

RARE MOMENTS WITH THE "CLOWN PRINCE"

by Fred Hobbs

Copycats are so prevalent in show business these days. The format for the long running TV show, Survivor was developed in 1992 and today the channels are crammed with dozens of other so-called "reality" shows. Movie plots repeat the same themes over and over. Comedians steal liberally from the routines of other performers. How refreshing when an "original" act comes along, especially if the performer is also exceptionally talented.

When asked to write on the subject "an interview with a special person," one name immediately surfaced: Victor Borge. It just happens that, in my TV broadcasting days, I was privileged to interview this extraordinary musician and humorist during one of his concert appearances in Denver.

Borge learned to play the piano in his native city of Copenhagen at the age of two. As a young man, he won a scholarship with the Royal Danish Orchestra. When the Nazis occupied Denmark in World War II, Borge began to include some humor in his performances, some of it directed at the oppressive occupiers. The public telling of jokes about the Nazis plus the fact that he was born into a Jewish family, made life dangerous.

In 1940, Borge arrived in the United States and though he knew only a few words of English, polished his act combining classical music with his original brand of comedy to win key spots on network radio. Both Bing Crosby and singer/band leader Rudy Vallee featured Borge on their popular shows, billing him as "The Clown Prince of Denmark."

His concerts included routines, such as "inflationary language" in which the word "wonderful" became "twoderful" and "fortunate" became "fivetunate."

Playing Chopin's classic "Minute Waltz," Borge would point out its value as an egg timer.

During an engagement in Denver, the local news media were invited to interview him at the Brown Palace Hotel where he was staying. Most of the questions were of the "say something funny, Mr. Borge" variety. My cameraman and I agreed that this approach was not only banal, but somewhat insulting to a performer of the stature of Victor Borge. As the session wound down we approached the public relations representative traveling with Borge and asked if we could do something different. The hotel had an adjacent meeting room containing a grand piano. Would Mr. Borge consent to a "one on one" more serious interview while seated at the piano? The p.r. guy said he'd ask. Borge said "fine."

He sat at the piano and softly played classic themes in the background while he gave some of the details of his anti-Nazi "behind the scenes" role on behalf of the legitimate Danish government and spoke quietly and movingly of his family's difficulties during that period and how proud he was to be accepted so warmly in the U.S.

Most of the TV coverage on the other channels featured about 45 seconds. We managed to persuade our producer to give us three and one half minutes, considered a "life time" by general local TV news standards.

Rare moments with a great artist.