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Insult Without Injury

ONE of the more curious developments in radio comedy is the use of what has become known as the "insult technique." Gale Pedrick, script editor in the Variety Department of the BBC, refers to this in the 1952 issue of the *BBC Year Book*. "Ten years ago," he writes, "the public laughed when Ben Lyon twitted Vic Oliver about his thinning locks, and Vic retaliated by a gibe at Ben's advancing years and waist-line. People will still laugh at this good-humoured leg-pulling today. . . It is a strange but successful formula." Perhaps the most familiar example is given regularly in *Take It From Here*, a programme which apparently would not be complete without some reference to Richard Bentley's age, looks and general debility.

There is, of course, nothing funny in the simple facts of age, obesity and baldness. The humour in *Take It From Here* may come partly from the contrast between what Bentley claims to be, his idea of his own appearance and behaviour, especially in romantic situations, and the image of him presented to the unseen audience by his team-mates. There is always fun to be had from incongruity, as Falstaff showed long ago when he became an ungainly suitor in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The "insult technique" is not as new as it sometimes seems to be. Nothing heard on radio programmes has quite reached the range and force of insults exchanged by Falstaff and the Prince in certain scenes of *Henry IV*. The difference in broadcasting, perhaps, is the use of repetition. Every time Jimmy Edwards is insulting to Bentley he helps to strengthen the picture of an imaginary Bentley in the minds of listeners. The picture has to be touched up every week; and this, while re-creating the popular image of the character Bentley is supposed to be, provides

openings for wisecracks. Although the theme remains constant, the variations bring an illusion of newness. If they failed to provoke laughter, it might be safe to assume that the character, rather than the technique, was ceasing to please. In all these exchanges, however, one requirement is essential. An insult may be amusing if it is an obvious and absurd exaggeration; but even then it will not come off unless it is thrown out in the right kind of voice. And here we come closer to the art of the comedian.

A mistake in timing or a false inflexion in the voice would destroy the illusion. The comedy is make-believe, a fantasy in which men may say things unforgivable in a real situation. There are indeed people who can be rude to friends with a twinkle in the voice which removes all offence; but they need to be sure of themselves and their friends: the faintest hint of malice would sour the comedy. Men can remain complacent when the right sort of interest is being taken in their baldness or advancing waist-lines. A joke is acceptable because it implies that the victim is interesting to his friends. To be noticed, even in a humorous way, is oddly soothing. And minor infirmities, which might be resented in youth, are borne with a little more than resignation as men grow older. They may be blemishes on the ideal picture we carry of ourselves; but they are ours, and are therefore justified and may even be worn proudly. Comedians are not likely to be successful unless they understand human vanity. They know that when we laugh at insults given to an imaginary character we are pleased either because we know that these comments leave us untouched, or because, if they come close to us, the sting is removed. There is a sort of therapy in comedy, and the artist who can make us laugh deserves well of the nation.

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