

## FOLKLORE ON TELEVISION

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Early in the spring of 1969 I was asked to speak about certain topics of folklore on local television in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On three different occasions I was asked to do a "five minute spot," first on Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs, next on unicorns, and finally on the folklore of "Beauty and the Beast." Perhaps some students of folklore have had the opportunity to do similar programs; if not, some of you may be asked to participate in such an adventure. Hopefully, you will appreciate my personal findings as a sort of preparation.

An important factor in this discussion is that the subject of folklore is considered by this local television station as suitable subject matter for children's viewing. The program runs from seven to eight o'clock in the morning and is aimed at pre-school and primary school children. Each show focuses upon a central theme or topic, and all the activities are related to the central idea. Each performer, be he child, speaker, or singer, must curtail his participation to a five minute segment. The subject matter must be entertaining and directed at the age and interest level of the young television audience. The folklore presented, therefore, must be "nice and clean", according to the standards of the television code, and must be appropriate to the policy of the station. The moderator of the program always referred to folklore as "mythology," and it seemed obvious to me that those on the staff of the station thought that mythology should not only be suitable for children, but that it was to be entertaining as well. As far as this station is concerned, the function of folklore is to amuse and entertain children by presenting a "clean" version of what they think is mythology.

When I was first invited to be on this show the central theme was the discussion of different items which start with each of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet; each day a new letter would be the topic. My television debut was to fall under the letter H, and hex signs were to be spotlighted. My preparation took me back to notes taken in folklife courses, to my "Dutch" professor, Dr. Don Yoder, and out to the nearby countryside to photograph or obtain hex signs to show on the program. I purchased a few signs which, although produced for the tourist market, were in accordance with traditional designs. After so study I decided that among the Pennsylvania Germans, hex signs were considered as barn decorations; symbolic meaning, if any, derive from their use as a kind of family crest. These findings were to be my central message.

Upon arrival at the studio at 6:30 A. M., I was told that my spot would come around 7:35. I had a two-minute chat with the lady moderator, who couldn't believe that my findings were true. I hoped I had convinced her I was correct. During the first half hour I realized that the television staff had built the whole show around the false impression that

all Pennsylvania Germans did in fact believe in hexes and witches, and that the signs were really supposed to ward off the evil doings of such creatures. My message was to be in complete opposition to their preconceived notions! I was convinced that this was to be my first and last television appearance.

All too soon my segment of the show approached and I was positioned next to a blackboard on which I had placed my commercial examples of folk art. I showed a few color photographs of the signs on barns, and the camera focused in on my materials. I started feeling confident until the moderator asked, "Do these signs really ward off witches?" Was she playing the devil's advocate or did she still cling to her preconceived notions? I tentatively postulated my findings to the contrary. She then turned to the children sitting next to us: "Do you think the hex signs ward off witches?" The children replied in the affirmative. I stuck to my position and started giving examples to prove that the signs were in reality decorations that some Pennsylvania Germans paint on their barns "chust for nice." I rhetorically asked if they thought that anyone so superstitious would display this deep-seated belief in public. I gave examples from my experience of the use of hex signs as "signatures" or "family crests." Bricks of butter are so marked in order that the buyers in the local markets can see which is the mark that denotes "Mrs. Yoder's butter." A final example was that all the buildings of one farm carry the same decoration in place of the family name. I really had to think fast. I hoped that I was convincing.

As a finale I took a compass and tried to draw the typical rounded rosette type of barn decoration, showing children in the audience how they could make their own signs. If you ever try to do this make sure the dividers of the compass stay firmly fixed; mine didn't and the last point of the rosette was not complete. I was mortified until later when I learned that hex sign drawings were popular in local schools that day. Unfortunately, I couldn't have known this during the show. I thought my television career was over.

Imagine my surprise when a week later I was asked to handle the subject of unicorns, the main topic to be treated for the letter U. On this occasion I was heralded in the local issue of TV Guide. My name was printed backwards, and the blurb said I was to speak on the "mythology of the univorn" (sic!). I can understand their printing my name in reverse order; one can overlook the misspelling of mythology; but I was distressed later to hear my eight-year-old niece say she had heard me speak on univorns. Again we see the emphasis on "mythology" as a synonym for folklore. This concept is still current among the station's television staff, which is an interesting comment on the tenacious nature of primary beliefs among educated people. I doubt if I can ever change this belief.

During the research for this presentation I came across the fact that the unicorn is associated with virginity. It seems that only a true virgin is able to subdue the ferocious beast where even the most skillful hunter always fails. In the Unicorn Tapestries at the Cloisters in New York City, for instance, the fifth tapestry shows the unicorn captured by the maiden. I was fearful that the moderator might ask me how the animal was captured, and the last word I wanted to use was "virgin," as I was sure the station would not like me to employ a word that might be controversial. Therefore, I searched in the library to find items of

interest about the unicorn that would not emphasize this aspect. To my relief, I found quite a large amount of suitable material.

I was most confident when the cameras aimed at me for this, my second T.V. appearance. By now I am sure you have guessed the moderator's opening question: "How do you catch a unicorn?" I was caught in a trap; I knew that for the sake of veracity I should have said, "By throwing a virgin in its path." Instead, however, I substituted "young girl" for "virgin" and turned quite red-faced because of my bowdlerization. And even though I had a large drawing of a unicorn made by a friend, I am afraid that I stumbled through my description. In any event, I know I left out many of the interesting facts which I had looked up in the library. The fear of public censure from the anonymous audience had caused me to change my complete style of presentation. A word to the wise: Try to give the moderator the opening question you wish to be asked; had I done this, I might have avoided my self-inflicted confusion. I was able, however, to show a peice of paper rolled up and shaped to look like a horn. I had meant to say that the children in the audience could make a similar one and play at being a unicorn, but my time ran out. Later that day I stopped at the school where I used to teach and saw children on the playground butting each other with paper horns, so I assume that the idea came across without my saying a word.

My final television appearance of the spring season came with one day's notice. They had finished with the alphabet and were now going into children's stories. The one for the next day was to be "The Beauty and the Beast," and of all things, they wanted me to bring in physical materials. This time I was really stumped: I had less than twelve hours to produce both a beauty and a beast. I thought that the moderator could be the beauty (she is quite attractive) and that I could be the beast, but that sounded too flip even for a children's show. I considered taking in my dog, whose name is Bear, and who looks very much like a beast, but I also discarded that idea. I finally settled on bringing all the pictures to the studio which I could find of "beauties" from cultures other than our own. I selected "beauties" which to the children might appear quite "beastly," and pictures of "beasts" which looked most beautiful. I looked up the story in The Types of the Folktale (425C for those of you who are interested) and noted the wide distribution of this tale. I went to the station armed with a vast load of visual materials.

Before the show I was asked how long I thought my presentation would take, and I guessed from about five to eight minutes; this was fine with the moderator. I was scheduled to appear at 7:45 but it became obvious that the show was "running late." At about 7:52 I was again asked how much time I would need, and I made the same reply. A second question came back immediately: Could I boil it down to a minute and a half? I thought of all the preparation the day before, but I found myself saying I would comply with the request. As it was, I spoke for three and a half minutes and a commercial had to be dropped; but folklore won out. I had prepared an opening question for the moderator and things went well. I was conscious of leaving out much of my prepared material, but at least I was in control from the start. At the conclusion of the show, I sadly requested that I be dropped from the regular scheduling due to impending final examinations. Now that the exams are over, I look forward to getting back under the lights.

What can be learned from all this? My first observation is that a television station may consider folklore a subject only for children. Knowing this in advance may help you shape your materials and style of delivery; it may help you in deciding whether to use possibly controversial items. If you can find out about the policy of the station regarding such matters, you may ask if certain things are permissible or not. Always try to give the moderator a written lead-in question so that you may start at the point you desire and not be caught off guard. Prepare your delivery in advance so that you can give a longer or shorter version as the situation may demand. I have found that if you are scheduled toward the beginning of the show there tends to be more leeway in time allotment; toward the close of the show the time segments always seem to shrink. You must therefore be flexible.

The more visual materials you can use, the better. Remember that television is more oriented toward showing than telling. Pictures, maps, and drawings are fine but concrete objects in the round are best. Formulate a central theme with lots of illustrations to back up your basic generalization. Have as many examples as possible even if there is not enough time to employ them all. The more you know about a subject, the more confidence you will have when you have to stare into the lens of the camera. It is advisable to include some simple project which the children can do after the show is over. Use simple materials that the children can obtain at home. Simplicity is the key, with an accent on drawing or making something very quickly. The age and interest factor is important here. The more mechanical the operation, the better.

Finally, a word of encouragement: You will be your own worst critic. Don't be too hard on yourself if mistakes occur; probably only you will know of the errors. Present your materials as honestly as possible and you will be successful. You will also have a lot of fun and enjoy the adventure. I did!