

"a dreamer and a schemer"

by Jeannine Amber

You can learn a lot about a person by rifling through their purse or sifting through the contents of their desk drawers. The same can be said about making a close, but discreet, inspection of someone's office. The person I hoped to glean a few gems of insight about was Mark Breslin, founder of Yuk Yuk's Komedy Kabaret, the world's largest chain of comedy clubs.

I gave the office a cursory inspection; the clock on the wall read 5:25, the time was 4:11. I made a cryptic note.

Breslin: What's that mean?

Excal: What?

Breslin: That symbol on your note pad.

Excal: Oh. Nothing.

Silence.

Smooth eh?

Breslin relaxed, "Feel free to ask me anything," he said. He looked at the clock, "We have plenty of time." He looked at the clock!

So what does this all mean? Not a hell of a lot. This wasn't even the man's office. Mark Breslin, an entrepreneur who graces the pages of the business section as often as the celebrity columns, doesn't have an office. When he does an interview at

Yuk Yuk's Bay street headquarters he wanders around until he finds an empty room.

As it turned out, due to Breslin's propensity for going on, somewhat at length, about anything and everything, my less than great detective skills were not essential to getting the story.

Armed with an English degree from York ('73), Breslin began his career as an entertainment programmer at Harbourfront booking everything from folk groups to comics. When Harbourfront changed its policy, Breslin found himself out of a job, and the comics found themselves without a venue.

Breslin arranged for the comics to perform in a community centre on 'folk night.' "It didn't mix at all because the folkies were really idealistic and the comics were really cynical," he explained.

Eventually Breslin took over the Church Street basement on Wednesday nights and called it Yuk Yuk's; from these humble beginnings, the now-famous chain was born.

After 18 months and good national press, Breslin decided it was time to move on to bigger and better things. He and a friend managed to raise enough capital to open the Yuk Yuk's on the edge of Yorkville. "We opened up six nights a week, and every single person in the press said, 'there's no way this stuff is going to work.' We were mobbed from the moment we opened," said Breslin.

Breslin surprised them in the '70s with his instant success. He is still surprising people today.

By all reports, I had expected to meet an overly aggressive business type whose interest lay no further than the acquisition of the next dollar. Surprise number one, he was nice, very nice. Surprise number two, he was given to lengthy dissertations on whatever topic I could throw his

way. He quoted Blake, referred to Faust and even gave me his own version of McLuhan's global village theory. It was a perpetual situation of ask a simple question and get more, far more, than you had bargained for.

Breslin says he was not an enormous comedy fan when he was growing up. "With a flip of the coin I could have gone into a career in poetry." Now that would have been interesting.

What follows are some gems of wisdom from someone who graduated from York and made it big.



Mark Breslin on Women in Stand Up Comedy:

"There are no real role models for all those funny 17-year-old girls. There is no one they can watch and say I want to be like her. (Female comics) are either too old or their too esoteric or they're not quite successful enough. One breakthrough person is required and then it's going to quintuple . . .

"The more pressing problem I suppose is that there is something in the aggressive nature of standup comedy that makes it difficult for a woman to stand on stage alone as an aggressive gesture. We don't prepare women for that role when they are growing up."

Mark Breslin on the Secret of his Success:

"I identified an audience in a way that nobody else did. Everybody in their '40s who controlled showbusiness at that time said, 'this will never work. I wouldn't want to see this.' But the audience was changing. It was getting younger and younger. I realized the real trick was finding the 25-year-olds. Those were the people I wanted to attract to the club . . .

"The comics were all 25, somebody older would sit there and say, 'who is this kid and why is he trying to make me laugh?' . . .

"It was definitely an un-Canadian kind of comedy. It was definitely inspired by things in the U.S. These kids were talking about sex and drugs and rock 'n roll. It all seems so obvious now but back in '76 it wasn't obvious at all."

Mark Breslin on getting a Business Degree:

"I really don't think a business degree would have helped. A business degree is highly theoretical and helps you to work for someone else. I learned by doing. I am an entrepreneur, not a businessman and there's a big difference. I get things going and then it's up to the businessmen of the world to make it run and make it profitable."



Mark Breslin on the Value of his English Degree:

"It helped only in a very esoteric way, a very tangential way. When I studied English I guess I learned how to read text and how to read into texts and that was valuable when I started looking at scripts . . .

"It's just I'm not sure I needed four years of that to wind up doing what I do . . .

"I got one of those nice broad humanistic mad gay romps through western civilization kind of educations that I guess allows me to see what I do in some of cultural context."

Mark Breslin On Comics:

"People need approval. People who perform need an unusual amount of approval. Comics seem to be people who need approval every 45 seconds. They need people to laugh at what they say or respond to what they say. An actor can wait with the script, a musician can wait until the song is finished, but a comic wants it now, now, now . . .

"Comics are very selfish people, the reason we pay to see comics is because they articulate a more selfish point of view then we would ever dare . . .

"The comics (who perform at Yuk Yuk's) make a good living, they have a good circuit to work on...but there's no hope of them ever being stars here . . .

"These guys don't get into this because they want to make a living, they get into it because they want to be superstars. They see themselves in limousines with a blonde on each arm, that's their vision. This country will not tolerate that vision, U.S. is only to happy to encourage that vision. So ultimately they have to go (to the United States)."



Mark Breslin on his years at York:

"My years at York were basically spent cowering in the library on a couch with a book over my head to avoid social contact. Always on the verge of one nervous breakdown or another. I was a pretty delicate individual then. But I found a socially acceptable vehicle for my hostilities.

"I did not have a good time at York. In fact, I had a miserable time. In fact, it was probably the most miserable times of my life.

"I went through a depressive phase during the time I was at York and I think there is something about that place that encourages that to happen.

"My life goes through certain arcs, going to university was the end of one arc, leaving university was the beginning of another. So I was between arcs. I was arcless."

Mark Breslin on the Residual Effects of the '60s or Mark Breslin on Himself:

"I see myself as a bourgeois beatnik. I see myself still in a kind of anti-establishment rebel role. I never really fit into any group. I still really don't. I'm involved in the arts but I don't really have much to do with that scene. I'm kind of my own scene. I'm kind of a loner and I'm such a loner that I had to build an institution around me to protect my sense of lonerness."