

# Former Gloucester High grad

## turns yuks into bucks

By Denis Grignon

Six years ago, Norm MacDonald didn't walk off the amateur night stage at an Ottawa comedy club. He ran.

Less than a year after his shtick at the local Yuk-Yuk's, MacDonald had transformed his four minutes of pleasantly funny political and sociological jibes into 40 solid minutes of brilliant comic prose. Before long he was headlining his own show at clubs across the country.

Only two years into his career, he earned a spot on the much revered Just For Laughs International Comedy Festival in Montreal. Five appearances on the now-defunct Pat Sajak show followed.

That was enough to woo talk show host David Letterman. Twice. MacDonald's got a standing invitation to return.

In an artform that expects its finest standup comics to hone their craft for 10 years before hitting *The Big Time*, MacDonald has industry experts scratching their heads.

Howard Wagman, the Yuk Yuk's Ottawa manager who introduced MacDonald to the stage, says the comic's intangible quality shone through right away.

"Most comics need a lot of grooming. Norm hardly needed any," says Wagman.

The unprecedented leap should come as no surprise, though, given MacDonald's track record.

He was only 14 when he graduated from Gloucester High School; 16 when he enrolled at Carleton University.

About his early academic maturation, MacDonald is characteristically unfazed: "I guess I just went ahead fast."

But for the 29-year-old, prodigy did have its price. "I was always on the outskirts, very shy and introverted," says MacDonald. And there were a few false starts too: a move, solo, to Vancouver when he was still a teenager, a broadcasting course at

Algonquin, a string of less-than-stimulating jobs.

Standup comedy, he says, provides him with the comfortable vehicle he needs. "On stage," says MacDonald who now lives in Toronto and regularly visits family in Ottawa, "you can

just talk and not be interrupted. You get your thoughts out and everyone listens." And listen they do, despite the fact that he looks more like a shopping centre's lost little boy than an esteemed standup comic.

With hands moving in and out of his pockets, eyes warily scanning the room and a seemingly nervous smile, MacDonald plunges into his material.

"I got a lottery ticket the other day. Gee, that's a crummy gift. What's a guy thinkin' when he gives you a lottery ticket? It's like, Here ya go! NOTHING! Absolutely nothing at all! From me to you . NOTHING! Happy birthday!"

Initially, there's only a murmur from the crowd. Heads turn slightly and eyes squint towards centre stage.

Understandable. Fidgeting and often repeating himself, MacDonald appears totally unrehearsed.

Still, he maintains that the clumsily innocent act is in tune with his true self.

"I used to be in great shape. I was in great shape when I was younger. I was in top physical condition when I was...ONE. No, really! I could show you a picture of myself when I was one and you wouldn't even recognize me!"

Suddenly, like dominos tumbling onto one another, curious smiles turn to laughs.

"I even looked good for my age. Other one year olds used to come up to me and say, 'What are you, ZERO? Man, you don't look a day past zero!'"

In comedy lingo, the performer is "Killing." Huge laughs now, and even the occasional round of applause. (Continued)



MacDonald: the comic's comic