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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

The doctor is in -- again

Patrick Dempsey of "Grey's Anatomy" is being hailed as this TV season's comeback kid.

By Michele Hatty

Paging Dr. Amoeba?

Somehow, that doesn't have quite the same ring to it as "Paging Dr. McDreamy."

But long before Patrick Dempsey acquired the moniker ascribed to the sexy neurosurgeon he plays on ABC's hit dramedy "Grey's Anatomy" (Sundays, 10 p.m. ET), the handsome, hazel-eyed Maine native answered to that much more, um, humble nickname.

"My friends called me 'Amoeba' until junior high," he says with an affable shrug. "I didn't really start growing until I left high school. Until I turned 35."

As he breaks into a wide grin, it's clear he's teasing. But there's a kernel of truth behind his smile: For the past two decades, the actor has suffered plenty of growing pains. And now, at 40, Dempsey is staging a comeback the likes of which hasn't been seen since Desperate Housewife Teri Hatcher re-emerged from the rubble of those RadioShack ads.



"This year has been amazing."

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Dempsey's first flirtation with fame came nearly 20 years ago, when he drove teenage girls mad in the 1987 big-screen romantic comedy "Can't Buy Me Love," opposite Amanda Peterson. He was just 21 at the time, and the instant adulation that followed was fleeting. After making a few more sex comedies, he toiled in forgettable films such as 1991's "Mobsters" and in occasional guest roles on TV shows such as "Will & Grace" and "Once and Again." And not even the Power of Reese (Witherspoon, that is -- he played one of her love interests in 2002's "Sweet Home Alabama") could resurrect his career.

"My 30s were incredibly difficult. I was just 'that guy who was in that '80s movie,' " he says flatly as he sinks back into his chair and fiddles with his black baseball cap.

Then "Grey's" came along. And now, as he sits in an air-conditioned observation tower overlooking a racetrack in steamy Sebring, Fla., Dempsey is circumspect. Turning his attention away from the parade of high-performance, souped-up Audis and Porsches roaring past as they compete in the American Le Mans series race that's being run here today, he says bluntly, "This year has been amazing. My life has changed completely."

But Dempsey had to overcome more than just the stigma of being a washed-up teen star: He also had to contend with dyslexia, a learning disability he was first diagnosed with back in middle school.

"It really hurt me during auditions. There was a 10-year period where I had to memorize pages of dialogue and invest so much of my time and energy into every audition, going in knowing that I wouldn't get it anyway," he says with a trace of bitterness. (Among the roles for which he auditioned was the lead on that other doctor show, Fox's *House*; the part went to Hugh Laurie.) "When 'Grey's Anatomy' came up, I was really at the breaking point. I was like, 'I can't do this anymore. I can't keep auditioning.' "

Fortunately, "Grey's" creator Shonda Rhimes stepped in. "I honestly wasn't that aware of Patrick during the '80s," she admits. "The very first time I met him, I was absolutely sure that he was my guy. Reading the lines of Derek Shepherd, Patrick had a vulnerable charm that I just fell for. And he had amazing chemistry with Ellen Pompeo," who plays Meredith Grey, a surgical intern who is currently embroiled in a love triangle with the handsome doc.

Rhimes admits Dempsey's dyslexia threw her at first, particularly at the first few "table readings" (meetings when the cast gathers to read fresh scripts aloud). "I did not know about Patrick's dyslexia in the beginning," she says. "I actually thought that he didn't like the scripts from the way he approached the readings. When I found out, I completely understood his hesitation. Now that we all know, if he is struggling with a word, the other actors are quick to step up and help him out. Everyone is very respectful."

"Grey's" focuses as much on characters' love lives as it does on the cases its surgeons handle. "It's a soap opera. And it's also

very funny," Dempsey says. "People get so invested in these characters."

And although he knows what will happen as the show surges toward its season finale in the next few weeks, Dempsey is mum on plot details, mainly because of Rhimes' strict no-spoiler policy. He does, however, have his own hopes for the good Dr. Shepherd: "I want him to get darker. I want him to be a little less dreamy and more of a nightmare, just for a little while, in order to round him out."

In recent weeks, his character has tentatively recommitted to his wife and formed a fledgling "friendship" with former lover Meredith. Meredith, in turn, has gone on to be with what Dempsey calls "an odyssey of men," hooking up with a series of one-night stands.

Meredith's encounters echo the casual attitude many of the characters on "Grey's" exhibit toward sex. So far, interns and docs at the fictional Seattle hospital also have endured a syphilis outbreak and an unplanned pregnancy. Does it concern Dempsey and the rest of the cast that a group of doctors -- even fictional ones -- would be shown engaging in so much unprotected, casual sex?

"We do talk about it," he concedes. "But there are consequences for their actions. I think a lot of people identify with Meredith. She's a metaphor for someone searching for love and not finding it in the right way. And Shonda, in her defense, is taking us somewhere with that story."

Of course, the show's sexy subplots have bolstered Dempsey's renewed heartthrob status. Everything from his hair (which, he points out, is starting to gray) to his ubiquitous five o'clock shadow is admired and discussed ad nauseam on fan sites.

As "Chicago Sun-Times" TV critic Doug Elfman notes: "I think of Patrick not as Dr. McDreamy but as Dr. McDrooly. Every time a woman in my presence says his name, a tiny bit of drool starts to form in the corner of her mouth. I keep expecting them to pass out from swooning, like in those old movies."

This attention is flattering, but it can be complicated for the actor, who is both a husband (he married Delux Beauty founder Jill Fink in 1999) and a father (daughter Talula is 4). After all, when he met his now-wife, women weren't falling all over him. "I was very cold," he says, dryly.

The couple is navigating this new terrain carefully. Explains the actor, who has been open about infidelities in his first marriage to his much-older manager (they wed in 1987 and divorced in 1994): "What's come up with all of this attention is, like, 'Wow, we've got to work on our thing more than ever so we don't become a cliché Hollywood story and break up.' "

So, Dempsey says, they attend therapy as a couple, and he goes on his own: "Our life is no longer our own in a lot of respects. We're working on those issues now. 'How are we? Are we getting enough time together to keep the intimacy alive?' "

The actor is committed to the show for the next several years -- gratefully so -- and will be mixing in films during TV breaks. Next up: Hilary Swank's new project, "Freedom Writers," a drama set in a tough school system; and Disney's "Enchanted" opposite Amy Adams and Susan Sarandon.

He also hopes to escape Los Angeles: "I would love to move to a small town. I grew up in the country and could spend hours playing in the woods or riding a bicycle down a country road, not worrying about anything. I want to allow my child to be a child."

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Dempsey's back in the race -- literally

When he's not donning his Dr. McDreamy scrubs, Patrick Dempsey often sports a high-tech, fireproof jumpsuit like the one he's in now as he prepares to race a Panoz sports car under the hot sun at a historic track in Sebring, Fla. "It's a very Zen experience," he says of being behind the wheel during a race. "You're so in the moment. For me, it's the only place where I really can relax and calm down."

It's not quite as Zen for others in his life, like, say, "Grey's Anatomy" creator Shonda Rhimes. "I just pretend it's not happening," Rhimes says. It also makes Dempsey's co-star Ellen Pompeo nervous. Still, she says, "I've never seen him happier than when he has just finished a race."

Dempsey, who is addicted to the Speed channel ("I watch no real TV but racing") and has been competing for about three years, isn't likely to abandon the track anytime soon. He says his dream is to compete in France's prestigious 24 Hours of Le Mans. Plus, he just added Indy car racing team owner to his résumé.

Besides, he loves the camaraderie in the racing world. "Here, they've known me for a number of years," he says. "I gravitate toward those people because they liked me before, and they still like me now."

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*Grooming by Jillian Dempsey, Bardeen; styling by Erika Ewers.
Shirt on cover: Polo by Ralph Lauren; jacket inside: Marc Jacobs*

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