

Court Jester (1955) Frank & Panama

P Michell, 2018

Synopsis:

Former carnival performer Hubert Hawkins (Danny Kaye) and maid Jean (Glynis Johns) are assigned to protect the infant royal heir from tyrannical King Roderick I (Cecil Parker). While Jean takes the baby to an abbey, Hawkins gains access to the court by impersonating the king's jester, unaware that the jester is really an assassin hired by scheming Sir Ravenhurst (Basil Rathbone). When Princess Gwendolyn (Angela Lansbury), falls for Hawkins, a witch secretly aids him in becoming a knight.

Made a year after Knock on Wood.

Full of sub-plots and wonderful dialogue by Panam & Frank.

Some films are made just for pure fun and entertainment!

Wonderful example of ensemble work in film making. Writers, Cinematographer, Composer, Chorgographer, Actors.

A spoof on Errol Flynn's Robin Hood (1938) and Italian Commedia dell'arte . Set in Merry Olde England but filmed at Paramount studios in Hollywood. There's fantasy castles and backgrounds in long shots.

Filled with many famous British actors working in Hollywood – Glynis Johns, Cecil Parker, Basil Rathbone and Aussie Michael Pate. John Carradine plays Giacomo.

For a short time Danny Kaye could do no wrong in cinema - from children's films Hans Christian Anderson (1952) to the 'family greats' – Court Jester and Knock on Wood (both made within a year of each other). Kaye however quickly became outdated as cinema changed to gritty realism in late 1950s. At his peak Kaye was the mega-star in three orbits: TV, theatre & cinema.

Famous lines / scenes:

Introductory song

Clicking of fingers so Kaye changes character.

The fast-track knighting sequences.

'Hermine's Midgets' sequences early and late in film.

'Brew that is True' sequence before joust.

Recreation of Robin Hood's swordfight with Basil Rathbone (see trivia).

"Get it. Got it. Good."

"The Duchess dove at the Duke just when the Duke dove at the Doge. Now the Duke ducked, the Doge dodged, and the Duchess didn't. So the Duke got the Duchess, the Duchess got the Doge, and the Doge got the Duke!"

Dena Productions:

Equal share – Kaye, Fine, Frank & Panama.

(Kaye's daughter called Dena.)

They seem to have cobbled together an amazing batch of talent for this film ...

Typical of the post studio system of independent producers.

Danny Kaye Blogspot with info on Court Jester cost overruns by David Koenig.

<http://thedannykayeshow.blogspot.com/2017/02/why-court-jester-gave-ulcers-to.html>

Book Reference:

<https://www.amazon.com/Danny-Kaye-Jesters-David-Koenig/dp/1937878015>

Norman Panama & Melvin Frank:

Producers, Screenwriting & directors. Specialised in radio scripts for Bob Hope (hired 8 gag writers so he could be 'the best'), Milton Berle. In Hollywood from 1938. Working on light comedies. Number of 'Road' movies (Bob Hope & Bing Crosby), My Favourite Blonde (1942), White Christmas (1954), Court Jester (1955). Best work in 1940s and 1950s.

Sylvia Fine:

Danny Kaye's wife and often wrote his numbers. Lyricist, composer, producer. Most of his songs by her. Integral to his theatre and cinema work.

Vic Shoen (1916-2000) Composer. His first feature film.

Famous as bandleader. Working with Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller Count Basie, etc. Best remembered as musical director and arranger for Andrews Sisters.

From Wikipedia:

Schoen composed and arranged for Danny Kaye's 1956 movie *The Court Jester* – a hugely successful musical-comedy. Film composer [Elmer Bernstein](#) was hired as the assistant musical director to Schoen for the film. The Court Jester was an enormous challenge for Schoen at the time because it was his first feature film. He was not officially trained on the mechanisms of how music was synchronized to film. Most of the earlier films he worked on needed vocal arrangements (different from background score) which were recorded before the shooting of the film. Schoen learned on the job how to synchronize 100 minutes of background score and vocal arrangements. Sammy Cahn and [Sylvia Fine](#), who was Danny Kaye's wife, were asked to provide seven songs for the picture. Some pieces in the film (also known as 'cues') were very long and required a great deal of hours for Schoen to finesse. One piece that Schoen was most proud of in his

career was the chase music he wrote toward the end of the movie when Danny Kaye's character engages in a sword fight. Schoen wrote a mini [piano concerto](#) for this scene.

A pleasant surprise happened during the recording session of [The Court Jester](#). The red "recording in progress" light was illuminated to ensure no interruptions, so Schoen started to conduct a cue but noticed that the entire orchestra had turned to look at [Igor Stravinsky](#), who had just walked into the studio. Schoen said, "The entire room was astonished to see this short little man with a big chest walk in and listen to our session. I later talked with him after we were done recording. We went and got a cup of coffee together. After listening to my music Stravinsky had told me 'You have broken all the rules'.

Ray June (1895-1958) Cinematographer (182 films)

He did some of his best work at MGM, and helped develop what became known as "the MGM look": a rich, elegant, glossy veneer that set that studio's product apart from every other. Even an inexpensive "B" picture from MGM often looked better than many of its competitors' top-rank "A" pictures, and June was one of the men responsible for that.

Robert Alton (1906-1957) – Choreographer (un credited)

Broadway and Hollywood choreographer. He is principally remembered today as the discoverer of [Gene Kelly](#), for his [collaborations with Fred Astaire](#), and for choreographic sequences he designed for Hollywood musicals such as *The Harvey Girls* (1946), *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946), *Show Boat* (1951), and *White Christmas* (1954).

Won Broadway's 1952 Tony Award as Best Choreographer for "Pal Joey."

Alton moved chorus dancing into a new era, by featuring soloists and small groups, and requiring the chorus to be adept at both ballet and tap." **He discovered Gene Kelly** and worked with [Fred Astaire](#), [Cyd Charisse](#), [Marilyn Monroe](#), and the [Nicholas Brothers](#).

"When I have a dance to do, I study the script, listen to the music, and then go away and dream."

Little people – Hermine's Midgets.

Its amazing what can be found on the Internet. For any interested here's a link to this European performing group:

<https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/unusual-signed-card-hermines-midgets-508279191>

Trivia:

Made for a cost of \$4 million in the fall of 1955, it was the most expensive comedy film produced at the time.^{[2][3]} The motion picture **bombed** at the box-office on its release, bringing in only \$2.2 million in receipts the following winter and spring of 1956. Later huge success on TV.

In the famous "snapping" swordfight between [Danny Kaye](#) and [Basil Rathbone](#), Kaye's sword movements were too fast for Rathbone, who was 63 at the time. The film's fight choreographer dressed up as Rathbone's character and was filmed from behind for the fast sections. If you look, you can see that most of the fight consists of "Rathbone" from the back, then shots of the real Rathbone standing "en garde". Further Rathbone did not know when Kaye switched from character to character type of fencing.

Another similar sword fight was done in *The Princess Bride* (1987) where comically one of the characters says something like 'I've been fighting only with my left hand', then changes to sword fight even harder. [Paul]

The character The Black Fox is clearly modeled on Zorro, the early California masked avenger whose name is Spanish for "fox". As in this film, in "*The Mark of Zorro*" (1940) Basil Rathbone loses the big final sword fight.

[The Jackson Michigan Zouave Drill Team](#) was a U.S. Civil War re-enactment group. They performed the intricate high-speed marching maneuvers during the knighting ceremony. The US Army adopted the Model 1863 Zouave rifle, a percussion or "cap-and-ball" muzzle-loader, which was manufactured by Remington. Obviously the marching knights could not be armed with Civil War-era rifles in the movie. The original Zouave units were North African regiments of the French Army, beginning earlier in the 1800s and serving through both World Wars.

A characteristic of *commedia dell'arte* is [pantomime](#), which is mostly used by the character [Arlecchino](#) (Harlequin).

Reviews:

"Get it?" "Got it!" "Good!"

[theowinthrop](#) 1 May 2006

This film was Danny Kaye's biggest success as a musical comedy. Set in Medieval England, it followed the career of would-be "Robin Hood" type, Hubert Hawkins, who is one of the peasants determined to overturn the tyrannical regime of King Roderick (Cecil Parker) and Lord Ravenhurst (Basil Rathbone). Hubert is a master (?) of disguise - witness his impersonation of "Fotheringay, the wine merchant" who has an annoying catarrh. He replaces a visiting court jester from Italy named Giacomo (John Carridine, regretfully in a cameo performance only). Using this role he invades the castle of King Roderick, not realizing that Giacomo is not only Italy's greatest jester, but it's leading hired assassin - and that Ravenhurst has sent for him to get rid of his competition to solidify his political power and to aim at marrying the Princess Gwendolyn (Angela Lansbury). Hubert's girlfriend Maid Jean (Glynis Johns) is on hand to try to assist, only to watch as Princess Gwendolyn finds the "jester" attractive - and when Hubert is hypnotized by Gwendolyn's sorceress maid Griselda (Mildred Natwick) he becomes - well a dashing swordsman and adventurer, like the real Giacomo...so long as he does not

snap his fingers! Kaye had some delightful dialog, particularly with Rathbone as straight man - such as the alliteration in the "Summary Line" between them, and in their mad duel scene, where a briefly arrogant Hubert calls Ravenhurst a "Ratcatcher". Of course the best bits are the description of the (apparently) mutually fatal confrontation of the Doge of Venice, the Duke, and the Dutchess, and the business of the pellet with the poison in the various goblet, flagons, and chalices (which eventually Kaye shares with an equally tongue tied Sir Griswold (Robert Middleton). Parker, a usurper who seems ruthless like Richard III but is far more easily befuddled (watch how Johns handles him when he makes a play for her), is quite amusing. The film never flags (a problem with some of Kaye's comedies at times), and deserves it's position as his best work.

Avid Csontos, on [October 17th, 2010](#)

A delightful must – as entertaining as it is timeless!

Each time I see this film, I'm taken with what an ensemble piece it is – not speaking only of the cast, but the writers and crew as well. It's one of those magical movies in which everyone clearly seems to be on the same page – and is having quite a delicious time being there.

The marvelously intricate farce script by directors Melvin Frank and Norman Panama (as the opening theme song tells us, "...plot we've got, quite a lot") – combined with the fiendishly clever lyrics by Sylvia Fine, mostly set to music by Sammy Cahn – makes for just about non-stop glee. This is a movie I tend to see at least once a year, and love it every time. It is simply a refreshing potion (if you will) of ingenious comedic set-ups – madcap mayhem at its finest!

And the laughs start from the get-go, with Kaye's opening number. I'm always tickled by how Fine's lyrics here comment on the opening credits. We also get Basil Rathbone's name tossed back in again and again, making it humorously clear who the villain will be.

With the sterling aid of Lansbury, Rathbone and Natwick, the entire cast is at the top of their game – but who wouldn't be with a script this good? (My favorite of Kaye's routines has to be when he is hypnotized by Natwick. That and the subsequent finger-snappings that send him reeling from courageous to cowardly never fail to slay me.) What makes the cast shine even brighter is the expert timing in every detail. A real treat and kudos to all! "Life could not better be!" indeed!