

ED WYNN SAYS:

"Life Gets Better with Age!"

Next Thursday, this comic-turned-actor celebrates his 75th birthday—and his triumph over the idea that a man's life can be measured solely by the calendar

By JOSEPH N. BELL

RETIREMENT," says Ed Wynn, "shouldn't be measured by the calendar, but by what's in a man's heart. Sometimes retirement is a terrible waste and the quickest way to a broken heart. Look at Grandma Moses and Jean Sibelius. Their most productive years came long after society would have retired them!"

He might also have added: look at Ed Wynn. The world tried to retire him a decade ago as a baggy-pants, funny-hat comic of a bygone era—a great showman, to be treated with respect and condescension, but not to be permitted out of the pasture to which he had been consigned.

It's to his everlasting credit that Ed Wynn refused to accept this verdict. His comeback in show business is one of the inspiring stories of the generation. Today, his services are in constant demand, and he is probably better known than in the prime of his career as a stage and radio comic.

But Ed makes it clear that this was more than a business resurgence. "It was a comeback in life, too," he points out earnestly. "It's one thing to retire from a job. But we should never retire from life. Once we do that, we're finished."

Ed never retired from life, even when his career was at its lowest ebb in the early 1950s. It's impossible for anyone who hasn't known the lifelong adulation that was accorded Wynn to understand what it meant for him to be calling on producers, hat in hand. Yet that's what he did—for several years. In his middle 60s, bewildered and not a little hurt, frightened and lonely, Ed knocked on doors and asked for a job. But he found no takers.

"Everyone was respectful," he remembers, "but I didn't want respect. I wanted work. After a couple of years of this, I had the feeling I'd never been in show business at all. People would say,

'Oh, yes, you're a great comedian, but . . .'"

Ed's brand of comedy never projected well on television. He pioneered in this new medium and had a show of his own for three years; then regular TV employment changed to occasional guest spots and finally nothing. Ed couldn't understand why. In desperation, he sent for his actor-son, Keenan.

Says Ed: "I didn't want to retire. I didn't need the money, but for personal reasons I needed to work very badly."

When Keenan arrived, Ed told him: "You think differently than I do. You're of this world and this generation, and I seem to have lost touch with both of them. Why? What's happened to Ed Wynn?"

Keenan hesitated. Besides a strong filial affection, Keenan looked on his father as the world's greatest clown. Finally he asked: "Do you want me to give it to you straight?"

"I want it straight," Ed told him.

"Okay," said Keenan, "your kind of comedy is corny today. You wear funny clothes and big shoes and silly hats. You're a great comedian, but you've got to become more sophisticated about it; you've got to quit wearing funny clothes."

Ed was bewildered. "This is the only kind of comedy I know. I couldn't change now."

THAT'S WHEN KEENAN came up with the suggestion that has made a new life for Ed Wynn: he proposed that his father become a dramatic actor. Ed laughed at him. "I've never spoken a straight line in my life," he said. But Keenan persisted. He was then working in a movie called "The Great Man," and he asked director Jose Ferrer if there might be a part in it for his father. Keenan, Ferrer, and author Al Morgan all urged Ed to test for a

character role in the film. Ed resisted, but finally gave in and promised to try.

Several weeks later, uncertain and uneasy, Ed appeared on a sound stage to take his postgraduate course in dramatic acting. The script called for him to do a six-minute 45-second monologue—the second-longest speech ever written for a movie. Ed did it in one take.

When he finished, the technicians and actors on the set applauded. Ed Wynn's new career was launched on the waves of that applause.

SINCE THEN, his successes as a dramatic actor have tumbled one on another. In "Requiem for a Heavyweight" and "You Can't Take It with You" on television, and as Uncle Sampson in the movie, "Marjorie Morningstar," Ed won much critical praise. Then he played the fat part of the unwanted guest, Dr. Dussell, in "The Diary of Anne Frank." Ed's latest role is that of the toymaker in Walt Disney's soon-to-be-released "Babes in Toyland."

In spite of his new dramatic success, Ed is still first of all a comedian. But now his audience is limited to those on the sets where he happens to be working. He shows up every day with a new joke which he tells with the precise timing and wondrous inflections which made him a great comedian.

Ed is probably the world's foremost connoisseur of jokes—old and new. He should be: he has been writing, collecting, and telling jokes longer than any American entertainer alive today. Born Isaiah Edwin Leopold in Philadelphia on Nov. 9, 1886, he never had any other ambition than acting—much to the discomfiture of his well-to-do parents.

When Ed journeyed to Connecticut to join a show troupe with the money his father had given



Spry and healthy at 75, Ed is far from pasture-bound. Photos show Keenan, grandchildren.

(Continued on page 6)