

The last laugh

Never hotter, Shatner cons a whole town

By MICHAEL GILTZ

NO one has ever successfully pulled a practical joke on actor William Shatner.

"I'm too egotistical to think I would fall for anything like that," says Shatner, whose sense of humor has kept him afloat in Hollywood for 40 years.

"So it hasn't been done. But I'm a con man and you know what they say about con men. They can be conned more easily than anyone.

"I'm preparing myself for that terrible moment when something is pulled on me."

It'll have to wait. Shatner is the one pulling the strings when he plays a doozy of a prank on Riverside, Iowa, the self-proclaimed, future birthplace of Captain James T. Kirk of "Star Trek."

Next Tuesday, he launches a reality miniseries called "Invasion: Iowa" for Spike TV.

Over four nights — ending April Fool's Day — we see Shatner and crew come to town pretending to shoot a low-budget sci-fi movie. But really they spend their time pushing the locals' buttons.

Think of it as "Candid Camera" with (really bad) special effects.

Shatner is the self-absorbed star — grabbing the food off people's plates in the local diner (no one

ever complains), walking around with his Emmy in hand, playing with the bust of Captain Kirk in the town square and asking the local minister if he minds if the movie people smash the 100-year-old stained glass windows in the church.

Locals are recruited to act in the film and serve as go-fers, card holders and so on.

His cell phone goes off, blasting out — of all things — Usher's hit single "Caught Up" as the ring tone.

That gives them a front-row seat to watch as Shatner's body double spends ages stretching before his nude scenes or to overhear that Shatner's hapless personal assistant is "actually" his illegitimate son — but doesn't know it.

Still, no matter how goofy he acts, it's clear the townspeople — who bake the crew pies and put up with their idiocy with good-nature — are really thrilled about the movie.

When one local who wants to be a stand-up comic speaks movingly about how much this means to him, Shatner and the rest start to look very uneasy about the joke they're playing. (The townspeople find out the truth during the finale.)

"It occurred certainly to me and to all of us that what we were about to do could be very cruel," says Shatner. "But if we played the joke on ourselves so that we appeared the fool and they reacted to our foolishness and Hollywood behavior, then it worked."

His cell phone goes off during the interview, blasting out — of all things — Usher's hit single "Caught Up" as the ring tone. "I need a loud ring," explains Shatner. "Somehow my upper register is leaving me so I gotta get a lot of volume."

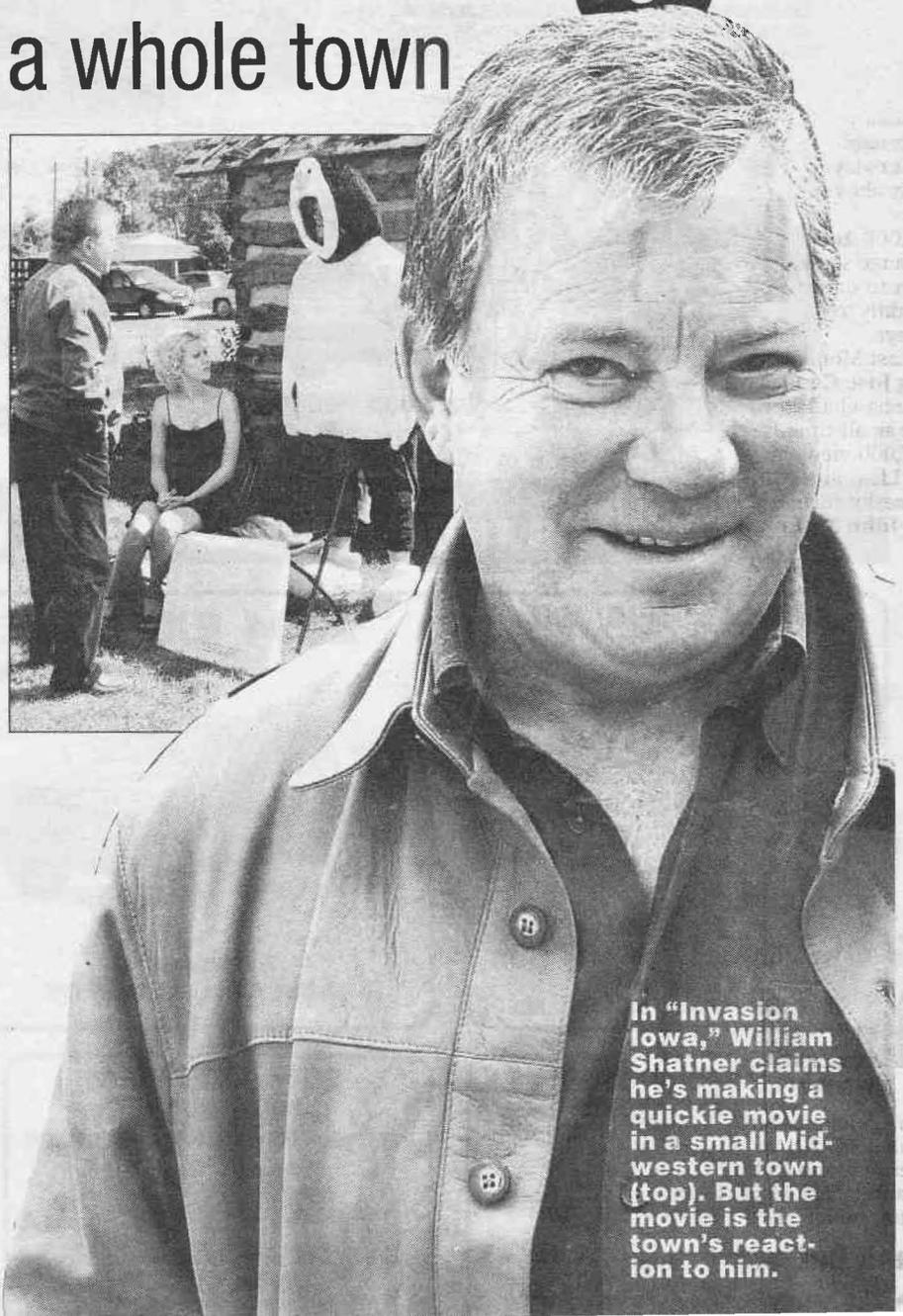
It's a reminder that Shatner — who turns 74 tomorrow — has never been hipper.

His new movie, "Miss Congeniality 2," opens on Friday.

And of course, he's revelling in his "Boston Legal" role — Denny Crane. The show has enjoyed a constant stream of guest stars.

"Heather Locklear is in my arms — not as we speak, but shortly after I put the phone down," says Shatner about his "T.J. Hooker" co-star who will be two upcoming episodes in May. That has to be more fun than another recent guest, Carl Reiner, right?

"I put him in my arms, too," says Shatner. "I have no discernment whatsoever."



In "Invasion Iowa," William Shatner claims he's making a quickie movie in a small Midwestern town (top). But the movie is the town's reaction to him.