

Kaye as in “king” – not always as in “klown”

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BY DEE GIBNEY

“I don’t do this kind of thing very often,” Danny Kaye reveals as we sit down to a Chinese New Year day interview.

“But then I always say that when I meet a girl for the first time,” he says batting his eyelashes in mock bashfulness.

The tone is set for the rest of the morning, as people troop in and out of his multi-room hotel suite and the phone rings incessantly.

The phone rings yet again, for what must now be the 20th time and Kaye, ever the clown, feigns a startled jump. “Ooh there’s the phone. It must be somebody.”

It is. He trudges off to take the call while someone else rushes to get the doorbell. Our wild-haired teenage photographer enters and Kaye does a triple take. Assured that the vision is real, Kaye takes a “hard line” against having his photograph taken.

“I don’t know if I want a horrible kid like you taking my picture. Does your father know about this?”

The sparring is off to a chaotic start and eventually Kaye is convinced of the merits of a shot taken by the “horrible kid” and orders him to get out his “kid toys” admonishing him against selling any copies.

He jumps, again in mock terror, at the click of the film falling into place in the camera, and at the snap of the lens as it is fitted. He cannot resist playing to his entourage. As the charade eventually relents, along with the laughter, he decides to show off his odd looking sandals made from an imprint of his own foot.

“Here feel the inside,” he insists proffering what appears to be a size 14 clodhopper. “Hey get this picture,” he commands the “horrible kid”.

“You want me to put my hand inside your *sboel*!” I exclaim, at this point having little choice but to play along with the game.

“You’re going to put your hand in my *what?!?*” Kaye’s feigned shock ups the ante. “Young woman, do you know what shoe means in Arabic?”

The shoe episode finally dispensed with, he concludes that photographers have to be the most “insecure people in the world.

“Because if you let them they would take pictures for six, seven, nine hours – and still want just ‘one more.’ And only one – only one mind you – is going to be printed somewhere. (*Ed. note: As it turns out the newspaper ran a sequence of many of Kaye’s every-changing expressions taken throughout the interview*).

Later, accompanying him to the Star Ferry on his way to a lunch meeting, the “horrible kid” tagging along, we are hailed by an Italian woman who sees her idol approaching from a distance. Within half a block her excitement is palpable.

“You are so beeyootiful, so beeyootiful, my number one,” she cries with her movie camera thrust in his face.

“Hey what kind of camera do you have there,” he teases.

“Oohh you want it? You want it?” she coos.

For the remainder of the walk to the Star Ferry we run a gauntlet of curious stares.

“Are you on vacation or location?” a local actress says with a smile as she passes.

“Location. I’m trying to locate the horrible kid a job.”

A woman on the ferry almost falls off her seat craning to get a better look and overhear the conversation.

Does he ever get tired of all this fuss? The obligatory lunches, dinners and constant, sometimes cloying attention? Surely it must impede his freedom of movement at times.

“Freedom comes from within, but yes there are times when I would just rather be quietly by myself,” he admits.

He becomes quiet and serious. There have been too many people around during the interview. He doesn’t like to be on show, to have “voyeurs” when he talks about things that matter. Can we talk later in the afternoon or tomorrow?

A time is set and the next day over the course of the morning, another side of Danny Kaye emerges. The Danny Kaye who devotes himself to children, whose horizons stretch far beyond comedic acting.

Danny Kaye – the name is almost synonymous with UNICEF – travels the world on behalf of the organization to wherever he is needed, where famine or disease have struck. Or you might find him attending high powered meetings in Geneva at the United Nations headquarters, putting on benefits for underprivileged children or conducting a symphony orchestra for the Musician’s Pension Fund. His work as celebrity ambassador for UNICEF is a lifelong mission.

“Someone once asked me at a press conference, ‘How much good have you done?’ How does one know. For every life you save, for every disease you overcome, there is another child being born into exactly the same conditions.

“Life is a precious and lovely force, but it is held in such small importance sometimes. We all have to go sometime, but ‘why so soon?’ I ask. If you can just prevent that time from coming too soon for someone, well it’s something.”

Does he consider himself a political person?

“Well I don’t go around waving any particular banner. I admire the self reliance in China no matter what the political ideology,” he says of the country, still new to international diplomacy.

He tells a story that best illustrates the answer to the question. Arriving in India during the Bangladesh genocide, he had barely touched down before he was asked by the press what he thought of the situation.

“How long have you been living here,” he asked the first journalist. “Forty-six years” was the reply.

“And do you know a lot about Indian politics?”

“Yes I do.”

“And are you,” he asked the next journalist. “Are you well versed in Indian politics?”

“Very much so – but I don’t agree with him,” the journalist emphasized, pointing to his colleague.

“And you expect me,” Kaye said, “me who arrived only 40 minutes ago to comment on a situation which you haven’t been able to agree on in 40 years?”

Someone as widely travelled as this philanthropic comedian can sometimes be expected to be a cross-cultural oracle, but Kaye harbours no such pretensions.

“Mystical India. Inscrutable China. We’re not so basically different. The more I travel, the more I find that there are differences in the way we do things, but not in the things we do. Whether the family is getting together for Christmas or Chinese New Year, it really isn’t that different. Whether the kids are eagerly waiting for Santa or packets of lucky money, it comes down to the same fundamentals.

“No matter who you are, no matter what you do, if you use the gifts you have; if you see, if you hear, if you feel, if you taste everything to the fullest, you will have lived. And learned. And you will be a better person for it.”

Next up for Kaye is a meeting with Ingmar Bergman about a new film in which the Swedish director would like Kaye to star.

“One goes through phases. But with me it’s not planned. I can’t say from one year to the next that I will be more or less active in one department or another. I take things as they come.”

At the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, Kaye sat among top Israeli political and military figures who were debating far into the night following the surprise Egyptian attack,

When the time came for him to speak, he explained what he saw happen in his own way.

“Ladies and Gentleman,” he began. “In my profession you hear how good you are every day of your life. I’ve been hearing it for the past 45 years. And after a while, because you’re human, you begin to believe some of it.

“But also in my profession there are certain checks and balances called audiences. Audiences will not tell you how well you are performing. Only you can tell yourself that. But they will let you know if they like what you are doing nor not.

“My friends, you have heard for the last 25 years how good you are – and you have begun to believe it. You have let yourselves grow fat . . .”

The analogy was obvious and the point taken.

The man who brought joy and laughter – and health and a chance at life – to countless children, the funny man who warmed hearts the world over, regardless of age or culture, has also made leaders of a nation listen with grave attention.

His most rewarding moments, he says, are working with children in need.

“If we can show these children, that many people of many faiths, nationalities, creeds and colors have banded together to make their lives a little more bearable, if the basic seeds have been planted and if people are communicating – not simply talking – but *communicating* – then we may just have a chance to live in the kind of world without the plagues and wars that we know today.”

Danny Kaye is one such planter of seeds.