

# THE ROAD TO LAUGHTER

## STARRING

# BOB HOPE



"AS TOLD TO" CLAIR SCHULZ

*Note: When I was seeking inspiration for this article, I was visited by the muse of comedy. I always thought that muse was Thalia, a female who carried a shepherd's crook, but my visitor was definitely a male with a distinctive nose and a microphone in his hand. He said, "Let me tell the story. You'll just confuse people with little things like the truth."--Clair Schulz*

I've never worked for a digest before. Instead of applauding, just rustle the pages now and then so I know you're still there.

I'd like to start at the very beginning when only God and Al Jolson were around, but let's just go back to 1907 when I was a little four-year-old Leslie Hope getting settled in Cleveland after leaving my native England with my family. When the kids at school would switch my name and call me Hopeless, I'd get my revenge by fighting them and leaving my blood all over their fists.

I had a gift for being a mimic in those days and won a contest in 1915 with my imitation of Charlie Chaplin. I must still have a flair for that sort of thing because when I walk by people say, "There goes that little tramp."

I left school as soon as I turned sixteen and boxed under the name Packy East. I knew my days in the ring were over when I couldn't remember anything between "Come out fighting" and "Give him some air."

I had always been fast on my feet so I

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did a little hoofing in the twenties with a guy named George Byrne and before long we started to mix in a few jokes. We called ourselves "Dancemedians." (I can't repeat what the audience called us.)

After we were given a bit part in *The Sidewalks of New York* on Broadway in 1927, I did a solo spot one night and decided that since none of the tomatoes thrown my way made a direct hit that I should try it on my own as an emcee and monologist. Byrne was so upset when we split that he couldn't stop giggling all the time he was packing my suitcase for me.

It was when I went out on my own that I changed my name to Bob Hope. I was soon moving up the ladder of vaudeville and playing the better houses, but I still had a rough time of it. At the Coliseum Theatre in New York I had to come on after the sad end of the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* and make people feel happy. That was like trying to cheer up Dewey on the day after the 1948 elections with a singing telegram delivered by Margaret Truman.

But there was no stopping me now except empty seats and the reviewers so while I was playing the Palace, Broadway called in the form of *Ballyhoo of 1932*. That led to a part in *Roberta* with Sydney

Greenstreet (you remember Greenstreet: a duffel bag with jowls) and a role in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1935* with folks like Fanny Brice, Eve Arden, and Edgar Bergen who just vanished after the show closed and were never heard from again. In 1936 I carried Ethel Merman and Jimmy Durante through *Red, Hot and Blue*. What I didn't have to go through in those days!

But I wanna tell ya that it was during that time when I started to develop the character that people would soon be seeing on the screen: the glib braggart with a yellow streak a foot wide down my back. In reality I've always been a sweet, well-adjusted person with no hang-ups. If you don't believe me, just ask my analyst.

That conceit just oozed out of Buzz Fielding, the ham I played in my first picture, *The Big Broadcast of 1938*. (Actually, I did make six two-reel shorts from 1934 to 1936 which the Warner Brothers used to show to traitors in closed rooms after the Chinese water torture failed.) I didn't have much to do in that film except introduce acts and sing "Thanks for the Memory" with Shirley Ross. I wonder what happened to that song?

Paramount quickly put me in two more films with Shirley and three with Martha Raye. Martha was a real sweetheart to work with, but when I would do duets with her and she opened that big mouth I'd say, "Just wide enough to let the notes out. I'm not coming in."

I had dabbled a bit with radio on the *Rippling Rhythm Revue* so when Pepsodent came calling in 1938 I signed on the dotted line (with a tube of toothpaste, of course). I brought along a zany character named Jerry Colonna who I met while filming *College Swing*. You've heard of the cat that swallowed the canary? Colonna

looked like he swallowed the cat and the tail got caught on his upper lip. Elvia Allman and Blanche Stewart played dim-wits Brenda and Cobina and later Barbara Jo Allen took the part of the man-hungry Vera Vague. And we'd have lots of guest



stars like Judy Garland, Jack Benny, and, yes, even an old groaner named Crosby who we would feel sorry for when one of his sway-backed nags finished fifth in a four-horse race.

My program was really different. Other comedy shows would have lulls between the jokes. We came out with a thirty-minute lull.

But I wanna tell ya it really was different in that before the guests were brought on I would open with a monologue about the economy or politics or what actress just got married or other current topics. Fred Allen would toss barbs around with his wife or Kenny Delmar, but I was out there dying by myself. Just think: the part that Johnny Carson followed to stardom was



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paved with the eggs I laid way back then.

During the war we were broadcasting out before the troops more than we were before a studio audience because I felt that was the least we could do for our boys who were giving their most for us. Ex-soldiers and nurses still tell me how those visits to army camps lifted their morale. All I can say is they will never know how much entertaining them meant to me.

But radio was just one medium. Everyone seemed to want me then (including those guys who take the photos that go up on post office walls). In 1940 I made the first of my frequent appearances as Master of Ceremonies for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences annual giveaway. I always hoped that I would be given an award for one of my pictures, but the closest my acting ever got me to an Oscar was the night they said I could take Homolka home with me.

I knew the odds against winning that prize were against me each time I went on the road with ol' Dad. Bing and I were actually rather subdued in the first one, *The Road to Singapore*, but by the time we traveled to Zanzibar in 1941 and Morocco the next year we were batting out dialog all over the place. When Dottie Lamour would get frustrated trying to squeeze her lines in while we improvised, Bing would tell her, "When you find an opening, toss something in."

What made those films so much fun is that we all went along for the ride when Bing and I talked directly to the audience or set up our patty cake routine or kept looking left and right when talking about "the papers" in *The Road to Rio*. Everyone was in on the joke.

I was really clicking movies out there for a few years: *The Cat and the Canary*, *The Ghostbreakers*, and *Nothing But the*

*Truth* with Paulette Goddard, *Caught in the Draft* and *They Got Me Covered* with Dottie, *My Favorite Blonde* with Madeleine Carroll, *The Princess and the Pirate* with Virginia Mayo. Notice the pattern? Put a pretty face in to go along with the gags. The women they got for those pictures were cute, too.

Woody Allen once said that I was a "woman's man, a coward's coward, and always brilliant" (and I didn't even have to pay him!). But that was the character I played many times: a would-be Don Juan who wilted at the first sign of danger. Somehow I'd summon up the nerve to approach one of the bad guys with a rude remark like "What do you hear from your embalmer?" One minute I would be a parody of the Errol Flynn-Tyrone Power hero, the next I would be saying outrageous things that could get my neck in a noose. I



BOB and BING on the Air

think it was that split personality of fraidy cat/wise guy that brought people to theatres to see those pictures. That and Crosby's radio show.

There are those who say I reached my peak after the war years. (There are also those who say that everything I did after I left England has been downhill, but who listens to Milton Berle's relatives?) *The Bob Hope Show* sat atop the ratings, my syndicated column called "It Says Here" appeared in newspapers across the country, I was among the top ten box office stars right through 1953, and the WACs voted me the man they'd most like to eat Spam with in a Quonset hut.

*Monsieur Beaucaire* is one of the better costume pictures I did with a great cast of Joan Caulfield, Marjorie Reynolds, Cecil Kellaway, and Joseph Schildkraut. Joan actually had to pretend she didn't like me throughout most of the movie. What an actress! I did my own dueling with Schildkraut. I also did my own love scenes with Joan. What an actor!

In 1947 Dottie joined me as *My Favorite Brunette* on the run from a group of villains which included Peter Lorre and Lon Chaney, Jr. Lorre and Chaney. That's Lum and Abner with fangs. It's true that because I was involved with the production of this picture I paid Crosby \$25,000 for his cameo at the end as the disappointed executioner who is denied his chance to kill my character, Ronny Jackson. Bing said he'd return the money if he could really pull the switch on me.

Critics keep saying that *The Paleface* is my best film and they may be right. It certainly made the most noise at the box of-



BING, DOROTHY and BOB on the Road

fice and that was music to my ears. Now that I've had time to see the movie a number of times and review the high points like the dentist chair scene, the laughing gas episode in the cabin, "Buttons and Bows," Potter's reaction to a jolt of potent whiskey, the confusion over the directions Painless is given before the gunfight, and the scare takes, I have come to two conclusions: 1) it's not too bad; 2) I'm glad theatres had a policy of no refunds after the picture started.

Four years later in 1952 Jane Russell and I did a sequel with Roy Rogers called *The Son of Paleface*. It wasn't bad either. Even Trigger gave it 3 1/2 spurs.

It's nice that television stations blow the dust off *The Lemon Drop Kid* and give it a whirl every December. That Damon Runyon story is good for a few chuckles and "Silver Bells" is now a yuletide standard, but before Marilyn Maxwell and I

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could get in the studio to cut a record of that song that croaker who did "White Christmas" beat us to it. I got even with Bing when I made his toupee stand on end after I told him that instead of going to Bali our next film would be called *The Road to Baldy*.

By 1954 my program had gone the way of most radio shows, and I must say I miss those days. Part of the fun of doing my own show and guest shots came from the lines I would toss in at the spur of the moment. The versions of *Fancy Pants*, *The Lemon Drop Kid*, *My Favorite Blonde*, *Monsieur Beaucaire*, *The Paleface*, and *The Great Lover* I did on *Lux Radio Theatre* or *Screen Director's Playhouse* sometimes took hilarious detours from what was written. I've always been quick with an ad-lib—and I have the writers to prove it.

I think I also proved that I could do some serious acting when the part called for it. My scenes with little Mary Jane Saunders in *Sorrowful Jones* didn't scare Spencer Tracy into turning in his union card, but I earned a few good words in the papers for showing that I didn't need a raft of quips to keep me afloat on the screen. Ditto for the speech I gave to get custody of my children in *The Seven Little Foys*. In *Beau James* I took on a tragic role as New York Mayor Jimmy Walker and went the distance to show his decline and fall. I must have been a good actor in order to play with such conviction men like Eddie Foy and Walker who sometimes behaved like down-right heels. No comments, please.

Of course, while I was making pictures I was also doing TV specials for NBC. (I signed my long-term contract with them because I thought the initials stood for Nothing But Corn.) Doing just a handful of shows a year gave me the freedom to make personal appearances at nightclubs

and benefits, do tours promoting books such as *I Owe Russia \$1,200* and *Five Women I Love*, entertain the boys in Korea and Vietnam, turn out a film a year through 1969, and still have time to golf and hobnob with some fellows in Washington named Ike, Jack, and Gerry. My wife Dolores claims that the only way she could have gotten my attention during those years was to become a director, enlist, or get elected.

I can honestly say that I received the clippings about my last films more warmly than they were reviewed—I burned them! But Lucy shines through in *The Facts of Life* and *Critic's Choice*, and *The Road to Hong Kong* had its moments (three, to be precise). But my old audience, the people who had grown up seeing my films, by that time were watching my movies on TV while waiting for their children to come home from dates. I might have been more successful during those years by breaking into movies then playing in theatres like *Easy Rider* and *M\*A\*S\*H* with the announcement "Children! Do you know where your parents are? Go home and watch *My Favorite Brunette* with them."

And I think they would have enjoyed it because my humor appeals to all ages regardless of whether they like slapstick, satire, banter, double-takes, or one-liners. That's one test this dropout can still pass: my movies and shows make people laugh out loud.

When all is said and done that is what has made my life worth living. All the honorary doctorates and medals and plaques and speeches about humanitarianism and other accolades touch me deeply, but you do me the greatest honor when you remember me with a smile. ■

(NOTE--Tune in TWTD during May, Bob's 95th birthday month, for a five-week salute to Bob Hope on radio.)