

“Vic and Sade: Decoration Day Parade” (May 28, 1937)

Added to the National Registry: 2015

Essay by John Hetherington (guest post)*



The cast of “Vic and Sade”

The classic radio comedy “Vic and Sade” ran for more than 3,500 episodes, mostly on NBC, between 1932 and 1945. The program chronicled the daily life of the Gook family—bookkeeper Victor Gook, his wife Sade, and their adopted son Rush—and it explored the humorous aspects of everyday experiences in a small town in middle America. With its combination of relatable writing and absurd humor, it would win over more than seven million weekly listeners. In its time, it was hailed as one of the great radio comedies, and it attracted fans from every walk of life, including such noted luminaries as Pres. Franklin Roosevelt, the “New Yorker’s” James Thurber, and a young Ray Bradbury.

The episode “Decoration Day Parade” aired on May 28, 1937, and like every one of the show’s episodes, it was the work of Paul Rhymer, a talented young man who had risen through the ranks at NBC in record time to be given his own show just six months after starting with the network following his college graduation. Later, when Procter & Gamble asked NBC to create a “family” show to advertise their products, the 27-year-old Rhymer was given the job of developing one, a job he initially didn’t want to do until he figured a way to make a “family” show into an inventive comedy. P&G rejected the final product, but NBC’s Clarence Mesner liked it so much that he let it run on the network as a sustaining program—i.e. one without commercials--until a sponsor could be found. P&G became the show’s sponsor two years later.

Rhymer approached every episode of “Vic and Sade” as a slice of its characters’ lives. Rhymer prided himself on having an eye for the ridiculous, and in “Decoration Day,” as with most of the series’ episodes, the power of the comedy emerges from the accumulation of small but amusing details that were simultaneously absurd but also grounded in Rhymer’s experiences in Bloomington, Illinois, the town he took for the model for the unnamed community where the Gooks lived. The world of “Vic and Sade” was also decidedly a middle-class one, distinct from the upper-class fantasies of many serials like “One Man’s Family” then also on the air. The Gooks’ problems might be small, but they were relatable to the majority of listeners. Rhymer

also made another powerful contrast with the melodramatic soap operas that surrounded “Vic and Sade”: His show would be happy rather than sad, or as the show’s longtime announcer Bob Brown put it, “an island of delight in a sea of tears.”

“Decoration Day Parade” is important because it is the first episode for which the audio recording survives. Although it comes five years into the show’s run, it is the first episode we have where we can hear the exceptional performances of series stars Art Van Harvey (Vic), Bernardine Flynn (Sade), and Billy Idelson (Rush), and can truly appreciate the life that the talented voice cast breathed into Rhymer’s scripts. Throughout the series, these three voices (joined late in the series’ run by Clarence Hartzell as Uncle Fletcher and David Whitehead as Russell) were the only window into the rich and layered world of “Vic and Sade.” Rhymer created a cast of memorable characters, which included the Mayor, but they existed only through the often absurd and highly detailed stories the Gooks told about them. They were never heard, and this episode is no different. The whole story is told from Vic’s perspective, with Sade and Rush chiming in to offer commentary and criticism.

In “Decoration Day Parade,” Vic is excited that the town big shots have asked him to organize and run the town’s annual parade for Decoration Day, the former name of Memorial Day. There is a problem, however, since Vic has a business trip scheduled and has to be in Chicago on parade day. Vic, thinking highly of his own importance, suggests that he is irreplaceable and the parade can’t go on without him. Sade, however, deflates his fantasy by suggesting that the townsfolk will simply line up and march like they do every year, even if Vic has to miss the parade to be in Chicago. “Miss my parade? How can there be a parade?” he asks, plaintively. Vic is very proud of the work he’s done—“I’ve done everything!” he says—and imagines that the mayor will faint when he hears that the parade is off. “When I’m gone, the whole thing will be paralyzed and at a standstill,” he says.

“I don’t see how one measly little fella can hold up a whole city from enjoying their Decoration Day,” Sade dryly replies.

“I’m the one measly little fella!” Vic responds in exasperation.

The episode’s humor revolves around the tension between Vic’s grandiose view of himself and everyone else’s more realistic perception of his minimal importance. A running joke is Vic’s description of the parade as his own, rather than that of the community at large, and he is more concerned about getting to march in his lodge uniform with his plumed hat than whether the rest of the town will enjoy the parade. Sade laughs at Vic’s efforts to cast his absence as a “desperate crisis,” as she and Rush both remind Vic that plans aren’t really necessary. They only need to line up on Mulberry Street and march out to the cemetery. When Vic informs Mayor Simmons by phone that he’s leaving town for the day, the mayor decides to run the parade himself. Vic grandly fantasizes about staying up all night briefing the mayor on complex parade plans, but the mayor waves him off because he won’t attend the parade either. Instead, he’ll direct the parade through a newspaper ad instructing the townsfolk to line up and march out to the cemetery, just as Sade and Rush had said they should do. The episode ends with Vic’s disgusted reaction.

“Decoration Day Parade” features many of the memorable features of Rhymer’s comedy, including realistic small-town details, colorful off-mic characters, and an affectionate look at the folly of the human comedy. As a self-contained entry point for new listeners and a historically important episode for longtime fans, this episode is a worthy entry in the National Recording Registry.

John Hetherington is a communications lecturer for the State University of New York. He is the author of “Vic and Sade on the Radio: A Cultural History of Paul Rhymer’s Daytime Series, 1932-1944” (McFarland, 2014) and wrote about “Vic and Sade” in “Critiquing Culture in the ‘Small House’” for the Journal of Radio & Audio Media.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.