

KOVACS
ERNIE

1958

ERNIE KOVACS —what a husband!

By EDIE ADAMS KOVACS

AS TOLD TO JOHN M. ROSS



A wife's-eye view of the wacky wonder boy of TV and Hollywood

ERNIE KOVACS IS like one of those tricky, double-illusion pictures that comes in a box of candy or cereal. What you see depends on how you look at him.

Meeting him for the first time on the television or movie screen, his strong features, smart-aleck manner, bold mustache and smoldering cigar might strike terror in a fair maiden's heart.

With me, it's different. My heart flutters when he walks into the room. I buy his cigars to make sure he's never without one. And on occasion I've even begged him not to shave off that mustache. But, that's love for you. I'm his wife!

Of course there was a time when I tried to get away from this man by fleeing to another continent—the climax to the biggest spat of our courtship

days. I told Ernie I wasn't sure about marriage—and for my punch line I announced I was sailing for Europe.

"Go ahead, go to Europe!" he bellowed, dramatically. "Go to Afghanistan or Hightstown, New Jersey, if you like! Who cares?"

But then he showed up at the boat loaded down with flowers, perfume, candy and all the standard peacemaking props. It was a little broad, but touching, too. My heart melted a little, and a big emotional scene followed—right there in front of all my relatives. But I clung to my plans for the trip. I figured it would be our Big Test.

I found out quickly how much fonder absence can make the heart grow. Instead of staying in Europe six weeks, as planned, I remained three days

—three miserable days. And I spent most of that time on the transatlantic telephone, talking to Ernie.

This wild episode had a happy ending, however. Shortly after I returned—on September 12, 1954, to be exact—we were married in Mexico City in a ceremony that was in keeping with the Kovacs flair.

Most brides can carry the beautiful words of the marriage rite encased in their memory book for the rest of their lives. But, not this girl! Our ceremony was in Spanish, which neither of us understood. For all I knew, the judge could have been sentencing us to the gallows.

Only some elbow-nudging by former Ambassador Bill O'Dwyer, our host, which enabled us to respond with "Si" at the proper time, prevented the bit from becoming a comedy of errors.

But in Spanish, or in any other language, I took title to a husband who is the complete antithesis of the strange and zany characters he plays before the cameras. Gentle, kind and thoughtful, he's in love with his family and devoted to his home. There's one exception—he's just as funny around the house as he is on-stage. He sees humor in almost everything, and he points it out and shares it with others.

Sometimes he'll spend weeks searching for the perfect gag gift. Last year, I was shopping all over New York City for a leopard coat and I was unable to find exactly what I wanted. I mentioned this to Ernie in passing. The light bulb flashed in his mind. He thought it would be pretty funny to stroll into the house on my birthday with a real, live leopard on a leash and say: "Well, honey, I found a coat for you."

For days this top-secret project occupied most of his time—after all, he had no experience at renting leopards. He finally located a leopard cub through the curator of the Bronx Zoo, and was about to buy it when the man warned:

"I hope you don't have any children at home!"

That stopped him in his tracks—thank goodness.

For most occasions, however, Ernie is strictly sentimental. And often it's overwhelming. Last year, on our third wedding anniversary, Ernie was in Hollywood making his first movie—Columbia's *Operation Mad Ball*—and I was playing Daisy Mae in *Li'l Abner*, on Broadway. It promised to be a lonely day—but Ernie was way ahead of me. He hired a Mexican trio long distance and dispatched them to my dressing room at the St. James Theater. They also brought along shallow vases of floating gardenias, of which I had become so fond during our Mexican honeymoon. And then they serenaded me with all our favorite tunes—while I bawled.

Ernie also waxes sentimental when he's on the receiving end of a gift. On my abbreviated European jaunt, I bought him a pair of dueling pistols at the Paris Flea Market—a little gag of my own. This gift was the start of his antique weapons collection, which now has expanded to the point where it threatens to turn our home into a museum.

Ernie fusses over our apartment like a spirited beaver. I can't slip a new vase onto a corner table without him noticing and commenting on it. But gadgets are his passion. He's wired our apartment with an intercom network. (Continued on page 12)

As a patient in the dreary, roach-ridden charity wards, Ernie found he could make people laugh

(Continued from page 10)

The hi-fi has outlets in every room; telephones with push-button panels are everywhere; five TV sets operate by remote control. Those who've seen his original wiring schemes and controls can't agree whether it's the work of a genius—or a madman.

Ernie's tremendous drive—his capacity for work and his hunger for success—can be traced back to a near-tragic period of his life. He had been bitten by the acting bug early. In high school he took part in plays and operettas, and was good enough to win a scholarship to dramatic school. So he went to New York City to seek his fortune.

He was the typical small-town kid, subsisting on hopes and dreams and little more. He lived in a run-down, \$4-a-week rooming house on West 74th Street, and he was naive enough to become thoroughly shocked when the police raided the house one day and carted off the landlady and her several "daughters" who had been operating a slightly illegal business in the basement rooms.

He ate at the Automat for less than \$1 a week. On weekdays his dinner consisted of a dish of baked beans—a dime in those days. On Saturdays, he lived it up with a beef pie—a 15-cent special.

Ernie tells a hilarious, but pathetic, story of the days the pangs of hunger drove him to the brink of desperation. He was lapping up his daily ration of beans when a woman set down her tray at his table. He looked longingly at her roast beef, candied sweet potatoes and other goodies. The woman had barely touched her food when she suddenly got up and left. Ernie watched to make sure she was leaving; then he started for her plate—only to be beaten to it by the eager hands of a busboy. Ernie says it's the closest he's ever come to committing mayhem.

A job in summer stock at Brattleboro, Vermont, appeared to rescue Ernie—temporarily. Performing one play at night and rehearsing another by day, plus building sets, painting scenery, directing, stage-managing and the like, summer stock isn't exactly a vacation. But Ernie made the grind a little more strenuous with his penchant for poker.

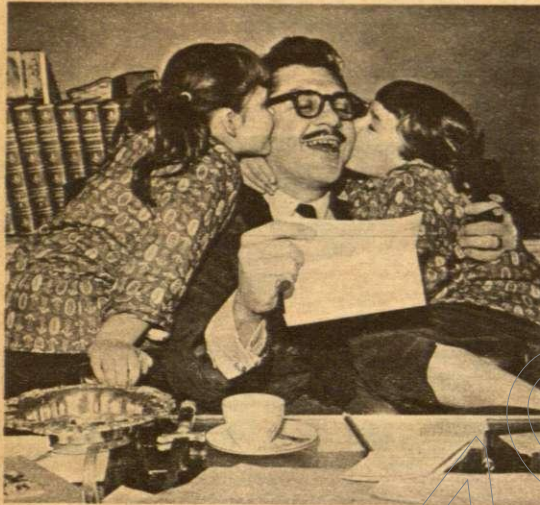
Poker has been Ernie's vice since he was 11. With him it's strictly a man's game—in Hollywood his "pals of the round table" were Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Eddie Fisher, Peter Lawford and Tony Curtis. He treats it as a game of endurance, rather than skill. Sessions have been known to run around the clock.

It was the same, even back in summer stock. The game would start after the final curtain at night and would continue until the rising sun shone through a pre-designated pane of glass in a back-stage window. At that point, the game would end and rehearsal for the new show would begin. Once he literally fell asleep on his feet.

Of course the pace caught up with him. He became seriously ill with pleurisy, and for the next 18 months he was shuffled from hospital to hospital as a charity patient. Several times he was near death, but his reaction was to poke fun at his desperate plight and trample on hospital rules and doctors' orders.

His first stop was at a hospital that formerly had been a prison. Roaches infested the wards. Mental patients were mixed in with the medical patients. Ernie says that one had to have a sense of humor to survive. He was not wanting. He operated the card game in the men's lavatory after "lights out."

And in the dreary wards he came to the realization he could make people laugh. He used the doctors for his straight men and missed few oppor-



Ernie and his daughters, who unwittingly saved Edie from being gifted with a leopard coat "on the hoof."

tunities for practical jokes. His daily newspaper, *The Lavabo Tribune*, was a satire on medicine, doctors and illness.

Once a week, he had a date for a fluoroscopy—a "living X ray" which permits observation of the infected lungs. This became great sport for Ernie. He would prepare for these sessions by taping tin foil letters on his chest, spelling out messages like: "Out to lunch!" or "What's up, Doc?" When he was called in for his examination, he'd remove his pajama top in the dark, step before the machine, and wait for the doctors to groan.

When he was transferred to a hospital, in the hills of New Jersey, Ernie, an ardent hunter, talked his father into disassembling a shotgun and bringing it to the hospital in a small package. Ernie succeeded in slipping out of the hospital with the package several times a week. He'd reassemble the gun in the woods and have his fill of hunting.

This went on for many weeks. One day, after a thorough examination, a doctor told him:

"Ernie, you're coming along fine. If you continue this progress, I think you'll be able to sit out on the lawn for a few minutes a day."

"Thanks, doc, I could use some air," he said.

Aside from his gambling, his pranks and his excursions into the woods, Ernie used the long recuperation period to gain an education that was to equip him for the variety of tasks he later tackled. He read two and three books a day and listened to recorded operas and classical music by the hour (I spent five years at the Juilliard School of Music, but his musical knowledge tops mine).

Fully recovered from his ordeal, he became a man-in-a-hurry. He dabbled as gag writer, newspaper columnist, disc jockey, special events broadcaster. Breaking into TV, he took on assignments singlehandedly that would have exhausted a sizable staff. At one point, he appeared on WPTZ, Philadelphia, 13 hours a week—mornings, afternoons and evenings—both local and network.

He'd write scripts for 1-minute skits, 5-minute skits, blackouts and the like. He'd run his own contests, do his own clerical work. He'd select the music, do the art work, set up camera gags. Often he even wrote the commercials. But he was happy doing it. In fact, when he was called to New York to star in various network shows, he continued to do almost everything himself.

Ernie never gets excited about a performance. When he was doing *Tonight*, he'd sit down at the typewriter a couple of hours before "curtain" and say, "Let's see now, what will we do tonight?"

Perhaps the best example of his uncanny capacity for work is his first book, *Zoomar*. He wrote the whole novel (500 manuscript pages!) in exactly 13 days. It became a best seller and soon will be made into a movie. Right now, though, he's busy at Columbia finishing up *Bell, Book and Candle* and getting started on *Miss Casey Jones*.

Ernie seems to do his best work when he is looking the deadline squarely in the eye. The trailer which Ernie wrote for the picture, *Operation Mad Ball*, won wide acclaim throughout the movie industry. How this creative bit was put on paper is almost unbelievable. For weeks Ernie had been telling the studio that the trailer script was finished. This was an absolute lie—he hadn't touched it.

Finally, with *Mad Ball* completed, but not the trailer, we were all packed and about to walk out the door for a vacation in Mexico, when the telephone rang. The studio man said he was sending a messenger out to pick up the script. Ernie, with hat and coat on, walked to the typewriter and wrote the script in 20 minutes.

I met Ernie in 1951, after I had sidetracked my plans for becoming a music teacher for a fling at show business. I had won the Miss U. S. Television contest of 1950, lost on Arthur Godfrey's *Talent Scouts*, and wound up as the girl vocalist on Ernie's TV show in Philadelphia.

It might have been love at first sight, although at the time, Ernie professed to hate all women. He had had a very unhappy marriage, and his only concern in life was his work and the welfare of his two young daughters. But after a few days he tendered a half-hearted invitation to dinner:

"I'm going out to eat. Are you going to eat?"

I accepted immediately.

The next day, Ernie bought a Jaguar, explaining he hated taxis and since he'd be taking me out he'd better do it in style. That was in 1951. I haven't had a date with anyone else since.

It wasn't always a smooth voyage in the beginning. Ernie used to rant and rave every time an engagement took me out of town. But once he decided he wouldn't be jealous of my career, there were no more problems. Now when I have to play out of town, he'll say, "Oh, you're going to Boston? Well, I'll bring the kids up for the week end and we can go to the beach and . . ."

Ernie takes his role of parent very seriously, but invariably winds up playing straight man to our two little girls—Betty, who's 11½, and Kippy, nine. He's made them so hep it's almost frightening. They know all the Kovacsian routines, all the punch lines. They go to dancing school with me for tap and ballet, and I handle their vocal training at home. They have uncanny rhythm and timing for kids their age.

Last year friends used to tease me about my weekly 6,000-mile round trips to spend a few hours with Ernie while he was in Hollywood and I was doing *Abner* in New York. But that's been the secret of our happiness—togetherness. Why, I've seen Ernie pass up an easy \$750 fee for sitting on the panel of *What's My Line?* just because he wanted to take me out to dinner.

We have lots of friends in Hollywood, where we have a home, and in New York, where we have a city apartment and a suburban home. Lots of varied interests. But we like each other best!