

Author's note: During this unprecedented time I have kept busy by writing down episodes from my career entitled **Waiting in the Wings**. I shared one earlier this summer called '**Sing Herman! Sing!**' I now want to share another excerpt from my collection of musical adventures entitled '**There's No Business Like Show Business**'. I hope you enjoy.

Cal Stewart Kellogg, October 2020.

There's No Business Like Show Business

Martin Feinstein, General Director of the Washington Opera, was a mover and a shaker. He learned the craft of promoting when he worked in the PR department of the Sol Hurok artist management agency. Martin knew how to bring people together for special events and he did so in spades when he invited some of the biggest celebrities in show business to Washington for a spectacular fund raising presentation benefitting the Washington Opera. At the span of so many years it is hard to recall everyone who graced the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater stage that evening, but I know that Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, Jean Stapleton, Christopher Plummer, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Tammy Grimes, John Reed (from the D'Orly Carte Theater), Jerome Hines, Catherine Malfitano and believe it or not, Ethel Merman all took part in one way or another! In addition, the Washington Opera cast of *The Barber of Seville* sang the finale from the first act.

How Martin managed to enlist these great entertainers would probably fill the pages of a very interesting book. Ms. Merman agreed to come because she had always wanted to sing the duet, "*You're Just in Love*" from "*Call Me Madam*" with Jerome Hines. And of course, Martin lured Hines with the same idea.

The Terrace Theater is a small 450 seat affair. Ticket prices were hefty to say the least. I conducted the Rossini finale, Jerome Hines in the great aria from Don Carlo, "*Dormiro so!*", Catherine Malfitano in Juliet's waltz from Gounod's "*Romeo and Juliet*" and John Reed and Jean Stapleton in two duets from Gilbert and Sullivan. Tammy Grimes had her husband on the podium for her part of the show. Bill Huckaby, the chorus master of the company, was in charge of accompanying Ms. Merman and Mr. Hines in their duet.

The word was that Ethel Merman had been in the hospital with her feet up due to a blood clot that was stationary but could be very serious trouble if dislodged. She was brought to the theater and seated near the small stairwell leading backstage. I finished my part of the rehearsal and to make room for my conducting colleagues had jumped out of the pit from the podium. The pit held 36 players maximum. There was very little room and we had to figure out how the three of us would be able to share the podium and any open space near the podium because there was no way we could exit without crawling over the orchestra members.

As I reached the first row of seats, Martin came up to me and said "Help Ms. Merman to the stage. She will rehearse after Ms. Grimes has finished." I approached her, told her it was time to travel a bit and that I would help her. She leaned on me so heavily that I was practically carrying her. Her gait was a slow shuffle and each step was taken with painstaking unsteadiness as we inched our way to the stage. Each step up the stairwell was a Herculean effort. She balked a bit in the darkness backstage and relied on me to guide her onstage to the seat that was waiting for her. She sat and nodded to Bill. The orchestra began "There's No Business like Show Business." She complained about the tempo and the *rallentando* at the end. Bill did his best to accommodate. They rehearsed with Mr. Hines and someone from the stage crew helped her offstage to one of four dressing rooms. It was around 4 PM. The show would begin in 3 and a half hours. She never emerged from that room. Everyone was kept away from her door. No one was to call her until her entrance. Most of the men roamed the hallway or sat in the folding chairs placed around the stage door. I recall literally bumping into Mr. Caesar and Mr. Fairbanks before the show got underway.

The fund raiser was a mixture of musical numbers, comedy skits and theatrical readings. I completed my part of the proceedings and moved off the podium attempting to squeeze as best I could between the wall and the concertmaster. Tammy Grimes did her part of the show and then the house microphone announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Ms. Ethel Merman." Bill began the peppy introduction to "There's No Business like Show Business", a vamp of 8 bars before she was to start singing. I have never seen and still have trouble believing what happened next. In perfect time with the beat of the music, Ethel Merman, **The** Ethel Merman, barreled her way onstage. Not letting on to any physical difficulty whatsoever, she reached center stage just before her vocal entrance.

She began to sing as only one person on this earth knows how to sing. She might have been about 30 feet from the pit. The sound was deafening. I noticed that my mouth was wide open. This was more than a well-known entertainer. This was a force of nature, and the very embodiment of the song she was singing. Ms. Merman was in her 80s, had been in the hospital a few days before she journeyed to Washington, could hardly walk up the small set of stairs to get backstage a few hours before the show and had to be escorted very slowly to her dressing room. It was by far the most impressive performance I have ever witnessed. The duet that followed was visually charming. "Jerry", as he liked to be called, stood 6'6" and Ms. Merman was dwarfed standing at about 5' 1". The audience went wild as could easily be imagined.

It was an unforgettable evening in the theater. Martin raised a lot of money that night for his opera company. It's a shame he's not around to tell us how he got all those celebrities together. But then again, he probably wouldn't tell us anyway.