

TW

Wednesday

In Hollywood, they said John Lithgow was too good for TV. Then he went and proved it by winning four Emmys in the last six years for "3rd Rock From the Sun." Now the over-the-top actor has a new crop of fans — little kids.



John Lithgow is beginning to look toward the day that "3rd Rock From the Sun" will end.

'Rock'-a-bye baby

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Actor John Lithgow has won four Emmy awards and a worldwide audience thanks to the hit sitcom "3rd Rock from the Sun."

But this high-concept comedy does not have too many years left. Thanks to too many timeslot shifts, NBC turned an instant Top 10 smash into a dependable, albeit more modest success.

Lithgow is committed to two more years, but there is talk that these E.T.s may be going home as early as the end of this season.

If that happens, the loudest sighs of disappointment may sound a little high-pitched.

These days, Lithgow's biggest fans are little kids.

Adults know him as the TV star who's played homicidal maniacs on screen ("Ricochet") and one-upped Cary Grant on Broadway ("The Front Page"). But he's been quietly building a second career by strapping on an acoustic guitar and spouting nonsense tunes like "The Gnu Song" or reciting silly poems that start "Once there was an elephant who tried to use the telephone."

The 55-year-old has a children's CD, a video and a picture book out — and a concert tour in the works. The book is "The Remarkable

Farkle McBride," (\$16; Simon & Schuster), the amusing story of a musically prodigious little boy who quickly bores of the instruments he's mastered. Lithgow wrote it to perform with an orchestra, as a new way of introducing young people to the symphony. "The concerts are neat, because they combine something I've wanted to do with something that's so necessary," says Lithgow, who will read from the book at the Lincoln Center Barnes & Noble and Books of Wonder on September 21. "There's been a vacuum left by Leonard Bernstein and Danny Kaye."

They were famous for popularizing classical music, and Lithgow hopes to follow in their footsteps with Farkle McBride. Lithgow's intentions are clear in the has-to-be-read-aloud text.

"When Farkle McBride was a three-year-old tyke, all freckle-y, bony, and thin, He astonished his friends and his family alike, by playing superb violin," reads one passage. But in the story — wittily illustrated by C.F. Payne — the boy smashes his instrument in frustration when it seems too lim-



"3rd Rock" is still in orbit.

Raffi set.

"One thing I learned early on was to never let them on stage with me," explains Lithgow, who has children of his own. "Don't even let them reach out and untie your shoelace. That becomes the big event, and once you lose them you can never win them back."

"When '3rd Rock' is over, we'll all feel tremendously melancholy, but there comes a time when it's time to move on. But it's wonderful to have something specific to go on to. I've always thought the best way to follow

"3rd Rock" was to return to Broadway, do something serious on stage."

That's exactly what he'll do: star on Broadway in 2002 in a new musical of the classic Burt Lancaster movie, "Sweet Smell of Success." A recent workshop production went so well, that Lithgow's collaborators — including director Nicholas Hytner, writer John Guare and composer Marvin Hamlisch — are composing at the bit.

"The great frustration is that we all wanted to go right to work on it," says Lithgow. "It is awful to have to put it in mothballs for several months."

ited. Ultimately, Farkle finds happiness as a conductor.

Lithgow knows it's a challenge to keep kids entertained, something he'll be doing at Carnegie Hall on Nov. 12.

"It's a very particular kind of response you get from kids," says Lithgow, who only started playing the guitar at age 27. "It's very unsophisticated and unedited. You know when you've got them, and you sure know when you don't. They don't sit there like stones, like adults. They run away. They literally run away!"

Lithgow has learned a few rules for maintaining control of the