

# Michael Cera Wants to Make You Squirm



The New York Times  
July 8, 2007

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LOS ANGELES

Michael Cera, who just turned 19 years old, but whose peach-fuzz cheeks and deceptively innocent eyes make him seem at least five years younger, loves emotional discomfort. His, yours and, especially, that of an unsuspecting audience. Nothing amuses him more than the wincingly awkward silences that freeze a room the moments after someone, usually him, blurts out something embarrassing in a trying-too-hard attempt at looking cooler than they are. He revels in it.

“Yeah, that’s my favorite thing,” he said, somewhat sheepishly, during a recent interview

at a lobby-adjacent coffee shop in the Beverly Hilton Hotel. “I always kind of end up in situations where I don’t know too many people and I’m not very social and I feel, you know, extremely uncomfortable. But there’s some secret pleasure I take in things like that. In things going horribly wrong.”

That awkwardness was at the heart of the character for which people know him best, George Michael Bluth, the painfully confused adolescent with a highly inappropriate crush on his cousin in Fox’s short-lived but fanatically admired comedy series “Arrested Development” and also underpins his role as a high school senior desperately trying to score with out-of-his-league alpha chicks in “Superbad” the latest R-rated comedy from producer Judd Apatow (“Knocked Up” “The 40-year-old Virgin”), opening August 17.

But, in what may prove to be a model for the star-making potential of the internet, Mr. Cera’s most visible presence these days is online. With his friend and collaborator Clark Duke, he is starring in, writing and producing “Clark and Michael” one of CBS’ first original web series, 10 online-only episodes (a new episode debuts every Wednesday) fake-chronicling the attempts of two clueless wanna-be filmmakers, Mr. Duke and Mr. Cera playing more befuddled and less sympathetic versions of themselves, trying to get their first television series produced.

Mr. Cera is also popping up in much-downloaded viral videos that include a fake screen test for Seth

Rogen's character in "Knocked Up" in which he ends up in a screaming match with Mr. Apatow (parodying a widely-dispersed actual video spat between Lily Tomlin and director David O. Russell on the set of "I Heart Huckabees") and a fake self-promotional video, called "Impossible is the Opposite of Possible" where an insufferably arrogant Mr. Cera, who wrote the script, explains the secrets of his success, including his physical fitness because, "If people find me more attractive to look at, they also find me more fun to be around and more exciting to talk to."

"I carry this article around with me in my laptop bag, an interview with David Cross (who was also on "Arrested Development" and has become one of Mr. Cera's many comedy mentors) called "Comedy Isn't Pretty." It was him talking about how not enough people are willing to look foolish these days. That really had a big message to me. You can't have any shame."

For someone so young and theoretically still subject to post-adolescent peer pressure, Mr. Cera, a middle child who lives with his parents and two sisters in Brampton, Ontario, a Toronto suburb, seems remarkably comfortable with the idea of making himself look like a dork and/or jerk for the sake of a joke. He was 12 years old, he says, when he decided that looking cool was less satisfying than amusing himself.

"I sort of gave up my ambition to be handsome," he said,

remembering how in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, as a big fan of facade-skewering comedies like "Mr. Show" and "The Tom Green Show" he began wearing a pink bicycle helmet to school and taking on fake, sometimes obnoxious personas, to interview classmates.

"There was a day when my friend Chris and I decided we didn't care what people thought of us. I said, you know, 'We won't care if people think we're losers!' And he said, 'No, man, we'll be kings.' So I decided to start wearing the helmet and see if people thought I was an idiot. And then I was EXCITED about people thinking I was an idiot."

"As a kid, he was not easily amused," said his mother, Linda Cera. "And he wasn't ever the one hamming it up for attention. He never connected with the kind of over-the-top humor that usually made other kids laugh, making faces and stupid dances and things. But then if I'd knock my arm into the furniture and pretend I was hurt, that made him laugh."

Before he was even in pre-school, Mr. Cera says he knew he'd be an actor. He was obsessed with becoming Bill Murray, watching "Ghostbusters" over and over when he was only four years old. He still carries a "Ghostbusters" wallet, a piece of trivia he has not yet shared with "Ghostbusters" writer Harold Ramis, who wrote and will be directing Mr. Cera's next feature film, "Year One" with Jack Black.

“I’m not going to show it to him,” Mr. Cera said. “I’m afraid it’ll change the whole dynamic.”

Mr. Cera started acting professionally, first in local commercials, when he was 9 years old. He was 14 when he filmed the pilot for “Arrested Development.” Mitchell Hurwitz, the show’s creator, describes Mr. Cera as “so confident, respectful and well adjusted, it’s frightening. He’s like a little Ron Howard.

“I think I went further with awkwardness of the (George Michael) character, because I knew Michael could play it,” Mr. Hurwitz said. “I was a little embarrassed about approaching him with some of the more delicate material about him being attracted to his cousin and he just went, “oh that’s great.” And I was thinking, ‘ How can anyone this young have the objectivity to embrace this and think it’s funny?’ He just has this uncanny maturity and I think he’s gonna be a big part of this next generation of comic actors.”

Mr. Cera and Mr. Duke started working “Clark and Michael” two years ago , when both were living in a short-term corporate apartment complex in Marina del Rey while Mr. Cera was filming “Arrested Development” and Mr. Duke was finishing up his film degree at nearby Loyola Marymount University. A shared enthusiasm for “Mr. Show,” the original British version of “The Office” and the deadpan style of the improv comedy troupe “Stella”

convinced them they should work on a project together ,

“The show is pretty much what were doing at the time, a lot of hanging out, playing guitar and messing around,” said Mr. Duke. “We just kind of wrote it with o real aspirations for it. We were just trying to make each other laugh. And sometimes it does feel like it’s just a big in joke between us. ”

A 10-minute pilot version , was shot for Mr. Duke’s college thesis film and eventually found its way to Matt Kaplan at CBS, who was looking for content for the CBS Innertube website. “Clark and Michael” with its low-tech aesthetic and mockumentary feel, not to mention Mr. Cera’s “Arrested Development” college-aged fan base, immediately appealed to him.

“We were looking for something that wasn’t a full television show but also not a video someone would just put up on YouTube,” Mr. Kaplan said, “And it allowed Michael the kind of creative flexibility he wouldn’t have if there were a network television show.”

So, without the burden of commercial sponsors and focus groups, “Clark and Michael” unfolds in weekly bursts between 7 and 10 minutes long, filled with the awkward silences that Mr. Cera likes so much and plenty of absurdist low-key mockery of life on the show business fringe, including one scene where Mr. Cera, after having a script rejected, is crying in a bathtub, refers to a well-known “Screenwriters Guide to Hollywood” moaning “We

wrote symbols and themes and motifs. We read the whole Syd Field book.”

“We didn’t originally think of this as being for the internet, we were thinking more like it being something on “Adult Swim,” Mr. Cera said. “But it turned out exactly how we wanted it to be..

Besides “Superbad” and “Year One”, Mr. Cera will also be appearing “Juno” an independent film comedy directed by Jason Reitman, to be released this fall. Although he doubts there will be any more “Clark and Michael” episodes, he’s not ruling it out, mostly because he’s not sure what he’s going to do next.

“I’m very afraid to make decisions,” he said, “because I want the people who liked ‘Arrested Development’ to like whatever I do next. I don’t want to let them down. I think too much about every decision I make.”

And then there’s a too-long silence. Kind of uncomfortable. Mr. Cera was probably pleased.

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