

A Biography of Peter Brough

Peter Brough was a popular ventriloquist who reached the height of his fame in the 1950s with the famous radio program entitled *Educating Archie*.

Brough (pronounced Bruff) was born in Shepherd's Bush, London, on February 26, 1916. Both his father and his grandfather moved back and forth between careers in the business of entertainment and in the business of manufacturing. Peter Brough was destined to follow in the family tradition. Arthur Brough, who was the father of Peter Brough, was also a music hall ventriloquist who used a dummy named Tim. Tim was used in the film *Dead of Night* (1945), where Michael Redgrave plays a vent whose dummy takes possession of him.

Brough began performing ventriloquism at an early age. He first appeared in theater in 1938.

During World War II, he performed for the military and tried using a variety of dummies. A 1943 British Pathé film entitled *Mum's the Word* shows Brough at a young age as an already accomplished entertainer, but in that film he uses a walking stick with a talking head. He calls the stick John. The film ends with a song that has a wartime theme: "You're a Little Chap with Big Ideas".

He also experimented with a figure named Jimmy or Lucky Jim (that may have been made by the noted figure-maker Len Insull). However, a dummy with a strong sense of identity and personality was still some time in the offing.

But also in 1943, after receiving harsh comments from a critic about his pathetic characters and weak material, Brough began experimenting with voices and eventually decided to use the pitchy voice of a fourteen-year-old that would later be recognized throughout England.

Brough then began imagining the schoolboy character that would make him famous. He went to noted figure-maker Len Insull and paid 250 British pounds for the dummy's head alone. This was a veritable fortune for Brough, but he had the foresight and determination to invest in his idea and in himself. Moreover, Brough ordered an expensive suit of clothes for his new figure from a posh London tailor on Savile Row.

Archie Andrews made his radio debut in a 1943 variety radio program entitled *Music Hall*. Brough then approached the BBC with the idea of a regular program entitled *The Archie Andrews Show*. The BBC was not impressed and turned down the idea.

But Brough did not give up. He turned up at the BBC again with impressionist Peter Cavanagh, and this time the BBC accepted the idea. The new show was called *Two's A Crowd*, but it was not successful. So Brough and Archie became a supporting act for other bigger-named stars.

In 1949 Brough tried the BBC once again with an idea for a program. The BBC accepted, but on a trial basis.

Educating Archie began in the middle of 1950 on BBC Radio as a temporary replacement for another radio program that was taking a summer hiatus. No one at the BBC initially thought that a ventriloquist on the radio would have much of an appeal. But popularity came fast for Brough's program, and the BBC wisely decided to continue it on a regular basis.

Archie Andrews was a trouble-making wise guy, and usually he was dressed in a striped schoolboy blazer. Sometimes intentionally, and other times by accident, Archie continually caused trouble for his guardian Brough. Brough always played it suave and cool, and his personality was usually sublimated beneath that of the boisterous Archie.

A number of popular stars made guest appearances on *Educating Archie*, but perhaps the most famous of all was a regular on the program: the then teenage Julie Andrews. Julie Andrews played Archie Andrews' girlfriend.

Archie soon became a valuable commodity, so Brough asked his insurance company to double the insurance on Archie Andrews to £10,000. The insurance company responded that they would most willingly increase Archie Andrew's coverage once Mr. Andrews passed a medical exam.

Before long, *Educating Archie* became the number one radio show in Britain. With such enormous popularity, a merchandising franchise soon built up around the character of Archie. Dolls, cups, soap, candy, books, and clothing items – all bearing the image of Archie Andrews – could soon be found all over England.

Fans of the program included the Royal Family. Brough even performed privately before King George VI, and his children. Curious about how Archie worked, the King asked Brough if he could examine the control mechanisms. Later, regarding Archie, the King made this comment to the press: "That's the only fellow I've ever beheaded."

By 1953 *Educating Archie* was again voted as the best radio program, and Brough received the coveted Silver Mike award for the second time.

In 1956 Archie was so popular that the BBC decided to transfer the show as a TV sitcom under the title of *Here's Archie*.

On his way to make his first show, Brough lost Archie. The trunk he was in had mysteriously disappeared. Brough offered a reward of 10,000 pounds for the figure. But no one claimed the reward. Instead, Brough received an anonymous note stating that “Archie can be found at Kings Cross Station lost property office.” Brough found Archie at that station. One must wonder whether this was a publicity stunt.

However, Brough’s ventriloquist skills had suffered from his years on the radio (where no one ever cared whether his lips moved or not); and the TV show did not achieve the success either Brough or the BBC hoped for. There was only one 45-minute episode made of *Here’s Archie*.

In 1958 Brough tried television again. This time *Educating Archie* appeared on ITV, and one of the leading writers for the program was the clever comedian Marty Feldman. The show was successful enough to last one and a half seasons, but not more. It ended in December of 1959 with a total of 27 completed half-hour episodes.

In 1961, following the death of his father, Brough decided to retire from show business and take over the family’s clothing and textile business.

Only on rare occasions did he appear on television after that. During the 1970s he appeared on a few BBC comedy shows, and he also occasionally performed at charities.

Peter Brough was married twice and had two children. He died on June 3, 1999, at the age of 83.

The popularity of Archie continues today. In fact, the dummy Brough used was sold at an auction in the United Kingdom in November of 2005 for a whopping £40,000.

A Biography of Peter Brough

© Bob Albano June 12, 2006

Selected Sources

Barker, Dennis. "Peter Brough: The Voice of Archie Andrews."
Guardian Unlimited: Monday, June 7, 1999.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk>

BBC Guide to Comedy: *Educating Archie*
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/articles/>

BBC Guide to Comedy: Here's Archie
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/articles/>

Burns, Stanley. *Other Voices: Ventriloquism from B.C. to T.V.*
New York, Sylvia Burns, 2005.

IMDB Database: Peter Brough
<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0112655/>

IMDB Database: *Educating Archie*
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0051271/>

Vox, Valentine. *I Can See Your Lips Moving: The History and Art of Ventriloquism.*
Kingswood: Windmill Press, 1981.