

SUPER SAD





At 20, Michael Cera is the hottest, freshest comic talent in movies — a rep he cements in *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*. So why is he glumly talking about retirement?

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At first sight, Michael Cera seems like an unlikely star. Placid, gangly, with spaghetti limbs and a penchant for laughing nervously through his nose with a fixed, sphinx-like smile, he has the air of someone still in the throes of awkward adolescence (he only left his teenage years behind in June), still struggling to feel comfortable inside his own skin. Occasionally, the slender actor shifts uneasily in his chair like he's being grilled for terrorist offences, not chatting to a movie magazine.

It can be a strangely unnerving experience — when *Total Film* queries whether his love of classic films comes from his father, he eyes us like we've just asked him if his mother still irons his underpants, without answering. But then he'll casually toss out a wry aside or bone-dry witticism and you'll find yourself flashing back to his finest moments in *Arrested Development*, *Superbad* or *Juno*. And it's here you can see just how much of the laconic, disarming and inscrutable Cera is imbued in his characters. At the Toronto Film Festival for press duties on *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*, he arrives at the hotel suite sporting light-brown corduroys and a bright-red backpack. He looks like he's on his way to class (it's feasible — he only lives an hour away in Brampton, Ontario).

Nick & Norah is a teen romcom set around New York's indie music scene. Cera stars as Nick, the only straight member of queercore band The Jerk Offs, still moping over his callous ex-girlfriend when he encounters Norah (Kat Dennings), an equally gawky foil from his school. Bonding over his mournful mix CDs, they cram into his crappy yellow Yugo for an all-night quest to locate a secret gig by their favourite underground band and, natch, fall in love.

Striving to be *Say Anything...* for the iPod generation, it doesn't quite succeed, but it's spiced

up by another sardonic, mellow turn from its zeitgeist-tapping star. Cera signed up to appear in *Nick & Norah* after he'd shot *Superbad* and *Juno*, but before either film had been released. Originally tapped for a smaller role, his stratospheric rise to Hollywood's comedy A-list last year resulted in a hefty promotion to leading man.

"I liked Pete [Sollett, director] a lot, I liked his other movie *Raising Victor Vargas* and I liked the script," says Cera simply. "I'm much quicker to not do things than to commit to something, but I had a good feeling about this."

Cera has craved the life of an actor since he was a tiny tot and watched *Ghostbusters* on virtual repeat while recovering from a nasty bout of chicken pox. Mel Brooks' *Star Wars* spoof *SpaceBalls* was another keen favourite ("It blew my mind because it was so funny"), although the Cera clan only had it on a Beta tape. When Michael wanted to rewatch the movie, his Sicilian-born father Luigi had to drag the Beta VCR out of storage. "It became like this elusive thing that I only got to watch once a year."

In Cera's opinion, repeat viewings of funny films and telly (*The Simpsons*, *Monty Python*), combined with the peer group he hung out with, incubated his muted, slow-burn sense of humour. "I had funny friends growing up and that's when your sense of humour forms. We'd hang out in each other's houses, go to the mall, watch movies, skateboard, go for bike rides... There are people that I've been with since I was really young and you stay together as you're growing up."

These days, he splits his time between his parents' house in Brampton and his LA apartment and namechecks Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill and Jason Bateman as Hollywood pals. But he still counts >>

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Long night out: (above and right) Michael Cera, Ari Graynor and Kat Dennings in *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*.



Teenage kicks: (above) Cera in *Arrested Development* with Jason Bateman and Portia de Rossi; (below left) as Evan in *Superbad*.



his friends from the north as his closest. Landing his first commercial when he was nine, he skirted through kids' telly and TV movies before moving to LA with his mum, where he nabbed *Arrested Development*, the late, much-lamented cult sitcom about the spoiled and dysfunctional Bluth clan. As Jason Bateman's puppy-doggish son George-Michael, Cera made awkward mumbling and wide-eyed deadpan a comic art before the series was cancelled in 2006.

By then, he was already jumping into film. He had small roles in *Frequency* and *Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind*, but George-Michael was the sensitive-funny blueprint he carried to Paulie Bleeker in *Juno*, Evan in *Superbad* and now Nick in *Playlist*. In refusing to hog the limelight, he's become one of the most non-threatening romcom lead ever. Ask him if he feels he's a confident person and he replies, "Well, not to talk to. I mean, I like talking to people. I don't like big groups, though. I never have. I've never liked crowded halls or concerts or anything. I get kind of claustrophobic. And that's something that you're forced to be exposed to when you're an actor. Sometimes you have to go to things where there's a lot of people and that's not really for me."

Cera finds it excruciating being baited by the paparazzi at red-carpet bashes ("It's almost animalistic"), people eyeballing him on the street or anonymous keyboard-tappers tearing him down on message boards. He's feeling particularly vulnerable on that front, having subjected himself to one hate-filled rant a few days earlier. He declines to name the site that spawned the vitriol but says, "Someone told me that people were saying some mean stuff about me. And it's just like, 'But you don't know me!' My sisters know me, my family knows me but those people have just seen me acting. It's very strange. I try and stay away from that stuff because it can be very depressing."

He admits that his parents are worried about the effect that fame is having on him. "They've seen how it can kind of be a weight," Cera sighs, explaining how he's heading to Brampton after Toronto work duties for some nurturing r&r. "It must be strange seeing your son going through stuff like this. My life has changed in the past year in a weird way; not for better or for worse, but it's a strange change to go through. It's something nobody warns you about. Nobody says, 'This might not all be positive.' Nobody sits you down

and says, 'Is this something you really want to do?' Even if they'd done that, I would have still done it because it's been amazing. But it comes with a lot of scary stuff." It's also tossing up some brilliant opportunities. This summer, he filmed *Youth In Revolt*, an adaptation of his favourite book (by CD Payne) about "a kid who's unhappy with his home life, meets a girl on vacation and has to figure out a way to be with her". He's also co-starring with Jack Black in Harold Ramis' *Year One* and, early next year, he's due to start shooting Edgar Wright's *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World* with Mary Elizabeth Winstead, an adaptation of a graphic novel series about a slacker forced to do battle with his new girlfriend's seven wicked exes... As for the *Arrested Development* movie that's been dangled like a particularly crunchy carrot in front of the show's eager fanclub, Cera doesn't expect it to happen and isn't convinced that it should.

"I think *The Office* did it perfectly," he muses. "They did two series and the Christmas special and they got out on a high. Leave 'em wanting more, which is kind of the number one rule of showbiz. To betray that instinct feels scary. I wouldn't wanna see more of *The Office*. So my instinct is to leave them wanting more – don't push our luck."

He may be a nascent comedy superstar, but with his growing I'm-a-celebrity-phobia, there's a good chance that Cera will no longer be acting if an *Arrested Development* movie does eventually achieve lift-off. Only 20 years old but still packing baby-faced charm, he could keep playing teenagers for many years to come if he wanted to. In fact, Cera hasn't given any thought to making the transition to adult roles because, he insists, "I don't know if I wanna act forever. I'm just going to do things one at a time and see how I'm feeling after each one..."

And if he does quit the biz, has he thought about what he'd do next? Enrol in university, perhaps? "Not right now. If I do, I'll just do it for like one course or something but I'm not gonna try and get a BA or anything like that. I don't want that experience. I could see myself doing something different soon... anything. Work in a factory... Why not? This isn't the only thing to life." **TF**

***Nick @ Norah's Infinite Playlist* opens on 30 January and will be reviewed in the next issue.**

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