

# Tonight The Program's Gonna Be Different!

*The Life and Times of Ed Wynn, The Fire Chief*

BY ELIZABETH MC LEOD

He wasn't really a comedian at all. He was a clown. An old-fashioned baggy-pants clown.

And, indeed, a sad clown at that.



His career — and for that matter, his personal life — were filled with ups and downs. For decades, he battled crushing personal depression — and yet, he endured. For nearly sixty-four years, Ed Wynn was a professional entertainer, dedicated to the simple pursuit of laughter. Even when he himself had little to laugh about.

Isaiah Edwin Leopold was born in Philadelphia in 1886, the son of a successful hat manufacturer. The elder Leopold was determined that his son should follow him into the family business, but young Isaiah had different plans. From an early age, the boy enjoyed clowning — for family and friends, for schoolmates, for anyone who would stand still long enough to observe his antics — and finally, tensions between Isaiah and his father grew to the point where the youth ran away from home to join a traveling theatrical troupe. In 1902, hatter's son Isaiah Edwin Leopold became actor Ed Wynn.

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His first efforts in show business proved ill fated. The acting troupe ran out of money in — of all places — the rough-and-ready riverfront logging city of Bangor, Maine. Wynn's father refused to pay his way back to Philadelphia, so the would-be entertainer was forced to take a job playing piano in a Bangor brothel in order to earn the money for a ticket home. His father hoped that this experience would serve to get the show-business bug out of his son's system once and for all, but the boy had no interest whatsoever in becoming a hat salesman. He occupied himself more with exploring the comic potential of the more funny-looking hats in the company's stock, and within a few months of his return home, he had run away again — this time to New York. And this time, he was gone for good.

Before the end of 1902, Wynn had teamed with vaudeville comedian Jack Lewis in an act satirizing the foibles of college boys. The act enjoyed a two-year run on the Williams Time, a small family-oriented vaudeville circuit, and the experience taught Wynn the basics of visual comedy. It was during the run of Lewis And Wynn that the classic "Ed Wynn" character first began to fall into place — the voluminous coats, the tiny hats, the slap shoes, the owlsh horn-rimmed glasses — and most of all, the twittering, dithering personality. By 1910, Wynn was working solo — and was ready for the Big Time. By 1913, he was headlining at vaudeville's Mecca, the Palace Theatre in New York, in an act called "The King's Jester," in which



the “Ed Wynn” character was charged with the task of making a sour-faced king laugh — which he finally accomplished by whispering an off-color joke in the monarch’s ear.

It was this act which brought him to the attention of Master Showman Florenz Ziegfeld, who added “The King’s Jester” to the *Follies of 1914*. Wynn became a show favorite — to the chagrin of rival comedian W. C. Fields, who was not amused when the manic Wynn disrupted his “Pool Sharks” sketch by hiding under the pool table and making faces at the audience. Never one to be upstaged, Fields put an end to this interruption — without breaking character — by walking around to the front of the table and knocking Wynn unconscious with the blunt end of a pool cue. Thinking it all part of the act, the audience howled.

But even an angry Bill Fields couldn’t stand in Wynn’s way. Success followed success, and in 1917 Wynn accepted a long

term contract from Ziegfeld’s arch-rivals, the Shubert Brothers — who headlined him in a string of musical-comedy revues. And then came the first of the setbacks.

Ed Wynn had enjoyed great success in the theatre up to this point, but he well knew that the life of the average actor was precarious. Producers treated performers as so many interchangeable parts, rehearsal and travel schedules were merciless, and contracts were woefully one-sided. The average actor had no protection, and for Wynn — a whole-souled political liberal — the situation was intolerable. Finally, in 1919, Wynn walked out on his Shubert contract to take a lead-

ing role in the nationwide actors’ strike which finally led to the recognition of the Actor’s Equity Association.

But his courage in standing up for his fellow actors earned him a place on the infamous Shubert Blacklist. Wynn was banned for life from the Shubert theatres, and the power of the blacklist was such that he was unable to secure a contract with any rival producer. So, finally, he took an enormous financial risk, and became his own producer.

It worked. Thruout the 1920s, Wynn headlined in a series of his own revues — produced, written, and staged by Wynn — the series began with *The Perfect Fool* in 1921, and continued thru the decade with *Ed Wynn’s Grab Bag*, *Manhattan Mary*, *Simple Simon*, *Follow The Leader*, and *The Laugh Parade*. All of these shows followed essentially the same pattern, presenting Wynn as a capering master-of-ceremonies tying together the individual revue scenes. Funny costumes, ab-

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surd jokes, and outlandish visual gags were all key components of these productions — the very essence of Roaring Twenties Broadway Nonsense.

It was during the run of *The Laugh Parade* in 1931 that Wynn's career came to a turning point. The show was one of the few critical successes during that disastrous Depression-wracked Broadway season, but it was losing money. Earlier that year, Eddie Cantor had become the first major Broadway star to turn to radio as a full-time alternative to the stage, and Cantor's success inspired Wynn to pay attention when he was approached by the Texas Company with an offer to star in his own radio series. The company was preparing to introduce a new "emergency-grade" gasoline with the brand name of "Fire

Chief," and proposed to Wynn that he headline a radio series built around a "Fire Chief" character.

Both Wynn and Texaco had some misgivings about the project. Wynn depended heavily on visuals for his comic appeal, and was unsure about radio. He had experimented with the medium as far back February 1922, with a broadcast presentation of *The Perfect Fool* over WJZ in Newark — and found the experience to be terrifying. He avoided radio thru the rest of the twenties, and Texaco was only able to convince him to commit to the new series by offering him a \$5000-per-week paycheck. But Texaco itself was concerned about Wynn's dependence on visual comedy, and consequently two company executives sat thru an entire performance of *The Laugh Parade* with their backs to the stage to determine if the comedy would carry over on a purely aural basis. They were finally satisfied — and *The Fire Chief Program* made its debut over the NBC-WEAF network on April 24, 1932.

The series drew plenty of advance publicity — Radio Guide magazine offered a cover article in which Wynn's famous slapshoes rated a photo all to themselves — and expectations were high. In packaging the show, NBC's Program Department followed the example of Eddie Cantor and Jimmy Wallington in providing Wynn with a staff announcer to serve as his foil for the series — and it was a sign of the faith NBC had in the project that the network's most prestigious announcer, Graham McNamee, was assigned to the show. Although McNamee had never done comedy before, he would







prove to be an ideal choice.

In the ten years since the ill-fated *Perfect Fool* experiment, Wynn's mike fright had only escalated, and he approached the opening broadcast in a cold sweat. It was McNamee who calmed him down each week, McNamee who gave him the courage he needed to face that forbidding black enamel box. The two men became close friends — and McNamee's regular-guy enthusiasm acted on the air as the perfect complement to Wynn's manic comedy. But even with McNamee's friendship, support and encouragement, Wynn was still frightened, still insecure about his ability to perform as a radio comedian — and to help him get thru each week's program, the show was made to be as much like a stage performance as possible. *The Fire Chief Program* was aired from the rooftop stage of the New Amsterdam Theatre — former home of the *Ziegfeld Follies* — before an enormous live audience. Wynn appeared in full costume — scooting out onto the stage each week on a toy fire engine, wearing a tiny Texaco Fire Chief helmet, and proclaiming "I'm the Chief tonight, Gra-

ham! Tonight the program's gonna be different!"

But it really wasn't that different from what Wynn had been doing on stage for more than twenty years. The program was a series of short exchanges of revue-type jokes, broken up by musical interludes performed by Don Voorhees' Orchestra. During the musical numbers, Wynn would dart backstage and quickly change his costume — each outfit more outlandish than the last. But unlike Eddie Cantor, Wynn was able to keep the visual joke of his appearance separate from his verbal comedy — he didn't refer to his costume gags on the air, didn't make them part of the show targeted at listeners at home. In short, the theatrical trappings were there only to keep Wynn from panicking and freezing before the microphone. With the costumes, with the audience, he could pretend he was still in the theatre, and forget all about that frightening little box. Although *The Fire Chief Program* quickly became one of the most popular new shows of 1932, Wynn never overcame his terror of broadcasting, and it was a constant psychological struggle to face the microphone each Tuesday night.

And this fear of broadcasting may have led Wynn into the most tragic venture of his career - a venture which would nearly destroy him, both professionally and personally.

By 1933, Wynn knew that the Broadway phase of his career was over. He had tried to make an impression in film, but his personality was too unrealistic for the screen. He was successful in radio, but broadcasting terrified him — aside from the mike fright, he was constantly worried about the ravenous way in which radio ate up material. Jokes and bits of business he had spent years refining on the stage were used once on radio — and then they were gone forever. Wynn knew the world of show business was changing, and he wanted to re-



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main a part of it — but performing was becoming an increasingly insecure way to make a living. He needed something more solid. If the performing end of broadcasting wasn't to be his future — then maybe, he decided, the business end would be.

To that end, Wynn spent much of 1933 organizing nothing less than his very own radio network. In partnership with a short-tempered Hungarian violinist named Ota Gygi, Wynn put together a group of investors and formed the Amalgamated Broadcasting System, buying a small New York City station, WBNX, to serve as its flagship. Wynn sank all of his personal savings — and all of his personal prestige — into the project. It would be, he hoped, a legacy for his family.

(It should be noted here that neither Wynn nor Amalgamated ever had anything to do with station WNEW, which didn't go on the air until 1934. Although WNEW did for a time occupy the studios that had originally been built for Amalgamated, Wynn himself was never involved in any way with that station. Contrary to a myth dating back at least to the 1940s, the "EW" in "WNEW" *doesn't* stand for "Ed Wynn" — rather, the "NEW" stands for "Newark," the station's original location.)

The Amalgamated Broadcasting System signed on for the first time on September 25, 1933 with a gala four hour program from the newly-constructed WBNX studios on Madison Avenue in New York. But the project was doomed from the start. Wynn was in Hollywood making a film during the summer of 1933, and he had left Gygi in charge. This was his biggest mistake.

Gygi was an old-school European, a man of strong and rather snobbish opinions — and his influence on the policies of Amalgamated was significant. At a stroke he managed to alienate almost the entire New

York City press corps by announcing at a kickoff press conference that he was only interested in what the New York Times thought of the project and had no use for any of the other papers — especially not the tabloids. As it happened, one of the city's most powerful radio critics was Ben Gross, of the tabloid Daily News — and Gygi's attitude ended up costing the new network any support Gross might have given it. Other radio critics followed Gross's lead, their comments on Amalgamated running from dismissive to snide.

But even more damaging was Amalgamated's attitude toward advertisers. The new network treated them as a necessary but distasteful evil, wrapping itself in proclamations of "public service" and enforcing a policy of no direct commercial announcements on any of its programs.

Advertisers would be allowed mentions at the opening and closing of programs, but no direct sales talk. This sort of policy had dominated radio during the twenties, but had been abandoned by both NBC and CBS by the turn of the 1930s — and by returning to such a rule, Amalgamated was in effect cutting its own throat.

Few advertisers were willing to pay top dollar rates for less freedom than they could get from the established chains — and without big-money advertisers, Amalgamated had no chance of offering top-quality programming. Without top quality programming, the network could not attract powerful affiliates. And without powerful affiliates, the network had no hope of attracting advertisers. If one had tried to deliberately craft an operating plan predestined for failure, it would have looked very much like the plan adopted by Amalgamated.

The new network lasted just over a month, falling silent on October 28, 1933. By then, Wynn had formally washed his hands of the project — but he still felt re-



sponsible for what had happened. He had lost his entire life's savings in the venture — but despite that loss, he took upon himself the responsibility of paying back all the money his investors had lost — a sum exceeding \$300,000. As he struggled to meet this commitment, his depression deepened.

In 1935, Texaco dropped Wynn's option, and *The Fire Chief Program* came to an end. The comedian was out of work, deeply in debt, and his marriage was crumbling under the strain. He tried to put together a new Broadway show, but failed. He tried a radio comeback in 1936, but Graham McNamee was unavailable due to other commitments, and Wynn worked instead with announcer John S. Young, a polished New Englander who lacked McNamee's sense of enthusiasm and, more importantly, was unable to provide the backstage moral support Wynn desperately needed, especially at this vulnerable point in his life.

McNamee finally joined the series in mid-run, but even this reunion of the two old friends wasn't enough to save the show. Wynn's comedy style had become dated — the yelping vaudevillians of the early thir-

ties had been supplanted by smooth character comedy in the Jack Benny style. By 1937, the series was cancelled, and Wynn slipped into a deep, chronic depression. His wife divorced him that same year, in a messy public scandal, and under all this stress, Wynn finally snapped. He suffered a complete mental breakdown — and disappeared from public view for two years.

With the help of his son Keenan, Ed Wynn gradually re-emerged from seclusion in the early 1940s, venturing first onto the stage and then back into radio in 1944 for one of the most unusual series ever broadcast. Entitled *King Bubbles of Happy Island*, the new show presented Wynn as the monarch of a fairytale kingdom in which he traveled about helping his subjects with their problems. The show was fully-staged for its live audience, with elaborate sets and costumes for Wynn and his entire cast, and sponsor Borden's Dairies had high hopes when the series premiered in September 1944.

It was, indeed, a unique format. And it couldn't have come at a worse time. America wasn't in the mood for fairytale sweetness-and-light when there was a war to be won. Radio comedy in the war era tended to be loud, abrasive and brassy — as different from Wynn's flittering silliness as possible. Critics were brutal in their dismissal of *King Bubbles*, and the show vanished after a single season.

Wynn kept trying. In January 1946, he rejoined Texaco for a revival of *The Fire Chief Program*, doing one comedy segment each week on what was otherwise a program of concert music with tenor James Melton. Original 1930s scripts were used during Wynn's segments, and the show was promoted as a bit of early-radio nostalgia. But Graham McNamee had died in 1942 — and the stilted Melton was a poor substitute in the straight-man role. Predictably,

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the series floundered and was cancelled in July 1946. And with it ended Ed Wynn's radio career.

But, again, Wynn kept trying. He fought off the continuing waves of depression, of insecurity, of fear — and turned to television in 1949. His *Ed Wynn Show*, broadcast live on the West Coast and nationwide by delayed kinescopes was one of the early successes of network TV, bringing 1920s-style revue comedy to a whole new audience. Wynn worked “in one” on this series — he had come to realize he'd never be able to replace Graham McNamee — but he was frequently joined by guest stars, including some of the true legends of comedy. Visual comedians from Buster Keaton to Lucille Ball joined Wynn in 1949 and 1950, and audiences loved the novelty of seeing these artists in their own living rooms.

*The Ed Wynn Show* earned Wynn one of the first Emmy Awards presented in 1949 — but by the early fifties, the novelty had faded. The broad vaudeville-type humor of sophistication's infancy gave way to a more sophisticated brand of sketch comedy. And Ed Wynn was no Sid Caesar.

Wynn's career in the early fifties tapered off, his best-remembered role being the voice of the Mad Hatter in Disney's animated version of *Alice in Wonderland*. It was an appropriate full-circle role for this hatter's son as he approached the half-century mark in his show business career, and following this role, he gradually slipped into retirement. When he made guest appearances on variety shows during the mid-fifties, it was as a “Grand Old Man Of Comedy.” Little did he realize a whole new career was just ahead.

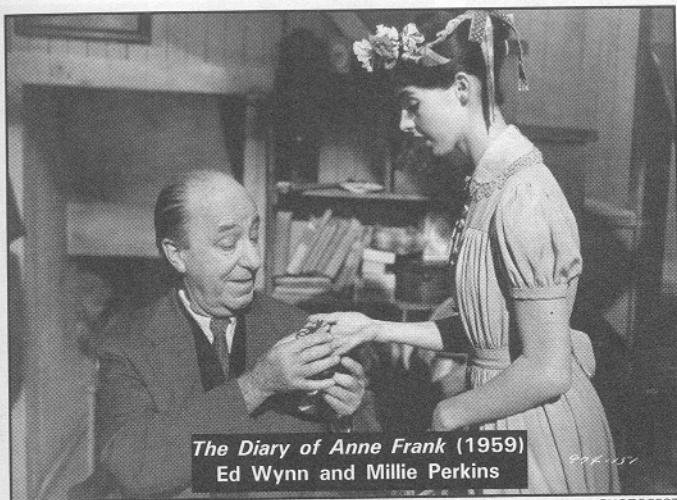
It was at the instigation of son Keenan that Ed Wynn turned to straight acting in the late fifties. The senior Wynn knew that



“Requiem for a Heavyweight” *Playhouse 90* (1956)  
Keenan Wynn, Jack Palance, Ed Wynn

comedy had changed, that his style was outmoded and old-fashioned — but he still wanted to work. Keenan had been cast in a *Playhouse 90* television drama by Rod Serling, a compelling story of the seamy world of small-time boxing entitled “Requiem for a Heavyweight.” The play contained a key role for a trainer — a wistful, elderly man named “Army” who represented the faint voice of decency in an otherwise corrupt business. In a suggestion that might have seemed bizarre, Keenan approached producer Martin Manulis and recommended his father for the role — and Manulis took the idea to Serling, who against his better judgment, agreed. Ed Wynn himself was terrified,





*The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959)  
Ed Wynn and Millie Perkins

PHOTOFEST

certain he would fail and ruin the show — but at Keenan’s prodding, he reluctantly took the part.

“Requiem For A Heavyweight” aired live on October 11, 1956 — and was one of the true high points of the Golden Age of Television. Keenan Wynn played Maish, a corrupt fight manager ruthlessly manipulating the career of the simple-minded boxer Mountain McClintock, played by Jack Palance. And Ed Wynn, as Army, surprised everyone — critics and author alike — by turning in an extraordinary, searing performance in his first real dramatic role.

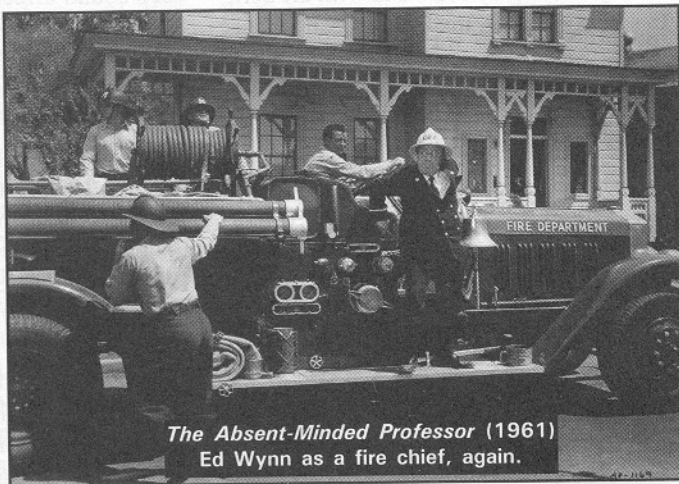
Over the next decade, Wynn would appear in twenty films — sometimes in comedy relief roles as gently-batty old men, and sometimes in touchingly-dramatic parts. His work as the gentle Mr. Dussell in the 1959 film adaptation of *The Diary Of Anne Frank* earned him an Academy Award nomination in the category of Best

Supporting Actor. Two years later, he returned to the Disney Studios for a part in the Fred MacMurray family comedy *The Absent Minded Professor*; and his role in this film was an inside joke for old-time radio fans — he appeared as a dithery small-town Fire Chief. Somewhere, Graham McNamee was smiling.

Wynn acted steadily over the next several years — most often in Disney films, and also appeared frequently on television. He died of cancer on June 19, 1966, just a few months shy of his eightieth birthday. In his last years, Wynn finally seemed to have found the peace of mind, the security, that had eluded him for so long — as can be seen from the plaque on his niche at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California.

It’s a simple inscription - but one which says much about this sweet, sad man.

“Dear God — Thanks.” ■



*The Absent-Minded Professor* (1961)  
Ed Wynn as a fire chief, again.

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