



Victor Borge plays life for laughs by Joseph N. Bell

*Neither a melancholy Dane nor
a neurotic comedian,
this piano-playing wit has quipped
his way to riches and
a happy family life.*

VICTOR BORGE may be coming to your town. It all depends on whether he feels like traveling and where he thinks he'd like to go!

Borge is one performer who not only can write his own ticket, but can buy the railroad if he doesn't like the way it's being operated!

His Broadway show—which ran for almost three years—returned its investment the first week. From then on, it was mainly gravy, most of which went to the only member of the cast: Borge.

He is paid \$175,000 for his once-a-year television appearances, and, asked how it feels to make \$175,000 for an hour's work, he answered solemnly: "I don't see anything too remarkable about it. After all, a horse named Needles made \$123,000 for about two minutes' work in the Kentucky Derby last year."

This is Borge—master of the quip, impeccably polite, ostensibly serious—yet completely and irrevocably zany. When asked what he considered the greatest difference between Danish and American schools, he answered thoughtfully: "It has been my observation that over here the children speak more English."

These remarks are delivered after such seemingly serious consideration that Borge's listeners are often three sentences back while he is scattering fresh booby traps up ahead. As a result, talking with him is like trying to grapple with a greased eel. It's also delightful and stimulating.

Borge's career seems to be moving in three directions: spasmodic road appearances with his one-man show, recordings, and efforts as a TV producer rather than an entertainer.

Borge enjoys playing to live audiences and seeing the country, so whenever he gets bored with New York or has a yen to visit a particular part of the United States, he tells his agent: "Set me up a tour in such-and-such part of the country."

The areas he visits are likely to depend on the weather. During January and February, for example, he heads South. He has played before 93,000 in Philadelphia's Municipal Stadium, 110,000 in Copenhagen Park—and a handful of refugees on the deck of a ship. He has no idea where he'll be going next—or why. But he'll stay on the road only two weeks at a time, which he considers long enough to be away from home.

He is excited over the stereophonic recordings on which he is presently working, both conducting and playing all of the "serious" numbers performed on his three television shows to date. Though he frequently spoofs it, he loves good music and probably could make his way as a concert artist, without the buffoonery. But there's little chance of that ever happening. He has no yearning to devote himself exclusively to "serious" music—a term he deprecates.

"What do you mean by serious music?" he asks. "Just because it's old doesn't mean it's serious. Composers like Brahms and Schubert and Chopin were the popular composers of their day. I don't

consider their work serious. I think it's more likely to be lighthearted and gay."

Borge is trying to persuade his sponsors to permit him to bring his concept of good music to television. He presently has a contract for three one-man shows—one a year. He is negotiating a second contract to produce—not appear on—another half-dozen television shows yearly.

Borge's television policies are envied by other performers. He exposes Borge once a year—no more. "I'd like people to feel they want to see me



Borge's "full house" includes his wife, Sanna, (dark hat) and, left to right, their children, Sanna, Jr., Ronald, Victor, Frederikke, and Janet.

more often—not that they've seen me too much."

His first two television shows contained material from his stage show, but his third appearance, last November, was entirely new. Nevertheless, while praising the show, some criticized him for warming over the same material. This disturbed his Danish aplomb.

"Nothing," he says emphatically, "was repeated. But how can you convince critics of that? It's like the reaction to spontaneous things that happen when I'm on stage. No matter how impromptu they are, invariably somebody comes around afterward and says, 'That was a good bit. How long have you been doing it?' I never know what's going to happen when I start a program. But I have a terrible time convincing anyone of that."

One of the things that contributes most to the spontaneity of the Borge shows is his jousting with members of the audience. He seldom permits a latecomer to arrive unannounced from the stage, and anyone who leaves during a performance is usually peppered verbally up the aisle.

"I never insult guests, though," he says. "The main reason for the repartee is to stall until they are seated or out of the theater because they're a distraction to other members of the audience."

Typical was Borge's hilarious encounter with a woman in New York. He had completed about 15 minutes of his show when a middle-aged lady panted down the aisle to a sixth-row seat.

Borge got up from the piano, came to the edge of the stage, and directed the lady politely to her seat. He told her how sorry he was that she had missed the early part of the show, then proceeded to give her a capsule version of what had gone before. Returning to the piano, he had a sudden afterthought.

"By the way," he asked, "may I ask why were you so late?"

The lady stood up and told him. "This is the fifth time I've seen your show. My train was an hour late and I rushed right over here from the station without even eating lunch."

Immediately, Borge was solicitous. For several minutes, he and the lady discussed what she would like to eat, then he called the stage manager and sent him out to order lunch. Returning to his piano, he resumed the show until the lady's lunch arrived onstage. Then, solemnly, he carried it down into the audience where he passed the tray to the hungry latecomer. She ate sandwiches and drank coffee through the rest of the show.

Borge's wry wit—as well as his considerable musical talents—were apparent from childhood. Born in Copenhagen in 1909, and raised in a family devoted to music, Victor became a piano prodigy and made his concert debut at 14. In a hushed hall, before 2,000 expectant people, young Victor began playing Rachmaninoff with two fingers while winking at the ladies in the front row. The audience started to laugh, and the conductor—who couldn't see what was going on—became so flustered that he quickened his beat until the orchestra was far ahead of the soloist.

Borge stopped playing, walked to the podium, turned the score back several pages, and solemnly resumed his place at the piano. The audience cheered—and thus the career of one of this era's great clowns had been launched.

WHEN EUROPE went to war in 1939, Borge was the highest-paid stage and screen star in Denmark. He lampooned Hitler unmercifully—until the Gestapo gave Borge a position atop its "extermination list." Victor fled his homeland just ahead of the Nazis, and found his way to New York in 1940.

He was 31 years old, virtually broke, and couldn't speak a word of English. He taught himself English by watching two or three motion pictures a day. But engagements came slowly.

After years of hodgepodge piano recitals and second-flight night clubs, Borge was hired to play on Bing Crosby's radio program. He had the

(Continued on page 9)