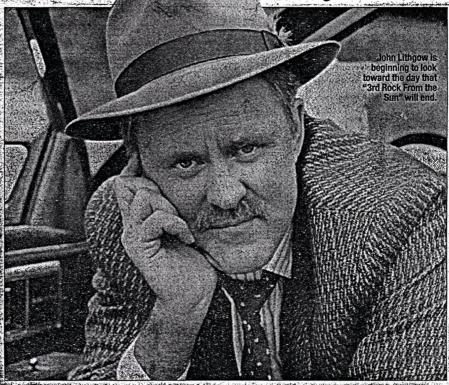
In Hollywood, they said John Lithgow was too good for TV. Then ... he went and proved it by winning four Emmys in the last six years for "3rd Rock From the Sun. Now the over-the-top actor has a new crop of fans little kids.



By MICHAEL GILTZ

ctor John Lithgow has won four Emmy awards and a worldwide audi-ence thanks to the hit sitcom "3rd Rock from

But this high-concept comedy does not have too many years left. new way of intro-tranks to too many timeslot ducing young peo-shifts NEC turned an instant Top, ple to the symphony. 10 smash into a dependable, albeit more modest success.

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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 who s piayed hometean manuacy on screen ("Ricochet") and one-upped Cary Graiff on Breadway ("The Front Page"). But he's been quietly building a second career by strapping on an account cruit tar and spouting nonsense tunes like "The Gnu Song" or sectifing silly poems that start "Once there was an elephant who tried to use

the telephant." 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 musical-ly prodigious little boy who quickly bores of the instru-ments he's mastered. Lithgow wrote it to perform with an orchestra, as a new way of intro-

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 Kave.

They were famous for populariz-ing 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-

ited. Ultimately, Farkle finds happiness as a conductor.

Lithgow knows it's a challenge to keep kids entertained, some-thing 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 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 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

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 produc-tion went so well, that Lithgow's collaborators—including director Nicholas Hytner, writer John Guare and composer Marvin Ham

lisch — are chomping at the bit. The great frustration is that we all wanted to go right to work entit," says Lithgow. "It is awful to have to put it in mothballs for several months."