

Art & Commerce

A Meeting of Minds

American Inventor's judge connects with veritable innovator

Have you caught any episodes of *American Inventor* on ABC? The show that stars J. Walter Thompson creative director Eddie Evangelista as judge, jury and executioner of everyday folks who believe in their hearts that they, with the right combination of cash and guidance, could be the next Elias Howe, Thomas Alva Edison or Howard Wexler?

Eddie brings his Brooklyn accent, only slightly tempered by years in Massapequa and on Madison Avenue, and his Kings County temperament to the task—a task he does so smoothly that you wonder why Harriet Miers was nominated for the Supreme Court when Eddie could have faced down those juridical giants on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

The show, too, has its moments. One of them showcased a portable latrine inventor. As he put it, his invention specializes in “No. 1.” His brainchild is a long, black cloak that you unfold from a simple carrying case and put over your body, neck to feet. The cloak includes a pouch into which you leave your deposit; then you remove the cloak, fold it up, put it back in the simple carrying case (deposit and all) and you’re off.

The four judges (Eddie Evangelista plus Mary Lou Quinlan of ad fame, a British businessman and an American guy who has a number of patents and flowery shirts that, if shot in black and white, could pass for Ernest Borgnine’s weekend wardrobe in *From Here To Eternity*) dismissed the inventor so quickly he could not complete his on-camera demo. It was a rare time that they agreed; in fact, some of the drama of the show is the condescension of the Kealakekua fashion plate to his fellow panelists as much as to the competing inventors. The judges also, completely out of character, refrained from suggesting ways to improve the product or widen the market. (A flowery cloak instead of monotone, I would have thought. Or a woman’s version, perhaps. Certainly an option allowing for “No. 2,” as the inventor would have phrased it.)

I’ve known Eddie Evangelista since 1987, having worked with him on print ads for *Life Magazine* and TV for MCI at our agency.



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Eddie is a facile designer and a strong, clear, conceptual art director who could carry me when my attention drifted. I thought it would be amusing if I got him together with a working inventor over lunch.

Elias Howe, who conceived the sewing machine, has passed. Thomas Edison, despite having been played by Mickey Rooney, Pat Hingle and Spencer Tracy, did not achieve the immortality to see his gilded age of invention ascend to sweeps period. But Howard Wexler, live inventor of the game Connect Four and thousands of other clever toys and devices, agreed to join Eddie and me.

“Eddie, I’ll make a reservation at Palm Too, right near your office,” I offered.

“Nah, let’s go to Avro, the Greek fish place on 48th Street,” he countered emphatically. No gavel sound heard on the phone, though.

“Ok, you make the res; I’ll pay the check,” I replied meekly, as if his bailiff.

Howard brought samples of his inventions, including a travel Connect Four that folds into a soft zippered envelope. Connect Four gets a lot of free product placements in movies because it is a vertical two-player game that reads easily on film. Also, its simplicity (put four checkers in a row and prevent your opponent from doing so) has gotten kids into the fun of if-then logic and competition. I didn’t ask Howard to play because the last time I crushed him, and then the son of a friend wiped him out even worse. There was also the possibility that Howard had been lying down, setting me up for a cash game.

Eddie arrived fashionably late, looking much more like J. Walter than Messner Vetere (he wore a jacket, and it was pressed). I had told him the purpose of the lunch would be an interview for *Adweek*, so before his Diet Coke and my Beefeater Martini took, I got into it.

Interviewer: First question is off the record. Eddie, one of the judges, the one who is an inventor himself, was quoted in a trade publication saying that you and Mary Lou were ad agency hacks. Comment?

Eddie: Off the record, he’s a _____.

Somebody who worked with him said that his only real invention was himself.

I was impressed. Like someone running for office, Eddie did not defend when questioned; he attacked. A sign that Eddie is more suited for the legislative or executive branch than the judicial, where to get anywhere you got to smile and suck up and be humble when someone calls you a racist, a sexist or a hack.*

Howard interrupted when I said that the interest for me in the show is the ambition of the serious inventors, people who are less interested in the cash prize than they are in having their ideas made real and used gratefully by the public.

Howard said, “Over the years I’ve had thousands of ideas that never went anywhere.”

“Were they good ideas?” I asked. “I mean, do you feel that they or you were misunderstood, and they had real, overlooked worth?”

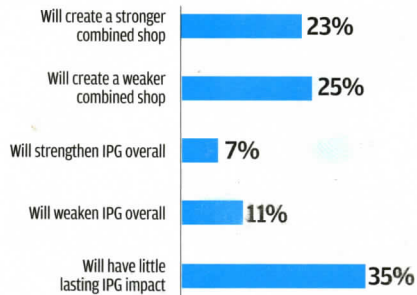
“I don’t know,” Howard said. “But at this moment in my career, when I am completely focused on Connect Four to make money, I thought of doing a Web site in which I would display all my inventions and give them away to anyone who wants to develop them.”

“Eddie,” I said, “You could design it. Be both the judge and the accused.”

*Eddie called me later to tell me all the clients whose brands and products he had recently and substantively helped. Like the great political spinmeisters, he knows that first you kick attackers in the nuts, and then, after sufficient pause, you go smilingly positive with your record and your promises. I left the epithet blank in his answer because I could not remember which orifice Eddie had referred to and didn’t want to misquote him.

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