

Entertainment

Yuk Yuk's founder just wants approval

By JOHN LAW

Entertainment writer

Mark Breslin — savvy businessman, founder of Yuk Yuk's comedy clubs, and all-around funny guy — prefers to keep a wary eye on the 'Industry'.

"And I use that with a capital I," he says before veering into the gut-churning spectacle he saw at the recent Comic Relief 5 benefit.

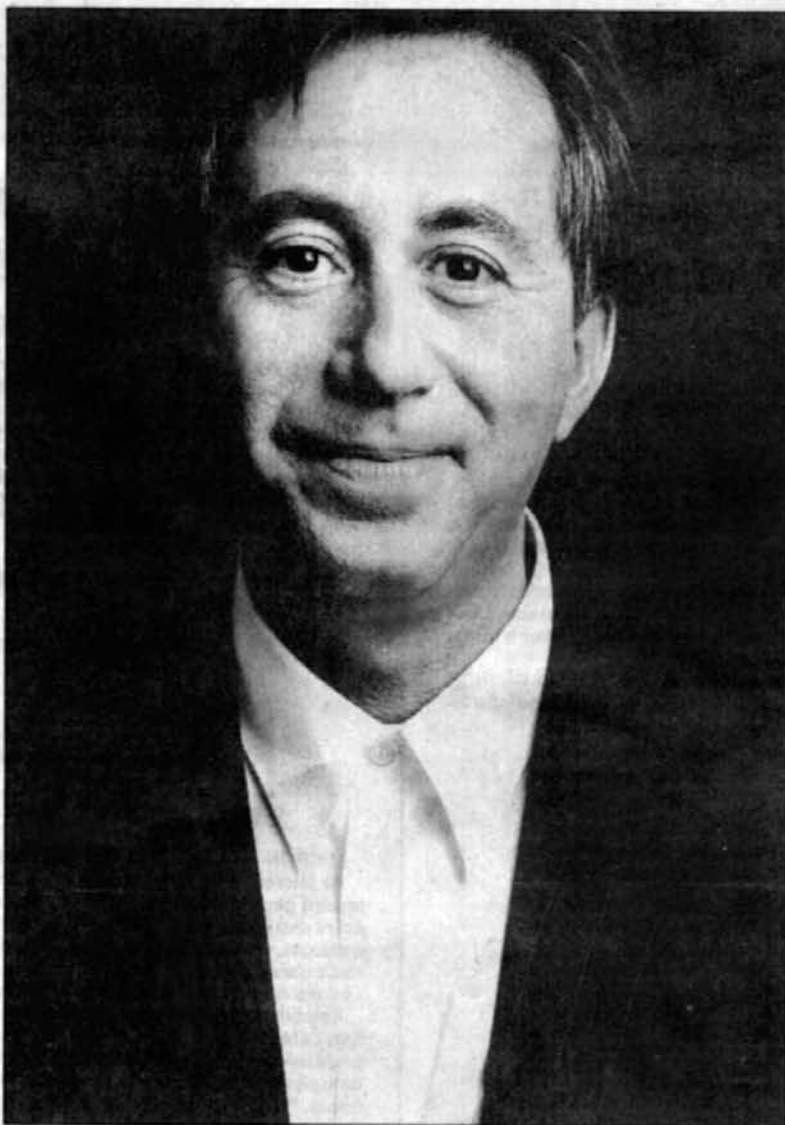
Midway through the show, a tribute was held for foul-mouthed fireball comic Sam Kinison, who died in a head-on automobile collision earlier this year. Breslin thought the tribute was appropriate. He thought the people applauding him weren't.

"He got a standing ovation, and I guarantee two-thirds of that audience, those 'Industry' people, months before were saying how impossible he was to work with, and how he was a dirty man, and all the rest of it. I guess it's not the first time Hollywood's been hypocritical," said Breslin during a recent phone chat. "Let's put it this way...I saw (director) Robert Altman's *The Player*, and I thought it was way too mild! I thought it was a *kind* look at Hollywood."

Breslin has always cast a favorable eye on the comics no one else likes, or admits to like. The Sam Kinisons. The Andrew Dice Clays. The crude jokesters who like to push the limits of what's acceptable just a little further. Who like to "challenge people's expectations."

It's this unpredictable, sometimes unruly style that Breslin loves when he takes the stage, which he will do during his annual visit to Niagara Falls' Yuk Yuk's (in Maple Leaf Village) this weekend. On any given night, he will reduce an audience to fits of hysterics by belittling patrons in the front row. If he doesn't like your jacket, he'll tell you. If he thinks you have to pass gas, he'll tell you. If he thinks you have an uncanny resemblance to "a lesbian accountant", he'll tell you.

Breslin can barely hide his contempt for the audience most nights, but that's always been his style. He loves to play on the fear someone has of a comic exposing their insecurities for all to laugh



Yuk Yuk's founder Mark Breslin takes the stage this weekend at the Niagara Falls club in Maple Leaf Village. A place, he's amused to discover, that also houses a new JFK Assassination Centre. "I think Jackie did it," Breslin theorizes. "She was a spurned woman."

at. During one performance he emptied a woman's purse on stage, read her private notes, and questioned her method of birth control. No one need wonder why Yuk Yuk's customers have been known to flee the club in tears.

"I'm trying to throw people's expectations out the window, and one of the expectations you have in show business is of the 'friendly host', or the 'genial host'. I'm trying to invert that, along with a lot of other things. My act is about not

having any values. It's a very amoral act. It's aggressively amoral, and that's the joke of it.

"I've lost it many times on stage, and I think part of the appeal is seeing if I will really go too far and go over the edge.

"If I veer into an understanding of their bondage fantasies, they get very nervous at the identification."

Yet, why does Breslin, whose chain of 19 Yuk Yuk's clubs brings

in \$13 million annually, even temper with going over the edge? Why doesn't he sit back and let the up-and-coming comics do the talking on stage?

Ego. Boredom. Maybe something Freudian. Take your pick.

"I've asked myself that and, in fact, my analyst has asked me that a lot, and we've come to the conclusion it's the sheer desperation for approval," Breslin wisecracks. "I've just turned 40, and I still act with the neurosis of a 25-year-old.

"There's very little in your life that can give you that kind of approval. You own a business, and people sort of applaud you for that, but then they also take shots at you. But when you're on stage and doing well, it's just one of those perfect moments. I keep doing it because I'm addicted to those perfect moments. I'd like to say I do it because I need to entertain the people, but really, my needs are much more selfish. I need to entertain myself."

Breslin, as any Canadian comedy buff knows, formed Yuk Yuk's in the basement of Toronto's Church Street Community Centre in 1976, and has nursed it — sometimes precariously — to its present monolith size. Clubs have opened and closed (the Montreal club was a botch, he admits, because there weren't enough English-speaking people in the city to support it), and he nearly lost everything in the recession 10 years ago.

The name is now synonymous with amateur and professional comic talent, as Breslin has created a monopoly of sorts. Everytime someone sizes him up for competition, they inevitably back down. The business side of Yuk Yuk's, as opposed to the entertainment side, is a serious topic to him, and few can faze him.

"Jealousy is always going to be there. I've done something I suppose a lot of people would have liked to have done. I'm very ambitious — I didn't stop with one club as a lot of people might have," he says. "I'm true to my real goals, which is, one, to provide a totally uncensored environment for stand-up comedy, and, two, to always favor a nationalist program of hiring."