

● REALLY BIG SHOW

Heeere's . . .

The Michael Essany Show



Essany, a 20-year-old student, fights for Johnny Carson's crown on E! by holding court with Hollywood names, such as Kelly Rowland and her pet.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

COLLEGE student Michael Essany was seven years old when he became obsessed with Johnny Carson and late-night television.

"My grandparents introduced me to Johnny," says Essany, who is now 20.

"During the school year, my dad would tape the show for me. You've heard Rosie O'Donnell say she wanted to stay home from school to watch Merv Griffin. It was the same for me, but with late-night."

At 14, Essany began doing his own talk show on a cable-access channel in his hometown of Valparaiso, Ind. Mom worked the camera, Dad provided snacks and the living room was his set. But no unknown bands or second-rate talent for Essany.

"I knew my show would never go anywhere if I had local talent," says Essany.

"I wanted 'Tonight Show' quality guests."

It took a year for Essany to put together his first three episodes, which included celebs like Ed McMahon (who even re-

corded "Heeereere's Michael!" for him), Roger Moore, and Leeza Gibbons. Six years later, Essany is closing in on his 100th episode and Gibbons is producing a reality show for E! called "The Michael Essany Show."

It's not yet the late-night talk show he's dreamed about. This six-episode series is more like "Larry Sanders" crossed with "Meet My Folks," with the first half showing Essany working on booking guests, polishing his monologue and trying to get through classes as a sophomore at Valparaiso University.

The second half shows highlights from his show, such as David Brenner talking about what Carson is really like.

An earnestly excitable fellow, Essany speaks enthusiastically about all the celebs who agreed to appear on his show when it was just the schmucky little dream of a kid living out in the middle of nowhere.

"These people did not have to help me," says Essany.

"For five years, I booked 91 celebrity guests and they were not offered nationwide exposure. Jeff Foxworthy, Jewel,

Ray Romano, Leeza Gibbons — they were just trying to help me."

Essany doesn't think anyone has yet filled Carson's shoes. "Johnny's the MVP of late-night hosts," he says.

"He was more of an entertainer. He could do things they can't. A lot of hosts go wrong by making too many punchlines when there aren't any there to begin with. It's almost like they're chasing a joke quota and it's ridiculous."

He's thrilled about this show, but won't be crushed if it doesn't take off because this is a reality series — and he isn't calling the shots. So for now he'd rather have high grades than high Nielsen ratings.

And what about Carson's many marriages? Is Essany following in his footsteps there? Is he at least dating someone?

"No, I'm not," admits Essany. So having his own show on E! can't hurt his social life, can it?

"No, it cannot," he laughs.

"Feel free to print that!"

THE MICHAEL ESSANY SHOW
Sunday, 10:30 p.m., E!