Howie Mandel recalls when nobody was laughing; Martha Coolidge happy to find strong femme characters

by Marilyn Beck & Stacy Jenel Smi

Howie Mandel tells us he finds it interesting when he gets messages from people who say, "'I went to school with you. You were so funny.'

"The truth is," he candidly admits, "nobody told me that then. It was more like people telling me how immature and crazy I was."

We asked the "Deal Or No Deal" and "Howie Do It" star about the story that he'd been expelled from high school for hiring contractors to build an addition to the school library â€” a stunt that could certainly be construed as a harbinger of his "Howie Do It" practical jokes.

"From the Yellow Pages I called different contracting firms and gave my real name because I was being honest," recalls Howie. "A guy showed up to measure the library, and the principal went out and asked what he was doing. When he said they were going to bid on the library expansion, the principal said, 'Who authorized this?' And he said Howard Mandel had authorized it."

What made things worse â€” or funnier, or both, depending upon how one looks at it â€” was that when Howie was called into the principal's office and readily admitted what he had done, the principal "asked me, 'What were you thinking?' And I said, 'I was thinking of getting three bids â€¦ '"

He notes that his reputation with the school authorities "was not as being a funny, entertaining person, but more someone they would have a psychologist in to see." With classmates, "They weren't laughing so much as murmuring to each other, 'Is this guy insane?' In school the thrust is to fit in, not to stand out," Howie points out. "Then there are the class clowns who make a name for themselves and are regarded by the rest of the students as heroic. And then there was me."

Now, of course, "On 'Howie Do It' I'm getting paid to do the kinds of things I used to get punished for." And he has found the people who appreciate his sense of humor â€” millions of them. Or, rather, they've found him â€” at 8 o'clock Friday nights. Howie will reveal more of his checkered past in December. That's when his "Here's the Deal: Don't Touch Me" autobiography is due for release. Maybe. "I read on Amazon.com that I'm 288 pages into it," Howie says, "but I haven't done three."

BEHIND THE CAMERA: Director Martha Coolidge, who has the Brittany Murphy-Jason Lewis "Tribute" debuting on Lifetime (4/11), has two features on her radar as her potential next assignment. One is a Nick Kazan project that has to do with a nuclear reactor mishap â€” it's a comedy â€” and the other is "a comedy for older women, called 'Good Vibrations,'" Coolidge tells us. "It's about a woman who is left adrift after her

husband's death who gets into the sex toy business."

Coolidge says she was attracted to the cable picture in part because, "I love mysteries â€” I read them a lot â€” and I found in this story strengths of the great mystery writers I love to read, with a highly empowered female character at the center. I don't know if I've read Nora Roberts before, but I really enjoyed reading 'Tribute,' I must say."

The moviemaker who's delivered such fare as "Rambling Rose," "If These Walls Could Talk" and "The Prince and Me" says she finds herself looking at movies and saying, "Where are all the strong women? Why are all these women dips?"

GETTING SERIOUS: Mike O'Malley is most known for his work on "Yes, Dear," and although he enjoyed that show, he admits the show he misses most is Christian Slater's "My Own Worst Enemy." In fact, being a part of the short-lived show has taken his career aspirations on a different a path. "That was my favorite part that I've ever had. I got to play a spy who shot guns and stabbed people in the neck. It was rewarding to a whole different degree, so this year, even though I've been asked to host a few game shows and things like that, it's not something I want to go back to right now. I'd really like to pursue more serious acting work," says the actor/host/comedian. "I do wish that show was still on. That's the one I'm currently mourning, but this time last year, I didn't even know that show existed, so hopefully something else really cool is around the corner. That's the thrilling, yet precarious part of being an actor."

MEANWHILE: Besides guest starring on "My Name is Earl," O'Malley did make room for one hosting gig. This Sunday (4/12), he'll be premiering TBS's "World's Funniest Office Commercials." "It's my third one I've done with these guys, so it's fun," he tells us. "I have a background with doing commercials, I still do commercials, I recognize the impact that a good commercial can have and of course how hard it is to make a good one in a very brief amount of time. We know that television wouldn't be around without commercials, so we're appreciative when the creative people put some time and thought in doing an ad," he notes. "Not that they're always good, but you're skipping through some pretty good laughs if you always skip through commercials."

With reports by Emily Feimster.

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