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RADIO CAN SPARK UNLIKELY COMPARISONS

By MAUREEN
NEVIN DUFFY

What would Stephen Crane, author of the Civil War epic "The Red Badge of Courage," have made of radio's Bob and Ray?

It's a closely kept secret — judging by the audience size most times — but the house at 508 Fourth Ave. in Asbury Park where Crane spent about eight of his formative years hosts entertaining little performances, usually in the spirit of some holiday or other.

Each December, the Crane Players, a changing cast of illustrious actors and readers, offer up their "Season's Readings," in which yours truly has been lucky enough to land some small parts since their inception seven years ago.

This season the wizard behind the merry mayhem, Frank D'Alessandro, who also owns the well-preserved and cared for famous home, resurrected one of radio's much loved pair, Bob Elliot and Ray Goulding, for a routine to tickle the spirits of the assembled. Crane House Players' Michael Mooney and Eric Revilla played the parts of Goulding's man in the street, Ward Smith, and Elliott's by-the-book inquiring reporter, Wally Ballou, respectively.

Theater of the absurd

D'Alessandro chose "Wally Ballou and the Cranberry Grower," in which Wally finds a hapless farmer, in Times Square, who never thought of making cranberry sauce or even juice from his produce. Revilla and Mooney delivered their lines with appropriate dimwittedness, drawing loads of laughs.

But we had to ask D'Alessandro, who later channeled Baby Jane Hudson (who was surprisingly up to date on U.S. politics and the economy), to explain for us the connection between author, poet and reporter Crane and radio's Bob and Ray.

"'Theater of the Absurd' comes to mind," says D'Alessandro, a much revered former math teacher from Middletown High School North. "Bob and Ray were also rebellious toward authority and liked to poke fun at the media."

Both of which were favorite targets of Crane's.

"The media basically drove Crane out of town," says D'Alessandro with a chuckle. "He was not playing by the conventions of the time. Crane was only meant to report that "Miss Julia Springdale played piano at the Palace Hotel . . .'"

Instead, he used the opportunity to expose the silliness of early Asbury Park's middle-class mores; i.e., snobbery.

"Crane was using the media in ways it didn't count on," notes D'Alessandro, who bakes for days prior to a Crane House event, in order to dish up serious sustenance along with the frivolity. The culinary

fare often coincides with the entertainment; homemade lasagna and biscotti for a screening of Katharine Hepburn and Rossano Brazzi in David Lean's "Summertime"; Irish Soda Raisin Bread for John Ford's "The Quiet Man" and Irish literary readings; and a fresh batch of Camilla Parker Bowles' Vanilla Darker Rolls for The Duchess of Cornwall's surprise appearance. You can just imagine the feast we had for "The Man Who Came to Dinner"!

"Bob and Ray made fun of early TV and radio, taking convention and twisting it," says D'Alessandro. They were people of the media, assaulting it for laughs and perhaps to make a few points. Of Bob and Ray the Wall Street Journal once wrote, they "gently, relentlessly, hilariously pierce the protective armor of just about every red-blooded American type you can think of."

Crane was also known to pierce some armor. He lost his job as a reporter (and his brother, Townley, his editor's post) at the New York Tribune, when Stephen Crane wrote of an Asbury Park labor parade: "The bona fide Asbury Parker is a man to whom a dollar, when held close to his eye, often shuts out any impression he may have had that other people possess rights."

A tongue-lashing

A note to reader Carolyn of Long Branch: You're absolutely right. It was Flick who stuck his tongue to the flag pole. You can even see it again on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFu7SjF7Hfg). I was wrong to say it was Ralphie. And for that I'll confide that I, too, froze my tongue to something — not a pole, but the freezer. My sister was watching Andy Williams and I had to wait for the commercial. A very, very long wait!

Maureen Nevin Duffy created and hosted "Asbury Radio — The Radio Voice of Asbury Park," a weekly public affairs talk show over WYGG, 88.1FM. It continues as a blog on AsburyRadio.com. E-mail AsburyRadio@aol.com or write 3 Deal Lake Court, Asbury Park, NJ 07712.
