



## Lunch with June Foray

Shared by Jake Friedman

Heads up this holiday season: In case you weren't aware of new DVD releases for your wish list, be sure to add these beauties: *Looney Tunes Golden Collection vol.3*, *Rocky and Bullwinkle vol.3*, *Ducktales vol.1* and *Disney's Cinderella - Special Edition*. Now here's a pop quiz for you: What do all these bits of animation have in common? The answer, of course, is June Foray. Her unmistakable voice, which you probably know better than your own mother's, has played a part in these and many other animated projects since the golden age. And not only was she prolific, but when you watch *Magica DeSpell* cast her sorcery on Scrooge McDuck, you can see the kind of acting skills that have kept directors coming back to June for more. Observing a June Foray character, from *Witch Hazel* to *Ma Beagle*, is seeing the best efforts of an actress getting the character across with nothing more than her vocal chords. Just listen to the energy in the acting. The experience in radio children's records all comes through, and you can hear someone who has worked hard since childhood to be great at what she does. Her tale is better told as chapters in *Makin' Toons* by Allan Neuwirth, and *The Magic Behind the Voices* by Tim Lawson and Alisa Persons. Me, I'm no historian. But I did have lunch with a living legend.

Setting: The San Fernando Valley. June (she let me call her June) and I drove around strip malls and outdoor eateries looking for a good place to do a quiet interview. Finally we found a Mexican place that looked promising. We each ordered a burrito and sat outside under a parasol in the California air. I ran my tape recorder as we chewed the fat, taken aback by how comfortable June seemed to be in front of the device. Most people become self-conscious and awkward when there's a tape-recorder mike in their face, but of course June spent her entire career in front of a microphone. As we talked, the parking lot behind us became a venue for frequent cars and rather large trucks, which overrode the salsa music blasting from the restaurant outdoor speakers. June must have seen me regard my tape recorder regretfully. "This is going to be a wonderful remembrance of California, with the noise," she said. "I'm sorry about that. But it'll be interesting." I was enthused by her go-with-the-flow approach, and soon we finished our food and began talking.



June Foray

June figures it was her performance as *Witch Hazel* in the musical Donald Duck cartoon *Trick or Treat* that got the attention of Warner brothers. "It was Chuck [Jones] who brought me over to do *Witch Hazel*, on *Broomstick Bunny*. And when I read the script I couldn't believe it, that they would still call it *Witch Hazel*, with the same actor, with the same type of voice [as Disney's]!" June was able to find uniqueness in the Warners witch. "I did it for comedy, I think. I didn't make her mean... I put a little bit of a British dialect, a cockney, because Halloween started in Great Britain."

Though she worked with Bob McKimson as the voice of *Alice* in *The Honeymousers*, June contends that she never got to know him as well as she did *Friz* and *Chuck*. "Chuck was tall and handsome. *Friz* was short and, you know, good looking but ... I thought Chuck



was the intellectual of the animation [business]. He could quote Aristophanes and Mark Twain at the drop of a peg board. He was really terrific. ... Chuck was such a wonderful director that he didn't direct! He would just give me the dialogue, and I read the dialogue, and he said, yeah, that's right on, and then I recorded it, and then I'd say, 'wouldn't you like another one for protection, we just did one take.' He said, 'no, that's fine, that's fine.' Never directed me. Friz was the same way."

At the same time as she lent her voice to Warner Brothers, June worked with Tex Avery narrating for *The Car of Tomorrow*. I wondered what he was like in person. "He was very quiet. You would think he was uproarious, the way his films are. But he was a very quiet, introspective sort of man."

After the Warner Brothers studio closed, Chuck and June continued working together in films like *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*, *The White Seal*, *The Cricket in Times Square* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. "I did everything Chuck did ... We loved each other as good friends. He was a wonderful person and I guess he respected me, what I did, because I never auditioned for him. He just called me, because he knew I could do it. I miss him."

Of course, it was in the 1959 That June began working with Jay Ward in the "Rocky and Bullwinkle" series as the voices of Rocky, Natasha and others -- including the Brooklyn princess, June's own invention and one of Jay's favorite voices. June said that originally, Jay wanted "Rocky and Bullwinkle" to be the first primetime adult cartoon show, which would have predated "The Flintstones" by a year. "It could have been, but the networks didn't do it. But [Jay] was very strict. He wouldn't allow the networks to tell him what to be or what to say. When we first started with ABC, they would have a representative from the network in the control room. And he'd say, 'you can't say that,' and Jay would say, 'do you want it tomorrow or next week? I can have it tomorrow.' And [the network rep] would say, 'forget about it.' They never came back."

If you watch "Rocky and Bullwinkle," you can feel the friendship and good humor shared by the cast at recording sessions. I always wondered how they maintained that. "We'd come in, tell jokes, and finally Jay'd say, ok, let's take it, let's record. The sessions were about two hours. We did five segments each night -- five Rocky and Bullwinkles, or five Fractured Fairytales, or five Dudley Do-Rights. Most of the time was just joking around, and recording was just incidental."

We couldn't talk about the '60's without mentioning the Talky Tina character from "The Twilight Zone," which hired her because of her previous work for a commercially-released talking doll. "It all started with the doll that I did -- Chatty Cathy. And so, apparently, they loved the Chatty Cathy voice, because she was very sweet, and Talky Tina was very sweet, you know, when she said, 'My name is Talky Tina and I'm going to kill you.' But she said it in such a sweet dear way, it was even more menacing that way." In 1995, June reprised her role as a homicidal doll in an episode of the USA series "Weird Science" lampooning "The Twilight Zone."



Later in her career, June remained a go-to talent for new cartoon shows, including "The Smurfs." "I auditioned for [director] Gordon Hunt. He wanted to hear me do things, and I saw the only female there was Smurfette. And so Gordon said, 'why don't you try some of the other characters?' So I saw Jokey, and [when] he laughed, [the script] said H-Y-U-K, so that was *hyuk hyuk hyuk hyuk!* That's how I came up with that voice. And next thing I knew I was hired as Jokey." Later on in the series, Hunt cast June as Mother Nature. Obviously, "The Smurfs" was only the first of the now classic '80's cartoon shows to feature her talent.

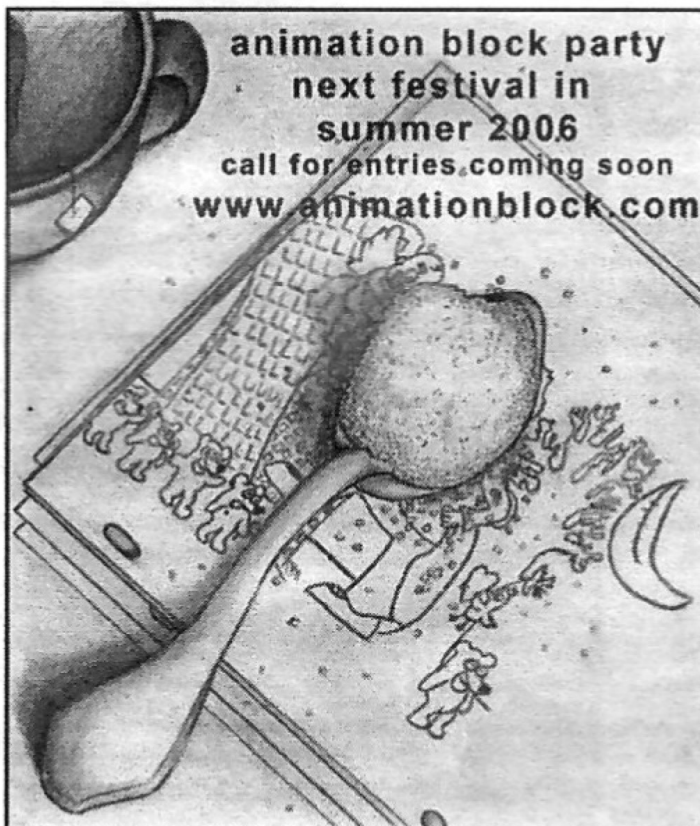
By the time Disney television was ready to cast for "Gummi Bears" and later "Ducktales," June didn't have to bother with an audition. "I guess they knew what they wanted and they just called me. I'd try something and they said, 'oh, that's fine.' I never had any problems." Her portrayal of Grammi Gummi, Ma Beagle and Magica DeSpell had affected the TV-watching kids of the late '80's just as their parents had been during the run of "Rocky and Bullwinkle". So I just had to ask June what a battle of wits would be like between Natasha Fatale and Magica DeSpell. "It would be even, dahling," she said. Interestingly, these shows recorded their actors together, in one recording booth. "It was always a lot of fun." No doubt.

In addition to her voice work, June has cultivated a very special relationship with ASIFA. After joining the newly-founded Hollywood branch of ASIFA in 1964 and working closely with co-founder Ward Kimball, she became president in 1973 and held that office until 1979. Believe it or not, it was June who started the Annie Awards in 1972. "I thought, who would be the best to honor? The older people first, so it was Max and Dave Fleischer. They were the first ones. [Some] said 'Oh, nobody'll show up.' Four hundred people showed up, and they had a ball." June also headed weekend conventions at USC where professionals all over the field of animation, including the Chuck Jones and Friz Freling, would come in as guest speakers. Impressed with June, Walter Lantz enlisted her help to organize a convention of his own at the American Film Institute.

It was inspiring to see hear about willingness to help and contribute to her community. I had read about how she led a boycott against overpriced beef in the 1970's. "I'm a very progres-

sive person. You know, they made liberal a dirty word, which is stupid." Her passion to challenge what we take for granted can be seen in her book, *Perverse, Adverse and Rottenverse*, in which she tears cultural idioms a new one. "All of the ancient shibboleths that we've been taught by our mothers and fathers, I shatter the hell out of most of them."

Even with this book finished, and also having retired from a 25-year service on the board of the Motion Picture Academy, June has been as busy as ever. Recently, Disney has hired June to voice Magica once more in an educational DVD teaching English to Japanese children. She's been reprising Granny for various Warner projects, like "Baby Looney Tunes," "The Sylvester and Tweety Mysteries" and the film *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*. She



voiced Natasha and Nell Fenwick for slot machines in Vegas, as well as characters for online Bullwinkle pop-culture spoofs like "Desperate Moosewives," directed by Xeth Feinberg. To top it off, she recently appeared on CNN with Larry King for the first time.

It was an amazing experience talking with June. Parting ways at the end of the afternoon and waving goodbye, I felt like I had been in a time machine, an inspirational seminar, and the company of a new friend all at the same time. And as I drove my rental down the Southern California expressway, I remembered some of June's last reflections that day. "I enjoyed everything I did. You know, people say, 'well, how did you do this?' Inside of every person, there is always a mixture of anger and love and compassion and hate, and whatever. So any of the characters I did who had that, part of me would come out and do it in that manner. So it was easy to be somebody else."

Modest words from a girl at the top. Thanks for sharing your gifts, June.

*Jake Friedman is a New York-based animator.*



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& June Foray  
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