

# Buddy Hackett: Back In “Action”



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By Joe Rhodes

The pictures are everywhere, framed on walls, mounted in albums, some of them arranged on rolodex snapshot displays, others loose and scattered all over Buddy Hackett's house, the place in Beverly Hills where he and Sherry, his wife of 44 years, have lived for almost three decades. ("Originally we lived three houses away," he says, a glass of tequila in his hand, "but we sold that one, cause I wanted to get out of that neighborhood.") Some of the photos are of celebrity friends -- Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, Marilyn Monroe and Lucille Ball, Merv Griffin and Shecky Greene. Some of them are family shots, nieces and grandkids playing on beaches, anniversaries and weddings, children and pets. Small moments, some of them 70 years old, kept within easy reach.

"That one's my mother and father and that one's my wife --she was beautiful then," he is saying, moving slowly down the corridor that leads to the master bedroom, every bit of wall space covered with a photo, a painting, an award or a framed review. "And this is a hooker I knew somewhere. I don't remember if I did it with her or not."

Hackett, now 75, has always been like this, a curious mixture of cuddly and profane, a teddy bear with a dirty mind. Which is why it makes perfect sense that his first significant return to the public eye since he stopped doing his nightclub act three years ago is on "Action",

Fox's scathing, controversial but somehow lovable parody of the dark, vicious and sexually-twisted world of Hollywood power brokers, most notably ruthless producer Peter Dragon, (played by Jay Mohr) a barracuda with just enough self-doubt to make him interesting, if not exactly sympathetic.

It was Mohr who lobbied for Hackett to play the part of Lonnie, Dragon's chauffeur, bodyguard and favorite uncle, the one person he knows will always tell him the truth or, if necessary, punch someone in the face. Lonnie, like Hackett, is a street-smart old pro, unafraid to threaten someone twice his size or to say things like, "I take Viagra just so I won't pee on my shoes," a line, by the way, that is straight from Hackett's act.

"It just made sense to me," says Mohr, who worked as a stand-up before his acting career took off after he played Tom Cruise's nemesis in "Jerry Maguire." "To me, he's a legend. In a time where other guys were just buying jokes, he was telling stories about things that really happened to him. He was off color (in the early 60's) when people weren't really doing that. I mean, he wasn't up there saying, 'Take my wife, please,' he just went up there and told the truth. He was a torch bearer."

("Joey Bishop," Hackett would say later, waiting between takes on the "Action" set, "once said to me, 'You got it easy. You just talk until you come to a punch line.'")

Mohr and Hackett met two years ago when both were auditioning to do the voice of "Paulie", the title character of America's most successful wise-ass talking parrot movie. Mohr got the main part (by, oddly enough, doing the voice as a Buddy Hackett impression) and Hackett took a smaller role as a pawn shop owner. They've been friends ever since.

"Buddy sort of mentors Jay," says "Action" creator and executive producer Chris Thompson, "which is really the blind leading the blind, cause they're both nutty as fruitcakes. But Jay wanted him to read for the part and I certainly was interested, because I grew up in a time when all those nightclub guys -- Buddy, Shecky, Jackie Mason -- were big and Buddy was the funniest of them all.

"So he came in to read and we were in there for two hours and never opened the script. It was just two hours of shtick and stories about gangsters and hoodlums and movie stars. Which is what he does every day on the set. It's like he still doing his act, just for us. And he hasn't lost a step."

This is not exactly true. He has, after all, lived 75 years, many of them involving late nights, whiskey and gin. Hackett only works on "Action" two days a week and he says that, except for the occasional talk show or special appearance (like the MTV video awards last month) he'll never perform in front of a live audience again. There are days -- although not many -- when his energy simply runs out and the stories slow to a crawl.

"I'm not here for the money," he says, "I'm here because I need to have somewhere to go."

He's been performing since he was 15 years old, putting together a variety show for a small hotel in the Catskills, where he spent most of his adolescent summers. Admission was 50 cents (35 cents for kids) and by the time he and the band split the money, everyone made \$6 apiece.

He was born in Brooklyn, a short, round kid named Leonard Hacker with a smart mouth and every intention of going into his family's trade -- upholstering furniture. But when he'd tell this friends, they'd just laugh. "You're gonna be a comedian," they would say. "The whole neighborhood knows that."

After serving in the Army during World War II (where his primary combat assignment was

kitchen patrol) Hackett came back to New York, changed his name, and started doing clubs like the Pink Palace in Brighton Beach. His first out-of-town gig was in Bridgeport, Conn., when he was 20 years old. "I went up on the train and it turned out to be a group of Shriners. I'd never worked a place with all men before, especially older men in funny hats. And they didn't laugh. I thought I was finished, that you only get one chance. I didn't know how the business worked. I still don't. So I told my agent that it didn't go so good and he said to me, "Don't worry. It's Bridgeport. Who's gonna know?"

He performed on Broadway, had his own sitcom "Stanley" in 1956, and had leading roles in films ranging from the 1958 drama "God's Little Acre" to "The Music Man," and "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World" in 1963 and, let us not forget, "The Love Bug" in 1969. But for most of the 60's and 70's, Hackett's reputation was built on his notoriously risqué nightclub act which consistently packed the big rooms in Vegas and Atlantic City, and his often unpredictable appearances on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson, where he'd frequently appear with a cocktail in his hand, talking about his love for golf, guns and alcohol, not necessarily in that order.

"People never knew what I was going to say, and neither did I" he says, in the midst of offering a

guest some tequila with the instruction "You're not supposed to sip it. Whack it down!"

He stopped performing in 1996 when, for the first time in his life, he was struck with stage fright, a sudden dizziness, the sense that he couldn't breathe. He now believes it was the result of gum surgery he'd had the night before, combined with exhaustion and, maybe, the little bit of gin he'd swallowed just before going on. Still, that was it.

"Look, I've done everything," he says. "I've been everywhere. I've played the White House four times. And it's all been wonderful. But, to me I get just as much enjoyment from the memory as I would having to press the suit and go do it again."

So he's happy now to take small parts, voice-over work, to hang out on the set and hold court. And he's happy to stay at his home, surrounded by art (there is a Renoir in his bedroom, a Picasso in the den, a Cezanne in the bathroom and a Sinatra --yeah, that one -- by the living room fireplace.) And, of course there are the photos, the thousands of photos, so many of them of famous friends, so many of them gone.

"There's Danny Thomas. He's dead. Anthony Newley. He's dead. George Burns. He's dead. And Harvey Korman. He acts like he's

dead. Sometimes I think I'm the only one left."

He sits back, the shot glass at the ready, and spends the rest of the afternoon spinning tales -- about how he used to be part-time cop in Fort Lee, New Jersey (Badge No. 347) in the early 60's, a celebrity millionaire who spent his weekends pulling over speeders and drunks, who were often confused by the familiar voice asking to see their driver's license. He talks about drinking with Sinatra, playing golf with Bob Hope, calling out, "Morning, Al," to Elvis Presley whenever they'd pass on the Twentieth Century Fox back lot. The King, perplexed would later ask a mutual friend, "Doesn't Buddy Hackett know my name?"

He talks about the Catskills, he talks about Vegas, he talks about it all, one story sliding into another. His memory never fails him. And if, for some reason it does, it doesn't matter. Because the pictures are everywhere.

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