Humor and Ethnic Stereotypes in Vaudeville and Burlesque

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The halcyon days of the American vaudeville and burlesque theater, roughly from 1890 through 1910, compose the period in which ethnic humor on stage was most manifest. These decades were also years in which American humor changes significantly, moving away from the familiar literary and journalistic pseudo-folklore, the Yankee and Southwestern wise fools, commonsense philosophers, tricksters and con men, to the more universal “little man” of the twenties and the modernist and post-modernist comedy which would develop after the “golden age” (roughly from the end of the first World War to the early 1930s) (see McLean, Jr., chapter 3, Pinsker). The period was also one in which two other genres, film comedy and comic strips, as well as the popular theater, emerged to compete with the published word and to a lesser extent the platform lecture, as the forum for American humor.

While it is easy to see the differences in the humor of the nineteenth century with the emerging “modern” forms, it is important to note similarities and continuities as well and to be reminded that cultural changes take place neither suddenly nor absolutely. All of the familiar characters of earlier American humor can be located throughout twentieth century sources, in all genres, and many important motifs recur as well. In his recent book, American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930’s Film Comedy, Mark Winokur presents the interesting argument that American literary comedy was always, in a sense, “ethnic,” in its contrasting of immigrants to the new land with Europeans and immigrants to the western frontier with more established easterners (23-73, for reference to vaudeville, see esp. 63-73). Ethnic humor in the popular theater has a lot in common with the dialect humor of nineteenth century writers, and it reaches forward as well as backward in the literary humor of writers such as Roth, Heller, Malamud, Bellow and Reed, among others, though not always overtly.
Ethnic humor itself is not a uniquely American phenomenon of a specific historical period or particular form of popular entertainment. There are examples from the classical theater and folk theater worldwide which would be included under any reasonable definition of ethnic humor, and in our own theatrical tradition ethnic humor is to be found in the pre-Civil War minstrel theater, the rural tent theater circuit, the urban popular theater, and other popular stage entertainment vehicles from the late eighteenth century. Ethnic humor is present from the earliest days of the variety theater (I use the term “variety theater” here generically to embrace minstrel theater, vaudeville, burlesque and the revues), for instance in the “Double Irish” acts of McNulty and Murray in 1865 or of the Russell Brothers, John and James, as early as 1876.

Though stage expression of ethnic humor faded by the end of the 20s, along with the decline of vaudeville and burlesque, it did not die out entirely, surviving if not thriving in the Broadway revues such as George White’s “Scandals,” Earl Carroll’s “Vanities,” and Florenz Ziegfeld’s “Follies,” in the standup comedy of resorts and nightclubs, and in the mass media of film and television situation comedy. It is also manifested in American popular literature and journalism, appearing in the voice of Finley Peter Dunne’s Mr. Dooley, Leo Rosten’s Hyman Kaplan, Langston Hughes’s memorable Jesse B. Semple aka “Simple,” in Milt Gross’s ‘Nize Baby’ pieces, and elsewhere in America’s newspaper columns, magazine features and popular books.

The ethnic humor of the variety theater is easy to describe. It consists of comic monologues, two-acts, and comic sketches. The core of the humor is the construction of caricatures based on familiar ethnic stereotypes and linguistic humor—puns, malapropisms, double entendres, and accent-play, including broad exaggeration and misunderstandings which result from faulty pronunciation. The two-acts and the sketches provided, as we will see, a bit more thematic content and complexity, but for the most part, the ethnic humor was formulaic—pretty basic stuff.

The monologues and two-acts provided the structure, such as it was, for the construction of the caricatures and for the language play. Virtually all of the ethnic characters in the variety theater were flat representations of familiar stereotypes. A few of the better performers added their own twists and stylistic signatures, but even these were glosses and aesthetic adventures rather than deviations from the expectations of type. The Irish characters are drunk, belligerent, and dumb (dumb was the term commonly used in the comedy—it meant stupid or unintelligent, but it also meant culturally naive, “green” or bewildered, “unhip” as well). The Italians are happy ras-
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cals, promiscuous, proliferate, and irresponsible, comically hyper-
emotional—and dumb; the Germans, usually called “Dutch” in vaudeville from the same corruption of Deutch which gave us the Pennsylvania Dutch, are lazy, stodgily conservative, and of course, also dumb. Blacks are lazy, dishonest, promiscuous, proliferate, irresponsible and—guess what—dumb. Jews are usually “canny” to use the term provided by the basic classification system established in Christie Davies’s important study, Ethnic Humor Around the World, that is, they are smart in the sense of too clever, manipulative, dishonest—but they are also portrayed, perhaps surprisingly as dumb, especially as lacking in “street smarts,” and potential suckers. Jewish men are also particularly weak, cowardly, the victims of bullies (including Jewish women). Some of the traits are more specific and particular than the generic categories described by Davies. For instance, blacks are associated with an insatiable desire for watermelon, chicken, or pork chops; Italian immigrants are associated with crime and huge families, “Dutchmen” with sauerkraut and beer, and so forth. Some of the jokes deal specifically with the issues and dynamics of immigrant assimilation, as in the case of Cohen, who thanked his gentile friend for providing him with a nice salmon dinner the previous night. When his host corrects him by noting that the dinner was actually ham, Cohen replies indignantly, “So who asked you?” Here Cohen is the target of the joke, perhaps, for his hypocrisy and for his glib willingness to manipulate the truth, but he is also triumphant, that is he can eat his ham and have it be salmon too. Another latent but not unimportant theme encoded in this simple bit is the social mingling of Jews and gentiles, the gentile’s willingness to host the Jew, and the price the Jew must pay, in terms of fidelity to religious law and custom, to accept the invitation.

Collectively the immigrant caricatures sketch men who fit many of the basic categories in Christie Davies’s classification scheme, which outlines several oppositional pairs, stupid versus canny, lazy versus relentlessly acquisitive and competitive, cowardly or militaristic and aggressive, cheap or recklessly spendthrift. Alcohol abuse, a trait associated most prominently with the Irish in vaudeville humor, but also ascribed to Dutch, Black, and Italian ethnics is another important theme. These ethnic men often have problems with women. They are straddled with nagging and demanding wives and/or with jealous girlfriends, or they are the victims of attractive flirts who control, torment, or disorient them. Needless to say, the women are often the victims of the men’s infidelities, broken promises, fiscal irresponsibility and so forth. Indeed most of the male versus female humor clearly is much more sexist than it is ethnic. For instance a song like “The Wid-
“The Widow Rosenbalm” in which a soldier’s widow lives high off of his pension, neglects her children, and toys with her many suitors, might be seen as an anti-Semitic theme, but it is actually an adaptation of “The Widow Dunn,” a misogynist Irish song, and it could easily surface as well in any other ethnic costume. Another central element of the ethnic humor in the variety theater are the jokes and routines which deal with the immigrant’s problems with money, the lack of which, the need for which, and the quest for which are omnipresent. Characters are always trying to get money from each other, help each other solve pressing financial dilemmas, and in other ways familiar to the working class audience, get ahead in the new world of opportunity or, perhaps more characteristically, scramble for survival on streets which are not exactly paved with gold.

Language humor provides much of the actual laughter in stage ethnic comedy. The Italian character thinks that the mayor is a horse (mare), he confuses the pallbearer with a polar bear, and he asserts with confidence that the student who went to college to get a diploma could have saved a lot of time, money, and effort simply by looking in the telephone book under Pipes, Repair. Ikey Blatt was invited to an affair in which evening dress was requested. Naturally he came in his pajamas. A famous Bert Lahr song, “Ach, Gott How that Woman Could Cook, Jawohl,” offers such lines as: “Her Zoop had a flavor / Like bitches and cream / her pancakes—ah—vot a bootiful dreaaaaaaaaam / And her oysters and fishes—were simply—malicious. / Ach Gott how dot woman could cook, jahwohl” (56). Such linguistic humor is often derided as simplistic and juvenile, and indeed it is, as its popularity with young children attests. But it is also a reference to problems of language acquisition, a serious matter for immigrants, who realize constantly that understanding and misunderstanding vocabulary and pronunciation can be crucially important, even literally a matter of life and death!

The ethnic two-acts, called Double Dutch, Double Hebe, Double Wop, Minstrel (for Blackface, borrowing from the dialogues of the End Men, Tambo and Bones, in the minstrel theater), and the sketch- or skits offer opportunities for the development of somewhat more complex themes and images. The opposition of a dumb or culturally naive character with a smarter, more hip, possibly “street wise,” or even a con man, compatriot allows for the adaptation of very familiar American comic structures and character types to the specific contexts of the immigrant experience. The stupid character can play the various roles of the fool, from the negative bumpkin to the naif to the commonsense philosopher, exposing folly accidentally through fortuitous, ironic misunderstanding or through innocent honesty. Or he
can employ simple folk wisdom in opposition to more sophisticated error. His foil can be a trickster-con man, a slick rascal who uses his wit to survive in a hostile environment. As that prominent observer of American culture from Southwestern humor, Simon Suggs, liked to put it, “its good to be shifty in a new country.” The smart/dumb opposition recalls the Yankee humor of Hosea Biglow, the southwestern humor of Sut Lovingood and Simon Suggs, the literary comedians from Artemus Ward to the above-mentioned Mr. Dooley, Hyman Kaplan and “Simple.”

The two-act also allows for other oppositional examinations, such as those described by Davies. Norms of honesty versus dishonesty, of generosity versus thriftiness, of sobriety versus conviviality—in short just about all moral, ethical and social belief and behavior can be defined and described. The brief sketches allowed for even further development of humor revolving around the everyday lifestyle common to just about all of the immigrants. In one Dutch sketch, for instance, “Dot Quied Lotchings,” the laughter is provided by the usual language gags and stereotypes. The stock Irishman grouses about the Dutchman’s taste for lager, “Divil burn me if I can understand people drinkin’ lager beer when they can get drunk so much quicker an’ bet- ter on whiskey.” But the sketch also provides a humorous glimpse at the business of taking in boarders, a common practice in urban, immigrant America. It shows how hard it is to get a landlord to rent you a room unless you are the “perfect tenant” (i.e., no kids, pets, bad habits, domestic needs), and how having boarders disrupts the serenity of the landlord forced by financial exigency to open his or her home (McNamara 129-31).

Accounting for the prevalence of ethnic humor in the popular variety theater of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and exploring its various motives and functions is not nearly as easy as describing it. Beyond the small, mostly descriptive set of histories of American humor, Hill and Blair, Bier, and others, there is a sizable shelf of pertinent theoretical literature, both dealing with the motives and functions of humor generally and tackling the questions of ethnic humor specifically. In several conference papers, I have made my own modest contribution—a continuum description of the motives and functions of racial, ethnic and gender humor—and others including Lawrence LaFave, Marvin Koller, William Martineau, and the above mentioned Christie Davies have tackled the issue directly. John Lowe’s 1986 article in American Quarterly, “Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing,” is an indispensable introduction to the topic.
The most immediate and obvious explanation for ethnic and racial joking is that it allows for expression of hostility and superiority. This observation still leaves open the question of whether such expression tends to lead to or to justify actual acts of hostility, or whether it might neutralize or soften anger by providing alternative channels of expression for it or perhaps by providing some sort of “safety valve” for letting off the steam generated by people of different cultural backgrounds, often also historical enemies, who are living in very close quarters in the American urban environment. It has been argued that even aggressive, hostile humor is a mock attack, rather than an actual blow. Perhaps the most persuasive modern scholar taking a more jaundiced view of the effects of ethnic humor is Joseph Boskin, whose important essays in *Humor and Social Change in the Twentieth Century* are, fortunately, scheduled to be reprinted in a new, more accessible edition. Boskin points out that humor allows, that is licenses, cruel, hostile, negative sentiments which both directly and indirectly sanction and frame oppression, social control. According to Boskin, “Humor is one of the most effective and vicious weapons in the repertory of the human mind” (28).

A theoretical position which supports this view is the argument advanced by Hugh Dalziel Duncan, among others, that humor can have a conservative function, ridiculing that which is different from the norm, from the status quo, and “bringing it into line.” Umberto Eco echoes this line, arguing in “The Comic and the Rule” that the liberating effects of comedy’s licensing of deviation—Bakhtin’s spirit of carnival—is offset, at least, by the realization that, after the comedy, there is a return to order; the sanctioned norms prevail (275).

Some, but not most, of the texts support the argument that the ethnic humor of the variety theater was hostile and aggressive. For one instance, an Irish character, informed of an accident in which forty Italians and one Irishman are killed responds: “the poor man.” Certainly many of the ethnic stereotypes are at least derisive, more characteristically offensive, unpleasant, at least to our contemporary tastes. There are plenty of examples of ethnic humor which might justify holding a member of the targeted group in contempt, and that would obviously support Boskin’s point that it then further justifies oppression. In this sense, theatrical humor in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century can be understood as a means by which the public expressed resentment against the waves of new immigrants and also allowed for conflict and hostility between ethnic groups to be expressed in a displaced, but not necessarily, socially benign manner.
Other approaches, however, suggest more positive motives and functions. The portrait painted by many of the participants—performers and audiences—perhaps fueled by nostalgia and selective memory, is that ethnic humor was harmless fun, light amusement, pleasant banter, enjoyed by all. Joe Laurie, Jr. argues that ethnic humor was generally accepted as gentle fun, because it was a familiar staple in every day discourse; it had not yet acquired the assigned designation of improper or insulting (81). Albert McLean, Jr. claims that while the “new humor” of the popular stage was more aggressive and confrontational than earlier humor had been, its effects were more to create harmony than to exacerbate discord. According to McLean, in American Vaudeville as Ritual, “…vaudeville as a ritual of a New folk, was one of the means by which Americans came to terms with a crisis in culture” (3). Constance Rourke, the dean of American humor historians, contends, in American Humor: A Study of the National Character, that “Its [humor’s] objective—the unconscious objective of a disunited people—has seemed to be that of creating fresh bonds, a new unity, the semblance of a society, and the rounded completion of an American type.”

A related, but more sophisticated case for positive functions of ethnic humor is that of Charles Winick, who states that “a joke reflects social attitudes and provides a vehicle through which people can voice feelings for which there is no socially acceptable or easily accessible outlet” (125). Similarly, Mary Douglas, among others, emphasizes the liberating qualities of humor, allowing sentiments which are repressed or blocked in the “official culture” to surface and to be processed, often with positive benefits for social change. Bakhtin is also cited, very frequently, supporting this position in his account of the motives and functions of carnival and of Rabelaisian deviations from polite social norms.

Christie Davies’ theories about ethnic humor also provide potent arguments for less negative assessment. Davies maintains that the oppositional pairs which frame most ethnic jokes allow a society to establish boundaries of approved and scorned behavior. This is not entirely in opposition to Boskin, of course, but it sees the social control as operating within the society, rather than imposed on it from outside or above. Davies also sees the social and cultural control functions of ethnic humor as subordinate to their cognitive value, that is, to the ways in which they contribute to cultural awareness, to the process of acculturation. “The assertion and maintenance of ethnic identity are themselves values, and each individual is expected to strike a reasonably happy mean between the anomie and paralysis that would result from total cultural relativism and the crass ethno-
centrism that automatically negates the cultural values of others” (309).

Characteristically, alas, my own answer is d)—all of the above! The theories described above are correct, and there are still a few more ways to account for the many varied motives and functions of ethnic humor in the popular theater. The uses and gratifications of any humor depend upon a number of variables: who says what to whom under what contextual circumstances. The same joke, image, or caricature can have hostile intent and aggressive function, it can enhance group moral, it can be an aesthetic comedy-creating exercise, or it can be employed ironically as a sign of friendship and acceptance that is so strong, so transcendent that otherwise taboo utterances are acceptable. The audience might react entirely differently to texts according to how they are presented, to the mood or spirit created by the artist, but the experience also varies according to the composition of the audience; homogeneous audiences react to comedy entirely differently than do heterogeneous ones. The members of any audience do not have uniform reactions to humorous stimuli. It depends on your sense of humor. You had to be there. Smile when you say that. This approach to ethnic humor as polysemic is not intended to suggest that the responses are so infinite that they defy any intelligent hypotheses about the role of such humor in the popular theater of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As I have maintained in this essay, there are useful explanations which make some sense of it all. The significance of ethnic humor in the variety theater has to be mapped, however, rather than nailed down in one spot.

It remains for us to consider, briefly, why ethnic humor faded by the teens and died by the end of the twenties. One view is that the audience outgrew it and began to reject it. Supporting the idea that the audience voted, democratically, by its expression of approval or disapproval, Joe DiMeglio claims that “if no group was dismayed, an ethnic joke was in order. If a group objected, the particular ethnic joke was removed” (6). Paul Antoine Distler traces the decline in the popularity of ethnic humor to the assimilation of the ethnic population and a corresponding disinterest in the themes and images of immigrant life, but the dates just do not work to support his thesis. Ethnic humor had been banished, essentially, from the variety stage long before it would have been foreign to its audience” (40). James Dorman describes an audience which became too sophisticated for crass, vulgar ethnic humor, as do Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., who notes that the ethnic humor reigned until the audience “achieved a new economic and social dignity (7).
However, there is more compelling evidence that ethnic humor on the variety stage suffered a more violent, untimely death, as opposed to having simply withered away. As has been reported thoroughly by the historians of the popular theater, a conscious and concerted effort was made to “clean up” the variety entertainments, particularly vaudeville, but burlesque and the revues as well. B. F. Keith played a leading role, from within the profession, in this particular form of ethnic cleansing (along with his expurgation of “dirty” language and suggestive sexuality), but it was also spurred from outside, from pressure groups, usually organized ethnic societies, which attacked humor deemed offensive to the group’s image, often with boycotts, demonstrations, disruptions, and other activist techniques. Geraldine Mascio reports that the Russell Brothers, for instance, were brought down not by audience boredom or neglect, but by an organized protest movement orchestrated by the United Irish societies, a group composed of ninety-one Irish societies. As Maschio informs us, a special committee called the “Society for the Prevention of Ridiculous and Pervasive Misrepresentation of the Irish Character” pretty much single-handedly accounted for the Russell Brothers’ humor suddenly becoming politically incorrect (85).

In his essay “On Vaudeville,” William Dean Howells imagines a dialogue between the editor and his visitor. “Then what you wish, the editor suggested, is to elevate vaudeville. The visitor got himself out of his easy chair with a groan and a growl. You mean, to kill it” (77). As we know from our own contemporary experience, ethnic humor did not die. It was merely buried alive, forced underground into popular, vernacular, serendipitous joke telling rather than more formal theatrical and media forums. And now, of course, efforts are being made that it be exhumed...so that a stake might be driven through its heart.

Works Cited


