



DONALD O'CONNOR: THE MAGIC RETURNS

The lights go up on the opening scene of the Los Angeles production of Neil Simon's *I Ought to Be in Pictures*. Donald O'Connor enters stage right, the eyes, bright like copper pennies, sparkling as the waves of applause wash over him. The audience claps wildly and simultaneously gasps, "Oh my, he's gained weight!"

But the giddy glow is still there. When O'Connor lets his special incandescence flash out into the pitch-black theater, the other actors fade into the flats. A light step, a quick goofy upturn of the lip and that magical moment of recognition tingles the hair on the back of your neck. After the final curtain call, O'Connor steps across the footlights and asks us if we'd mind singing a few bars of "Singin' in the Rain" while he pads across the stage. Mind?! A whoop is let out and the crowd gleefully obliges with the words

it knows so well. Applause thunders through the theater. Donald O'Connor has made you forget. He might as well be 27 and dancing up walls.



DC about to climb a wall

The curse of being preserved forever young on a spool of celluloid haunts most actors, but probably Donald O'Connor more so. He has not starred in a feature film for nearly 20 years and the impulse to make comparisons is irresistible. Those copyrighted eyes have slipped behind some extra folds of skin. The face, once so elfin, is apple-cheeked now. Donald O'Connor is no longer a Universal juvenile or Gene Kelly's screen pal. At 57, he is thirty years older, a fact that takes some getting used to.

I Ought to Be in Pictures is light fare even by Neil Simon standards, but it gives O'Connor the chance to play a good-hearted curmudgeon with a dash of rascality about him. O'Connor is controlled and alert, but not antic. His uniquely kinetic style, which has used up a few million kilowatts in the last half century, is running trimmer and a bit more conservatively.

Of course, crashing through all that carpentry over the years has had an effect. O'Connor admits to being just a little crazy. Consider his schedule. This show was the end of a five week tour. After a day's rest, he flew to New York to begin rehearsals for the national tour of *Show Boat*. That will mean a short run in Hous-

ton, two or more months in California, a swing through the east and eventually to Broadway.

At the same time, O'Connor is writing his third play, considering more film roles after his success in *Ragtime*, putting the finishing touches on his symphony and thinking about composing a ballet.

Backstage O'Connor relaxes in his dressing room with a cup of coffee. The exhilaration of the show has faded, but it's obvious that the stardust still glitters.

"Oh sure," he smiles. "It sustains you. It's the reason you keep coming back in this business and keep doing it. If you like what you do, it's icing on the cake."

O'Connor has been doing what he likes, more or less, for 57 years. Born into a roughhouse, knockabout family vaudeville act, he probably learned to take a pratfall before he could walk. His brothers taught him to dance at age three when he joined the act full time. The O'Connor family (also known at times as the Crane family or the Montague family, depending on the classiness of the date) played throughout the country in some of the best houses and some of the worst. But for O'Connor it was all velvet.

"It's a wonderful life! I never missed a thing. It's a lot of crap if they tell you otherwise. You're with your family. You're pampered, you go out and perform and get applause for being ridiculous and antisocial. You take pratfalls, kick your father in the behind—you live out your fantasy as a child."

"There was a closeness to it. We had other people around us, helping us, taking an interest in us. It was healthy competition. If you stole the show, everybody would say, 'Hmmm...the little bastard. He's very clever, isn't he?' Now, if you're talking about motion pictures, that's different."

Life in Hollywood was difficult because of the ever present black cloud of school. In vaudeville the constant travelling made

it easy to evade truant officers. But the law made sure the studios' talent charges learned how to read and write, just in case.

"I resented it. All my time away from the camera was spent doing school work. When that was done, I'd have to go back to work! But I was still headed in a direction that was fun for me. I liked being in motion pictures."

The road to Hollywood was perhaps a natural one for a talented 12 year old vaudevillian who could sing and dance. O'Connor got his first break when he played for a charity.

"With me, it's been a question of luck. I call it 'the helper on my shoulder.' I never auditioned for anything I did. I was working with my brothers at a benefit for the Motion Picture Relief Fund in 1937. Somebody from Paramount saw me. They needed a kid to play opposite Bing Crosby and I got tapped."

O'Connor's luck held on for a few years and he played "everybody's son," as he later put it. Then biology took hold. In one year he grew a foot, went down an octave and suddenly found himself out of a job. Ups and downs are (sometimes literally) the existence of a vaudevillian. O'Connor recovered from the blow and went back on the road with his brothers, though the dates they played seldom called for the Montague family. It was at one unsavory theater that luck managed to find O'Connor again.

"We were working the Stratford theater in Chicago, in 1941. It was really a broken down theater then. The dregs of show business, of vaudeville. A Paramount scout saw me there and sent me a wire to come out and make a picture called *What's Cookin'?* with Peggy Ryan and the Jivin' Jacks and Jills. That started my 'second career' in films. I was there for 16 years. You can't say that was planned. You don't go out and get that. It was just sheer luck being at the right place at the right time."



DC and Gene Kelly jumping for joy in "Moses Supposes"

The studio kept O'Connor busy in a string of pictures with Ryan and other Universal stars. As his box office receipts grew, so did his latitude on the set. The front office couldn't figure out why he was popular, but as he noted,

"They had a lot of guts. I'd go in and do a scene and they'd yell 'cut' and I'd still be moving. They let the cameras roll, because I used to ad lib all the time. They'd use that in the film. I didn't go crazy, but what I did was fun and funny."

Audiences loved his combination of slapstick and hoofing as much as the studio executives were perplexed by it. The mystery deepened when O'Connor was called upon at one rehearsal to do a standard step. He couldn't do it.

"I never learned the basic steps," said O'Connor. This revelation takes a moment to sink in. The mantle of American popular dance which so solidly rests on the shoulders of Astaire, Kelly, and O'Connor has suddenly gone a little cockeyed.

"I don't know them. Can't do them to this day. With Peggy and the Jivin' Jacks and Jills, you had the greatest dancers in the world. They could pick up a routine in five minutes, a full chorus. All they had to do was call off the steps, like "shuffle ball change." There's a complete dictionary of steps. I never learned that. I learned from sight and sound, from what other dancers in vaudeville taught me."

"Universal sent me to Johnny Boyle, Sr. [the dance coach] to

learn the basics. Just the basic steps—hopping, slapping! he sent me back two weeks later saying I was unteachable. I could not learn the basic steps. The intricate stuff, the breaks, and so forth, no problem. But get me regimented...pain.”

Audiences didn’t seem to mind and certainly not the accountants who added up the take at the box office. O’Connor was, as he jokingly put it, “the Elvis of my day” and his services outside of Universal were always in demand. Universal’s “loan outs” of O’Connor helped his films at the home box office and boosted his studio’s prestige at the same time.



DC, Debbie Reynolds, Gene Kelly singing “Good Morning”

“Doing a musical at Fox or MGM helped them. I’ve always run scared—so have my agents—but to work for another studio on loan out for nothing? I said the hell with that! So I got paid. If Universal hadn’t been so fixed on a career boost for Universal, they would have put me on suspension.”

Luckily Gene Kelly’s future screen buddy managed to avoid this standard Hollywood thumbscrew. When it came time for Kelly to cast the part of Cosmo Brown in *Singin’ in the Rain* (a role which called for an actor who could sing, dance and make funny faces), O’Connor was chosen. There were no anxieties over basic steps, since the film concerned itself with two vaudevillians making their way in pre-talkie Hollywood. Both Kelly and O’Connor had spent their early years hoofing, so the problems of

dancing styles was eliminated—or so O'Connor thought.

“The first time we met, Kelly started talking about the numbers, the ideas he had, everything. It sounded great. ‘It would be a lot of fun and hard dancing...etc.’ Later I was going home and I suddenly thought, ‘God, which way does he turn?’ Because I only turn to the left, which means that your dance routines, your steps, are the opposite of everyone else’s. The next day we exchanged perfunctory hellos. Before I could say anything, he asked me ‘Which way do you turn?’ I told him to the left and he said, ‘Thank God! So do I.’”

With that problem out of the way, the relationship got off to a smooth start, in spite of what O'Connor called Kelly's “hard ass” reputation.

“I never had a problem with him. I had his funny bone. He'd try to be serious and look me in the face and fall down laughing. We had a good time. But he's a taskmaster and a perfectionist. I don't like to rehearse a lot and he does. And the only way to really do it good is by rehearsing.”

“We finished the ‘Moses Supposes’ number in something like half a day. After lunch, we moved over to another stage and started on ‘Fit as A Fiddle,’ which was unheard of at MGM. They'd take days to do stuff. Anyway, Kelly and I are dancing away, crazy, jumping and leaping. We were working with bows and Kelly's bow went underneath the violin and he stopped. The cameras were rolling. He said, ‘Let me see your bow,’ so I showed it to him. ‘That's why it went under! It's three inches shorter than mine. They didn't give me the right bow!’ He threw it down and stomped off to his dressing room. So...the lights went down and people started going their own ways. After about 15 minutes I wanted to see what was bugging him, so I went into his dressing room. He had his feet up on a table with a big grin on his face. He was as

tired as I was and he wouldn't tell me and I wouldn't tell him."

O'Connor's wacky spontaneity paid off in *Singin' in the Rain*. Though most of the dances had been plotted out to some extent by Kelly, O'Connor's knack for improvising on the set brought the two together as de facto collaborators. But for his solo spot, O'Connor was on his own. And for once he drew a blank.

"I couldn't think of a darn thing. Kelly said we might do another 'Moses Supposes,' only with 'To Follow in My Footsteps.' Just about that time Roger Edens came in with this tune, 'Make 'Em Laugh.' Gene had to look over some sets so he suggested I take the song and work with Carol Haney and Jeannie Coyne [Kelly's assistants] and see what I could come up with."

"So we went into a little room and I said play me the song. I started fooling around with the lyrics and doing pratfalls. Whatever they laughed at, I said write down. I showed part of it to Kelly to see if we were on the right track. He said, 'It's wonderful, but you've got to put in those crazy faces.' 'Okay,' I said, 'I'll run into a wall.'"

"If you remember in the movie, they cut in close to me when I open the door and hit the brick wall and do the faces. That's Gene's favorite part! The other bit, with the dummy on the couch, came to me when someone saw a dummy in the corner and said 'see what you can do with this.' So I started playing around with it. Right away it reminded me of an incident when a little guy on the subway tried to pick me up. The same thing happened with the hand, everything."

The end result was pure vaudeville and pure O'Connor, an antic pastiche of everything he knew plus a few things he made up on the spot. 'Make 'Em Laugh' is one of the greatest comic dance sequences in movie history. "It came," he said, "from love and laughter."

“Thank God for Gene Kelly. He’s a very gracious man; otherwise the number wouldn’t have been in the picture. It was such a show stopper. But you see, it’s his great talent. If it’s good for the picture, it’s good.”

With any creative dancer, a great deal occurs between conception and what happens when the idea is fleshed out on film. The gems of improvisation are cut and polished and supported on a sturdy jetty of craft. Without it, the spontaneity is unruly or out of sync; the magic never fully captured.

“The great numbers of Astaire—like Kelly’s—are all thought out. But in rehearsal you’ll say, ‘Wait a minute, what did you do there? That was good.’ What are you doing? Improvisation.”

“Take Kelly’s jumping up on a lamppost. He felt like jumping up on a lamppost and singing. It’s a beautiful moment—and it’s an ad lib.”

The atmosphere that allowed for this kind of extemporaneous creation soon evaporated with the arrival of television. The studios began to lose money. They couldn’t afford the lavish musicals or the staffs necessary to produce them. The studio system changed and with it, the movies.

“You don’t have actors today with the background of a Kelly or an Astaire. I was born into my trade. Kelly was a hooper and dance instructor. He loved ballet, movement, everything. He became a singer, dancer, comedian and actor. The more you could do, the cleverer you were, the more money you made.”

“The spark is missing today. Producers and directors have settled for what’s standard. They’re not interested in someone who is multi-faceted, a total performer. Actors have become specialized.”

It would seem that for all of its faults, the old studio system had its merits. The autocratic production line churned out a lot of suet, but it also trained many professionals skilled in the craft

of making movies. Sometimes experimentation was encouraged. The result was often art.

When the movies stopped growing, at least for O'Connor, he began to wonder about the new electronic competitor down the road. In the meantime, he had just started a series of pictures with Francis the Talking Mule. Three pictures were envisioned, but they were so successful for Universal that O'Connor ended up making six.

"They were wonderful films and the mule and I got along beautifully. After three I said, 'That's it. I'm getting typecast with the mule.' But Universal wanted me to keep on. After awhile I said there were other more important things to do. Luckily, I was doing other things on loan out, so they couldn't make 20 or 30 of those damn pictures, one right after the other."

Of course, getting a script like *Singin' in the Rain* on a loan out was rare. But it was frustrating to find challenges outside of Universal, either at MGM or on television. Worst still, it was galling to be acclaimed as the rising musical comedy star when musical comedy was dying a quick and painful death as television sucked away audiences from the theaters.

The opportunity to strike out in a different direction came in 1957 when O'Connor was cast as the lead in *The Buster Keaton Story*. It was an inspired choice. Both Keaton and O'Connor had grown up in roughhouse vaudeville acts; O'Connor was young and agile enough to play the part. He understood slapstick as well as anyone. As for Buster's deadpan expression, O'Connor simply used his "rehearsal face."

It could have been his greatest movie role. Instead it was a bitter disappointment. The occasion did not live up to its promise.

"The rapport between Buster and me was wonderful. [Keaton acted as advisor on the film.] We did the same damn act in vaude-

ville. So we knew what we wanted to do in the film.”

“It could have been a magnificent picture. But it was a complete untruth. A good picture, yes—someone looking at it couldn’t be dissatisfied. But it surely wasn’t Buster’s life. The first few pages of the script have Buster in the circus as a child. His father drops dead and they wheel him out of the tent on a baby buggy. I went to Buster and said, ‘Buster, I’m not sure about the facts. How old were you when you were in the circus and your father died?’ Buster said, ‘Wait a minute. I was never in the circus. I did a little in England and France, but I came from vaudeville.’ ‘Oh’ I said, ‘Well...how old were you when your father dropped dead?’ ‘I was 48.’

“Right from there! So you know the rest of the script had to be a total fabrication. The great things that Buster did could have been incorporated into the film if the producer and director had known what they were doing and handled the subject matter delicately. The one thing they understood was Buster’s drinking problem. They didn’t understand anything else, the subtleties, the beautiful things. The drinking was only part of his life. But they hooked onto it.”

Working with Buster made the filming bearable, but the experience led O’Connor to the realization that Hollywood didn’t have much left to offer him. The money was there, but not the material—or the inspiration on his part. O’Connor stayed on at Universal, making pictures and keeping an eye on television. When the Colgate company offered him a live, once-a-month variety series on NBC, he jumped at the chance. Here was another medium to conquer and this time, he not only sang and danced, but wrote and directed the show. Within two years O’Connor had won himself an Emmy and taken the critics by surprise. Then he quit. Why?

“I became a damn factory. They were coming too fast. I was competing with myself on the screen as well. The audiences were used to those big, wonderful routines on the screen that take time to put together. Then they’d see something less on television. Well, something’s got to suffer. Besides, I was falling down on my performances on television. In the movies I had maybe two weeks to come up with something. In TV, I had minutes.”

He also had to face the rapid shifts in programming. The live, vaudeville-like element of TV was soon abandoned in favor of filmed, controllable sitcoms. Music and the movies had also changed by the end of the ’50s. The Technicolor fantasies that had propelled O’Connor to stardom were considered old hat; realism began to seep into the cinema. Where did that leave Donald O’Connor?

“Not with much,” he said. “I did *Anything Goes* in the ’60s and quite a few other films. A couple of lousy things too. I didn’t want to do that anymore. I was settling, running out of guts. I was making so much money and I wanted to keep it up. But I thought, ‘What’s more important, the money or doing something you want to do? Something people can look at later and say, Goddamnit, that was good.’”

“I had too much pride in my work to continue. So I quit.”

Twenty years have gone by and O’Connor has made only sporadic appearances on television or in the movies. Mostly he has returned to performing live—his first love—in nightclubs and particularly on stage. To Donald O’Connor, changing is growing, no matter what the size of the paycheck. There’s always a new challenge for a total performer.

“I’ve always had something else to fall back on. My ego hasn’t been that big a factor. If you take something less than what you’ve been used to, that can be a hell of a drag. If you want to let it.

That's when you stop learning and take it for the money and argue with your wife and beat your kids up. It's better to be out of it at that point."

"I've had to take something lesser, but so what? It's been marvelous. At least I keep working and learning. Hopefully my style will come back in again."

Apparently it has. Luck, as always, reared its Irish head and smiled down on O'Connor. 25 years earlier, Jimmy Cagney had wanted O'Connor to do his screen biography. The suggestion has gone back and forth since then and as O'Connor said, "I'll be able to play his grandfather by the time we do it."

By chance O'Connor visited Cagney and they talked about doing his life as a play. Film director Milos Forman was there that same day, going over Cagney's role for the filming of *Ragtime*.

"Milos said to me, 'Look, why don't you be in *Ragtime*? You'll be in the picture with Jimmy and Pat O'Brien. You'll have a wonderful time and go to Europe. It'll be great.' I asked him what part he had for me. 'There's nothing in it,' he said. 'Do whatever you want. Write in your own part.' He sent me a script and I saw there was a matinee idol at the beginning and the choreographer later. We just combined the two and it made a tasty little cameo. For editing purposes, we had to have lines already written. But the rest of it was all ad lib."

O'Connor takes obvious pleasure in this. And he admittedly enjoys the renewed attention. The last few years have been crowded and happy, with *Ragtime* and stage appearances. Fantasy is back and with it, the musical. O'Connor's own revival has coincided with that of another long-time favorite: *Show Boat*. He has neatly stepped into the starring role of "Captain Bill" for this Broadway-bound national tour. It will be his first lead in a big Broadway show. O'Connor takes pleasure in this too. A performer's article

of faith has been affirmed.

“This is what I was born to do. That’s what I’m here for. A lot of people in this life are always searching for what they want to do, for a purpose. I was given one.”

He has given the gift back in spades. Luck has smiled on Donald O’Connor too many times to think it’s an accident. There’s a plan, somewhere.

Lucky us.