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The joke's on you

Is it time to terminate the Schwarzenegger gags?

By J. Freedom du Lac -- Bee Pop Culture Writer - (*Published January 12, 2004*)

You can almost predict these kinds of things.

Lurking around almost every speech, interview or news conference given by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, there's a Hollywood reference just itching to come out.

Friday, for instance, after unveiling his \$99.1 billion budget plan, the sartorially superlative Schwarzenegger took questions until he finally got his cue to praise the tireless work of Finance Director Donna Arduin.

"I only play the machine in my movies," Schwarzenegger said, his Austrian eyes smiling. "She is the real machine."

That remark came just three days after the erstwhile "Terminator," in his State of the State address, went off the script handed out by his handlers and noted that he wants to sell California, and that he's a natural salesman and, well, let him tell you:

"If I can sell tickets to my movies like 'Red Sonja' or 'Last Action Hero,' you know I can sell just about anything."

This from the same guy who told the audience at last month's Christmas-tree-lighting soiree that the 59-foot white fir reminded him of his Hollywood past because, you know, "my aaahcting was a little wooden."

Thank you very much; be here all term.

"I think we're in for three years of 'Governator' jokes, at least," says Sally Stewart, author of "Media Training 101" and a former USA Today reporter who sometimes covered politics. "Look at Ronald Reagan -- he was president for eight years, and throughout his tenure, people didn't stop making Hollywood references. They have a very long shelf life, and everybody gets it."

Even Reagan himself, who as a presidential candidate implored his supporters to "win one for the Gipper" -- a line lifted straight from his role as the dying Notre Dame football player George Gipp in "Knute Rockne, All American."

"Reagan used his movies all the time in his speeches and his public statements," says Alan Schroeder, author of the upcoming book "Celebrity in Chief: How Show Business Took Over the White House" and a professor at Northeastern University. "He was a great one for tapping into his movie persona when it suited his purposes."

Reagan's rivals attempted to do the same, Schroeder says -- especially when he was campaigning for governor of California, as everybody from actor Gene Kelly to politician Pat Brown tried to use the Republican's acting career against him.

"I think he inoculated Arnold Schwarzenegger in a way," Schroeder says. "Once there's a precedent, it's not so easy to bring that up as a point of criticism."

Not that politicians and pundits haven't tried with Schwarzenegger, who announced his candidacy on "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" in August by (surprise) sending "Terminator 2's" iconic "hasta la vista, baby" greeting to Gray Davis.

In a speech in June, as rumors swirled that the Republican Schwarzenegger would run, State Treasurer Phil Angelides joked that he wouldn't discuss the recall election until his own movie came out.

"It's called 'Treasurer 3: Revenge of the RAWS,' " the Democrat said. (Honk if you're wonky enough to know that "RAWS" are revenue anticipation warrants, better known -- or perhaps not -- as short-term borrowing notes.)

At a Capitol lunch reception on the day Schwarzenegger was sworn in, termed-out Assembly Speaker Herb Wesson, D-Los Angeles, toasted the new governor by referencing 10 of his movie titles.

And after the State of the State address last week, state Controller Steve Westly's office sent out a media advisory that noted: "The governor gave a good pitch. Now we need a screenplay that delivers."

Of course, before sliding into Davis' old digs in November, Schwarzenegger was an actor, not a screenwriter.

But who's counting, if not the Democratic controller?

Barbara O'Connor, for one.

The director of the Institute for the Study of Politics and Media at California State University, Sacramento, O'Connor has been monitoring the movie chatter -- and she is not necessarily impressed.

With one exception: "It is quite effective for him," she says of Schwarzenegger.

Otherwise? "Trying to emulate him without walking the walk isn't going to get you anywhere," she says. "People can see through it. I wouldn't do it unless I had the background to pull it off."

Communications consultant Cherie Kerr won't even go that far.

While Schwarzenegger has starred in more than two dozen movies, that means nothing now, she says.

"I think if you're going to be in film, you should stay in that medium and keep it contained there," says Kerr, who has coached countless corporate executives and a handful of politicians on their speaking skills. "If you're in politics and want to be respected and taken seriously, you have to behave appropriately."

Schwarzenegger's repeated use of acting jokes is not appropriate, she says. And besides, they're just not that funny. (Trust her on this one: She's a founding member of the Los Angeles improv-comedy troupe the Groundlings.)

"It's really been overused and overdone, and I think the jokes are corny," she says. "Stay away from the shtick, Arnold."

Likewise the rest of you legislators, Kerr says.

Especially Westly, who held a news conference last fall on the west steps of the Capitol, where he sat in a director's chair, near a popcorn machine, and droned on about the script he wanted to deliver to Schwarzenegger, now that the actor had a new leading role and all.

(Two thumbs down, say those who were there.)

"It's like hitting a punch line at the wrong place, or overdoing a joke," Kerr says. "Stay away from that stuff. Don't get caught up in that silly game."

Eventually, hopefully, thankfully, predicts Schroeder, the Northeastern professor, that game will become boring -- even to Arnold himself.

"The novelty will wear off, and his governorship will become something about other than who he used to be," Schroeder says. "He can't escape his movie past, even if he wanted to. But now that he's elected, what people in California are going to care about is what he does for them at the moment."

Coming soon to a Capitol near you: "Last Action Hero Joke."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger -- a real stand-up guy

"We are mad as hell, and we are not gonna take it anymore."

"Do your job for the people, and do it well, or otherwise you're out -- hasta la vista, baby!"

"When I go to Sacramento, I will pump up Sacramento."

"It's the most difficult (decision) I've made in my entire life, except the one I made in 1978 when I decided to get a bikini wax."

--"Tonight Show With Jay Leno," Aug. 6

At a boisterous Orange County Fairgrounds rally in Costa Mesa, Schwarzenegger vowed to "destroy the car tax," which the Gray Davis administration had tripled to help close a multibillion-dollar budget gap. He told the crowd:

"In the movies, when I played a character and I didn't like someone, you know what I did? I destroyed it. I'll show you exactly what we're going to do to the car tax."

A crane then dropped a giant weight onto a car, crushing the vehicle, and Schwarzenegger said:

"Hasta la vista, car tax" (as the rock anthem "We're Not Gonna Take It" blasted through loudspeakers).

--Oct. 2

"What we face may look insurmountable. But I learned something from all those years of training and competing. What I learned is that we are always stronger than we know. And California is like that, too. We are stronger than we know. There's a massive weight we must lift off our state. Alone, I cannot lift it. But together, we can."

--Inaugural address, Nov. 17

"I'll be back."

--Rallying public support for his budget plan at a Bakersfield mall, Dec. 4

"When I light this tree, it will not blow up. So don't worry."

--Capitol tree-lighting ceremony, Dec. 9

"I'll be back."

--Surveying earthquake damage in Paso Robles, Dec. 23

"I changed my mind. I want to go back to acting."

--Joking in the State of the State address, Jan. 6

"I am a salesman by nature. And now most of my energies will go into selling California. If you can sell, if I can sell tickets to my movies like 'Red Sonja' or 'Last Action Hero,' you know I can sell just about anything. California is the easiest sell I've ever had."

--State of the State address, Jan. 6

--Compiled Bee chief librarian Pete Basofin

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