

# I spy, you spy, we all spy for 'I Spy Returns'

By Ted Kuzlo

When asked what it was like to work with Bill Cosby again in "I Spy Returns," Robert Culp lets out the laugh of a mischievous little boy covered in mud.

Cosby and Culp reprise their roles as Secret Service agents in "I Spy Returns," Thursday, Feb. 3, on CBS.

"Everybody asks the same question, and it's very hard to answer, except to say that when we first worked together he taught me how to have fun. I taught him, and he taught me, but the thing he taught me, mostly, was how to have the most wonderful time imaginable. And it was like that all over again. It was like putting on an old suit, the best suit of clothes you ever had. And we had pure fun!"

And fun between two old friends is the strongest and most enjoyable part of this reunion. Although there may be too many "you're fat" and "you're old" jokes, Cosby and Culp have a great relationship that's a joy to watch. Unfortunately the plot seems fat and old.

In the film, Alexander "Scotty" Scott (Cosby) has retired from the sleuth business to teach. But when

he discovers that his daughter (Salli Richardson) is recruited to follow in his footsteps by his old friend and ex-partner Kelly Roblason (Culp), Scott confronts him to get her out of the business.

Kelly tries to offer comfort by explaining that his son (George Newbern) is accompanying Scott's daughter on her first mission, but that just worries Scott even more. Soon the experienced agents follow their rookie offspring and the two pairs take turns rescuing each other from evil spies.

The original series, which aired from 1965-68, earned Cosby three Emmys for his performance while Culp was nominated for both writing and acting.

"Bill, I think, put it better than anybody," Culp says. "Someone asked him 'What was it like to work with Culp again?' and his response was 'When I hear his voice I know exactly where I am.' And the same thing goes for me. There isn't any other way to put it."

"I Spy Returns" almost didn't get made; Culp explains "It's a long and tortured story.

"When Bill hit it big with 'The

Cosby Show,' he made a deal with Warner Brothers for features. Warner Brothers thought that the most logical thing for him to do was 'I Spy'; this was going to be a big \$20 million picture!

"The deal was that I was to write and direct. Well, two years later, and four scripts later — two of theirs and two of ours — we couldn't agree on anything. They hated the scripts we came up with and we hated the ones they came up with because they didn't understand what 'I Spy' was all about. (Cosby and I) just sadly parted company, and (Warner Brothers) wasted a lot of money. This was '87.

"Well, then it fell into limbo, and Bill was busy and I was busy, and yet Jeff Sagansky, the guy who runs CBS, heard about (the project) and said, 'I want that one,' and he just kept after it and after it until it became a reality."

Culp explains that people often attribute Cosby and Culp with the reinvention of the so-called buddy film. But he thinks they may have actually created the genre.

"When anybody looks back on it," Culp says, "there never was a buddy movie before, outside of 'Gunga Din'; the father of the concept in film, the first time it was really successfully brought off. The only other example is Laurel and Hardy.

"And as a matter of fact, Bill and I both worshipped Laurel and Hardy, and there were some deliberate references to them in the stuff that we did (in the original series), as we made it up going along. ('I Spy Returns') was the same thing."

The smoothness and wittiness of Cosby and Culp's dialogue is one of the foundations of "I Spy Returns," probably because it's real.

"It's very hard to write dialogue for Bill and me" he says. "Nobody's ever been able to do it except me. The scripts I wrote for 'I Spy' — we never changed a word. We did it the way it was because I had honed it and honed it and honed it until it was fun and also plithy.

"But the rest of the time, when we found scenes that we couldn't make work for us, we just threw them out, and said 'What is this scene about' and then we'd turn the camera on and wing it."

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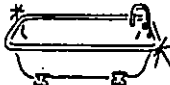
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