

Cover story

Mr Deadpan

Television bad boy Jeremy Wells is back with a new season of *Eating Media Lunch* specials. Sarah Lang braves an interview.



I FEEL SORRY for the waitress. Every time she ventures near us deep in the underground innards of central Auckland's Gravity Cafe, Jeremy Wells seems to be in the middle of talking about bestiality, sex with a prostitute, or his own conception.

Although a discernible blush creeps up the waitress' neck on each occasion, Wells doesn't pause. In fact, I get the feeling the TV presenter/comedian/reporter (my definition) – “microphone guy” (his) – is enjoying the extra audience.

When he talks, hands clasped beneath his chin, he mostly fixes his gaze on the ceiling as if to draw inspiration from above, or on the water jug as if to glean drops of wit from it. Switching from friendly to stand-offish, from eloquent to vague, from confident to self-deprecating, from serious to definitely not, Wells seems to sport several personalities – or, if this is a performance, several personas. All of whom make me sweat for a candid answer. I find I'm jotting down “must be taking the piss”, “sounds sarcastic here” and “actually sounds earnest”, while he seems mighty pleased when I don't know whether to believe what he's just said.

He left me speculating on what happened in a certain North Shore brothel after Wells, wearing a helmet-cam, prepared to have sex with a prostitute while filming a sex special for *Havoc* (the 1997–2002 hit show he co-hosted with Mikey Havoc). I remember the strong implication he'd done the deed. Says Wells: “Yeah, there was a weird moment where the sex worker was looking at me and I was looking at her and we sort of thought ‘what the hell’.” He pauses, waiting for a reaction, and I bite. “So you did?” “Well, I shouldn't really say,” he grins. “I feel terrible, no I won't say. Put it this way: I definitely got to know her in that half hour.” There's no pressing him further.

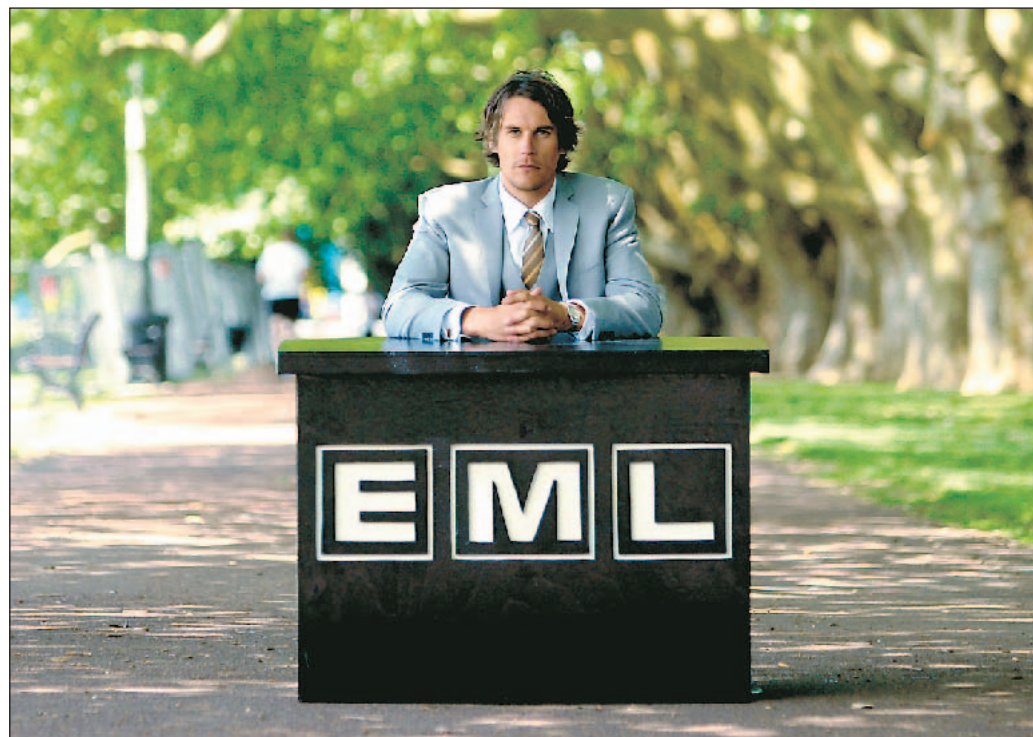
Wells doesn't deny he likes to shock. In fact, the 31-year-old seems to be missing an embarrassment chip, if his leftfield questions, poker-faced piss-taking and no-holds-barred pranks on *Havoc* and the offbeat media satire *Eating Media Lunch*, are anything to go by. Unleashed on the unsuspecting and the overly confident, that deadpan poker face nods sagely, giving pillocks just enough rope to hang themselves by blathering on.

But Wells is offended – or does a good job of feigning it – when I suggest one of his weapons is ridicule. “I don't really see myself as a person who ridicules people,” he says firmly. “We definitely don't ever set out to ridicule. We never say ‘who can we get this week’ or anything. Ever.” Still, Wells admits people are wary of him, with or without camera, and says it's getting harder by the week to get people to talk to *EML*, whether celebrities or commoners. “Most people won't. As soon as we say which show it's for they say ‘na’.”

So he and the *EML* team have tracked down some unwary foreigners. In the first of three episodes, screening this Friday, the show stops by the Minnesota State Fair en route to the recent Republican National Convention. With relish, Wells relays a chat with the fair's barnyard spokesman about cannibalism – “I mentioned that people say pork tastes a lot like human” – and bestiality, informing said spokesman that there's 1200 bestiality complaints to the New Zealand SPCA each year. While I note “taking the piss” in capitals, he swears by this (untrue) tally before launching into a spiel about the morality of bestiality: “If a male dog decides to have sex with a woman is that wrong? I mean, it's not really.” It's much the same argument he put forward in Minneapolis, shortly before being detained by the police.

This'll be the eighth season (albeit a short one) of *EML* which, at 5 years old, is already one of New Zealand's longest-running satires and Best Comedy winner at this year's Qantas Film and TV Awards. “It was a great feeling,” says Wells. “We'd been a finalist for a few years and we'd always lost so I assumed we were going to lose again, especially seeing our show isn't as funny as [fellow nominees] *bro'Town* and *Pulp Sport*.”

Whether or not you're a fan of the show, there's no doubt its host is very funny. What turns the situation jokes and lightning wit from amusing to plain hilarious is his astounding mastery of the deadpan face, even when something's side-splittingly funny. “I find the easiest way not to



OUT TO LUNCH: Jeremy Wells prepares to interview an unsuspecting member of the public.

JANNA DIXON

laugh is to think about my conception,” says Wells, with, of course, a straight face. “I think about my parents in a double bed somewhere in Henderson Place. It's quite sobering,” he says, finally cracking and laughing. Jokes aside, he's simply trained himself to keep a straight face during “performance”, although while the camera's not on him he's often grinning away.

Despite the apparent ease with which he endures embarrassing onscreen situations, Wells insists he doesn't have a thick skin. “I'm thin-skinned. Shocking, like a balloon!” He tells me he can spot his self-consciousness when watching himself on TV. As he seems to be making a big effort to get me to believe him on this, it crosses my mind that being so well-known for taking the piss must make it hard to convince people when he's being serious.

Something else the self-proclaimed “D-list celebrity” is known for, or by, is Newsboy, the name Mikey Havoc bestowed on his onetime-BFM newsreader which “just kind of stuck. Most people still call me that. Well, not most people, but lots. People who yell out to me yell ‘Newsboy’ rather

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than ‘Jeremy Wells’.” Although he says he's never tried to shake the nickname, he'd like to point out that people keep getting the inflection wrong: it's *Newsboy* rather than *Newsboy*.

Growing up in well-to-do Remuera with an older brother and his parents (he won't confirm but doesn't deny his mum is ex-Silver-Ferns coach Yvonne Willering), Wells always had an entertainer streak, making stunt-filled home videos with a mate and watching TV during his limited after-school and Saturday-morning viewing window. Sandwiched between his first three high-school years at Auckland Grammar and his seventh-form year at St Paul's in Hamilton was a year at strict Christian boarding school Wanganui Collegiate. He was expelled from the school for giving a cap of marijuana oil to a recovering drug addict at a Marton treatment centre. “It sounds so bad when you say it like that... but essentially yes, that's exactly what I did. To be honest, it's not something I'm proud of.”

In 1995, he began the Bachelor of Communication Studies at the Auckland Institute of Technology (now AUT), before leaving in the final term of his journalism major. There are two rumours circulating about why he didn't finish

the degree: one's that he went round crowing he'd already “made” it.

“Unbelievable!” says Wells mildly. “I hadn't made it, I hadn't even been on TV at that point.” He says the other rumour, that he was kicked out of uni, isn't true either. So, from the horse's mouth: because he was news-writing and reading on Mikey Havoc's BFM breakfast show, Wells hadn't been able to go to enough morning lectures to fulfil the requirements to sit his media theory exam. He vividly recalls being hauled into the journalism head's office. “I'll never forget what she said to me,” he says, slowing down to emphasise the words: “BFM will get you nowhere’.” The next day Havoc told him he'd been offered a new MTV show and did Wells want to be a researcher? He did. Soon TV2 snapped up the show and Wells was promoted to on-camera sidekick.

After six years on *Havoc*, and three series travelling round the country taking the piss out of such towns as Wanganui and Gore, Wells says it was time to move on – to *EML*. A Robin suddenly without his Batman, he admits it felt weird branching out on his own. “Performing's always weird. If you start to think about it too much you'll start to freak yourself out. So you try not to think too much.”

The future is something else he doesn't think about, though he says he's sure the TV work “could easily all dry up very quickly. At some stage you'll get washed up and everybody will laugh at you and you'll just have to deal with that.”

Still, it's looking pretty good for now, with season nine of *EML* and season five of Wells-fronted comic revisionist history *The Unauthorised History of New Zealand* currently under negotiation with TV2. He's also about to start filming new TV One series *Birdland*. “I love birds. I am a bird.”

He's getting more tangential by the minute so I tell him I'm done. “Thank God!” he says, admitting he's much more comfortable shining the spotlight than being in its glare.

Once the recorder's switched off, he's much more fun and laidback with not a jot of piss-taking. When we chat about the US election, his intellect becomes blindingly clear: he's got an in-depth knowledge of at least the last half-century of US politics. And he becomes visibly more animated when we swap gossip about peccadilloes of the high-profile.

His most candid comment, presumably an interviewing tip, comes unprompted as we part ways. “What I do is not think about what should I ask but what shouldn't I ask. People hate you for it and it's embarrassing, and I hate uncomfortable situations, but it's worth it.”

I can just imagine the current affairs show – *Closeup with Wells, Newsboy Live* – with Wells riling politicians and CEOs into incandescent rage. He looks at me as if I'm mad. “Current affairs? Me? No! How could people take me seriously?”

Eating Media Lunch returns to TV2 this Friday at 945pm.