

t's Saturday and I'm standing in a garage in Springfield and the guy next to me suddenly blurts out: "What is a euphemism for a necrophiliac for cars?"

This question, posed by a mechanic, isn't rhetorical. No dirty punch line hovers expectantly in the air. He's just curious.

Necro-vehicularization? Auto-necrotic-eroticization? Hoopie-humping? Piston-twistin'? Van-dallyism?

Whatever the term, the act itself — romancing dead cars — is about to put Springfield on the map. Not your ordinary street map. No, we're talking about the only map that really counts these days, the cathode map navigating among *Swamp People*, *Cops*, *Hillbilly Handfishin'* and *Jersey Shore* jerkoffs.

The map of reality television.

You see, outside behind the spacious garage at Welby's Car Care in Springfield is a graveyard. It's here that automobiles in various stages of disrepair form a metallic maze where dented hoods are propped up like headstones.

This is not, however, where old cars come to die; Welby's junkyard is more limbo than last resting place. Don't feel sad for that demolished '71 'Cuda or grieve over the cute little BMW beached by the fence. Magic happens here. This Springfield garage is home to an oddball team of automotive experts that specializes in restoring wrecked cars to factory specs.

Magic, yes, but no tricks. Refurbishing cars is exacting work. Welby's will take that smashed-up Barracuda and — by painstakingly hammering out dents and sleuthing down coded parts and matching paint tones — return this classic beauty to its birthday suit, the condition it held right off the factory line in 1971.

The dramatic process of rebuilding muscle cars is the basis of *Graveyard Carz*, a new reality show. Produced by Springfield-based Division Productions, the show will premiere at 8 pm on Friday, April 20, on Discovery's Velocity Network.

It's a gearhead's dream job. Those sexy muscle cars are as integral to the American soul as cheeseburgers and Mickey Mouse. Welby's traffics in the dream, but it's long, hard work, demanding patience and tenacity. Car reconstruction, in fact, involves far more scientific precision and artistic focus than the oily rags and torqued lug nuts of typical auto repair. This is not horseshoes and hand grenades.

Welby's technicians are surgical in their expertise, in a sort of acutely obsessive way — Dr. Frankenstein's bringing lifeless cars back from the dead by salvaging the parts they need wherever and whenever they can find them.

THE PURLOINED CAMSHAFT

The Frankenstein analogy doesn't quite hold. Mary Shelley's reanimate monster was bolted together from random chunks of disinterred flesh and bone. The Welby's crew revives vehicular corpses with found parts that are perfect fits — matching the car's original date, make and serial stamps, down to every itty-bitty pin. This is more akin to solving a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces were dumped willy-nilly from an airplane on a cross-country flight.

Such revamping requires an encyclopedic knowledge of cars, an expert's eye, loads of available cash and an uncanny feel for authenticity, not to mention the detective skills of Philip Marlowe. It calls for a little crazy, and a whole lotta love. The guys at Welby's exhibit all of these qualities, and then some.

This "and then some" has translated itself, in Hollywood verbiage, into star power.

Division TV marketing rep Thomas Lesh says he's excited to see what the national response will be to *Graveyard Carz*. "Car enthusiast or not, I believe many people will see themselves and people they know," Lesh says. "There is a lot more coming back to life here than just old Mopars. I believe good, old-fashioned, American hard-work ethics, integrity and a sense of who we are and where we come from in this great nation is being restored, one Mopar at a time."

Actually, audiences in this country will be latecomers to *Graveyard Carz*. Last year, *GYC* debuted internationally on networks in Italy, France, South Africa, China and New Zealand, to name a few. The cast at Welby's is now at work filming the show's second season.

What gives *Graveyard Carz* its surprisingly high-octane appeal is the cast — a swarm of working-class guys whose wonky work routine has been spun into television gold. There's something for everyone here: action, suspense, slapstick, drama, sitcom scenarios and a trunk-full of smack talk.

In *Graveyard Carz*, the precision work of rebuilding wrecked cars collides head-on with the hilarious stuff of guys goofing off. The result is a glorious boob-tube mash-up of *The Three Stooges*, *Sanford & Son*, *Antiques Roadshow* and *Perry Mason* meets the *Lincoln Lawyer* (if his other car was a Chrysler). This is a new genre for a new age: the blue-collar roast staged in the second-city junkyard.

DROP OUT, TUNE UP, BUY IN

The man standing dead center of *Graveyard Carz* is Mark Worman, CEO of Welby's Car Care. Worman is a lifelong Mopar enthusiast. In layman's terms, this means he's a diehard Chrysler guy — Mopar is the service arm of Chrysler, making hardware for Dodge, Plymouth and, of particular interest to Worman, those elegant Barracudas that embody the American ideal of a whiplash-fast dream machine.

"I grew up on car magazines," Worman says, noting that over the course of his life he's been reading about cars "to the point where all that geekedness pays off."

Born in 1962 at Eugene's Sacred Heart Hospital, Worman says he "was raised in Springfield and never left." He attended Yolanda Elementary and St. Alice School, but then dropped out just halfway through his ninth-grade year at Springfield Jr. High.

"I hated school," Worman tells me. Having lost his father to cancer at 12 and battling serious health issues of his own, young Mark put his mother's trust to the test. "My mom toiled over the idea for weeks," Worman says, "but ultimately decided that if she forced me to go out the door and to school, there was a chance I'd start skipping and get in the wrong crowd."

It was a risky move, but mother's intuition paid off, largely due to Worman's interest in rebuilding small motors of all kinds. "If I was in the carport where she could keep an eye on me," Worman says, "then how bad could it be?"

Through a program at Lane Community College, he earned his high school diploma at 16. "Twenty-two As, one B and one C," Worman says. "Not bad, I reckon." He also worked during his mid-teens at Wonder Bread in Springfield. "When I would be cleaning the shop as a kid," Worman recalls, "I remember thinking how cool of a hot-rod shop this would make."

After spending years working in various local garages and rising from pump jockey to mechanic to a position in management, Worman in 1985 started his own business, opening Welby's Car Care Center. "It was a small, three-bay shop that ultimately launched my business to where I am today," he says.

Where Worman is today is like déjà vu all over again. Just a few years back, he relocated — or returned, perhaps — to the stomping grounds of his first job.

"It was just a big open shell," Worman says of the former Wonder Bread building. "When we tore it down, we had enough lumber to build a house." By installing, among other amenities, "ten big doors, drains in the floor, a truck loading dock," Worman finally brought to fruition, 35 years later, the cool garage he'd dreamed about as a teenager. "And here I am," Worman says, "full circle."

PORNO FOR PLYMOUTHS

The shtick of *Graveyard Carz* is simple, though in a complicated sort of way. Likely the show would sport decent odds for success even if it casted morose mechanics who collectively delivered fewer lines than Danny Trejo in *Machete*. That's because there is an unlikely but undeniable element of intrigue in treasure hunting the relic-rare parts required to rebuild munched muscle cars to precise OEM (original equipment manufacturer) standards. In Hollywood terms, *Graveyard Carz* is like *CSI* meets *Sons of Guns*.

Now imagine all that precision work in the hands of Charlie Chaplin, George Carlin, Don Rickles, Denis Leary and Jack Black. That's *Graveyard Carz* — a modern vaudeville routine performed by unreconstructed car geeks, part blustery ballet and part good-natured bullshit, and propelled by an unscripted avalanche of continuous verbal sparring, spontaneous put-downs, endless insults of endearment and the graceless physical comedy of *Jackass*.

Shot on location by a three-person crew of local film students wielding Canon DSLR-7D digital cameras and then edited with uncommon sophistication, *Graveyard Carz* is a self-contained and well-structured show, with the form and flow of a sitcom featuring strongly developed characters and an engaging narrative arc.

Moments of chaos do occur, as does the occasional awkward mistake. The reality of this particular reality show has the slightly anxious appeal of a comedy of errors without the errors — of an accident waiting to happen. The *Graveyard* guys might act tough, but it's hard to believe they don't live in terror of being the idiot who, oh, let's say, misplaces that one crucial part that is a total bitch to replace.

"The dumb leading the dumb" is how Worman describes his crew. As both real-life and TV boss, Worman's role is a cross between Ahab and Moe Howard — the beleaguered boss and top Stooge. He also produces the series and is involved every step of the way, from storyboarding to directing and editing, to making sure everything revs along at a good pace.

BEHIND THE SCENES FOR THE FILMING OF GRAVEYARD CARZ SEASON TWO

