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Young comic finds his star rising again

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

SIX YEARS AGO, young Mike Binder burst on the national comedy scene. That first year, "I made \$90,000," Binder said last week by phone from his home in California. "I was 19 years old."

The second year was not so good. He made \$7,000. The next year, \$3,000. But things are looking up again for Binder, who was first discovered by TV-comedy maestro Norman Lear.

Now 25, Binder is grateful for the opportunity to see his star rise and fall — and be on the rise again. "I had a lucky year and a half, then three years of hard times. I couldn't get any work," he explained.

"I had to settle back and grow a little bit. I'm not there yet. I still have to hustle for everything I get."

Just last week, a half-hour pilot was shown on CBS-TV, with Mike Binder starring as one of the buddies in "Diner," a comedy based on the surprise movie hit.

"WE GOT wonderful reviews all across the country, except for Detroit," said Binder, who is originally from Birmingham. The network has until November to decide whether or not to put the show on the season's schedule.

"The pilot was done — written and directed — by the guy (Barry Levinson) who did the movie," he said. Binder plays Eddie, a young law student who just got married and is trying to grow up.

"It's the lead. It's a good character," he said.

"Diner" takes place in the '50s, and the main set is Eddie's house where he and his wife have moved in with his parents.

"It's a real neat look at life back then. All the reviews said the characters are so real."

Binder said every major paper has done a story about him recently, including the Los Angeles Examiner, the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune.

"MGM used me as a focal point for publicity for 'Diner'."

"The highs are so incredible," he said, reflecting on his newly recaptured popularity.

IF "DINER" doesn't make it on the fall schedule, CBS will probably use him in a mini-series, Binder said. He has done several movies for CBS, including an Army-movie pilot, and a TV movie called "Shakin' It Up" that was never released but will be changed and shown as a TV movie next season. His first TV movie for CBS was "The Freddie Frita Story."

Of the network, he said, "They've been very good to me. I've been working with them for two years and they've been paying me."

Growing up in Birmingham, Binder wanted first to be a comedy writer (he's a big fan of Woody Allen), then decided to become a comic himself. Right after graduating from Seaboard High School in 1976, he pursued his dream by performing as a stand-up comic locally and then in L.A.

Binder, who writes all his own material, got exposure performing at the Comedy Store. "I was 18 when Norman Lear said, 'I want to sign you,'" Binder made a TV pilot for the sitcom "Apple Pie," which went on the air as a series but didn't last.

The young comic has only fond memories of working with Lear. "He was wonderful. Lear called me Tuesday (the day after the pilot for 'Diner' was shown) to tell me how much I'd grown in 'Diner.'"

After a first year of \$90,000, "the next year I was broke," Binder didn't have a penny left of his big earnings.

WHAT MAKES Binder favored for TV comedy success is his style. "Norman Lear kept telling me I really had a naturalness as far as comedy acting and I could be subtle. That's what Barry Levinson, who directed 'Diner,' said. I'm the choice when a subtle, classy comedy comes along."

Metropolitan-Detroit residents who want to see Binder perform in person

will have the opportunity Thursday, Aug. 25, when he and comics Howie Mandel and Dave Coulier appear in the Comedy Jam at the Premier Center in Sterling Heights.

"I'm so excited about that," he said. "We want to have it every year. To have national guys ever year and have a comedy festival in Detroit. Next year, we could go someplace bigger."

"I know all the guys — Richard Pryor, Robin Williams, Eddie Murphy. I knew them before they were anybody. These guys would love the idea. Comedians aren't money hungry. They like to work in support of situations like that."

Binder recently did an HBO comedy special, "The 11th Anniversary of the Comedy Store," with Robin Williams and Richard Pryor.

"It's been on all month after the WHO concert," he said. "Sixteen million people have seen it." The show ran during July and early August and may be shown again on the cable network sometime in the future, a spokesman for Birmingham's Booth Communications said.

BINDER SAID that, as a teen-ager, "I was a weird kid." As an example, he told about how a party was going on downstairs in his house and, instead of joining the fun, he went upstairs and wrote a comedy script, "That's My Mama." His mama is Judy Trumbull, who runs the Rialto gift shop in Birmingham.

"I always wanted to write movies like Woody Allen," he said. Another dream being realized centers around a film script he wrote and will produce in Michigan with his friend, Jeff Thal, who also is from Birmingham.

"Tales of the War Wagon" is about a couple of guys from Royal Oak who are hot guys in high school but can't compete with their old buddies who go on to college at the University of Michigan. The "war wagon" is the car the two guys drive, going up to see their friends in Ann Arbor.

Binder now lives in an apartment in Westwood. His girlfriend, Sallan Kelly, who is also from Birmingham, came out to join him in California two years ago.



Mike Binder (standing right) and the rest of the guys in the cast of CBS-TV's "Diner" were seen recently on the pilot for the show, which may be on the network schedule this season. The other buddies in this comedy set in the 1950s are James Spader and Michael Madsen (seated) and Max Cantor and Paul Reiser (standing).

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