

The American Comedy Archives Interview

LOUIS NYE

Interviewed March 7, 2005

By Bill Dana and Jenni Matz

In Los Angeles, CA

Biographical Information:

Born May 1, 1913 in Hartford, CT, Died October 9, 2005 in Los Angeles.

Louis Nye began his career in theater before moving to New York and entering radio. Nye was a comedian who coined the national catchphrase “hi Ho, Steverino”, as Gordon Hathaway, on *The Steve Allen show*, on which he was a regular performer in the 1950s. Nye created many other characters, such as Harvey Footlight. He was a nightclub and radio performer and a master of many voices and accents.

His other acting credits included Sonny Drysdale on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Kirby Baker on *Harper Valley, P.T.A.*, and as host of the variety show *Happy Days*. He was the voice of Inspector Gadget in the cartoon series in the 80s and 90s. He also appeared on *St. Elsewhere*, *The Love Boat*, *Laverne & Shirley*, *The Munsters*, *the Jackie Gleason Show*, and was a frequent guest on Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show*.

His film credits include *Cannonball Run II*, *A Guide for the Married Man*, *Good Neighbor, Sam*.

Most recently Nye appeared in HBO’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm* as the father of Jeff Garlin’s character (2000-2002).

NOTE:

The Following is an Excerpt from our interview with Louis Nye.

To read the full transcript, please contact the Archivist

BILL DANA: This is the voice off camera asking this to Louis Nye to set us all in the mood. He will do a medley of Doug (inaudible).

LOUIS NYE: Rather strange desire. But, when I was in radio, I would also play human beings and that if they needed a dog, I would just lean back and go ruff (barking like dog several times) and then the director would say, could you put that in the distance way off (demonstrates dog barking way off in the distance). He would say, thank you very much, good, we got that. How about dog fighting another dog? (demonstrating dog fight). That was nice to earn a living doing that. Many times, people from other radio stations would call me up and say, you have that guy that barks, send him over there. I would go over there and pick up another \$7.

DANA: Let's talk a little bit about your family in Hartford.

NYE: Well my father was a grocer, meat market and grocery store. He supplied his people that brought -- a lot of them were Travelers Insurance. Hartford is an insurance city, you know, and many insurance companies in Hartford, and as a kid, I was on WTIC, Travelers Insurance Company, and they had a radio program and I would come on there and do all kinds of things and it was the starting of my desire to act to undo something. I would be in plays, too, that were

done by the Hartford Players and as a kid, you find all these areas where it doesn't cost anything, but you can play the roles. It was wonderful to do that. I never studied and I am sure I missed something.

DANA: Since this is a resource for students of Emerson and others, do you think that that's a void, something that you should have done, actually studying of the art?

NYE: Oh, I think it's a wonderful thing and it's proper. I often thought, gee, if I had gone to college, university, I might have had an easier life, starting off with some good direction in college that they usually have. Yes, I would say that it's wonderful to study. Some of our best actors are college students that belong to clubs at their universities.

DANA: So, you went in from Hartford, did you have a gig before you left Hartford?

NYE: Well, I was on WTIC, as I said. Is that what you asked me? Try to be a little clearer.

DANA: Jenni, jump in any time.

JENNI MATZ: Going back to -- talking about that you didn't have a formal education in acting, yet you had a desire early on to be on the stage and to be in radio and you were on *Crime Doctors*, was one of the shows that you were on.

NYE: You know, it's a wonderful thing when you think back about

your life that stimulates you to some point, the things that you do to learn about that. Movies were always a good challenge. I used to love to go to see funny character people in the movies, you know, silent pictures, I remember seeing a lot of silent pictures in some of the old theaters. They always had letters, and it's wonderful. Also, I noticed that if you had a fire, now that I have a piece of paper in my hands -- close your eyes and listen. (crunches paper in hand to sound like a fire). So, a lot of things that you do by imagining and business hasn't changed that much. So, I recall so many things that happened that you repeat as you go on and you repeat these things but the things that you learn from silent pictures like the -- because nobody talked, so they had these people looking -- and then they write it underneath and explain what he's thinking about. I was always fascinated by that.

MATZ: You did several TV shows and several Broadway shows. What I am curious about is what drew you to the comedy end of the spectrum rather serious acting?

NYE: On Broadway, if you do a job, a small job on a play and it's funny, people already decorate you with a funny guy and you just keep improving on it all the time, playing larger parts. Sometimes, you come in and you almost save a

show by having the show get lighter and it's pleasant. The guy that talks maybe a little differently than the other actor and his "path" is outstanding because he's screaming and everybody says he's a good yeller, he's good, he yells and he gets his part. I like all kinds of acting. I don't bother with this (inaudible). I like bad actors very much because you learn from them.

DANA: Can you remember the first time that some third party said hey, you're funny, or laughed at you?

NYE: My mother. She never knew what I was doing. Yes, it was in a play on Broadway where the reviewer mentioned my name. It was in a show called *Touch and Go* by Walter Kerr and his wife wrote it. From then on, I used to get jobs doing that. Review would help, on Broadway especially. You learn something.

DANA: As a kid going up, did you have brothers and sisters?

NYE: I had a sister.

DANA: Did she think you were a funny guy?

NYE: No. She didn't until I grew up, until the world told her, till the world opened its mouth and said, your brother's a funster.

DANA: Very interested in the value of humor, especially in survival and also if you have to be part of any ethnic or religious group, humor can help you through.

NYE: It's like today, people make fun of themselves. They make fun of their origins. Black people do that. Any comic that was Jewish in New York already had his own form and say, *good evening ladies and gentlemen, I want to take the opportunity to* -- in New York and they did their stuff and it was kind of marvelous. Then, suddenly, that straightened out and all those people are gone. The only people who that kind of humor about growing up are black, Latino people. It's changed now but in New York, there were so many comics in those days.

MATZ: You had such versatility and you did so many great characters. One of my favorite was Harvey Footlight. I wonder if you could talk about -- you were one of these few comics bringing back sort of...

NYE: Well, I tell you that little machine in the back you had comedy on it, old-fashioned comedy but it was -- they didn't do anything funny but I used to hear it and a couple of years later, when I first it, it impressed me and I said, of course. Well, it's morning time and it's time for me to go out and milk the cows (funny laughter). I have to get a couple of quotes ready to sell them around. That's what I do (laughing funny again). You do that over and over again and it was no material at all, it's what you did

for a living. Then, they had the singers, you know, four or five might sing a song about the choo-choo train so you hear these things and it floods into your mind and it becomes part of what you use and feeds you comedically speaking. Of course, when you are a kid, too, you start, in those days, with the different personalities different nationalities around. You found that if you did them, people admired it instead of saying making fun of me. A lot of people start out as Italian descent. I used to do a guy that used to come to my father's store and says, Comea here to buy pound tomato and I bring home to -- and cut up with a biga knife. Then, I take onion, take onion and cut 'em up and mix them up with olive oil and take a piece of garlic, crush it up gooda and I rub in there and I rub the whole bowl around with that, the garlic gives it a nice taste and it's healthy for you. A doctor told me one time garlic, if you ever have children when you get married, eat a lot of garlic. Thank everybody for all the information we get. Then, you do it and it comes out humorous, funny, whatever.

MATZ: It is a touchy subject because if you've been doing a character, it might become offensive to somebody but you seem to have been able to carry it off and I knew that you worked with Jack Benny and one of the things he said about

being a successful comic is that people have to like you.

I wonder how you managed to really get away with doing some of these characters, where comics today are a little more crass.

NYE: I think of Benny, the first time I -- we were at a college, UCLA, and it was a show for the introduction of a new singer, he was a fat kid and he become like a legendary singer in Vegas -- I can't think of his name, Wayne Newton.

DANA: If I old sing high...

NYE: I was on the Benny show and while I was on the Benny show, I was doing all these things while I was talking to him. Now, look here Jack -- I says, gee, I'm doing Jack Benny and he loved it and wanted that. He was such a dear, dear man. He was lovely to work with and to be with. Bob Hope was the same. Bob Hope is so helpful. He would say, fix that (inaudible) for God's sake, what's happening here! Four old rivals would hobble over and come down to you. Move this way -- it will be all right. Do it over again. They would give you direction and -- those were wonderful days. They made you feel so good. You know that, Bill.

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: We would like to talk a little bit about you had some

versatility and such a range in characters, but the one that you probably are best known for is Gordon Hathaway, although you don't particularly care for Gordon. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how it evolved and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

NYE: Steve Allen loved the hat that I came in with one day and they -- put the hat on and he says, you are going to be a married guy, have children and all that but you have a very light way about you. Play that. I did. I -- *hi ho* Steverino. I never in my life thought that would become like a big thing, where people would write away for pictures and to record Hi Ho. I don't know why that happened. I think people liked it, that's all. He was a gentlemanly guy and class, a little class there. Hi Ho was his heading when...

DANA: Could have been any number of ad agency guys.

NYE: Yeah, of course, you would find these guys around all over.

DANA: it was exciting because there was a hint of mint.

NYE: Hope once told me that it's crazy. He says -- they were doing that, watch carefully next time you see a (inaudible) little area where it's a little (inaudible) and of course, Benny always liked.

MATZ: You have been in this business for so long, have you figured out what it is that makes people laugh?

NYE: I never found the proper words, even though my wife is so smart and she even failed to give me the proper words. I don't know why. I guess it is when you do it, you do it and there is a quality coming from you that makes something funny. How else, unless you are -- funny-looking is a great help, too. when the man we just mentioned -- name funny-looking people.

DANA: Don Knotts...

NYE: Yeah, look at Don, sweet little Don, getting upset about something, remember him, how he would choke when he would do the weather. He would put a weather guy on there and it was just brilliant. He always had that light bit of a cough, just the timing. You find these things about yourself, make fun of yourself, too and if it comes off, it's fine. I think the different kinds -- look at the European great actors that we have had that are so funny, funny people, the French man, I can't think of his name, (imitates a French speaker). You know you hear it and you don't understand what he is saying, but if you watch it long enough, you get the idea. I never was attracted to go and see comics work. I used to love to go to foreign pictures. Pictures. That was my joy, to go to a foreign picture and not understand a word and today, how many times when you see an old English-talking it's to me delightful

because they are not careful of worrying about Americans understanding them, but you see, a guy -- (imitates thick British accent), not at all. After all, never in my life did I -- (inaudible), (imitates loud laughter). You go along with that. I used to go there, never learned anything, watching these people. I say, what the hell did he say?

DANA: Did it just happen, this amazing ability, the ear that you have, the way of recreating -- because you are doing us the authentic, you are reproducing something. You are not doing a caricature. These people exist.

NYE: OH yeah.

MATZ: I am wondering if you could talk a little bit, the importance of knowing who came before you? How important is it to know what the jokes were and are there certain jokes that everyone needs to know?

NYE: I think it's wonderful if you can do a little research to see what your business is like and what people sounded like and how they worked. I think it all adds to it, plus, looking at some wonderful straight characters, and it doesn't have to be comedy, just look at wonderful actors. Larry -- the writer--had was talking about that one night,

about watching all these real things and -- my God, you watch as much time as I did, -- in New York, we used to have theaters where they played only French and foreign films, on 42nd Street. You would go there and give them the coins and you sit down and you see a whole show with great French actors and the English actors. I also like the English juveniles. When I first heard the word mummy (said with British accent). Imagine a guy talking about his mummy (said with British accent). It hits you here, mummy (with British accent). Oh no, not at all, yes of course, very good, thank ya (said with British accent).

DANA: Was there a Louis Nye process of learning a dialect or was it you just heard it once and zap, you just...

NYE: No, you studied it. You say, why does he say it like that? My God, it's terrible -- this man, he puts all his words together so you put words together just like he does and then people learn because they heard it but they it from me. It's that little extra thing that you have to think about all the time that it's just a little bit of difference, you know. What was the English actor I did so much with him, we used -- he just died a couple of years ago. Peter Ustinov. Oh my God, one time Peter Ustinov came in late on the *Steve Allen show*. He flew in and had other business to do so I went to him and I said, Peter,

let's do two Russian soldiers of very high rank like a general, salute each other and we'll talk. That's all the information. He nodded his head and took his jacket off and he says -- why do they always have to give you a funny-looking jacket and was peed off about the whole thing, so we got him another one that looked better and got me one, and I walked in with a limp. He was already sitting in a chair and I walked in and said to him, (says something imitating Russian accent). He got up and answered me in Russian. That wasn't Russian, it was double talk. He did it and it sounded like I did and he said, as he did that, when we discussed what we were going to do, I said, we'll be a little sick in the stomach, both of us, and age, a bad foot, bad arm, from the Army, he says yes, so getting up to greet me, he was already doing this, getting up like in great pain. It was beautiful to see. We were acting. He said he did it in Russian, part of it, and part in double talk. We had a wonderful meeting. I remember one time I said (talking with Russian accent) and he did one of his -- to show you how upset he was about his friend that died. It went on and I would give anything to get a hold of wherever it is. It's so delighted that it went on (inaudible).

DANA: Keeping in mind that students of comedy watching you as we speak, what would you -- if you were a student, what would you want to hear Louis Nye say about a career in comedy?

NYE: Do it. Just go and do it. If you don't work much, you get a stomachache because you are not eating right, but do it. To me, the saddest thing about youth is not to do what you wanted to do but 12, 14 years pass by and you still have that feeling and your face is getting old, your hair is losing ground, and you really can't spend much money on a good wig and you go to your grave wishing that you had done that thing. I think, to me, that's the saddest. I don't know how your people would feel about it. To me, that's dreadful. Bomb out, but do it proudly and say (inaudible) and you quit, but to go on and have it in here all the time, to me, is an illness, it's a terrible illness.

MATZ: Can you talk a little bit about sacrifices you must make in order to be in this business because it is a hard business?

NYE: In my time, old timers would say to me, have a dark jacket and pants to match. I said, tuxedo? Yeah. But, you can get away if you just have the shirt, and have a certain way of life. It's almost -- not priestly, I would say -- the students (inaudible) living tight little lives so that they can act and I found that some understood the business so

well that they lived that way in their early youth before going broke. If you can't get a (meal) buy an apple and have some peanuts around. That's nourishing. The apple, that would be our supper. In those days, what was it 15 cents for the big, fat apple and some peanuts and live that kind of a life until you can afford it and I have met people that have done that. You know what, a lot of them were college kids that got out of the university -- the thing about college is that they have their own theaters many times, but those that don't, you have to find an area, some kind of group that have players and learn all you can and graduate to a little place where they say, I'll give you 20 bucks for this, can you be here tomorrow night. Well, at the end of the four nights, (inaudible) \$20. In those days, 20 bucks would carry you for a week and a half. Yes, you have to sacrifice for something that you really feel you love, even if you find out after you get it that you hate it and don't want any part of it.

MATZ: Do you ever find that with some of your characters, people expected you to be in character all of the time and it would melt into your personal life?

NYE: Oh yeah, sometimes people are -- sometimes, you need people

to go and say Hi Louis, how are you, how are you doing? I don't like that. I'm tired of the whole thing; I'd like to take a nap now.

DANA: Well, you have earned yourself a nap.

MATZ: Is it all worth it?

NYE: Yes. It is worth it. You got to know what you want to do and it's important that you follow it. One chance you get to go around the block. I haven't been doing to much lately because my sweet, dear, wonderful wife has been ill with the God-damndest disease I ever heard of, craziness. I am starting to think the doctors are funny, they are funny people. Pills, go out of your brains, the pills you take. I am talking about Parkinson's so if you have an aunt or uncle -- you know it's rough. We do the same. We just hope and pray for something good and wonderful and for some great doctors to suddenly say, hey, I found it. What a dramatic thing that must be.

End of Interview Excerpt: Louis Nye