

TV Close-Up: Pete Hulne

by Eirik_Knutzen

The first among equally unknown actors who make up the ensemble cast of "American Body Shop," Pete Hulne is deliriously happy not only to be working, but getting paid for something he truly loves - improvisation.

PETE HULNE - Pete Hulne plays Sam Kelly, the owner of an auto body shop staffed by loonies, in the TV comedy 'American Body Shop.' CNS Photo courtesy of Comedy Central. "American Body Shop" - created by Sam Greene, directed by Jim Jones and executive produced by both - revolves around a bunch of loonies running an auto body and detailing shop on the outskirts of Phoenix. The characters include Sam Kelly (Hulne), the shop's owner and more or less the voice of reason.

Denise (Jill Bartlett), the comely receptionist and office manager, is fully capable of cold-cocking an obnoxious customer or disgusting a fellow employee; Tim (Tim Nichols) is an undersexed idiot prankster; Johnny (John DiResta) comes off as a total pervert with a Brooklyn accent; Rob (Nick Offerman) is a moron with complex solutions to simple problems; and Luis (Frank Merino) seems to be a mysterious Peruvian hiding the fact that he speaks English perfectly.

"We are a bunch of no-names handpicked for the show by Sam and Jim," said Hulne, 39, the perfect dark-haired Irish everyman. "All of us have worked in the business, but never run across each other before, so there are no airs, no egos. The producers don't allow any jerks on the set, so there are no fights, no dramas. And we get together for a beer after work occasionally."

Another unusual feature about the "American Body Shop" production is that Sam Greene fully scripts every episode, but sends the early drafts around for comments and input.

"And I mean it goes to everybody, then invites improvisation," explained Hulne. "It makes everybody feel connected and like they belong. Believe me, that just doesn't happen on other shows."

In fact, Hulne was a bit skeptical when told that improvisation could go a long way when he auditioned for the series.

"When I have gone in and created my own funny stuff, I've never heard from those producers again," he said, laughing. "I've heard stories about heavyweights like David E. Kelley and Steven Bochco going crazy for actors making minute changes to the script, like 'Don't' instead of 'Do not.' Come to think of it, neither has cast me in his shows."

Born along with an identical twin brother, Pat, in Roger's Park on Chicago's North Side, Hulne is the son of a fundraiser for a charitable organization and a nurse - both deceased before having a chance to share in their son's success. While Pat became a firefighter, Hulne's older brother Chip became a police officer. Their sister was a nurse, and now takes care of her husband and five children full time.

Always hanging with his twin brother, Hulne never lacked an audience as a homebody or class clown. Always goofing around, he came up with mean impersonations of his friends and relatives in addition to the requisite number of celebrity voices. But he was more attuned to sports than the theater until the all-girls St. Scholastica Academy (High School) begged for boys to join their stage productions at nearby St. Gregory High School.

A good Catholic, he was always ready to pitch in for a good cause - particularly when it involved a multitude of pretty girls separated from handsome boys against their will. Somehow he survived two years of extracurricular activities at St. Scholastica before he met his wife-to-be, Linda, on campus. She went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism at Northwestern University and worked for ABC News until their children - Sean, 5, and Sofia, 3 - came along.

Hulne, totally into comedic acting, spent the next couple of years studying at nearby Evanston's Piven Theater Workshop (taught by the parents of "Entourage's" Jeremy Piven) and wrapped up his student days at Chicago's Columbia College with a B.A. in advertising art with a theater minor. Hulne developed his talent for physical comedy with workshops and performances for such stellar local organizations as the Improv Olympic, Second City and the Annoyance Theater. TV commercials for products ranging from Bud Lite, United Airlines and Ford trucks paid most of his living expenses until he landed his first feature film, "Celtic

Pride," in 1996, a small job that called for identical twins (leading to part-time employment for his brother, Pat, too).

His movies, which now include "Elf," "Anchorman," "Employee of the Month" and an upcoming children's story to be shot this summer in Connecticut, help pay the mortgage on his Los Angeles home.

He also performs at Hollywood's I.O. West Theater on Saturday nights with his own improv group, BeerSharkMice. Happiness is family life, period. His son already knows where his college fund is coming from.

"Sean gets the biggest kick out of joy buzzers and whoopee cushions, plus he has a little book asking what he loves most about his daddy," said Hulne. "His response was, 'I love my daddy because he makes me laugh, he's really funny.' That's my boy, he's really smart."

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