



the disaster-flick spoof *Airplane!*, feigning indigestion. "It's that awful food in the parliamentary cafeteria." A pause. Another *FRAAPP!*, and Erik and Leslie burst out laughing — much as I'm sure they did during their boyhood in Regina, Sask., when they'd do the old "pull my finger" gag.

"I never travel alone," the actor says of his little joke-shop wind instrument. "I've gone through a lot of them. I lose them or they get stolen."

So much for Leslie Nielsen playing against type in the Zucker brothers' comedy *The Naked Gun* and its upcoming sequel **The Naked Gun II-1/2: The Smell of Fear**. "Actually, it's the other way around," says Nielsen (a.k.a. buffoonish Police Lt. Frank Drebin). "I was cast against type for 25 or 30 years before *Airplane!*" (his first project with the madcap team of David and Jerry Zucker and partner Jim Abrahams). "For whatever reasons, I don't know, the color of my hair maybe, I've had all these patrician roles of dignity, background, responsibility — none of which

**Leslie Nielsen, above and left, mugging for the camera, flanked by George Kennedy and Ed Williams. Right, Nielsen and Priscilla Presley in a hilarious send-up of the pottery scene from *Ghost*.**

qualities I have. I'm a farm boy."

So he was a natural for the ZAZ (Zucker/Abrahams/Zucker) film-making team. Their specialty is to put demented, inappropriate lines of dialogue into the mouths of intense, schlockily serious TV actors like Robert Stack, Peter Graves, Lloyd Bridges, George Kennedy — and, of course, Leslie Nielsen. They practically *fell in love* with Nielsen, creating for him the role of Drebin, the stolid hero of the short-lived, hilarious TV series *Police Squad!* (on which *The Naked Gun* films are based).

"He's the Harrison Ford of dumb cops," Nielsen says proudly of Drebin, who returns in **The Naked Gun II-1/2: The Smell of Fear** to rekindle his relationship with Jane (Priscilla Presley), the clumsy former mob mistress, and to smash a plot to influence U.S. energy policy (armed with only a police revolver and dumb luck).

Of course, you can never trust Zucker press releases. During filming, they announced their surprise at signing George Kennedy again for the role of Drebin's squad boss Captain Hocken, "since he made it quite clear he would never work for us again."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Kennedy — who was in all

four of those awful *Airport* movies in the '70s — would probably name his children after those goofy ZAZ guys. In fact, they first had their eye on him for *Airplane!*, but Kennedy was under contract to the *Airport* filmmakers, who didn't find the idea of him appearing in a spoof very funny.

"George would have loved to have been in *Airplane!*," Nielsen says of his longtime friend. "You can't be in some of the stuff we've been in without having a sense of humor. Even now, I can't watch most TV dramas without laughing."

It didn't take long for good-natured Nielsen to find Priscilla Presley's playful side either. "I met Priscilla and she was acting like a very proper lady, so I made a face at her," Nielsen says, crossing his eyes and sticking out his tongue to demonstrate the look in question. "And then she made the same face back at me. That's when I found out she was a little girl inside."

Just think of the whole *Naked Gun* gang as a classroom of problem children, with no killjoy teachers around.

**The Naked Gun II-1/2: The Smell of Fear** opens this summer.

— Jim Slotek

