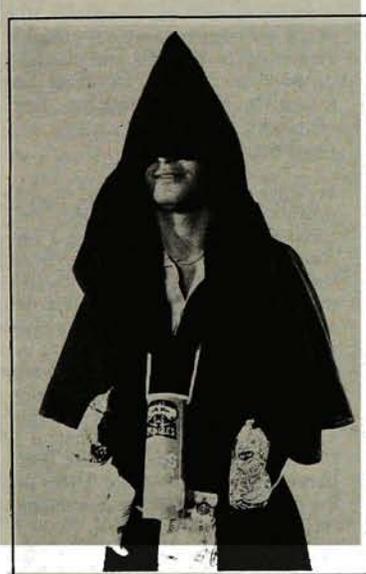


Hurricane Howie

by Gary Lamphier

Ready to storm the States this summer, in a campaign backed by Paramount Pictures, actor/comedian Howie Mandel (Gas, Comics and Drats) is about to get the full star treatment.



"A lot of kids come up to me and say: 'Bobby?' So I say: 'What?'"

— Howie Mandel

Howie Mandel is having a seizure. Right on cue. He blasts out from the wings like some cheerfully misguided missile, his body still gyrating from its tussle with gravity. He's a six-foot slice of jello in heat. "I'm so excited," he screeches, arms flailing the smoke-filled air. No one, it seems, is inclined to quibble. This man looks dangerous.

Howie lunges into a series of jokes. Each is punctuated with a question ("Yaknowwhat? Yaknowwhat?") or admonition ("Watchis! Watchis!"). Some are merely inane. Others are blatantly mindless. All of them—well, almost all—are funny.

There's the one about the Japanese guy who takes his Nikon to parties "Jussa be wanna tha guys." And the joke about two guys who walk into a bar, "which is really funny," marvels Howie, "cause you'd think the second guy would have seen it." And then there's Howie resolving the classic 'hand or eye—which is quicker?' dilemma. (He flaps his hands open and shut in sync with blinking eyelids; the eyelids win.)

The studio audience—an agreeable bunch who earn their freebies by applauding and laughing for the cameras—doesn't seem to need convincing. They laugh from the gut, loud and hard. (Except for one young lady, whose face in close-up conveys both fascination and profound disbelief.)

In the control room, the scene is rather different. One of the co-producers for Showtime, the American pay-TV firm that is taping this show, looks tense. He's rocking back and forth on his chair, digging the back legs into the floor. His eyebrows contain enough furrows to warrant spring seeding. He is muttering incredulously to no one in particular: "Jeesus... Chrii... Wadisszis? Jeeeesuss... Whaaa..."

Suddenly, he jumps up and rumbles out of the room. Thirty seconds later, he's back, now leaning against a wall with one hand on his hip. "Relax," a female voice reassures. "He's really popular." Consoled if not convinced, our troubled producer hunkers back to his seat, eyes glued to the bank of monitors before us. They show Howie doffing his pants. Underneath are some ill-fitting diapers. A baby bonnet sits atop his curly head of hair. Howie, the slightly menacing speedo, is transformed: he is now Bobby, the slightly menacing infant. Bobby is explaining the facts of life: "And then the male organ gest big and hard, 'cause he's got a lotta' work to do."

This time, there are no rejoinders. There is sporadic laughter. The producer is smiling. Bobby, turning serious, moves on to toilet training: "Every time my mommy would put me on... the potty," he squeaks, the utter horribleness of the memory almost too much to bear, "I

would... I... would... cry." And he almost does cry, the poor thing, prompting whispers of maternal comfort from the audience ("Awww... izzenthatkeeooot..."). Bravely, Bobby continues: "And so my mother would say 'Bobby, why is it that whenever I put you on... the potty... you will cry?'" And the audience, hooked, really wants to know. ("Hey, Bobby, why you look so downtrodden, young fella? Somebody steal your rattle?") Bobby brightens. He's got the answer: "Because," he says, breaking into song, "it's my potty and I'll cry if I want to, cry if I want to..."

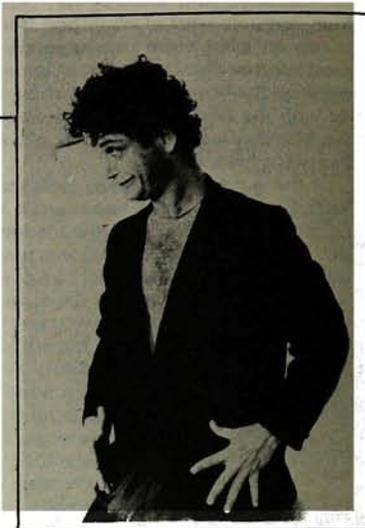
By the time we recognize the tune, the bonnet is off, Bobby has evaporated and Howie is thanking the audience as he exits.

Half an hour later we're chatting in the hallway, joined by Howie's manager David Holiff. It's close to midnight and the Global Television studios are all but deserted. "I had to stand still for 45 minutes behind those curtains," Howie complains to Holiff. "You know how I like to pace before a show. I couldn't make a sound. They wouldn't cut the tape to let me move around. I think they were trying to save money."

"Don't let them do that to you," says Holiff, a bit angrily. "That's your fault. See, you learned something tonight."

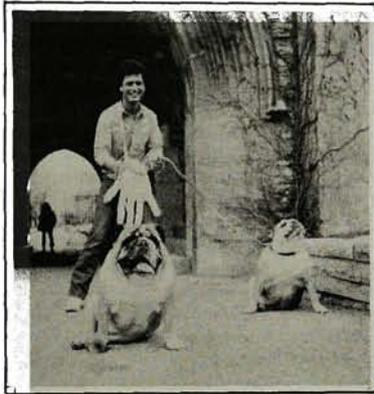
Howie has learned a lot these past 36 months. Back in '78, he was a 23-year-old school dropout and x-carpet salesman. He was an unknown commodity, just another would-be comic working on his routine at Yuk Yuk's Komedy Kabaret in Toronto. Of course, he'd always had this appreciation for life's comedic possibilities (one that wasn't always shared by those of sound mind). There was the time when Howie delighted teachers and classmates alike by retrieving some ominous-looking foreign matter from the school swimming pool. In his teeth. (Unknown to the unfortunate onlookers, said foreign matter was in fact a Sweet Marie chocolate bar, courtesy of H. Mandel.) And how could one forget Howie's award-winning performance as a carpet salesman? On one occasion, he sold a family an entire apartment worth of underpadding. Sans carpet. "They beefed when it came apart a little the first time they vacuumed," he explained to one interviewer. "But I asked them what did they want at \$2 a square yard."

Since the demise of his sales career and the ensuing stints at Yuk Yuk's, Howie has been busy selling himself—



Gary Lamphier, former staff reporter of *CineMag* is presently a freelance writer working in Toronto.

Suddenly, he jumps up and rumbles out of the room. Thirty seconds later he's back... doffing his pants. Underneath are some ill-fitting diapers.



with more than a little help from the Toronto-based Holiff, and some high-falutin Hollywood connections (the same publicists who handle Jane Fonda and Sylvester Stallone, among others). He's appeared on numerous Canadian and American network TV programs (*Make Me Laugh*, *The Palace*, *The Alan Hamel Show*), shared the spotlight with Dick Shawn on an NBC special, hosted a Home Box Office music/comedy program called *Pop Clips*, and will soon surface in three feature films (*Drats*, *Comics*, and the upcoming Paramount release, *Gas*). Paramount is now negotiating with the major American talk shows (Carson, Douglas, Griffin) for possible appearances before *Gas*' July launch, and Holiff says Mandel will open a yet-to-be named Las Vegas act sometime this summer.

As more than one critic has pointed out, Howie is "hot." But the same was being said of him a year ago, when he first began to attract attention. Since then, a string of TV and film commitments have kept him busy, along with frequent appearances at The Comedy Store in Los Angeles, where he now lives with his wife, Terri. Still, Howie hasn't broken into the "star" category yet.

A network TV series might provide the platform needed, but Howie professes ambivalence about being pegged to a role indefinitely. "Right now I'm passing a point in my career where it's so risky to get locked into a character for five years," he says.

Instead, he's hoping that his films—particularly *Gas*, which is one of Paramount's major summer comedies will provide the impetus. "Right now, I'm just waiting for the movies to come out," he says. "It's kind of scary."

In fact, acting has long been his primary interest, and he's now taking lessons to improve his skills. "I don't want to be a stand-up comic forever," he says. "It's just a means to an end. I use stand-up as a showcase." Hence his club dates (a recent appearance at Yuk Yuk's drew about 40 media and show business types), and his appearances on programs like *Canada AM* (where Howie the chef prepared cheese and crackers and bread with butter) and *The Alan Thicke Show*. "The Comedy Store is really my home base," he says. "I have a great time there. It's a wild crowd. In a club situation, when they're wild it makes me wilder."

Television, with its canned laughter and restrictions on time and material, allows for less interaction and requires greater discipline, he says. "On TV, you're being seen by millions of people across the U.S. and Canada. If these 40 people in the studio don't like you, it's not going to matter. It's those millions that count. So they 'sweeten' the laughter (i.e. turn up the volume) and you have to react like the joke went over big, even if the studio audience doesn't react. Also, on TV you've got to be tight. If they want 10 minutes you can't give them 11 minutes. At a club, if you're on a roll, you can go with it. You can be dirty, you can use four letter words—words like four, for instance."

The guy really is difficult to take seriously. One suspects that he likes it

that way. "I just wanna go crazy," he explains, as if any conscientious mother would want the same opportunity for her child. Howie does have saner moments, though. Usually when he's discussing acting, or his desire to return to Canada. ("I feel safe here. At such time as I don't have to be there, I'll come back.") But sobriety never intrudes for long. In his dressing room before taping, Howie is having trouble with his diapers. The towel he's wearing is too large. Tucked inside his pants, it suggests a severe case of mumps—in a very strange place. Finally, one of the wardrobe staff appears with a smaller towel. Howie drapes it over his face. "I AM... A MAN!" growls the Elefun Man, in a fit of exquisite bad taste.

It is Thursday evening at Yuk Yuk's, the beginning of a long weekend. The house is full. Many of the front seats are occupied by media types, ushered to their places by Holiff. "He works his ass off," says Howie, admiringly. Tonight, Howie is the 'special, non-featured feature guest' on the bill, but it's clear that he's the man most people are here to see. When he finally bounds onto the stage 90 minutes later, the audience erupts. Howie's manic energy, freed from the constraints of a TV screen, is contagious.

Many of his lines are familiar. He does the Nikon joke. The routine with the immigration agent. The hand/eye schtick. But he improvises, adds a new twist for the local audience here, some raw material there. "You know, women in L.A. don't use vibrators," he beams eagerly. "They just wait for earthquakes and sit on the parking meters." He 'recreates' Dustin Hoffman's performance in *Marathon Man* by jogging on the spot. He does his impression of an Italian without a car (gambling dice suspended from a headband). When he dons Bobby's baby bonnet, the applause is spontaneous. Click: recognition. "And then the male organ gets big and hard," chirps Bobby. "Like the Incredible Hulk." Someone is shrieking from the corner.

Bobby turns toward the racket, his eyes growing wide: "I'm just talking about it. She's doing it!" he exclaims. A man near the doorway guffaws loudly. Bobby turns slowly, in mock awe. "With you?" he enquires, his finger drawing an imaginary line across the room. "Wow! That's a boner!"

And the audience, like Howie, can't quite contain itself. ●