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An Evening with Cary Grant

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“Let’s go early,” I told my wife, “maybe an hour ahead so that we can get a front row seat to see Cary Grant in person.” How naive can one be? When we arrived, the line snaking into the auditorium was already a block long. I looked around. There were people of all ages — many had flown in from as far away as Japan and Australia just to spend an evening with Cary Grant.

Every plush red seat in the huge triple-balcony auditorium at DeAnza College in Cupertino, California was occupied by an excited fan. At regular intervals along the aisles that led to the stage a microphone was positioned. The stage was empty except for a microphone next to a tall stool and a small table on which there was a pitcher of ice water and a glass. Behind these items was a huge pull-down screen for an 8-minute montage of memorable film clips that would be used to present Mr. Grant.

Before he appeared, we discovered that Cary Grant was Archibald Alexander Leach born Sunday January 18, 1904 in Bristol, England. The setting was the Edwardian age of gas-lit streets, horse-drawn carriages, trams and four-masted schooners. His father, Elias James Leach

was a tailor's presser in Todd's Clothing Factory and his mother, Elsie Maria Kingdon Leach, came from a family of brewery laborers, laundresses and ships' carpenters.

He left school to perform in English music halls where he mastered the acrobatic art of making people laugh by slipping backward and taking a fall — a skill that he would use later in many movie comedies.

Yes, he was tall, dark and terribly handsome in those early films but when he came on stage, he was even better looking at eighty. Tall, lean and tanned with silver hair, black horn rimmed glasses, and impeccably dressed in a dark suit. I thought of the critic who marveled "at the Cary Grant clothes, all worsted, broadcloth and silks, all rich and underplayed, like a viola ensemble."

The format was simple. Anyone in the audience was invited to step up to a microphone in the aisle and ask a question. The first person was a woman with red hair and colorful scarf.

"Cary," she started and then paused. "May I call you Cary?"

"If it pleases you," the mellifluous voice floated into the audience, "by all means." When I heard him speak, I felt like Clint Eastwood who said to a friend after he met Cary Grant at a party, "Oh, my God. He actually talks like that!"

The woman retreated with, "Mr. Grant, you look so elegant in the way you dress. The young men of today look like they're on their way to a Halloween party. Why can't they dress like you?"

There was a dramatic pause before he spoke. "I appreciate your comment about my clothing. But you know, in any relationship between a man and a woman, at some point, the clothes must come off." Laughter filled the auditorium. He had this audience in his pocket.

Now someone from the audience was standing in each aisle behind every microphone waiting patiently to ask a question.

The next question: "Mr. Grant, how tall are you?" No detail about this man was uninteresting to his fans. He once complained to a reporter, "Why is it not sufficient to see and enjoy the performance of a great entertainer or athlete and then leave him or her alone?" The answer, of course, is that the fan and the celebrity have a special and peculiar one-way friendship. The celebrity is an intimate friend to the fan who, unfortunately, is a stranger to

the celebrity.

Straightaway without missing a beat, Cary Grant responded to the “How tall are you?” question with, “Six feet and a half inch tall.”

The moderator pointed to a person in the balcony. “Mr. Grant, what is it like being Cary Grant?”

As he spoke, I could hear the stand-up comics imitating him with, “Judy! Judy! Judy!” — a line that never appeared in any of his movies. What he actually said was, “Susan! Susan! Susan!”

His answer: “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant. Let me expand a bit. I sense that you may feel that I am free of problems. Let me assure you that I have the same anxieties and insecurities as anyone in this auditorium — maybe more.”

A follow-up question from a balding man with rimless glasses: “Why is someone as famous and wealthy as Cary Grant traveling to different places speaking to audiences?”

“To build my self-assurance.”

A handsome middle aged woman with perfectly quaffed grey hair was speaking. “Mr. Grant, do you remember a movie you made called, North by Northwest?”

“Yes. Yes I do.”

“Mr Grant, you threw yourself on the ground as the crop duster swooped down on you.”

“Yes. I remember.”

“Mr. Grant, in the next scene, the soil spots on your suit were in a different location.”

“I beg to differ with you. The studio provided a dozen identical suits to make that movie, but we had a special person on the set to pay close attention to those details.”

“No, Mr. Grant,” the woman insisted. “The soil spots shifted from one scene to the next.”

“Well,” Cary cleared his throat, “how are you so sure?”

“Because,” she replied, “I have seen the movie eighteen times.”

Cary bowed his head in a gesture of respect to the woman and said, “You know, you are probably right. I have a print at home. After I leave here, I’m going home and look at it again.”

A high school student with auburn hair in a pony tail and wearing a letter sweater

pleaded: “Mr Grant, please come back and make another movie. Please...” The audience supported her request with enthusiastic applause. This is remarkable for a man who was almost excluded from film work when a talent scout viewing Grant’s first screen test jotted down this comment: “bowlegged and his neck is too thick.” It was almost as devastating as the reaction to Fred Astaire’s first screen test: “Can’t act. Slightly bald. Can dance a little.”

“I am honored that you want me to make another movie,” Cary said. But you know, watching movies is fun, but making them is hard work, especially for the lead actors.

“Let me give you an illustration. Perhaps you remember the movie Notorious. In it there is a close-up of me in a love scene with Ingrid Bergman. When you saw it, you thought I was whispering tenderly to one of the most beautiful women in the world. But actually I was delivering the lines to a fat little man sitting in a canvas folding chair by the name of Alfred Hitchcock. Can you imagine how difficult that was?”

Hitchcock, the Leonardo Da Vinci of the suspense film noir, thought of Cary Grant as an actor’s actor — considerate, pleasant to work with and able to make creative innovations that improved the appeal of any movie. Hitch once commented to an interviewer, “...Look at me. Do you think I would have chosen to look like this. I would have preferred to have played a leading man in life. I would have been Cary Grant.”

Grant continued, “...and it is expensive making a movie — more expensive than making any other product. Every mistake, especially by a lead player, may cost a hundred thousand dollars. For example, in the movie I just mentioned, Hitch came to me and said, ‘Cary, in the next scene I would like you to take a sip from the glass of water on the table next to you before you speak your lines.’

“I could hear a gasp from the crew that surrounded the set. The sound man came over to me and implored, ‘Cary, please don’t make a slurping sound because it will be magnified on the sound track and ruin the scene. Also, be careful to set the glass gently on the table without a sound.’ The lighting technician told me, ‘Cary, please hold your arm at this angle when you pick up the glass so that we don’t get a shadow.’

“Keeping all those directions in mind, my task was to deliver a speech that was natural and believable to you. Ah..., indeed it is hard work which I have done for many, many years. I don’t want the responsibility any more. But I do thank you for your request.”

“Mr Grant,” a person in her early thirties in a professional looking pin-striped suit was speaking. “What is your five year plan?” This is a young person speaking to a man approaching eighty.

“My five year plan is to continue breathing in and out.”

The moderator asked the last question. “Cary, is there a question that was not asked that you would like to answer?”

“Well, yes. No one asked me about the production I am most proud of. And that would be the birth of my daughter.” The applause from the audience, who were now on their feet, was deafening. The man who, like the rest of us, would like to be Cary Grant, was only with us for a few hours, but if he was willing, I for one would have stayed the entire night to listen.

A few years later, headlines flashed around the world reported the passing of Cary Grant. About death, Cary said, “...I don’t dwell on it...but I don’t want to attract it too soon.”

Note. Some quotes in this article are from “Cary Grant, A Class Apart” by Graham McCann, Columbia University Press, New York.

You comments on this article are welcomed by the writer, who can be contacted at:

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