

THE BIG SHOW

A photograph of two men in dark suits standing on a stage, seen from behind. The man on the right has his hand on the back of the man on the left. They are illuminated by a bright, warm light from below, creating a dramatic silhouette effect against a dark background. The floor appears to be a polished wooden stage.

A true
story
about a
newcomer
and a
Hollywood
LEGEND

MARK BENNETT

THE BIG SHOW

A Non-Fiction Novella

Mark Bennett

A tribute to my mentor and friend,
Television Producer, Fred de Cordova.



The Larry Czerwonka Company
Hilo, Hawai'i

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*To my wife Mandy for her unwavering faith and
making my life a joyful one.*



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Pictured are Quinn K. Rediker and Mark Bennett
Back cover photo from Mark Bennett's personal collection

Foreword

The *Reader's Digest* used to have a feature entitled, "The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met." If they could increase that to "The Most Unforgettable Couple I Have Ever Met," it would certainly be Janet and Freddy de Cordova, mostly because of the era in which they lived.

The pre-television Hollywood where Clark was of course Clark Gable, Bogie was Humphrey and my personal favorite, Dick was Richard Rogers, and of course, Ronnie, the 40th president of the United States, who Fred directed in the forgettable *Bedtime for Bonzo*.

Freddy and Janet were dear friends of ours and we enjoyed reading about them, and hopefully, you will too!

Bob Newhart
29 July 2013
Los Angeles, CA

Gift, n. 1. something given voluntarily without payment in return, as to honor a person or an occasion or to provide assistance; present. 2. the act of giving. 3. something bestowed or acquired without being sought or earned by the receiver.

“Any open door that leads to a conversation that benefits you is good.”

~ Fred de Cordova

I cannot pinpoint exactly the first time I saw Fred de Cordova, but I am certain I was very young, and it was a fleeting glimpse of a distinguished man sitting next to a clock and pointing to a talk show host named Johnny.

At the time, had my mother come in to tell me that it was past my bedtime for a school night, pointed to that distinguished man on my black and white Zenith television set and informed me that we would be in business together; We both would have had a good laugh.

You see, at five, I was a magician (just a short drive and we could purchase tricks from a small town in Michigan that has dubbed itself the Magic Capital of the World), at ten a classical pianist, by eighteen an actor and then on to serious studies in both crafts: First at the University of Colorado, Boulder and then on to the California Institute of the Arts. There was no Plan B.

Enter fate.

I got lucky on several occasions as an actor playing small roles on soaps, sitcoms and a couple features.

While I was on a lunch break at NBC, I went over to Studio One to listen in on Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine, rehearse.

The next day it was Bonnie Raitt performing a number from what would become a Grammy award-winning album.

The Temptations.

Stevie Ray Vaughn, on one occasion, arrived three hours before the scheduled camera rehearsal to jam with his band Double Trouble.

It was during this exclusive, aggressively loud rehearsal/jam that the Executive Producer of The Tonight Show, Fred de Cordova, cigarette in hand—yes, you could do that then—approached me.

“Excuse me,” he says.

“Yes, Mr. de Cordova.”

“Tell me something.”

“Yeah?” I lean in, placing my still lengthy post-college hair behind my ear in order to hear without any obstruction.

“Is this good?” He nods to the band.

“Odds are favorable with the viewers.”

“Very well.”

And with a perfectly timed George Burns smoke-take he adds, “Name?”

I shout, “I’m Mark Bennett,” and extend my hand.

“Constance Bennett, thanks for the note. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again.”

That was the encounter that would forever alter what I thought was my course.

Quips turned into conversations which then evolved to the exchange of ideas and before I knew it, it was the run-ins with Fred I looked forward to the most.

I’ll never be certain what it was that this universally well-respected and beloved living Hollywood legend initially saw in me. He did tell me in that first encounter that I reminded him of someone he knew a long, long time ago. My response?

“Yeah, Joan Bennett’s sister,” deliberately ignoring his subtext.

“That’s funny,” Fred would dryly say if something tickled him beyond words.

Maybe it was the quips. Maybe it was the fact that I knew his old-school references. Perhaps he liked the discreet avenue he could take by asking me questions like, “What is this Grunge nonsense anyway?”

I don’t think I’ll ever know. And that is just fine with me.

“I think you are very talented, you will go far in this business, understand that I am a fan and if you don’t like that you can go fuck yourself.”

~ Fred de Cordova

I didn’t know if there was a producer’s school, but if there ever was an expert on the *How to’s* of show business (any medium), all roads would point to Fred de Cordova. As fickle as the entertainment industry can be, fleeting for both successes and failures alike, Fred received a check every week from *somewhere* for sixty-eight years.

Tough record to break.

Florenz Ziegfeld, The Schubert’s (not the organization, the brothers) Jack Warner, Carl Laemmle, Burns and Allen, Jack Benny and Johnny Carson to name a few. He knew Fanny Brice and Josephine Baker. He discovered Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, Jackie Gleason and Danny Kaye.

Imagine then, how I felt, the first I saw on a piece of paper: “Fred de Cordova and Mark Bennett pre-approved as Executive Producers.”

Or as Fred said, “You will alarm many people.” Believe me, I was first in line when it came to the word, “alarmed.”

There he was though, my teacher, my confidant, my partner and friend.

I was grateful for every moment.

My first day at the then, NBC Productions, was the result of Fred taking a gamble and going to bat for me. He, without my knowledge and nor did he ever bring it up anytime thereafter, basically closed the deal. Sure I had an agent, but Fred got me the office.

Right next to his.

Earlier that week, I saw him standing on *The Tonight Show* set where the monologue takes place.

Fred shouts, “Did you hear the news?”

“I’m always the last to know,” I counter.

He makes a motion for me to come closer.

In an instant, all the hustle, noise and activity that go in to a nightly talk show, vanishes.

Fred quietly gestures the parameters of my deal and with typical poignancy declares, “You should be very proud of yourself. People have been walking around this town for years trying to do what you’re doing right now. You have an idea, you put it to paper, and now someone is paying you to do something about that idea. You got it.”

Fred opens his arms as I receive from him the biggest hug.

Then with a whisper, a look in the eye and a fatherly pat on the cheek he adds, “You should be very happy and know that I will be with you every step of the way.”

A real movie moment, and when I look back, he still gave me the credit.

Kenneth Tynan once wrote: “Fred de Cordova has an engulfing handshake that is a contract in itself, complete with small print and an option for renewal on both sides.”

A hug must mean you get a long life in syndication. For now, at the point of innocence, the adventure had just started.

“Listen to everything and everyone.”

~ Fred de Cordova

Creative Executive . . . I always thought that was such an oxymoron. As with anything though, under Fred’s aegis, I was learning the delicate balancing act between what *you* want, what the *Network* wants and what your approved production people want. All of it operating on a perceived, not-nearly-enough, so-called, shoestring budget.

Nothing rattled Fred.

And I was busy enough making my bones and staying out of the way that I had yet to achieve “rattled” let alone getting passed it.

Such an effective teacher was he, allowing me to make my own mistakes. On one particular end-of-business day, when we would have our routine *Day’s Recap*, Fred, with sheer delight (when it came to controversy) told me: “I had a highly unpleasant conversation about you today with Gary Considine.”

Gary was my tolerant leader in Creative Affairs and apparently I had done one of those cart-before-the-horse actions that only a good newcomer could accomplish. Instead of going to the source (me) he spared me and screamed at Fred. Gary’s charitable act prevented me from therapy and gave Fred the giggles.

I was mortified which did not silence Fred’s funny bone. He did however quietly explain how to repair it.

I learned you can fix chaos—but you can’t fix crumbling.

“You do your best to tell the truth in an industry
where it’s damn near impossible to do so.”

~ Fred de Cordova

So accurate is that quote in relationship to this business of show that on many occasions it was challenging for me to utter the words, “I’m working on a couple projects with . . .”

The one truth I could hang my hat on and even *I* felt I was lying. I had yet to hit my mid twenties, I felt like I was the only wannabe actor in the world who’s day job is as a producer and my evolving relationship in business is with someone who was born when Ragtime was in the Top Ten.

The fact that we were generations apart never mattered to Fred, and he always sought my opinion first before *we* made a final decision.

Fred approached business in a very step-by-step manner. Knowing that television is a series of your best-educated guesswork, he always wanted to look at the downside first. He spoke simply without being condescending and felt that redundancy or repetition kept everyone on the same page. He was fair but always favored the Network. He felt that there was an art to what he would call “staff casting.” In other words, you hire according to the needs of a particular show. “The toughest part of your job as an Executive is saying ‘no’ to your friends . . . This is why I don’t have any.”

He was an appropriate gambler. An optimist. A mensch.

He had the wonderment of a child. He was selfless. He could effortlessly give off the impression that he was thick-skinned. He was ageless. He kept up with the times even though he may not have liked it. He was a smart-ass, the best audience in the world, and he was always full of mischief.

During the beginning part of my “tenure” as a member of the organization at NBC I found it no coincidence that my initial Talent obligations where I was required to sell-in-the-hopes-of-booking certain individuals all happened to be none other than . . . Fred’s friends.

Smart and safe.

It honestly didn’t matter to me although I always imagined Fred having dinner with these people the night before: “I’ll have Mark give you a call tomorrow at home and you respond as if you’ve never heard this before.”

Nevertheless, I was having a particularly productive day—
”Hello Mark? Jack Lemmon. How are ya?—“

When it became necessary for me to make a mad dash to the restroom in between phone calls.

As I stand there, doing what one does, I overhear a flush from the stall next to me.

While I am thinking of the calls I have to make, I feel a gentle but firm push of a hand.

And with a, “Did you miss?” Fred de Cordova was out the door.

We hope that you have enjoyed what you have read thus far and would like to continue on and read more. You can follow the link below to purchase *The Big Show*. We also hope you share this book sample with your friends.

www.markbennettauthor.com