

## Film Review: *Gleason*

There's a scene in this 2002 film where Jackie Gleason's producer and agent frantically search for him in the **CBS Studios**, just minutes prior to a live performance of ***The Honeymooners***. *The Great One* is in his dressing room with the windows open to 57th Avenue below, and he's listening to the traffic. He says to his agent:

*"You hear that? Listen: You can get a cab on a Saturday Night. You know why? 'Cause everyone is at home in front of their televisions waiting to see me."*

He wasn't exaggerating. Jackie Gleason was a comedic genius. With the possible exception of John Cleese in ***Fawlty Towers***, *The Honeymooners* was the funniest and most original comedy show that's ever appeared on TV. Every witticism and gesture he made were hilarious, and every occasion offered an opportunity for a memorable wisecrack. He was always "**ON**." It's no coincidence the relationship between John Cleese and his wife in *Fawlty Towers* resembles that of *The Honeymooners*.



Gleason began doing *standup* comedy in New York nightclubs for little or nothing. Eventually, he emceed a stage show, where he was discovered by Jack Warner of **Warner Brothers**. His film debut ended abruptly because the writing was banal, and he battled with its director until he was fired. After drowning himself in booze for several months, he got his big break performing at the **Broadhurst Theater** on Broadway, where he was given artistic control and received great accolades. He was then offered the opportunity to host "*Cavalcade of Stars*" for the **Dumont Television Network**, where he originated *The Honeymooners*. From there, he was offered a prime time slot by Bill Paley at **CBS**.



***Honeymooners Set***

*The Honeymooner's* main character, **Ralph Kramden**, is a big baby who's never grown up. He drives a city bus in Manhattan, so he and his long-suffering wife **Alice** often struggle to pay their bills, but they "*get by*." As a result, he's constantly conjuring-up *get-rich-quick* schemes with his

upstairs neighbor, **Ed Norton** (Art Carney,) every one of which falls flat on its face each time. *Ralph* and *Alice* bicker a lot, but *Alice* always stands her ground and doesn't flinch at *Ralph's* threats to send her "**to the Moon one of these days.**" When there's been an argument, they always make up in the end with *Ralph* telling *Alice*, "**Honey, you're the greatest.**"



***Ralph & Alice Kramden***

Gleason admired Charlie Chaplain who retained complete control over every aspect of his films. When Gleason originally produced *The Honeymooners* for the **Dumont Television Network**, he insisted on total control, just as he later did when negotiating with **CBS**. He was given

control of writing, directing, producing, choreographing, and music. This was an unusual demand in those days, but it succeeded admirably. He was also an obsessive micro-manager, but the proof is in the pudding.

It's sometimes speculated that many comedians are inspired by emotional pain, and that was clearly true of Jackie Gleason. His father Herb abandoned his family in Brooklyn when Gleason was only eight, and Gleason later confessed to his agent that he had always believed he was the reason his father left them. For most of his life he was haunted by these feelings of abandonment. In reality, both parents drank heavily, and argued excessively. Their arguments probably inspired *Ralph and Alice Kramden's* bickering, except that *Ralph and Alice* loved each other.

After abandoning his family, Gleason's father lived just an hour's drive away in Connecticut. When Gleason eventually achieved stardom as an entertainer, his father reached out to him in a registered letter that brought him to tears and may have inspired him to take stock of his life. That letter shocked Gleason into some much needed self-awareness because he was repeating the same disastrous mistakes his father made. Gleason was boozing heavily and had effectively abandoned his wife and two daughters in order to romance his *Secretary, Honey Merrill*, and other glamorous women. The film implies that his return to his family is the reason Gleason didn't continue *The Honeymooners* beyond 1956.

The film cuts back-and-forth between Gleason's childhood and his adult career to illustrate several points. One is Gleason's insecurity from being abandoned by his father at age eight. Another is to demonstrate how Gleason as an adult seemed to follow blindly in his father's footsteps. A third is that many of the characters that Gleason brought to life in his comedy sketches were based on real-life characters he observed while accompanying his father to Vaudeville shows when he was a kid growing up in Brooklyn.



**Cast of *The Honeymooners***

Actor Brad Garrett gave an admirable performance as *Jackie Gleason* in this film, but it was an impossible role for anyone to fill. Every line and gesture -- no matter how meticulously it mimicked Gleason -- comes across to the viewer as a mere imitation of the original. Gleason's charisma and stage presence defined the character of *Ralph Kramden*. No matter how noble the intent, ***Gleason*** is like watching a remake of ***Casablanca*** without Bogart, or ***The Ten Commandments*** without Charlton Heston, or ***The Music Man*** without Robert Preston.

--- Earl P. Holt III