

Ralph Bell

Brian Kavanaugh

Ralph Bell, born Ralph Scognamiglio on November 27, 1915, was a successful stage and radio actor best known for his distinctive delivery style. Little is known of his early life. He was either born in New Jersey or New York City but spent most of his early years in Hackensack before attending the University of Michigan. There he attended the college's drama school while majoring in English. Upon graduation in 1937, he was offered and accepted a job there teaching drama.

A year later, Ralph Bell moved to New York City to begin an acting career of his own. His first known role was a bit part in the play *What a Life!* in 1938, which was later adapted for radio as *The Aldrich Family*. Other stage credits include *See My Lawyer* (1939), *Banjo Eyes* (1941), *Native Son* (1942) and *The Great Big Doorstep* (1942).

In the late 1940s, Bell transitioned to radio, where his nasally, sing-song voice made him a natural for playing various sinister roles. One his first high-profile roles was as good-for-nothing Spencer, then later Nora's "lost" father, Alfred, in the radio soap opera *This is Nora Drake* (1947). He also had roles as Joe Peterson in *Lorenzo Jones*, Charlie Gleason in *The Strange Romance of Evelyn Winters*, Jack Eastman on *Valiant Lady*, and various roles on *Big Sister*, *The Guiding Light*, and *The Right to Happiness*.

From 1951 to 1953 he played Craig's nemesis Lt. Travis Rogers on *Barrie Craig, Confidential Investigator*, and had regular appearances on scores of other radio programs, including *2000 Plus*, *The Big Story*, *Cloak and Dagger*, *Counterspy*, *Dimension X*, *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*, *Top Secret*, *X Minus One*, and *You Are There*. He also appeared in 123 episodes of *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* in the 1970s.

Bell was one of 151 names from the entertainment field listed in the 1950 anti-Communist booklet, *Red Channels*. This was perhaps because of his participation in Stage for Action, a radically anti-racist, anti-fascist, and pro-union activist organization founded in the 1940s. How much this damaged his career is debatable, but his participation in television or entertainment in general outside of the New York area was limited until the late 1950s.

He returned to the stage for a time, appearing in *The Crucible* (1953), *A View from the Bridge/A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955), *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1969), *The Time of Your Life* (1969) and *Camino Real* (1970). He also wrote scripts for *The Loretta Young Show* and *The George Sanders Show*, before beginning to appear on television in small roles and doing voiceovers for commercials. Some of his better-known television appearances include *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Patty Duke Show*, *Kate & Allie*, and *Law & Order*. He also appeared in a handful of movies, including *Wolfen* (1981) and *Zelig* (1983). He also was a longtime member of the Screen Actors Guild and served on the national board from 1965 to 1994.

Ralph Bell was married to actress Pert Kelton until her passing in 1968, and to actress Patricia Roe after that. He died suddenly at his home in New York City from a massive heart attack August 2, 1998. He was 82.

References:

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