

## La Rue, Danny

by James Quinn

La Rue, Danny (1927–2009), female impersonator and entertainer, was born Daniel Patrick Carroll on 26 July 1927 at 10 Horgan's Buildings, Cork, the youngest of five children of Thomas Carroll (1895–1929), a carpenter, and his wife Mary Anne (née Dennehy) (1897–1976), a seamstress. He was only eighteen months old when his father died. Danny attended St Maries of the Isle national school in Cork. When he was aged five, his mother took him to see Jimmy O'Dea (qv) in 'Mother Goose' at the Cork Opera House, an experience that made a great impression on him. In 1937 the hard-pressed family moved to London, where they lived in Earnshaw Street near Soho. They settled in well: Danny loved the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Soho and the energy and grandeur of London. He attended the local St Patrick's school, where his fresh-faced good looks often meant he was cast as a girl in school plays, and enjoyed serving as an altar boy at St Patrick's Roman catholic church in Soho Square; for the rest of his life, he retained a strong catholic faith and love of ritual. During the 1940 blitz the family home was destroyed and the Carrolls moved to Kennford in Devon. After attending a local school, Danny left aged 15 to work as a baker's assistant, a lift operator, and a window dresser in Hutton's shop in Exeter.

In 1944, aged 17, he joined the Royal Navy, serving as a steward on HMS *Alaunia*, a large repair ship. He became a member of the ship's concert party, playing a native girl in a comic send-up of *White cargo*. John Gielgud, touring with ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association), saw the show in Singapore in December 1945 and, recognising Danny's comic talent, advised him to consider the stage as a career. Despite his tall, athletic build, Danny continued to feature as a girl in concert party revues for the next two years. In 1947 he was demobbed, and found work in London as a window dresser in a branch of Hutton's in Oxford Street, occasionally appearing in amateur dramatic productions. He auditioned in 1949 for 'Forces showboat', an all-male revue, and was offered a job in the chorus. For four years he toured with this and other all-male revues, but was never at ease with the exhibitionism of some chorus-line colleagues. Seeing little future in dressing up as a woman, he returned to dressing windows in Hutton's, where he showed a flair for creating lavish displays and organising fashion shows.

In 1954 he was asked by the promoter Fred Gatty to join the chorus in a show at the Irving Theatre. Wary of losing his day job, Danny agreed on condition that he appear under a stage name. Gatty billed him as 'Danny La Rue', recalling 'I wanted a bit of French sophistication, and when Dan was all dressed up with his feathers he was as long as a street anyway' (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 June 2009). La Rue stood out and was offered a two-week slot at Churchill's club in Bond Street, which became a three-year engagement as top of the bill. From 1957 there followed a seven-year stint at Winston's in Clifford Street, and in March 1964 he opened his own eponymous

nightclub in Hanover Square. Featuring La Rue himself and comedians such as Ronnie Corbett and Barbara Windsor, the club's saucy satirical revues attracted royalty, celebrities and the general public in large numbers, with 13,000 members at its peak (the club closed in 1972 when its lease expired). La Rue made his television debut in 1958 in a variety programme presented by Hughie Green, and afterwards appeared regularly on British television in programmes such as *the Frankie Howerd show*, *The good old days* and *Entertainment express*. By the late 1960s he was one of Britain's most popular show-business stars. He made his first television special, *An evening with Danny La Rue*, in 1968 and that year reached no. 33 in the English pop charts with his signature song, 'On Mother Kelly's doorstep'. In 1969 he starred in a production of 'Charley's aunt' for BBC television's *Play of the month*, and also had evening shows on BBC Radio 1 (1969) and Radio 2 (1979).

La Rue made his West End debut in the musical 'Come spy with me' at the Whitehall Theatre in 1966, the first of many stage hits (it was filmed by London Weekend Television in 1977). The camp exuberance of pantomime suited his act perfectly, and he appeared in his first West End pantomime, 'Queen Passionella and the Sleeping Beauty' in 1968, followed by sell-out runs of 'Danny La Rue at the Palace' (1970–72), 'The Danny La Rue show' (1973–5) and 'Aladdin' (1978). La Rue loved the immediacy of live performance, and much preferred acting to an audience than to a camera. He starred in only one feature film, *Our Miss Fred* (1972), an undistinguished comedy written mostly by Hugh Leonard (qv), in which La Rue played a drag artist trapped in German-occupied France in the second world war.

In an act that often involved impersonations of film stars such as Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich and Elizabeth Taylor, La Rue spared no expense to look glamorous. He could have a dozen costume changes per show, appearing in sequin-studded dresses with 20-foot long trains of ostrich feathers, extravagant wigs, immaculate make-up and fitted eyelashes. After swanning onstage in full attire and basking in the audience's admiration, he would usually greet them in a deep growl with 'Wotcha mates!' His act was laden with double entendres and risqué jokes, but generally avoided anything overtly sleazy or offensive (he abhorred the use of four-letter words), which contributed to his broad popular appeal. He could sell out a summer season in Blackpool or Margate just as easily as a West End theatre, and appeared in the Royal Variety Performance in 1969, 1972 and 1978. Although no great singer or impersonator, he carried off his combination of old-fashioned glamour, playful innuendo and amiable self-mockery with considerable charm. He always insisted that his act was in no way sexually subversive or ground-breaking, and that he was not a drag queen but just 'a bloke in a frock' who dressed up for laughs.

La Rue was Variety Club of Great Britain showbiz personality of the year (1969), theatre personality of the year (1970), entertainer of the decade (1979), and won the Brinsworth Award of the Entertainment Artistes' Benevolent Fund for his contribution to his profession. He was the subject of a specially extended edition of *This is your*

life in 1984 when surprised by Eamonn Andrews (qv), and in 1987 was elected King Rat of the show-business charity the Grand Order of Water Rats. Professionally and personally generous, he was a popular figure among his peers, numbering Judy Garland, Bob Hope, Liberace, Rudolf Nureyev and Peter Ustinov among his admirers; Noel Coward described him as 'the most professional, the most witty and the most utterly charming man in the business' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 2009). Actors such as Paul Scofield and Laurence Olivier admired his talent, and Siobhán McKenna (qv) made a point of taking her Abbey Theatre drama students to his performances to observe his comic timing. La Rue prided himself on his work ethic and professionalism, and had an ego that matched his success; at times he could adopt a rather grand manner and show obvious signs of irritation if not given the respect or praise he believed was his due.

He took his show to Canada in 1976 and the following year to Australia, where he became particularly popular. In 1981 he was offered £500,000 to play Sun City in Bophuthatswana but refused because of his aversion to apartheid. As his popularity declined in Britain in the late 1980s, he increasingly worked abroad. Proud of his Cork origins, he visited the city regularly in the 1960s and 1970s, performing occasionally, and was always warmly received. In June 1984 he was given a civic reception by the lord mayor of Cork, John Dennehy (his first cousin), and that same month performed twelve times at the Cork Opera House, breaking box-office records. He also gave eleven performances at the Olympia in Dublin in July 1985 (his first Dublin appearance). In 2005 he played 'Danny comes home' for a week at the Everyman Palace Theatre in Cork as part of the Cork European Capital of Culture events.

From the late 1960s, La Rue earned considerable amounts of money, which funded an extravagant lifestyle and numerous property investments. In 1970 he bought the Swan Inn, an eighteenth-century hotel on the Thames at Streatley, Berkshire. A year later he acquired a country home at Mill Lane in Henley, and in 1972 a chateau near Grasse, on the French Riviera. In 1976 he invested over £1 million in buying and restoring a country-house hotel, Walton Hall, in Warwickshire, which he entrusted in 1982–3 to two Canadian businessmen. They turned out to be conmen and left behind massive unpaid bills for which La Rue was legally responsible. On 27 July 1983, the day after his 56th birthday, his company went into voluntary liquidation and he was forced to sell his other properties. He threw himself into work to pay off his creditors, and made theatrical history in 1984 when he played Dolly Levi in 'Hello, Dolly!' at the Prince of Wales Theatre, the first time a man had taken a leading female role in a major West End production. The show, though, was badly mauled by critics, and effectively marked the end of his West End career. During La Rue's visit to New Zealand in 1985, Jack Hanson, his manager and lover since 1960, died from a brain haemorrhage, leaving La Rue stricken with grief. For a year he was unable to work and drank heavily, but eventually found solace in work and his religious faith. For most of his life he had little choice but to be guarded about his personal life and sexual orientation – his rather anodyne autobiography revealed

little – although he admitted that he found sexual promiscuity 'rather frightening. You can't be happy and promiscuous' (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 June 2009). In 2000 his lover Wayne King, an Australian pianist, died aged 46 from AIDS, after which La Rue raised hundreds of thousands of pounds for AIDS charities and regularly visited hospitals and hospices. He was awarded the OBE in 2002 for his charitable work and services to the entertainment industry, and described the day as the proudest of his life.

Out of necessity he continued to work well into his 70s, usually in pantomimes or seasonal tours of provincial venues. His last major public appearance was in 'Hello, Danny', a biographical show that opened at the Benidorm Palace on 11 November 2007. La Rue was played by Jerry Lane, the show's co-creator and director, but Danny appeared briefly on stage and sang some songs. Thereafter, his health prevented him from working. He suffered a mild stroke in January 2006, and subsequently had several more strokes and was diagnosed with throat cancer. For his last years he lived in modest circumstances at the home of his friend, carer and dressmaker, Anne Galbraith, in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, and died there on 31 May 2009. After funeral mass at the church of the Transfiguration, Kensal Rise, he was buried alongside Jack Hanson in St Mary's cemetery, Kensal Green, London.

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Roger Baker, *Drag: a history of female impersonation on the stage* (1968); *Ir. Times*, 13 Apr. 1971; 20 Nov. 1973; 17 Sept. 1976; 18 June 1984; 27 June 1985; 7 Nov. 1987; 2, 6 June 2009; Peter Underwood, *Life's a drag: Danny La Rue and the drag scene* (1974); Danny La Rue (with Howard Elson), *From drags to riches: my autobiography* (1987); *Daily Telegraph*, 1, 2 June 2009; *Guardian*, 1, 2 June 2009; *The unforgettable Danny La Rue* (TV documentary, 2010; dir. Mark Turnbull)