

Don't miss Ty Burrell as the adorably awkward Phil Dunphy on ABC's hit show *Modern Family*.

#1 dad

THE FUNNIEST FATHER ON TV, TY BURRELL OF MODERN FAMILY, TALKS EMMY®S, "PEER-ENTING" AND WHAT IT'S LIKE TO WORK WITH SUCH A TALENTED CAST (KIDS AND WRITERS INCLUDED).

WRITTEN BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY

When a member of Generation X grows up and becomes a middle-aged parent, what happens to him? (Here's a clue: The result is not *Father Knows Best*.)

The answer is personified by America's most beloved, if often besieged, TV dad, Phil Dunphy of ABC's *Modern Family*, portrayed with awkward likeability by the talented Ty Burrell. The actor, 44, plays the better half to control freak Claire (Julie Bowen), who together comprise a contemporary couple.

Told through the lens of three such "modern"-day marriages, the series tackles with warm humor many of today's social issues: gay partnership, foreign adoption, May-December romance, post-divorce reshuffling and culture clashes.

Its EMMY AWARD®-winning track record is proof positive that nothing is more hilarious than comedy grounded in truth. *Modern Family* was named Outstanding Comedy Series for 2010, and is once again in the running to earn TV's highest distinction in its category for 2011. It's also garnered an additional 16 nominations, shared among its executive producers and cast, including Burrell for the second year running as Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series. (He lost last year to castmate Eric Stonestreet.)

Burrell has appeared on and off-Broadway for years, as well as in TV series such as *Back to You*, and in films as diverse as *Morning Glory* and *The Incredible Hulk*. But Burrell truly broke out in 2009 when he joined the cast of the goofiest-yet-utterly-real clan seen on television since Archie, Edith and Meathead ruled the tube some 40 years ago.

Here, *Spotlight* talks with the Family man about what it's like to make the whole country laugh — and why his show is the most-DVRed program in the nation.

VF: *Modern Family* isn't just critically celebrated, it's also hugely popular. Why do you think people love the show so much?
TB: It's a combination of old and new comedy — older comedy, meaning it's comedy with some warmth that attempts to be, in the words of [showrunner] Christopher Lloyd, nourishing. And it has a little bit of a grittier side and awkwardness — a more contemporary form of comedy.

VF: The cast often enacts what could be real-life situations. Do you think this plays into the show's success?

TB: Most of the stories come from the writers' actual lives. [There's] a conscious attempt to stay away from mean-spirited stuff... there's something to it that always feels well intended. That's an amazing thing to play as actor. It's a fundamental human trait. Some people mean to do wrong, but most people are trying to do their best, even if they're creating all kinds of trouble, or even sabotaging others. The writers are really skilled at putting that out there for us...to screw up

VF: Is there a lot of ad-libbing going on?

TB: Rarely. Occasionally some interviews [when the characters break "the fourth wall" and speak directly to the camera] are improvised, and some alternate jokes, but as far as structured scenes between two people, we strongly stick to the script. The way it's filmed and styled can make it seem more realistic.

VF: What's it like working with such a talented cast? You're all so good!

TB: Including the kids! It's a very fun, exciting place to go to work, where whoever you work with brings something different and cool to scenes. I get really giddy getting to goof-off and react off [the others] every day. It's kind of a daydream!

VF: Phil Dunphy has his own unique way of parenting — on ABC's official Web site, it's called "peer-enting." How would you describe it?

TB: I would say he attempts to be cool. He makes a lot of mistakes from trying too hard. I love that. It's a really fun thing to play. He wants to be the kids' best friend, sort of like a super human. Everything to everyone. So he's constantly going all-out.

VF: Is your parenting style anything like Phil's?

TB: I do embarrass myself regularly, but my daughter [Frances, 2, whom he and wife Holly adopted last year] is too young for me to try to make her think I'm cool. My wife is constantly laughing because she thinks I'm turning our daughter into a ham, constantly performing. It's a lot of arm flapping, trying to make her laugh.

VF: Is Phil inspired by anyone in particular?

TB: From a writer's standpoint, a lot of the material is from [executive producer] Steve

Levitan. From my perspective, Phil is a couple of other people in my life who shall remain nameless!

VF: What are some of your favorite Phil moments on the show?

TB: Chris Lloyd likes to say his favorite thing is to write me in situations where I'm uncomfortable. I, for whatever reason, get some sick joy out of that. The kidney stone episode ["Up All Night," Season 1] is one of my favorites. I love that he thinks he's dying but won't call the fire department because they're stereotypically too good-looking and he doesn't want them flirting with his wife. Categorically, I also love scenes where we're all together because we have such a good time hanging out. The "Family Portrait" [Season 1] episode is one of my favorites; it was fun performing with Kobe Bryant. He was a natural!

VF: So what can we expect when the show comes back for its third season September 21*?

TB: I know we're going on a vacation. I believe we're going to a dude ranch. So I think Phil will be on a horse.

VF: As an actor, you've pretty much done it all: TV, movies, theater. Is TV your favorite?

TB: It is. I've done a few plays that were incredible experiences, and some films that were major as well. But the multi-camera sitcoms are the most satisfying. It's an amazing job, the most creative experience I've ever had. [Participating in] the meetings as we're making decisions on set and contributing jokes — although most of my jokes fail!

VF: *Modern Family* is the #1 most-DVRed show. What's on your DVR?

TB: Most recently: *Mad Men*, *Walking Dead*, *Game of Thrones* and *Parks & Recreation*.

VF: Pretty good EMMY company!

TB: You're right. It is!

 **modern family**
Modern Family returns
September 21 at 9pm ET/8pm CT

About the Writer: Lauren Paige Kennedy is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles California. She regularly pens celebrity features for *WebMD the Magazine*. Her work has also appeared in *The Financial Times*, *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*.