselling DVD set while the second season will premiere to strong ratings and reviews.

"It's been a great ride," says McHale, before he gets started on a weekend with the family. "I knew from reading the script that this is something that could keep going, this is something where the possibilites are endless.

The Soup host pauses, deadpans: "I'm just hoping that *Community* can become as popular as the *Kardashians*."