

## A Gossip Bad Boy Tries Being Nice

By [LAURA M. HOLSON](#) OCT. 17, 2012

ON a recent rainy Tuesday, the pop-culture personality known as Perez Hilton strode onstage at the Kirk Theater on 42nd Street and broke into song. It was a solo in “Newsical the Musical,” the Off Broadway revue, and the guest star was crooning about how he was no longer a catty gossip.

When a photo of Julia Roberts’s hairy armpit flashed on a screen behind him, Mr. Hilton mischievously compared the fluff to a Chia pet. “I can’t say things like that anymore and it’s driving me out of my mind!” he cried with an oversize toothy grin.

He lingered over a photo of Robert Pattinson, the actor’s shirt stained with sweat, and sniffed the armpit as the crowd murmured, “Eww.” Later, Mr. Hilton covered his maw as other photos flashed on screen: the battered face of the country singer Randy Travis after a car accident and subsequent arrest; an overweight Barbra Streisand; Oprah Winfrey, her face wrinkled like a Shar-Pei.

“I resolved I must be kind!” Mr. Hilton sang (none too convincingly).

One could argue that if Mr. Hilton was truly kinder, he might not have played his new persona for camp at others’ expense. But Mr. Hilton, who was born Mario Armando Lavandeira Jr., has been on something of a redemption tour since he rose (or sank) to fame with his highly trafficked gossip Web

The site was a guilty novelty a few years ago, but celebrities and their support teams soon became fed up with his vicious insults (he once called the actress Jennifer Aniston “cripplingly codependent”) and doodles of penises (like the one he scrawled on a photo of Rumer Willis, the daughter of Bruce Willis). In 2009, he got into a brawl outside a Toronto club when he called the singer Will.i.am a homophobic slur.

When Mr. Hilton started speaking out against the bullying of gay teenagers in 2010, some in Hollywood cried hypocrisy. He was widely criticized for a tweet referring to a photo of Miley Cyrus, then 17, getting out of a car, her skirt hiked up. The reality star Khloe Kardashian, a frequent target of Mr. Hilton, circulated a video denouncing him. He went on Ellen DeGeneres’s show to deliver a public mea culpa and got a chilly reception.

Since then, a chastened Mr. Hilton, 34, has toned down his malicious rhetoric considerably, in keeping with a new culture of nice online that has accompanied the rise of social media. In April, he appeared onstage at Ms. Winfrey’s Life Class tour, describing his newfound enlightenment (brought on in part, he said, by weight loss) as a series of “aha orgasms.” He said he stopped drinking alcohol and began seeing a therapist this year. And in September, Mr. Hilton apologized on Bravo’s “Watch What Happens: Live” to Sarah Jessica Parker for years of mockery.

Mr. Hilton seemed repentant for the damage he inflicted, aware it could take years for him to make amends, if at all. “What’s important for me is not being liked, but it is that people think I am no longer toxic to the world,” he said, sipping a glass of Diet Coke at Chez Josephine.

He has revamped his Web site to include family-friendly pages on celebrity children, pets and fitness and says he wants to act on Broadway, have a talk show and host a music festival, all of which could put him awkwardly face-to-face with the very celebrities he has insulted for years.

“I’m aware of the fact there are going to be a lot of people with lingering resentment and a lot of skeptics,” he said. “And that’s O.K. because I am not pretending to be perfect.” Mr. Hilton started blogging in September 2004 and reached the apex of his popularity in 2007 when he made the rounds of popular talk shows like “The View” and was profiled by ABC’s “Nightline.”

But emboldened, perhaps, by his nom de plume and the curtain of cyberspace, he was less accountable to the truth than a Louella Parsons or Liz Smith. “I don’t believe that when you are famous you deserve to have lies written about you,” said Amanda Lundberg, a film and celebrity publicist whose clients include Tom Cruise, a frequent target of Mr. Hilton. “I don’t know why we as a culture think that’s cool.”

Ms. Lundberg also expressed skepticism that Mr. Hilton had truly reformed. “You might be kinder and gentler, but what is that?” she said. “Where is the truth? It’s just another narrative to sell subscriptions or get more traffic on a Web site.”

Indeed, sometimes Mr. Hilton’s logic about what is offensive is puzzling. In early blog posts, he routinely scribbled sexual epithets on posted photographs of Ms. Cyrus, then a breakout star from the show “Hannah Montana.” But when he was asked recently by a photographer to stand on a seat in the empty Kirk Theater for a portrait, Mr. Hilton protested, saying, “It would be disrespectful to theatergoers.”

Still, other publicists say they have noticed Mr. Hilton’s shift. “In the old days, I’d have to monitor, oh, what is he saying?” said Simon Halls, who represents Jude Law, an actor who has had his share of tabloid glare. “Now I don’t have to worry about it.”

But while Mr. Hilton’s new softness may be good for celebrities and their protective publicists, he has seen his online popularity waver. There has been a decline of unique visitors to PerezHilton.com to 4.17 million in August 2012 from 4.68 million a year earlier, said comScore, which monitors Web traffic.

Mr. Hilton, however, seems to have loftier goals than page views. He credits his personal turnaround to a renewed interest in getting physically and mentally healthier. At the beginning of 2012, he stopped drinking for five months (He is not an alcoholic, he said) and began more stringently monitoring his diet.

In therapy he spent hours mulling his relationship with his mother, who lives near his home in Los Angeles, and his sister, Barbara, who oversees Mr. Hilton’s office and manages his schedule. And he took up daily yoga, in part, to build muscle under skin that lost elasticity after he lost nearly 80 pounds. Now he tweets what he calls “Perezisms,” or feel-good musings (“I choose to be happy!!!”) to inspire.

“When you speak about a lot of this, it begins to sound cheesy,” he said. “But it’s been real.”

A bonus of the weight loss is that he has become more sexually confident, he added. “Someone asked me my inspiration for losing weight and I said I wanted to get laid,” Mr. Hilton said (he is gay). He had a fling this summer in Las Vegas with a dancer for Cirque du Soleil, something he said he would not have contemplated if he were overweight. “I am going to manifest a husband next year,” he said.

But whatever his self-professed changes, Mr. Hilton hasn’t lost his taste for personal barbs. He recently posted an item about Mr. Cruise, contending that the actor, recently divorced from Katie Holmes, was depressed and pining for Cameron Diaz, with whom he starred in “Knight and Day.” “Dating is SO much harder when Xenu isn’t finding you a match,” the posting said, referring to Scientology.

Ms. Lundberg said the report is untrue. Mr. Hilton is unapologetic. “It’s not like I reinvented the wheel,” he said with a grin, speaking about his new persona. “I just put new rims on it.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/18/fashion/perez-hilton-pursues-redemption.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FGossip>