

VEGETABLE SOUP

BY JEFFREY REZNICK

A children's television program to combat racism was "a noble experiment in human values."

On September 11, 1975, New York's Commissioner of Education Ewald Nyquist convened a press conference in New York City to introduce *Vegetable Soup*, a new magazine-style children's television series produced and distributed by the Bureau of Mass Communications of the New York State Education Department. The series was funded through a grant from the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. To illustrate his remarks, Nyquist presented clips of the opening title sequence and a segment about "questions that children ask about race and racial characteristics," like "what makes people's hair look and feel different?" The opening welcomed young viewers with a score by the award-winning composer Peter Link, then best known for his work on the rock-opera *Salvation*, combined with animation by the acclaimed artist James A. Simon, president and creative director of Wantu Animation,





*Producer Yanna Kroyt Brandt, Project
Director William Hetzer.*

NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

the first fully African American animation studio. The lyrics to the score invited everyone to “come on along and join us” as multi-colored, music-playing individuals and singing faces encouraged viewers to embrace the allegory that “it takes all kinds of vegetables to make vegetable soup.”

Vegetable Soup was unique, being the first publicly funded series to be broadcast on both public and commercial stations nationwide, and on cable television via Warner-Amex Satellite Entertainment.

Moreover, it was unlike any other contemporary or previous children’s television program, as it was based primarily and fundamentally on the understanding that racism and racial differences were major determinates of health in the lives for all children. As Nyquist explained, the series “reinforces and dramatizes the positive, life-enhancing value of human

diversity, and it does this in entertaining and effective presentations that children can understand and relate to.”

Countering Racism

Participating in the press conference was Yanna Kroyt Brandt, the award-winning executive producer of *Vegetable Soup*, who, through a creative process with Link, developed the name of the series to fit its concept. As Link recalled in a 2017 interview, “Yanna told me that she was working on a new children’s series to help counter racism. She had a working title of about five words, and we discussed a number of ideas based on her fundamental idea, as she conveyed it to me, that it takes all kinds of people to make the diverse world in which we live. From this—and please keep in mind that crazy music titles were in vogue at this time—the idea occurred to me that it takes a variety of vegetables to make vegetable soup.”

During this same period, Brandt had engaged James Simon in creating animations for the title sequence, as

well as the envisioned segues between the various “genres” of the series—as Brandt and her production team called the individual productions—all of which made up the magazine-style format of each episode, encompassing animation, live-action, comedy, drama, and documentaries, all as means to address and celebrate the importance of multicultural diversity in America. Link met with Simon to see his visualizations as one guide to proceed with his scoring. As Link recalled: “Jim’s animation process was the most powerful thing in our effort together to conceive the title sequence. I was struck by the whimsy of his work, and especially his use of a variety of vivid colors.”

In a separate 2017 interview, Simon emphasized two specific features which distinguished his animation of the opening title sequence: “I used a variety of colors to help convey and reflect the many colors of America. And if you look carefully, you will see that the faces did not have eyes, or they did not have complete eyes. I introduced this in the animation to underscore the diversity of America and [to] counter the idea that a single color could represent a single individual.” Such was the creative collaboration between Link and Simon which brought Yanna Brandt’s vision to life, as she explained in a contemporary interview, “The melting pot idea is no longer viable. Many people don’t want life to be a melting pot. They want to be a part of the whole, yet they want to maintain their own ethnic and cultural identities. The aim of the program is to help children learn to live together in appreciation of the common humanity of different peoples.” Brandt continued, offering the realistic view of the intentions of *Vegetable Soup*, “we are not naïve enough to think that television can



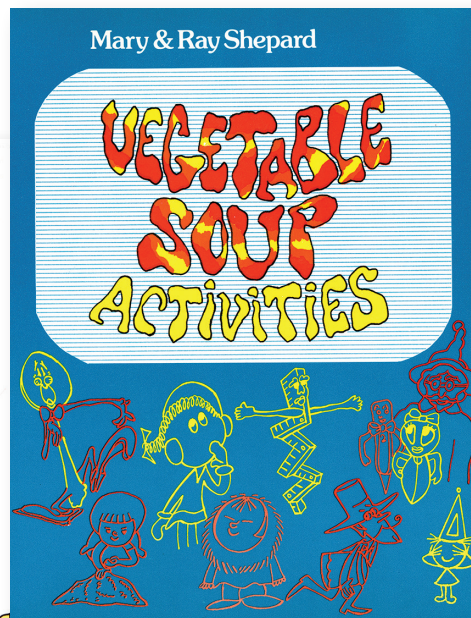
The show spawned spin-off publications for use at school and home.

suddenly change anyone's deep-seated prejudicial attitudes, but it can certainly present positive images and evidences which contradict negative attitudes. This is especially true for young children 8 to 12, during those crucial years of development."

Many Colors

With this target audience and overall focus, Brandt and her creative team made *Vegetable Soup* different from one of the most popular publicly funded contemporary children's programs: *Sesame Street*. "I don't consider [Vegetable Soup] competitive with *Sesame Street* in any way," Brandt explained, "*Sesame Street* is for children younger than six ... it teaches them mathematics and how to read. We're talking about attitudes."

Link and Simon joined a large, diverse group of writers and producers who came together under Brandt's direction to craft and curate the multi-ethnic focus of *Vegetable Soup*. In identifying, gathering, and orchestrating this collective talent from



multiple minority backgrounds, Brandt met—and exceeded—the clear expectation of the federal government that the series would "employ members of minority groups in responsible positions in [its] development, production, and administration."

In her achievement, Brandt embraced an approach to producing the series which was as forward-thinking as the series itself, fundamentally because she believed that one could not achieve the latter without the former.

As Brandt recalled in a 2013 interview, "I was determined that we were going to search out and hire minority crews, minority producers, minority editors, all sorts of people of color, not just African American but Hispanic and Asian etc. And to have a real United Nations. And to help these people train so they could then get jobs in the mainstream industry. ... So, *Vegetable Soup* was not only about doing the program. It was also about how the program was going to be done."

Complementing the talent of these contributors and augmenting the

public profile of the series was the participation of several prominent personalities of the day, including singer Bette Midler and actor James Earl Jones. Midler served as the voice of Woody the Spoon in what would become a popular sequence of the same name, animated by Simon, in which Woody helps the viewing youngsters cook up tasty, easy-to-follow ethnic recipes. James Earl Jones lent his voice to the animated character of Long John Spoilsport, who taught children how not to behave in the genre "The Big Game Hunt." Other animated characters included Luther and his friends, created by Brumsic Brandon Jr. from his nationally syndicated comic of the same title—one of the first such comics to feature a mainly Black cast of characters. Other high-profile personalities who contributed their time and talents to *Vegetable Soup* included Ricardo Montalban, a Mexican-American actor; Paul Russell of the Dance Theatre of Harlem; Willie Tyler, a Black ventriloquist; folk singer Bill Withers; Native American ballet star Maria Tallchief; Asian American dancer and singer Pat Suzuki; and Puerto Rican jockey Angel Cordero.

Advisory Committee

Fundamental to developing and producing these and the many other genres which made up *Vegetable Soup*—indeed the series as a whole—was the involvement of an advisory committee of consultants, which was itself a requirement of the federal grant received by the New York State Education Department. Monitoring the production of the series every step of the way, the committee consisted of twenty-five members representing fourteen ethnic groups and four public school organizations.

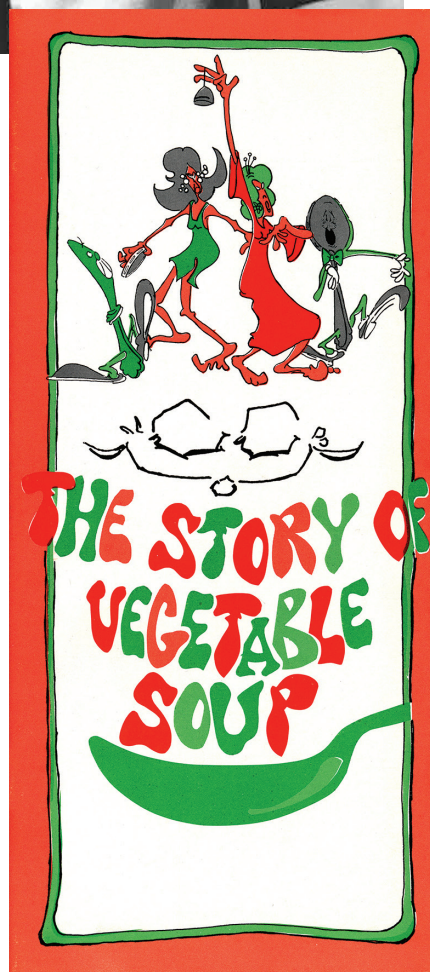


Scene from a popular segment called "Outerscope II." Some viewers found the puppets odd and producers subsequently made changes to make them more "aesthetically pleasing."

The grant guidelines stipulated that one-third of the committee members were to be Black, one-third Caucasian, one-third Hispanic, and half of the members had to be parents of children in the target age range of 7-10 years. Moreover, members had to represent at least five ethnic organizations, and it needed to include three students.

Vegetable Soup continued for a second and final, season as *Vegetable Soup II*, and it continued to be broadcast into the early 1980s. Over the course of its lifespan, the series won numerous awards. For

their collaborative contributions to *Vegetable Soup*, Simon and Link won seven of the top awards at the 1975 International Animated Film Association-East Festival. The Ohio State University conferred its prestigious Ohio State Award, specifically for episode #16 of season 1, which featured a historical, multi-lingual segment about celebrating birthdays and an especially provocative segment about bullying. The series also received the Writers' Guild of America, East, Best Writing Award for best children's script of the year 1976 for "The Superlative Horse," which was directed by Urs B. Furrer and based on Jean Merrill's award-winning 1961 allegorical children's story *The Superlative Horse: A Tale of Ancient China*. *Vegetable Soup* also won the Bronze Medal of the International Film and Television Festival of New York, the Cindy Gold Award from the



Information Film Producers Association, and the Golden Eagle Award from the Council on International Non-Theatrical Events.

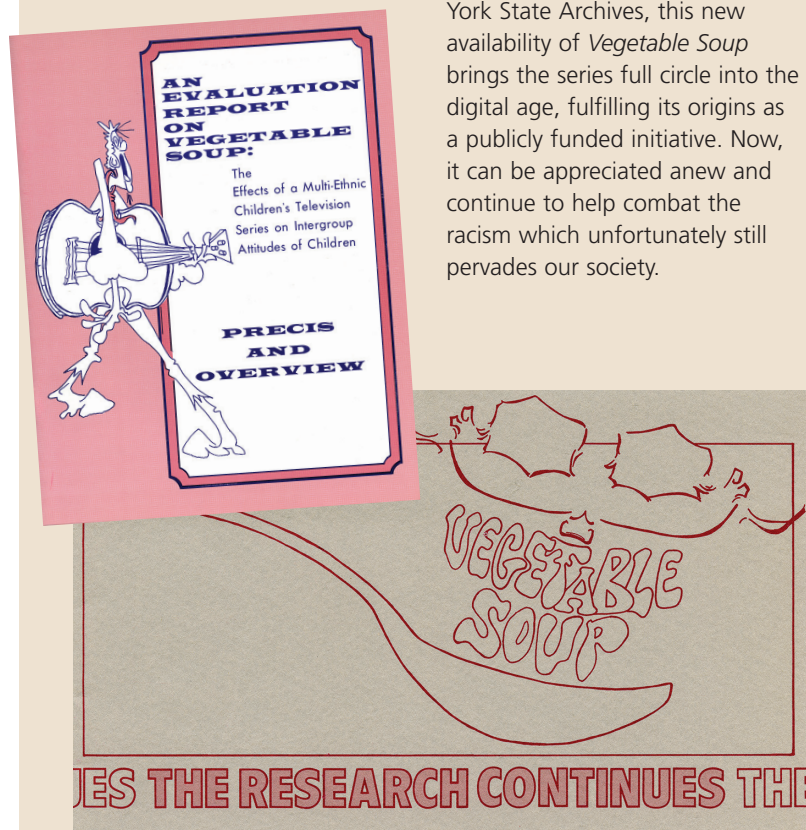
Researchers also appreciated the series through the work of its head of research and evaluation, Luberta Mays, PhD, a professor of education at Medgar Evers College, a former teacher at Bank Street College of Education, and a specialist in early childhood development. Mays led the formative and summative research components of the series, outcomes which prompted psychologist Dr. Sherryl Browne Graves to state that “[o]ne conclusion emerges clearly from this research: Educational programming that consciously includes blacks and other minorities in positive portrayals can alter positively racial attitudes, especially under conditions of prolonged or multiple exposure.” Complementing Graves’s positive assessment of *Vegetable Soup*, the noted New York clinical psychologist Salvatore Didato aptly described the series as “a noble experiment in human values.” As such, it represented a remarkable achievement in its day and one which audiences across the United States appreciated for its thoughtful and creative content and intended goals. Today, *Vegetable Soup* is an equally remarkable chapter in New York State history and the history of initiatives to ameliorate the negative effects of racism and racial isolation on all children. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

This article draws on interviews with contemporaries who brought *Vegetable Soup* to life, and substantial collections of the New York State Archives and Library which document the development, production, and reception of the series. These collections include drafts of the “Special Project” grant application of the New York State Education Department submitted to the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which reveals how very well staff of the department justified the cultural need for their proposed children’s series on race, racial isolation, and racism. Collections of the New York State

Archives and Library also include unique correspondence and meeting minutes pertaining to the production of the series, ephemera reflecting publicity efforts, and rare printed publications, including parent-teacher guides, a contemporary history of the series by noted New York journalist Osborn Segerberg Jr., and extensive research reports authored by Luberta Mays of Medgar Evers College.

In February 2020, the American Archive of Public Broadcasting (AAPB) announced the inclusion of *Vegetable Soup* in its freely available online collection, available at https://americanarchive.org/special_collections/vegetable-soup. Made possible through the support of the New York State Archives, this new availability of *Vegetable Soup* brings the series full circle into the digital age, fulfilling its origins as a publicly funded initiative. Now, it can be appreciated anew and continue to help combat the racism which unfortunately still pervades our society.



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