



# DAUGHTER OF HOLLYWOOD LEGEND FRED ASTAIRE AVA ASTAIRE-McKENZIE SHARES CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AS SHE TAKES HER HAT OFF TO THE WEST END CAST OF HER FATHER'S MOST FAMOUS MUSICAL



Now 70, Ava has happy memories of her father (inset, above, with his daughter) and is pictured wearing his favourite signet ring, which he wore in the smash hit 1935 Irving Berlin musical *Top Hat*

**A**s Ava Astaire-McKenzie takes her seat this week at the West End opening night of *Top Hat the Musical*, she will be wearing a very special ring: the one her father Fred Astaire wore in the famous film.

"I have lots of bits and pieces of Daddy's," says Ava, speaking exclusively to **HELLO!** at London's elegant Waldorf Hilton hotel ahead of the opening night. "But I wear this ring a lot. He always wore a ring on his little finger. This was in a pile of stuff he gave me when I was about 15."

Now, nearly eight decades after Fred and Ginger Rogers lit up the silver screen, his daughter, who earlier this year celebrated her 70th birthday, is in London to see the curtain go up and to pose for **HELLO!** with *Strictly Come Dancing* star Tom Chambers, who takes the lead role of Jerry Travers – as played by her father in the film – and the *Top Hat* ensemble.

Ava was one of the first people, along with the family of composer Irving Berlin, to be approached by producer Kenny Wax with the idea of bringing the 1935 RKO Pictures musical comedy to the stage. "I was thrilled," says Ava, who shares the finely drawn features of her father. "It's a wonderful vehicle, packed with some of the greatest numbers, like *Face the Music and Dance* and *Cheek to Cheek*, and of course it was the film that made Daddy's career. I liked the idea straightaway."


## GOLDEN MEMORIES

Ava has a very special perspective on Hollywood's golden era. From an early age she would visit the set where her father – star of such classics as *Funny Face* and *Let's Dance* – was filming. "My parents always let me go to sets which they thought would be amusing to a child. So we went on the set of *Ziegfeld Follies*, which was great because there were lots of girls in fabulous costumes and bubbles. I loved it."

Another film set Ava remembers visiting was *Easter Parade*, in which her father starred with Judy Garland: "It was quite revolutionary at the time because they had a conveyer belt-like stage when Daddy and Judy sang *We're a Couple of Swells* and I was allowed to go on that." Ava was also friends with Judy's daughter Liza Minnelli and the two went to each other's birthday parties.

Ava is the first to admit it was a magical childhood for her and older brother Fred Jr. With the *Daddy Long Legs* star one of MGM's leading lights, the Astaires mixed with the Hollywood elite. Studio head Sam Goldwyn and his wife Frances were two of her parents' greatest friends, while neighbours included screen legend Ronald Colman and his wife, actress ▶



A group of cast members from the musical *Top Hat* are posed on a stage set. In the center, a woman (Ava) wears a black dress with a white and yellow polka-dot cape. She is surrounded by several men in black tuxedos and top hats. One man is seated in the foreground, holding a cane. The background features ornate architectural details and a large chandelier.

**'Top Hat was the film that made Daddy's career. I liked the idea of a stage show straight away'**

Putting on my top hat, tying up my white tie, brushing off my tails... Ava with Tom Chambers (front) and other cast members of *Top Hat the Musical*, which is based on the classic RKO movie and opens in the West End this week





## 'I can't dance; and Daddy tried to teach me to sing but I couldn't hit a note'

he literally grieved for years. I guess I supported him in his grief. After Mom died, I took on the role of his companion and as I got older, hostess. Fred Jr is six years older than me and he had already left home to join the air force when Mom died."

Fred and Ava, already close, shared a strengthened bond after Phyllis died: "I was certainly a daddy's girl and he was a wonderful father. He would defend me to the hilt – I remember one time an assistant in the local pharmacy had upset me over something or other and Daddy went down and tore her off a strip."

Ava admits she has not inherited her famous father's talent. "I can't dance and I remember one summer Daddy tried to teach me to sing but I couldn't hit a note," she laughs.

Not long after Phyllis died, Fred took the children to Ireland, to Lismore Castle in Waterford. Fred's sister Adele – with whom he had started out in showbusiness in vaudeville and on Broadway – had married Lord Charles Cavendish, second son of the 9th Duke of Devonshire. Lismore was one of the family seats.

"Daddy took us there as some sort of refuge. I became terribly close to Aunt Adele after that," recalls Ava. "She had sadly lost three children in early infancy so I think we both filled a hole in each other's lives."

The trips to Lismore began Ava's own love affair with Ireland; she and her husband, artist Richard McKenzie lived in Cork for more than 40 years, bringing up their sons Tyler and Kevin there and only recently moving back to the US, to Palm Springs.

### DADDY'S GIRL

Talking to Ava is like tapping into an encyclopaedia of Hollywood in its heyday. She has memories of famous faces, such as her teen heartthrob, Elvis Presley. "Daddy and I were invited to a dinner hosted by Frank Sinatra for his daughter Nancy," she says. "Elvis was there too. I was such a fan. I remember he walked into the room with Priscilla and I was just in awe."

She was struck dumb at dinner when she found she was sitting with Elvis on one side and Frank on the other. "Don't ask me what we spoke about; I can't remember. I just remember the salad! It was the first time I'd had Italian squid salad, which was Frank's favourite."

Ava reveals that Fred was also a fan of Elvis: "He liked him, he really did, he thought he had good rhythm."

Fred never wanted any film portrayals of him and Ava can understand why: "Who could play Fred Astaire? I mean who?"

She has spent much of her life promoting her father's legacy, speaking at tribute concerts and giving lectures on cruise ships around the world. And, with family friend *Planet of the Apes* star Roddy

The London stage show evokes the golden age of Hollywood – but Ava is keen to point out that its star Tom (above, with Ava) is not simply impersonating her father in the famous film (below, with Ginger Rogers). "Tom is absolutely charming and very talented," she says. "I saw the show in its early stage on tour and I was very impressed with him"



Benita Hume. Ava's mother Phyllis was particularly friendly with *Wuthering Heights* star Merle Oberon and David Niven was a regular visitor to the family's home in Beverly Hills. "He was great fun and a wonderful man," says Ava. "I'm still very friendly with his sons; David Niven Jr came to my 70th birthday party in March."

Fred's most famous dance partner, Ginger Rogers, with whom he made ten films, was not a frequent visitor. "Dad and Ginger were really good friends, but they were work friends," Ava explains. "He didn't see much of her socially; I only remember her coming to our house once for dinner and that was dinner in the family room rather than a formal affair."

Sadly, in 1954 when Ava was just 12, her blissful existence was shattered when Phyllis, Fred's wife of 21 years, died of cancer. "It was a terrible age to lose your mother," says Ava, clearly still moved even though nearly six decades have passed since her death.

"Daddy loved my mother so much

(LEFT) JACKET COAST. RIGHT: JACKET. COSTUME STUDIO





McDowell she has helped to create a collection of memorabilia housed at Boston University.

Her one request regarding *Top Hat the Musical* was that whoever played Jerry Travers shouldn't simply be impersonating her father.

And, she tells **HELLO!**, she is more than happy with Tom, who has already performed the role in a successful tour. He's also an ambassador for the charity Starlight and performed recently at a gala evening to raise funds to help grant wishes for seriously and terminally ill children.

## 'It's a wonderful thing, really, to know Daddy was an inspiration to so many people'

"Tom is lovely and very talented. He's absolutely charming," Ava tells us. "I saw the show in its early stage on tour and I was very impressed with him."

Tom's co-star, Summer Strallen, is an old friend of Ava's. "She played the young Adele in a tribute show I did for my father at the London Palladium in 2001. I also know her aunt, Bonnie

Langford, well. All I can say to both Tom and Summer is that *Top Hat* was very influential to my father's career and I hope it does the same for theirs. They are both already successful, but a little more never hurts."

Striving to sum up her father's influence on popular entertainment Ava says: "I've had so many young

actors and dancers come up to me and say they would never have gone into the business if not for my father, it's a wonderful thing, really, to know he was an inspiration to so many people."



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*Top Hat the Musical opens at the Aldwych Theatre on 9 May; visit [tophatonstage.com](http://tophatonstage.com).*

Ava didn't inherit her dad's breathtaking dancing skills (watching him in action, right) but they were very close, especially after her mother Phyllis's early death. She would accompany him to big Hollywood occasions, meeting stars such as Elvis (below)



ADDITIONAL PHOTOS: CAMERA PRESS/WILLY RIZZOPARIS MATCHSCOOP

