



Captain Nice

*The Short and Happy Flight
of America's Insecure Superman*

by Dan Hagen

"Watch out for the fallout!" Carter called. "I'm going to take the potion!"
"Do it, boy!"

There was a blinding explosion! A cloud of smoke billowed up from behind the couch! A sulphurous odor filled the air! Then a figure, choking, eyes tearing, stepped from the smoke. It was:

Captain Nice!

He spread his arms, lifting his cape, revealing the lettering on the chest of his red, white and blue uniform. His muscles bulged, his jaw jutted, his steely eyes glinted.

"And to think!" Mrs. Nash murmured. "A moment ago, that was my finky son, Carter!"

"It's still me, Mother," Captain Nice said. "No matter what I become, I'll always be your son."

— William Johnston, *Captain Nice* paperback novel (1967)



On the evening of January 9, 1967, NBC viewers were treated for the first time to these sprightly, though not deathless, lyrics:

Look! It's the man who flies around like an eagle.
Look! It's the enemy of all that's illegal.

Look! At the muscles on those arms, they're like hammers.

Look! It's the nut who walks around in pajamas.
That's no nut, boy, that's Captain Nice.

Nice! Nice! Nice! Nice! Nice!

The theme song was written by Brooklyn-born composer Vic Mizzy, who'd also penned the catchy themes to *Green Acres* and *The Addams Family*. Mizzy didn't find *Captain Nice* funny, and the show's creator Buck Henry, in turn, didn't care for Mizzy's theme song. He'd have preferred to punctuate his comedy with an instrumental theme, like the one Irving Szathmary had written for Henry's other parody sitcom, *Get Smart*.

ABC's *Batman* had become TV's surprise hit the year before, a fact not lost on the other two networks. Debuting the same night

(TOP) Able to bend steel in his bare hands! William Daniels in a publicity photo for *Captain Nice*. © NBC. (ABOVE) Jack "King" Kirby's promotional poster for NBC's *Captain Nice*. Courtesy of The Jack Kirby Collector. © NBC.

as *Captain Nice*, actor Stephen Strimpell gained the strength of a thousand men and the ability to fly in another Superman spoof, the CBS sitcom *Mr. Terrific*. Pretty much a yawn.

Captain Nice ran opposite CBS's sitcom *The Lucy Show* and ABC's World War II adventure *Rat Patrol*. The critics ran from cold to lukewarm to warm, at least preferring the show to *Mr. Terrific*.

In the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, Bob Hull said *Captain Nice* and *Mr. Terrific* were "embarrassing likenesses in theme,

costume and gag." But both the *Boston Globe* and the *Detroit Free Press* used the phrase "Nice is nicer."

In the *New York Times*, George Gent said *Captain Nice* "...at least gave some evidence of a sense of style." In the *Washington Evening Star*, Bernie Harrison called the show smartly written, brisk, and ingenious.

In retrospect, it's clear that NBC had the fresher approach. "The show was just irreverent enough to make it work both as spoof and super-hero," recalls fan Chuck Rothman. "Carter was never as dumb as Maxwell Smart, but often had problems trying to live up to the super-hero lifestyle."

Buck Henry, in creating his clever but largely unappreciated show, anticipated with comic effect something that might happen in real life if some masked, super-strong fellow were to fly around doing good deeds.

We imagine helpless, grateful citizens being overawed, and look-up-in-the-sky-ing, but very, very quickly we'd get used to him, just as we get used to every impossible thing that happens—men landing on the Moon, Japanese nuclear reactors poisoning the Pacific, walking around with *Star Trek* communicators in our hands, and so forth.

Henry's satire was deft. I remember laughing at an episode in which a highway bridge, ruined by corrupt contractors, collapses during its dedication ceremony. When police chemist Carter Nash (William Daniels) appears as Captain Nice to catch the bridge and save the day, the mayor wonders if he wouldn't mind just standing there to support the bridge permanently.

Cheryl Spoeher, a fan of *Captain Nice*, recalls, "I loved the way he defended the whole concept of comic-book heroes, as well as showing how a real person might be if they got powers. He never liked the taste of his super-serum, often getting a stomach ache from it... and he was the only sane and moral man in his hometown."

A couple of decades after the show's early demise, Daniels put it down to the audience's inability to cheer for an "insecure Superman." But after all, Henry's *Get Smart* featured an inept super-spy and ran five seasons. Later, Daniels said CBS's decision to air *Mr. Terrific* a half-hour before NBC's *Captain Nice* really hurt both shows.

Mr. Terrific starred Strimpell as Stanley Beamish, a filling-station operator whose unique biochemistry permitted him

FAST FACTS

Captain Nice

- ▶ **No. of seasons:** One
- ▶ **No. of episodes:** 15
- ▶ **Original run:** January 9, 1967–August 28, 1967
- ▶ **Primary Cast:** William Daniels, Alice Ghostley, Ann Prentiss
- ▶ **Created by:** Buck Henry
- ▶ **Network:** NBC

to pop a government-developed power pill and become a flying, super-strong secret agent for a maximum of 100 minutes.

To the general audience, both *Mr. Terrific* and *Captain Nice* were obviously Superman parodies. But the two protagonists also resembled a largely forgotten DC Comics superhero, Hourman. He, too, had gotten his time-limited powers of strength and speed from a wonder drug. In fact, both sitcoms were sometimes criticized because of America's growing uneasiness about drugs.

With the *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman!* musical having just closed on Broadway and four live-action superheroes (*Batman*, *The Green Hornet*, *Captain Nice*, and *Mr. Terrific*) on TV's three networks, maybe it was just a case of "capelash," as one wit suggested.

But in fact, Daniels' "insecure Superman," played for laughs, anticipated the evolution of less campy super-hero stories in later decades.

Publicity photo of *Captain Nice* stars William Daniels and Ann Prentiss. © NBC.



Writers would wonder: What if the superhuman protagonist wasn't a pure moral paragon, but had ordinary human hang-ups like most people—dominated by his mom, nervous around women? The concept had dramatic legs, and Marvel Comics under writer/editor Stan Lee was headed in the same direction at the same time. Writer/producer Stephen Cannell explored that same territory more than a decade later with *The Greatest American Hero* on ABC [which writer Dan Hagen also covered in these pages, in *RetroFan* #5—ed.].

Henry saw to it that *Captain Nice* had a satiric point, whereas *Mr. Terrific* pointedly did not.

"They kept saying 'Do another series!' so I said, 'Okay, superhero,'" Henry told Jim Benson on *TV Time Machine*. "It's something we all grew up with. And you know, I knew where the jokes would be."

Henry knew the face of the actor he wanted to play Carter Nash, if not his name—that guy who had played stuffy child welfare worker Albert Amundson in the 1965 film *A Thousand Clowns*.

He turned out to be William Daniels, a busy actor who'd appeared on Broadway even in his teens in the long-running play *Life with Father*. Daniels had received the Obie Award for Distinguished Performance by an Actor in Edward Albee's 1960 off-Broadway play *Zoo Story*.

And so it was that Daniels left the cast of the Broadway musical *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* and flew to Hollywood to film his first TV pilot, *Captain Nice*. Afterward, he got on an Air France jet to Paris to appear in the Stanley Donen film *Two for the Road* with Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney.

Joining Daniels in the *Captain Nice* cast was Alice Ghostley, best known to TV audiences as the insecure witch Esmeralda on *Bewitched*. She was much surer of herself as Carter's mom.

When Carter resigned from the police lab on principle, his mother was full of sympathy. "What is it, dear?" she asked. "You haven't eaten a thing since you lost your job and began feeling like a worthless failure."

Playing love interest Sgt. Candy Kane was Ann Prentiss, who closely resembled her sister, actress Paula Prentiss.

Big Town Mayor Finney was played by Liam Dunn, who went on to turn in classic comic performances in *Blazing Saddles* and *What's Up, Doc?* William Zuckert was cast as Chief of Police Segal. Byron Foulger "appeared" as Carter's father (Why the quote marks? Because the out-of-touch character always had his head buried behind a newspaper).

Coggled and caped, the super-hero was visibly a little embarrassed, but remained plucky. Captain Nice could catch bullets, punch through walls, survive artillery blasts, and fly around the world in under an hour.

"You know I can't fly at night," he once remarked. "I don't have wing lights."

"Well, it had Buck Henry, and he would take a script, go into a room, and make it funny," recalled Daniels in an interview with Will Harris. "He was a terribly gifted comic writer."

Daniels once got his head banged into a wall while flying, and that wasn't the only mishap.

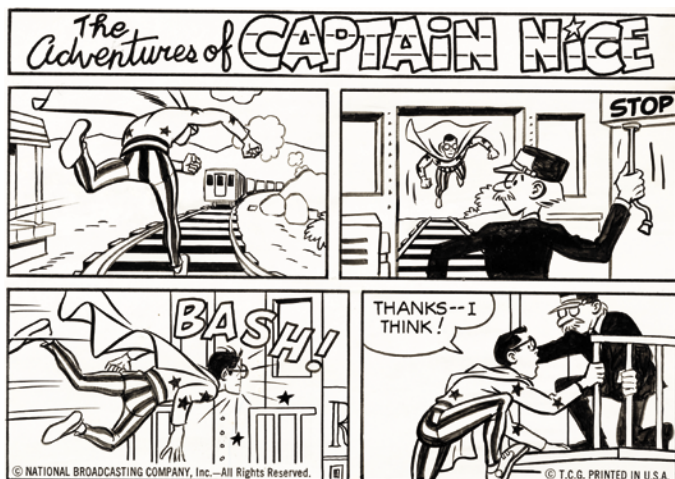
"There was a scene where I supposedly knock down a door and come charging in, and I was standing next to the director, right near the door, when they were practicing it. And suddenly they blew out the door, and it makes a tremendous noise. And



Publicity photos of Daniels' derring-do as Captain Nice, and (INSET) as the hero's alter ego, Carter Nash. © NBC.

I had a ringing in my ears that went on for a couple of days, so I finally went to a doctor, who said, 'Well, sure, you've got a ringing: They broke your eardrum!' I said, 'Well, how do you know?' He said, 'Because there's blood in there!' [laughs] So he says, 'You're going to lose some of your [hearing] highs.' Which I have."

"Unfortunately, Captain Nice was no stronger a personality than Carter Nash was normally—shy, unassuming and mother-dominated," observed *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows*. "In fact, if it had not been for his mother, who demanded that her son wage war on the evil forces that constantly threatened society, he would not have gotten actively involved in fighting crime at all. The sight of Captain Nice trying to maintain his composure while flying over Big Town (he had an acute fear of heights) in his baggy, moth-eaten, red-white-and-blue leotards (made for him by his mother) did not exactly terrify evil-doers."



Still, Captain Nice managed to keep Big Town safe from its un-terrified criminals for 15 witty episodes:

Episode 1: The Man Who Flies Like a Pigeon

Airdate: January 9, 1967

Synopsis: Unassuming police scientist Carter Nash doesn't want to use his super-power formula on himself, but can't convince anybody else of its value. Finally he must become "Captain Nice" to save Sgt. Candy Kane and stop the criminal Chameleon (which, oddly enough, was also the name of the first super-criminal Spider-Man fought).

Trivia: The super-hero's *nom de guerre* comes from Carter's spur-of-the-moment attempt to explain away the initials "CN" on his belt buckle.

Episode 2: How Sheik Can You Get?

Airdate: January 16, 1967

Synopsis: Captain Nice saves a visiting Arab dignitary from assassination, but then the man wants to make Candy Kane his 120th wife.

Quote: Captain Nice: "This is a democracy, Mr. Ibid. We can arrest people for practically anything."

Episode 3: That Thing

Airdate: January 23, 1967

Synopsis: While stopping jewel thieves, Captain Nice breaks a bottle of his super-formula, which is ingested by a hungry caterpillar. The super-hero and the military are unable to stop the gigantic insect's rampage, and fear it will become a super-butterfly. But then Captain Nice super-charges his pet parakeet, which consumes the caterpillar.

Quote 1: Dr. Von Keppel (Johnny Haymer): "I am a scientist, and if there's one thing I don't joke about, it's caterpillars!"



(LEFT) Original art by Wallace Wood for a comic to appear as part of Topps' proposed Captain Nice trading card set. The project went no further than test cards. Courtesy of Heritage. © NBC. (BELOW) One shot was all he got! The photo covers and the first page (with Joe Certa art) from Gold Key Comics' *Captain Nice* #1 and only (Nov. 1967). © NBC.



Quote 2: General Rock Ravage (Frank Maxwell): "Time's not the answer here, boy! It's bombs!"

Episode 4: That Was the Bridge That Was

Airdate:

February 6, 1967

Synopsis:

When a new bridge collapses during its dedication, Captain Nice is on hand to prevent disaster. Discovering that the crooked contractors have used oatmeal instead of concrete,

the super-hero must rescue Mayor Finney, whom the crooks have kidnapped.

Episode 5: The Man with Three Blue Eyes

Airdate: February 20, 1967

Synopsis: Ex-con "Big Joe" Kowalski dies before he can tell anyone where he cached the \$2 million he stole, and criminals decide to kidnap a charlatan mentalist whom they think can find it for them.

Trivia: This episode introduces the Great Medula, played by veteran character actor John Dehner (who was the voice of Paladin on radio's *Have Gun Will Travel*).

Episode 6: Is Big Town Burning?

Airdate: February 27, 1967

Synopsis: Captain Nice corrals an arsonist (Vic Tayback) who threatens to expose his secret identity to keep Carter from testifying against him.

Episode 7: Don't Take Any Wooden Indians

Airdate: March 6, 1967

Synopsis: Poison darts fly when a disgruntled South American explorer plots murder against his financial backer.

Episode 8: That's What Mothers Are For

Airdate: March 13, 1967

Synopsis: Because Captain Nice is so good at catching criminals, the Big Town City Council decides it doesn't need a police force any longer, and fires Carter. In revenge, Carter's mom hides his Captain Nice costume and super-formula so that the city will be left at the mercy of crooks.

Episode 9: Whatever Lola Wants**Airdate:** March 20, 1967

Synopsis: Carter is annoyed by the loud nightclub located next to his lab. Actually, the music is being used to disguise the noise being made by criminals who are tunneling into the city jail to free a fellow crook. When Carter intervenes, he's slipped a pill that makes him appear to be drunk.

Episode 10: Who's Afraid of Amanda Wolf?**Airdate:** March 27, 1967

Synopsis: A guest in the Nash home, Amanda Wolf (Madlyn Rue), is willing to testify against crime boss Mr. X, but Carter must fend off both her romantic attentions and an attack by the gang.

Episode 11: The Week They Stole Payday**Airdate:** April 3, 1967

Synopsis: Can Captain Nice recover the stolen Big Town city payroll while saving his mom and Candy Kane from kidnappers?

Trivia: Victor French and Pat Harrington, Jr. guest star.

Episode 12: Tastes Okay, But Something's Missing**Airdate:** April 10, 1967

Synopsis: Criminal Harry Houseman (Simon Oakland) holds Carter and his mother hostage while his gang loots the post office. How can Captain Nice stop them when he's run out of a key ingredient for his secret formula?

Episode 13: May I Have the Last Dance?**Airdate:** April 17, 1967

Synopsis: When Candy tries to clear Carter of a theft charge, Captain Nice finds he must round up a gang of female fur thieves disguised as a dancing school.

Episode 14: One Rotten Apple**Airdate:** April 24, 1967

Synopsis: Who's trying to kill egotistical nightclub owner Lloyd Larchmont (Bob Newhart)? Candy and Carter try to find out, despite the interference of Carter's mom.

Trivia: Charles Grodin and Jo Ann Worley also guest star.

Episode 15: Beware of Hidden Prophets**Airdate:** May 1, 1967

Synopsis: Medula returns to help Captain Nice capture a gang of art thieves.

Trivia: Joseph Campanella also guest stars as the criminal mastermind Kincade.

Quote 1: Medula (gazing into his crystal ball): "I predict there's a 50-50 chance that one well-known nation—which, for political reasons, I cannot name—will go to war with another nation, also unnamed, possibly within the next few years or a while after that..."

Quote 2: Candy: "Don't try anything or I'll fire a couple of warning shots right into your leg."

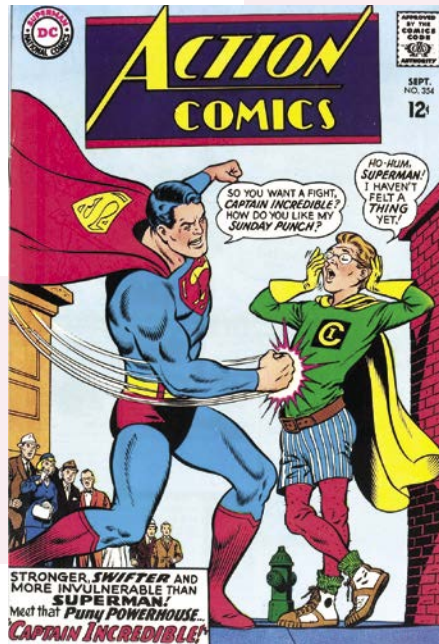
Kincade: "Sergeant, maybe we can make some kind of a deal."

Candy: "I don't make deals with thieves and hoodlums."

Kincade: "Why not?"

Candy: "Gee, I don't know. I just don't."

Quote 3: Medula: "To a metaphysician, nothing is impossible if he has three things: profound concentration, complete faith in his own ability, and a switchblade hidden in his back pocket."



Although *Captain Nice* was a short-lived series, the character inspired this DC Comics take-off in *Action Comics* #354 (Sept. 1967). TM & © DC Comics.

Despite its brief run, *Captain Nice* inspired both a Gold Key comic book and a Tempo paperback novel.

Things came full circle in July 1967 when *Action Comics* #354 (cover-dated Sept. 1967) hit the newsstands. The cover showed Superman powerless to defeat a skinny super-hero called Captain Incredible. The character was Superman editor Mort Weisinger's wink at Captain Nice and Mr. Terrific, and the issue was published just as the last reruns of both sitcoms were being aired.

"William Daniels went on to have a distinguished career, with *Knight Rider* and *St. Elsewhere* being two of his TV successes," Will Murray noted in Michael Eury's book *Hero-A-Go-Go: Campy Comic Books, Crimefighters, and Culture of the Swinging Sixties*. "Strimpell's acting career languished over the next two decades, but [he] is today remembered as an excellent acting teacher. Coincidentally, both former TV rivals appeared in the 1976 TV miniseries, *The Adams Chronicles*."

Although he left the role of Captain Nice behind in 1967, Daniels played a hero again, more than once. In the Broadway musical and film 1776, Daniels' songs and speeches as John Adams rang out like the Liberty Bell. He went on to portray both John Quincy Adams and Samuel Adams as well.

"I have now played every important member of the Adams family, except for Abigail," Daniels noted dryly.

And when he ended his seven-year run on the hit sitcom *Boy Meets World*, Daniels, as Mr. Feeny, gave his now-grown students some final words of advice that were worthy of the super-hero he once was:

"Believe in yourselves. Dream. Try. Do good." 🦋



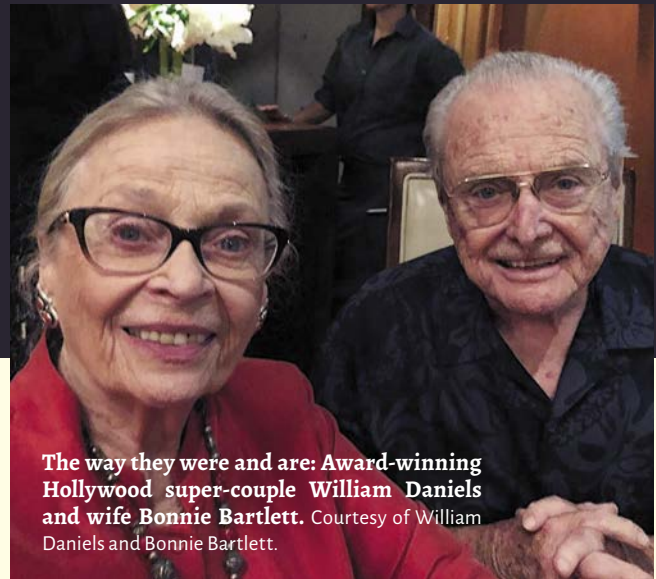
DAN HAGEN, a writer who's a former central Illinois newspaper editor and university journalism instructor, has won numerous awards from the Associated Press, United Press International, the Southern Illinois Editorial Association, and the Illinois Press Association, as well as the Golden Dozen

Award for Editorial Writing from the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors. He's written articles for several magazines in the U.S. and Great Britain, as well as for Marvel Comics and NPR.

William Daniels *and* Bonnie Bartlett

by Dan Hagen

RETRO
INTERVIEW



The way they were and are: Award-winning Hollywood super-couple William Daniels and wife Bonnie Bartlett. Courtesy of William Daniels and Bonnie Bartlett.

He's been, among other things, John Adams, the Graduate's dad, a super-hero, a surgeon, and the voice of a car.

Born in Brooklyn in 1927, William Daniels was a child performer from the age of three who, in 1960, earned critical acclaim and an Obie Award in Edward Albee's play *Zoo Story*.

He's had notable roles in numerous memorable movies, including *A Thousand Clowns* (1965), *The Graduate* (1967), *The President's Analyst* (1967), *Two for the Road* (1967), *Marlowe* (1969), and *The Parallax View* (1974).

Daniels originated the role of John Adams in the 1969 Broadway musical *1776*, and played the part again in the 1972 film version.

His starring TV roles included *Captain Nice* (1967), Mr. Feeny in the ABC sitcom *Boy Meets World* (1993–2000), and two TV series at once during the Eighties. Daniels was Dr. Mark Craig in the critically

acclaimed *St. Elsewhere* (1982–1988) and the distinctive voice of KITT the supercar in the popular *Knight Rider* (1982–1986). Daniels won two Emmys for *St. Elsewhere*, and Bonnie Bartlett—who has been Daniels' wife since 1951—also won one. He was president of the Screen Actors Guild from 1999 to 2001.

"When strangers recognized me in public they still didn't know my name, but they remembered the uptight doctor in that hospital show," Daniels recalled in his memoir *I'd Rather Be Elsewhere*. "It's an odd way to live, but there are many actors and actresses who have had the same experience. ... We don't end up on the cover of *People* magazine. But many of us without name recognition make a fine living, put our kids through college, and, if we're lucky, enjoy long careers precisely

because we can play many different kinds of roles. We're not typecast. That's the reason I am still working in my late 80s.

"As a character actor I became a star, but a very small one, and I saw time and again how the big stars—the leading men—surrounded by sycophants, lost their sense of reality and then lost everything: their families, their marriages, and, in some cases, their lives."

RetroFan: Are your grandchildren aware that you were once a comic-book super-hero?

William Daniels: I don't...

Bonnie Bartlett: Yeah, Liam.

WD: Does Liam know that?

BB: Our son Michael showed Liam one of the *Captain Nice* shows. Mike found them somewhere and he showed them to him. And Liam loved it.

Was there a parrot you talked to on the show, Bill?

WD: Um-hm.

BB: Liam loved that, so he was very busy doing the parrot, and talking about the parrot.

WD: As I walked by, the parrot would say, "I love you," and I would reluctantly say to the parrot, "I love you, too."

RF: Somebody for the character to talk to, I guess. Batgirl had the same thing, oddly enough.

BB: Really? They probably stole it [laughter].

RF: My friend Cheryl described *Captain Nice* this way. She said it was *Get Smart* in reverse. Instead of a silly man in a high-level government spy organization, it was the only sane and rational man in a town full of foolish and corrupt people.

BB: That's funny. That's good.

WD: That's pretty good.

RF: That's one of the reasons I liked it, that he seemed to be the only sane person.

WD: [chuckling] Well, you know, Buck Henry wrote both those things. And he has a great sense of humor. I enjoyed very much working with him, or for him. And in *The Graduate*, too.

RF: *Captain Nice* was a Superman spoof, as you say. You would have been 11 years old in 1938 when Superman arrived, the perfect target audience. Did you follow the character in comics or on radio, or were you aware of it?

WD: I was just aware of it. No, I didn't follow it on any source.

BB: No, he was too busy working. Bill doesn't know any of the movies of the time. I went to the movies. He never went to the movies. He was working.

RF: What did you think about the fact that *Mr. Terrific* aired at virtually the same time as your show?

WD: Well, it was one of those things where the networks were fighting against each other. We were, I think, in rehearsals when we heard that suddenly CBS decided to do this *Mr. Terrific*. And that would have been all right, but they scheduled its first



(TOP) Daniels as TV super-hero Captain Nice, from the back cover of the 1967 comic book *Captain Nice* #1. (BOTTOM) CBS-TV's competing caped crusader, *Mr. Terrific*. Captain Nice © NBC. *Mr. Terrific* © Universal Television.



Daniels as John Adams and the cast of the Broadway musical *1776* with President Richard M. Nixon after a special 1971 performance in the White House's East Room. White House Photo Office.

showing a half-hour before ours. We were NBC, and they were CBS. So I think it was kind of two networks fighting with each other.

RF: It probably hurt the reception of both shows.

WD: It didn't help either one of those shows.

RF: What is your overall impression of *Captain Nice*, looking back now?

WD: You know, we're going back a long way. I thought it had some amusing writing. Buck Henry is a talented guy that way. He was the producer-writer. Looking back now... I haven't given it much thought [laughs].

BB: I can tell you all about it. He had a very good time doing it. He loved doing it, he loved Buck, he loved all the people that were working on it. He loved Alice Ghostley. And the guy who played the [mayor], Liam Dunn. Anyway, Bill really had a good time.

RF: Alice Ghostley was a very forceful mother for Carter Nash, and you had a forceful mother, too, right?

WD: Yeah, but Alice was, I thought, a wonderful comedienne. My mother wasn't a comedienne [laughs]. My mother was an ambitious woman with her kids, and put us both into show business.

RF: Is flying an uncomfortable business?

WD: Only when they first put me up straddled on pulleys, and ran me across the studio and banged my head into the wall on the opposite end.

RF: Ouch.

WD: That wasn't very funny. They were filming it just for the opening credits, I guess.

BB: I [also] had to fly for three days or something for a commercial, and it was frightening. They almost destroyed my

whole pelvic region there. Oh, Christ Almighty!

WD: It wasn't fun being in those...

BB: No, they were not comfortable!

RF: I read an interview in which Buck Henry said he felt he'd let down a very talented cast because the show didn't last longer. What did you think of that?

WD: No, I think that, as I said, the networks... As soon as CBS heard we were doing this *Captain Nice*, they put together, quickly, this *Mr. Terrific* in opposition to us.

St. Elsewhere (1982–1988) stars William Daniels, Ed Begley, Jr., Mark Harmon, and Ed Flanders. St. Elsewhere © MTM Productions.



And it hurt us, because it previewed the same night a half-hour earlier, you know. I think it hurt both shows.

RF: Boy, 1967 must have been one busy year for you. You had a TV series, *The Graduate*, and *The President's Analyst*.

WD: [chuckles] Yes, it was a very busy year.

BB: And then you went on to do a play.

RF: I'm sort of amused that you didn't want to be credited as the voice of KITT the car when everybody who heard it, including me, recognized you instantly.

BB: [laughs]

WD: First of all, there's a kind of a little story there. This was before this sort of thing was done—*A car that talks?*—and I read this and I thought, "This is ridiculous." [The producer] wanted me to come and tape a section of it and he'd take it to New York and plug it for producers. I had worked for this producer before, on a *Movie of the Week*, so I went over and I just kind of halfheartedly did it. And he went off and I forgot about it.

And then he called me and said, "We sold it! So, will you be willing to do it?" I said, "Well, you know I'm doing *St. Elsewhere*. He said, "I know you're doing *St. Elsewhere*. We'll just work around you. So my agent said, "Billy, you really can't ask for more than that." So I did *St. Elsewhere* and I'd go over there and do this part of the car. I think for an hour show it took me about 45 to 50 minutes to knock off my part of it. And I never did meet David Hasselhoff, who had the lead, until we had a Christmas party. I just knocked it off, and

I couldn't believe that it was a success, but it turned out to be!

RF: It did. Tell the story about the fan who asked you where you were in the car.

WD: Oh, God. I was doing a signing in England, outdoors, I remember, sitting at an outdoor table. And these poor people were paying like 15 pounds or something to get an autograph or a picture and a signing. And this one man—he looked very well put-together, mid-thirties, I suppose—and he said, "Excuse me, sir, may I ask you something?" I said, "Sure." I was signing his thing, and he said, "Where were you in the car when you did the voice?" So I looked up and I said, "You mean, was I under the hood?" [laughter] He said, "Yeah," and he was serious. So I had to inform him that I was really in a studio, and he kind of left sort of disappointed.

RF: The poor guy. You know, I sometime see in your roles a sharp note of authority and intellect. What do you think is the source of that?

BB: He has it. Bill has no education, and it wasn't until he came to Northwestern that I kind of taught him how to just go to school. He'd never really gone to school. I just taught him how to. By the time he was finished at Northwestern, he was writing wonderful, wonderful papers. He got a scholarship to get a master's.

He has one of those—I don't know what you call it, a kind of a hidden intellect. It's like he never thought about

it, it never occurred to him. A lot of people who are intellectual like to flout it. But he would come up with the damndest things, just out of the blue, and I would look and say, "Oh, God, that's pretty good!"

RF: It comes off as very genuine on screen, the intellect. On *Boy Meets World*, I always thought of Mr. Feeny as [The Paper Chase's] Prof. Kingsfield for kids. You know, John Houseman?

BB: Oh, yes! That was wonderful.

WD: Oh, yes, yes. It was more in that area, although I didn't fashion myself off of him or anything like that.

BB: No, but it was that kind of thing. The wonderful thing you see is that the kids responded to that.

RF: They do. To both you and Houseman. People are looking for that kind of thing, I think, in many ways. You modeled the value of education in *Boy Meets World*. It's sort of under assault in America now, and I wanted to hear your thoughts on that, if I could.

WD: Well, I'll tell you a little story. When this part was offered to me, I went to the producer, and I said, "This is a teacher, and he has a kind of funny name, Mr. Feeny." And I said, "I don't want to make fun of a teacher." I said, "I think they're very important for society and they're totally underpaid."

And he assured me, the producer said, "Bill, I had a teacher in high school who became a mentor of mine. I had a great deal of respect for him, and I based this part on my reflections about him.

(FAR RIGHT) Bill and Bonnie, stars of *St. Elsewhere*, at the 39th Emmy Awards' Governor's Ball on September 20, 1987. Emmy photo courtesy of Alan Light. (RIGHT) Mad about each other! The couple's *St. Elsewhere* roles of Dr. Mark Craig and Ellen Craig were lampooned by writer Frank Jacobs and artist Mort Drucker in "St. Healthscare," appearing in *MAD* #281 (Sept. 1, 1988). *MAD* TM & © EC Publications. Courtesy of Heritage.



So this part is going to be treated very respectfully, and not made fun of.” And I said, “Well, that’s fine.”

BB: And they had a lot of humor in it, there were a lot of funny things.

WD: Oh, sure, but never did it deride the profession.

RF: Right. I just watched the last scene of the show, and it really is touching.

WD: Oh, that, yeah. That was wonderful. He wrote a wonderful scene there, he set it up beautifully. I remember very well being moved myself by it, when they left the classroom and I said, “I love you all.” It was very moving for me as well.

RF: That was a perfect dramatic set-up, that Feeny said it only after they’d left. Would you say you owe part your success to the G.I. Bill, because that enabled you to attend Northwestern?

WD: Oh, yes, absolutely. And that’s where I met my wife, who got me through Northwestern! Because you know, I was a performer, so I seldom had much basic education. I went to a professional children’s school. And I’d just check in and say I had an appointment, then I’d go down to Chock Full o’ Nuts and have coffee and a doughnut and read the *New York Times* instead of going to the class. I had a very spotty education until I met her. She was head of her class.

RF: It was kind of brave of you to go to Northwestern when you’d had such a spotty education.

WD: I know.

BB: It never occurred to him.

WD: No, it didn’t.

BB: [laughing] It never occurs to him.

RF: He’s as brave as John Adams or Captain Nice, I guess.

WD: Yeah, I just stumble along from one thing to the next.

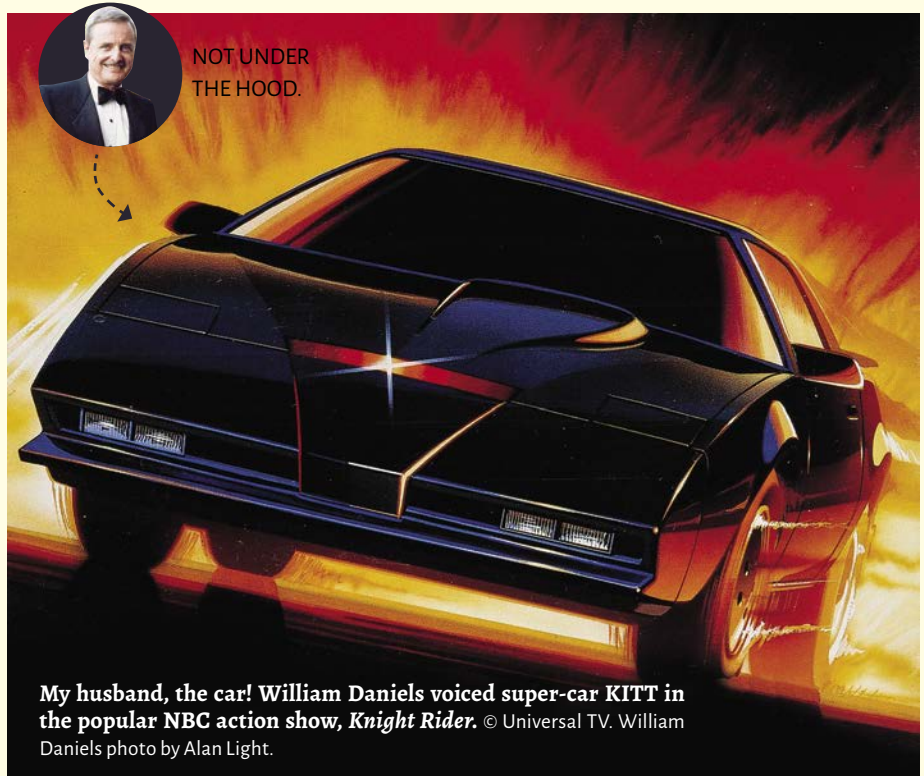
BB: That’s what he’s supposed to do.

WD: But anyway, that’s where I met Bonnie, and actually she taught me how to get through all this learning business. Writing essays, doing reading assignments, taking tests.

BB: But he’s basically, what do you call it? An autodidact?

RF: An autodidact, yes. Self-taught.

BB: He really went on from there.



My husband, the car! William Daniels voiced super-car KITT in the popular NBC action show, *Knight Rider*. © Universal TV. William Daniels photo by Alan Light.

RF: This is an off-the-wall question, but what’s your favorite Western, your favorite Western movie?

WD: Mmmmm. Probably anything that John Ford directed. Henry Fonda did one...

RF: *My Darling Clementine*.

WD: Yeah, *Clementine*.

BB: Wasn’t there *Red River*?

WD: *Red River* was Montgomery Clift. I loved that picture.

RF: What do you like about Westerns?

WD: I love them. They don’t do them anymore, not like they used to, when the studios were turning out all those Westerns.

RF: Somebody said—and I think there may be some validity in it—that the Western genre was sort of what the super-hero genre is now. Instead of cowboys, there are super-heroes.

WD: Maybe so.

BB: I think it’s people trying to say what is good and what is bad. They’re fairy tales.

WD: The cowboy movies were very realistic. Nowadays, these supermen things are just filled with special effects.

BB: The cowboy movies weren’t realistic. They *seemed* realistic.

WD: Well, they seemed so, given our understanding of what the West was like.

RF: People didn’t fly, anyway.

I think Westerns, private-eye things, police stories, and super-heroes—it’s all about good and evil, right?

BB: Sure, sure, sure. And that’s the reason you like to read a thriller is to catch the bad guy. We just watched something. Bill rarely will sit with me and watch something on television, but he got caught on a Belgian movie and wanted to find out who did it [the murder] [laughter].

RF: It occurred to me while reading your book—I imagine you can’t say the name “Michael” in a crowd without somebody thinking of KITT the supercar. [laughter]

BB: They love it. He did a commercial recently, and all he had to say was, “It’s the future, Michael.” [laughter]

RF: I don’t want to keep you too long. It is great to hear that incredible voice. [Daniels laughs] You must just thrill people, walking down the street and talking.

BB: He gets beautiful, beautiful, beautiful letters from fans. He really does.

RF: I bet. It’s been really great talking to you, and I thank you very much.

BB: Bye-bye.

WD: Oh, sure. Bye-bye.

BB (to Daniels): We have to go to the post office.

WD: All right, let’s go! 🐾