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Rickie Layne, 81; Borscht Belt Ventriloquist Became a Major Hit on Sullivan's 1950s TV Variety Show

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Rickie Layne, a ventriloquist whose frequent appearances on "The Ed Sullivan Show" with his Yiddish-accented dummy Velvel boosted the former Borscht Belt comic's career to a new level in the 1950s, has died. He was 81.

Layne, a longtime resident of Northridge, died of heart failure Feb. 11 at Tarzana Hospital, his family said.

Layne was performing at Ciro's on the Sunset Strip with singer Maria Cole in 1955 when Nat King Cole would stop in each night to watch his wife.

Cole was so impressed with Layne and Velvel that he urged Sullivan to put the act on his popular Sunday night variety show.

When Sullivan said he didn't want to travel to Los Angeles to see Layne perform before booking him on the show, Cole made an unusual guarantee: If Layne bombed, Cole said, he would appear on the show himself at no charge.

Layne made his Sullivan show debut on Jan. 1, 1956. Afterward, Sullivan invited him to return in two weeks, and Layne and Velvel made several dozen return visits over the years.

Sullivan was such a fan of Layne and Velvel that he'd often get into the act himself, serving as straight man for the dummy, who referred to the normally stone-faced TV host as "Ed Solomon."

During one Christmas season appearance that included Layne's rendition of "Twas the

Night Before Christmas" from a Jewish child's point of view, Sullivan told Velvel that he had bought him a gift, a dog.

Velvel said he hated dogs.

"Why?" asked Sullivan.

"I used to be a tree!"

Layne's Sullivan show guest shots increased

demand for him in clubs and other venues. Over the years, he performed at the Copacabana in New York, the Chez Paree in Chicago, the Fontainebleu Hotel in Miami Beach, the Orpheum Theatre in Los Angeles and Las Vegas hotels such as Caesars Palace, the Flamingo and the Desert Inn.

Born Richard Israel Cohen in Brooklyn in 1924, Layne was the son of Russian immigrants who divorced when he was 5. His mother, who studied at the Juilliard School of Music, became a popular vaudeville comic billed as Gypsy Sonya.

Layne began entertaining at age 9, doing impersonations of Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson and other stars. But his act took on a new twist after an uncle gave him a dummy.

"One night I tried the dummy out as an encore," Layne recalled in a 2002 interview with the Jewish Journal. "The audience liked the encore better than the act."

He named the dummy Willie Gladstone — Gladstone "because he slept in a Gladstone bag."

During his teens, Layne and his dummy toured with one of the traveling entertainment troupes assembled by Major Edward Bowes, whose "Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour" was a hit radio show. After serving in the Army



A Brooklyn native, Layne moved to Los Angeles as a young man and thereafter appeared frequently in local clubs and revues.



RICKIE LAYNE

Ed Sullivan, left, liked them so much that he would sometimes play straight man for Velvel, who called the host "Ed Solomon." Among other TV jobs, Layne and Velvel appeared on "Night Court" as an aging ventriloquist and his dummy.

during World War II, Layne entertained at Grossinger's and other hotels in the Catskills, where Willie got a new name: "Velvel," Layne once explained, "is Willie in Jewish."

Layne performed in touring revues that included "Borscht Capades" and "Bagels and Yox" and, after moving to Los Angeles in 1949, appeared frequently in local clubs and revues.

He later worked occasionally as a character actor in films, including "The Shaggy D.A.," and on television, including a 1986 guest shot on the

comedy series "Night Court," in which he and Velvel appeared as an aging ventriloquist and his dummy.

In 2002, the International Ventriloquist Assn. presented Layne with its Askins Award for lifetime achievement.

LaRue, Layne's wife of 56 years, died in 2002. He is survived by his three daughters, Sandy Duncan of Burbank, Teri Layne of Northridge and Kelly Benning of Woodland Hills; and four granddaughters.