

TV Sunday

'Smallville' will be big



Tom Welling (right) plays Superman as an uncomfortable teen — without a cape — who can do things other kids can't.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

WHEN actor Tom Welling found out he'd won the part of Superman as a teenager in the new WB series "Smallville" — a role that could transform him from a mild-mannered 24-year-old actor into a major star — he was in exactly the right spot: a phone booth.

OK, there aren't actually any real phone booths left in L.A. But he was on the side of the road with a phone in his hand.

"I went to the final screen test between me and another fellow," he remembers. "I was on my way back from the Warner Bros. studio and I stopped in a gas station to call my manager and tell him how it went. I called and get him on the phone and he said, 'Can you hold on a second?' I'm like, well, alright. I'm thinking, 'Thanks for the priority.' Next thing I know, there are literally seven people on the other line and almost in unison they say, 'Tom, you got it!'"

Calling from the set in Vancouver, Welling is bracing for the onslaught of attention that "Smallville" will bring him when it debuts Oct. 16 on the WB. (It has one of the toughest slots in television, facing off against "Frasier" and the new hit "Scrubs" on NBC; the cult favorite "Roswell" on UPN; and "24," the most talked-about show of the season on Fox.)

Welling, who was born in upstate New York and spent years in Michigan, Wisconsin and Del-

Want to play Superman? Then you'd better be able to carry the weight

aware, has every reason to expect the show will change his life. His biggest previous success came on a three-episode arc of "Judging Amy" that was expanded to six. He also had a brief appearance as a frat boy in the pilot for Fox's "Undeclared."

He may be a relative unknown, but the character of Superman has unfailingly brought its stars fame. Superman has succeeded as a comic book, a newspaper serial, a radio show, a matinee serial at the movies, the memorable '50s TV show starring George Reeves, the smash films with Christopher Reeves, the romantic comedy "Lois & Clark" that ran for four years on ABC.

The only truly forgettable Man of Steel was a little-remembered syndie show "Superboy" that ran

for three years in the late '80s and had a college-age Clark Kent battling vampires and other paranormal things.

As everyone has made clear, this Clark Kent is just a teenager with super powers that make him feel awkward and alone — just like most teens. "No tights; no flights" is their motto.

Welling, who has been happily tackling 14-hour days on the set and isn't even sure which episode they're on, likes that. He tried to fit in during school by switching from acting to sports like soccer and baseball. But Welling loves that Clark isn't a goody-goody hero yet. He might even be rebellious ... and a rebellious teen with super powers is something to behold.

"Clark is one of the kids," explains Welling. "He has a lot of friends, but he's not necessarily the most popular because he feels the powers that he does have alienate him from being a real kid. He's trying to come to grips with what that means. They've made him less geeky, less square."

"Clark's not always going to be the nice guy; he won't always do the right thing. He's a teenage kid trying to grasp the concept of these abilities and what he's here for and how did he get here and where is he going. There's going to be anger and vengeance and violence. We all know how he turns out; this is the journey of how he gets there."