

Legendarily hip actor **Henry Winkler** tells Jenni Frazer about his rift with his parents, his phonetic barmitzvah, the hit '80s show that hasn't gone away — and Captain Hook, angry pantomime Jew

Still happy days for the Fonz

Interview

The man who, for a decade straddling the 1970s and '80s, was the coolest man on the planet is, at 61, happily still cool. Henry Franklin Winkler inhabited the character of Arthur "The Fonz" Fonzarelli in American television's award-winning series "Happy Days" from 1974 to 1984, raising his profile from a secondary role with just six lines to the main, in fact the *only*, reason to watch the show.

Supposedly a mechanic, whose overwhelming success with women made him a role model for the more nerdy high-school leads — especially Ron Howard, who later became a decorated Hollywood director — the Fonz was greeted with rapture and adulation all over the world, wherever ABC sold the series.

Fonzie's iconic leather jacket was reverently received by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC and placed on display (together with his lunchbox) after the series ended. And, somewhere in the world, day and night, "Happy Days" is still being screened so, even if he wanted to, Winkler could not get away from his alter ego.

In fact, he does not want to. Winkler's is an extraordinary story of a man who has reinvented himself repeatedly, emerging as a likeable, funny, family man. He is in London somewhat improbably to take part in an art form of which he had never previously heard — pantomime.

When "Baywatch" star David Hasselhoff pulled out of the New Wimbledon Theatre's production of "Peter Pan" to become an X-factor judge for Simon Cowell, the producers turned for a replacement Captain Hook to the Fonz. Winkler has grabbed the opportunity with, so to speak, one arm — the other being occupied. "I can't believe I'm acting

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with a hook," he mutters.

Born in New York in October 1945, Winkler's childhood was not, by his own account, a success. His parents, Ilse and Harry, were young Jews who met and married in Nazi Germany before escaping to the States on the eve of the outbreak of war.

"They came on a six-month visa and they never went back," says their son, "so I never knew my grandparents, or had aunts or uncles." When the Winklers and other refugees helped to found Congregation Habonim on New York's 66th Street, the shul founders served as a surrogate family to Henry and his older sister Beatrice.

Harry Winkler, who had run a successful lumber business in Berlin, coated the family jewellery in chocolate when he and Ilse escaped to the States, so that if they were stopped it would simply appear to be confectionery. He sold some of it to provide seed money to start up again in New York. "He wanted me to take over the business," Henry Winkler recalls. "My father was still proud of Germany. He sent me back in 1966, to work in a lumber mill and learn the business. After everything is said and done, they were German through and through."

The Winklers sent their only son to a private



Photo: John Riffkin

Henry Winkler in brief

Born: October 30 1945, New York

Famous role: The Fonz in Happy Days

Less famous role: Shark-like lawyer Barry in cult TV show "Arrested Development," alongside Jeffrey Tambor and Liza Minelli

Charitable man: Fundraises all over United States and Canada for the Jewish Federations, although he's never been to Israel. Awarded the B'nai B'rith Champion of Youth Prize and a United Nations Peace Prize for his work for children. Holds the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Artes et Lettres from the French Government

Jewish observations: At odds with German immigrant parents: "They didn't understand my dyslexia. I learned my barmitzvah phonetically." Characterises Captain Hook as a "New York Jewish boy who studies Talmud in his cabin"

Contribution to the language: "Jumping the shark" — applied by TV executives to any show that resorts to ridiculous plot-lines when it has run out of steam, derived from a "Happy Days" episode when Winkler did just that: jump a shark
Panto debut: In "Peter Pan," at the New Wimbledon Theatre, December 7 to January 14

school in New York but he was, he says, "an unbelievably poor student. I was — and am — dyslexic, which my parents never understood. I couldn't read Hebrew and learned my barmitzvah phonetically. I find it incredibly hard to read books. Every one I read, I have to own it in hard-cover, and it's like a triumph on my shelf."

He was about seven years old when he knew he wanted to act. "I can't tell you why, I just knew. But my father wanted me to take over the business, and said so, about 15 times a day." He assumes a German accent: "Vy do you tink I brought ze business over here?" Winkler replied: "Besides being chased by the Nazis, Dad, was there a bigger reason than that?" He hated the lumber business, he says, and at this point says bitterly that he did not care for his parents very much.

Finally, overcoming huge personal difficulties, Winkler took a degree in drama in Boston

and then a master's at the Yale School of Drama. Back in New York, Winkler worked in radio and TV commercials, children's theatre and some off-Broadway improvisation shows. In 1974, he got his lucky break, starring as "Butchie Weinstein" opposite Sylvester Stallone in the coming-of-age film, "The Lords of Flatbush."

That same year, Winkler auditioned for a TV role on his birthday, October 30. "All of a sudden my parents became [again, in an ironic German accent] 'ze co-producers of Henry Winkler.' Then all of a sudden they wanted to be supportive. And I told them it was too late. I didn't care one way or the other." He is clearly still angry for bitter hurts caused all those years ago. And since he is a famously devoted family man — he and his wife Stacey have three children, Jed, Zoe and Max — I wonder whom he chose as his role model rather than his parents.

"I promised myself every day, every night, that I was going to be a different kind of parent than my parents were to me. My children were allowed — encouraged — to have a different point of view, they were able to change my mind... If I made up a rule and they had a very good [counter] argument, I would change the rule according to the logic that they gave me." He grins. "So! My children are very rude. But they are very nice people."

And since, he says, his parents had done nothing to help his self-esteem — "that was down around my ankles" — when he came to play the Fonz, he did everything possible

He did everything possible to make Arthur Fonzarelli the sort of person that Henry Winkler was not

to make Arthur Fonzarelli the sort of person that Henry Winkler was not. He won two consecutive Golden Globe awards for the portrayal, has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and three Emmy nominations. Then "Happy Days" ended and so, to some extent, did Winkler's high-profile visibility. He changed tack from acting to directing and producing, and, in an extraordinary shift for a dyslexia sufferer, became co-author (with Lin Gordon) of the hugely successful Hank Zipser series of children's books — subtitled, "The World's Most Amazing Under-Achiever" (which one may suspect are the stories of an eight-year-old Winkler). There are 11 Zipser books out, with a 12th on the way. Feedback from avid readers shows they are getting the comedy stuff just right: "One kid wrote and said, 'I can't spell, Hank can't spell — bet I could be a writer.'" Another wrote: "I laughed so hard my funny bone fell out."

Which brings us back to Hook, and Winkler's talent for comedy — which may be slightly taxed by having the anarchic British comedian, Bobby Davro, as his co-star in the pantomime. When I arrive at the theatre for the interview, Davro is busy putting the wind up Winkler as to how an audience traditionally responds to certain parts of a panto script. The show, he teases the American, could run from an hour-and-a-half to almost three hours. As Winkler blanches slightly, Davro tries to cheer him up. "Don't worry," he says, "the kids will all want to go and pee." "So will I," says Winkler, with feeling.

According to Winkler, Captain Hook is a nice Jewish boy who was barmitzvah at New York's Bnai

Jeshurun Synagogue (heartland of the happy-clappy approach to Judaism) and who, Winkler swears, spends his nights in a log cabin studying Talmud. Now he explains that he is sure he knows why Hook is so angry. "He can't put on his tefillin properly because that pipsqueak, Peter Pan, cut off his arm. Wait till I get my hands — I mean, hand — on him."

He says he is less anxious about the hook than the boots he has to wear. "I think you girls should start a revolution and say 'no more high heels!' I mean..." and Winkler is off on a riff about how he travels with one case while the blessed Stacey, allegedly, has 19.

Suddenly, the door opens and in walks Bobby Ewing from South Fork in "Dallas" (aka the actor Patrick Duffy, a good friend of Winkler's). He is playing Prince Charming in a pantomime up the road.

Has it, I wonder briefly, all been a dream?