



An Evening with Danny Kaye' at The American Century Theater

by [David Friscic](#) on July 21, 2014



Brian Childers IS the exact personification of Danny Kaye in the wonderfully amusing and slightly manic current production at The American Century Theater (TACT), *An Evening with Danny Kaye*. Childers bounded onto the beautifully-rendered concert style setting (a hallmark of TACT is above-par superior, authentic period detail and scenic design) and emanated the many and myriad details of Kaye's lively and intelligent persona. Utilizing every part of his limber body to achieve laughter, Childers progressed through a series of highly amusing patter songs, list songs, novelty songs, show tunes, Hollywood film songs, and various up-tempo numbers that kept the audience enthralled throughout ninety-minutes of almost complete non-stop physical movement.

This non-stop movement characterizes this delightful and literate musical evening (which is the fourteenth production of the Robert M. McElwaine Reflections Series, TACT's initiative designed to inspire and produce new and original stage works that compliment the company repertoire of important American musicals and plays from the 20th Century).

The history of this endeavor is fascinating in its immediate connection to the DC metro area and, especially, to the American Century Theater. Artistic Director Jack Marshall directed the first production when Childers played Kaye in a production entitled *Danny and Sylvia* (referring to Kaye's prolific songwriting wife Sylvia Fine) at the Writer's Center in Bethesda. That acclaimed production was written by Robert McElwaine and had a very successful run at the Writer' Center and moved to a new TACT production in Arlington going into its 2001-2002 Season. So outstanding was this production and interpretation by Childers that Childers won the 2002 Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Performance in a Resident Musical.

This brings us to this wonderful current production directed with vigor and style by Stephen Nachamie and accompanied by the outstanding Musical Direction of Jeffrey Biering. Legendary and innovative concert performances are the touchstone in this production which channels the manic personality of Kaye forcefully and intuitively into a series of highly amusing songs (with occasional patter). Master Carpenter Michael Salmi, Projections Technician Shayne Weyker and Lighting Designer Marc Allan Wright all have to be commended for recreating various components of a very authentic nightclub setting replete with small tables and chairs near the stage for Childers to engage the nightclub customers (in this case, the actual TACT audience!) in numerous one-liners and anecdotes. On the side and at the rear of the stage were brightly-lit colorful lobby cards that portray many of the films that Kaye starred in such as *White Christmas*, *The Five Pennies*, *Up in Arms*, and *Hans Christian Andersen*. On stage left is nice replication of a makeup table, dressing room and touring trunks-and on stage right is an impressive Grand Piano. At the top center stage is a very effective visual aid-a video screen that highlights the progression of Kaye's career from the Catskills circuit to European touring to Hollywood film stardom.

A decided highlight of the show was Childers' hilariously comic "list" song "Tchaikovsky" from the musical *Lady in the Dark*. Childers "brought the house down" with the song's endless verbal intricacy and accelerating speed. Childers evoked Kaye well as he reminisced about working with Gertrude Lawrence in the hit production and he even propelled himself into an intriguing rendition of Lawrence's famous trademark song "The Saga of Jenny."

Childers kept up the manic and disarming tone of Kaye's personality throughout the show and was especially vigorous and energetic in his rendition of the standard "Ballin' the Jack." During several of the songs, the thrust of the show became interactive as Childers plunged into the audience to sing segments of his songs to specific individuals. He effectively employed the device of encouraging the audience to join in the singing.

“The Gypsy Song” was very well-done and another strong point of the production as Childers sang each line with evident relish and flair. It often seemed as if Childers possessed elastic legs as he literally thrust his left and right legs out with lithe and limber aplomb—you could easily imagine you were actually viewing Kaye in person during several moments in the show, so convincing was Childers’ portrayal.

Childers’ presentation of Kaye at the London Palladium was superb with Childers projecting a radically witty rendering of Noel Coward’s “Mad Dogs and Englishmen.”

The concluding Hollywood component of the show had Childers singing a song from *The Court Jester*, reminiscing about costarring with Louie Armstrong in *The Five Pennies*, and an absolutely glorious suite of songs from *White Christmas*—including the title song, “Counting Your Blessings” and “Sisters”. From *Hans Christian Andersen*, Childers sang a suite of engaging songs including the title song, “Copenhagen,” “Thumbelina,” and “The Ugly Duckling.”

Childers concluded his show with a wistful and haunting rendition of “Anywhere I Wander” to loud applause and standing ovations.

One-person shows can be hard to pull-off—but this show is as successful as two of my favorites—Hal Holbrook’s *Mark Twain Tonight* and Elaine Stritch’s *At Liberty*. It is extremely emotionally gratifying to have Childers return to his “home” at TACT, after travelling so successfully all over the nation.

The appeal of a performer like Kaye is in his “larger-than-life” persona which was developed through years of hard work and experience performing on the Catskills circuit, the stage, concert halls, Hollywood, and television. Childers captures this “larger-than-life” persona while, concurrently, presenting all of the precise details and minutiae of Kaye that so endeared him to audiences everywhere.

This is a one-man show which will linger in your memory and in my memory forever.

Running Time: 90 minutes, with one 15-minute intermission.

An Evening with Danny Kaye plays through August 16, 2014 at The American Century Theater at Theatre II in the Gunston Arts Center-2700 South Lang Street, in Arlington, VA. For tickets, call (703) 998-4555, or purchase them [online](#).