

Fred MacMurray: A BIOGRAPHY

FOREWORD

By Don Grady

Every once in a great while something happens in life that is miraculous.

It was early 1960. I was 15 years old, building a cedar bench in the garage of our Burbank, California home when my father appeared, suitcase in hand, and announced that he was leaving us. I was so confused and angry I pounded nails into a two-by-four for hours.

At the same time, over the hill in Brentwood, legendary film star, Fred MacMurray, was losing contact with his teenage son Rob who, according to Fred, had rejected their life style for an alternate experience in a commune in northern California.

“My Three Sons” was in early rehearsals when I got the call. The producers had cast another actor to play “Robbie” but, for reasons I never found out, they needed to replace him. I was summoned to a hastily held audition at noon, and by 3pm I was cast as the new Robbie. My acting abilities probably helped, but I still believe the reason I got the part was because the cleft in my chin looked like Fred’s!

So there we were a few weeks later, Fred and I, one who had lost touch with his son Rob, and the other who had lost touch with his father, playing Rob...standing face to face. Well, we hardly stood face to face... he was 6’2” and I was 5’7”! Still, there we were, about to bond in a way that neither of us expected.

Fred was always nice and very polite, but not an easy man to get to know. He towered over me like one of those monuments to big business on Wilshire Blvd. I felt inconsequential standing in his shadow. All I was looking for was a nod of acceptance, and I finally got it the day Fred took out his sax and I accompanied him on piano. I remember the twinkle in his eye and the connection I felt. Music bridged the unspoken gap between us, and a deep friendship began.

Fred often spoke to me about Rob. It bothered him deeply that he couldn’t connect with his only son. Gradually I came to see Fred as a man who was longing to have the same relationship with Rob, as Steve Douglas had with his sons...a relationship that he created on screen and would continue to re-create for twelve years. I’ve always felt that one of the reasons the show was so successful was because there was really very little acting going on!

In becoming a Douglas, I was able to live out a family life that probably most of us never had. True, the Douglases didn’t have a mother...but I didn’t care. I had a great one at home. On Stage 11 at Desilu Studios, Fred would take me under his wing five days a week, and advise me about all sorts of things...how to deliver certain lines, what

foods were healthy to eat, what I should and shouldn't do with the girls I was dating (oh, those were some fun talks!), and what was proper to wear. Every time I put on a suit and tie, Fred would come over and tie it for me...explaining how this side goes over that side, then this part goes through there, etc. I literally didn't tie my own tie for years! It was Fred's way of fathering me, of showing me he cared. And I soaked it up. He loved me like a father, I loved him like a son...and I'll never forget him.

Through his TV sons, Fred found the chance to express his love for his son. Through Fred, I found the chance to experience a father-son relationship, which I eventually had with my real dad. And through the Douglas family, a lot of people found that many of life's difficulties could be conquered with a lot of warmth and a little humor.

How much of that is miraculous? I suppose it depends on where you are in life, and how much of a miracle you need. For me, Fred MacMurray was the miracle I needed.