

Ambassador Gutman Interview in Flemish left-of-center TV weekly *Humo*

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“Everything in Belgium Is Fantastic”

*Note” Published on the page detailing the TV programs of October 6*

A remake of *Fame*, the high school musical film of 1980, will be released in Belgium tomorrow, October 7. There is nothing special with this, one would say, except that, among the actors and next to Kelsey Grammer, there will be Howard W. Gutman. Indeed, the same Howard Gutman who can call himself U.S. Ambassador to Belgium since last July 24, and who will come and introduce himself as such on *De Laatste Show*. Can you tell us more about this, Mr. Gutman?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘I *Fame*, I play the father of a high school kid who is a butcher. They shot four scenes with me, and one has been kept in the film: my son is coming to ask me for money, and I express my skepticism about his study choice (laughter.) Playing a butcher is new for me: since I am not really an actor, I usually play the role of a lawyer. I myself was a lawyer in Washington DC for 27 years. Two days ago, I was in Los Angeles for the première. At the end, I came across Kelsey Grammer in the men’s room. He told me ‘great job, man!’ That was particularly nice of him, because he probably does not know that I am Mr. Ambassador in Belgium. For him, I am simply the guy whp plays the butcher.’

*Humo*: How did you start as an actor?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘I began as an advisor of *K-Street*, a TV series about politicians and lobbyists in Washington. Steven Soderbergh was the director and George Clooney the producer. When they had questions on political or legal issues, they would come to me for advice. At a given moment, Steven told me: ‘Howard, can’t you simply play the role yourself?’ I did not ask him to repeat. And so I began as an actor. After *K-Street*, I played in a few films, including movies with Tim Robbins and Alec Baldwin. And I am supposed to play in a movie with Matthew McConaughey soon, but I do know yet whether the State Department will let me do that.’

Humo: I understand you know George Clooney very well

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Well, we are not intimate friends but he once had dinner at our place, together with his wife and parents. I had organized a fundraising for his father, who is a politician. We have stayed in touch since then. George spends a lot of time in Europe, so who knows I can recruit him to do something for the U.S.-Belgian relationship. The latter is actually my main task as Ambassador.’

Humo: How does it happen, becoming Ambassador in Belgium? Do you get a phone call from the President?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘More or less, yes. I was in my office in March when I got a phone call. I picked it up and a lady told me: please hold for the President.’ Soon President Obama was on the line: ‘Hi Howard, How are you doing? Listen: you have always been a faithful friend and a good advisor. Would you like to represent the U.S. in Belgium?’ I told him: with pleasure, on condition that you visit.’ That’s what he promised me to do, but without specifying when it might be. Media like to write that I got this job because I raised funds for the Obama campaign, but this is nonsense. Sure, I did fundraising, but this is something anyone who had a high level job on the Obama campaign. The Obama Ambassadors are also quite different from U.S. Ambassadors before: we are younger, we still have kids at home, and we work for a living. In the past, only wealthy old men became Ambassadors, of the type who are members of at least four country clubs.’

Humo: In an interview with TV Brussels, you said you wanted to visit all Belgian communes during your time as Ambassador?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘That’s correct.’

Humo: I checked and there are 589 communes in Belgium

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Not a problem. I have been here a few weeks and I have already seen so many places: Bruges, Zeebrugge, Noki

Humo: Noki?

Press attaché: Knokke

Ambassador Gutman: 'Indeed, Knokke. Knokke must have one of the worst PR department in the world because in the U.S., no one has ever heard of it. Whereas it is certainly as nice as Saint Tropez! En then Bree, where I traveled to congratulate the wonderful Kim Clijsters. Without exaggerating, Bree is one of the nicest jewels on earth. I had not seen such a beautiful city-hall before! Really wonderful. And I won't talk about the Mayor – Jaak Gabriels – you can't simply not find a more talented politician in the world. No, 589 communes, that's goinf to work. I already have a map on my wall where I indicate with pins the places I have been to. And if at the end of my tour I am missing 56, I'll jump in my car to quickly shake hands with these 56 mayors. 'Hi, I am the U.S. Ambassador, nice to meet you!.'

Humo: There isn't anything you don't like in Belgium?

Ambassador Gutman: 'No, I find everything fantastic.'

Humo: Come on, you do not mean it

Ambassador Gutman: 'Ok, I'd say the chocolate shops here are way too tempting. How on earth can the Belgians resist that temptation? My cardiologist is not laughing about it. Another problem is that Belgium is six hours ahead of the U.S. East Coast and nine hours of the West Coast. As a result, it is only at 3 a.m. that I have finished answering e-mails and giving phone calls. And every morning at 7 I have my lesson in French or Dutch. So far, I have not been able to sleep more than three hours and a half per night.'

Humo: How is your Dutch?

Ambassador Gutman: 'So so. It is a nice language but a difficult one. I especially have a problem with the 'g.' I pronounce that letter too strongly. Zeebrugge: that is not wasy, you know!'

Humo: Which Dutch word do you find the funniest?

Ambassador Gutman: 'Smakelijk. It is an hilarious word!.'