

His Brilliant Career

At 13, Seth Green is a star
of TV, movies and the ninth grade.

BY CONSTANCE ADLER

HHEY! DIDJA HEAR THE ONE ABOUT THE CIRCUS fire? It was intense. Get it? *In tents.*" Seth Green makes friends wherever he goes. Right now he's trading quips with the waiter in the restaurant at the plush West Hollywood hotel where Seth and his mother are staying. They have been summoned from their rowhouse in Overbrook Park to Lotusland because Seth has a part in a television pilot being produced by Aaron Spelling, the man who brought us *The Love Boat*, *Dynasty* and *Charlie's Angels*.

Seth is having some trouble with his filet mignon, so the waiter cuts it into little pieces for him while the boy reclines in his soft armchair like a hemophiliac prince. He eats about a third of the steak and gives up. A Rocky Balboa Action doll, fists raised aggressively, stands next to the plate while Seth plays with his penny arcade puzzle. He brings one or several of his toys with him wherever he goes, to work, to dinner. It gives him something to play with while his mother talks to whatever adult comes into range.

"He reminds me of my cat," the waiter, a slender, fussy man

who is actually an actor, says of Seth. "Affectionate mostly, but with claws that hurt."

Seth does have some unfortunate habits. When his mother asks him to do something he would rather not—like shut up—he often mutters under his breath, "Smell my farts." Then he shuts up—*fast*. He picked this one up on location in Tucson about a month earlier while making a movie called *Can't Buy Me Love*. His mother, Barbara Gesshel-Green, really can't stand this latest in Seth's arsenal of smart comebacks, but it will be awhile before she breaks him of it. He is only 4 feet 8 inches tall and about 80 pounds, but Seth Green is a very resilient 13-year-old boy.

When her son finally tires of hearing grown-ups talking, he asks to be excused from the table. He goes back upstairs to the TV and the pile of comic books in the suite of rooms he has been sharing with his mother for the past two weeks.

"If it weren't for the business," his mother observes, "Seth would be a disruptive child."

And what's the difference between a disruptive child and a successful child actor?

"Luck. A look. Ambition. Discipline," she says, ticking them off on her fingers.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROSS WHITAKER

SETH BEGAN SHOWING SIGNS of being something other than a disruptive child at the age of six, when he told his parents, "You're wasting the best years of my life!" He then picked up the phone and called his godfather's brother who was working in television and asked him to persuade his parents to let him become an entertainer. His mother, who had been resisting the idea, relented and took him to Weist-Barron in Philadelphia, a television workshop.

Gail Walton, who was the manager of Weist-Barron at the time, was so impressed with Seth that she offered a bribe to Barbara Gesshel-Green, who is a painter and a printmaker in addition to being Seth's mom. Walton told Barbara that she could paint a mural on a wall in the offices of Weist-Barron in exchange for Seth's and his sister Kaela's lessons. Barbara said OK, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Seth began by doing commercials. Then he got the part of Egg in the film of John Irving's novel *Hotel New Hampshire*. It was an opportunity for the young actor to work with the director Tony Richardson. It was also an important turning point for Seth since it eventually led to his playing the part of Joe in Woody Allen's nostalgic *Radio Days*—a Portrait of the Auteur as a Young Man. When Don Brinkley, writer/producer on the Spelling pilot, saw him in that, he called Seth in to audition. "He just blew us away," Brinkley says. "Then we took him to ABC and he blew them away, too."

Hopes for the pilot turning into a series are of course very high. Naturally, it would mean a great coup for such a young actor. "It's also a chance for Seth to make some money finally," Barbara adds. "Oh, you don't make money in movies. And you certainly don't make money on a Woody Allen movie. It all goes into sets and costumes. Do you know what it takes to make Rockaway Beach look like it did in the '40s? You don't do a Woody Allen movie for the money [she wouldn't say what Seth earned]. You do it for the privilege of working with Woody Allen. You do it to learn. There's no way you say 'no' to Woody Allen." Since then, he's landed the role of Bette Midler's son in *Big Business*, which also stars Lily Tomlin, as well as appeared in commercials for Lee jeans and Lemon Joy.

Making a pilot is a gamble for all involved, but for Seth and his mom especially, it presents a peculiar dilemma. If the pilot becomes a series, Barbara will face the prospect of moving her entire family out to the West Coast so her youngest child can pursue his career. Her husband, Herb Gesshel-Green, who is a teacher at Engineering and Science High School, isn't quite ready for this. Nor is their daughter, Kaela, who doesn't see why she should leave Philadelphia and all her friends just because her brother has kind of an unusual summer job. And besides, Barbara

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herself is not fond of Los Angeles. She seems to have developed an allergic reaction to it—her eyes have been watering since she got off the plane.

“Between the azaleas and the smog, this place is killing me,” she says. The other thing she doesn't like about the place is that you can't walk anywhere, like to the corner bar for fried calamari, as is her wont back in Philadelphia. All you can get in L.A. is croissants. It's not *all* misery, mind you. The hotel where they are staying is a favorite among rock 'n' roll stars, and the desk clerk has some very exciting stories to tell about the Beastie Boys. The thing that Barbara *really* likes about L.A. is sitting around the pool and getting to know people like Ben Gazzara and Robert Mitchum.

“I don't collect autographs, I get phone numbers,” she says. Seth seems to have inherited his fearlessness from his mother. She approaches everyone from desk clerk to Robert Mitchum with equal confidence and has collected a lot of

wonderful friends along the way.

Even so, L.A.'s not their home. If the pilot gets picked up, the Gesshel-Greens may or may not pick up, too. “We just didn't expect our lives to change this much,” Barbara says. “I never actually thought this would happen. We thought we were humoring him.”

Considering the strides he has taken, Seth's career thus far has been only a little disruptive of the family harmony. Kaela, who is 15, ran into some troubles in school last year for which Barbara blames herself partly. “She hit puberty, and we were in Cincinnati. You know, I'm never home, and I have to explain to my husband that she doesn't always mean what she says. Also that there are certain times of the month when he has to hide the chocolate and stay out of her way. It hasn't been easy for him.” Fortunately, Kaela found the Orlandi Dance Center, and she and her jazz group recently took first place in the National Dance Educators of America Competition. And Herb has gotten to know his daughter better than he might have otherwise.

The center of all these troubles and joy is having pink cotton candy for breakfast in front of the television. Seth has also eaten the center of a pop tart, its edges carefully broken off and left in a neat pile in the dish. He is surrounded by his . . . *things* is the best word for it. The base of the table lamp is decorated with a swarm of G.I. Joe Action dolls that have been carefully arranged to look like they are scaling a small ceramic Iwo Jima. Taped to the table is an index card bearing a message to all interfering chambermaids: “Please Do Not Touch or Make Adjustments To!” There are X Factor comic books (from Fat Jack's

Comicropt in Overbrook Park), two baseball caps (both blue) and a Robotic Arm. This useful item is a mechanical claw worked by a lever at the end of a long stick. With it Seth grandly extends a damp, half-chewed chunk of cotton candy, which he drops in his visitor's lap. It is declined and placed back in the claw. Seth retrieves the candy and pops it back in his mouth.

There is also a Wonder Whipper, which is a green, gluey, hand-shaped thing with a stretchy arm. It sticks to whatever surface you throw it at, such as a khaki cotton skirt, for instance. Seth, growing more flirtatious now, offers the use of his Wonder Whipper while he has a session with his tutor.

"No thank you," his visitor says. "It's disgusting."

"That's nothing compared to some things I could show you," Seth rejoins, and smiles mysteriously.

When his tutor, Pia Mehr, arrives to provide Seth with his daily three hours of school, the cartoons are briskly ordered off. Seth obediently settles down for a morning of Venn diagrams. Pia is a teacher who also has a background in theater production. Whenever Seth is not needed specifically for a scene, he and Pia go to a trailer marked "school" and work on the assignments marked out by his teachers back home at Lambertton High. Pia is also a representative of the California Welfare Board, assigned to ensure that the child labor laws are observed. Child actors actually have two guardians with them at all times on a set: their legal guardian (usually a parent) and this representative of the Welfare Board. Pia makes sure that no one pressures Seth into working longer than the nine and a half hours allotted for child labor, which includes breaks for meals and school time. This teacher can shut down a day of work for the whole company if the child is working longer than he should. She is also there to make sure the script does not require the child to speak any obscenities or wear costumes that are too revealing. She is essentially a buffer between the child and the production company; Pia says that she has in the past been put in a rather compromising position. Mothers of child actors sometimes give consent for the child to work illegal overtime for fear that if they make things difficult for the production company (which stands to lose a lot of money if forced to extend shooting another day) the child won't get another job. It is then Pia's job to contradict both the director and the mother.

Stage mothers really get Barbara steamed. She means the ones that push their children into show business. On the other hand, Barbara feels very comfortable that Seth's career was all his own idea. She's just along for the ride. She and Seth witness some pretty scary situations with other mother-and-child teams. Soda pop parties, little get-togethers for children in show busi-



PERMA SMIRK:

"So tell me, how big are Molly Ringwald's lips?"

ness, are where you see most of them.

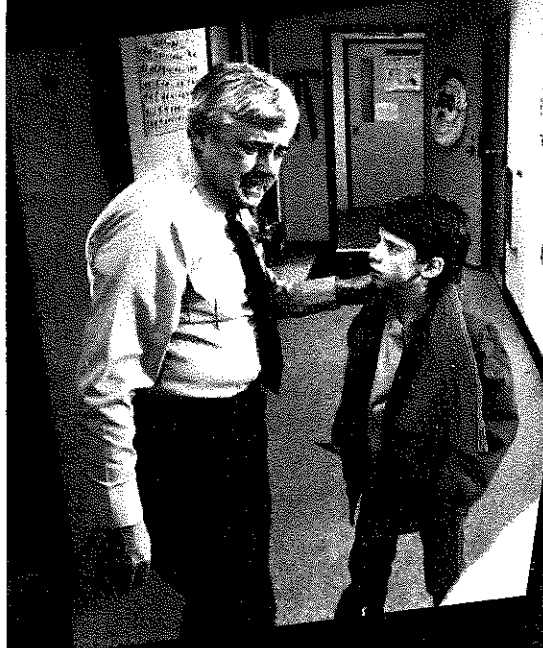
"It's all, 'Who do you know?' and 'What are you working on?' And this is from the *kids*, yet," Barbara complains. "Seth knows he's not any different from anyone else. Just lucky. He's lucky that he can do what he loves doing and get paid for it. He knows to treat people equally. He treats the crew the same as the other actors. And that's very important because a gaffer can make you look bad on film if he wants to. You know, you can see it in the dailies if a light is hitting you wrong. No, Seth is good to everyone. The funny thing is that the really spoiled kids are *not* the ones who are working a lot, either.

"I remember one of the extras on *Radio Days*, a little girl. They wanted her to wear this dress. Now, remember this is a period piece—set in 1938 or 1940—and dresses for girls then were ugly. OK? Ugly. Well, she took one look at this dress and said, 'I can't wear that. I'm much too pretty to wear that.' Now, this kid's gonna have prob-

lems, and she's only nine years old."

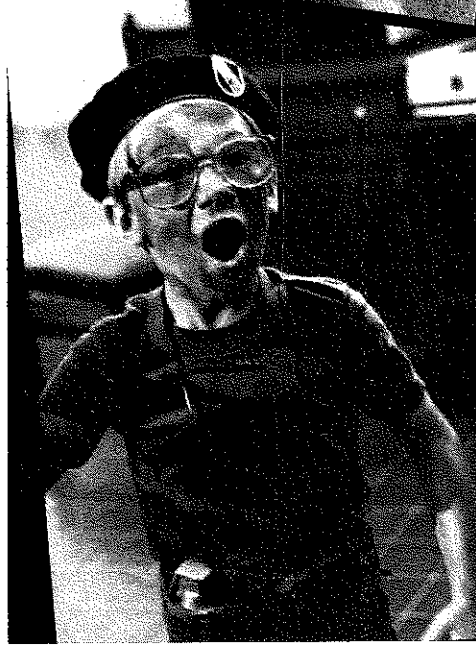
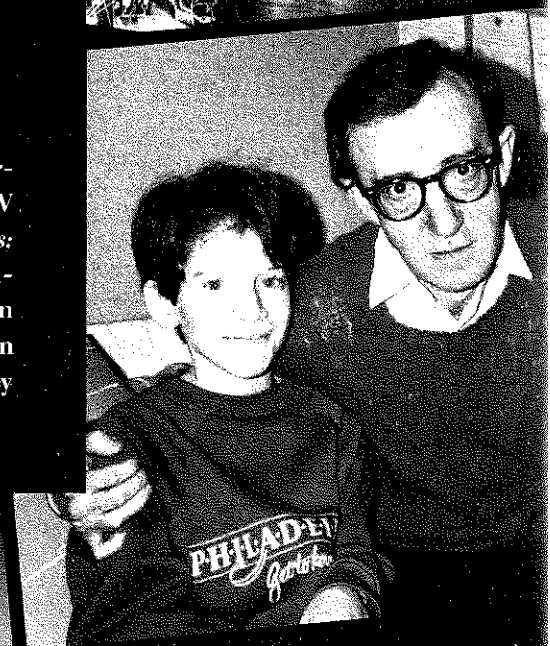
While Seth gets his math drill, Barbara puts together slides of her work. She is preparing them for a competition sponsored by the Philadelphia One Percent Art Program. There is a wall in the Criminal Justice Building just waiting for a mural, and Barbara wants a crack at it. "This is called trying to reclaim my life," she says in the car on the way to the Federal Express office. She is referring to the fact that she has not painted in earnest for the past three years—ever since her son's career took off in earnest. As it turned out, *his* career is *her* career, too, since she must be his companion wherever he works. When Seth works outside of California, she is usually able to get a job on the set as a production assistant or doing some scenic design. But the labor laws in California are stricter than elsewhere and she can't work on the set because she is non-union. So, for the filming of this pilot she stands around, watches her son and becomes progressively more bored.

It used to be that a woman sacrificed her career so that her husband could become a great success. And that was bad enough. The girls who became women in the '60s and '70s vowed never to live in their husbands' shadows, but none of them ever anticipated being eclipsed by her own son. That seems a cruel joke after all the struggle to become an autonomous person. But "flexible" is the watchword when you're a showbiz mom like Barbara Gesshel-Green. Enormous changes at the last minute are a way of life for her. In Los Angeles, no one ever does what they say they're going to do when they say they're going to do it. Nothing is ever on time or on budget. It could be very frustrating for a person who loves organization. Fortunately, as Bar-



SETH'S SCRAPBOOK

Clockwise from top left: In "Charlie's Christmas Project," a TV special; with the cast of Radio Days; with the Woodman; in a commercial for Lee Jeans; in an Amazing Stories segment; and in the grip of actor Patrick Dempsey in Can't Buy Me Love.



bara describes herself, she's "the kind of person who just takes things as they come. It's the only way. But it's also the reason I have so much trouble getting my slides out. *That takes planning.*"

Meanwhile the dirty laundry is mounting, and it doesn't look as though Seth is going to get any clean socks today; there are just too many other things to do. School is done for the day and they are still waiting in the hotel for the call from the production assistant that will summon Seth to work for the day. It's already 3 p.m. Since he only has a limited number of hours he can be on the set, they don't call him until absolutely necessary.

When Seth, Barbara and Pia finally get to the set, the rest of the crew, who have been there since 6 a.m., are in high gear. Seth is rushed into wardrobe and then to makeup. He kibitzes chummily with Ron the makeup man, while Ron makes him look like a healthy freckled boy who spends a lot of time in the sun and eats well.

"So tell me, Ron," Seth opens. "How big *are* Molly Ringwald's lips?" And then, as Ron tucks Kleenex into Seth's collar, "I knew a makeup man once who made me wear tissues all day."

"You should," Ron counters. "On your face."

Seth makes his Robotic Arm clack open and closed loudly near the poor man's nether region and snarls, "Castration made easy!" This is Seth's running joke all day. The reaction is universally one of dismay, precisely what Seth hoped for.

While Seth is being buffed and bronzed, Pia reads aloud from her *Cosmopolitan* review of *Radio Days*. Seth doesn't like the way the writer referred to his performance: "... an uncanny delineation of a skinny insecure kid who will grow up to be a skinny insecure comedian." Seth didn't even know he was playing the young Woody until he read it in reviews. Seth's veneration for the filmmaker is obvious, although he disagrees with the interviewers and reviewers who say he is the image of the auteur as a boy. Seth is also strangely reluctant to talk about working with Woody Allen.

In fact, Seth is reluctant to talk to anyone resembling a reporter. Since he is an agreeable boy, and his mother would like him to talk to reporters, he does it occasionally. But he seems uncomfortable with being scrutinized and with the idea that his remarks—often glib and not well thought out—are being preserved for posterity.

At present, the kid is pummeling an inflatable clown, the kind that pops back up at you when you punch it. Lucky for Seth, he's playing a character whose parents buy him lots of toys. So there are a lot of usable props lying around his "bedroom" for Seth to occupy himself with until the rest of the crew is ready



STAGE DOOR MOMMY:

"He knows he's a kid, and he likes being a kid."

for him. They are still working on a scene wherein a doorbell is answered. This is finally accomplished in a dozen takes or so, during which time Seth plays Mastermind with the location manager.

Seth is a tremendous hit with the crew. They treat him like a beloved pet who talks—and talks and talks and talks. It's obviously a lot of fun for him to be around all of these grown-ups who will always stop and listen to him go through his patter of one-liners.

"I ran into Joan Collins coming out of the ladies' room," Barbara remarks.

"I wish *I'd* run into Joan Collins," Seth replies, and wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. Seth's stagey zingers startle his listeners, but people recover quickly in TV Land. Seth has been privy to an unusually advanced education in the ways of adults. They seem to forget that he's only 13. When the actresses also working on the pilot sit in a circle discussing something hilariously girlish and naughty—something to do with the best cure for chronic

back pain—Seth wanders not-so-innocently into the midst of it.

"Oh, you're just the one we needed," they welcome him with joyous cries. The actress playing his mother, a stunning red-haired woman with a throaty voice, bounces him on her knee and sings, "Pony boy! Pony boy! Won't you be my pony boy?"

"Pedophile . . ." someone mutters under her breath.

It's hard to tell if Seth actually understands what's going on, or only has an idea that it is terribly racy and he ought to affect his customary knowing smirk. Perma Smirk seems to be Seth's favorite mode for operating in this adult world. It covers a lot of possibly confusing situations and makes him look terribly savvy.

These adults, he has learned, are also terrific audiences. Seth keeps up a steady stream of patter, bits of other comedians' material, some original stuff, but all of it delivered with the smooth assurance of a Borsht Belt regular. He does voices especially well: Like some manic revolving door, he goes from Illiterate Black Man to Illiterate Redneck to Surfer Boy to Ronald Reagan. A little boy is not supposed to be sophisticated enough to impersonate Ronald Reagan, whose voice is not easy to do. Seth could be stealing another comic's riff, but even if he is, it's a pretty seamless rip-off. People can't quite figure out where his voice is coming from. It's the same unsettling feeling you get from the scene in *The Exorcist* when Linda Blair first opens her sweet childish mouth only to emit the deep, knowing voice of Old Scratch himself. It's an ancient voice, one capable of irony, sarcasm, cynicism, innuendo, double entendre. And it has no business coming out of a child's mouth.

This is not to say that Seth is a little devil. He is a sweet boy.

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He has lovely manners. He's friendly, affectionate, generous with his toys. But if the kid had had the misfortune to be born in medieval France, he would very likely have been burned at the stake for satanic possession. Although he might have been spared by landing a job as court jester.

Seth is finally called to work, and after a protracted series of repetitions the director gets a usable print of the scene. Everyone begins to leave, but the director makes them wait. It's been a long day, he knows, but, as he explains in a conspiratorial whisper to the cameraman, "Seth has a funny little thing he wants to do. And I promised him if he were a good boy, he could do it." The whisper goes quickly down the ranks to the rest of the crew, and they all go through the motions of yet another take so that Seth can do his joke.

Seth goes outside the set, then walks in the door and shouts, "June Beaver! I'm home!"

The actress opposite him, a game girl, calls out a jubilant "Ward!" (Seth, who is better acquainted with Howie Mandel than Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, seems to think Beaver was June's last name.)

The director calls "Cut!" And everyone goes home for the day.

ONE OF THE PERQUISITES OF BARBARA'S poolside schmoozing is that she and her son occasionally get some plummy invitations. For instance, tonight they are zooming toward Zuma Beach to watch the filming of the new Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon beach movie. Pee Wee Herman has a cameo appearance, and tonight they are filming him singing "Surfin' Bird" at a beach party.

California in March is still cold, especially near the water, so the dancers wrap themselves in blankets between takes. Pee Wee stands among them in his usual too-small gray suit, black lacquered hair and sweetheart-red lips. When the music comes on the dancers fling off their blankets and leap into '60s-style choreography. Their faces, beneath fluorescent fright wigs, are done up in psychedelic hearts and flowers.

Between takes, Seth cruises smoothly through the crowd. He will talk to anyone, but he mainly picks on girls, especially the ones that are at least a foot taller than he. His standard opening line is: "Hi there. Doing anything Saturday night?" It works insofar as they will smile, laugh even, and pay attention. He hasn't gotten any dates yet but seems pleased with the reactions.

He and Frankie Avalon have studied with the same voice coach in Philadelphia. So it seems appropriate that Seth should say hello to Frankie. Barbara is much more excited about this prospect than Seth. The aura of an only slightly aging sex symbol

is lost on him, but he goes along in his usual agreeable manner.

There is a dense crowd around Frankie, though, and only Seth is small enough and persistent enough to squirm through. It is a historic moment: Two sons of Philadelphia meet on Zuma Beach. One wears a blue terry cloth bathrobe and a heavy layer of bronzing gel, the other, Adidas and a Ghostbusters button. Frankie's darling cap of Roman curls remains untouched by the years. And then there's Seth, 4 feet 8 inches tall, a redhead with eyelashes so pale they almost disappear against his pale skin. Perma Tan meets Perma Smirk.

Seth confidently introduces himself and lets Frankie know that they are fellow *landsmen*. But Frankie is under the mistaken impression that Seth and his mom are mere fans who have elbowed their way onto the set. So he smiles and says cautiously, "Uh . . . are you vacationing here?"

"There's Trashy Lingerie!" Seth shouts from the back seat. "Isn't that great?" he says, pointing to the blue leather corset in the window.

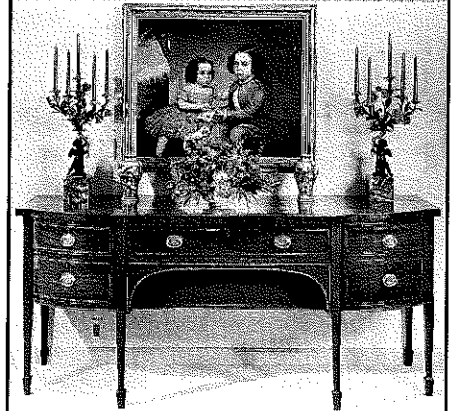
. . . or uh . . ." Barbara hurriedly informs him that they are in Los Angeles because Seth is *working* and tells him all about *Radio Days*. Has Frankie seen the movie yet? No, he hasn't.

At this point a thug from the outer reaches of the crowd surrounding Frankie leans in and says, "Oh yeah! I seen that. You were the one watching the naked lady through the window."

Seth handles the yokel like a pro—he pulls an elaborate prissy face and says, "Hm . . . Oh yes. I remember that scene quite well." Frankie laughs. He is charmed by Seth, as are most people who meet him for the few minutes it takes before he loses interest and moves on. Even Frankie doesn't hold Seth in thrall for very long. The kid is drawn away by a particularly fetching teenage brunette. He chases her down and embraces her warmly, although they have never met before.

The capper on the evening for Seth comes when the director calls for lunch break. (In this upside-down world of Hollywood, lunchtime can come at 9 p.m.). Pee Wee Herman steps down from the stage. He is weary from a heavy set with

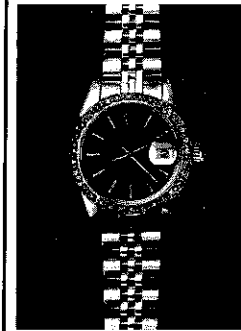
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SETH GREEN

the band, but he obliges the autograph-seekers who have been straining for hours to reach him. Seth stands away from the crowd watching quietly for once—it is considered abysmally uncool to look excited about spotting a celebrity. When Pee Wee catches sight of the kid, though, he pushes through the throng of fans and extends his open hand. “Hey, dude!” Pee Wee shouts. The two shake hands, and Seth is delighted. His sister *loves* Pee Wee Herman. Now he can tell her he has shaken the hand of the great man himself. And she will surely suffer terrible pangs of envy. He can’t wait.

DURING THE FOLLOWING DAY’S SHOOT, THE pressure to finish on time is palpable. Seth has a pressing date back home—he has an appointment with his rabbi to get ready for his bar mitzvah, which is exactly one week and one day off. The slightest bit of overtime will probably ruin everything and drive his mother to distraction.

Today is Seth’s big scene, the one in which he is supposed to come home and find his mother weeping. It’s a highly emotional scene and requires some deft handling. Actually, at this point Seth doesn’t know what the scene *is* and won’t know until he gets there and learns his lines, just before it’s shot. Fortunately he doesn’t have to learn more than five or six lines at a time.

“Seth doesn’t like to be overheard,” Barbara explains. “I mean, that’s what he tells me. I’d like him to rehearse more.”

“I just don’t like to spend two hours studying something that I’m just going to forget,” Seth interjects. “And besides, after two hours you can get real tired of it.”

When asked how he prepared to play a character that is two years younger than his actual age, Seth is momentarily without a smart comeback. He seems genuinely perplexed that he is expected to prepare at all. He reads the script before he gets to the set, so he has an idea of what the story is about, but that’s about all he does to get ready. The rest just seems to come to him as he does it for the camera. It’s a mysterious process that he doesn’t seem able to articulate just yet.

Seth does his scene very well, turning himself on and off like a faucet, cracking jokes between takes as is his custom. The actress playing his mother, however, has to work herself into a fit of tears for each of the dozens of takes they do. It is obviously taking a toll on her, this plumbing of great depths that is required to produce tears on command. After the last retake, she is wrung out and exhausted. It isn’t a healthy thing to lay open all this raw, quivering emotion to the chill air, not to mention the camera and the crew, and she is

a little embarrassed.

When it’s finally over, Seth takes her face in both his hands, kisses her lightly on the lips and then once on the knuckles of each hand. It is a strange thing to occur between a grown woman and a small boy, especially when the boy is wearing a Little League uniform. It’s an almost disturbingly mature and intuitive act on his part—even for this strange place where strange things happen all the time.

Barbara tries to lend some insight. “He just helped her—that’s all. He’s a deep kid,” she says. “He’s mature about things having to do with the business, but if you listen to him, all that he talks about, besides his jokes, are his toys. He’s a kid. He knows he’s a kid, and he likes being a kid.”

Now that the actress has regained some of her composure, Seth challenges her to a game of Mastermind, and they disappear into his “bedroom.” Don Brinkley, who wrote the script and stops in on the production once in a while, says he’s seen this strange combination of the adult and the child in Seth.

“He’s different from other kids,” Brinkley says, “because he understands what he’s saying. Most kids just recite their lines the way they’ve been coached, but there’s nothing behind the eyes. They don’t know what they’re saying. Seth knows what he’s saying. He’s really a *nice* kid, too. It’s just a shame he’s so much smarter than the rest of us.”

Barbara attributes the level head on Seth’s shoulders to the training she and her husband have given him. Herb is a teacher now, and Barbara, who spent two years in Norway studying the works of Edvard Munch, used to teach art at Kensington High School. “Great place!” she says, and raises a fist in remembrance. She and Herb are products of the ’60s, quite mod in their day. Their best friend and Seth’s godfather, Craig Marion, calls them “post-hippies.” For their wedding portrait, Barbara wore teenybopper false eyelashes. Herb sported a very hip Maynard G. Krebs goatee. They were both involved with the alternative Parkway School during its starry-eyed beginnings, and Barbara describes their parenting techniques as being greatly influenced by such quaint teacherly things as group dynamics and a sincere concern for truly *communicating* with their children. Even if that communication has to be done in the voice of a drill sergeant.

“CREEP! NOW!” Barbara Gesshel-Green barks at her son, her training from Kensington High School coming to the fore. This may not sound like any way to speak to a star, especially when the star is busy signing autographs. But the star’s mother is ready to leave the toy store, and she’s

tired of waiting. Seth has talked her into going to the Beverly Center Mall, a shopping metropolis. She consented because she felt sorry for him. There has been a minor familial rift because Seth, at his mother’s request, has to call his uncle and cancel their date for Tag Team Wrestling. The kid was droopy with disappointment until one of the assistant directors suggested, “Barbara, he likes girls so much, you should take him to mud wrestling.”

The kid recovered like lightning: “Jello’s better,” he countered knowledgeably. “You can see more.”

On the way to the mall, as they drive along Santa Monica Boulevard, Seth is vastly entertained by the passing sleaze. Talk about an advanced education.

“Hey, look to your right! There’s Trashy Lingerie,” Seth shouts from the back seat when he spots his favorite store. “Isn’t that great?” he says, pointing to a huge glassed-in display of mannequins wearing blue leather corsets, ostrich feathers and similarly impractical garments. Barbara is taking Seth to the mall so he can look for the new line of G.I. Joe Action dolls that he has been anxiously awaiting, checking their arrival with hourly calls to the store. Blue leather corsets and G.I. Joe Action dolls.

When Barbara parks the car, Seth sprints for the toy department, buzzing quickly without comment through the 100 percent white cotton things in Girls Lingerie 6–10, these apparently holding no attraction. He can’t find what he wants here, so he speeds on down the mallway, mother in tow.

The cashier at the toy store, a large, astonished woman, is the first to recognize Seth. She is enthralled that a movie star has come into her very own store and lets everyone within earshot know that “the kid from *Radio Days* is here.” Seth is overjoyed. Instant audience.

Seth has not yet learned of a graceful way to handle being recognized. Now that the Woody Allen movie is out, it’s happening more than ever. He didn’t mind the two girls in the toy store who asked him for his autograph, because they were civilized about it. But ten minutes later in a bookstore, a man with big teeth grabs Barbara’s arm aggressively and demands to know, “Is your son a movie star?”

Seth is embarrassed. He disappears behind the magazine rack and heads for the comics shelf, placed conveniently low. Barbara purses her lips, ponders the words “movie star,” and shrugs doubtfully. The man persists.

“He was in *Radio Days*, right?”

Barbara concedes this point.

“We just saw the movie last night,” the man’s wife says.

“Yeah, for a minute there, when I saw him, I thought I was sleepwalking,” the

man says, and then mercifully leaves.

"What do you mean you almost fell asleep?" bellows Seth, who has been listening, but not carefully enough, as he charges out into the open. His mother collars him before he can sink his teeth into the man's leg.

SETH'S BAR MITZVAH IS IMMINENT, AND SO Seth has a Hebrew tutoring session on Saturday at the Valley Beth Shalom synagogue. He has one week to learn his Haftorah and his Torah portion. This session with the tutor has made him realize how far he has to go. The teacher is a meticulous Israeli who struggles with his English and is not at all impressed with Seth's resume. To him Seth is just another inattentive boy who has not done his homework.

Miraculously, Seth is cowed. He struggles through his Haftorah. He falters. He

"You made me want to do my own bar mitzvah all over again," an older gentleman tells Seth after the ceremony. "It was a hologram," Seth replies. "I was out here all the time."

sighs and whimpers, but the teacher is unmoved. "Again Seth," he commands, "It's *your* bar mitzvah, not mine. I can't tell you if you are ready. It's up to you. You must read your Haftorah *every day*."

This scene is a radical change from the day before. The Hebrew tutor does not play flirtatious games with Seth to get him to work, as the director of the pilot does occasionally. At one point during the previous day's filming, the director, trying to get Seth to say a line correctly, knelt before him in an imploring stance in order to be on eye level with him and confer in private. Seth leaned against the prop door frame with studied cool. After considering the director's request for a moment, he pulled the visor of his own baseball cap down over his eyes, punched the director companionably in the arm and then did his scene. Now Seth knows his charms would be wasted—he could no more punch his Hebrew tutor in the arm than he could run naked through the sanctuary.

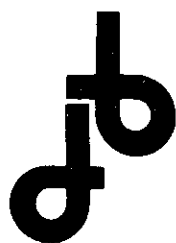
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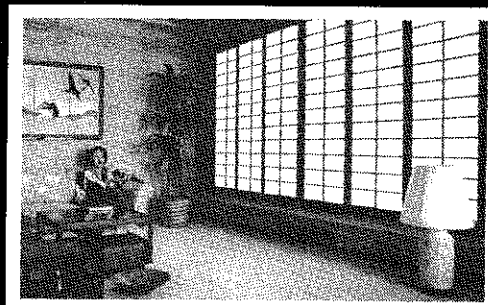
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SETH GREEN

the tutor wants to hear Seth's speech, which he will read at the end of the service. For such a performer Seth is suddenly shy, so he squirms out of it. But the tutor isn't letting him go without a lecture on the golden calf, which is the substance of the Torah portion Seth has chosen to read on his bar mitzvah.

"Expand your priorities," the tutor tells him, "Because you may think that your gods are Kareem Abdul-Jabbar or the Woody Allen. But when you are in this business, you have to expand your priorities. You must know that there is only one God and he is within you. In this business you could become a junkie or a druggist, unless you expand your priorities. That is the lesson of the golden calf." Seth listens politely, then takes off as swiftly as he can.

MARCH 21ST. THE VERNAL EQUINOX. A DAY of transition. And today Seth Green becomes a man.

Seth, the man, in his white yarmulke, tallis, brand-new blue pin-stripe suit and improbably large shoes, is working the room like a Vegas lounge comic who's back in town after a prolonged absence. He greets the early arriving guests with hugs and kisses. His Grandma Pearl, Barbara's mother, is kvelling with the guests, giving them his itinerary for the past month.

"He's just back from California. He was making a pilot with Spelling. Did you see him on Carson? Very funny—Seth was. Yeah, he's excited today. I told him if he gets obnoxious I'll split his head right down the middle. Seth! Get over here."

The kid is tumbling with his buddies from school and summer camp. He has not seen them in a long time, and a wondrous change has come over him now that he is with other kids. When he is with adults he becomes like them, but with other kids he begins to exude something approaching genuine innocence, unadulterated joy, enthusiasm, childlike excitement. His grandmother puts a stop to that right away and drags him off to meet more cousins.

The service goes very well. Seth does very well. His whole family does very well, in fact. It's an ensemble performance. His parents, his sister, both grandmothers and a few uncles join him in reading the Torah portions in English. Then Seth reads his Hebrew portion in respectable form and finally gets to his speech. He notes that his rabbi was the one who inspired him to become an actor.

"You didn't know that, did you?" Seth chirps bravely at the imposing figure behind him. The only people Seth is afraid of are rabbis, but now that his ordeal is almost over and the rest is in English, Seth's moxie is coming back.

When it's the rabbi's turn to speak, he begins a moving and compelling sermon on personhood, faith and leading a good Jewish life in this changing world. He opens with a joke:

"Here at Beth David we do not give Oscars for most outstanding performance. We do, however, give Irvings. And Seth, you should get an Irving for most creative bar mitzvah."

The rabbi then goes on to exhort Seth not to be led astray by any alluring golden calves, to remember who Seth is, not to conform to other people's expectations so that he "becomes an echo, not a voice." And finally the rabbi sums up:

"Now Seth, I've never studied Stanislavsky—I'm not a Method rabbi. So, I don't know how much you bring from your real life to your acting. But I think the roles you play offstage in your life must be connected to your inner self. You must al-

Making a civilized human being out of a boy is hard enough without having to compete with Woody Allen's penthouse.

ways express your inner thoughts and feelings. You don't always have to be, you know . . . Ta dum! You have a geyser-like enthusiasm, a great sense of humor. You don't always have to try so hard. Just look beneath the roles and you will find the true mensch."

To close the service, the Gesshel-Green family stands at the back of the synagogue while the congregation recites the kiddush, the prayer over the wine. Seth, now down from center stage, does a Three Stooges routine for the amusement of his pals in the back row. His sister hits him in the head with her purse. All assembled file out into the reception area for a light repast of orange juice, bagels and a variety of cured fish. There Seth is surrounded by well-wishers; his friends snatch his yarmulke off and beat him in a friendly manner.

A florid, white-haired gentleman tells Seth, "You did so beautiful, you made me want to do my own bar mitzvah all over again."

"It was a hologram," Seth protests, "I was out here the whole time."

Now that this long-awaited and much-dreaded event is over, Seth is practically hysterical with relief. Yelping like a dog just released from the kennel, he plunges

into the party with a zeal unmatched by any of his guests. The party is set up in the basement of the synagogue, and the DJ greets the incoming celebrants with loud music. Seth is a most popular fella and is the first one to hit the dance floor. The other boys, still too shy, decide instead simply to wear their ties around their heads like bandannas, turn up their shirt collars and don the sunglasses that Barbara provided as party favors.

Seth, bless his heart, is the only male under the age of 14 who is still wearing his tie around his neck, and he's the only one dancing. He is rewarded for his bravery with the company of four, five and sometimes as many as six girls at a time. His godfather, a mild-mannered former rabbinical student, watches from the sidelines and is very impressed. After a joyous, rousing dance of the hora, Seth's godfather stands to make an eloquent and heartfelt toast to the newest adult member of the congregation.

Seth, who has been sucking helium from one of the balloons in his centerpiece, says, "Thank you very much," in a strange—even for him—high-pitched voice.

Back at the house, the party continues with Seth's buddies on the floor in front of the TV. The girls remain sedately on the couch. They eat popcorn and watch a video of Seth on the Johnny Carson show. Before he went on, he reports, he had been given explicit instructions on how to behave. Most repeated of these was, "Don't upstage Johnny. Don't step on his jokes." So by the time he got out there, he was a jangle of nerves. Only his mother and grandmother could tell the difference in Seth, who acquitted himself with dignity. The first thing he did when he sat down between Ed and Johnny was hand Johnny his favorite new Kenner product, Ectoplasm.

"Is this going to be gross?" Johnny Carson wanted to know.

"Yes," Seth quickly responded and giggled a giggle that was distinctly recognizable from the character he just finished playing on the TV pilot. It's a good stock giggle, but nothing compared to the rude guffaw coming out of his mouth now as his buddy Chris wrestles him to the floor and pins him. The other boys decide it would be fun to wrestle on the floor, too, and they start murdering the bar mitzvah boy. Grandma Pearl breaks it up.

"Enough! Enough horseplay," she shouts. "He has to work next week." She goes back into the kitchen, and they resume.

Seth's father and sister arrive at the house late. Kaela makes some loud, jocular threat in Seth's direction to the effect that they opened all his presents in the car. He ignores her.

SETH GREEN

Herb kneels on the floor, and the boys pause in their pummeling for a moment while father speaks to son.

"I took the rest of the your bar mitzvah cake to the Downtown Jewish Home For the Aged," Herb says. "And Seth, you should have *seen* them. They had such big, big smiles on their faces. It was really nice." Herb has a big, big smile on his face. He speaks very slowly and looks deeply into Seth's eyes as he delivers this message. This is an old teacher's trick: Arrest the child's attention to let him know this is a message from which he is intended to learn Something Very Important.

It is unclear from Seth's frail form, his face mashed into his mother's shag carpeting, whether he has gotten the message. It is not clear if he has understood that his father made the donation in Seth's name, that it is *Seth's* bar mitzvah cake that brought smiles to these elderly faces.

Nor is it clear if Seth has absorbed the importance of these smiles. The most *any* parent can do in the struggle to make a mensch out of the morally rootless material we call Boy is to knock him on the head occasionally and say, "Hey! Pay attention here. I'm trying to tell you Something Very Important." And hope that it sinks in. Any kid—even the civilian children who don't star in Woody Allen movies—will probably only get the obvious part of the message anyway. Their "pleases" and "thank yous" will come out with the tonelessness of an automaton until later, when the value of the words becomes clear.

But the Gesshel-Greens have a more difficult challenge. Making a civilized human being out of a boy is hard enough without having to compete with the lingering effects of Woody Allen's penthouse, or lavish attention from gorgeous actresses, or the Santa Monica Strip, or the scrutiny from reporters. Even the most square-headed kid could become spoiled by this glitzy, fast-paced world. It happens to a lot of so-called adults.

So the Gesshel-Greens have elected to keep knocking the kid on the head, watch for signs of swelling, and continue reminding him of his "pleases" and "thank yous," however mechanically they may come out of his mouth. If his parents' vigilance works, Seth should weather these early years in the fast lane and emerge as the mensch that his rabbi envisions. Besides, as his mother knows well, there's something terrifically healthy about a kid checking out of the plush West Hollywood hotel, saying farewell to the waiters and the rock stars, and then returning to his own room—all 6 by 8 feet of it—in an Overbrook Park rowhouse. His toys are there. His sister is there. His dad is there. The Gesshel-Greens aren't planning any enormous changes—at least not yet. ■■



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