



TEN OUT OF 10



For twelve years, Matt LeBlanc lodged himself in viewers' consciousness as Joey, the lovable, if not-too-bright, struggling actor on NBC's *Friends* and its Joey spinoff. Now he's pulled the rug out on that.

In Showtime's *Episodes*, a comic satire of the television industry, Matt LeBlanc plays Matt LeBlanc, a tantalizingly shrewd, somewhat fictional version of himself, who thinks nothing of exploiting his former Joey TV persona to his advantage.

In one scene, for instance, his character, who is making a comeback on a new sitcom, is leaving the set for a custody hearing for his children. "I'll be fine," he quips. "I'll just give the judge a couple of 'How you doin's?'"

"It was fun to poke fun at a guy who knows what it's like to be the guy who played Joey," says LeBlanc, who, in real life, can't go out without someone spouting that Joey catchphrase or trying to foist sandwiches on him.

"That's where Joey and I are alike: I love a good sandwich," LeBlanc says. "But I can tie my own shoes." He adds: "If people believe that's who I was, then I did my job well."

Joey aside, part of the fun in *Episodes* is trying to determine where the real Matt LeBlanc ends and this TV counterpart begins.

"He's a little more of an asshole than I like to think I am," says LeBlanc, referring to his character's flawed morals. In one scene, he sleeps with his good friend's wife. "It's not something I would do," the actor says. "Or if it did happen, it's not because 'Stuff happens.'"

How about his character's assertion that he once played one of the lost boys in a Broadway production of *Peter Pan*? "I did play the cowardly lion in sixth grade," LeBlanc offers.

Boston raised, LeBlanc was working as a carpenter when he paid a visit to New York. An innocent street flirtation with an aspiring actress resulted in a commercial gig.

He landed his first regular television part at twenty-one, playing a high school jock on CBS's *TV 101*. Other series roles followed, including

Fox's *Top of the Heap*. He was out of work, though, and down to his last eleven dollars when he auditioned for *Friends*. During the audition, he thought, "If this goes good, I can get out of debt."

Friends, which ran from 1994 to 2004, snowballed into one of the most popular sitcoms ever. LeBlanc, who says he always had to drink three cups of coffee before he could channel high-energy Joey, was nominated for Primetime Emmys three times during the run as outstanding lead actor in a comedy.

After his spinoff ended in '06, LeBlanc focused on raising his young daughter and enjoying his cattle ranch near Santa Barbara. He quit dyeing his hair. "I'm forty-three. How long are you going to have no gray hair?" he says.

When the creators of *Episodes*, David Crane (an executive producer of *Friends*) and Jeffrey Klarik (briefly, a story editor on *Friends*), came knocking, LeBlanc initially felt apprehensive. But the more he thought about it, the more excited he got, especially knowing he'd be less shackled by censorship.

"I spent twelve years playing a character that always had to be PC."

Now Showtime, which coproduces *Episodes* with the BBC, has picked up the series for a second season. Along the way, LeBlanc has pitched a few gags of his own. One was inspired by the final contracts he and his *Friends* costars negotiated for \$1 million per episode, a deal that became front-page news.

"Everyone assumes we're super rich," LeBlanc says. "I said, 'Let's exploit that. Get me a jet.'"

Matt
LEBLANC

BY ANN FARMER

