

FILM AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION

Fantasy eclat voluptuary hedonism or Mark Breslin's Friday Night!



BY DAVE LAZAR

DESPITE its pretty outer appearance, the inside of the CBC building in Toronto can seem like a bit of a bureaucratic wasteland. I made my way through the maze of offices and cubicles to my meeting with a Canadian Media Monster, Mark Breslin. The offices of the new executive producer of *Friday Night! with Ralph Benmergui* seemed quiet as I awaited my audience.

High-calibre power

Breslin arrived, moving swiftly down the hall followed by about four other production people. They spun into his office and the door swung shut. High-calibre Canadian power, I thought to myself. Two minutes later, the other men left the office together and Breslin's executive assistant told me to go in. "Call him Mark," she said. And so I entered the lair.

Breslin's office was well decorated but modest, if not conservative, for a man of his means. Finishing up on the phone, he pointed me to a seat. There was Mark Breslin, middle-aged, short and stylish with a grin that said, "Just try me."

"What's the interview for?" He asked casually.

"Playback."

"Oh no, forget it," he snapped, "I thought it was for *Playboy*."

I laughed and apologized for not bringing my camera.

Always articulate, graphic and controlled, Breslin told me about

the path that brought him to the CBC and *Friday Night!* He also spoke of the baggage he brought with him, a whole chain of matched luggage labeled Yuk Yuk's (a string of comedy clubs owned by Breslin).

"I've seen every comic in the world. I've seen every kind of comedy, every kind of comedy pacing. I've also learned to be a good scrapper in the political intrigues. God knows that at Yuk Yuk's every possible enemy has come through that place trying to take it away from me. Whether it was organized crime, the government, unions or whatever. I've fought with them all and learned to win. That's a very valuable skill when you come to an institution like this.

It was an accident

"Like most things in my life, accident played a large part (in hooking up with CBC). Last year, I used to come to the show almost every week. For a lot of reasons. First, I had a lot of clients on it from my other life at Yuk Yuk's. So I would come down and give coverage to my clients. Second, Ralph has been a friend of mine for a long time and I came down to be supportive. The third reason, of course, is that the show makes a great date because you get to meet the stars and it's free. So I was here a lot. And because I was here a lot, I had a lot of opinions on the show. But who doesn't have an opinion on this show?"

Breslin went on to explain how he was in Vancouver and happened to run into George Anthony and Ed Robinson (the creative head and deputy head, respectively, of arts, music, science and variety at CBC) to whom he gave his "long-winded spiel" about what needed to be done with the show. One thing led to

another, and after several lunches, he realized he was under consideration. "You don't choose to come back to TV, it chooses you," the former *Joan Rivers Show* producer explained. "This is the first good offer I've had in a long time."

Now that he's got the job, something Breslin considers a sabbatical from his career as owner of Yuk Yuk's, where does his first duty lie? The CBC? The people? Canada? To be funny? Or simply as an outlet for talent?

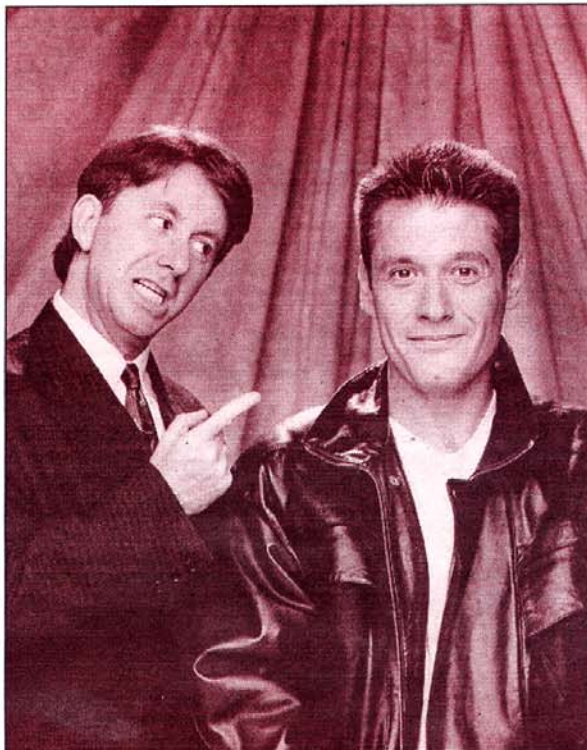
Many masters

"I serve many masters," said Breslin. "That's the compromise that always exists when you're in a position like mine. On some idealistic level I feel my first duty is to Canadian talent and to the audience. But CBC picks up the cheque so I have to be fair to their mandates too. My job is balancing out different needs that different people have. I also have to worry about Ralph (Benmergui) and what's good for him. Sometimes these things are in conflict and I have to make decisions that aren't always comfortable.

We go way back

"You know, I've known Ralph for almost 20 years. I knew him when he was a standup comic. I knew him when he had a rock band with my friend Joel (Axler), who is the comedy producer on the show. Of course, I knew him through *Midday*. He married a woman who was a waitress at my downtown Yuk Yuk's. We have many ways of going back together; we even went to the same high school. So there's a lot of karma between Ralph and myself."

Enough karma to keep him as front man for a show that, critics maintain, he consistently struggles with? According to Breslin,



Breslin (left) and Benmergui

Photo: Denise Grant

Benmergui is perfect for the job.

"What I like about Ralph in this role is that there aren't a lot of people who can be a good interviewer, a pretty good comic, a good comic actor and play with an audience. There may be individuals in this country who are better than him at any one of those things, but have no abilities in any of the other tasks. Ralph's pretty well rounded, and I like that."

Breslin wants Benmergui to be the sane centre of an insane universe. This insane universe is spearheaded by the show's house band, *The Look People*. We

talked about the controversy that has surrounded his choice of band (fronted by a lead singer sporting a troll-like tuft of hair, they have a very non-network appearance) and his strategy behind it.

"We were going to be doing such unusual and surreal things on the show and I had to prepare people for that. Once you see *The Look People* in the opening shot, and you've got a big hermaphrodite behind them, you know you're not in chartered territory. My fear with last year's band, as competent as they were, was that they signified a certain kind of regime. A regime that this show isn't about.