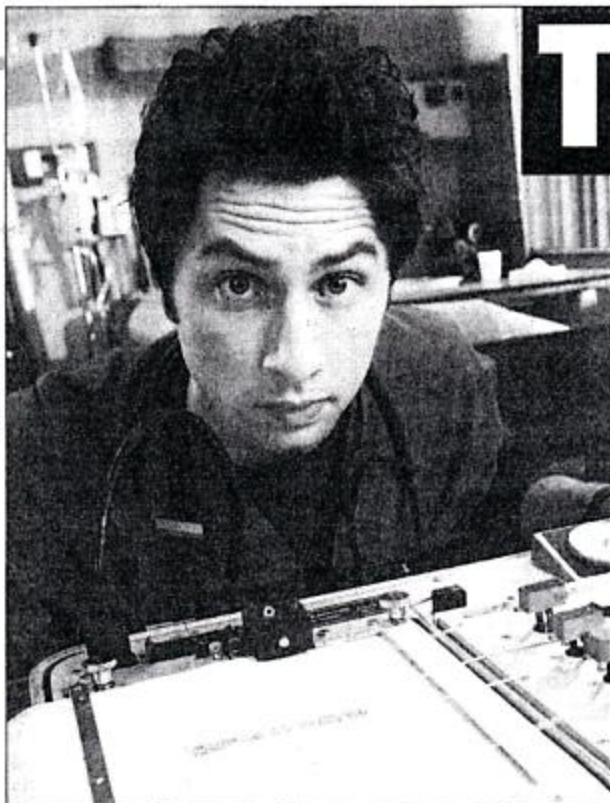


TV Sunday

Zach Braff's second-grade teacher gave him his first stage direction — tone it down a little.



NBC has its first hit comedy since 'Will & Grace' with a show called 'Scrubs.' It stars a Woody Allen actor from New Jersey who took a big gamble

Dr. Strangeglove

By MICHAEL GILTZ

SURE, Zach Braff is star ring in the new NBC sitcom "Scrubs." But who are his family and friends really excited about seeing? Rosie O'Donnell.

"I just did her show," says Braff. "I didn't even realize my family were such big Rosie O'Donnell fans. But when I told them I was doing the show, everyone wanted to come."

His family may naturally think of other people as real celebrities, but soon the 26-year-old actor will be getting that sort of attention from everyone else. He stars in one of the riskiest new shows of the season, a sitcom that veers in tone from silly to sentimental while telling of the travails of JD, a puppy-dog cute, first-year doctor.

"The show is unique," says Braff, who grew up in South Orange, N.J. and gave up his apartment on Avenue A and 7th Street when "Scrubs" made the fall schedule for NBC. "There's no laugh track and it's not strictly comedy. Even within comedy, it vacillates between different genres. At times, it's slapstick and at times it's really dry. Then all of a sudden, you come around the corner and you're in a dramatic scene."

At times, "Scrubs" seems to owe a great debt to "Ally McBeal" — there are fantasy sequences that let us know what

JD and his friends are really thinking — but the real inspiration is obviously "M*A*S*H" meets "ER," thanks to its serio-comic tone and a great cast including Donald Adeosun Faison of "Clueless" as his buddy Turk, Judy Reyes as the smarter-than-the-doctor nurse Carla and John C. McGinley in a breakout role as the caustic Dr. Cox.

"If we could think of a show we aspire to be like, ["M*A*S*H"] is the bar," admits Braff, who is single. Though he jokingly promises they'll bail out long before "M*A*S*H" stretched-out, 11-season run, "Scrubs" is off to a good start. It's one of only two new sitcoms to get good reviews (the other is "Undeclared" on Fox) and it's done a pretty good job of holding on to the audience for "Frasier," which it follows. "Scrubs" has already been picked up for the entire season by NBC.

For Braff, it's the culmination of a lifetime of hard work and a gutsy decision that might have ended his barely beginning career.

He stepped on stage for the first time in a grade school production of "The Emperor's New Clothes" held in the library.

"My first direction was from my second grade teacher, Mr. Wallis, who told me I should bring it down a little," Braff laughs. "I was already a ham in second grade."

He got the performing bug and went on to acting camp when he was older, where a manager spotted him and started sending Braff out for commercials and other gigs.

"I went on hundreds of auditions and didn't get anything for a while," remembers Braff, who would take the train into Manhattan almost every day after school. "It's hard. It's so, so hard. For every 'yes' you get, it feels like you get a thousand 'no's'."

'When you're in a Woody Allen movie, there's a really nice momentum. To walk away from it was a really hard decision'

At 14, he did a pilot for a CBS drama set in a high school that never made it on the schedule. Then Braff filmed the After School Special, "My Summer as a Girl," where he dressed up like a maid to get near the girl he wanted to date.

"A lot of people pull out the Tom Hanks/'Bosom Buddies' analogy. And if you're going to pull anything out of that experience, let it be that. It was essentially 'Tootsie' for kids. In order to get the girl, I had to dress up like a girl. The story had to be told," he deadpans.

Amazingly, his friends didn't

tease Braff about it. "It would have been different if I was in drag working in a burlesque club," he says.

Then came the once-in-a-lifetime break that every actor dreams of: a role in a Woody Allen movie. Braff got the plum role of Allen's son in "Manhattan Murder Mystery."

"I was 18 and it was my first film credit," says Braff. "It was very surreal. 'Annie Hall' is one of my favorite movies of all time.

And to be there in a scene playing Diane Keaton and Woody Allen's son is... the only way to describe it is dreamlike. You keep waiting to wake up. It's really weird."

So what did Braff do to capitalize on this momentum? He went to college for four years and didn't go on a single audition.

"When you're in a Woody Allen movie, there's a really nice momentum. To walk away from it was a really hard decision," says Braff.

"But it was really important to me that I get a liberal arts education. I really wanted to study film. So I went away for four years. I didn't audition for anything. I made short films and took acting classes. Then I came back to New York and started up again."

The gamble paid off: Braff picked up right where he left off. First came a role at the Public Theater in "Macbeth," opposite

Alec Baldwin, Angela Bassett, Liev Schreiber and directed by George Wolfe. Then came a flashy turn as a gay, drug-addicted club kid in "The Broken Hearts Club" and now "Scrubs."

"It's such a lottery," says Braff, who knows how lucky he is to be on a show he can actually be proud of — and that actually made it on the air.

"Look at how many pilots get made. If you're lucky enough to get a part in a pilot and you're lucky enough to get that picked up and then lucky enough to get a good time slot and get good reviews..." he pauses, fumbling for the right words. "It's amazing that it ever happens."

Now he plans on keeping the momentum going, by working during his hiatus and hopefully one day fulfilling his dream of directing. Braff is certainly helped by the whirlwind pace of a show that moves as quickly behind the scenes as those head-spinning moments on "ER."

"We shoot the show so fast," says Braff, "we have a five-month hiatus. We fly! We don't even take breaks. We shoot five days a week, every week, and we bang out an episode in five days."

"So, we do 22 episodes and I'm done at the end of January and I have five months off. So I could do a movie and a play. Other shows usually do two weeks on, one week off. I'm so glad. For me, I'm so excited to work, I'm going to work nonstop."