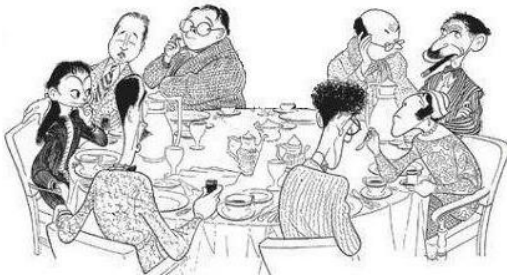


Algonquin Nights: The Invention of Nonsense

Series Proposal



Premise:

“The Invention of Nonsense” is a hilarious and heartbreaking period comedy-drama about author and smart-ass Dorothy Parker and her glib Algonquin Round Table pals as they battle personal and professional demons to become among the most famous, influential and quoted trend-setters of the raucous Roaring Twenties. But how is it that some of the wittiest wisecrackers in history still struggled to find happiness, contentment, and true human connection? Whether they admit it or not, this is the challenge they share, meeting almost daily over lunch or bootleg cocktails to hash it all out with their caustic quips and clever conversation, before returning to their typewriters for New York’s top newspapers, magazines and Broadway hits. The series will explore the themes of ambition, creativity, community and compassion, with Parker, especially, ultimately realizing, perhaps just a bit too late, that “Ridicule may be a shield, but it is not a sword.”

Why Now?

These were the social media darlings of their day, the original “influencers,” when there were 18 daily newspapers in NYC alone, 6,000 speakeasies, and over 100 live stage shows running at any one time. The city’s population was already pushing six million, radio was yet to come, and moving pictures were just catching on. Along with live theatre, the printed word was entertainment, and this was the gang who churned it all out daily.

With the Roaring Twenties having been reduced these days to an occasional Halloween costume, what was this wild decade really like? With the first episode ostensibly occurring in June, 1919, at the era-defining conclusion of America’s first “Great War”, and the inception of the giddy, suffragette-movement-liberated, bootleg-liquor-stoked Roaring Twenties, the so-called “Age of Wonderful Nonsense,” the series follows the then-and-still-famous Dorothy Parker and her incredibly ambitious, popular, hard-working and rabble-rousing Manhattan contemporaries, her widely-read, witty wise-cracking newspaper/magazine/play-writing pals at the birth of the “Algonquin Round Table,” the SNL and TMZ of their day.

With most episodes culminating with the group assembling at the Algonquin Rose Room Restaurant to reflect on and regale one another with their pithy observations and smarty-pants accounts, each episode will feel sequential. Although, since the show's events are presented as recollections, we can in fact jump around in time, somewhat like *This is Us* (although always with the same cast.) The show is mostly a frantic comedy, but looking back a century later, it's an ironic case of "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Tone:

One-hour dramedy, heavy on the "medy." Giddy, witty, colorful, hectic, and irreverent. And if we have to pick something for comparison, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is not a bad place to start. And reaching back into classic cinema, the fast-talking wise-guy films written by some of the Algonks themselves like *Front Page/His Girl Friday*, *The Thin Man*, and the high-flying Marx Brothers are solid touchstones.

So Who Are These CHARACTERS?

DOROTHY PARKER is the gravitational central character in this literate and literary universe. At the time New York's only female critic, Dorothy is the one still most remembered, now mainly for her wisecracks, but her incisive and insightful collected works have yet to fall from grace or out of print. With dark hair and an even darker wit, Dorothy presents herself as world-weary and one-of-the-boys, but is at heart a flirty romantic. On the surface a tough cookie, and a champion of multiple human-rights causes, she strives to stifle her inner doubts, which serve to both drive and thwart her. Her friendship with coworker Robert Benchley is her anchor, but she sincerely craves an enduring camaraderie with many of the others, especially as her marriage to heartthrob Eddie Parker disintegrates.

Alexander Woollcott observed, "She has the gentlest, most disarming demeanor of anyone I know. The outward social manner of Dorothy Parker is one calculated to confuse the unwary and unnerve even those most addicted to her company. She is so odd a blend of Little Nell and Lady Macbeth, that it is not so much the familiar phenomenon of a hand of steel in a velvet glove, as a lacy sleeve with a bottle of vitriol concealed in its folds."

ROBERT BENCHLEY is a lovable everyman, the Jerry Seinfeld of his day. An observational comic, his theatre reviews, articles, short stories and eventually 48 short films are all about "Look how silly life is." He's a truly good person, but with a wry outlook and comment on everything. A contradiction himself, he's a family man with a wife and two sons in New Jersey, all while maintaining a separate apartment and life in New York City, and later Hollywood, a principled teetotaler who eventually succumbs to the giddy excesses of Prohibition and the Jazz Age.

GEORGE KAUFMAN had an ironic and absurdist perspective and personality. He gained fame as a playwright, theatre director and producer, humorist, and drama critic. He was awarded two

Pulitzer Prizes for drama, and a Tony for directing. He was a twitchy germophobe, but also quite the ladies man, caught up in a scandalous affair with actress Mary Astor in 1936.

Collaborator Moss Hart: “The most striking characteristic Mr. Kaufman presented to the world was an almost studied aloofness and indifference. But behind that mask lay a modest man who could be seized and touched by the dark doubts that licked at other men’s souls, and he was not without his own mischievous qualities.”

ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT is a large man in size and personality, the emotional and theatrical ringleader of the group, a renowned author and critic, with a sarcastic and insulting sense of humor, but also an effusive patron of the arts, and at the time, one of the most famous people in the nation.

HAROLD ROSS appreciated talent wherever he saw it. As editor of the Army’s *Stars and Stripes* magazine during the Great War, he worked and played with Woollcott and columnist Franklin Adams, and met future wife and collaborator Jane Grant, all in Paris. More of a curmudgeonly observer than a great wit himself, Harold could still be counted upon to express a reliably extravagant and excoriating comment. A perfectionist, Ross was defined by creating and running the *New Yorker* magazine – to which his Round Table circle all contributed.

FRANKLIN PIERCE ADAMS is the top dog at the time, with Woollcott nipping at his heels. Known to the world as FPA, he positioned himself as the arbiter and reporter of all that was current and clever, and helped bring many of the others to fame. He served during the war with Ross and Woollcott, and their tradition of witty one-upsmanship and all night poker games started there.

HEYWOOD BROUN was another of the decade’s top journalists and editorial voices. He authored a new column every day which appeared on the front page of the *World* alongside FPA’s. A humorist with a humanist side, Broun was equally enthralled with society, sports, and politics. Perhaps not as quick a quipper as his pals, it was Broun who penned, “Repartee is what you wish you had said.” But Broun had plenty to say each day in print, and was fired from two newspapers for saying it. It was Broun who dubbed the new group the Vicious Circle, and when he died at 51, ten thousand people attended his funeral.

RUTH HALE, Heywood Broun’s wife, was an accomplished journalist in her own right who declined taking his last name in marriage, or to promise to “and obey.” She waged a legal battle for a married woman’s right to own property and to keep her maiden name, and formed an early feminist group, the Lucy Stone League.

You get the idea. Yeah, these guys were famous and prolific, with lots of personal history and publications to plumb for episodes. And yes, I know we can’t cast them all, but “Who were they like?” I hear you thinking:



Dorothy Parker



Robert Benchley



George S. Kaufman



Alexander Woollcott



Harold Ross



Franklin Pierce Adams



Heywood Broun



Sarah Victor



Ruth Hale

The Pilot:

In the cold open, we jump right into meeting most of the characters as they attend the Broadway opening of some new act named the Marx Brothers. Afterwards, as Dorothy Parker returns home to type her review, after several drinks and pills, she attempts suicide by cutting her wrists. How could someone so seemingly successful, glib, and nonchalant be in this state? We flash forward and then back in time for the rest of the episode to see how the “Algonquin Round Table” initially assembled for a roast of taste-maker Alexander Woollcott, as we spot each of these hilarious and intriguing personalities in their personal and professional lives at the genesis of their rise to acclaim, and the beginning of an answer to that question.

Season One Story Threads:

Parker is fired from *Vanity Fair*, and Benchley and Sherwood resign in protest, all reported by Woollcott and FPA in their columns. Parker and Benchley initially set up an office for freelancing, christening their endeavor Park-Bench, with Harold Ross throwing work their way. Dorothy, like some sort of proto-goth, subscribes to an undertaking trade magazine, torturing Benchley with the graphic illustrations. After giving that a try, Benchley accepts a job at *Life*, and Parker moves on to *Ainslee's Magazine*, vowing to do more “serious” writing on the side.

On a personal level, Dorothy fights to keep her marriage afloat with Eddie, but he soon moves out. Dorothy seeks comfort from Benchley's slick roommate Charles MacArthur, with disastrous emotional results, and Dorothy's first suicide attempt.

The first season is dominated by Harold and Jane's attempts to find financing and collaborators to launch the *New Yorker*, with Jane recruiting yeast bigwig Raul Fleishman, first to Harold's poker games, and finally as an investor in the season closer. The Rosses meanwhile opt for a simple civil ceremony, and the two, along with Woollcott, look for and find a group party house on the west side.

Kaufman and Connelly work to get their plays to the stage, all while Kaufman keeps his day job working with Woollcott at the Times, and Connelly keeps courting Margalo Gillmore from the first episode.

Each episode will have a theme, the exploration of race issues for example, with Paul Robeson as their guide to a Harlem Renaissance night out on the town, or a look at polarization around immigration and terrorism during the notorious Sacco & Vanzetti trials, while also spinning out the spiraling careers and personal challenges of these colorful and chatty characters, initially as they chase success, and then wrestle to survive the “bitch mistress” once they’ve arrived.

The Creative Team:

Steven Vlasak is a screenwriter, playwright, former film and television development assistant, and a current content producer and consultant for stage and online. He most recently served for seven years as the Operations Manager at Industry Entertainment, the management and production company behind many noteworthy feature films and popular series. Steven is also the head of the Los Angeles chapter of the Dorothy Parker Society. His award-winning play “Nights at the Algonquin Round Table” has received a handful of sold-out runs around the country. He is, obviously, a huge fan of Dorothy Parker and the entire Algonquin group, and would love to help share their wit and legacy further. Steven’s credits are at www.StevenVlasak.com

Much like Harold Ross assembled an “**Editorial Board**” in advance of getting his *New Yorker Magazine* off the ground, the following experts and authors are available as writers and consultants:

Kevin Fitzpatrick is the most knowledgeable Parker person out there, the author and editor of four books on Dorothy Parker and the Algonquin Round Table, and eight books about New York history in total. Creator and President of The Dorothy Parker Society www.DorothyParker.com, and the data-packed www.AlgonquinRoundTable.org, Kevin is also the individual who orchestrated and personally transported Parker’s cremains to their appropriate final resting place in New York’s Woodlawn Cemetery. www.amazon.com/Kevin-C.-Fitzpatrick/e/B001K8TYU8?ref=dbs_p_pbk_r00_abau_000000

Brad Soho is another Round Table expert, especially on Alexander Woollcott, George Kaufman and the Marx Brothers, with an encyclopedic knowledge of their lives and writings, and manager of the Woollcott appreciation group www.facebook.com/groups/301538243920540

There is also interest from established show runners and staff comedy writers, but if you’ve read this far, perhaps you’re already imagining how to help this Jazz Age baby walk.

