

Entertainment Outlook

Actor still asks 'who loves ya, baby?'

STAR SPEAK



FRANK SANELLO

With his trademark lollipop and catch phrase "Who loves ya, baby?" Telly Savalas became an international phenomenon as a tough New York cop when the TV series "Kojak" debuted in 1973. The CBS show ran for five years and earned the actor an Emmy award.

This season, Savalas, 64, returned as the bald policeman in new episodes of "The ABC Saturday Mystery Movie." In the TV series, he alternates with Peter Falk's "Columbo," another 1970s revival; Jaclyn Smith's "Christine Cromwell"; and Burt Reynolds' "B.L. Stryker"

Born in Garden City, N.Y., Savalas grew up in a wealthy Greek-American family. He dropped out of high school to enlist in the Army during World War II. He later graduated from Columbia University with a degree in psychology.

After a stint as a press officer for the U.S. State Department, Savalas became a producer for ABC News (1955-58).

When a friend who was also an agent couldn't find an actor with a foreign accent to play a role on a TV show, Savalas, as a lark, faked an accent and auditioned himself. He got the job.

After only three more TV productions, Savalas made his feature film debut in "Birdman of Alcatraz" in 1962. It earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor.

He played a series of supporting bad-guy roles (including a memorable part in "The Dirty Dozen") on the big screen, until "Kojak" made him the country's most unlikely leading man.

Lately, Savalas has taken time off from his TV series to star in a feature film being shot in Australia. Based on a true story, the film deals with an aborigine who became a boxing champ. Savalas plays a fight promoter.

Q. Which has been more fun: the old "Kojak" or the new one?

A. The old one. Only because I was surrounded by guys I considered my "playground" — my brother George Savalas and Kevin Dobson. But as I get settled on the new show, I suspect I'll have a new "playground" eventually.

Q. The old series was a major hit with the critics and the viewing public. Why do you think the new incarnation of "Kojak" is in the ratings basement?

A. There are four reasons: "The Golden Girls." It's an enormously popular show, and we have the misfortune of being opposite it on Saturday nights.

I suppose it could be worse. We could be opposite "Cosby."

Also, the old ("Kojak") series is in a lot of markets and runs in syndication seven nights a week. So, in effect, we're also competing against ourselves.

'I never got nervous as an actor because I remembered how confident my father was.'

— Telly Savalas



Telly Savalas

Q. It's hard to picture it, but you once did a nightclub act in Vegas. What did your act consist of?

A. You name it — singing, dancing, goofing off, ad-libbing. I did an hour and a half on stage. I loved it, but it's too much to do if you're also doing movies and a series.

Q. You must have had an affluent upbringing since you attended private boarding schools.

A. My father had a successful restaurant-supply business. We were

very wealthy, then he lost everything in the Depression. We were dragged out of prep school — five kids — and ended up selling cakes from the back of a truck.

Q. That sounds like something out of Dickens. It must have been traumatic.

A. Are you kidding? I loved it. I got to eat as many cakes as I wanted. Seriously, it wasn't traumatic because my dad was there with me.

Q. Did majoring in psychology help you later in the cutthroat world of show business?

A. Majoring in psychology was a total waste of time, but we won't get into that.

Q. How often do you shave your head?

A. Every time I shave my face.

Q. Tell me the famous story about your mother's reaction when you told her you were going to star in "The Greatest Story Ever Told."

A. She said I would make a wonderful Jesus. I told her I wasn't playing Jesus; I was playing Pontius Pilate. My mother thought I was handsome and should be playing good guys.

At the premiere of "The Dirty Dozen" — I played a rapist-murderer in that one — she yelled at the director for casting me in such a vicious role.

My mother was fearless. She was one of the first, what do you call 'em? Women's libbers!

Q. Is it true that your mother won the Miss Greece title?

A. Absolutely. She won in 1939 at the World's Fair in New York.

My father was the original razzle-

dazzle man. He was the greatest father in the world. In tragedy or good times, he was the greatest pop going. I can't sing or dance, but because of my father, I gave it a shot. That's what he taught me. I never got nervous as an actor because I always remembered how confident he was.

Q. Reruns of "Kojak" are seen all over the globe. Have you been recognized as Kojak in unlikely places?

A. I've been to the remotest parts of Africa, and they knew who I was. I went to Leningrad with the cast of "The Love Boat," and I got the red-carpet treatment — literally. "The Love Boat" actors had to take the bus. The Russians supplied me with a private car. When I walked into my hotel in Moscow, 1,000 people started ap-

plauding. I turned around. I thought Brezhnev must have been behind me, but they were applauding me.

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