

VOICE OF INSANITY

The actor behind Bender is a different beast to his bad boy robot character, writes **Sally Browne**

You may not recognise his face, but you will recognise his voice. John DiMaggio is the magnificent voice of Bender, the wise-cracking, beer-swilling robot with a heart of chrome on TV's *Futurama*.

It's a role he's played since the show began in 1999. And he, along with the cast and creators Matt Groening and David X. Cohen, are part of a core group who have helped make the show an international (or intergalactic) hit with viewers in the millions.

As well as *Futurama*, DiMaggio has lent his larynx to shows including *Adventure Time* (Jake) and *Pound Puppies* (Niblet), and video games like *Gears of War*. In the flesh, he has shared screen time with Robert De Niro, and proudly boasts a call sheet from *Little Fockers* "with me and Robert De Niro's name on it" on his wall.

"I was the paramedic. I had a big day with Bobby D. I was very lucky."

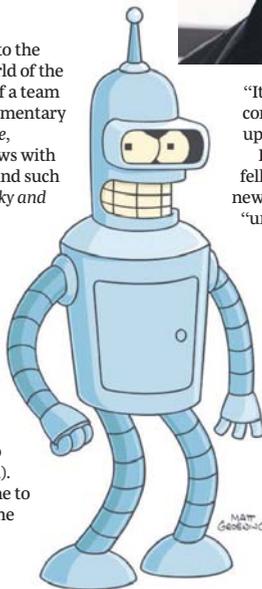
The comedian and actor from New Jersey says he fell into voice acting after a friend tipped him off that it was a good way for an actor to pay the bills.

And now, in tribute to the little-known secret world of the voice actor, he is part of a team who have made a documentary called *I Know That Voice*, featuring rare interviews with the vocal acrobats behind such loved shows as *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, *The Powerpuff Girls* and *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

"That's my baby. I'm the executive producer of that," he says of the documentary, due for release next year.

"We're waiting to see if we're getting into Sundance (film festival).

"It's really a valentine to my profession and to the people that I've been working with over the past 16 years.



Belligerent bot: John DiMaggio, below, is the voice actor of Bender in *Futurama*.

He also pays great respect to Billy West, his astoundingly talented colleague who voices not only Fry on *Futurama*, but Professor Farnsworth, Dr Zoidberg and Zapp Brannigan.

"Billy West is an amazing, amazing, amazing actor. I'm so blessed to be working with him."

Futurama fans will be able to see DiMaggio in the flesh today at the Supanova pop culture expo in Brisbane, where he's happy to swap a word or two with fans – just don't ask him to record you a voicemail message . . . he gets that a lot. He's often asked to repeat Bender's great catch phrases.

"I try not to overdo it because the next day, I can't speak."

When he's not being Bender, DiMaggio, a live music fan, lives in the Hollywood Hills with his girlfriend as well as two cats and two dogs.

While he does enjoy an occasional beer, DiMaggio is a very different character to his robot counterpart.

"He's just a great character to play because he's just so over the top sometimes and, over the years, he's grown so much; his emotions are deeper and deeper every time I get to play him. So it's a lot of fun.

"I love this show and I love where it started and it's a real thrill. And it's opened up a lot of doors for me to play a lot of other characters. I've been able to do other shows because of this and I'm thrilled, I really look forward to it and I knock on wood every time that I think about it."

Supanova, RNA Showgrounds, Brisbane, concludes today.

"It's a thrill to see all my comrades come out and back me up on this."

DiMaggio is also working with fellow producer Tommy Reid on a new kids' cartoon, which is still "under wraps".

"We're getting ready to pitch it so we've got some talented people working on it.

We already did a theme song for it."

DiMaggio nominates the great Mel Blanc, who brought Bugs Bunny and the rest of the Warner Bros cartoon family to life, as his favourite voiceover artist. "You can't say enough about the guy. He wrote the book (on voice acting). I've never met him, but we did get to interview Noel Blanc, his son, which is pretty cool."