

The Fuller Brush Man

by Emily Soares | June 19, 2009



Red Skelton's early life is the stuff of fiction. His father, who died before he was born, was a clown. At the age of seven, Richard (Red) was singing on the street for pennies and ran off to join a medicine show when he was ten. The rest of his childhood and youth were spent on showboats, in vaudeville, burlesque and circuses, learning how to play an audience and developing his own material. In the early 30's, a routine in which he imitates the way different people dunk donuts got him a booking at the Paramount Theater in New York, which, in turn, brought him to a successful career in radio.

Skelton made his way to MGM in 1940, and the studio immediately set him to work as comic relief in films such as *The People vs. Dr. Kildare* (1941). But his first big break came in a remake of a 1933 film called *Whistling in the Dark*, which Skelton made in 1941 under the same title. His comic timing and snappy dialogue was well received and put Skelton in front of a bigger film audience. The movie's success led to a series of *Whistling* films, which many fans consider some of his best film work.

The Fuller Brush Man (1948) was produced while Skelton was on loan to Columbia pictures and reunites him with *Whistling* director S. Sylvan Simon. More auspicious chemistry was supplied by screenwriter Frank Tashlin, (*The Girl Can't Help It*, 1956 *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, 1957).

In the film, Skelton plays eternal underachiever Red Jones, who can't seem to stay out of his own way long enough to win the hand of his sweetheart, Ann (Janet Blair). Red decides he'll take a stab at selling Fuller brushes door-to-door, like Ann's other suitor, Mr. Wallick (Don McGuire). Needless to say, slapstick and misadventure ensue, including a murder case that implicates Red. He emerges victorious, however, after an unforgettable Keystone Cops-like finale that also offers a taste of the satiric humor and surreal slapstick that Tashlin would give full expression to in the next decade.

Though Janet Blair plays Skelton's love interest in **The Fuller Brush Man**, she was not pleased with her second-fiddle billing and filed suit against Columbia for \$250,000, alleging breach of contract because she was entitled to but did not receive equal billing with Skelton.

While Skelton was prolific during his heyday, some believe that Skelton was underutilized by MGM. In his book *The Great Movie Comedians*, Leonard Maltin suggests that Skelton might have had a more profound film career if he'd started at another studio: "He brought a rare combination of visual and verbal agility to his work that would soon put him in a class by himself. Unfortunately, he wound up at M-G-M, a studio that offered everything money could buy except respect for individual comic genius." In the same book, writer Ross Wetzsteon observes that Skelton's career was a contradictory one, though he made it work for himself: "A mime whose greatest success was on the radio. A folk humorist in the years when American entertainment was becoming urban. A vulgar knockabout at a time when American comedy was becoming sophisticated and verbal. A naïve ne'er-do-well in the age of the self-conscious schlemiel."

Whether Skelton's success was because of or despite his being out-of-sync with prevailing taste is hard to say. But he suffered from a lack of confidence throughout his life as an entertainer. Vincente Minnelli recalls in his autobiography that Skelton was never sure of himself in situation comedy, since so much of his material involved one-liners. "I'm not funny," he complained to Edna, then his wife and manager... "You're crazy," she told him. "You've never been funnier." Red proceeded to agonize over all his previous performances. It was a wonder to him that he'd ever gotten this far."

For most fans, however, there is little question as to why he succeeded. Timeless in his goofy appeal, Red Skelton's brand of comedy continues to delight audiences of all ages.

Producer: S. Sylvan Simon
 Director: S. Sylvan Simon
 Screenplay: Frank Tashlin, Devery Freeman; Roy Huggins (story)
 Cinematography: Lester White
 Art Direction: Carl Anderson, Stephen Goosson
 Music: Heinz Roemheld
 Film Editing: Al Clark
 Cast: Red Skelton (Red Jones), Janet Blair (Ann Elliot), Don McGuire (Keenan Wallick), Hillary Brooke (Mildred Trist), Adele Jergens (Miss Sharmley), Ross Ford (Freddie Trist), Trudy Marshall (Sara Franzen), Nicholas Joy (Commissioner Gordon Trist), Donald Curtis (Gregory Cruckston), Arthur Space (Police Lt. Quint).
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