

Sounds on Ceiling Haunt Writer James Kirkwood

Thump, Thump, Thump,
Thump, Thump . . .

By DON LEE KEITH

If it weren't for his beard, James Kirkwood might be less of an author and more of a voice on television, selling spray deodorants or toothpaste. Maybe he'd still be an actor in soap operas, delighting the afternoon boob tube audiences.

He might not have written one of the year's finest novels, "Good Times/Bad Times." And that would be a pity.

But James Kirkwood has his beard. "All the time I was trying to finish the book, I kept getting calls to go into New York and do commercials. They pay a lot of money for those things, but I needed to be writing. With a beard, they would not hire me, and that way, I could go on writing."

He interrupted the conversation to glance at the ceiling of his French Quarter apartment, his residence while he's in New Orleans to cover the Clay Shaw trial for Playboy magazine. "Listen to that," he almost whispered.

Thump, thump, thump. A steady walking overhead, then an abrupt stop. More steady walking, another sudden stop. "I swear I'm not making this up," Kirkwood said with a laugh. "This goes on night and day. How can anyone keep that up all the time?"

The writer pushed his typewriter aside and leaned back in his chair to enjoy a cup of coffee and try to ignore the upstairs marching. For a man in his mid-thirties with a series of careers to rival the design of a crazy-quilt, he can seem curiously boyish, and perhaps this attitude of spontaneity has been a factor in the appeal of both his novels. "There Must Be A Pony!"—the story of a boy's insistent optimism despite the rigors of being the son of an actress—appeared several years ago with rave reviews which were surpassed a few months ago when his second novel was published by Simon and Schuster.

SECOND EVEN BETTER



JAMES KIRKWOOD

Cleveland Amory called "Good Times/Bad Times" the best novel by a young author since "Catcher in the Rye." Virtually every major publication printed their praises for the book, which, contrary to most cases, happened to be a second novel that was better than an excellent first one.

Both books involve murder; both are told in first person and from the viewpoint of youngsters. In truth, between the ages of 13 and 17, Kirkwood discovered five bodies, three of which were suicides. During this time, he was known to his friends as "The Body Finder."

"Murders," he said, "or why people commit such irrational acts when they're not really murders—that fascinates me."

"First person viewpoint? Well, that's because my enthusiasm for writing somehow becomes equated with telling an important story to a very good friend. It enables me to keep up my degree of enthusiasm without getting lost in a literary tale. It keeps me more interested than writing in the third person."

Inevitably, of course, his work is said to have a tinge of the Salinger touch. Kirkwood won't deny that "Catcher" may have exerted some influence. "But Holden Caulfield was a pessimist. Salinger's youths are in trouble, and their downfall is their own. With my people, they come out of their situations better."

His people have all been a part of his life. "Maybe the secondary characters are more amalgams; but the main ones I've kidnapped from real life. I may imagine them on to do things they actually didn't do. I may guide their actions. But basically, they're persons I've known."

The people James Kirkwood has known constitute quite a list—ranging from what might be a Who's Who of entertainment to sheet metal workers at Lockheed Aircraft plant.

He's been featured in more than a dozen Broadway and touring company shows, play-

ing with such actresses as Martha Raye, Imogene Coca, Kaye Ballard and Sylvia Sidney. He did a summer tour of "Welcome Darlings" with Tallulah Bankhead. His own play, "UTBU" (Unhealthy To Be Unpleasant) was produced on Broadway starring Thelma Ritter, and his first novel was adapted for the stage, featuring Myrna Loy.

NO CLIMB WITH ROZ

In fact, Kirkwood was signed for the part of Patrick Dennis in the original New York production of "Auntie Mame," but he was fired before he even rehearsed. "It was not done in a kindly way. It smarted for several years. Rosalind Russell is, indeed, a talented woman, but she would be well advised not to go mountain climbing with me," he says.

In addition to the stage, he has behind him a record of numerous television appearances

(including four years as the son of "Valiant Lady"), and for several seasons he toured the night club circuit as half of the comedy-satire team of Jim Kirkwood and Lee Goodman.

His non-acting credits include the following: doorman at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, sheet metal buckler, cowboy on a ranch, night mail clerk at the Waldorf Astoria, and radar man aboard a troop transport.

Add to these the title of best-selling author (the new book is an alternate for Book of the Month Club) and Kirkwood should qualify for a letter in versatility.

He tugged at the throat of his striped turtleneck sweater, got up to remove several books from the sofa (the apartment was piled with virtually every volume on the Kennedy assassination ever written) and finally settled again to light a cigarette and comment on the transition from actor to writer.

"Well, the soap opera I was doing was knocked off the air by a powerful quiz show.

"We were running out of

catastrophes anyway. I realized that television was moving, or had moved, rather, to California. Westward I went.

WHY GET UP?

"I lived high on a ridge atop a Hollywood hill, and it was interesting waking up in the morning to see if I could make out any landmarks down through the smog. Then one morning, it occurred to me to ask myself why I was getting out of bed. I'd been in California six months, and still no job. That morning, it struck me that there was a forelorn lack of dignity in not being allowed to work at my profession. When you must be given permission to work, it's rather like winning the turkey raffle and about as calming as a brisk game of Russian Roulette.

"I got to thinking: a composer can compose, a writer can write, a painter can paint. Every day. But an actor cannot give performances by himself—certainly not without attracting unfavorable comment from friends and neighbors, and gaining a reputation as a certified ding-a-ling.

"I figured if I couldn't act—well, I was pretty sure I could compose, equally certain I couldn't paint. Kitchens, yes; the sky, no. Then I thought hey, wait a minute. My handwriting is awfully bad, but I could always get a typewriter."

So, he enrolled in a writing course at UCLA, started a novel against the advice of the professor. And sure enough, as soon as he stopped caring if the telephone rang, it did. Offers for guest shots—on and on and on. Finally, he moved to a ranch in Amado, Arizona ("An area not exactly bursting with theatrical activity"), and completed his first novel, which was accepted for publication immediately.

"Suddenly I was a writer. Suddenly every day was, if not exactly Christmas, at least a joy to leap into for the pure and simple reason that I could do my work, rain or shine, without going through agents, casting consultants, directors, producers, whatever."

I CRIED FOR TWO

Not long afterwards, he adapted the novel for the stage. The rights were sold to the movies. Then, another short stint on the boards in person,

and he was back at the typewriter, working on his play, "UTBU." It opened on Broadway two nights after New York's famed transit strike began. "We closed in a week. I cried for two," he says.

Who is this peculiar fellow who mixes wit and philosophy in the same blender?

In the first place, he's the son of Lila Lee and James Kirkwood; two of the silent screen's most idolized. Pick up almost any anthology of that era and you'll see the senior Kirkwood wielding an iron-faced response to horrified extras. Meanwhile, Miss Lee was vying with Nita Naldi for the affections of Rudolph Valentino in "Blood and Sand."

After that marriage, young Kirkwood's father married four more times, and his mother, twice. The boy was shuffled between 18 different schools; both his parents' careers suffered severe dips; there was virtually no stability or home life.

He prefers to think of it as

an unusual childhood, even a fascinating one. "If I hadn't had it, if I hadn't been through those varied experiences, I doubt if I'd written a letter, let alone novels and plays.

"Also, at this stage in my life I'm enjoying a relatively happy adulthood. Too many people cling to their traumatic memories, use them as excuses for their grown-up miseries and behavior. I think we have to press on, not just sit around in the puddles of our past. Then, too, a well known writer once gave this definition of writing: Writing is turning one's worst moments into art — and sometimes, even money."

EARLIER, BETTER

For his own writing, Kirkwood prefers to start in the morning, usually in his beach home in East Hampton, N. Y. "The earlier, the better. The complete quiet of the morning is conducive. It's like the world hasn't caught up with me; problems aren't yet showering down on me. Most of my best work is done by eleven, because by the afternoon, I start fiddling around. And something else — I don't believe what some folks says about writing having to be torturous to be good. My best

work comes easiest. When I wrote the death scene for "GT/BT," you could have thrown a hand grenade in the room and I probably would never have blinked. I was that involved."

On critics: "The only thing to do to keep your sanity is to

be delighted when your efforts happen to connect with a critic. Sluff off the bad reviews."

On personal literary ambition: "I'd like to write an almost perfect little novel. A small and concise one. Mainly because I like to read them, and, too, I sometimes feel that the longer the book, the less the author has to say."

On other writers: "I admire Capote's ability, Mailer's energy and Maugham's story telling. Saleswise, few authors are as overrated as Harold Robbins and Irving Wallace."

Thump, thump, thump. The noise had started again. The overhead neighbor was at it once more. Kirkwood's face disfigured itself into a mock Bela Lugosi. But Kirkwood was too much of a clown to hold the expression. He broke into laughter and sent a gesture heavenward.

"Murders, bodies, gruesome details—all these I've seen and known. But that," he said as he lighted another cigarette, "that's a mystery I can't comprehend. You don't suppose it's a conspiracy?"

Thump, thump, thump.