

## **Grandish Wordplay: Harburg's Ish List**

By Edward Rothstein

NY Times – Dec. 23, 2009

Text Only

In Avatar Studios in Manhattan recently, something sort of goofy came over me, manifested by a persistent grin as I listened to Christopher Fitzgerald and Kate Baldwin sing. The cast of this season's Broadway production of "Finian's Rainbow" was making a recording for February release, and in this case, the musical's leprechaun (Mr. Fitzgerald), slowly turning mortal, was discovering a new kind of feeling whenever he was near Sharon (Ms. Baldwin).

It was very like the feeling I recognize in myself when in close proximity to the best work of this 1947 show's lyricist, E. Y. Harburg, known as Yip, which is why I was listening to this session. That is also why I went to a rehearsal for a production of the 1951 musical "Flahooley," a less distinguished achievement than "Finian" but one in which Harburg was also verbal master of ceremonies. ("Flahooley" is being performed through Jan. 3 at the Theater for the New City in the East Village in a joint presentation with the Harlem Repertory Theater.)

This leprechaunish feeling isn't easy to define. In the song in question, "Something Sort of Grandish," Burton Lane's melodic lines are panted out in short stuttering phrases; one phrase jumps up to a high held note ("My heart feeeeeels") and then joyfully seesaws about like someone trying to find a secure footing ("so sugar candish"). But Harburg makes it clear that stability and clarity are not to be found. When the leprechaun sings of "something sweet, something sort of grandish," the "sort of" suggests a vague resemblance, while the "ish" makes it even vaguer. And the leprechaun, who is not only new to the feeling but also new to expressing it, leaps about searching for comparisons, trying to describe a passion "so dareish" and "so I don't careish" that is sweeping him limb to limb, something that is "terrifish, magnifish, delish." There is something endearing in the patter, as if we were listening to a child just emerging from an amusement-park ride who doesn't yet feel on solid ground. "Please accept my proposish," the leprechaun pleads. And Sharon, more sober if not more experienced, stands "hand in handish," feeling some "relish" for their "hellish condish." Who wouldn't hope, as the leprechaun does, that all their "ishes/Could come true"?

And who can listen without succumbing to the dizzying mixture of invention and description compressed into these ishes? Their pace is so unrelenting, it takes many hearings before you even realize what is being said when Sharon is asked to "be give-in-ish." We have to work — or rather play — to decipher the playfulness.

This happens again and again in Harburg's lyrics. You are never comfortably swept into sentiment. You can't bask in romance, nostalgia or anger; there is too much to attend

to. The leprechaun and Sharon are too full of vitality to be totally give-in-ish; they never stop thinking and jesting. That is also asked of the listener.

The technique seems so effortless that we may not even be aware that we are lured into something so darish. Sometimes, as in the song Harburg wrote for Groucho Marx — “Lydia the Tattooed Lady” — his playfulness is on the surface. We are invited to imagine the fleshy possibilities of Lydia’s tattoos, particularly when their historical allusions are cataloged with Groucho’s eyebrow-wagging leer: “When her muscles start relaxin’/Up the hill comes Andrew Jackson.”

But other times, Harburg slyly circles around his big subject — the nature of the human — by imagining beings who are really not quite human, allowing us to see ourselves from the outside. In their book, “Who Put the Rainbow in ‘The Wizard of Oz?’” (1993), Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg (Yip’s son) show that Harburg did not just contribute lyrics to that classic film but also determined its shape with an almost operatic use of song to define character and propel the story. He transformed the tale from a dated allegory into an exploration of the magical attributes of humanity, largely through the songs he wrote for the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion.

These beings dream of having a brain, a heart, the nerve. They yearn for possibilities: to unravel every riddle; to be awfully sentimental regarding love and art; to be a lion not a mowess. But look closely, and you see they already have what they want; if they got much more, they would become insufferable. Who wants to hear a brainy Scarecrow ponderously explain why “the ocean’s near the shore”?

Harburg’s heroes may dream of something that will unravel every riddle, lead them to riches or that will usher in the “Finian” promise of that great “come-and-get-it day.” But is any of that really so earnestly to be desired? What if all those wishes really did come true? Uneasiness accompanies the exuberance.

“Finian” is surely one of the finest works of the American musical theater (and the current production at the St. James Theater does everything to reinforce that conviction), partly because the joyfulness and discomfort seem perfectly poised. It is like the old fairy tale of the three wishes, in which the quarrelling couple waste their opportunities in argument. Far better, they learn, to live without fantasy but with full knowledge. Only in “Finian,” magically, we end up with both.

This is all the more astonishing because Harburg had very weighty political ideas in mind. Originally, according to the Meyerson and Harburg book, “Finian” was supposed to include songs by Earl Robinson, who was responsible for ballads of the political left like “Joe Hill” and with Harburg had written “Free and Equal Blues” in 1944. The character Woody, with his wanderlust, high moral vision and guitar, was surely an allusion to Woody Guthrie. And the evil Senator Billboard Rawkins was modeled after two of the most notorious racists in Congress, Senator Theodore G. Bilbo and Representative John E. Rankin, both Mississippi Democrats.

Rawkins gets his comeuppance by being turned black and learning what it is like to live as the object of his own hatred. Harburg originally had imagined dealing him a far more brutal lesson. He would be nearly lynched onstage for having sexual relations with a white woman — his wife.

The result, Harburg later acknowledged, would have been “a little grim,” and it would have also upset the musical’s delicate balance. Instead Harburg’s political point is softened by wit; his roughest jabs here may be the way he rhymes “class” with “Astor” and “nut” with “butler,” creating vulgar prods at the privileged. But we remain in the realm of fantasy: racism dissolves, Rawkins is returned to his white skin, and commercial acquisitiveness is given up as banal.

Evil forces, in Harburg’s world, are not overcome with revolutionary doctrine; rather, they lose their power because they are seen as less open to human complexity. They fail to be lyric-worthy, in Harburg’s highest sense.

This makes it all the more tragic that after the triumph of “Finian,” which played for 725 performances on Broadway, Harburg’s professional life was crippled by blacklist era obstacles. His left-wing advocacy derailed his Hollywood career. Could word have also been sent out by Rankin seeking vengeance for his “Finian” drubbing? At the time he was a crucial figure on the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

At any rate, Harburg’s lyrics show he had too nuanced a view of humanity to be much more than what he said he was: a left-wing F.D.R. Democrat. The songs don’t suggest he would have much patience for revolutionary absolutes. In a letter to a lawyer for MGM in 1950, Harburg wrote, “I am outraged by the suggestion that somehow I am connected with, believe in, or am sympathetic with Communist or totalitarian philosophy.”

But the experience upset his poise. However clever in parts, “Flahooley,” written during that period, is too anxious to score as many points as possible. The lyrics never lure us into imagining other worlds, and the nonhuman characters — puppets — maintain their wooden traits. It was a great loss that Harburg could not pursue the many projects that might have been (including a musical version of “Huckleberry Finn”).

We must make do, instead, with more than 500 songs, ranging from the pungent sorrows of early lyrics like “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” to the infectious glories of “Finian.” And the other day I found myself again feeling something under my skinnish as the leprechaun recounted his mortal predicament with brilliant rhetorical virtuosity in “When I’m Not Near the Girl I Love.” Desire — feckless, reckless, restless desire — for any girl he’s near unleashes a full flow of alliterative fantasy: “When I’m not facing the face that I fancy,” the leprechaun sings, “I fancy the face I face.”

Maybe that’s true for the fickleness of love, but frankly, when it comes to fondness for lyricists, it’s iffish.