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By JACK RYAN

Ernie Kovacs: Serious-Minded Clown

His zany humor has made him a top star—now all he has to do is convince people he's not really that crazy



ON THE HOLLYWOOD SET of "Sail a Crooked Ship," a starlet was asked if she enjoyed the far-out humor of one of the film's costars, Ernie Kovacs.

"No," she said poutingly. "I always know just what to expect from him—the unexpected. I like comedy where I know what's going to happen."

Happily for Ernie Kovacs, the starlet represents a minority report on his brand of humor. At 42, the mustachioed madcap has achieved a rare position in formula-happy America: he has become a star by doing the different, and he'll be the first to tell you the harrowing battle has changed a foot-loose young man into a homebody of serious and reflective mien.

Kovacs' humor nowadays is largely visual. A man at a shooting gallery knocks down moving ducks with monotonous regularity until one duck stops, pivots, and produces a six-gun from under his wing. BANG—no sharpshooter.

He once showed close-ups of tense scenes—the soft treading of nurses' shoes, the wheels of an operating table, the swinging doors typical of a surgery room, the masked faces of perspiring attendants. When the camera first rolled back and the music swelled to a climax, the full scene appeared: a family carving a turkey.

"People expect me to be the same off camera as I am on," Ernie says resentfully. A \$2 cigar acts as a barometer for

Kovacs' blood pressure: at this point it probes straight from his mouth like the lance of a knight ready for battle. "They expect me to run around wearing a chamber pot on my head—I'm a grown man! Sure, my family and I have lots of kicks—we listen to Bartok recordings, read, play some poker—that's fun!

"I suppose wild humor is something you inherit just by being Hungarian," he says, his cigar dropping in a philosophic arc. "My family could put on some kookie shows back in Trenton (N. J.) in the old days. Mom could put on a show just raising the shade. We'd all be sitting at the dinner table, soup spoons half up to our mouths, and Mom would decide to pull the shade up—would she let it go with a bang or would it slide up softly? Lord," Kovacs says appreciatively, "how she could milk that gag!"

KOVACS' PARENTS were immigrants who became moderately wealthy in the restaurant business and provided their two boys, Ernie and Tom, with clothes, spending money, and autos. "We had it soft," Ernie says, "and it probably brought out the buffoon in us."

The Depression and his parents' divorce threw Ernie into a harsher world, but his flair for the theatrical won several drama-school scholarships and, next, six years of steady work in traveling stock companies. Acting was serious business to the off-stage clown—so serious Kovacs overworked himself, fell victim to pneu-

(Continued on page 12)

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