ATLANTIC CITY

For Danny Windsor, it's women's work

By Bill Kent
Special to The Inquirer

Danny Windsor is a nightclub comedian, master of ceremonies and occasional tap dancer.

"I do jokes. I just turned 65 last Saturday, so I do old jokes," he says in a rolling, radio announcer's voice. "I don't do any four-letter words in my act. I can get blue, but I'm never dirty, and I never insult or offend anybody or make 'em mad. I've worked in front of kids and old people, every kind of audience there is. I've been in show business since I was 5, and I know what works for me and I won't let anybody tell me different. I have fun. I go crazy. I tear my wig off. I pull out my boobs and throw them at people . . . ."

Huh?

"And I've never wanted for work," he adds. "There are maybe seven to eight days of the year when I'm not working. You name a club and I've worked it. Philadelphia? Palumbo's, Ornatti's, Sciolla's and just about every after-hours club. Jersey? The Latin Casino, Eddie's Log Cabin. Atlantic City? I've played Atlantic City at least once a year for the last 40 years. I did them all. The 500 Club, the Jockey Club, Club Madrid, Le Bistro, Fort Pitt in the old Jackson Hotel on New York Avenue. Back then I did my act in a tuxedo. I still do a lot of work in a tuxedo."

When he isn't in a tuxedo, or lounging about his Ventnor apartment, or riding his new bicycle ("It was a birthday present!") on the Boardwalk, Danny Windsor is in a dress, wearing a bra, heavy makeup, a wig, stockings, huge high-heeled shoes and a smile.

Windsor is "one of the boys" in *An Evening at La Cage* at Bally's Park Place. The comic/tragic drag show, the longest-running casino show in Atlantic City history, this week celebrated its sixth year on the Boardwalk.

In the show, Danny Windsor does Ethel Merman and a burlesque character he invented named Disco Dolly. In his repertoire are Sophie Tucker, Mae West, Tootsie Malloy — "She's another character I invented, the last of the red-hot mamas from Prohibition," he says with a chuckle. "When I do her, I end the act with a 3½-minute tap-dancing routine that, at my age, just about kills me."

No, no, it wasn't always this way. "For the first 20 years or so, I was mostly a stand-up comedian and dancer. Then I did this show in Bucks County at the Playhouse Inn, back in 1962. It was called the Big Broads of Broadway. I had never done impersonations of real people before, but we got the costume together, put me in a wig and I looked exactly like Ethel Merman. I know this because two nights later Ethel was there in the audience and we became great friends."

Was this his big break? "Oh, no. The peak of my career was opening for Judy Garland at the Palace Theater in New York. The Palace Theater! I toured with Mae West, and I've played clubs that have had standing-room-only crowds for years, and I've been in so many movies."

It might be difficult, he admits, to recognize him on the silver screen. He was born in Santa Barbara, Calif., to parents who had a vaudeville song-and-dance act. ("They called themselves the Merry Monaghans. Universal made a movie about them.") At age 5, Windsor became a contract player and dancer, first for producer Hal Roach, and then at Universal and MGM studios. While at MGM, he was Gene Kelly's assistant and a dance director on some of Donald O'Connor's movies.

"Last year I rented a movie, *You Can't Take It With You* with Jimmy Stewart and Jean Arthur, and I saw myself as a kid, one of a group of kids hanging out in the park while Jimmy and Jean were necking. I didn't even remember making that picture and there I was. What a surprise."

World War II beckoned and Windsor joined the Air Force as an administrative assistant and a gunner on B-52 bombers. While stationed in Guam, influenced perhaps by an overdose of Mickey Rooney movies, Sgt. Windsor and his buddies decided to put on a show.

"You know how those armed forces shows are. The female lead was Fifi LaTrine and somebody had to play her."

Windsor volunteered. The show was a hit, on Guam at least. After the war, Windsor worked up a song-and-dance act that, after a long run in San Francisco and Los Angeles nightclubs, went on the road with Judy Garland, Mae West and Marlene Dietrich.

"I played Atlantic City then, doing all the clubs and the Steel Pier. In those days, the Atlantic City clubs were strictly tie-and-jacket places, with black tie on Saturday night. You couldn't walk on the Boardwalk after 5:30 in the afternoon with shorts on. You had to be dressed properly, or they'd ask you to leave."

Windsor also married and raised three children. "None are in show business, thank God. My son is a merchant seaman and my youngest daughter is an executive with Revlon. My oldest daughter is such a square. She won't even see my show."

Which doesn't annoy her old man. "You can't please everybody. My act is pure fun, with my greatest respect to Ethel, of course. I don't make the prettiest broad in the world, but I'm a comedian and that's how I play it. All for laughs."

Danny Windsor in his stage costume for "An Evening at La Cage" at Bally's.

IF YOU GO

"An Evening at La Cage" plays the Park Cabaret Theater, Bally's Park Place, Park Place and the Boardwalk. Show times are 9 and 11 tonight, 7:30, 9:30 and 11:30 p.m. tomorrow, 8 and 10 p.m. Sunday, Monday, Wednesday. No show Tuesday. Tickets, available at the box office, are $19 Saturdays, $16 other nights, and require a one-drink minimum. Phone: 609-340-2708.