

# ‘There’s Famous, And There’s Infamous. And I’m Smart Enough To Know The Difference’

**If you have** any doubt Kathie Lee Gifford might be different from the person you see on TV — an attractive, middle-aged woman with a propensity to share a lot, perhaps too much, of herself and to mow down accepted social mores — have lunch with her. The first lunch she ever had with Hoda Kotb, her co-host of the fourth hour of “Today,” was at the Rainbow Room; it lasted five hours, involved several glasses of wine and ended only when management asked them to leave. At some point, Gifford sang, in full voice, a song she wrote called “I Want to Matter,” and Kotb began to cry. “And I went, ‘Oh, I love you,’” Gifford recalled. “Anybody that loves my music I love automatically.”

Gifford and I were having lunch at Neary’s, an Irish place on East 57<sup>th</sup> Street that she and her husband, the former N.F.L. Giants Hall of Famer and “Monday Night Football” announcer Frank Gifford, frequented before they abandoned Sut-

Kathie Lee Gifford on  
Hoda, Frank, Broadway, religion,  
nudity, promiscuity, her  
bunions, drinking on television and  
why people love to hate her.

By **ANDREW GOLDMAN**

ton Place for Greenwich, Conn. The restaurant was empty except for a priest and Tony and Bonnie, an affectionate pair of seniors from Philly, who go to Neary’s every time they’re in New York because Gifford sings its praises on TV. Bonnie came to our table to fuss over Gifford, who fussed right back and told Bonnie she should bring a busload of her friends to see “Scandalous,” a musical that Gifford wrote about the pioneering Christian radio evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson and that is opening on Broadway

next month. “My leading man is naked the entire second act,” Gifford said. “Don’t leave at what Frank calls half time.” Tony sent over a round of pinot grigios and thanked Gifford for giving his wife such a thrill. He’d never be able to live up to it. “Oh, you know what, Tony,” she purred, all Roxie Hart throaty. “I think you’ll find a way.” Then, turning to his wife, “Tony doesn’t have a problem in that direction, I hear.”

After finishing lunch — at her suggestion we both had lamb chops — she asked to inspect my teeth, which for all I knew might be a postmeal tradition in her family. “Let me just check you,” she said, drawing back her lips to reveal her own perfectly gristle-free choppers. “No, you’re good, except right there. . . . Right there on that side. . . . Dig! Dig! Go for it.”

It’s easy to reach a certain level of intimacy with Gifford. Within the first hour of our meeting the week before, she shared the following things:

PHOTOGRAPH BY RYAN PFLUGER



That a doctor from Zimbabwe performed surgery on her bunions, and she now has “the most beautiful feet in the world, except for Hoda.” That her relationship with her mother, Joanie, has been, at times, challenging since Gifford divorced her first husband in 1983. “Basically after my first marriage ended, my mom thought it was time to be my mom again,” she said. “So it was control issues.” Most surprising, Gifford shared the advice that her former psychiatrist, Dr. Byram Karasu, offered her after a flight attendant lured her husband to a hotel room wired for sound and video by The Globe, a supermarket tabloid, in 1997, a subject that friends say is typically off-limits. “He said, ‘Kathie, if you can’t forgive your husband, forgive your children’s father,’ which was so genius because I was mad at the other one, but I love that guy.”

At Neary’s, though, the conversation focused on “Scandalous,” whose improbable 12-year journey to Broadway began in a White Plains shopping mall. “What I do on television,” she said, “you know, it’s silly stuff that I do professionally. This work that I’ve done in theater is much more like what I am as a human being. I am 10 percent silly and 90 percent dead serious.”

“Scandalous,” for which Gifford wrote all the lyrics, is, she hopes, proof of just how serious she can be. “People think that because I’m happy, I’m therefore shallow,” she once told Barbara Walters on her show, “Live: With Regis and Kathie Lee.” Her very name on the marquee, she fears, might poison audiences. That is, after all, what happened when her foray into pop music in 2000 produced a song called “Love Never Fails.” “Until they found out it was me, people loved the song,” Gifford says. “Story of my life.”

There may well be something therapeutic in staging the story of McPherson, possibly the most famous woman alive in the 1920s and 1930s and now largely forgotten. McPherson was a media star, a church founder, a radio pioneer with a driven, religious mother, whose rise was tainted by a trial for faking her own kidnapping. Then came several nervous breakdowns, and finally a fatal drug overdose in 1944. “Aimee almost destroyed herself because of her personal doubts,” says David Friedman, one of two composers on “Scandalous” and a close friend of Gifford’s. “She had a big talent. She was loved. She was vilified. I think it might explain Kathie’s fascination with Aimee.”

**At 8:30 one** late summer morning, Gifford was enthroned in the center chair of “The Today Show” makeup room in Rockefeller Center, four oversize purple hair curlers framing her face. It’s a cramped room — not much wider than a hallway, with six chairs spaced out in front of a mirror — and, given the salaries of the hosts, surprisingly modest. Gifford says her dressing room is

even less posh; it’s in the basement, which she insists on referring to as the “anals” of NBC.

At various points, Savannah Guthrie sat down for a midshow touch-up; Matt Lauer popped in and cracked up the women with a PG-13 joke he made me promise I wouldn’t print; Kotb wandered in and out, newspapers tucked under her arm. But if the “Today” makeup room were a Broadway show, Lauer, Guthrie and Kotb would be the equivalent of the chorus members who, as the curtain rises, can be seen scurrying around a town square with a baguette or a baby carriage, setting the stage for the imminent arrival of the leading lady.

It’s impossible to wrench the spotlight from Gifford. Immediately after swallowing her breakfast — a spoonful of peanut butter dipped in oatmeal — the fusillade began. To Kotb, who mentioned she found Benjamin Bratt attractive, Gifford said: “Hoda, you love anything with two legs and somethin’ else. Are you noticing a pattern here?” She slapped me on the thigh, in an uncanny re-creation of the impression Kristen Wiig used to do of her on “Saturday Night Live,” scanning the room for reactions, shoulders convulsed with silent laughter. “Kathie Lee would always say, ‘Oh, it’s nothing like our show,’” Kotb said of the “S.N.L.” skit. “And I’d go: ‘Kathie, it’s exactly like watching our show. They don’t even change the dialogue.’”

Gifford was never crazy about Wiig’s portrayal of her — as a wine-swilling, Hoda-undermining machine — but the executive producer of “Today,” Jim Bell, dates the show’s success to when the parody first appeared in 2009. “Even though there might be a couple stings along the way,” Bell says, “if they’re talking about the show in the lead skit on ‘S.N.L.’, it indicates a certain cultural awareness of the duo.” As of last year, the real Kotb and Gifford migrated into late night; NBC rebroadcasts the hour at 2 a.m., following “Last Call With Carson Daly.”

Given that the “Today” hosts drink on air — a tradition that began when Chelsea Handler appeared to promote her book, “Are You There,odka? It’s Me, Chelsea” — late night makes sense. Days of the week have been redubbed “Boozeday” and “Winesday”; the whole show is imbued with a Cheeverian day-drinking subversiveness in which it’s considered acceptable for the hosts to remove their bras, as they did on one show in 2011, to commemorate the garment’s 100th anniversary. “It’s kind of weird, isn’t it?” says Regis Philbin, Gifford’s former co-host on “Live” and a 50-year television veteran. “I see the glasses there, and I think: What the hell are they doing? It’s only 10 o’clock!”

For the first year, ratings were flat. But by

## ‘If you look back on my career, the only thing I’ve never done is porn.’

2010, Gifford had become, in the estimation of Entertainment Weekly, “cool.” And whereas on “Live,” Gifford was a junior partner in the enterprise (the show ran for years before Gifford joined), the format of “Today” is in large part her doing. It was Gifford who suggested that Kotb, cast as her hard-news foil, “set it free” and stop relying on notecards; soon Kotb would even stop wearing her IFB, the earpiece that allowed her to hear the control room. (Gifford never wore one.) The show’s senior producer, Tammy Filler, must yell or scribble notes with a Sharpie. Which means the show might career into the wall, as when Gifford quizzed Martin Short about how he kept the love alive with his wife, Nancy, who, unknown to Gifford, died of cancer two years before. It was riveting television, cringed

through by tens of thousands on YouTube and proof that on the fourth hour of “Today,” anything can happen.

“i

f you look back on my career, I’ve done everything except porn,” Gifford said. Gifford is prone to exaggeration — or perhaps confusion. When I asked her former agent Sam Haskell about her claim that she owned a 24 percent

stake in “Live,” Philbin owned 25 percent and Disney the remaining 50, he seemed genuinely puzzled. “Ah, no,” he said. “I look at Disney as the owner of that show. I look at them” — Philbin and Gifford — “as profit participants.”

But it is true that her show-business career has been long and weird. For those who know her life story, that she ended up writing a Broadway show about a Pentecostal broadcaster might as well have been genetically predetermined. Her parents were both performers, in their own way. Though he would later settle into a career as an insurance underwriter, her father, Aaron Epstein, played saxophone in bands after World War II. (Gifford likes to say her father was Jewish, but he was only half Jewish and was raised “halfheartedly” Episcopalian.) He fell in love with Joan Cuttrel, a secretary who had hoped to be a famous singer and fed her obsession with show business by reading movie magazines. “If only he knew me, he’d love me,” Joan would often say,

of Tyrone Power.

Gifford, who does private Bible study, what she calls “devotions” every morning (she was on the Book of Job), was 12 when she found her mother sobbing and reborn in front of a televised Billy Graham crusade. Joan, whom she talks to every morning at 9:15, was, and continues to be, the family’s most fervent proselytizer. She tried to convert one of the Broadway show’s composers, David Friedman, who happens to be gay and Jewish.

Gifford was brought up to fear sex outside marriage. She claims not to have set eyes on a penis — apart from the family dog’s and a glimpse of a pervert’s at a showing of “Swiss Family Robinson” — until her wedding night. She was 22; her husband, Paul Johnson, was 29 and also a virgin. “Some cultures believe that when you take a picture of somebody, a little piece of your soul is taken away,” she told me. “I believe that sexual promiscuity can do that also, it can chip away at your soul, at your human value.”

Anita Bryant, the Christian singer and orange-juice spokeswoman, who hired Gifford out of America’s Junior Miss pageant to be her live-in assistant and baby sitter, helped her get into Oral Roberts University, where her roommate spoke in tongues. Gifford dropped out (the aggressive fund-raising of evangelists like Roberts turns her off), but Roberts did provide experience in the world of Christian music. Johnson produced albums of hers, and the pair became something of a power couple of Christian entertainment. But her fame soon eclipsed his as she began performing regularly on “The 700 Club.” The marriage was, she concedes, professionally fruitful but never a love match, and they split, despite years of counseling with therapists and their pastor. Gifford then started working with Haskell, who would be her agent for the next 25 years. But apart from one season in 1977 as the La La Lady on “Name That Tune,” and another on an exactly-as-good-as-it-sounds sitcom called “Hee-Haw Honeys,” the roles didn’t materialize. Gifford’s greatest success was her nightclub act, opening for the likes of Bill Cosby, and once for Milton Berle, which was, she says, “one of the worst experiences of my life.”

It was then that she began to perfect her brand of mouthy exhibitionism. “The best way to get a great show is to be out of control,” she said. “I would go out into the audience, sit on laps, kiss baldheaded guys, rock babies, you know? Sing a



Gifford (top) with her husband, Frank, and son, Cody, in the '90s. With Regis Philbin (bottom).

cappella, do jokes. I wrote medleys that gave me tremendous leeway to take as much or as little time as I wanted with an audience.” The act led to a gig subbing for Joan Lunden through two maternity leaves on “Good Morning America” (where she first locked eyes with Gifford, whose “incredible set of buns,” as she has described them, attracted her immediately). Then, in 1985, Philbin chose her as his co-host for his local WABC program, “The Morning Show.” Three years later, thanks in part to the ratings boost Gifford brought, the show went national and was renamed “Live: With Regis and Kathie Lee.”

It is at this point in history where the Gifford partisans choose sides. Either she was relatable or she was cloying. “Our prime years were when I was having babies,” Gifford said. “You ask any executive over at Disney, that’s why the ratings were going through the roof. To all the women watching all across the country, it was like Lucy and Little Ricky again. Nobody had ever been that honest and open about pregnancy and babies.”

But some thought that Gifford was shamelessly using the lives of her son, Cody, born in 1990, and her daughter, Cassidy, born in 1993, to boost ratings, and that referring to her husband as “Frank the Love Machine” was unseemly. It didn’t help that she had two *bichons frisés* named

Chablis and Chardonnay. “God bless her, I don’t have anything against her,” was how her perennial scourge, Howard Stern, began a characteristic 2010 tirade. “But she has really got to be the world’s dumbest person.”

In 1996, Gifford’s image took a major hit when it was revealed that her Walmart clothing line was manufactured by child labor. Gifford denied any knowledge of the conditions and lobbied for improved labor standards overseas. “I did the right thing,” she said. “I stayed in it, I fought, I took the blows for people who really do need help.” Then a year later, the “Frank Gifford flight attendant” scandal broke. She said not one word about it on TV. “I don’t think it’s the reason she left the show,” Friedman says, “but she was glad to be out of the public eye. As Kathie Lee says, in the beginning everybody adored her, but then the worm turns.” She came to feel that the world relished her misery. “Yeah, she did feel like that,” Philbin says. “It was traumatic, but I think it was mostly in her mind.” Three years later, she left “Live” to pursue her true love, musical theater.

**Over its 12-year life**, “Scandalous” has had many incarnations. At one point, it was titled “Saving Aimee,” and before that, “Hurricane Aimee” (the name was changed in a hurry after Katrina). At another point, McPherson was to be played by different actors for different stages of her life. McPherson’s trial was the framing device for the whole play when it was performed in Seattle, where it received some critical reviews; now all the action takes place at a Pentecostal revival. Because of the demands “Scandalous” has placed on his wife, Frank Gifford has taken to referring to himself as “Mac,” after McPherson’s second husband. “The audience lost interest in Aimee’s story when her second husband came on the scene,” Gifford explained. “So we wrote him out. Frank calls himself Mac, the guy that got written out. And it’s pretty close to the truth.”

Gifford has written three more shows since “Scandalous,” one for toddlers called “Party Animals,” a musical for tweens called “Keepin’ It Real” about a surfer girl in Malibu “trying to stay pure to the environment and her body in a world that’s completely inauthentic,” and a family musical called “Under the Bridge,” about Parisian street urchins who befriend a crusty but lovable bum named Armand, which had a life Off Broadway in 2005. But if (Continued on Page 51)

**GIFFORD**

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Gifford imagined that she'd been away long enough for the establishment to take a fresh look at her and perhaps even accept her in their hearts, she was mistaken. The Times's Charles Isherwood savaged "Under the Bridge" in a review that began: "No secure numbers are available, but given recent global traumas, it's a safe bet that few of us are losing sleep these days over the disappearance of Kathie Lee Gifford from the celebrity horizon."

Gifford, says David Pomeranz, a co-composer on "Scandalous," is "an easy target." Five weeks before previews were set to begin, the concern was that she'd be one again. "There's absolutely fear within the production about that... that people will crucify the production unjustly because she's attached to it," says Carolee Carmello, the Tony-nominated Broadway veteran who plays McPherson and whose performance has consistently been the brightest spot in reviews. "I really hope they give the piece a chance."

"Scandalous" is not just Gifford's Broadway debut as a writer.

It's a first for the show's composers — Friedman and Pomeranz — and for the director, David Armstrong, who runs the Five Avenue Theater in Seattle, where the play had its most recent tryouts. Two of the production's lead producers, Dick and Betsy DeVos, have never produced a play on Broadway. (Dick, an heir to the Amway fortune, is most famous for spending \$35 million of his own money mounting a quixotic 2006 campaign to become Michigan's governor.) And it's certainly a first for the Foursquare Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the church McPherson founded, which also put up money for the show.

It's impossible to say what Broadway audiences will make of "Scandalous"; after promising to share the book for the musical, the show's publicist changed his mind — the show was too much in flux. ("Oh, God, is it in flux, yeah," Friedman said.) Well, I asked, considering that Gifford started her career with Anita Bryant, whose homophobic Save Our Children campaign in the late '70s has been credited with paving the way for the Moral Majority, was "Scandalous" aiming to save souls? "I wouldn't be interest-

ed in being involved a piece that was proselytizing or fundamentalist," Friedman replied. "This is not in any way a glorification of Aimee Semple McPherson. It's an exploration of what it's like to be a very iconic person who has tremendous human flaws." And despite the Bryant connection, Friedman went on to say, Gifford doesn't share Bryant's homophobic views. "One of my favorite stories about Kathie is that some fundamentalist friend of hers said: 'Oh, I just love David Friedman. I'm so sorry he's going to hell,'" he recounted. "And Kathie said, 'Well, dear, should you happen to get into heaven, you might be shocked at who you run into there.'"

At rehearsals in early September, I sat with Gifford as Carmello belted out "Stand Up," the show's opening number, which, as it was performed that afternoon, began with McPherson's announcing, "I know you've heard much that has tested your faith in me, but I must confess that if I'd believed everything I'd heard and read about me in the last few weeks, I'd hate me, too." Afterward, we sat alone in an empty rehearsal room, Gifford in a white batwing-sleeve blouse that made her look as

if she might take flight. She was telling a story about having lunch at the Polo Lounge in Beverly Hills with Al Pacino, who was mulling playing Armand in "Under the Bridge." (She's hoping he'll star in a movie adaptation someday.) "And he strides in, the movie star he is," she recalled. "And of course everybody is looking at Al Pacino going where is he going. Who is he going to sit with? He comes over and sits down with me. And everybody's going, *What?*"

I pointed out that it seemed entirely plausible that she and Pacino, two famous people, would have lunch. "Well, there's famous and there's infamous," she said. "And I'm smart enough to know the difference." I suggested that she does what she does just as successfully as Pacino does what he does, and perhaps she shouldn't demean her own talent so. "Frank always says the same thing to me," she said. "He says: 'Why do you always say you just show up and sit there? Kathie, what you do is so hard for most people.' And I said: 'Well, maybe that's why. It's not hard for me. How does it take talent to do something that's natural?' What's hard for me is theater. *This is hard.*" ♦

**ACROSTIC**

By **EMILY COX** and **HENRY RATHVON**

Guess the words defined below and write them over their numbered dashes. Then transfer each letter to the correspondingly numbered square in the pattern. Black squares indicate word endings. The filled pattern will contain a quotation reading from left to right. The first letters of the guessed words will form an acrostic giving the author's name and the title of the work.

1	P	2	G	3	D	4	E	5	C	6	T	7	H	8	K	9	J	10	I	11	A	12	B	13	V	14	X	15	Q	16	N	17	G	18	O	19	T	20	P	21	H	22	R	23	W
24	J	25	S	26	C	27	D	28	I	29	N	30	F	31	V	32	B	33	G	34	Q	35	A	36	L	37	M	38	E	39	W	40	O	41	S	42	V	43	J	44	I	45	N		
46	T	47	A	48	X	49	B	50	H	51	C	52	R	53	K	54	S	55	W	56	E	57	F	58	O	59	P	60	J	61	U	62	I	63	G	64	T	65	M	66	N	67	A	68	H
69	B	70	S	71	C	72	K	73	E	74	R	75	F	76	D	77	L	78	O	79	Q	80	J	81	P	82	U	83	V	84	W	85	M	86	G	87	T	88	C	89	E	90	H	91	D
92	B	93	A	94	V	95	R	96	P	97	X	98	K	99	F	100	M	101	T	102	W	103	L	104	Q	105	N	106	E	107	J	108	B	109	X	110	H	111	G	112	S	113	K	114	R
115	M	116	V	117	I	118	A	119	D	120	P	121	E	122	O	123	F	124	H	125	U	126	G	127	B	128	Q	129	R	130	A	131	K	132	W	133	D	134	N	135	I				
136	P	137	M	138	C	139	X	140	E	141	L	142	G	143	O	144	F	145	W	146	N	147	A	148	K	149	R	150	B	151	J	152	E	153	V	154	U	155	X	156	D	157	H	158	Q
159	O	160	A	161	G	162	K	163	J	164	W	165	B	166	L	167	I	168	V	169	D	170	U	171	T	172	N	173	G	174	H	175	O	176	S	177	X								

**A.** 1982 film horrorfest written by Stephen King

67 118 11 147 160 35 47 130 93

**B.** Number one among evildoers

32 69 108 150 12 49 127 165 92

**C.** Bad guy often masked

5 71 138 51 26 88

**D.** Much bigger than normal

133 119 156 27 76 169 3 91

**E.** Formidable marine behemoth

38 140 121 106 4 152 56 73 89

**F.** Rain forest rodent that swims well

99 30 123 57 75 144

**G.** Belladonna or bittersweet

33 2 86 161 173 111 126 63  
142 17

**H.** Cryptic cry in a haunting 1845 account

124 90 21 7 50 157 68 174 110

**I.** Monster-slaying hero of the Geats

135 28 167 62 117 44 10

**J.** Physostigmine vis-à-vis belladonna

151 107 80 9 163 43 24 60

**K.** One working on a graveyard shift?

148 113 131 98 162 8 53 72

**L.** Reaction to a ghost shouting "Boo!"

141 166 36 103 77

**M.** Place in a Gothic setting?

65 85 115 137 100 37

**N.** Killer plants in John Wyndham's 1951 sci-fi novel

172 66 29 134 105 146 45 16

**O.** Source of Word H (2 wds.)

40 78 122 159 143 18 175 58

**P.** Develop as the star-nosed mole has (2 wds.)

96 136 1 20 120 81 59

**Q.** Shape shifter

34 15 158 104 128 79

**R.** What Diogenes the Cynic carried in the daytime

129 114 95 149 22 52 74

**S.** Set to receive trick-or-treaters, say (2 wds.)

54 112 25 41 70 176

**T.** Sign of calamity in the wind

101 19 6 64 87 171 46

**U.** Conveyor of a sanguine sort

154 82 61 125 170

**V.** Like something out of "Night of the Living Dead"

168 153 13 31 83 94 116 42

**W.** Strange things

84 132 23 102 55 164 39 145

**X.** Evidence of horror

177 109 139 155 48 14 97