

Julian McMahon: Smooth Operator



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By JOE RHODES

For all of its skin-deep emphasis on sex, scalpels and superficiality, its outrageous plot lines, gruesome medical scenes and gasp-generating bedroom couplings (Can America ever be the same after seeing Rosie O'Donnell and Julian McMahon humping on a zebra-print rug?), "Nip/Tuck", the Emmy and Golden Globe-winning plastic surgery soap opera about to begin its 5th season on FX, has always had a more profound underlying question at its heart: Can people really re-invent themselves?

It's what Nip/Tuck has always been about, a garish and gory exploration of the idea that, if you have enough money and know the right people, you can change yourself, on the outside at least, into who you always wanted to be. All it takes is the slice of a knife, the injection of a needle to make yourself, thinner, prettier, not so easily ignored. "Tell me what you don't like about yourself," the surgeons ask every prospective patient, as if they can fix whatever's wrong.

Julian McMahon, launched into international stardom and a burgeoning feature film career by his Nip/Tuck portrayal of bad-boy plastic surgeon Dr. Christian Troy, a charming cad whose seduction skills are more finely honed than his surgical techniques, understands this better than most. On the cusp of turning 40 years old, he has spent most of his life being judged by his appearance, of people assuming that because of how he was raised -- the privileged son of a prominent Australian political family - and how he looked -- tall, broad-shouldered and fashion-model handsome -- that they understood who he was.

"If I'd stayed in Australia, I could never have been myself," he is saying, settling in to a chair in his trailer on the Paramount lot, still in full Christian Troy mode -- bronzed, tweezed and nattily attired -- just after shooting yet another scene that involved him making unwanted (mostly) advances on a woman in a pricey hotel room that led to her shouting, "Oh My God, your ego is so huge, it's a wonder your head doesn't explode."

"I never knew where the attention was coming from," McMahon says, leaning

back, done with acting for the day, explaining why, when he was barely 20 years old, he decided to move overseas, first to Europe and then America, to pursue a modeling career that would lead to acting and, eventually, success on his own terms, a life that he built for himself. “If I’d stayed (in Sydney) and succeeded I would have always wondered was it because I had talent or because I had a name? I just wanted to be on my own.”

Julian was only three years old when his father, Sir William McMahon, became Australia’s Prime Minister in 1971. Although he was Prime Minister for only a year, he remained a potent national political figure until his death in 1988 and his wife, Julian’s mother, Lady Sonia McMahon, now in her mid 70’s, the Jackie O. of Sydney fashion and social circles, a Grande Dame diva to this day, famous the world over for a scandalously side-slit dress she wore to Richard Nixon’s White House. Photographs of her walking down a staircase, showing gasp-inducing amounts of thigh, were an international sensation.

So Julian and his two sisters, Deborah, one year older, and Deborah, five years younger, grew up in the spotlight, burdened by expectations that he struggled against, even as a child. “I was four or five years old when I told my parents that I didn’t wanna catch a limo to school anymore, I wanted to ride the bus,” he says, in his Americanized Aussie accent, flattened by the years away from his homeland. “Because I wanted to be like the other students. And this thing that took me to school separated me more than they could ever imagine.”

“I was always the smart ass,” he says, describing how he tried to fit in with the other kids, “doing stupid stuff, trying to make jokes, trying to get my schoolmates to laugh.

“I needed to be accepted, so much so that I would have done anything to do that
He worked hard to be thought of by his classmates as something more than “the son of . . .” He became the class joker, the fast playground wit and, as he became older and more athletic, the big man on campus, the captain of the rowing team, the rugby team, the president of his class. But, even then, there were assumptions. Because he was an athlete, he wasn’t supposed to be interested in theater or debate. There were always expectations, always pressures to be what he was supposed to be.

He went along with them for a while. He went to law school. He joined the right organizations.. But, he was always a bit of a wild child, looking for trouble, acting out. He could have ended up being just another spoiled rich kid, living his life in the clubs and the tabloids, the Paris Hilton of his day. “I was up for anything,” he says now.

When, still in his teens, he dropped out of law school to be a model, his parents were, to say the least, skeptical. And he certainly didn’t do it with any kind of long-term goals in mind. He’d met some guys at a party, went on a couple of shoots, got offers to go to Europe and jumped at the chance. It was a lark, he says now, more than anything, a chance to be on his own, bum around. “I started making some money, meeting beautiful

women and I thought, ‘It doesn’t get any better than this. I can do this for the rest of my life.’”

He’d returned to Sydney for his father’s funeral, when he was first approached about acting, offered a part in Australian soap opera called “Home and Away..” that is still going after 20 years on the air and also launched such well-known names as Guy Pearce and Naomi Watts. It could have been just another frivolous side trip, another way to avoid the serious responsibilities of adulthood, but McMahon quickly discovered that acting, for him, was something more, a way to access emotions that his upbringing had taught him to suppress. It was a revelation.

“That series had some extraordinary English and Australian actors in it who were so passionate about what they did that it was intoxicating,” he says. “I realized this was a way to really discover and learn more about human beings and yourself, that it really is an endless pit. I was fascinated.”

But his success on “Home and Away” meant he was also a public figure again, with all the baggage of his family name. His courtship, one-year marriage and divorce from Dannili Minogue, sister of pop star Kylie Minogue, in 1992, was paparazzi gold, two young sexy stars constantly out on the town. . It was time for McMahon to move to America, a time re-make himself.

“I just wanted to be on my own and America seemed a good fit,” he says.

“I had to start auditioning,” he says of his early days in New York, “and I remember thinking, ‘Okay, what am I doing here?’ I’d walk into the room and these people were like, we don’t give a damn who you are. And I thought maybe I should go back home.. But then I realized, if I can’t face this challenge at this point in my life, I might be screwed later on. So why not just give myself a chance. I needed to find out what I could do.”

His first break in America was getting a part on “Another World” in 1992. Then came the prime-time shows: as Detective John Grant on Profiler in 1996, demonic seducer Cole Turner Charmed in 2000 and, finally, Nip/Tuck in 2003. In all of them, he played devilish rogues of one kind or another, the master of the raised eyebrow and insinuating remark. Christian Troy is the character who made him famous, that led to him being cast as the villainous Dr. Doom in the “Fantastic Four” feature films and as Sandra Bullocks possibly-dead/possibly-not husband in ‘Premonition.’ The expectations of his childhood have been replaced by new assumptions, that maybe cads and aristocrats are the only parts he can play. That maybe some version of Christian Troy is all he can ever be.

Dylan Walsh, his Nip/Tuck co-star thinks such assumptions would be foolish., that his pal’s natural charm (“he’s like an old-fashioned movie star,” Walsh says) and tendency to be the center of attention (McMahon stole the show at this summer’s Nip/Tuck press presentation by insisting that the sex scenes, in his opinion, aren’t nearly kinky enough) may lead people to

underestimate what a skilled and serious actor he is.

“He’s got that Australian knack for saying irreverent things and getting away with them,” Walsh says. “But I see him being a leading man in movies for years to come. I’ve always said with his talent and his good looks, he and I will go far.”

Even when they’re not doing scenes together, Walsh and McMahon are virtually inseparable on the set, prone to lengthy ping-pong games and hours of hanging out in one another’s trailers. “H’s like a brother in a way,” McMahon says of his co-star. “We have similar paths that we’ve traveled in our lives, including marriage, divorce, losing a parent early in life, children. I don’t know if you believe in destiny but I feel like we were set on a path that cross at some point in time. The fact that we’re not sick of each other is pretty amazing in itself.”

It’s easy enough, McMahon admits, for him to encourage the notion some may have that he’s still an just overgrown playboy, destined to leer for a living. But it wouldn’t be true, no more than the notion that he was just a spoiled rich kid, or that he’d follow in his father’s footsteps, that he’d be what he was expected to be.

In truth, he spends most of his time with his seven-year old daughter, Madison, from his two-year marriage in he mid 1990’s to actress Brooke Burns. He is a lifetime gardener, a gourmet cook, more likely to spend his time cooking dinner and tending plants than

partying until dawn. He works out daily, running and cycling, would play more golf and do more snow skiing if he only had the time. But he’s too busy working to chase the wilder pursuits of his youth.

“I’ve still got a wild side,” he says. “not as wild as Christian, cause that can’t happen without going to prison. But in some regards, he’s not far from who I’ve been at moments in time. My idea of a big night now is just going out with friends, having a couple of drinks and some good food.”

He’s a gadget addict, he says, with a propensity for acquiring Ipods (“I think I have about 40”) and televisions. He won’t deny having as many as 30 television sets in his house as one time, including one in every bathroom.

“But no one is ever just one thing. Even when I was kind of a gypsy in my teens and 20’s, I knew I always wanted kids. I always loved gardening, even then. There’s a mix of people in everyone.

“Yesterday, I had a day off and I spent it with my daughter. I picked her up in the morning, we got milkshakes, went to the zoo for a couple of hours, had burgers, went for a swim and played, watched Scooby Doo and that, to me is a perfect day. I can’t imagine doing anything better than that.”

Julian McMahon, asked if he is a good father, says that, absolutely, he is.

“Because I let her be who she needs to be,” he says. “I let her express herself and I let her explore herself as much as possible. She won’t have the pressures I had. She can be who she wants to be.”

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