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Asheville Native Writes Book on Kay Thompson

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NEW BIOGRAPHY – Kay Thompson is pictured with an Eloise doll. Movie director and Asheville native Sam Irvin has written a book about the star and author titled “Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise.”

(Photo courtesy of the Sam Irvin Collection)

Many may remember Sam Irvin as an imaginative teenage boy who lived at 87 Forest Road in Biltmore Forest.

Irvin carved out a successful career in the motion picture industry and now has had his first book published, “Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise.”

Irvin fondly remembers growing up in Biltmore Forest.

“My dad was also named Sam Irvin, so I’m a ‘junior’ but don’t use it in my name professionally. I was born in Asheville. He and my mom, Mary, moved to the forest when I started classes at Asheville School in 1970. It was a wonderful community to grow up in and just a great playground for a kid.”

There was a fence in their back yard where it bordered Biltmore Estate. Their pet Samoyed, a breed of canine, frequently tunneled her way under the fence.

“We’d get a call, ‘Your dog is barking at the swans again. You’d better come pick her up,’” he said, remembering he would sneak over the fence to retrieve the family pet. “I’d go wandering in there and it was just this magical fantasy land. Even though I was already of high school age, exploring the estate was such a childlike adventure.”

Irvin’s father owned a number of movie theaters (with his partner Jack Fuller) in Asheville, Columbia, South Carolina (where Irvin Sr. was originally from) and in Spartanburg.

His father was a member of the Biltmore Forest Country Club and also was involved in a lot of civic and philanthropic activities, including president of the Chamber of Commerce and one of the primary advocates for the creation of Pack Place. Irvin’s mother opened a ladies apparel shop called Mary’s Folly downtown near the Asheville Community Theater in the early 1980s.

Irvin graduated from the University of South Carolina with a bachelor’s degree in media arts. He then moved to New York City and was hired as an assistant to film director Brian De Palma.

“I worked with him on ‘Dressed to Kill,’ a film with Michael Caine, Angie Dickinson and Nancy Allen. He made a lot of big Hollywood productions back then.”

Irvin moved to Los Angeles in 1990 after 12 years in New York City.

He gradually worked his way up to become a director himself and now has over a dozen feature films to his credit. He co-executive produced “Gods and Monsters” starring Ian McKellen, Brendan Fraser and Lynn Redgrave. In addition to a handful of other awards including a Golden Globe, it won an Academy Award (Oscar) for best screenplay adaptation and was nominated for several others.

“Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise” is the biography of a larger than life entertainer whose radio broadcasts were a huge sensation in the 1930s, and was head of the vocal department at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer during the early to mid-1940s. According to Irvin she became the world’s highest paid night club entertainer in the late 40s and early 50s with an act billed as “Kay Thompson and the Williams Brothers” – accompanied by a very young Andy Williams. A decade

and a half later Americans everywhere would be listening to him croon “Moon River.” Thompson discovered and mentored Williams and his three brothers. Irvin said Williams became her secret lover when he was only 19 years old and she was close to 40.



WORKING WITH THE STARS – Irvin worked with Liza Minnelli, who was also Kay Thompson’s goddaughter, on her Broadway show “Liza’s at the Palace.”

Photo by Dori Legg.

After the act had run its course in 1953, Thompson wrote a series of popular children's books titled after and featuring a protagonist named Eloise. The penthouse at New York's Plaza Hotel was home to this mischievous, rich six year old girl, her nanny, dog and pet turtle. Eloise's antics continuously landed her in hot water.

"The books were best sellers, not just on the children's charts. Her first book was the fifth best seller of the year and three sequels sold just about as well," he said.

Eloise's popularity inspired Thompson to compose and record with Williams a song that sold 100,000 copies shortly after its release in March of 1956. It remained on the charts eight weeks, peaking at #39 on the top 40 charts.

"My obsession with Kay Thompson dates way back to my childhood. My mother was one of the very sophisticated 'ladies who lunch.' She saw the Eloise book when it first came out in 1955 and bought it for my older sisters. I wasn't born until the next year, but when I was old enough for bedtime stories, this was the book my sisters read to me and I fell in love with it," Irvin said.

When he was older he saw the big budget Paramount musical "Funny Face" with Audrey Hepburn, Fred Astaire, "and this amazing cyclone of a woman played of course by Kay Thompson as the fashion magazine editor." Irvin had not seen Thompson before, but soon figured out her connection with Eloise.

"Kay Thompson: From Funny Face to Eloise" chronicles her career and relationships with some of the biggest names in Hollywood and beyond. Irvin said Thompson went to school with Tennessee Williams, auditioned for Henry Ford, got her first big break from Bing Crosby, coached Bette Davis, Eleanor Roosevelt, Marilyn Monroe, and Lucille Ball, created night club acts for Marlene Dietrich and Ginger Rogers, and was the "vocal guru" for Frank Sinatra and Lena Horne. She was also the mentor and best friend of Judy Garland and godmother of her daughter Liza Minnelli who recreated Thompson's night club act in a 2009 Tony Award winning Broadway tribute called "Liza's at the Palace." Irvin worked on that show as an historical consultant. The list of tinsel town luminaries continues.

"The time was overdue for a book to be written about Kay Thompson and I was the one with the passion to do it," Irvin said.