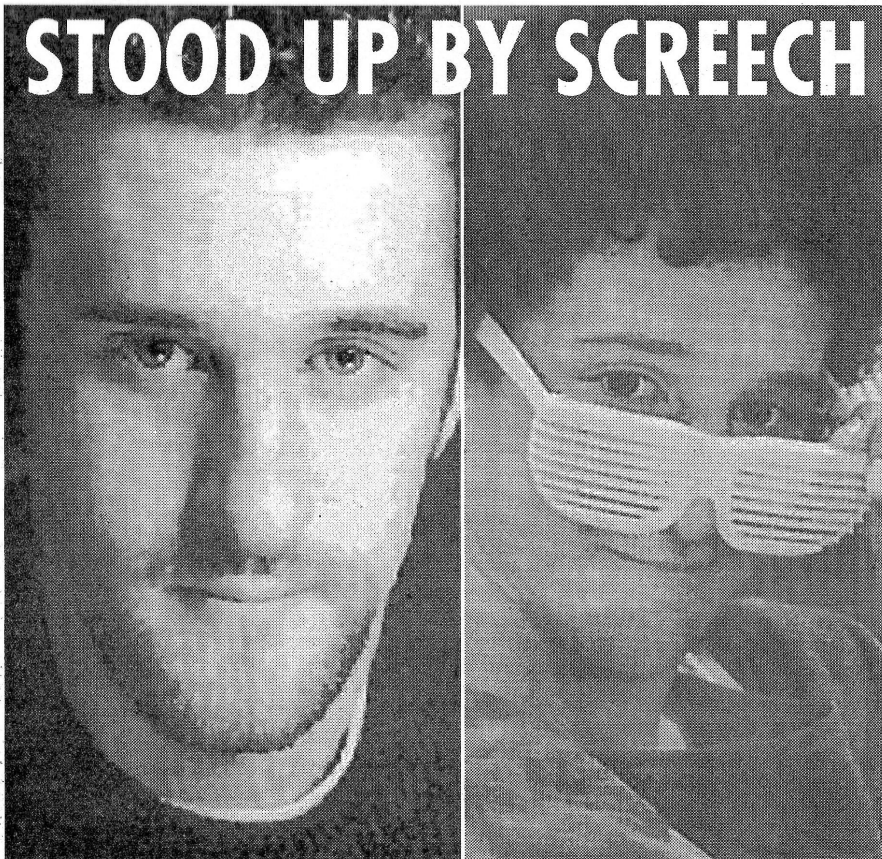


STOOD UP BY SCREECH



STAND-UP COMIC/ SAVED BY THE BELL ACTOR DUSTIN DIAMOND

After leaving Bayside High 10 years ago, it appears that Screech has become too cool for school. Screech doesn't need to return his calls.

His Canadian media contact can give me the number of his manager's cell phone, his hotel room number and tell me his whereabouts at any given moment, but she is unable to make him call back for a simple, 15-minute interview. Much like the free-wheeling schedule of a repairman, Screech even had a generous window between 12 and 5 to phone last Friday.

But I have limits, and more importantly, a life. So I left several messages clearly stating my reason for calling, my approaching deadline and my contact information. I will not sit by the phone waiting for Screech to call.

Even if he lives to be 100 years old, Dustin Diamond will be forever known as the squeaky-voiced, suspender-wearing dork, Samuel "Screech" Powers, the character he played for a decade on TV's *Saved by the Bell*.

The show featured a cast of archetypal characters: Mr. Belding the principal, Zack the charming mischief-maker, Kelly the airhead cheerleader, Slater the mullet-haired jock, Lisa the princess, Jesse the feminist, and Screech, the nerdy comic relief. The series became a big hit in the '80s, being the first live-action sitcom airing in a Saturday morning line-up previously dominated by cartoon shows. And who could forget its endless unsuccessful offshoots, like *Saved by the Bell: The College Years*, *The New Class*, *Hawaiian Style*, and *Wedding in Las Vegas*.

In a recent interview with online satirical magazine, *The Onion*, Diamond spoke about his experiences playing Screech.

"I had a place cut out for me, and I had a character that was very easy for me to do," he said. "I could pretty much do Screech in my sleep. I could phone it in."

He also discussed what it was like to play Screech again. And then a few more times.

"My initial reaction was to say no, which I

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did, and then [the producers] came back at me with a better figure. It's show business, and the business aspect is important because everyone's gotta eat.

"I weighed the decisions out and thought that I might get pigeonholed as this character forever, but I'm pretty confident that I can break it, because I'm not actually the character. I don't think I'll be punished for being a successful actor. I take it as a compliment, actually, that I can be good enough to convince people that I really am that way," Diamond said.

In order to escape being typecast as a geek, Diamond has made several perplexing attempts to get away from the label, but remain in the spot-

light. These include a couple of movie cameos and countless TV appearances, including *The Wonder Years*, *The Weakest Link*, *Off Centre*, *The Rerun Show*, *Star Dates*, *Wrestlemania 2000*, where he was the Blue Meanie's tag-team partner, and the notorious episode of Fox's *Celebrity Boxing* where Diamond clobbered Ron "Horsack" Pallilio — dubbed one of television's worst moments of the year.

Clearly, Diamond is not above capitalizing on his illustrious past to make some easy money and promote his new ventures. In many interviews, he casually slips in the fact that he plays bass for a prog-rock band called Salty the Pocketknife. He's also the director, producer and host of his own humorous instructional video called "Dustin Diamond Teaches Chess."

Diamond has also dealt with the rumour mill grinding out fake stories about his true identity. A simple search on the Web turns up stories about Diamond being the long-lost brother of Beastie Boys' Mike D. Not true. And even though Dustin's real middle name is Neil, he is not related to the aging rock star. He is also not gay, dead, or ever had a sex-change operation.

Now Diamond is cashing in on his fame as a gangly child-actor to get attention as a grown-up, goofy stand-up comedian. He's spent the last couple of years touring comedy clubs and campuses across Canada and the U.S. to perform his act, answer questions about the Screech years, and do the required photo and autograph sessions. Perhaps his act is so hilarious that Diamond now suffers partial hearing loss from repeated exposure to loud, hysterical laughter each night after

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his set. Maybe that's why he can't use the phone...

"It's not like I have a bunch of NBC writers giving me material," he said recently, when asked whether his act went beyond the stand-by Screech jokes. "But I do have a set. I talk about everyday things. Relationships, for example. Or being an actor. I use my ability for improv to play off the audience. And I'm not opposed to using the untapped well that is potty humour."

According to an online review, during his routine, Diamond jokes about how the producers overdid the spin-off shows, adding that a *Saved by the Bell* prison series was currently in the works. He also told the audience he wanted to produce a show called *Shaved by the Balls*, which would accurately reflect how cool Screech really was. He even typed up scripts and asked audience members to play the parts of the famous Bayside High gang. In this skit, Zack was constantly called gay, while Screech got all the ladies. Wishful thinking, Double D!

Sadly, he'll never enjoy the sexy celebrity status of the other *Saved by the*

Bell stars. Diamond was three or four years younger than his co-stars, and in some ways, he never caught up. Although we watched Elizabeth Berkley grown up on *Saved by the Bell*, she later bared it all as an adult in *Showgirls*. After playing Valerie on *90210*, Tiffani-Amber Thiessen now plays another sexy character in Fox's *Fastlane*. Still a blonde, square-jawed hunk, Mark-Paul Gosselaar joined the cast of the hit show *NYPD Blue*. Mario Lopez now co-hosts a daytime talk show, *The Other Half*, where he plays up his bachelor, ladies' man image. Only Lark Voorhies, who played Lisa Turtle, and Dennis Haskins, who played Mr. Belding, have fallen off the radar screen, sucked into the where-are-they-now Bermuda triangle of '80s television stardom.

Still, Diamond continues to rake in the dough. In some ways he's walking backwards along the career path. While most comics start out doing the club circuit, hoping to land a regular TV gig, Diamond's famous face has paved the way on the road to being funny.

Well perhaps this comedy stint will prove to be Screech's last laugh. The jokes are getting old, and Diamond's shtick is a little rough.

[BY KATYA DIAKOW]