



Lionel Stander: A Hollywood Story **by Bella Stander**

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There's a photograph of my father, the late actor Lionel Stander, that I've kept in an album for years. He's posing at the side of a pool in some New York hotel gym with his gut sucked in and his chest puffed out, wearing nothing but a big smile and a little cotton loincloth. "The Champ," it says, above his trainer's semi-legible signature and the date, August 1, 1953. Another image from that session shows him crouched over the edge, about to dive in, with the caption "Fit & Ready." I'd always found these images rather silly; they were so obviously trumped up for publicity purposes. And then while leafing through the album for the umpteenth time, I suddenly saw them quite differently.

These days, most Americans, if they remember my father at all, know him for his role as Max, the genial chauffeur/butler on "Hart to Hart," the 1980s TV series starring Robert Wagner and Stefanie Powers. Italians fondly recall him as a star of dozens of movies in the 1970s. But there was a time when Dad's face and especially his raspy, tough-guy voice were known all across the U.S.A.

My father made his Broadway stage debut and married for the first time in 1928, at age 20. He played the First Fairy (now there's casting against type!) in the Provincetown Playhouse

production of "Him" by e.e. cummings. Allegedly he got the part because he shot craps with the Players. He was in 10 more shows in the next six years, and somewhere along the line also worked as a newspaper reporter in Charlotte (he briefly attended UNC Chapel Hill) and New York. Dad never spoke to me much, even less so in his last years, so I've had to piece his history through stories I've been told, published interviews (not always reliable, as he tended to burnish the truth), official documents and that treasure trove of information, the Internet.



Until fairly recently I thought that Dad went directly from Broadway to Hollywood, but I learned that there were some notable stops along the way. From 1932 to 1934, he played ("acted" seems grandiose, considering the circumstances) with Shemp Howard, later of the Three Stooges, in a handful of short movie comedies made in Coney Island by Warner-Vitaphone. The first was "In the Dough," a comeback vehicle for former silent star Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, who unfortunately died the day after filming ended.

Though the Depression was deepening, Dad's star was on the rise. He went on the road with Fred Allen's radio show; then with Fannie Brice, Bert Lahr and other stars. In 1935 he moved to Hollywood and acted in a comedy short with Bob Hope and seven feature films, mostly playing "ethnic" types: a Greek, an Italian, an Irishman, several Jews (no pretending required). Less happily, he also shed his wife and toddler daughter, setting a pattern he repeated throughout his life. (He married six times and fathered six girls; my mother and I were the fourth of each.)

Having been contracted to Columbia Pictures (supposedly as their highest-paid supporting player), my father landed his biggest role yet in 1936: as Gary Cooper's press agent in "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town." I just watched the film again, and after 66 years it still holds up (I'm sure the same won't be said of the remake with Adam Sandler). Dad got some of the best lines; I'm always surprised to see how good an actor he was, with impeccable timing. That same year he also made a hit as Edward Arnold's comic sidekick in "Meet Nero Wolfe," plus had roles in four smaller pictures.

Dad was definitely on his way up. He acted in only three films in 1937, but the roles were juicy ones: "A Star Is Born," as a viciously funny publicist in what is still one of the best inside-Hollywood movies ever made; "The Last Gangster" with Edward G. Robinson and Jimmy Stewart, as a nasty thug; and "The League of Frightened Men," reprising his comic role in "Nero Wolfe." He also performed on Bing Crosby's radio show several times.

My father once said, "Hollywood was the mecca for nearly every worthwhile intellectual of the 1930s from all over the world." He was a voracious reader and, like many of his colleagues, was active in progressive social and political causes. He raised money for the Scottsboro Boys, the Spanish Loyalists, striking farm workers and the campaign to free imprisoned trade unionist Tom Mooney. He was an organizer of the Screen Actors Guild, a member of the Hollywood Anti-

Fascist League and a supporter of the activist Conference of Studio Unions in its fight against the Mafia-controlled International Alliance of Stage Employees (IATSE).



The Hollywood Blacklist is usually associated with the 1950s, but in fact it began in 1938, and Dad was one of its early victims. That year Columbia head Harry Cohn declared my father a “red” because of his role in exposing IATSE corruption, and told the Motion Picture Producers Association that anyone who renewed his contract should be fined \$100,000. As Dad recalled, this was a “secret blacklist,” so he was able to work in companies that didn’t belong to the MPPA, and for influential (and politically conservative) friends like Harold

Lloyd. His promising movie career stalled and didn’t recover for nearly 30 years. Dad acted in three un-notable films that year and married Wife #2.

Also in 1938, Congress created the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), under the chairmanship of Martin Dies, a conservative Texas Republican later found to have friends in the KKK. At first the Committee worked on unearthing Fascist sympathizers, then in 1940 concentrated its energies on routing out Communists and other leftist “subversives”—not coincidentally, individuals and organizations sympathetic to Roosevelt and his New Deal. In August of 1940, “secret” grand jury testimony implicating my father as a Communist Party member made its way to the front pages of the Los Angeles papers. Never shy, Dad forced his way into the grand jury hearing and the district attorney publicly cleared him of the charge.

Nevertheless, HUAC had Dad in its sights. Less than two weeks later, he testified before an executive session of the committee in New York and stated, without being asked, “I never was a member of the Communist Party, and never will be.” Yet Dies and an investigator repeatedly tried to paint him as a Communist because of his donations to such “front” organizations as the Red Cross and American Federation of Labor. Dad more than held his own, but probably didn’t help himself by pointing out to his Republican inquisitors that the Communist Party had backed Roosevelt (then up for re-election), and proclaiming him “the greatest president we ever had.”

After that my father had no film work for three years. Then, with HUAC inactive because of the war, he had minor roles in 10 pictures between 1943 and 1946, most made by small studios. He still had plenty of work in radio and theater: He was the first to play in the title role of the radio show “The Life of Riley,” and appeared on other shows with Fred Allen, Lionel Barrymore and Danny Kaye; acted and produced on Broadway and in summer stock.

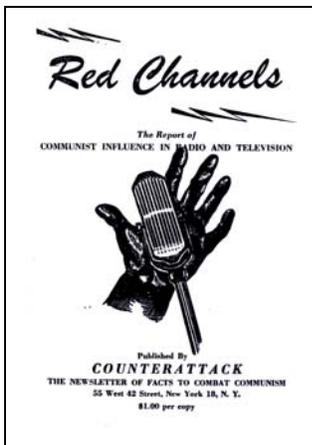


In the meantime, Dad served in the Air Force from 1942 (when childless Wife #2 dumped him) till 1944, but wasn't allowed to fly, he said, because he had been labeled a "premature anti-Fascist" (perhaps, but I think his lousy driving may have been a factor). He also married, fathered twins by and divorced Wife #3 between 1945 and 1950.

HUAC sprang back into life with a roar in 1947, under the chairmanship of New Jersey Republican J. Parnell Thomas, with J. Edgar Hoover testifying about "the mad march of Red fascism" and the Communists' plans to take over America. The Red Scare was on.

Six months later, a group of writers and directors known as the Hollywood Ten (many of whom my father had worked with) cited their rights under the Fifth Amendment and refused to testify for HUAC, earning them contempt of Congress citations, and later, jail terms. Within days of the citation, a consortium of movie producers declared that they would employ no Communists, and take action against "subversive and disloyal elements in Hollywood."

Now the blacklist was official. In order to keep working in the movie industry, one had to repudiate one's "subversive" past; even better, tell HUAC the names of one's associates. This led to the likes of Humphrey Bogart writing that he'd been "duped" in a magazine article entitled, "I'm No Communist"; and in a "private" session with HUAC, actor Larry Parks literally begging the Committee not to make him name names. He did and, as was blared in the newspapers two days later, my father's was one of those names. After that, except for a friend's low-budget quickie, Dad didn't work in the movies for 14 years.



However, one didn't have to be named as a Communist by a "helpful witness" like Parks or director Elia Kazan to get on the blacklist. All it took was a HUAC subpoena or, simpler still, being listed in a publication such as "Red Channels," and suddenly there was no more movie work. The blacklist soon spread to radio and then to TV.

For a taste of the times, here are some tidbits from a 1950 pamphlet, "Documentation of the Red Stars in Hollywood" by Myron C. Fagan, a Roosevelt-bashing former Broadway playwright-producer:

"By *his own admission*, the American Red is the most *degraded* and incredibly *criminal* character in our midst." "Hollywood was...*and still is* ...the SACRED Cow of Moscow. It was...*and still is*...the American Reds' chief source for financing their activities...they were

employing the *glamor* of Hollywood to *glamorize* those activities!" Lionel Stander "is another one whose extra-curricular chores far exceed his Front activities."

Fagan's overwrought prose—not to mention his punctuation, capitalization and use of italics—would be funny if he hadn't been taken so seriously (and, scarily, still is, judging by his

canonization on the Internet as a seminal conspiracy “scholar”). In 1961, the Senate Fact-Finding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities in California, though it chided Fagan, then in his 70s, for occasional over-zealousness, lauded his “most recent list of alleged Communists, fellow-travelers and dupes,” which included my father, who by then hadn’t been onscreen in a decade.

In 1951, actor Marc Lawrence named my father as a Communist in testimony to HUAC. Dad sued him for slander, but a judge ruled that Lawrence had congressional immunity. The latter immediately fled to Europe, beyond the reach of the courts and HUAC. With a \$150,000 television contract riding on Dad’s being cleared by the committee, he demanded that HUAC immediately allow him to refute Lawrence’s statements. He was subpoenaed, upon which he was blacklisted in radio and TV as well as Hollywood, but it took two years for him to be called to the witness stand. By then HUAC had turned its attention to the theater, where there was no blacklist because Actors’ Equity had publicly condemned the practice. My father had ended a year-long run on Broadway in “Pal Joey” only weeks before, and was on the road with the touring company.



On the morning of May 6, 1953, Dad, who always knew how to make an entrance, swept into the Foley Square courthouse in New York with a blonde on each arm. Harold H. Velde of Illinois was the HUAC chairman, but Dad immediately took charge, demanding that the TV lights and cameras be turned off, because “I only appear on TV for entertainment or for philanthropic organizations and I consider this a very serious matter that doesn’t fall into either category.” He told me that he had done so because the

HUAC members wanted to be shown with on TV with the stars, and he didn’t want to be used that way. I understand his reasoning, but I still wish that he hadn’t stopped the cameras, because he gave the performance of a lifetime.

Though Dad told Velde that testifying wasn’t the same as acting because there was no carefully prepared script, he tossed off a slew of perfect zingers. “Just to have my name appear in association with this committee...It is like the Spanish Inquisition. You may not be burned, but you can’t help coming away a little singed.”

He said he was happy to share information with the committee: “I know of a group of fanatics who are desperately trying to undermine the Constitution of the United States by depriving artists and others of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness without process of law.” Velde tried to interrupt time and again, but Dad just kept rolling along. I heard his unamplified voice fill a theater; no one could shout him down. “And these people are engaged in the conspiracy, outside all the legal processes, to undermine our very fundamental American concepts upon which our entire system of jurisprudence exists.”

When Velde managed to (temporarily) regain control, my father expostulated, à la Claude Rains in “Casablanca,” “I am shocked by your cutting me off. You don’t seem to be interested in the sort of subversive activities I know about.” Shortly thereafter, in barbed reference to bandleader Artie Shaw, who had tearfully testified earlier in the week, he said, “I am not a dupe, dope, mope, moe or shmoe. I’m not ashamed of anything I ever said in public or in private.” Evidently the audience was laughing at much of what Dad said, because Kit Clardy (R-Mich.) accused him of putting on a show, and threatened to have the lights and cameras turned back on so his “performance could be recorded for posterity.”

Things soon got serious. Dad upbraided the committee for trying to deny his constitutional rights and “attempting to impose censorship on the free theater that we all know and love.” Having denied under oath being a Communist back in 1940, he refused to answer questions relating to Lawrence’s testimony (perjured, according to Dad), which covered the 1930s. My father and the committee continued sparring to the bitter end. Dad: “May I make one statement now?” Clardy: “No.” Dad made one anyway.

Outside afterwards, he was mobbed by reporters and the next day was on the front page of every major newspaper. Dad was a hero to many people for his courageous stand, but red-baiters hated him all the more. He returned to “Pal Joey,” but that summer influential columnist Walter Winchell blasted him for being a Commie and called on producer Jule Styne to oust him. As the Equity representative for the production, Dad couldn’t be let go without cause, so stagehands tried to pick fights with him (he was still persona non grata with IATSE) in order to get him fired. He finally quit the show in Chicago and returned to New York with the young woman who became my mother.

Imagine you’re a 45-year-old actor whose face and voice are known from coast to coast. Your career is in tatters, the FBI is tailing you day and night, you’ve had three failed marriages and you’re about to begin a fourth with an 18-year-old beauty you’ve helped run away from home. What do you do?

You go to the gym, stand by the pool, suck in your gut, puff out your chest and smile big for the camera. The Champ. August 1, 1953.





Damp Recollections

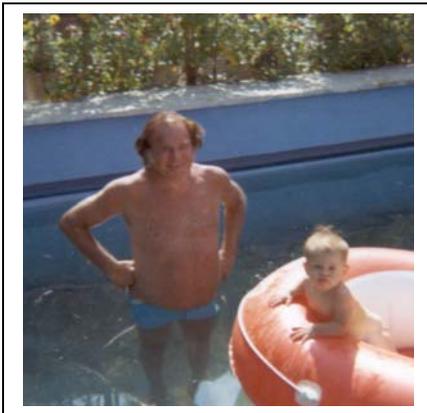
by Bella Stander

Many of my memories of Dad have to do with water, perhaps because I saw him most in the summer and he loved to swim. One of the earliest—and scariest—is of him swinging me over the surface of a large body of water and yelling over my terrified shrieks, “There’s nothing to be afraid of!”

My father left when I was three and married again when I was seven. A year later, in 1964, he moved to London with Wife #5, where I spent the

summer with them and my new baby sister. Dad and I frequently swam in a columned pool under some friend’s apartment building. He was acting in a play directed by Tony Richardson, who the following year broke the blacklist by casting him in “The Loved One,” one of the most deliciously barbed comedies ever, with an all-star cast including Jonathan Winters, Rod Steiger and Liberace. Dad had a figuratively wet role as a sloshed newspaper advice columnist.

He got literally wet—and a hernia—in his next film, Roman Polanski’s “Cul de Sac,” an even bleaker comedy in which he had to push a car on the causeway to Lindisfarne Island in the North Sea. During a rainy Christmas vacation with him in Paris in 1965, I sat in a darkened studio as he dubbed dialogue while watching a little screen replay footage of a car on a beach. The following summer I visited Dad in New York, and we spent what seemed like hours bobbing in the swells at Rockaway Beach.



I saw my father only twice in the next six years, then at 17 spent two weeks in Rome with him and Wife #6, and my next (and last) baby sister. Dad swam daily in his villa’s frigid pool, whereas one dip was more than enough for me. (He also relished scalding baths.) Another seven years passed till I saw him again. By then he was comfortably ensconced in L.A., thanks to his role in “Hart to Hart.” The show—indeed every TV show and movie—was on hiatus due to an actors’ strike. Dad, by then 72, mostly passed his days reading by his Pacific Palisades pool (gently heated, with a darling waterfall), occasionally swimming a few slow laps. Once or twice he went downtown to walk the SAG picket line and shmooze with his

cronies over lunch at Chasen’s. To my profound disappointment, I was barred from such outings; I assuaged my hurt feelings by doing intensive poolside TM (tan maintenance).

That was our last waterside visit. I saw Dad maybe five more times before he died of cancer 14 years later, on November 30, 1994.