

● REALLY BIG SHOW

Monk

Getting to be a habit



Tony Shalhoub's character Monk is an anxious detective. And Shalhoub, seen here with co-star Betty Schram, can be just as much a nervous nelson.

TONY Shalhoub is plagued by anxious moments almost as much as Monk, the obsessive-compulsive detective he plays on the hit USA series.

Take the most recent Golden Globe Awards, where Shalhoub won Best Actor in a Drama series.

"It's very, very different when you watch these things on TV as opposed to being there," says Shalhoub, the 49-year-old former co-star of the long-running sitcom "Wings."

"Once you're there, there seem to be a lot of people making an enormous fuss over everyone who's walking down the red carpet. Then, once you're inside the room, it's even more surreal — you can't look in any direction without your gaze falling on somebody enormous.

"And then to actually stand up there in front of them and speak your own words is terrifying, really."

Though everyone likes to think they can play it cool and that it's really about the work and it's really just an honor to be nominated, Shalhoub admits he got caught up in the moment.

"You can't help it," says Shalhoub, who's also known for roles in "Big Night," "Spy Kids" and "Men in Black."

"As soon as they begin to announce

your category, your heart starts to pump really hard and you think you might just black out. Then you're hoping they're going to announce your name, and you're dreading it at the same time because, if they do announce it, that means you have to stand up and say something coherent."

Shalhoub also had to be coherent when he gave the commencement address at his alma mater (the University of Maine at Portland) just a few weeks ago.

"That was another surprising thing, since I don't remember doing that well in college. Apparently they changed their opinion of me."

Shalhoub spoke about uncertainty because he didn't want to fill the graduates with false hope.

Yet uncertainty is exactly what "Monk" has avoided. Its second-season opener drew very good reviews, and a record number of viewers for a basic cable scripted series — a trick shows like "The Shield" have been unable to pull off.

Clearly, with 16 shows in the works — up from the first season's 12 — "Monk" is in it for the long haul.

Not that Shalhoub has taken it for granted.

"That whole couple of weeks approaching the premiere was filled with anxiety,"

he says. "You want some assurance the first season wasn't a fluke, that the novelty hasn't worn off and all of that."

Shalhoub, who is married to actress Brooke Adams and has two daughters, loves the shorter schedule of a cable show (he would have said no to a major network series). In just 16 shows, it's easier for the writers to maintain the quirky quality of a drama that's filled with humorous bits and classic chemistry between Monk and his girl Friday Sharon, the terrific Betty Schram.

With the new episodes — such as Monk's recent trip to Mexico and Friday's show set in the world of baseball — proving they've really hit their stride, it won't be a surprise if Shalhoub faces more tense moments when the Emmy nominations are announced in mid-July.

Meanwhile, he had to find somewhere to place that unexpected Golden Globe.

"It's on the mantle next to my daughter's baseball trophy," Shalhoub says. "Ironically, her baseball trophy is taller than the Golden Globe. It's shmier, too. I'm not sure what that's about."

— Michael Gilta

Monk
Friday, 10 p.m., USA