



JUSTIN TSUCALAS

COMEDIC VEHICLE

LATE BREAKING

COMIC MATHAN ERHARDT LEAVES A GIG AT THE MVA
TO WRITE FOR SAMANTHA BEE. *By Hannah Monicken*

“I only do *tasteful* nudity,” Mathan Erhardt says quietly. Photographer Justin Tsucalas and I are discussing possible backdrops for the “Full Frontal with Samantha Bee” comedy writer’s portrait at the Bun Shop in Mount Vernon. This is my first taste of the guy’s ultra-dry wit, delivered so stoically I almost miss it.

A year ago, Erhardt, 41, was even easier to miss. The unassuming Tucson, Ariz., native was living in Baltimore, in fact, and working at the Maryland Vehicle Administration. One of a handful of staff writers recently chosen to launch “Full Frontal with Samantha Bee”—the new late-night critical darling on TBS hosted by Bee, a former longtime “Daily Show with Jon Stewart” correspondent—Erhardt submitted a blind

writing sample and won the jackpot.

“I went from a career in irony to a career in comedy,” Erhardt, who doesn’t drive, remarks. He pauses, as if waiting for the laugh. “That joke killed at Thanksgiving with my family,” he says.

Of course, it’s not unheard of for comics to break big in middle age—David Sedaris comes to mind—but neither is it typical. Erhardt arrived in Baltimore in the ’90s to attend Morgan State University. Though he completed his coursework in 1999, he didn’t get around to filing the paperwork to graduate until 2002, which, once you’ve experienced just how laid-back he can be, seems like something he would do—or not do, as the case seems to have been.

Save for a three-year stint in Las Vegas

and a brief, ill-fated stretch in New York, Charm City has been his default home ever since.

“Baltimore is the closest place to me having roots somewhere,” he says. Despite landing his dream job in New York—he signed the contract in November—Erhardt kept his Madison Park apartment through June and visited on weekends, making the rounds to his Fells Point favorites: Sound Garden, Tortilleria Sinaloa and Gorilla King Comics. Once he finally decided to get a place in New York, he slowly started moving his stuff.

Hard to blame Erhardt for being gun-shy. His first Big Apple experience didn’t end so great. In 2012, he was hired through a friend for the new BET comedy show “Don’t Sleep,” hosted by real-life newsman T.J. Holmes. The show fizzled in a few months.

When that door slammed shut, Erhardt found himself writing freelance in New York—an already difficult proposition made significantly harder without a built-in professional network. He lasted another handful of months before moving back to Maryland.

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Before “Don’t Sleep,” Erhardt had worked mostly in restaurants while writing on his own time. But after returning to Baltimore, he went a different route, taking a job at the Maryland Health Connection.

That steady job led to another—at the MVA. All the while, he submitted to shows.

“It’s ridiculous that my first 401(k) was [earned] at the MVA,” he says. But shortly into his time snapping driver’s license photos, he heard from a friend (who heard from an ex-coworker who heard from another friend who heard from his agent) that “Full Frontal” was looking for writers. He submitted.

“What struck me when I read Mathan’s submission is, ‘This is a unique voice,’ says ‘Full Frontal’ (and former ‘Daily Show’) executive producer Jo Miller. “It didn’t sound a bit like any of the other 230 packets I had read. His strong point of view and bone-dry wit stood out immediately.”

Samantha Bee’s on-screen persona is caustic—positively vibrating with righteous fury—while Erhardt’s real-life demeanor is exactly the opposite.

“I’m not keeping a tally of how many times people like something that I wrote,” he says, and, considering his Twitter account is almost solely retweets of the show’s, it’s easy to take him at his word. “It’s about the piece resonating with the audience. I imagine—if I’d been in the industry longer—I might feel differently. Right now, I’m definitely just happy to be there.”

“Happy to be here” could be his life motto. His goal, however, is making people laugh—behind the scenes, of course.

“For somebody who is really shy and who doesn’t like to be the center of attention,” he says, “to see I have a hand in something people are paying attention to, it’s a really good feeling.” □



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