

WHATEVER HAPPENED

Milton Berle and Terry-Thomas are after hidden money in "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World."



TO MILTON BERLE?

FOR YEARS, Milton Berle was the biggest tv star in the country, filling the screen with all the hammy razzle-dazzle it could hold. But, in 1955, Mr. Television's ratings began to slip. Over-exposure was blamed. By 1956, Uncle Miltie's reign had ended.

What has "Public Energy No. 1" been up to since his weekly show went off the air? To find out, I visited him recently in New York.

"Off?" Berle growled at my first question. "What do you mean, off? I've done the Kraft series, the bowling series, personal appearances on variety and dramatic shows, and lots of Berle specials. I never went off!"

Then his face broke into a grin, and he said, "Okay, doll, what do you want to know?"

"Well, in the summer of 1956, how long a vacation did—"

"Vacation? I've never taken a vacation. Never! From 1948 to 1956, which is eight years, I did 30 shows a year; that's 240 hours, plus specials. So I deserved a rest."

"Did you take one?"

"No! Since '56, I've earned more than \$600,000 a year. I've done 40 weeks a year in night clubs, plus stage shows, movies, a record album, wrote a novel, and was top banana of 'Top Banana' in summer stock last season."

"Mr. Berle, what—"

"Let me tell you something," he interrupted. "No comedian lasted as long as I did on television. The track record is history: in 1951 I signed the greatest contract ever given a performer. NBC pays me \$125,000 every year until 1981, and I don't have to work."

"Why is that?"

"In 1951, three years after I started the show, I wanted to go on film. 'Well,' they said, 'we'd

rather have you 'live,' and so would the sponsor.' So I said, 'Yeh, so where's the residuals going to come from in 1970?' Those are additional payments I'd get when a show is rerun. So they said they'd compensate me for the loss of residuals with a lifetime contract if I guaranteed them 200 hours on the air. That 200 hours was up in 1956. I played it out. Hence the money continues—and I don't have to work!"

"Great."

"You bet. But I'm on call as a consultant. Also, I'm still exclusive to them."

"You can't work for another network?"

"Right. Unless I get written permission. That's not easy; but if I'm determined, I get it. Suppose, however, someone wants me for a show I don't want to do, but I don't want to make him feel bad. I turn him over to NBC. They say very sweetly (Berle imitated a very sweet NBC executive), 'No, Mr. Berle's our property.'

"Doll, call Dave Tebet, my friend and a vice president. He'll tell you about my contract."

"I believe you, Mr. Berle."

"You'll do as I say," he commanded. Then, instantly penitent: "You can call me Milton."

I CALLED THE VP, and he confirmed every word. As a matter of fact, he sounded a bit like a recording of Berle. Mr. Tebet added that since 1956 they've suggested 18 series which Berle has turned down. "But," he said, "we're hoping to get him on 'live' in 1964."

Berle leaned back. "You know, there was no closer relationship before I got married than myself and my mother." He sat up. "That's your story: my mother. She started me in show business when I was four and traveled with me until I got married at 33. The greatest gal that ever lived, my mother. She had the desire for my career and helped me and loved me. Difficult thing to break, that silver cord."

He may not be Mr. Television any more, but he's still the same old Uncle Miltie: brash, boastful, bombastic—and, despite it all, oddly likable

By MARYA SAUNDERS

Milton and his first wife, show girl Joyce Mathews, adopted a daughter, Vickie, who is now 18. The Berles were divorced after six years of marriage. In 1953 he married Ruth Cosgrove, a former press agent. In 1962, they adopted a three-week-old baby, Billie Michael.

"Why," I asked, "did you adopt another?" "Ruth and I tried to have a baby; we couldn't," he told me. "You need a family when you are married or you get selfish. Now we're more concerned about Billie than ourselves."

"Do you feel that having reared Vickie will help you with Billie?" He shook his head.

"You mean you were the best father Vickie could have?"

"YEP. I'VE GIVEN my daughter everything. She speaks French, Italian, German, and Spanish. She's returning from Switzerland soon, and I'll send her to Smith or Finch College. I'm going to give Billie all the advantages, too."

"You know," he smiled, "laymen only see one side of this comedian. They see Berle as aggressive, brash, flippant, a wiseacre who heckles, insults, interrupts. That's the image I built up deliberately. But," he whispered, "there are—may I say this without being considered megalomaniac or something?"

I nodded.

"There are two Milton Berles—the performer image and the Milton Berle who's talking to you. You've got to tell the reader the truth," he said solemnly. "Show the differences—that's your story angle."

He leaped up. "Well, got to get dressed now, doll. Say, when you write this up, mention my new movie, 'It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World.' So long, doll."

Truthfully, there are two Milton Berles, but it's hard to tell where the real one lets off and the performer begins.