

DANNY KAYE: WONDER MAN

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

Bob Hope told jokes better, Fred Astaire was his superior on the dance floor, Bing Crosby crooned songs more pleasantly, and Red Skelton demonstrated a greater gift for pantomime, but Danny Kaye did so many things well it didn't matter if he wasn't the best at any of them. Most show business figures can be labeled in a word: actor, comedian, dancer, musician, director, singer, etc. Danny Kaye is best described simply as an entertainer.

He started entertaining early in life by singing and making faces for classmates at P.S. 149 in Brooklyn. After a few years of secretly practicing vaudeville routines and songs with a friend, the pair literally took their show on the road by performing on the sidewalks of New York. One night a man who worked for a resort in the Catskills saw their act and hired them to be tumblers for the hotel.

This job proved to be an excellent train-

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ing ground for the young redhead because tumblers did everything they could to amuse guests, from telling jokes and acting in plays to conjuring up impromptu escapades and scavenger hunts. It was during

that summer of 1929 that the young man born David Daniel Kaminski sixteen years earlier was reborn as Danny Kaye.

A quick learner, Danny began putting his own stamp on musical numbers by adding bits of business to take advantage of a natural gift for inflection and his limber body. The phrase "throwing yourself into a

song" aptly described the lengths to which Kaye would go to captivate an audience.

During the early thirties he also began to develop his ability to improvise nonsensical lyrics like "Git gat gittle" and to affect foreign dialects. All of these little extras took the rough edges off his inexperience and began to give him the aura of a polished performer.

However, he was still going nowhere until he met a composer named Sylvia Fine who adapted her songs to fit Danny's tal-



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ents. The team raised a few eyebrows in a Broadway revue and soon their act at the Martinique nightclub became the hottest ticket in town. Sylvia and Danny worked so well together that it surprised none of their friends when they were married in 1940.

Before long Kaye was wowing them on Broadway in Moss Hart's *Lady in the Dark* with an electrifying number called "Tschaikowski" which demanded that he rattle off the names of almost fifty Russian composers without missing a syllable. More than one critic expressed the belief that no one could have improved upon his performance. It would not be the last time his contribution to a production would be considered unique.

After six months in *Lady in the Dark* Danny accepted an offer to star in Cole Porter's musical *Let's Face It!* This time he stopped the show twice with numbers that featured what had become his trademarks: double talk and peculiar body movements. On the strength of the Porter music and the Kaye pyrotechnics *Let's Face It!* ran for sixteen months until Danny left the show to accept a contract from Samuel Goldwyn to make motion pictures.

It became clear even in his first film, *Up In Arms*, that showstopping numbers written by Sylvia and expertly executed by Danny were going to be a Kaye staple regardless of whether he was on stage or the screen. "The Lobby Number," in which Kaye ran all around a theatre lobby, was so full of vitality that audiences could hardly have been blamed if they left their seats and joined in when Danny invited everyone to "Conga!"

His next movie, *Wonder Man*, featured the plot device that almost became the standard for his films: Danny impersonating someone else. But audiences marveling

over the way he moved his head as if it was disembodied during the "Bali" number and laughing at his gibberish during the mock opera which closed the film were having too much fun to quibble about predictable story lines.

During 1945 he starred on his own radio program while simultaneously working for Sam Goldwyn. *The Danny Kaye Show* certainly had much going for it: Kaye, Eve Arden and Lionel Stander in front of the microphone, Goodman Ace, Abe Burrows and Sylvia Fine handing them funny lines to say and sing, and the swinging sounds of Harry James in the background. Even though it was a popular program for its short run no real character was hung on Danny so the people at home could imagine him the way they could picture a parsimonious Jack Benny or a prevaricating Fibber McGee. His manic antics had to be seen to be believed.

1946 marked the zenith of Kaye's career. At times during that year his earnings surpassed \$40,000 a week. As a meek milkman turned boxer in *The Kid from Brooklyn* he was still fast on his feet, even if the "Pavlova" number he wobbled through looked like it belonged in a different movie. The face seen often on posters and in theatres also peered out from every newsstand as *Time* and other magazines put that wavy-haired, impish head on their covers.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, released twelve full months after *The Kid from Brooklyn*, demonstrated that Kaye had not lost a step in the interim. Danny had a knack for being funny both as milquetoast and as *bon vivant*, and Mitty's split personality provided him with a chance to show this ability gloriously.

No matter how successful Kaye's pictures were he couldn't wait for production to end so he could return to the stage. He loved the intimacy of appearing before an

audience and the immediacy of their response to his singing, dancing, and clowning. Danny Kaye left them rollicking in the aisles everywhere from Broadway's Palace to London's Palladium.

Kaye also enjoyed conducting the New York Philharmonic and other orchestras which allowed him an opportunity to delight both the musicians in front of him and the music lovers behind him. Danny

didn't miss one piece of shtick when he reached into his bag of tricks: stumbling on the way to the podium, pretending the score was upside down, sitting on the lap of a surprised violinist, becoming so caught up in the act that the baton sailed out of his hand, acting like an umpire trying to eject a clarinetist for allegedly hitting a clinker, and leading his charges through a rousing rendition of "The Flight of the Bumble Bee" with a fly swatter for a baton. During these concerts he readily admitted that he was "having the time of my life" and those hearing him undoubtedly had the same feeling of exhilaration.

He continued to deliver music and mirth in his movies as well. He performed masterfully in *The Inspector General* as Farfel, a poor schnook who was mistaken for a high-ranking government official. With his boundless energy he appeared to be all over the screen and, in fact, he was in one sequence when four Danny Kayes (Farfel, an Englishman, Russian, and German) sing the "Soliloquy for Three Heads."

In *Hans Christian Andersen* he revealed his wonderful rapport with children and his distinctive way with a song that could generate both giggles and tears. As Andersen Kaye appealed to the child in all of us.



Officials of the United Nations hoped to transfer some of the Kaye charisma into real life when they appointed him ambassador-at-large for UNICEF in 1954. Over the next twenty years Kaye gave generously of his time to travel all over the world raising millions of dollars for needy children.

1954 also marked the release of two of Kaye's better-known films. In *Knock on Wood* he again rolled out his dialects as a ventriloquist on the run from spies who chase him out on a stage in the middle of a ballet for the hilarious climax. Danny displayed his versatility in the yuletide classic *White Christmas* by dancing smoothly with Vera-Ellen and camping it up with Bing Crosby as the silly "Sisters."

Although Kaye thought *Knock on Wood* was his best picture, some of his fans would probably vote *The Court Jester* as their favorite. This is the film that required Danny as the hypnotized jester to change from timid to bold and back again at the snap of a finger. Whether dueling with villainous Basil Rathbone or trying to sort out the "vessel with the pestle, chalice from the palace, flagon with a dragon" dialogue Kaye was a wizard of sight and sound.

Surprisingly, *The Court Jester* did not

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regain its production costs and his next movie, *Merry Andrew*, brought in even less money. Danny took on more serious roles as a Jewish businessman trying to escape the Germans during World War II in *Me and the Colonel* and as jazz cornetist Red Nichols in *The Five Pennies*, but nothing could stop his slide in popularity at the box office.

For years Kaye had rejected offers to work on television, but with his movie career in decline he tried his hand at a few specials. After a very amusing show with Lucille Ball in late 1962, he agreed to accept an offer from CBS to do a weekly series. *The Danny Kaye Show*, although never near the top of the ratings, lasted four full seasons and featured Harvey Korman, Danny, and assorted guest stars in some of the most memorable sketches of the decade.

In 1970 Kaye returned to Broadway to star as Noah in the musical *Two by Two*. He demonstrated what a trouper he was when, after tearing ligaments in his leg, he continued on as master of the ark with his foot in a cast. *Two by Two* ran for a respectable 343 performances.

Kaye soon became more interested in hobbies like cooking and flying his own planes than in performing, although he did step out of retirement in 1981 to play a concentration camp survivor in the television movie *Skokie*. The fine reviews he received foreshadowed the honors that were to follow: the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award at the 1982 Academy Awards ceremonies; the Knight's Cross of the First Class of the Order of Danneborg in 1983; and a Kennedy Center award presented by President Reagan in 1984.

Throughout his career Kaye played gentle souls who through quirks of fate had their destinies altered; by just one chance



VIRGINIA MAYO AND DANNY KAYE

occurrence his own life was cut short. During quadruple bypass heart surgery Danny received an infected blood transfusion that saddled him with hepatitis C from which his liver never recovered. Death got the last laugh on March 3, 1987.

Or could it be that we get the last laugh as we watch the kid from Brooklyn dazzle us with his feet, face, and tongue? His exuberant, boyish charm and manifold talents continue to fascinate both adults and children.

Drama critic Clive Barnes once wrote that "Mr. Kaye is so warm and lovable an entertainer, such a totally ingratiating actor, that, for me at least, he can do no wrong." To which the best response is "Git gat gittle da gat gat gittle," which in this case means "You can say that again." ■

NOTE-- Tune in to Those Were The Days Saturday, February 1 for a Danny Kaye show featuring Jack Benny and his cast as they substitute for Danny, plus a 1946 Lux Radio Theatre broadcast rehearsal of "Wonder Man" starring Danny Kaye with Virginia Mayo.