

After 50 Christmases, Bob Hope's a regular-issue Santa

Yule special features Culkin, McEntire, AP gridiron team

by Suzanne Gill

"Let's put on a show!" That was the stock solution for bluesbusters from Mickey Rooney's Andy Hardy to South Pacific's Nellie the nurse. But, as any high school thespian will tell you, it's easier said than done.

Except when Bob Hope does it. For 50 years — ever since he came across the fledgling USO during World War II — Hope has been putting on shows for troops stationed at bases and aboard ships from Asia to the Middle East. And for four decades, he's been entertaining the civilian populace on television. In the opinion of the U.S. Air Force, Hope's earned his oak-leaf clusters, which are to be presented to him as part of this year's Christmas special, airing Wednesday, Dec. 18, on NBC.

Hope's on-screen producer is daughter Linda Hope, who seems to have the master chef's recipe for success close at hand as she draws up the guest list for one of her dad's specials.

"What I've been trying to do," she says, "is get some of the hottest people around in their respective fields. For this show, I wanted to have a child, because my dad works particularly well with children, and also because it's Christmas. So I said to myself, 'Who's the biggest child star around?' and Macauley Culkin of course comes to mind."

Typical of Hope guests, Culkin was eager to accept the invitation, but already rather busy with other commitments. Still, Hope is Hope, and a deal was struck with 20th Century Fox to spring the child actor from the set of "Home Alone 2" for a couple of days to do the Christmas show.

A few more phone calls and country music's Reba McEntire and Carolyn Sapp, Miss America 1992 ("My dad worked with her for a charity show in Florida about two months ago and thought she was a very talented young woman, and said, 'Let's see if we can get her for the Christmas show.'") were added to the roster for a show taped between Dec. 7 and 15 in Colorado Springs, Colo., the site of the U.S. Air Force Academy, and Nashville, Tenn.

Also featured this year is a tribute to comedian Redd Foxx ("because my dad loved Redd Foxx, and Redd went with him on a couple of those overseas Christmas tours") that includes a memorable sketch from the 1972 Christmas show that saw Foxx playing Santa.

An annual highlight is the singing of "Silver Bells," a latter-day holiday standard Hope introduced in

the 1951 movie "The Lemon Drop Kid." He's included it as a duet in 15 shows, and this year asked that wife Dolores, whose singing voice still earns well-justified praise, join him on the stage.

Because taping of the show would be completed just three days before its scheduled air date, with guests (including the Associated Press All American college football team) flying in from all over, producer Linda Hope has developed some contingency plans, but she says her father usually gets what he needs for a show — from guests to weather.

"My father has been really amazing with the weather," she recalls. "Last Christmas we were in Bermuda, and we were out on a beach doing a sketch which was the final piece of the show. All of a sudden, the rain came up. But we had everything set up, so we went ahead and did the thing, and we were just going to do it one more time to take off any rough edges, and we got through three quarters of it and it started raining, so we at least had everything in the can, as they say."

Although showman Hope has been heard to say that he puts himself in his daughter's hands during production of the television specials, she insists with a laugh that "he's being very kind, but he's the man who's been doing it all these years.

"I deal with the scheduling — the nuts and bolts part of it." She laughs again. "He's very cute to say that."

And now, for the fiftieth year and counting, on with the show.

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