



Wednesday, 28 March 2012

Parker Fennelly

Characters need the right setting to connect with the audience. If it weren't true, every TV spin-off would be a success.

Parker Fennelly was an actor, not a character, but he was known for playing the same type for decades—the rural New England philosopher. But he needed the right setting and the right characters around him. He succeeded on his own show with Arthur Allen in the mid-'30s, he succeeded a decade later with Fred Allen, he even succeeded on the Pepperidge Farm commercials of the '60s. But he didn't succeed all the time.

Fennelly was handed a starring role in a summer replacement show sponsored by Auto-Lite in 1947. He played the home-spun role everyone was accustomed to hearing weekly in Allen's Alley. Agency Ruthrauff and Ryan had high hopes for the show, realising a hit could put the show on the fall schedule. But the long-forgotten "Lawyer Tucker" is proof that entertainment requires the right mix of elements in place. After all, an outhouse will work just fine in the living room, but you wouldn't put one there (that's about the best cracker barrel philosophy I can cough up for now).



Here's a review of the show from June 18, 1947, six days after the first episode.

Just One Laugh to A Carload

By JOHN CROSBY

As Lawyer Tucker in the new program of that name (CBS 9 p.m. Thursdays), Parker Fennelly is a bit of Ephraim Tutt, a bit of Calvin Coolidge and quite a lot of Titus Moody, the character he normally plays on the Fred Allen show. He is, in short, cynical, shrewd, kind hearted in a pickle-pussed way, a defender of the oppressed, and a deflator of politicians. And through it all, he is rustic as all tarnation, a cuss word of such mild voltage that it's allowed on the air.

"Being at a bar of justice is like bein' at any bar," says Lawyer Tucker. "Sometimes what you're handed is mixed wrong. Gets ya into trouble. Ya know there's some folks that looks down their noses at a city the size of this. An' lookin' down his nose a feller's not apt to see much except maybe a wart or a freckle."

That is a fair sample both of the prose style Lawyer Tucker employs and the sentiments he enjoys expressing. **NOT SO FUNNY**

I'm afraid the lawyer just isn't as shrewd as the authors seem to think he is or nearly as witty as Titus Moody, who used to have trouble sleeping, because, he had short eyelids.

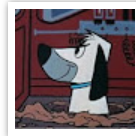
Around Lawyer Tucker are fathered a paste-up of small town types, most of them recognizable. Tucker has a law partner named Biggers who is a dope or, to be more specific, a Harvard man. Biggers is meek, confused and a little pompous.

Then there's Tucker's sister Sairie, spinsterish, respectable and smelling faintly of lavender. Also around is a nonegarian with as irritating a wheeze as I've heard in some time, and a villain named Whateley who got what was coming to him just as the curtain fell.

A BIT WOBBLY

The plot of the first episode was a slow-moving, almost non-moving, business about Tucker's retirement from the law, a retirement which lasts only about 20 minutes. Through it all Fennelly talks that clipped, twangy

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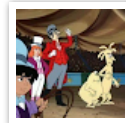
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American he does so well on the Allen show. ("Don't lose your temper, Dan'l." "Ain't lost it. Just found it.") But somehow it isn't very funny. The show wallowed rather uncertainly between characters, situation and gag comedy without ever quite making up its mind.

There's no reason why the adventures of a small town lawyer shouldn't make good comedy, particularly when he's played by as skilled an actor as Parker Fennelly.

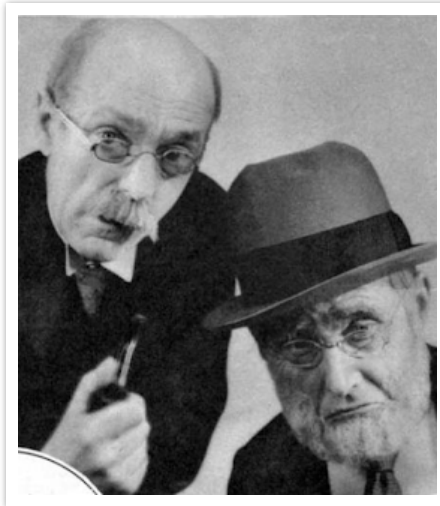
But the writers will have to pump a little more life, a lot more comedy, and much more action into the script before this hits the mark. Well, this was only the first script and maybe next time they will.

Incidentally, the show's sponsor has that foghorn voice in there advising you to switch to its product, but they appear to have cut down the number of times it's inflicted on the listeners. It only appeared six times in this script, which is about five too many.

"Lawyer Tucker" signed off September 4, 1947. Soon, radio was replaced by "furniture that talked," as Titus Moody put it, but Moody was nowhere to be seen on television.

Someone who sounded an awful lot like him popped up on the tube in the 1960s as an unnamed spokes-New Englander hawking frozen baked goods. Then, Fennelly got a supporting role on a TV series.

Somehow, it seems appropriate that a man who had played a casual, rural New Englander would team up with a man whose most famous role was a casual, rural North Carolinian. So it was that Fennelly was cast in Andy Griffith's "Headmaster." Griffith may have been a real-life high school music teacher before TV immortality as the sheriff of Mayberry, but audiences didn't accept him in his new role. The show flopped after 14 episodes. But it gave Fennelly, the actor, to do some out-of-character musing of his own in this newspaper feature of October 13, 1970.



'MR. PURDY' OF 'HEADMASTER'

Aging Actor Yearns For Broadway

By HAROLD STERN

Inter-Press Feature Syndicate

At age 78, he's a regular on the CBS-TV situation comedy series "Headmaster" and he's been doing commercials regularly for 16 years, but Parker Fennelly's ambitions do not stop there.

"What I'd really love to do is get back on Broadway," he said. "The trouble is, nobody asks me. They all think I'm dead. But I'm not. I just haven't done a show on Broadway since I was in a revival of 'Carousel' at the New York City Center. The person I marvel at and secretly envy is Margaret Hamilton. She's always working and she's no child."

Fennelly, who is quite a few years older than Miss Hamilton, doesn't seem to realize that as far as she's concerned, he's probably working all the time. The two veteran performers, however, have had to face the same sort of career problems. Miss Hamilton, for all the things she's done over the past 30 years, is still thought of as the Wicked Witch of "The Wizard Of Oz." Fennelly, for all he's done, is best remembered as Titus Moody of the Fred Allen radio show.

"For that matter," he said, "even the old 'Snow Village Sketches' haven't been forgotten."

That show is still remembered by 'old, old people,' and every once in a while someone stumbles across it and tries to turn it into a TV series. Ray Goulding, of Bob and Ray, called me a while back and said he was interested in becoming a producer and he wanted to do the series on TV. I put him in touch with the widow of the man who wrote the radio series, but nothing ever came of it."

He doesn't say it deprecatingly, but if you listen closely, you'll find him referring to the episodes of "Headmaster" as "sketches." This may possibly derive from his memories of "Snow Village Sketches." But if you think about it, much as the people producing TV series episodes may dislike the term, it is possibly the most apt description of these half-hour crumbs of life — rarely, if ever, substantial enough to be considered even a slice.

"I play 'Mr. Purdy,'" said Fennelly of "Headmaster," "sort of a philosophical and humorous caretaker of a private school in some unidentified community which looks suspiciously like a California suburb."

"Mr. Purdy is really a cameo character, I haven't got nearly as much to do as Andy Griffith (the series star) or Jerry Van Dyke. But it's a thankful part with a lot of good small scenes."

Fennelly started acting in the theater in 1916 and he's done movies and TV, but he is remembered fondly for his characterization of Moody, one of Fred Allen's favorite residents of "Allen's Alley," the man who immortalized the catch phrase "Howdy, Bub."

"I've never retired," he said. "I don't want to retire and I don't intend to retire."

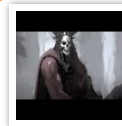
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"I don't really work all that much — a movie once in a while, about 30 commercials a year for Pepperidge Farm bread and now 'Headmaster.'

Unknown to most people is Parker Fennelly, playwright. He was first represented on Broadway by "Fulton of Oak Falls," which starred George M. Cohan and opened in New York in 1937 after a long road tour.

"I finished a play a couple of years ago," he said. "I set it in New England, but it was based on one of the longest and most famous cases in English legal history, 'The Tichbourne Case.' The play hasn't been produced yet."

He relocated his play from London to a town in New England, because he knows that area best

"After all," he said, "it doesn't matter what name you give him, I've been playing the same character for eons. I guess it's a combination of the fact that I come from a small town and I have the Down East accent. And when it comes to writing, people from small towns write about people from small towns a lot better than people from big cities do."

If "Headmaster" and his commercials aren't enough and you want to catch Fennelly in his patented role, his last movie, which stars Don Knotts, is scheduled for release this fall.

"It's called 'How To Frame A Fig'," he said. "It's not a bad little movie, but isn't that a terrible title? I sure wish they'd change it."

Fennelly lived to a ripe old 96. He died in 1988. And if you hunt around the internet, you can still enjoy him in Allen's Alley. Because, outside of rural Maine, that was the best place for him to be.



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [12:05](#)



Labels: [John Crosby](#)

1 comment:

Anonymous 6 November 2012 at 13:47

His full name was Parker Windsor Fennelly. His middle name is the same name as the House of Windsor in the United Kingdom.

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