

## All over the comedy map

### Sean Cullen's quirky sense of humour and singing impersonations to christen Orléans' new arts centre

BY TONY LOFARO, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN    MAY 30, 2009



Comedian Sean Cullen.

**Photograph by:** Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen

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#### SEAN CULLEN

What: Opening act at the new Shenkman Arts Centre

When: June 5

Where: 245 Centrum Blvd., Orléans

Tickets: \$36.50

Information: 580-2700

Comedian Sean Cullen has that recognizable face you often see on television but can't pin down by name.

In Canada, he's been on The Comedy Network, hosted his own sitcom on CBC, and appeared on Air Farce. In the U.S., he's appeared on The Ellen Show, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, Last Comic Standing and MAD TV.

Several years ago, the talented actor-comedian was wooed by CBS and spent almost three years in Los Angeles under contract trying to develop a pilot to please network honchos.

"I wrote three different pilots and they were all like, 'this is just too weird for us,'" said Cullen, 43, during a promotional stop this week in Ottawa.

"Les Moonves (CBS president) came to one of the readings we did. We had a great reading with Jon Cryer (Two and a Half Men) and Tony Shalhoub (Monk), who were in the cast."

He said Moonves didn't care for the premise of the pilot but took a shine to him, calling Cullen "the next Kevin James."

Problem is, Cullen didn't want to be compared to the King of Queens star. "They always have to categorize you. They always say it's this meets this. It's this guy if you put him in there. I found that TV executives don't have a lot of imagination."

That's the curse of Hollywood, you sit and wait for the time when you can shine."

Which is why Cullen is striking out on his own these days, touring the country with a show that is more reflective of his quirky sense of humour, honed after years of standup, appearances at the Just For Laughs Festival and with his former comedy group, Corky and the Juice Pigs.

Cullen is the opening act June 5 at the new Shenkman Arts Centre in Orléans, built under a public-private agreement with the city and a development consortium headed by Forum Leasehold Partners. The 84,000-square-foot facility has a 506-seat performing arts centre, a 100-seat studio theatre, a municipal art gallery and visual and pottery studios. It will also serve as a home base for various arts groups. The centre's official opening is June 18.

Cullen said he's not sure why he was picked as the opening night performer for the spanking new performing arts centre.

"Maybe they want everything to go wrong with my show so they'll know what they have to fix. I'm the guinea pig," he quipped.

Cullen said he's going to mix it up for his Ottawa show, throwing in new bits never seen before in his act. One of his funnier acts has him singing the theme from James Bond films with the unlikeliest of singers, including Neil Young, Bob Dylan and the group R.E.M.

"There's going to be a few different songs, a few old songs, but most of it is from my new album I Am a Human Man that the tour is named after. There's a broad range of styles on the album from country music, to anthem rock and Euro pop. It's all really strange."

In short, strange could neatly sum up Cullen's style of comedy. Whether on stage, TV or film, Cullen certainly has a different comedic take on most things and punches up his act with over-the-top concepts. One minute he talks about fighting with the Pope in Vatican Square, and the next he's a Cockney gangster or a gay Inuit. He excels in singing impersonations, including hilarious takeoffs on Van Morrison and Styx.

Singing nonsensical songs was a staple of his work with Corky and the Juice Pigs, a comedy group that toured the world, played the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and built a cult following after 10 years of performing. The group disbanded in 1998.

Cullen said venturing out on his own was necessary but daunting.

"It was really to find out what I would be like and what voice I would have as a solo performer. It's different when you're in a trio, you're just punching in when you're needed. To carry the whole show is a lot different."

Several years ago, he got rave reviews as the cunning Max Bialystock in the Canadian production of *The Producers* for which he earned a Dora Mavor Moore Award nomination. He's had success in theatre and television but so far, his film work is spotty, partly because he's a difficult person to cast.

"I'm not ugly enough to be funny looking and get cast for that reason and I'm not handsome enough to be in leading roles."

He's had a tiny role in Atom Egoyan's *Where the Truth Lies* and played a hockey referee in Mike Myers' *The Love Guru*.

"It was a terrible movie. They even dubbed my voice, and that was insult to injury. I read the script and it read a lot better than it actually was.

"I think for me I'm going to have to write my own movie and get it produced."

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