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# All the Editors That Are Fit to Spoof

By KEVIN FLYNN  
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IF you're a newspaper editor on stage or screen, you are, as often as not, crusty, loud and easily exasperated.

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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times  
Reeve Carney, left, and Michael Mulheren in the musical "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark." [More Photos >](#)

Big things, little things, all kinds of things annoy you.

Deadlines. Missed scoops. Staff running amok. A cub reporter who insists on calling you Chief.

But perhaps no editor has ever been as unceasingly incensed as J. Jonah Jameson, the bombastic leader of The Daily Bugle in the Broadway musical "[Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark](#)," for whom the irritants have expanded from typos and limp headlines to the many encroachments of time and technology.

"We're fighting bloggers! We're fighting the Internet! We're fighting Facebook! We're a daily paper in a 24/7 world," he shouts at his staff. "We're a dinosaur."

In fact, almost as antique as newspapers these days is the fictive depiction of the hard-boiled editor, sometimes played as an all-bark, no-bite softie and other times as an incorrigible schemer. If you want to know into which camp Jameson falls, pay close attention in Act II when the actor who plays him, Michael Mulheren, filches a few quarters from a nun's collection pot for the poor.

Mr. Mulheren said the musical's original director, Julie Taymor, viewed the character as not so much cranky as

ferocious.

"He's ferocious for news," Mr. Mulheren said.

Aren't they all, stretching back at least as far as Walter Burns and his rascally manipulation of ace reporter Hildy Johnson in "The Front Page," the definitive 1928 stage portrait of the news business by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur that was [last revived on Broadway in 1986?](#)

On screen Helen Mirren showed that female editors can be just as greedy for exclusives as she pushed Russell Crowe in the film "State of Play" (2009). In four Superman movies, from 1978 to 1987, Jackie Cooper's Perry White conveyed his own kind of

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avuncular insatiability for scoops, as did Jason Robards playing the real thing, Ben Bradlee, in "All the President's Men" (1976).

"You guys are probably pretty tired, right?" Mr. Robards asks his charges, Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman), as they pursue Richard M. Nixon. "Well, you should be. Go on home, get a nice hot bath. Rest up — 15 minutes. Then get your [expletive] back in gear. We're under a lot of pressure, you know, and you put us there. Nothing's riding on this except the, uh, First Amendment to the Constitution, freedom of the press and maybe the future of the country."

Jameson's white whale is nothing quite so noble as the truth. Even in a show so focused on acrobatic flying and elaborate sets, Jameson, or J. J. as he's called, wants what he always wants: pictures of Spider-Man, lots of them, preferably in some incriminating tête-à-tête with the Green Goblin.

"Don't come back empty-handed, Parker, or you're fired," he yells at one point to Peter Parker, the cub photographer with an uncanny ability to capture the web-swinging hero in action.

In real life newsrooms are tamer these days, even at the tabloids. Reporters eat salad and don't smoke. No one ever yells, "Get me rewrite!"

J. J., though, is from an era when the typewriters clattered and newspapermen often kept a bottle in their desk. In the musical it is also somehow an era overtaken by the Internet, an anachronism that Mr. Mulheren posits should not be too unsettling to an audience that has already chosen a musical "where a man wears a red and blue suit and turns into a spider."

There have certainly been more serious takes on the editor-reporter relationship onstage. Tracey Scott Wilson's 2003 play "[The Story](#)" explored how issues of race affect that dynamic in a fictional account that bore a resemblance to the Janet Cooke incident of 1980, in which a Washington Post reporter was found to have largely fabricated a prizewinning story.

In coming months two new plays about newspapers are set to open in New York. "The Wood" by Dan Klores examines the life of Mike McAlary, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning columnist with the whisk-broom mustache who himself seemed to have stepped right out of "The Front Page."

Mr. Klores said his play, which opens on Sept. 8 at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, would revisit, among other things, Mr. McAlary's relationship with his editors, including Jim Willse, who edited him at The Daily News, and John Cotter, who shepherded him at Newsday and The New York Post.

"It's a relationship that has to be built on mutual fervor, love of winning, trust and respect," Mr. Klores said.

In January "CQ/CX," a play by Gabe McKinley that is reminiscent of the Jayson Blair reporting scandal at The New York Times, will begin previews at the Atlantic Theater Company. Mr. McKinley said the editors he depicts are composites, but some of their tics will resemble those of the folks who managed the Times newsroom in the years before Mr. Blair resigned in 2003.

"There's a real emphasis by the editors to push the envelope and get stories," said Mr. McKinley, who once worked at The Times as a news assistant.

For the most part, though, newspaper editors in movies and plays almost never work for The Times. "You might as well work in a bank," sniffs one Chicago newspaperman in "The Front Page."

Actually, there are more than a few ruffians in this newsroom who bellow like longshoremen at deadline. But the enduring image of the editor at The Times is that of



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Spalding Gray in "The Paper" (1994), a clubby college type in a bow tie and suspenders who edits the fictional New York Sentinel. (The bow ties, by the way, are seldom seen these days.)

For his turn as Jameson, Mr. Mulheren, 54, wears a natty pinstripe suit and a thick furry mustache, not unlike that worn by J. K. Simmons who played J. J. with a similar full-blown fury in several of the Spider-Man movies. (The next Spider-Man film, due out next July from Sony Pictures, will not feature the Jameson character.)

Mr. Mulheren, whose depiction of a gangster in "Kiss Me Kate" (2000) earned him a [Tony nomination](#) for best featured actor in a musical, serves as a comic focal point for "Spider-Man," a responsibility he shares with Patrick Page who plays the Green Goblin. Mr. Mulheren said he did not study for the role, per se, because he did not have to. Newspapers were a part of his life growing up in New Jersey, where he regularly plowed through The Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Asbury Park Press, The Red Bank Register and The Herald Tribune, the last two of which are now defunct.

He had also read "Fit to Print," a 1988 book about The Times, and spent time at the old New York Post building on South Street, once to film an episode of "Law & Order" and once to meet Mr. McAlary.

Mr. McAlary, who died in 1998, wrote several columns in which he noted how unfair had been the prosecution of Mr. Mulheren's brother, John, a charismatic Wall Street trader whose 1990 securities fraud conviction was reversed and dismissed on appeal.

"He wrote that there was no basis for the prosecution," Mr. Mulheren said of Mr. McAlary. "He was a straight shooter."

Whatever Mr. McAlary did for his brother, the rest of the ink-stained crew have not been kind to Mr. Mulheren's show. Few musicals have suffered the [critical drubbing](#) that "Spider-Man" has. The box office was not hurt, though, and neither was Mr. Mulheren, whose approach to the reviews has been all J. J. Jameson in its eyes-on-the-prize durability.

"They are what they are," he said. "You just have to keep going."

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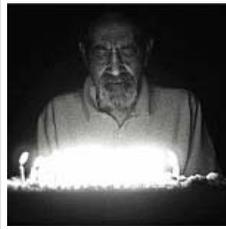
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