

Knock on Wood (1954) Frank & Panama

P Michell, 2017

A satirical spoof on cold war of 1950s.

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 Kaye became outdated as cinema moved quickly to realism in late 1950s. At his peak Kaye was a mega-star in three orbits: TV, theatre & cinema.

Kaye, like Hitchcock, never won an Oscar for his wonderful work at the time. Belated one decades later.

'Knock' is a great example of 'old style Hollywood Factory' cinema. When it was as good there was no equal. Mostly shot on Paramount back lot with UK cutaways inter-spliced. Soon Hollywood films would move away from the studio. It will be worth considering this a comparison for the last film of the year - Lavender Hill Mob.

Wonderful example of skilful co-operative film making. Hard to know whose contribution begins and ends. For example Michael Kidd's choreography almost certainly in ballet scene 'Polostvian Dances send-up' towards end.

Satirical of 'High Art' Russian Ballet scene. Hollywood has a long connection with poking fun at 'The Arts'. Marx Bros 'Night at the Opera' (1935) is one of the more famous examples.

Famous scenes - seat belt on plane, 'Don't say stomach', Zurich room / shower mix-ups, Monohan Ohan, elderly couple in car (repeated), red car demonstration, leg scratching sequence ... plus a whole lot of crazy banter. Films like this can never be made again ...

Dena Productions:

Equal share - Kaye, Fine, Frank & Panama.

Daughter was 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.

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.

Mai Zetterling:

Multi-faceted career in cinema.

Swedish. Trivia: Small time in Australia (1929-32) with family.

Acted with Ingmar Bergman in 1940s.

Played comedy films until the 1960s after which she began directing.

Quote:

I have been a child, a girl, a party doll, a mistress, a wife, a mother, a professional woman, a virgin and a grandmother. I have been a woman for more than fifty years and yet I have never been able to discover precisely what it is I am, how real I am. I ask myself - perhaps my femaleness is just a human disease.

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.

Michael Kidd:

Known for energetic dancing style. Famous for *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), dancing in *Kiss Me Kate* ()

Broadway from 1930s to 1960s – *Guys & Dolls* (1950), *Lil Abner* (1956) [with Frank & Panama].

Directed all dance numbers.

One of Broadway's and Hollywood's most distinguished, inventive and gifted choreographers, it was not uncommon to remember his expert dance sequences above all else.

"Here are these slobs living off in the woods. They have no schooling, they are uncouth, there's manure on the floor, the cows come in and out -- and they're gonna get up and dance? We'd be laughed out of the theater! [We ultimately managed to] find a way to have these backwoods men dance without looking ridiculous." -- M.K., on why he initially turned down *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954).

Note: at the same time (mid 1950s) Rogers & Hammerstein were making successful musicals with highly stylised (studio) dances and scenes. Agnes de Mille was the leading choreographer in this. Gene Kelly was making his musicals to around this time (*Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955) (with Michael Kidd)).

Victor Young:

Musical director.

Prolific composer (350 films!), arranger, conductor, child violinist. Unusually though Polish Jewish was born in Chicago. Sent to Poland to study music in Warsaw.

Nominated many times (around 23) for academy award for best scoring / original score. Won for *Around World in 80 Days* (1957).

Famous for Johnny Guitar Suite (1954), Shane, Autumn Leaves, Love Letters, etc. Died in his fifties. Great loss of talent.

Henry Bumstead:

Workhorse Art director. 74 films. Worked with Paramount from 1948 to 1960. Worked with Hitchcock on Man Who Knew too Much (1956)

Trivia:

British shoots used Jon Pertwee (Dr Who) as Kaye's double. 'Sir Pertwee' appears a year later in 'Court Jester' (1955).

Connection to Michael Redgrave's 'Dead of Night' which also stars 'Clarence' ventriloquist dummy.

In Ballet scene Kaye carries ballet dance off stage onto piano. One of his stage signature featured him sitting on stage, legs over orchestra pit.

Links:

Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danny_Kaye

<https://www.ancestry.com/boards/topics.obits/101323/mb.ashx>

Reviews:

One of the all-time funniest films.

[Anthony D'Amato](#), Chicago, Illinois

The sequence in this film where Danny Kaye lands on the stage of an balletic opera in progress has got to rank up there with the funniest single scenes in motion picture history. The spoof is as spot-on as the "Fantasia" spoof of opera in the "Dance of the Hours" sequence. It's hard to explain how the previous reviewer thought the new-car-with-gadgets scene was the funniest; actually, it's the most dated, and "Knock on Wood" would be better off without it. The story is a wicked satire on espionage agents, with Danny caught up unawares in the center of an international spy ring. There's also a love story reminiscent of "Walter Mitty", but this is the funnier film of the two. Danny Kaye is one of the most underrated actors of all time. His facial expressions--conveying what he thinks, which is often opposite to what he or the other characters are saying--is like a second voice carrying the humor line. It's so well done that it seems mundane to people who are not on the lookout for it. Only Sid Caesar, of all the comics in American history, including Chaplin and the other silent greats, used his facial expressions to the supreme comic effect that Danny Kaye achieved. I might even rank Caesar above Kay, but unfortunately Caesar did not get any good movie roles. (Mel Brooks wanted him for

"The Producers," and it would have become THE best comedy of all time if he had landed him, but some busybody associate producer hated Caesar and so he nixed the deal. How sad.) If I were pressed to choose among Danny Kaye's films, I guess I would choose "The Court Jester" above "Knock on Wood," in terms of all-round satisfaction. Yet the ballet spoof in "Knock on Wood" surpasses any single scene in "The Court Jester." If you never see it, you'll never know how funny a thing can be.

A more critical view of the film ...

Glenn Erickson

Performing powerhouse Danny Kaye was simply too talented to be called a mere Renaissance man; his fans are quick to list his accomplishments in every performing field. Kaye was a top comedian as well as an accomplished singer who made his name with novelty tunes featuring tongue-twister patter-scat lyrics delivered at a dizzying pace. Kaye excelled on radio, on stage, in movies, and on television.

As a film star Danny Kaye moved quickly from novelty status to top stardom in a series of lavish Goldwyn musicals, often co-starring with Virginia Mayo. In these light comedies Kaye often played a double role with contrasting personalities, or a milquetoast who finds his courage through love. In the late 1940s Danny Kaye's performing persona took on a more humanistic aspect, as he became a lifelong supporter of the United Nations and an "Ambassador" for its causes. Kaye's *Hans Christian Andersen* for Goldwyn shows the star at the height of this new appeal, as a warm-hearted exponent of international harmony. Kaye's movie characters didn't exactly develop a 'dark side', but some of his more sentimental moments express an acknowledgement of the precarious nature of happiness, an awareness of the hardships of life. When Kaye interacted with children in *Andersen* and in his later musical biography *The Five Pennies*, something harder showed through the sentimentality.

Knock on Wood sees Kaye revisiting his nervous and excitable comedy persona. Another split personality tale, it makes fun of psychiatry and Cold War espionage, standard satirical targets from the 1950s. The Technicolor production was made at Paramount just before Kaye's most enduring picture, the musical *White Christmas* with Bing Crosby.

Danny Kaye is Jerry Morgan, a successful stage ventriloquist with a peculiar problem: whenever he becomes engaged, Jerry voices his subconscious distrust of women through his stage dummy, Clarence. During a Paris engagement, Jerry cannot control "Clarence's" string of improvised insults directed at his latest fiancée Audrey (Virginia Huston). When she breaks off the engagement, the frustrated Jerry smashes the faces of his two Clarence puppets. Jerry's manager sets up an appointment with a psychiatrist in Zurich. On the flight Jerry has several embarrassing accidents with a female passenger, and then accidentally sleeps in her bed due to a hotel room mix-up. As it turns out, the woman is Dr. Ilse Nordstrom, Jerry's intended psychiatrist (Swedish actress Mai Zetterling). Nordstrom takes the case, despite Jerry's uncontrollable romantic overtures.

Meanwhile, the puppet repair artist Maurice Papinek (Abner Biberman) turns out to be a spy tasked with smuggling stolen plans out of the country, blueprints for a

secret atomic weapon called *Lafayette XV-27*. Papinek hides the blueprints in the wooden heads of Jerry's two dummies, and more than one team of competing enemy spies is assigned to steal them. Grim contact Gromeck (Leon Askin, later a Russian commissar in Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three*) is confused when Jerry thinks his name means "hello" or "thank you" in a foreign language. Traitorous English diplomat Godfrey Langstrom (Torin Thatcher) sends a pair of killers to snatch the plans. Blamed for their accidental deaths, Jerry is assumed to be a mad killer, and must rush to London to clear his name.

Knock on Wood's somewhat shapeless, scattershot screenplay earned the writing-producing-directing team of Norman Panama and Melvin Frank a highly suspicious Oscar nomination. At best the film an uneven attempt to weld Danny Kaye's performing strengths with some topical satire -- nothing serious, just good fun. Fans of Kaye will enjoy the film's comedy set pieces. Evading the police in London, Jerry Morgan impersonates a car salesman. The red sports car he demonstrates is a crazy Keystone Kops contraption with seats that pop up like carousel horses. Although Red Skelton mined more laughs with this kind of humor (in gags sometimes invented by Buster Keaton), the filmic comedian who best exploited goofy mechanical gizmos is probably the French genius Jacques Tati.

Another noted highlight occurs when Jerry tries to hide backstage during a ballet performance, and is pulled into the act. Expected to do pirouettes with the other male dancers, Jerry transforms an opera-like number into a comedy disaster -- and still wins the princess. The creative choreographer Michael Kidd staged all of the film's dances and musical scenes. As funny and clever as this number is, it has no real connection to the story. If the ballet scene or the funny car gag were dropped the narrative would not be impaired. Because many of its comedy highlights aren't really organic, the movie advances in fits and starts.

A more successful gag has Jerry hiding under a table where two murderous spies are meeting, doing ridiculous things to avoid detection. The film's spy subplot shows competing agents accidentally killing each other, etc., a comic motif perfected in the later James Coburn spy satire *The President's Analyst*. Other running gags involving the panicked Jerry fall painfully flat. At several points in the London chase scene Jerry dodges through the same car stopped in traffic. He makes polite apologies to the elderly passengers, who remain clueless and unflappable.

At times *Knock on Wood* makes Kaye's comedic personality seem inconsistent. Depending on the joke, Jerry is alternately klutzy or adroit, sophisticated or infantile. The well-cast supporting actors (Torin Thatcher, Leon Askin, Steven Geray) are given opportunities to pull funny faces, but not much in the way of memorable scenes. The charming, talented and beautiful Swedish actress Mai Zetterling bears the brunt of the film's least amusing comedy. Her Dr. Nordstrom meets Jerry on an airplane, only to be repeatedly bumped and knocked on the head. When Jerry spills hot chocolate all over the doctor, her lack of a reaction is typical of the film's undeveloped comedy sensibility. In Zurich Nordstrom prudently refuses Jerry's case because of his emotional attachment. Jerry stalks and harasses her for a few minutes, and she suddenly falls in love with him. After a few more unrewarding "featured co-star" parts like this one, Ms. Zetterling left for better acting opportunities in England. She eventually became a noted film director.

Danny Kaye's wife Sylvia Fine contributes several songs including the film's title tune. The psychiatric theme does motivate one musical number, in which Jerry dreams of his childhood and imagines his bickering parents performing on stage. The dream flashback provides Kaye the opportunity to play Jerry's father as well. The script's most curious component is its partial recreation of the Michael Redgrave episode from the famous British horror omnibus *Dead of Night*. Jerry's wooden alter ego Clarence parallels Redgrave's menacing, uncontrollable ventriloquist dummy Hugo. Jerry can't control what his dummy says either, and smashes it in a similar act of frustration. But once they are used as a hiding place for the plans for the atomic weapon, the two Clarence dummies no longer figure in the story. Jerry uses his skill as a ventriloquist only once, when he throws his voice to momentarily confuse Torin Thatcher and his murderous spies.

Knock on Wood is bright and cheerful but not one of Danny Kaye's most memorable comedies. Working with the Panama - Frank creative team a year later, Danny Kaye would score his funniest hit. *The Court Jester* is a smartly cast and plotted farce that makes much better use of the performer's many talents.