



Wednesday, 21 August 2013

Whither Dialects

The opinion that Stereotypes = Racism is debated today, but it's a discussion that's certainly not something new. And it's not something which will ever result in a universal consensus, I'm afraid. Some people think Rochester on the Jack Benny show was portrayed as an equal with the rest of the cast and superior to the man in charge. Others think he was "servile." There's no reconciling the two.

100 years ago, America was a land full of new immigrants of various ethnic and religious stripes. They gently kidded each other about themselves as they all tried to make a better life in a new homeland. That was reflected on the vaudeville stage, in radio and even in television. Unfortunately, there were others who weren't kidding. And then there was some guy over in Germany spouting nonsense about a master race and hate against a long list of people just because of who they were—and forcibly demonstrated it with murder. So ethnic humour became something other than a laughing matter to some, no matter what the motivation was behind it.

Groucho Marx jumped into the debate back in the days when network radio was at its peak in the mid-1940s. I can't find the exact quote now, but he expressed his displeasure to Fred Allen with the broad Jewishness of New York housewife Pansy Nussbaum, Minvera Pious' contribution to Allen's Alley. Allen, who either wrote or edited Mrs. Nussbaum's dialogue, reacted as you might expect.

Broadway gossip columnist Earl Wilson focused his attention on the matter of dialect humour in the August 21, 1946 edition of the *New York Post*. Both sides state their case. I post it without comment.

Fred Allen, Parkyakarkus Discuss Radio's Forthcoming Season

By Earl Wilson

NEW YORK—Very soon, radio will be belting us with its big autumn push.

You do listen in, occasionally?

You really should, you know, because with most programs what can you lose but your mind, or, in a few especially nauseous cases, your supper? Radio is acutely nervous about the fall. Several shows flopped sadly last spring. Some were fired. Now all the geniuses are worried about 1946-47, and about television. Eager to toss another banana skin on the icy sidewalk, I recently reported how Groucho Marx was slugging at the radio dialecticians, charging them with hurting the minorities. Groucho's grouch stirred up a storm.

...

Fred Allen, employer of "Mrs. Nussbaum," Queen of the Dialecticians, has just emerged from Old Orchard Beach, Me.—from which Orchard he didn't say—with a reply that tells Groucho to shedde.

"In my not too humble opinion," Allen has written to me, "comedians should confine their remarks to the stage and leave the soap box to those who feel that their postulations need airing.

"I do not believe," he goes on, "that the general public is inclined to take seriously any comment a comedian may make on world affairs.

"A plumber may air his views on the Koran. To the public he is still a plumber. And so it is with the comedian. In some cases, he, too, is still a plumber.

"It might be well if people in show business let the Western Union worry about messages . . ."

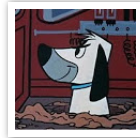
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I wrote not long ago a sentimental column that brought in a shower of complimentary letters and telegrams. Being all ham, I was tickled. Then came one letter from an intelligent woman saying this very same column stank. Please God, she said, never smell up the paper with that garbage again.

"You can't please everybody," in short.

I fear "Mrs. Nussbaum" of the Allen program, Rochester of the Jack Benny program, and Harry Hirshfield, Joe Laurie Jr. and Peter Donald of "Can You Top This?" are aware now that though their dialect jokes please

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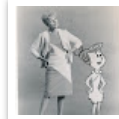


May 1940 - You couldn't blame David Sarnoff if he

mumbled some uncomplimentary comments at the F.C.C. in May of 1940. The Commission made two rulings, basically tell...

1 day ago

Yowp



Wilma - Jean Vander Pyl didn't have a big name on

television when she was cast to play Wilma Flintstone in 1960. The others were a bit different. Bea Benaderet ap...

3 weeks ago

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Today's Post: The 1964 World's Fair Documenta

ry and other

64 World's Fair stuff - This documentary is quite good. Most of you have probably already seen it, but I'm sharing it here anyways. While I'm add it, why not share some ...

28 minutes ago

millions, the same dialect jokes make a lot of others sore as hell.

So who is right? If you own even a second hand radio, you've got a right to sound off at the sponsors and tell them how to run their business, so let's go.

Parkyakarkus, who does the Greek dialect, tells me that Greeks love his dialect and made him a member of their best societies.

In a letter signed, "Your Pall, Parky," he says, "I have heard any number of radio programs that are downright offensive and should be off the air . . . And there's not a trace of any kind of dialect used in them. Why? Simply because they are presented in bad taste. So you see, it's not the dialect that's the rub. It's WHAT is said . . ."

Parky feels he handles the dialect judiciously. Joe Laurie would admit he handles Jewish inoffensively.

Up steps Harry Ruby, the song writer with a raucous "Hey, wait!"

Once, he says, vaudeville had Irish, German, English, Jewish and Negro comedians, "but only the Negro and Jew remain to be shown in a ridiculous light . . ."

Negroes and Jews have statesmen and scientists, but they are never portrayed, he says. "Your comic can incite laughter only by projecting ludicrous images. The impression that unthinking people get from these portrayals is responsible for some of the prejudice against them . . ."

Sometimes when I think of the headaches radio is going to have with television and the increasing sensitivity of the public, I'm glad I'm not on the air. P.S. I am not so worried about it that a sponsor couldn't fix it up.




Posted by Yowp at 07:16



Labels: [Earl Wilson](#), [Fred Allen](#)


2 comments:

 **J Lee** 21 August 2013 at 18:04

For me, it's the 'laughing with' vs. the 'laughing at' threshold when it comes to the dialect humor. When you combine it with someone who's supposed to be a not-very-bright character, and part of the comedy is mispronouncing words in a dialect, that tends to get old quickly and you can see why people would get irked by the association.

Post WWII, you don't see dialect jokes with Eddie Anderson and rarely any racial stereotypes, like Rochester going to Harlem to gamble. As with the other cast members, Rochester gets his comedy off Jack's eccentricities and weaknesses, not his own (and a day down the CBS dial in the 1950s, George puts Harry Von Zell into a far more subservient position on "The Burns and Allen Show" with Harry sucking up to George and being repeatedly fired a running gag in the sitcom. When Jack yells at Rochester or threatens to fire him, the blowback gag always hits Benny).

[Reply](#)

 **Steve** 22 August 2013 at 18:14

It's interesting to see Groucho take such a progressive stand as early as 1946.

So how did Chico take this?

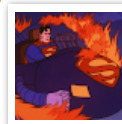
Steve

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The World's Greatest Super Friends: Lex Luthor Strikes

Back (1979) - A wonderful episode. In this episode, Lex Luthor escapes from prison by switching places with Lois Lane. After escaping he captures each of the Supe...

1 hour ago

Fernando Llera Cartoons



CONAGUA's cybersecurity payments found unverified

by ASF's 2002 audit. -

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[fernandollera.com](#)

4 hours ago

Pete Hale



My First Carl Barks - I decided to become a cartoonist last year, so

I started reading some old "animal" comic strips and books for study and enjoyment. I've already tried out...

7 hours ago

News From ME

Today's Video Link - We haven't had any Tom Lehrer on this site in many years so let's rectify that. Here he is on one of David Frost's eighty zillion TV shows in Great Britain...

13 hours ago

Way Too Damn Lazy To Write A Blog



Tomorrow Afternoon at Niles: Silent Era Animation and Jerry

Beck -

1 day ago

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acetate or two. There are a lot of people that would like to hear them again. The airchecks from AFN/AFKN/SCN etc usually t...

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They Never Got Credit
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Dancing Jungle Snake
Slobbering Woody
Retirement for Benny
Bye Bye Buddy, 1935
Concentration's Bob Clayton
Flea Circus Backgrounds
What Year is It?
Long Before He Said "Come On Down!"
Dance Floor From The Dance Contest
Now You're Callin' the Jive, Jackson
Yermo For Jack
An Assistant Animator
Ptui and Ptui Junior
Zap the Cat
Stan Freberg Has a Message
The Original Allen's Alley
A Brunish Banquet
The Best Drunken Fish in Cartoons
Jack Benny's Summer Job
Giddy Goat, Star of 1934
Moving the Budgets
Odor-Able Backgrounds

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