



Sunday, 28 January 2018

He Knows His Stuff

Jack Benny drew crowds with his movies in the 1930s but his films don't do a lot for me. When star spectaculars with contrived plots were big, he was put in those; to the right you see a still from *Man About Town*. Others took advantage of his radio persona. It's pretty much agreed *To Be Or Not To Be* was his best.

Thus the movie magazines wrote about him. Here's a feature article from *Modern Screen* of November 1939 where he talks about comedy, humour and his daughter, to whom he was extremely devoted.



BENNY, INC.

The other stockholders are three damsels who run Jack's life! Yet he's glad to sit on this Exchange

BY MARY MAYES

THERE IS an unknown woman in the life of Jack Benny. Her name is Thalia and she is said to be of Greek origin. Mary Livingstone is not jealous of her — at least, not in the ordinary sense. Thalia is the Muse of Comedy, folks, and Jack has been crazy about her all his adult life. The other women in the Benny scheme of things are, as you well know, the aforementioned Mary L. Benny and Miss Joan Naomi, the adored, adopted charmer of five, who winds Pop around the little finger and selects the daily neckties. These two ladies shall be mentioned in their places, but it is the laughing muse to whom we shall give our first attention.

Jack Benny has been consistently funny on the radio for a long, long time. He has been tops in all kinds of radio polls for a greater length of time than Spencer Tracy and Bette Davis have been winning Academy Awards. Now, with the happy release of "Man About Town," it seems that Benny has learned how to be equally funny in pictures. His previous movie operas haven't been nearly as good as his radio programs. The reasons for this heretofore sad state of affairs will become apparent as we go on talking about him and the gentle art of "how to be funny."

"How to be funny." I'm quite sure that, by actual statistics, there are nine million people in this country who would like to know the trick. Being naturally funny isn't enough. Belly-laugh jokes, sly puns, sophisticated wit — these are not enough. A comical voice (what is professionally known as good delivery) is a help, as witness the laughs Jack's Mary can get by merely opening her mouth. But it isn't all. Material — is that it? It's exceedingly important, and Jack Benny employs two smart gents named Ed Beloin and Bill Morrow, paying them salaries which aren't chicken-feed, babe, to help him whip up good material. But that isn't all, either. Let's listen to the Old Master himself, who seems to have the recipe.

"Why is Rochester funny?" he asked. "Rochester is funny because he has a God-given delivery. That asthmatic, smarty-pants, untutored, Aframerican voice is marvelous! But that's only part of it. Then, too, Rochester is gymnastically funny. His dancing has some comic sense; it isn't merely a series of gyrations. But he is funny chiefly because he is my servant and treats me with no respect whatsoever. Now how can he get away with this? He, a lowly colored boy, and me, his boss, and a member of the superior white race. Especially how can he get away with it in the South? We can get away with it because I, in my radio character and to a lesser extent in my movie character, am a combination of all the unattractive, small, nifty-nadgy, laughable, ridiculous characteristics which Mr., Mrs., and Miss America run across daily in friends, relatives, ex-boy-friends and neighbors. I'm a tightwad. I fancy my violin-playing, when actually I'm incapable of mastering Little Nellie's First Music Book, let alone 'Love in Bloom.' I'm a braggart about physical and romantic prowess or else I'm the type that all girls are safe with. I'm not grotesque, nor villainous, nor idiotic. I'm merely a

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combination of small, unattractive traits, slightly exaggerated. And that's why I'm funny, or at least I think so." You get the point — do you not? J. B. sits down and figures out how to make people laugh in the same way that the soup, tomato juice and bean tycoons sit down and figure out how to make people buy soup, tomato juice and beans.

"None of us would be funny," continued my favorite comedian, "if there were not a situation into which our various characters and cracks would fit, nicely and comfortably, without dragging gags in by the ears. Because a joke alone is not enough. We've left many a tasty joke on studio and cutting-room floors. An audience knows when a joke has been forced upon it and is apt to keep a very straight face about it.

"Once we cut a marvelous joke from a program — a joke about Eddie Cantor. I'm not going to tell it for we shall find a use for it some time. I ran into Eddie the following week and I said, 'Eddie, I had a swell gag in Sunday's program about you. Then, I dunno, at rehearsal, it didn't quite seem to click, so we left it out. But I think I'll put it in next week.' And Eddie said, 'Jack, when in doubt — remember that sterling word, "don't." A gag that is never told never lays an egg.'"



YES, J. B. certainly knows his stuff. His weekly radio program goes into work along about Tuesday of each week. In the meantime, Benny has been worrying ever since the preceding Sunday. Was the last program as good as the previous program? Maybe they shouldn't have made this crack, maybe they should have made that one. Oh, well, to work, now, to work! And Benny, Beloin and Morrow sit down with plenty of coffee, cigarettes and nice new pencils to chew. They engrave doodles on nice white paper. They ejaculate "Lousy!" at intervals. They stay up all hours. They finally get a rough idea. Wednesday, they bring their erasers and shape things up. They scribble down the sides of the pages and get a little bit enthusiastic. Thursday they get a little bit depressed. Friday, Saturday and Sunday, they cut and change and rewrite and rehearse and take aspirin. Benny watches the cast like a cat. The cast is his only barometer. If shrewd, comedy-wise people like them seem to be amused and enthusiastic, things stay in. If the cast seems a little cold, things come out. Flash ideas are carefully analyzed. It's not easy because nobody ever really knows, you see, until that program goes on the air. That's what makes it all so exciting, so nerve-racking, such a wonderful life, and such a head-aching bore, all at the same time.

Making a picture is a lot harder. And that's why it has been difficult to transfer the neat, sure Benny technique of being funny to pictures. He is his own radio director, but he cannot, obviously, be his own movie director. Many more elements enter into making a feature-length production. Many popular radio comics have flopped in pictures. J. B. didn't flop because he kept on a-figurin' and a-worryin' how to make a hit. "Man About Town" is only the first. "The New Yorker" is the tentative title of the second.

Now all has been about Benny, ze arteeste. Now for Benny, himself. When I told all my friends I'd just been to see Jack Benny, they asked, "Is he as funny in real life?" I said, "No." He is extremely serious about his job of being funny. He is, personally, a pleasant, shrewd, well-tailored person, with thick gray hair, fine teeth, an authoritative voice, and excellent manners. He gives the impression of being easy-going, with a certain steely quality underneath. I mean, you feel that he'd do anything to help a pal, but he wouldn't let anybody put anything over on him. The aura of show business surrounds him in a way that is hard to describe, for both his manner and dress are very much on the conservative side and he never calls anybody "Toots." But if you bumped into him in Tibet, you'd know he belonged to that screwball group of folk who can read "Variety" without employing an interpreter.

HIS whole face changes when he talks about his daughter Joan. That indefinable wise-acre quality which all expert showmen acquire disappears. A grin, which he tries to subdue, starts spreading over his amiable features.

"You know," he said, "when Mary picked her out — three months old she was — I didn't say anything. But the little thing — she was actually the homeliest of all the babies in Rabbi Wise's home in New Rochelle, New York. I know enough about babies to know that at three months, they're beginning to look something like human beings, aren't they? But Joan was so thin — hadn't filled out at all. Her eyes would cross occasionally and she had these bumps on her face that looked like mosquito bites, only they weren't. Impetigo or something, I think. Anyway, I must admit that, much as I wanted to adopt a child, I felt just the least bit dashed when I first looked at her. But I figured Mary knew what she was doing. Mary said, 'I want that one.' 'I'm not the sentimental type, but I've often thought since that Mary must have known something instinctively, must have felt something, that no one else could know or feel about little Joan. Why did she pick our baby, when there were so many prettier babies? There must be something to this maternal instinct.' Today, of course, Miss Joan is the type that wins prizes in the baby contests. She is dainty and graceful and coming along right smart with her tap-dancing. 'Oh, sure, she's headed right for the stage,' says Pop, which is exactly the opposite of what most show folks will admit that they hope for their children. Joan turns on the charm for Pop, after being perfectly matter-of-fact with Mary all day — just as all smart little daughters do.

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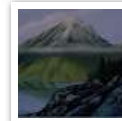


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Peter Gray's Comics and Art

New blog on my Art work...Original

She says funny things, which Mary and Jack have learned to take, in Miss Joan's presence, with perfectly dead pans. There was the time Jack was telling Mary about the excellent colored comedian named Eddie Anderson he'd discovered in Hollywood's Harlem. Yep. Rochester! Joan wanted to see Rochester, too. The day arrived when she did. And she turned to Jack and, in clear, ringing tones, exclaimed, "Why, Daddy, he isn't colored. He's just plain dark brown." She remembers every last living thing that she hears and recalls the names of people she has met for a moment months ago. All this is amazing and delightful to her father and mother. "And people say, 'How swell of you two to adopt a baby!' " says Jack. 'Ye gods! Phooey! We wanted a baby. We felt that nothing mattered a great deal if we could not have one, and the swell part about it is that she is healthy and cute and smart and unspoiled. The last is Mary's doing.

"We've been talking about adopting a boy," he went on. "I dunno. Sometimes, we go in and look at her having her supper in the nursery and we think, 'aw, the poor kid. She must be lonesome sometimes.' I've often thought I'd like a son to be a pal, friend and all that, you know, when he got to be fifteen or sixteen. But then I think, migod, by that time, I'll be hobbling around on crutches, and the doctor will long ago have said no more coffee and cigars, Jack, just weak tea with lemon and two cigarettes a day. So we still don't know.

"Our main problem now is how to tell Joan she is adopted. It would be wrong not to, we think. We've been paving the way in small things: letting her choose a puppy, and making much of the fact that she chose that one pup out of a kennelful of dogs. It isn't an easy task, but we feel that if we do it gradually, she will accept it naturally with no danger of emotional complications." I guess I don't need to say much about Mary after all this, do I? Mary is inseparably bound around with each detail of Jack's professional and domestic life, and has been ever since 1927.

Jack is the worrier, the less stable, the more unpredictable member of the family. Mary is the one who smooths him down or comes forth with the flip crack at exactly the right time. She has her own spot in the sun, lesser in size and glory than her husband's, but if she stays off the radio program for two weeks, the complaint letters have to be delivered in trucks.

SHE handles the marriage-career-and-child triangle with great cleverness, which is sumpin' when you consider that divorce bombs are continually bursting in the Hollywood air because other wives aren't as smart as she is. She puts her foot down occasionally when pleasure is continually pushed aside for business. While I was talking with him, a press agent popped in and asked could Mary give half an hour for an interview. "Don't ask me!" said Jack, throwing up his hands. "She says she's on vacation. I tell you — you call her yourself. You can do more with her than I can." Which is probably an accurate picture of the situation when Mrs. B. puts her foot down.

Nice folks, the Bennys. A mighty nice guy, Jack.


Posted by [Yowp](#) at 07:07

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