Alum Profile

Funny in a Good Way
Michaela Watkins (CFA’94) makes it to prime time — and beyond

Michaela Watkins remembers exactly where she was when the reality of her career taking off hit: in a hot tub with John Malkovich. Watkins (CFA’94) was in her first season as a featured player on Saturday Night Live, and Malkovich was that Saturday’s host.

“I was in a full Renaissance gown in a hot tub for a scene called ‘J’acuzzi’ — it was the lines from Dangerous Liaisons,” she says. “My brain just shattered into a hundred pieces. I had done Dangerous Liaisons at BU, in my sophomore year. I was a maid who moved furniture around.”

Watkins beat some dismal odds to make the leap from conservatory student to successful comedian, and in March she makes her big screen debut — in the Jennifer Lopez romantic comedy The Back-Up Plan.

She has always set lofty goals and stuck to them. Take her stint on SNL. “It’s just the direction I set my GPS,” she says. “I figured that if I set my sights to something so high, just heading towards that I’m going to pick up all the great things along the way.”

Watkins’s Saturday Night Live contract wasn’t renewed after her first season, but great opportunities are still coming her way. Last fall, she did a guest spot on the hit Julia Louis-Dreyfus sitcom The New Adventures of Old Christine. Over the holidays, she conquered her fear of flying (and war zones), visiting Iraq to perform for the troops.

“So many times you go, ‘Oh, if I just had a chance,’” she says. “Well, now I have the chance, and I can’t tank it. I have to work just as hard, if not harder.”

When she arrived at the College of Fine Arts in 1990, Watkins had mapped out a more conventional path as an actress: a conservatory education, a résumé built up in regional theater, and eventually, she hoped, roles on Broadway. She is grateful for what she learned at BU, in Oregon, where she grew comfortable on stage and got her Screen Actors Guild card. But five years later, having worked with every group in town, she was ready to move on. “What I really wanted, as unpopular as it was to say with all my smart, sophisticated theater friends, was to be on a sitcom,” she says.

She spent nearly six years studying and working in L.A., where she earned a coveted spot with The Groundlings, the improv comedy school and performance group that launched the careers of some of today’s biggest comedy stars, including Will Ferrell and Conan O’Brien. She appeared on TV sitcoms and dramas. Then one night she got the call she’d been waiting for: after two auditions, Saturday Night Live wanted her. She was on a flight to New York at six the next morning.

During her season on SNL, Watkins became known for wicked impersonations of Arianna Huffington and Hoda Kotb, and gained a cult following for her first original character, an iced-coffee-addicted gossip blogger. She says she had a great time on the show, and has no regrets about her brief tenure. “I had so much fun my first year, I don’t know why that couldn’t have happened a couple more,” she says. “But I put it out there, I’m happy with the work that I did, and now I’m moving on to do the next thing. I can sort of check that off.”

What’s next? A little bit of everything, Watkins says. She’s still performing with The Groundlings, shooting videos for Ferrell’s comedy Web site Funny or Die, studying song improvisation (“it’s the one area of improv I’ve always been afraid of”), writing a television pilot, and looking to get involved in live theater again.

“I feel very excited, and hopeful, and kind of cará sera,” she says. “Any second you get a phone call, and your life changes a lot. And that’s happened to me so many times — just when I think I’ve got it all set, I get a phone call.”

Jessica Ullian

As a featured player on Saturday Night Live, Michaela Watkins did wicked impersonations of Arianna Huffington and Hoda Kotb.