

# BOOK FORUM

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*A Special Issue On*

# THE THIRTIES



*Raymond Chandler's 1930s L.A. - Robert Benchley in Hollywood and New York - Jack Conroy and the Proletarian Novel - Coming of Age in the Thirties: A Portrait of Tillie Olsen - Mari Sandoz and Capital City - Debunking the Thirties with James Gould Cozzens - Out of the Ghetto: Michael Gold, Anzia Yezierska, and Henry Roth - Lionel Trilling, Richard Wright, and the Communist Party - Conservatives of the Thirties - Good Times in the Thirties - Breadlines and Movie Queues - Hollywood Realism and the Depression - Radio Humor - The Liberal and Radical Weeklies - New Books About America in the Thirties.*

## IN GOOD SPIRITS: ROBERT BENCHLEY REMEMBERED

ROBERT LUHN

Robert Benchley once said, on the death of George Ade, that "when a great humorist dies, everybody should go to a place where there is laughter and drink to his memory until the lights go out." When Robert Benchley died in 1945, two wakes were held, one in New York where he had lived and written, and one in Hollywood, where he had come in his last decade to work as an actor.

Marc Connelly presided at "21" in New York; Dorothy Parker and other East coast émigrés at Romanoff's in Hollywood. The gatherings were stricken more by disbelief than grief, and many toasts were made and stories told into the early hours of the morning until memories were clouded by alcohol and despair.

In the passing years the memory of Robert Benchley's life and work has faded almost to white, kept alive by his son and biographer Nathaniel and by others who were lucky enough to know him. The fragile unbroken chain is continued by those who come upon his books and discover one of the past masters of American humor.

As a humorist, Benchley took Stephen Leacock's tentative experiments and leapt into the literary spotlight of the twenties and thirties. Benchley's concoction of Dada, dementia and New England common sense produced a witty, urbane and oft-times mad look at life. As a theatre critic, first for the old *Life* magazine and later for the *New Yorker*, his gentle but piercing writings were discussed more than the plays he reviewed. Ever the boulevardier, Benchley epitomized the gaiety of Broadway and its determination to "Have a Good

Time." The speakeasy with its 24 hour conviviality was made for the nocturnal Benchley. He graced them with his easy laugh and affability.

Robert Benchley was many things to many people. To Ernest Hemingway, he was "Garbage Bird" Benchley (an attempt to describe Benchley's early morning dishabille). To his friends, "Mr. Benchley" or "Fred" sufficed. To the readers of *Vanity Fair*, *Life* and the *New Yorker* he was the first writer to debunk the revered myths of the old-fashioned Christmas ("... someone tries to start the conversation but everyone else is too gorged with food to be able to move the lower jaw sufficiently to articulate..."), the work ethic ("I do most of my work sitting down—that's where I shine.") and travelling by train ("In America there are two classes of travel—first class, and with children."). To movie audiences who were unfamiliar with his writing, his short films were a welcome wet patch in a desert of "B" and "C" pictures.

As a writer of unaffected nonsense, Benchley shone as few have before or since. Stephen Leacock, who served as an inspiration, smiled as he was left behind. James Thurber, a man not prone to give up much, called Benchley "incomparable," while E. B. White, Wolcott Gibbs and a later generation of humorists led by Woody Allen freely acknowledge their debt.

Jack Chertok, who produced most of the short films that Benchley wrote and starred in, told his directors to turn on the camera and let Benchley go. "What can you tell a genius?" said Chertok. "The camera looks inside you. When you're 100 times life size on a screen, you can't pretend to be something you're not. Bob was a good man and he was real. He had that most important quality: vitality. And of course, skill."

In spite of his talents, Benchley wrote less and less as the thirties came to a close. "No humorist is ever funny after age 50" he contended. When he finally hit the mark in 1940, he ended his association with the *New Yorker* and with writing. He spent the remaining years at his bungalow at the Garden of Allah, where the parties were brighter and gayer, perhaps because life had lost its sparkle for many who were there.

Benchley wrote thousands of articles, reviews and casuals but never achieved the "longer flight" of his novelist son Nathaniel. Some speculate that Nathaniel did what Robert Benchley would have wanted to do. If so, he passed on to his son the qualities that make a writer and certainly a humorist: compassion, understanding and a readiness to puncture the self-inflated balloon of human folly.

While I never could have known Robert Benchley, I was lucky enough to be acquainted with Nathaniel and to meet with him only a few short months before his death. Nathaniel established his reputation as a novelist, ghost story writer and biographer in the early 1950s. He took his success in different stride, moving away from New York to settle in Nantucket to continue his prolific career.

Late last fall I met with Nathaniel at his home on the island to talk about his father. Nantucket had always been a happy place for the Benchley clan and the

day with Nathaniel was suffused with his affectionate and sometimes pointed reminiscences.

I asked him what he admired most about his father. He paused for a moment, leaned back in his chair and glanced towards the ceiling.

"The first word that comes to my mind is honesty. An ability to get to the heart of a situation, to sum a thing up and to stand on principles. The upholding of principles. Sounds kind of highblown and windy. There was a fierce kind of New England honesty.

"He was absolutely marvelous company. And he had the ability to, if he felt it necessary, to correct somebody as gently as possible so that no offense was given. I can give offense by trying to be nice to people! One time I was in Hollywood and I ran into John McNulty at Barry Sullivan's house. McNulty used to play piano for the movies at Andover. He had a song 'Keep Your Dreams Within Reason' that he played. One thing led to another and we went back to my father's room at the Garden of Allah. McNulty asked a couple of people along. By the time my father got back from the studio, there was a full blown party going on in his apartment. So . . . he started passing out drinks. McNulty, who had one of those button-up sweaters, had opened it and was sitting next to Woody Herman's wife on the couch. He had one hand on her knee and was telling her that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. My father, in passing out drinks, came by and leaned over to Mrs. Herman and said, 'Excuse me. Is my friend becoming offensive?' The two words 'my friend' took the sting out of it; McNulty took his hand away, buttoned up his sweater and was out of there in five minutes. Very chastened and in no way angry."

Nathaniel's earliest memory was a bit more domestic, coming from the tender age of three.

"I remember in Crestwood, where we lived until 1920, the Stiles' [neighbors at the time] had a twin house just opposite ours. The bathrooms had windows facing one another across a very small area. My father and Stiles talked to one another while shaving in the morning. A small, isolated memory . . . I remember the first Armistice in 1918. There was a big train rail that had been bent almost circular and hung on a gallows, out in front of the house. It was a fire gong. It had a big sledgehammer with it and all the neighbors in Crestwood lined up to strike the gong. The kids were allowed to do it too. I remember David Stiles (who was much younger than I) had to have somebody hold the hammer for him. I thought he was an awful sissy until I put my hand on the hammer myself. Needless to say, I needed help."

The epilogue to the story came a quarter of a century later in Panama, where Nathaniel was stationed by the Navy in 1944.

"My father sent me a cable on my birthday saying MAYBE YOU DIDN'T RING THAT GONG LOUD ENOUGH. I sent one back saying, WHAT DID YOU EXPECT FROM A THREE YEAR OLD . . . BELGIAN CHIMES? The Navy security officer called me in and said, 'What does this mean?' I said it was a

family joke. He said, 'Tell me.' This was when they were cranking up for the Ardennes offensive. That was a month away. So I explained the cable to him. He said, 'That must mean you're 29.' I said he was correct. He couldn't find anything wrong with it, but you can see why he was suspicious."

Nathaniel might have been wary of his father as well, considering that the two saw each other only once or twice a week until Nathaniel was in his mid-twenties. But Nathaniel's reminiscences were fond, punctuated by laughter or a smile over some remembered incident. The two didn't become close until 1939, when Nathaniel moved to New York to pursue a writing career.

"The nature of his work was such that he didn't have much time off. The commute was brutal and all summer he was out in California. We became very close after I got married and moved into town. Whenever he was in New York, we would go out to dinner with him, maybe three times a week. [Before the move] he would come out to Scarsdale for Sundays or we would go into town.

"Suburbia was in many respects a drag, especially as he got more into the Hollywood routine. In suburbia, if he went to a cocktail party or a luncheon, people would say, 'Tell me about Jean Harlow! Is she really . . .' He never said anything about it, but at one point after we moved into town I said, 'Boy, it's such a relief not to have that commute.' He replied, 'Oh? I didn't realize I had a fellow traveller here.'"

It was during this period just prior to the war that Nathaniel's stature changed, at least in the eyes of his father.

"We used to meet at the Plaza at quarter to one on Sunday. The bar didn't open until one and it was fifteen minutes of real sweat. I remember one time sitting there waiting for an order and I just did this [turning his wrist over to check his watch] to see how soon it was 'til one. My father laughed. 'Oh, you too? Just hang on.' He later told somebody else that it was the first time he realized that I had become a man, that I was sweating out a hangover."

Nathaniel missed out on the heady nightlife of the speakeasy era, by virtue of his age. But in 1939 the glowing boulevard life of Broadway was open to him, guided as he was by a premier theatre critic who also happened to be his father.

"He knew the timing of the best acts in the different shows, so you could start out with him and go to one show and then another. It was all done by the clock. You might pick up four shows in one evening and then move on [to the clubs]. It was marvelous. The ticket takers and the doormen all knew him so there was no problem."

The night on the town usually ended up at "21," a favorite haunt of Robert Benchley's during Prohibition.

"When repeal came in, the people at '21' told my father that 'since he'd been so faithful during Prohibition' he could just forget about the check. So, he thought great! At the end of a couple of years, he got a bill from them. They said, 'Oh, we didn't mean forget about it completely.' He never paid it off."

When not at the business end of a scotch tumbler, Robert Benchley was

probably happiest at the *New Yorker*. He had started out at *Vanity Fair* doing various pieces ("It was a mare's nest anyway," said Nathaniel), later making a temporary move over to *Life* as a drama critic. The temporary move lasted eight years and firmly established Robert Benchley's reputation as a writer and wit. At the *New Yorker* however, Benchley found a more congenial atmosphere for his drama criticism and a chance to keep his eye on his colleagues as well in "The Wayward Press."

"I think he liked the *New Yorker* work better than any," said Nathaniel. "Harold Ross was a close friend. Thurber was on occasion, though he was mercurial, to say the very least."

Robert Benchley left the magazine in 1940, just a few years before Nathaniel's appearance in its pages. After Harold Ross's death in 1951, the *New Yorker* changed and some would say not for the better. The mention of Brendan Gill's "Here at the *New Yorker*" elicited from Nathaniel a candid assessment of the magazine and Gill, its current drama critic.

"I know a lot of people at the magazine hated [the book]. I think they felt that he was putting Ross down—mocking Ross—and boosting William Shawn [the present editor] to a shameful extent. To the extent of having Shawn write a chapter. Come on! Nobody needs a job that badly!"

"Willie Shawn is trying so hard to make it his own magazine and wipe out any traces of Ross. He's succeeded, God knows. They're hitting for some sort of intellectual level that I'm afraid is kind of rarefied. I was doing pieces there when Shawn took over. You got an awful lot of interference from Shawn that Ross would never have done. I would get notes saying 'The fathers among us—Shawn included—feel that you're being too strict with the boy here.' Ross would never have given a damn about anything like that."

Nathaniel's move to the city did not immediately lead to the *New Yorker*, of course, or even to the *Herald Tribune*, where he initially tried to get work. The Benchley name opened other doors to a writer in that era, but it was not always an advantage.

"It helped, but at the same time, it was a drawback because once a magazine had taken a piece, they expected much more from me. If I had been a Blevitch, they might not have taken it. But they wouldn't have expected anything."

Nathaniel eventually did get to the *Tribune* in 1939. At the same time, his father's output began to slow down, as his time was largely spent before the cameras in Hollywood. Some said it was just a matter of Robert Benchley's famous laziness coming to the fore. But when I put this to Nathaniel, he refuted it quickly.

"He wasn't lazy. He liked to put things off as long as he could. He was a procrastinator. He got his copy done just in the nick of time for the *New Yorker*. They often had to send runners out to get it. Benchley's law is 'Any man can do any amount of work, provided it's not the work he's supposed to be doing.' So he would find all manner of things to do rather than start a piece.

"At one point he was doing three pieces a week for the King Features

Syndicate and a radio show and in the winter, covering the theatre openings for the *New Yorker*. It was a hell of a pile up. Writing got harder and harder until he finally gave it up altogether. He 'quit while he was ahead.' I think that could have been a little rationalizing . . . to salve his conscience."

What kept Robert Benchley in Hollywood was a commodity he never coveted but always needed: money. The work in feature and short films was relatively undemanding and financially rewarding. Nathaniel added, "It was awfully hard money to give up." There were friends too: Roland Young, Bogart, Charlie Butterworth, Reginald Gardiner and others. Enough friends to have fun with at the Garden of Allah. The parties that Benchley held—and sometimes discovered going on in his living room—are legendary. But they weren't as wild as legend would have it. It is true, Nathaniel said, that his father in a puckish mood one night arranged a selection of furniture on the bottom of the Garden swimming pool. But for the most part, things were a little tamer.

"In the first place, most of the people [at the Garden] were working, having to be on the set at eight in the morning. The idea of wild Hollywood parties is in the mind of the civilians in Pasadena. They say, 'Boy, get me in on one of those parties!' And people are standing around talking shop. The people who misbehaved themselves at a 'wild Hollywood party' were from the East who came out and got smashed."

Wild or not, whatever charm Hollywood had for Robert Benchley soon waned. He ended up despising it and despairing for his career as a writer. But his passion for writing never withered, and he found an outlet in his unfinished magnum opus on the Queen Anne period. It started out as a novel, then became a play and finally a study of humorists during the time of Queen Anne. Nathaniel noted, "He gave that up when he decided that none of them were funny."

"Everybody has a magnum opus in mind," he continued. "But the minute my father started on anything like a novel, his mind would start working in terms of parody. There was one piece of his about writing and this sentence is given as an example of an opening. It said, 'Martin Blemish paced up and down the room, back and forth, thinking, thinking. So far he has failed to interest us as a character.' His mind was tuned that way. It couldn't stay serious for long. But anybody, particularly if you deal in humor, has a desire to change the subject, because humor is looked down on, generally speaking. I think one of the best things on humor was the forward that E. B. White wrote to *A Subtreasury of American Humor*. That's a beautiful job."

"His letters, as you know, are masterpieces of simplicity. I wrote him one time. It was winter and I was walking down the street and a black Labrador came woofing in the other direction, carrying an untouched and untasted peanut butter sandwich in his mouth. I saw him and said, 'Who in the hell's sandwich do you think you've got?' He gave me that quick silent glance and went on. I began to brood about it, saying now, where did he pick it up, where is he taking it, and did his owner say, 'Would you go down to the corner and get me a PB&M

and hold the mayo?' So I kicked this around, finally wrote to White and told him about this and said, 'Do you have any idea what might have been going on? We don't have much to think about in winter here on Nantucket. It's been nagging at me.' He wrote back, 'All I can say is that if this Lab was carrying the sandwich with a soft mouth, as I assume he was, I can only say that Labs are very conscientious about their business and some people shoot peanut butter sandwiches. Some shoot them before eating and some after. But that's all I could think of. I'm glad you have something to think about on your island. [John] McNulty said he could always tell a man who was thinking about a horse.' I could hear McNulty saying, 'See that man? He's thinking about the third at Aqueduct. I can tell.'"

Nathaniel resumed his writing after the war. He lived in New York, contributing pieces to the *New Yorker*, *Holiday*, *Good Housekeeping* and most of the major magazines of the day. In 1950 his first volume of stories appeared, followed shortly by a Broadway production based on the collection. The critical response was positive and helpful. When I asked Nathaniel about his father's guidance and thoughts on his writing, he replied,

"I remember him once complimenting me on a piece I had in the *Tribune*. I hadn't done any books and I hadn't really sold any short stories while he was alive. I'd done one or two Sunday supplement things and that was about all. He wouldn't have gone out of his way to do it anyway, just to flatter me or encourage me. In fact, he never gave me any advice, except never to mix Scotch and champagne."

The example of Robert Benchley's life, however, was enough to make Nathaniel consider the course of his own. The hectic, boulevardier existence that his father led was not for him. Having witnessed his father's desultory existence in Hollywood (and after working there himself for a year), he realized early that a writer needed minimal distraction. He had seen its effects on his father.

"He became more and more irascible. Everything he did, every idea he had, he thought, 'Oh God, I did that in 1920.' Suddenly everything had a *deja vu* quality about it. There was a *je mon fichu* that crept over him. And I think probably some of that irascibility came from the approaching terminus, shall we say. Writing was just getting harder and harder. He showed me the last theatre column he did for the *New Yorker*, and asked me what I thought. I said it was splendid. 'Well,' he said, 'It was written in blood, I can tell you that.'

"Reginald Gardiner played me a tape that he and my father had made on New Year's Eve, 1945. They'd been to a series of parties and went back to Gardiner's and turned on the tape recorder. They were laughing and scratching around and at one point my father said, 'Do you have a Bible here?' Gardiner got it out and he read from Ecclesiastes, 'There is a time for . . .,' ending with 'Vanity, the poet saith, all is vanity.' There was such weariness in that voice when he got to that line. That, I think, summed it up."

Our afternoon's conversation wound up on something of a spiritual note. Had Nathaniel ever been haunted by his father? Did he have a final Benchley ghost story to tell?

"He appeared . . . materialized about three or four days after he died. I'd been reading and gone to bed. Suddenly there was this apparition there in the doorway. Visibly taking shape, taking form. I chickened and turned on the light. I wish I hadn't now."

How did his father take to being a ghost?

"Well, S. J. Perelman and Maurice Duvier had been doing spirit writing—automatic writing—and they seemed to have gotten hold of Scott Fitzgerald. Sheila Graham's latest book had just come out and they asked, 'What do you think of Sheila's book?' The answer came back, 'She never understood my proud soul,' which was very Fitzgeraldian.

"Then they asked, 'Is there anyone else there we might like to speak to?' and the answer came back, 'Wait a minute, I'll get Bench.' So he came on. Perelman said, 'How do you like it up there?' The answer shot back, 'Whaddya mean, up here? And after as blameless a life as a man ever lived!' I could hear every word of that!

"As for the rest of it . . . there used to be times when I wished I could tell him something. There was always a feeling that when something particularly good or funny happened that you'd want to tell him. Obviously that fades after awhile. Beyond that . . ." Nathaniel's voice trailed off. I had my last Benchley ghost story.

The day was over, my boat to the mainland due to leave shortly. Nathaniel had to dress for a dinner party. We shook hands and I started out. At the door he told me to call him if the boat didn't run because of the weather. "If you get stuck, call me at the party and we'll put you up for the night." I mentioned in passing that I was thinking of working on a television pilot about the Garden of Allah. Nathaniel gently dissuaded me from the notion. We ended up agreeing that perhaps I should put the idea on ice for awhile.

We shook hands again and I left.

The writings of Robert Benchley will no doubt continue to be read for many years, depending of course, on the whims of publishers. The films are in release after 30 years, this time on cable tv and a generation half a century late is finally catching up.

But the loss of a blithe spirit like Robert Benchley is a distant pain, a recollection garnered from books and from the cherished memories of those who knew him. Now Nathaniel is gone too and the loss is increased, for that particular spirit of the twenties and thirties has finally slipped away forever.

All I can do now is go to a place where there is laughter and drink, and think back to a happier time that I never knew.