



TV

## Culture clash

On set with showbiz satire Episodes...

**O**N A PINEWOOD soundstage, Matt LeBlanc (played by Matt LeBlanc) is walking off the set of his new sitcom, on his way to a benefit for rape prevention. "Have fun at your rape thing!" chirrups Britcom actress Tamsin Greig, lobbing a barbed potshot. As Beverly Lincoln, the spiky half of a married English couple (fellow *Green Wing*-er Stephen

Mangan plays hubby Sean) lured out to Hollywood to remake their Bafta-hoovering telly series, she's watched their class act about a boarding school headmaster (played by Richard Griffiths) get mangled into a sitcom about a high-school ice-hockey coach (LeBlanc) called *Pucks!* No wonder she's feeling snarky.

### TALKING POINT

NBC execs once pressured the *Friends* creators to introduce an older, wisdom-dispensing cop to widen that show's demographics. "When the ratings took off, they backed off," says Crane.

Irked, LeBlanc grunts back sarcastically: "Thanks..." then stalks beyond the set's flimsy walls. Eyeing *Total Film*, he shrugs his shoulders: "Hard to remember my lines..." Even with his new silver-fox look, it's like bumping into Joey Tribbiani. And for good reason: *Episodes*' conceit is LeBlanc playing himself, albeit inflated for comic effect, toying with our preconceptions that, surely, he's just like the adorable dimbulb he played on *Friends* and spin-off *Joey* for 12 years. LeBlanc acknowledges his own Joey-ism, flashing a white-toothed smile before heading back on set. This is getting meta...

### With friends like these

*Episodes* is the brainchild of *Friends* co-creator David Crane and his real-life

partner Jeffrey Klarik (*Mad About You*). Partly inspired by Ricky Gervais' *Extras* and *The Larry Sanders Show*, they resolved to channel their own excruciating toils in the crazy arena of US network television (and the dynamics of their 22-year relationship into Sean and Beverly) into a sharp-tongued showbiz satire, which they pitched

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successfully to Showtime in the US and Hat Trick and the Beeb over here. Telly veterans with hits and flops under their belt (their only prior joint effort, *The Class*, lasted a single season), they've experienced the sharp end of moronic nitpicking that piledrives

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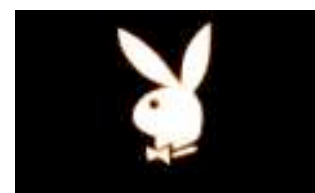
## BITE ME

You know what the world needs more of? Vampires! *Scream* scribe Kevin Williamson thinks so – he's creating a spin-off to his teen vamp series *The Vampire Diaries*. He says it'll be "*The X-Files* meets *Buffy*", is set on a college campus and features paranormal investigating. No word yet on the emo quotient.



## GHOUL TOWN

Sam Neill has been cast alongside former *Lost* regular Jorge García in *Alcatraz*, a new pilot from J.J. Abrams. The show follows an FBI team who are assigned to investigate a spate of reappearances by former prisoners and guards at the infamous jail, who vanished while it was still open. *Ugly Betty* and *House* gueststar Sarah Jones will also star.



## PLAY TIME

*Mad Men* has a lot to answer for – most notably new NBC series *Playboy*. Set in the '60s, it focuses on a team of women in a New York Playboy club working as Bunny Girls. Unlike its counterpart in Madison Avenue, *Playboy* will explore the sexual revolution.



## MAD WORLD

Speaking of *Mad Men*, the show has made such a pop culture impact it's inspired a uni course. Northwestern University are offering 'Consumerism And Social Change In *Mad Men* America, 1960-1965'. The Professor of History says the show "represents the mindset of the era". But is it still fun now it's educational?

stupid?' And he's not." Adds Crane: "There are elements of the real Matt, but it's not the real Matt. It's a character. He's amazingly game." LeBlanc *was* game – although, in agreeing to play the duo's punchline (in early episodes at least), he was nervous about fiction blurring too close with reality.

"I was afraid it would be too exposing," LeBlanc admits of his *Episodes* counterpart, a serial philanderer going through a nasty divorce and living high on the Hollywood hog. "It's a version of me that's much funnier than I am in real life, and also more damaged – I hope." Indeed, even he found some of Crane and Klarik's riffing too close to the bone: "I talk about a need to sabotage my happiness and an inability to appreciate the consequences of my actions," LeBlanc chuckles ruefully. "I'm learning a lot about myself, let's put it that way."

## Three's a crowd

Conceived in America, shot on both sides of the Atlantic, starring two Brits and a Yank, *Episodes* is a proper fusion of two distinct comedy cultures – though it remains to be seen how auspiciously Crane and Klarik have bridged the gap. Filtering the dysfunction of US network TV through the beady-eyed prism of two cynical Brits was always going to pose a challenge, even for comedy brains as sharp as theirs. There was the language barrier, for one thing. "There were words we'd never heard before," says Klarik. "*Shambolic*?! Seriously, we thought they were making it up." "Bollocks," adds Crane. "We don't have those."

Speaking of nether regions... *Episodes* gets its story thrust from the threesome dynamic between LeBlanc, Mangan and Greig, with

Sean and Bev's marriage disintegrating as he embraces LA with enthusiasm, and falls into a platonic bromance with LeBlanc, who whisks him off to Las Vegas – then shows him his legendarily enormous penis. That's right, *Episodes'* Matt has been given an unfeasibly large endowment. "It was a deal-breaker for me," LeBlanc deadpans. "Yeah, it was fun... At first I was like, 'Why exactly?' But it turned out to be funny. You don't ever see it, by the way."

"Your penis goes a long way in this series," Greig snickers to her co-star. "We had to keep a dick-joke count in one episode. And we still managed to squeeze another one in..." **Matt Mueller**

➤ *Episodes* is currently airing on BBC2 and is out on DVD on 28 February.

Old friends: (left) Matt LeBlanc and Tamsin Greig share a joke on set; (below) prepping for a scene.



promising pilots into oblivion, and regularly upends the attempted Americanisations of Brit hits (*The Office* being the rare, glorious exception). "You just know that whatever charm the original show has will get taken out," says Klarik. So, in holding up a harsh mirror to a frequently asinine industry, is *Episodes* their revenge? "It's all done with love," insists the jolly, bearded Crane. "Not from me – I'm full of revenge," counters his more acidic other half. It's not hard to work out which one's Beverly.

LeBlanc was always on their minds as *Episodes'* pivot: the sitcom supernova who gets wedged into the show and its creators' lives. "We wanted someone who people think they know and we know that's not who he is," explains Klarik. "They expect Joey. Even friends of ours will say, 'Isn't he

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