

_____ Notes on Writing for Radio _____

One of the earliest discoveries the astute radio playwright makes is that his audience does half the work!

If he doesn't, he's not astute. Nor is he a good radio playwright.

It is a very delicate task, this setting of your audience to work for you. Never get the idea it means less work. Rather, it means more. It means learning from experience the exact weight and balance of words and sentences, when to use understatement and when a point must be hammered home. It means putting yourself in the place

of your audience -- and listening as you write.

This method of listening to your dialogue as you write brings us to an interesting point. It is in this respect that the stage and film playwrights differ from the radio writer.

Writing for stage and screen is "visual" writing. Particularly in the latter case. The writer thinks, not so much in terms of sound as in scenes. Every picture is told in terms of vision rather than of dialogue -- and if you doubt this statement, try and recall the films in which you have carried away a memory of the actual dialogue rather than the visual story. Off-hand, I can think of only three such films seen over the past years. Noel C
seen over the past years. Noel Coward's "The Scoundrel" was one. Other and more recent films were "All About Eve" and "Kind Hearts and Coronets". The scenarioists who wrote the adult, vinegar flavoured dialogue for these films did it so well that it remained etched in the mind. :

On the other hand, one is forced to sit through flocks of films in which the dialogue is so moronic in quality that it simply fails to register on the mind. A further example is the coloured travel-talks. When this particular feature is finished, how many people in the theatre could tell you one cogent point from the spoken commentary? Indeed, with minds fixed on the beauty of the filmic images, the spoken commentary is scarcely heard.

Therefore, poor dialogue gets over in the films because, in the majority of cases, it is of secondary importance. So long as the photography is good, the story interesting, the frocking perfect - so long as the star says something pertaining to the plot, it is acceptable. The audience, in this case, does no work. The whole ensemble is so complete as to leave nothing to the imagination.

But how different is the radio play!

In this medium, dialogue, far from being secondary, becomes of the greatest importance. The spoken word stands out with all the relentless clarity of black upon white. Gone are the chromium backgrounds, the elaborate stage settings, the visual stimulation of a beautiful face or the heroic figure. The radio play is stripped of everything save what emerges from the author's pen. Good acting and skilful production may help, but never to the extent they would in the visual medium, which brings half a dozen other glorifications to attract the attention. In radio, as never before the play is the thing!³

And the radio author, if he does his work properly, has something greater than any man-made Hollywood property to help him.

He has that most fascinating and variable of all things - the human imagination. The imagination of his audience which, if stimulated in the right manner, will do at least half the work. The audience's imagination, which the films have attacked to atrophy,

audience's imagination, which the films have attempted to atrophy by leaving it nothing to dwell upon. For it is this intangible factor that can turn a single line of dialogue into a telling experience or a moment of horror and produce an emotional stimulus far more profound than carefully planned film sets could hope to do.

Let us attempt an example.

A man and his wife share a lonely cottage in the country. The nearest house is fifty miles away. This isolation and lack of visitors is made clear. The couple see no other human being from one month to another. But, of late, the husband complains of the feeling of a third presence in the house, something unseen, yet ever there.

Late one night, she wakes to find her husband missing. Creeping out of the bedroom, she enters the living room to see her husband seated at the table. She is about to call to him when she notices something else - something that checks the word on her lips. Instead, we hear a soft, fear-stricken whisper ... "Oh, God!.. John.. what is that standing behind your chair?"

Here is a situation of horror that the radio play alone can exploit to its fullest degree. That breathless whisper titillates the imagination of even the dullest among us. For we cannot see what stands behind the chair -- only the trembling horror of the question

gives us a clue. Is it man, beast or devil? Is it merely a moving shadow? And so our imagination builds the situation for us, creating a common horror particular to each and every one of us. In other words, each person in the audience sees behind that chair the thing most fearful to her or him personally!

If that situation was given in a film, the same result could never be achieved.

For the film is a visual medium and by that standard, must show something. In that particular case, the Thing that stood behind Jon's chair could only be the result of one person's imagination - the property man's. Such a figure could never hope to reach the apotheosis of everyone's idea of terror; indeed, it would probably have the reverse effect on some people since horror is a peculiarly personal thing. If one man's meat is another man's poison, assuredly one person's horror becomes something ludicrous and nonsensical to his neighbour.

Tyrone Guthrie, the well-known London stage and radio producer, touches on this "audience suggestion" in a preface to a volume of his own radio plays. In the broadcast play, he says, "the mind of the listener is free to create it's own illusion. Playwright, producer and actors combine to throw out a sequence of hints, tiny clues, suggestions and the mind of the listener collects, shapes and expands these into pictures. Admitted that this is difficult; it demands a great deal of

greater than any stage property to help him - the human imagination. The imagination of the audience which, if stimulated in the right manner, will do at least half the work for the playwright. But notice I say stimulated in the right manner! This must be no excuse for laziness or slack work for this will merely defeat its purpose.

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like every other trade. This is proved again and again when ~~these~~ first-rank ~~Australian~~ novelists and stage playwrights submit material for the microphone. Very often their attempts at microphone drama fall short --- because they are still writing for the stage or the novel. They are still writing for a visual medium.

Now this is the first important point the would-be radio dramatist must fully appreciate. Radio is always first and foremost a blind medium. You go to the theatre and the curtain rises on a well-lit stage, your imagination is immediately captured by a splendid set cunningly lit, the actors come on dressed in a manner to sustain the illusion of this particular play. Sometimes --- as in Anthony Armstrong's "Ten Minute Alibi" there may be only one man on the stage for fifteen minutes. He speaks no words at all --- the essence of the drama is in his visual movements alone. He might go to a drawer and hide a gun which later plays an important part in the plot; he might, secretly and alone, burn an important letter, or he may set a trap for some victim of his jealousy.

But when we hear a radio play, we are listening to a completely one dimensional thing. We face a box-like machine from which nothing but sounds issue. Gone are your stage settings, your lights, your costumes -- obliterated are your visual movements, your facial expressions that counted for so much on the stage. You have sound -- nothing in the world but sound --- with which to tell your drama to the