

The Film Forum's W.C. Fields Festival

Dr. Harriet Fields and Ronald J. Fields Speak

Photos by Steve Friedman



Film Forum's Director of Repertory Programming, Bruce Goldstein, introduces the opening night of the W.C. Fields Festival, and as Bruce said, the show was "Twenty-five years in the planning."

On April 22 the Film Forum in New York City hosted two descendants of comedy icon W.C. Fields in conjunction with a festival of the comedian's films. Dr. Harriet Fields, and her brother Ronald J. Fields are both highly involved in preserving WC's legacy, and both offered insights into the life and work of their grandfather. At the festival, Ronald J. Fields told an ironic story of W.C.'s character in *It's a Gift* assuming the amusing moniker Bissonette: "In one scene he reminds his dim-witted employee to '... never call me Mr. Bissonette [hard "et"] ... it's Bissonay.' In furthering my research on my grandfather's life I poured over the "Heritage Book" from the Lakeside Country Club, a favorite Fields hang out [where scenes in *The Dentist* were filmed].

The book listed all members of the club since its inception and, sure enough, Harold Bissonette's name popped right off the page with a phone number. I dialed the number, and completely forgetting my college French class, I wondered how should I pronounce his name. Well,

he belonged to a foo-foo upscale country club, so perhaps The phone rang three times when a raspy voice said, 'Hello!' I responded, 'Yes, hello Mr. Bissonay!' He retorted, 'It's Bissonette!'"

Harriet told of how W.C.'s wife



Dr. Harriet Fields in conversation with some truly enthusiastic film-goers and fans after the feature.



Dr. Harriet Fields poses by the Film Forum marquee.



W.C.'s Grandchildren, Dr. Harriet Fields and brother Ron introducing *It's a Gift* which was added to National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 2010, joining *So's Your Old Man* and *The Bank Dick* as the National Film Preservation Board "recognized (the films) as cultural and artistic treasures for generations to come".

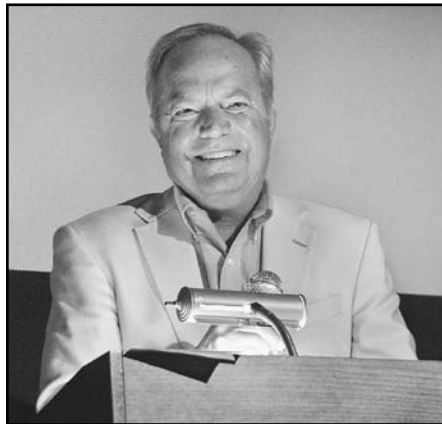
in the movie, Kathleen Howard, spoke of her love for working with him. Miss Howard also played WC's wife in *Man on the Flying Trapeze*. Harriet said that Kathleen's training on stage, and as an opera singer, allowed her to work with W.C. successfully as a partner--she knew she was there to support him and his improvisation. Harriet also spoke of how much she saw Kathleen Howard in her grandmother, "Hattie", except that the actress was taller. (Hence, the arm gesture in the photo on pg. 42.) Harriet, by the way, was named after her grandmother.

Ronald J. Fields is the world's W.C. Fields scholar and expert, author of "W.C. Fields By Himself", Prentice-Hall's best seller of 1973; "W.C. Fields A Life On Film", the essential filmography (St. Martin's Press, 1984); Emmy Award winner with W.C. Fields Productions, Inc. for W.C. Fields Straight Up, best documentary, PBS WNET, 1986; "Never Give A Sucker An Even Break: W.C. Fields On Business" (Prentice-Hall, 2000).

Dr. Harriet A. Fields is vice-president of W.C. Fields Productions, Inc., which owns the rights to the image and likeness and intellectual property of W.C. Fields. She is also a nurse educator and teaches health

policy and health care reform on Capitol Hill in the U.S. Congress.

More than a comedian, W.C. understood the value of comedy, as this quote suggests: "If I can make them laugh and through that laughter make this old world seem just a little brighter, then I am satisfied." Although his films would make you doubt it, he was something of a family man and once said, "Always keep with your family, they [meaning others] will try to take them away from you, but don't let them, always keep with your family."



Ronald J. Fields, whose resemblance to his grandfather is remarkable, is the author of the 1984 "W. C. Fields: A Life on Film", among others, and winner of the Emmy for the 1986 PBS documentary, *W.C. Fields Straight Up*.

Now, more than 60 years since his death, the legacy of W.C. Fields continues to grow. In 2010 the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress cited the importance of his film, *It's a Gift*, when adding it to the registry with these words: "The popularity and influence of W.C. Fields continues with each succeeding generation, distinguishing him as one of the greatest American comedians of the 20th century."

The Official W.C. Fields Website

perhaps says it best: "W.C. Fields speaks truth to authority with dignity, respect, and kindness. He fights for the underdog, the common person. Bottom line, W.C. Fields made and makes the world laugh--the best medicine of all."

The official W.C. Fields website has unique information and rare family photos, and latest updates and news. For more information about W.C. Fields, go to: www.wcfields.com



Dr. Harriet Fields and her brother, Ronald Fields, at the festival's opening night for the screening on the 1934 classic, *It's a Gift*. Harriet feels that this film best depicts the many levels and the nature of her grandfather, who died before she was born. The film showed an innate sweetness and caring underneath the curmudgeon, and she believes that was his true spirit. In the film W.C. created a multi-layered portrayal that worked the broad against the subtle, and captured both.



Maestro Steve Sterner with Dr. Harriet Fields holding her brother Ron's 1984 book, "W. C. Fields: A Life on Film", before the screening of her grandfather's 1926 silent, *It's the Old Army Game*, co-starring Louise Brooks, for which Sterner provided the piano score and the accompaniment.



A mustachioed W.C. Fields in the 1926 silent *It's the Old Army Game*.