

Gene opened Gilda's Club in New York to offer support for cancer patients and their families



Gene Wilder and Gilda Radner were a match made in heaven. But this union of two of comedy's biggest names would be horribly short-lived, as Steve O'Brien explains...

A love gone too soon

When Gene Wilder set eyes on the woman who would become his third wife, he was – by his own admission – looking pretty dapper. 'The day Gilda and I met,' the actor reflected in his 2005 memoir, *Kiss Me Like a Stranger*, 'I was in my make-up and dressed in a tuxedo when I walked up to her to say hello.'

It was Sidney Poitier he had to thank for initiating this meeting. As director of the big-screen comedy *Hanky Panky* (1982), it was the actor-turned-filmmaker who had hired this effervescent veteran of TV's *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) as Gene's co-star.

There's a touching video of Wilder being interviewed by talk show host Bobbie Wygant, around the time of *Hanky Panky*'s release in June 1982, and the look of pure joy on his face when Wygant mentions Radner is priceless. 'Isn't she wonderful?' the interviewer says, as Wilder beams from ear to ear. 'Why are you smiling?' Wygant asks. 'If you wanna know what I think of her,' Wilder replies, coyly, 'it'd be more than wonderful.'

Though it's a heartwarming clip, it's also heartbreaking, knowing that, within just seven years, Radner would be gone.

DEADLY DIAGNOSIS

To the outside world, this was a union forged in comedy heaven. Unlike the actor's first two wives, Gilda, who, at 35, was 13 years Wilder's junior, was a fellow performer and almost as famous

as her latest squeeze. As one of the original *Saturday Night Live* players, she'd won an Emmy and had appeared in a successful and critically acclaimed one-woman show on Broadway, titled *Gilda Radner: Live from New York*.

While her career was going from strength to strength, things weren't so blissful at home. Her marriage to SNL's musical director GE Smith was on the rocks at the same time as she was battling an eating disorder. But, according to the actress, it was 'love at first sight' that day in August 1981 when Gene walked up to her in the 007-like tux.

In her autobiography, *It's Always Something* (a catchphrase of her SNL character Roseanne Roseannadanna), Gilda wrote movingly of those first impressions of her 48-year-old co-star. 'My heart fluttered – I was hooked,' she remembered. 'It felt like my life went from black and white to Technicolor.'

The two were married on 18 September 1984, in the south of France. The next year, while the couple were filming the movie *Haunted Honeymoon* in London, Gilda suffered a miscarriage. But losing a baby wasn't the only health concern in the actress's life – she had long struggled with her weight and eating disorders.

So when she experienced chronic fatigue one Sunday in 1986, both assumed it was to do with her bulimia nervosa. But while the exhaustion continued, other symptoms emerged – stomach and bowel problems as well as leg pain. After months of misdiagnoses, Gilda was diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer. She endured months of chemotherapy and was told the treatment was a success – the cancer had gone into remission.

HEARTBREAK AND LOSS

With her strength returning, she wrote her autobiography, detailing her struggles with

bulimia and cancer, and was well enough to film a guest spot on the sitcom, *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, in 1988. But in December that year the cancer had returned. She died on 20 May 1989, aged just 42, with Wilder by her side.

'When I got there, a night nurse, whom I still want to thank, had washed Gilda and taken out all the tubes,' the actor told *People* magazine shortly after his wife's death. 'She put a pretty, yellow barrette in her hair. She looked like an angel. So peaceful. She was still alive and, as she lay there, I kissed her. But then her breathing became irregular, and there were long gaps and little gasps. Two hours after I arrived, Gilda was gone.'

Though Wilder would go on to marry Karen Boyer in 1991, his relationship with Gilda would continue to influence his life. In 1995, he co-founded the cancer support network *Gilda's Club* and, three years later, collaborated on the book *Gilda's Disease* with oncologist Steven Piver. He became a passionate advocate for cancer research, even testifying before Congress, where he recounted Radner's decline.

Wilder himself was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma in 1999, though it was successfully treated. He lived with Alzheimer's in the last years of his life, dying on 29 August 2016, aged 83.

Gene Wilder and Gilda Radner were, for a tragically short time, Hollywood's golden couple, two supremely talented and beloved comedians at the peak of their creative powers.

In 2005 Wilder explained to CNN how he was honouring his late partner by not dwelling on the past. 'If you asked Gilda, she'd say, don't be a jerk,' he said. 'You know, go out, have fun. Would I want to erase the memories I have, the good memories? No, of course not. But I wouldn't want to mourn for the rest of my life.'

DID YOU KNOW?

Gene and Gilda made three films together – *Hanky Panky* (1982), *The Woman in Red* (1984) and *Haunted Honeymoon* (1986). In *Saturday Night* (2024), about the launch of *Saturday Night Live*, Radner is portrayed by English actress Ella Hunt.