Chapter 1 Radio Drama is Born and In Its Cradle

The medium of almost unlimited possibilities

The BBC's Radio Drama Department used to send out a photocopied eight page guide 'Writing Plays For Radio' and explained with so much enthusiasm that 'Radio is an extraordinary medium' because it works on the principle that 'anything which can be described can be imagined.' They were trying to get across the idea that a radio play can traverse centuries in time and continents in geography. Film producers with limited budgets would have to think twice about the merits of running the story in terms of aeroplanes, ships and exotic locations, but in radio since all this takes place in the confines of a single mind the possibilities are indeed unlimited.

The word imagination is repeated over and over again in audio drama teaching. It is why Angela Carter said: '…as with all forms of storytelling that are composed in words, not in visual images, radio always leaves that magical and enigmatic margin, that space of the invisible, which must be filled in by the imagination of the listener.' (Carter 1985:7) She also talked about sound drama's mythological and spiritual qualities rooted in oral cultures going back thousands of years: 'Indeed, radio retains the atavistic lure, the atavistic power, of voices in the dark, and the writer who gives the words to those voices retains some of the authority of the most antique tellers of tales' (ibid 13).

My starting point is that unequivocally audio/radio drama is a beautiful and poetic medium. It is hugely creative with the limitless imaginative horizons talked about by the BBC in times gone past. It is deeply psychological and intimate, has huge logistical advantages in being economical and realizable with modest resources, and gives the

writer the power to fashion stories that are emotional, truthful and thought-provoking. Radio and sound is an enduring medium and rumours of its decline, eventual death and replacement have always been wrong. I will use the terms radio drama and audio drama interchangeably and randomly throughout. Obviously some sound dramas are distributed in podcast form and online only. Others are produced for broadcast by radio stations. There is also another term in use- audio fiction- and it is argued that this encompasses the multiple dimensionality of story-telling techniques, style and genres that arise from the boom in Internet and online sound storytelling cultures.

I have decided to give the book the title 'audio drama' because it will be discussing how to write dramatic stories in the sound medium. My book *Audio Drama Modernism: The Missing Link between Descriptive Phonograph Sketches and Microphone Plays on the Radio*, published in 2020, sought to demonstrate that recorded storytelling in the sound medium clearly predated radio broadcasting and there was certainly a mutually beneficial synergy between the practices in making sound plays for the phonograph and producing microphone plays in the early years of radio.

The first book ever to be published on the craft of radio drama writing was published in 1926 and written by a regional director of plays for the BBC at Newcastle Upon Tyne. Gordon Lea produced a landmark and early chapters and companion website resource references much of the detail. To begin with I wanted to draw out and emphasize six key almost luminescent points he made. He explained that writing sound drama was very much about regulating and playing with human consciousness. He said writing and creating a radio play was about orchestrating the human voices of the players coming out of a canvas of silence. He said they were like jewels against a background of black

velvet. He talked about the medium of the human voice as a mental pageantry of colour and delight which no artist in the world can emulate. He devoted an entire chapter to the listener's part, indeed participation in creating and being inside the world of the play. Listeners are in direct touch with the players inside this imaginative spectacle of human consciousness. There is no intervening convention- no barrier. Soul speaks to soul. He explained that there were two fundamental styles of structure to audio-dramatic writing. One was to deploy the narrator method and the other he described as the 'self-contained method.' This could be explained as the difference between telling and showing; a mantra so regularly articulated by creative writing teachers. Gordon Lea was so excited and even poetic about what can be achieved as a radio drama writer. He said if writers wishe to set their plays in the heart of a buttercup, the imagination of the listener will provide the setting.

The BBC did not miss a trick with the poetic resonances in selection and production of radio plays. 'The Butterfly That Stamped' rings like the title of a drama specially written for the sound medium, but it is fact an adaptation of the Rudyard Kipling story 'Just-So' adapted and produced by Maurice Brown for Boxing Day 1939. The then head of BBC Radio Drama Val Gielgud performed the role of the narrator storyteller.

The problem with stereotypes

The history of broadcasting and radio drama has uncomfortable and racist resonances in the past for on the very same page of the *Radio Times* promoting the butterfly play, there is a huge illustration of blacked-up minstrelling white men dancing and singing. This was advertising the Christmas Party of the BBC's then long-running vaudeville programme 'The Kentucky Minstrels' which ran for over 100 episodes between 1933 and

1950. At least four *Radio Times* entries for the series in 1933 used the deeply offensive 'n' word in the promotional blurb openly describing it as 'A N***** Minstrel Show' (Radio Times 1933:852). At the time Dr Harold Moody and the League for Coloured Peoples in London along with the League's magazine *Link* had been campaigning against the use of such demeaning and abusive language in the public sphere and they played a key role in ending the use of the word in BBC continuity, presentation and content (Fryer 1984:331-332). The most frequent comic entertainers appearing in the series were the African-Americans Harry Clifford Scott and Edward Peter Whaley who performed the characters Pussyfoot and Cuthbert. This compares with the racial-cultural trope of the most successful sitcom in US radio drama history being "Amos 'n' Andy" created and performed by two white Southern Americans, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. Their writing and acting of the minstrel style African-American protagonists Amos Jones (Gosden) and Andrew Hogg Brown (Correll) would make them millionaires and provoke a powerful campaign by Black American civil rights organisations to challenge its perpetuation of the tradition of derogatory racial stereotyping. The series ran from 1928 to 1960. Live short-wave relays of "Amos 'n' Andy" episodes were broadcast by NBC USA to the BBC from New Year's Eve in 1930 and through the early 1930s.

The *Radio Times* described the broadcast as 'something of an event. These pretended negroes, who broadcast daily in the interests of a powerful toothpaste corporation, are the single most popular item in the American programmes' (Radio Times 1930:655). The article suggested hearing it 'will be a step nearer to solving the great riddle of those United States.' (ibid) It even revealed plans were being discussed to produce a British equivalent through the impersonation of a Jewish family. Anti-Semitic language and

characterization have persisted in all forms of broadcasting and drama and even the progressive *Royal Court* theatre in London had to apologize and reflect on this in recent years. Morton Wishengrad's *The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto* was first broadcast by the US NBC network on the eve of the Day of Atonement in 1943, barely a few months after the German Nazi regime's Final Solution had liquidated the Warsaw Ghetto and murdered millions in death camps such as Treblinka and Auschwitz. Three productions and broadcasts of Wishengrad's dramatization of the heroic defence by young Jewish fighters drew over 12,000 letters of appreciation to the Network. The US War Department sent transcriptions overseas to be played on troop stations in all war theatres. The script was performed in hundreds of schools and colleges across the USA (Barnouw 1945:33). Yet it was never heard on the BBC and has never been broadcast in Britain. Close scrutiny of the BBC's archives reveals senior executives deliberately suppressed programming about the developing Holocaust against European Jewry. One scribbled on a document: 'If you give Jewish broadcasters an inch, they come clamouring for a mile' (Crook 1997:199). The racism against African-Americans in the USA means Langston Hughes' commissioned radio play *Booker T Washington in Atlanta* was published as a script in 1945, but never produced for broadcast transmission.

Contemporary dramatists in any medium need to be sensitive and cautious about the risk of derogatory and stereotypical words and concepts slipping into characterization and language through unconscious bias and cultural conditioning. It can certainly be argued the repeated use of the 'n' word in Lawrence du Garde Peach's 1929 radio play *Ingredient X* could have been considered problematic even for its time (du Garde Peach 1932:180-217). The humiliating and dehumanizing depiction of Africans when given to

the language of racist European colonialists means that this text is not appropriate for workshop teaching. This is despite being a progressive model for using long-form audio drama storytelling in the self-contained method of short scenes switching between dramatic action in storm at sea, plotting in the capitalist world of a City of London boardroom, and rebellion and conflict in an African colony.

The television version of "Amos 'n' Andy", though this time performed by African American actors, was broadcast by the BBC during the 1950s. It was at the end of this decade in 1958 that BBC Television inaugurated the "Black and White Minstrel Show" which ran for twenty years until 1978 and like "Amos 'n' Andy" in the USA faced criticism and campaigning for its cancellation by the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination. In an echo of the ambiguity experience for Scott and Whaley's participation in the Kentucky Minstrels, the teenage Sir Lenny Henry became the first black performer to appear in the show in 1975. His regret in being contractually obliged to appear caused him a 'wormhole of depression.' This book recognizes his later achievements as a significant radio playwright in a subsequent award-winning career scriptwriting and performing in serious and classical drama.

Audio drama is spoken word- for the ear and not the eye

One of the basic and foremost tricks I have always advised writers to deploy when writing audio drama is to create with the voice. What I mean by this is to speak the script- perhaps even before it is written down. And then speak it over and over again. For radio and sound has always been the spoken word medium. This is the reason it has connected culturally so well with the oral tradition in poetry and storytelling. General education has trained most people to write and read silently in literate English and good style values

often relate to how the script looks on a page. Radio and broadcast journalists are always trained to rehearse their scripts through presentation and a silent broadcast newsroom full of journalists is often not a very good one. It should be possible to hear people talking their stories. Some highly experienced broadcasters do not even write their scripts before recording their links. They think them first, and then speak them and from an early time in their careers develop a very precise instinct for time. They acquire the ability to adlib into specific linear time frames. Some televisual journalists present/link the voice-over directly onto the sound track of their film sequences.

I would argue that audio dramatists should develop the same skills. In this way the dramatic writing will have the necessary impact and form to connect with the listener's imagination. It can also be a lot of fun. Dramatizing characters and the interaction between them will often spark and catalyse new ideas and thoughts as well as inform the writer about the layers of subtext that can be allowed to breathe in communication in developing scenes without overwriting. It is true that podcasting no longer binds sound play creators for the online platform to specific time frames, but the discipline of writing and performing to time will always be demanded by the broadcasting world.

In the days when most sound plays were performed live, the writing to time skill was even more essential. Rehearsals needed to take into account the pace of performance and potential variation in production of sound effects. Even the mood of a character as interpreted by an actor could vary the length of a speech or line by a few seconds. There was the celebrated occasion when the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* company directed by Orson Welles catastrophically mistimed their live production largely through the last minute practices in writing and rehearsal. Orson Welles had to go to the CBS library

during a passage when his character was not performing to find some books to bring back into the live studio so that he and his actors could present extracts from adaptations that they would be doing in future weeks.

Having the chance to try out sound drama scripts in a performing group of fellow writers and actors is always an advantage. The interpretation and performance of scripts by others offers writers the chance to be more objective about their work. Precious lines and ideas originally cherished might turn out to be not so successful when vocalized. The failure to establish the unique identity of a character through the cadence and specificity of their speaking persona will become obvious through performance whether by writers themselves or an ensemble group working together on each others' scripts.

The Theatre Workshop doctrine of going out into communities to interview and document human experiences is a fine example of the significance of listening to people talking about their lives, hopes, fears, and memories and then bringing them back to the drama workshop space and through transcription, interpretation and improvisation producing refined dramatic expression of truths inspired by real life and real people. The dramatic language is not purely a recreation of the exact words of people speaking but crafted into dramatic narration and dialogue.

David Pownall- 'Sound theatre is a performance art of special purity.'

When David Pownall's collection of award-winning radio plays was published in 1998, he was described by the director Eoin O'Callaghan as 'one of this country's most talented and prolific writers for the medium.' (Pownall 1998). In 2010 Oberon Books published his elegant memoir 'Sound Theatre: Thoughts on the Radio Play.' Pownall reminds us that of the many advantages of radio drama is that there is no need for sequins

on the microphone, make-up, stunning frocks, knowing winks, gurning and certainly no nudity or 'cavorting eye-candy.' (Pownall 2010:17) His gentle surmising is very much in the tradition of Gordon Lea's tribute to a medium which 'is suspended in a universe of its own, a cloud of starry verbal vapour.' (ibid 19) The Goon Show when listened to without canned laughter or a studio audience as though cast into the silent air 'has a strange, floating pureness.' (ibid). The playwright has the simplest advice to his compatriots: 'Word, noise, silence, followable though – that's all there is to work with. Artists of sound theatre can make it mean anything and everything.' (ibid 17) He also points out that there have been more original plays written for radio in Britain over the last hundred years than for the stage over the last four hundred years. Between thirty and forty thousand plays have sparked and electrified the human imagination. Pownall's love and passion for the medium is witty and self-deferential. He was fascinated by the BBC's listener log for one of his plays broadcast in 2000. One phoned in saying 'This is the most boring play I have ever listened to' another said: 'Thought it was marvelous.' (ibid 61) Pownall observes that in the huge stream of swirling sound that is modern digital and online and analogue life, 'Bobbing along, in danger of being sucked down, is the radio play, needing a moment when the loop stops and the whirlpool ceases in which to be heard to advantage.' (ibid 66)

Shakespeare as radio drama

David Pownall's most enduring achievement in writing a radio play which explored the spirit of discovering how they should be made is 'An Epiphanous Use of The Microphone' (1998). Not only did he make an art out of linking present understanding with past and early discovery, he conjured two worlds: 1923 and the BBC's decision to

produce William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night from Savoy Hill as the first full-length radio play to be broadcast by the BBC's London station 2LO, and Twelfth Night's earliest public performance which took place at Middle Temple Hall, one of the Inns of Court, on 2 February (Candlemas night) in 1602.

Shakespeare was first broadcast by the BBC with a scene from *Julius Caesar* on 16th February 1923 performed by Shayle Gardner and Hubert Carter 90 years ago. This was the famous quarrel scene, the argument between Brutus and Cassius. The BBC celebrated this in 2013 by producing for radio performance by Harriet Walter and Jenny Jules from Phyllida Lloyd's all-female Donmar Warehouse production.

It was artistically and historically astute for the producer Jeremy Mortimer to cast an all-female production because the complex cross gender ambiguities and performance traditions in Shakespeare work so well in the sound medium. The British Empire Shakespeare Society had staged an all-female cast matinée reading performance of Hamlet during the 1920s. In 1923 the *Times* newspaper had reported on their reductive and minimalist word-based style of Shakespeare presentations:

> In the periodical readings arranged in London by the British Empire Shakespeare Society we are presented with Shakespeare 'as he is wrote'. We are given the traditional text and the traditional arrangement of scenes; there is no scenery and there are no costumes. The artists sit round in a circle in their everyday clothes, the scenes and stage direction are indicated by a lady who is described on the programme as 'stage directions',' and the action is carried through from beginning to end without pause. It is an ordeal from which the works only of the greatest dramatists could emerge with any measure of success...

(Times 20 March 1923:10)

Alan Beck argues that it was their track-record in presenting no costume near equivalent radio studio style performances which led to their booking, most likely by Cecil Lewis to produce the first four full-length radio Shakespeare plays by the BBC in 1923: Twelfth Night (28th May), The Merchant of Venice (15th June), Romeo and Juliet (5th July) and A Midsummer Night's Dream (25th July 1923). Dr Andrea Smith has brilliantly analysed the successful adaptations by Cathleen Nesbitt and reception of these broadcasts by newspapers and radio periodicals. Dr Smith is effectively elevating Nesbitt's creative and professional contribution to radio drama's first successful impact on large-scale broadcast audiences in Britain. Nesbitt did not mention her BBC achievements in her 1975 autobiography *A Little Love and Good Company*. Her value and contribution to British culture is much more than the footnote of having been in love with the romantic Great War poet Rupert Brooke who died from fever on his way to the Gallipoli campaign in 1915. She references the director and producer Nigel Playfair in respect of stage and theatre productions. The BBC's Cecil Lewis and Playfair's important connections and work with the BBC are invisible as is the British Empire Shakespeare Society.

Some of the Royal Shakespeare Company actors I was fortunate enough to direct- Mike Shannon, Don Henderson and Gerard Murphy- always emphasized how they thought Shakespeare had been writing for the radio age. There are many arguments why his plays are so suited for sound production and listening. The poetic nomenclature of verse speech is rooted in the oral tradition and in the Renaissance age for audiences with a high proportion of people who could not read. Shakespeare's plays were originally

presented in contemporary dress. As a writer Shakespeare was an outstanding artist in writing for the imagination. His ability as a dramatist to bring emotional intensity to his plots and characters covered the vast range of human feelings. His words were invested with powerful psychology. The emotional imagination of his audience is drawn into participating with the world of his plays.

David Pownall characterizes and dramatizes Cathleen Nesbitt's role in *An Epiphanous Use of The Microphone* 'commissioned by the BBC for the 75th anniversary of the first play ever broadcast.' The history of the first 8 to 10 years of BBC Radio drama between 1922 and 1930 has been researched and written in three academic studies completed between 1988 and 2008 by Tina Pepler 'Discovering The Art Of Wireless; A Critical History Of Radio Drama At The BBC 1922-1928' (a PhD with the University of Bristol), Alan Beck 'The Invisible Play'- History of Radio Drama in the UK, Radio Drama 1922-8' (academic staff research project for Kent University), and Roger Wood, 'Radio Drama at the Crossroads: The history and contemporary context of radio drama at the BBC' (a PhD with De Montfort University, Leicester). Wood's research and writing covers the period until the completion and submission of this thesis in 2008. Andrea Smith's 2022 PhD thesis 'Look with thine ears': A Century of Shakespeare's Plays on BBC Radio' for the University of East Anglia is the most comprehensive study of Shakespearean production and broadcasting in BBC Radio spanning the corporation's first 100 years.

The nearest we can get to hearing what the sound drama of this period was actually like would be some focus on what was canonized as the first play specifically written for the microphone- 'Danger' by Richard Hughes. However, Tina Pepler's thesis identifies the radio drama script written for *Children's Hour* titled: 'The Truth About Father

Christmas' by Mrs Phyllis M. Twigg as being the first sound play script commissioned, produced and transmitted by the BBC on 15th November 1922, but neither the script nor the play have survived in print or production. This fact had been hiding in plain sight since 1924 being clearly published as fact in Arthur Burrows' book *A Story Of Broadcasting* (Burrows 1924:71) He mentions Mrs Twigg also originated a series of stories *Tales of a Fairy Dustman*. These were broadcast in 1923 but are intriguingly attributed to 'John Hope Fellows.' It may be possible that Mrs Twigg was observing a Victorian George Eliot style convention of taking on a man's name for published authorship; a ritual also adopted by one of the most prolific original women dramatists for BBC radio in the 1920s, Kathleen Baker, who wrote and published under the nom-de-plume John Overton.

As we know, the BBC decided that radio drama's 90th anniversary should fall on 16th February 2013 to commemorate the transmission from Marconi House of scenes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*. Burrows clearly credits Cathleen Nesbitt for the 1923 BBC Shakespeare season: 'In this Miss Kathleen (sic) Nesbitt collaborated with Captain Lewis and took a prominent part.' (ibid 81) Burrows identifies the next landmark development as the production by Milton Rosmer on 29th November 1923 of Gertrude Jennings' one act 'farce, *Five Birds in a Cage*, which is built on the situation following a breakdown in a tube lift.' (ibid) The stage script of Jennings' play and a detailed review by Archibald Haddon of its radio drama presentation have survived and we can give this as much critical attention and evaluation as Richard Hughes's *Danger*, which Burrows describes as successful '*Grand Guignol*, depicting the plight of two lovers who find themselves in a mine disaster. I think all who heard this first attempt at building up a

really dramatic situation entirely by sound effects will admit that it was very thrilling, and opened up a wide range of possibilities.' (ibid 81) This success in developing sound drama directed to the imagination and the vicarious fears of listeners being trapped or enveloped by darkness and claustrophobia is a fully understandable epiphany on the potential of microphone drama.

David Pownall's laser test- ***An Epiphanous Use of the Microphone***

By the time David Pownall had his collection of six plays published by Oberon in 1998, he had written forty five plays for the BBC over 27 years. He explained that 'Radio provides a laser test. If a piece succeeds in sound only it has the inner strength to survive the clumsier, cruder forms' (Pownall 1998:12). He explained that a play 'is essentially one thing standing in its own time, controlled by a defining action or movement of character. Its edges are its truth' (ibid 12). The radio play has to succeed in the totality of successful fictional writing as well as the frame and matrix of its intrinsic strengths as a sound only medium. Pownall recognized that radio drama is 'the closest art to story-telling we have so its roots are very ancient' (ibid 10).

Why is *The Epiphanous Use of the Microphone* so successful? To begin with Pownall creates art out of the functional commission to fashion entertainment in the commemoration of Corporation history. The adjective 'Epiphanous' implies playing with the microphone in the dramatic arts for the first time is going to reveal some important truths. There is going to be an almost spiritual awakening and birth of a new art form. The characters will be changed by the experience. The struggle and challenge as it were is to produce the first full length radio play, Shakespeare's Twelfth Night in May 1923. It is going to be two hours long and this has never been done before. Everyone is a novice

in the radio medium. Cathleen Nesbitt and fellow actors have more professional experience of adapting and performing Shakespeare, but will they understand how to dramatize and perform for sound only? So much is at stake. For the BBC's Managing Director, John Reith, who in real life fully understood radio drama's special characteristics, he did not have the right to fail. The pressure on his very young producer Cecil Lewis is as great if not greater.

Pownall showed in unfolding scenes how Reith was under the cosh of political surveillance and censorship by the Conservative government's minister for broadcasting, the Postmaster-General, who just happened to be Neville Chamberlain. When Chamberlain warns Reith that the government will be listening very carefully to everything they are doing with an emphasis on the word 'very', Pownall dramatizes how the two men are squaring up to each other. Reith is compliant but at the same time stating that the BBC is hoping everyone and not just government ministers will be listening to their new service.

Chamberlain makes it very clear that Whitehall is anxious something so powerful is not infiltrated and subverted by people with the wrong kind of politics. The skill in Pownall's writing here is to use entertaining dialogue to reference the actual fact that the Security Service MI5 would eventually closely work with the BBC to vet new appointments and exclude people, mainly communists, judged to be politically suspect (Pownall 1998:24).

Pownall writes a parallel challenge for William Shakespeare and his company trying to put together the first public performance of *Twelfth Night* in the Middle Temple Dining Room in 1602. He has equally anxious censorship worries. His jealous rival Francis

Bacon is spreading rumours that the play mocks Queen Elizabeth the First's personal tragedy in having to execute her young lover Essex. She is being urged to see the performance to find out for herself. There are touches of what will later be explained as ironic transposition and resonance. In 1602 Shakespeare answers to the Queen's state censor of theatre the Lord Chamberlain. In 1923 Reith answers to a government minister in control of broadcasting called Chamberlain. The punning in names continues with the parallel of the 1923 BBC producer Cecil Lewis chiming with Queen Elizabeth's Chief Advisor being one Lord Cecil.

Pownall's play is a play with two inner plays, time present, time past 1923 and time past 1602. The struggles are paralleled. Reith's BBC needs to make Shakespeare succeed over two hours in virtual darkness. There is the sound they are creating in Savoy Hill's first and heavily draped studio directed to the ear, the mind and the consciousness of the listener. In the switchback to 1602, when the Queen complains of being too hot and Middle Temple's windows are thrown open, a gust of wind rushes in to blow out all the candles and *Twelfth Night* 1602 is also performed in darkness. The wind metaphor is extended with wit to 1923 with Reith insisting that the BBC production begins with a storm.

Pownall's characterization of Reith is clever and multidimensional. He does not reduce him to the reputation of a single minded arrogant tyrant and dictator of broadcasting. He gives Reith flourishing and evangelistic language to describe how he sees on air drama. This is in accordance with the content of Reith's book *Broadcast Over Britain* published in 1924. Reith did in fact have a poetic understanding of the power of radio and his writing about it was lyrical. So when Pownall has Reith enthusiastically exhorting

Cathleen Nesbitt to begin the play with sound as a brushstroke, he builds his speech with multisyllabic words and at the very high point that he has Nesbitt charmed directs the play has to be cut by an hour. Nesbitt's replies to him are amusingly juxtaposed between the 'I do' of catching his drift on using sound artistically, and then consternation at the idea of an hour's amputation of the play's length being both a question and an exclamation (ibid 41).

Pownall's Sir John Reith performs the wind himself; almost as a bridging time warp of energy to release the power of the BBC's *Twelfth Night* upon the consciousness of the nation. Though Pownall characterizes the Platonic and dictatorial Reith with the schoolboy charm of a player in the classroom of radio drama learning. There is all the tension of live cuing in broadcasting, with the studio manager positioning Reith properly in front of the microphone and even a joke from the Managing Director himself when he asks rhetorically how a storm can tread softy when he is asked to do so after finishing his brief performance. And after the count-down to the beginning of *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, Reith makes wind, a quite brilliant expression of character through vocalising non-verbal sound; much more than any equivalent half hour or one hour formal speech (ibid 58).

Pownall's play is a magnificent example of how the multiplicity of conflicts between characters and the effects of the various crises and disequilibriums develop, reveal and change the characters. The listener also joins the characters in their respective worlds of 1602 and 1923 to share what they are discovering by their experiences of producing *Twelfth Night* in the face of truly existential threats of censorship.

Cathleen Nesbitt is struggling to cope with Reith's diktat on slashing the sacred text. Understandably she is highly resistant coming up with the solution of reading it faster to which Reith has an opportunity to explain the lessons they have been learning in producing radio; namely listeners are easily distracted, and class, education and devotion to Shakespeare is not going to keep them listening. Nesbitt is given the magnificent quip that the play should be retitled Sixth Night (ibid 41).

Cathleen Nesbitt has to negotiate Reith's domineering and seemingly impossible demands and all the insecurities and anxieties of grumbling and disgruntled actors struggling to make sense of performing in a silent and sound-absorbing ambience to an imaginary audience. Pownall dramatizes how the tensions ignite to the point of near rebellion. In a scene between Reith and actor Olivia Rose he has Reith getting his own way when confronted by recalcitrance. The actress concedes the Managing Director is both microphone and universe (ibid 39).

Pownall parallels the respective productions' fortunes in overcoming the problem of Act Three, Scene Four; specifically how can Malvolio make his important entrance in yellow hose and cross-garters if the audience is blind (ibid 55). For Reith, Nesbitt and Lewis it is something that needs to be anticipated, translated and transposed into the sound medium. There are only seconds before the red lights go on and 2LO's *Twelfth Night* is to fill the London ether.

Reith pontificates to the actor playing Malvolio that all the arts are afflicted by curses; namely music is too vague, painting lacks depth, statues have no body temperature and the radio drama they are doing has an issue with yellow hose and cross-garters (ibid 58). Malvolio informs the Major (Reith's army rank in the Great War) that he will have to

grin and bear it. He is not wearing a costume and just holding a script. But then ‘he gets it’ to use modern parlance when Reith has encouraged him to think about the actor’s inner eye conveying the spirit and subtext of the scene (ibid). It doesn’t matter he is not wearing cross-garters.

This is great writing. Behold the subtlety engaged here. And the genius in building up the anticipation of how they would actually present and perform this scene in the 1923 *Twelfth Night* production. Reith’s wife Muriel is dramatized listening to the outcome in the radio drama version of a scene so tethered originally to visual cues, costume, business and meaning (ibid 59).

Pownall switches back to 1602 where William Shakespeare’s production problems have been no less troublesome. The sly machinations of Bacon, the complexity of Queen Elizabeth’s grieving over Essex meeting the play’s depiction of a play within the play about love’s suffering, and the ego of his star actor Burbage having to be contained.

Pownall skillfully characterizes both Shakespeare and Burbage by showing how he assuages artistic sensitivity and hubris with the necessary authority of a director. Burbage might want to be able to improvise for another five minutes by shortsightedly pretending to find a letter his character reads, have this reading doubled, and upgraded to a soliloquy, and have the interjecting lines of characters interrupting his reading cancelled, but Shakespeare insists he determines the stride of his actors, including the great and brilliant Burbage (ibid 30).

For William Shakespeare the yellow hose and cross-garters problem is an unplanned emergency where improvisation needs to be the master of the apparent chaos of what has become a visual stage play now performing in the sound medium only in some kind of

early 17th century black box theatre in the dark when all the candles have been snuffed out after the Queen insisted the windows be opened. Shakespeare hears his actors cut three lines and delights in appreciating the laughter and applause when Burbage says: 'Sad, lady! I could be sad: this does make some obstruction in the blood, this cross-gartering …' (ibid 59).

Pownall adds further powerful punches of ironical resonance. Burbage thought the audience, including the Queen, would have all walked out, but is amazed that they stayed, liked it and could not see a thing (ibid 60). The most skilful twist of irony is when Burbage reveals that during the interval he heard two courtiers gossiping that the 70 year old Queen would make the half her age young Essex put on yellow hose and cross-garters and dance about for her. The intensity of the irony in all the jeopardies and risks confronting Shakespeare continues during his private audience with her after the performance.

When the Queen asks how he knew about the yellow hose and cross-garters, he perhaps feigns that he cannot remember. Whether that is true or not, it is the right answer in an exchange and experience that could have cost him his life. The Queen indicates that if she had actually seen the scene as dramatized and representing something so intimate, her reaction would have been painful and much different to the laughter that ensued. She also observes Burbage lacks the good looks of her Robert, though he does share his vanity (ibid 61).

BBC advice and guidance past and present

Throughout its history the BBC has been doing its best to encourage new writing for radio as well as providing guidance on how to do it well and suitably for the sound

medium. I would argue that this has been a narrative of continuous progress where the amount of logistical/clerical and instrumental information has gradually been replaced with more detailed and specific advice on the art and aesthetics of audio drama writing. Certainly by 1929 when the BBC Drama Department had read more than six thousand plays, there was a clear idea on what to emphasize and encourage. For example, the 1929 BBC Yearbook devoted three pages to an article 'Writing Plays for Broadcasting.' The tone was direct and realistic: 'The way of the broadcast playwright is hard, for the microphone is a merciless instrument. Every unnatural phrase or sentence uttered by a wireless play is magnified into something approaching burlesque. The microphone demands an even more natural style than stage dialogue usually possesses' (BBC 1929:187). There was an open invitation 'for original minds to add other lines to the bold strokes already drawn on the canvas which will at last show the form of the new "drama of the ether"' (ibid 187). All rather quaint and romantic. However, few contemporary writers for sound drama would disagree with this observation on the psychological relationship between writer and listener:

> It is a mistake to think that, as the wireless is a medium chiefly relying on words, words themselves are the material which authors of this new art must depend on for their effect. The words are only the means to an end. The mental reactions caused by the dialogue are far more important than the dialogue itself.
>
> An even greater knowledge of human psychology than that possessed by the stage playwright is necessary to the author who will write a brilliant broadcast play. At present, the only criterion of success is the listener's reaction…
>
> (ibid 189)

The BBC offered the following hints with key points italicized for emphasis:

1. *Don't confuse the listener* by too many characters not differentiated, or not essential to your plot.
2. *Don't tire the listener* by unnecessary detail or long, pointless speeches.
3. Don't submit a play because you *like it*, but because you think, after careful consideration of your wide audience, that it will please and stimulate thousands.
4. *Don't meander*; let the plot be direct and clear to the average thinking man or woman.
5. *Don't introduce characters without due warning of their coming*, and don't make them talk for five minutes before we know who they are.
6. *Don't give any "business"* to characters which is not indicated by dialogue.
7. *Don't use offensive plots*. The B.B.C. knows it cannot please everybody at once, but it does *try* to offend nobody at any time.
8. *Don't be hampered* by the stage limitations of presentation and change.
9. Finally, *listen to broadcast plays*, and hear what methods are used by writers and what the producers are able to do by use of devices for "fading" one scene into another, superimposition of voices and sounds, noise effects, etc.

(ibid 190)

The BBC thought these homilies would 'prove informative' (ibid). By the 1980s what had changed? There was certainly more inspiration and an almost spiritual and evangelistic proverbial attitude with quotations from the former BBC Radio Drama Department Editor Martin Esslin 'The almost telepathic transference of images from

mind to mind is the beauty and the glory of the radio play' (BBC 1989:1) and writer Sue Townsend 'Radio gives you terrific scope. You can be anywhere, in any century, in any place' (ibid 2) though the quotation from producer Donald McWhinnie might be considered rather enigmatic 'The writer's business is to make excessive demands of his interpreters' (ibid). Certainly the BBC was pointing out that good radio is very difficult to write:

1. The audience has to be attracted and its attention held by means of sound alone, without the assistance of visual stimuli on which other media can rely.
2. Deprived of light, colour, movement, and all the devices which will support a play for the screen or theatre, the radio writer must conceive a rich variety of sound in order to stimulate the listener's imagination.
3. Much of this must, of course, depend on the quality of the dialogue itself. If what is said is interesting and exciting, it will carry a play a long way.
4. In addition, the writer needs to think of the other aural elements of sounds, music and, most important, silence. Pauses help the listeners to assimilate what they have heard and prepare for what happens next.
5. Speech will normally be the dominant element. Radio dialogue must often be more explicit than that written for the visual medium, but not actually sound explicit or it won't seem natural. It follows that the art of dialogue on radio is, at its best, extremely sophisticated.
6. A variety of sound is essential for holding the listener's attention and engaging their imagination. This variety can be achieved by altering the lengths of

sequences, number of people speaking, space of dialogue, volume of sound, background acoustics and location of action.

7. Don't send scripts written for any other medium.
8. As radio plays have to conform to a precise length, there is no way of measuring this by the number of words or pages. Reading aloud against the clock, making allowance for effects, music and pauses, is the only reliable method.
9. Obviously, the best way to become familiar with the possibilities of the medium is to listen to radio plays as often as possible and decide what works well and what doesn't.

(BBC 1989:1-8)

When the BBC World Service last ran a radio playwriting competition in 2020 it had boiled down ten recommendations which are fleshed out and further explained behind the online links in bibliography:

1. Grab the audience from the start
2. Write about something that is personal to you
3. Vary the pace and length of your scenes
4. Make sure the structure keeps them listening
5. Get under the skin of your characters
6. Express your characters between dialogue and interaction
7. Use the four building blocks - speech, sound effects, music and silence
8. Express the visual elements in a subtle way
9. Concentrate on your presentation

10. Enjoy writing your play

(BBC World Service Online 2020)

The BBC World Service covers the ground on essential aspects of radio play writing; particularly on the importance of the beginning by drawing in or even accelerating the listener's attention, and varying the pace and length of scenes. It also cites key aspects of fiction writing in respect of characterization: 'get under the skin' and characterization through dialogue and interaction. Principle seven is clearly based on a regular maxim of former BBC World Service drama editor Gordon House and was very well expressed in an interview recorded for the Spotlight programme in November 1996:

> Think of good characters, get them speaking in the way that we speak in a naturalistic way. Real characters talking in a way that is recognisable in your own culture. Conflict and story told through building blocks of radio drama- words, music, sound effects and silence. Then you can write a radio play.
>
> (BBC World Service 1996).

Radio Drama guidance at the time of writing is contextualized by a multimedia approach to scriptwriting and with a much more clearly framed educational and workshopping framework provided by the BBC Writers Room website. The BBC appears to approach the task by identifying eight essentials generic to any form of scriptwriting and the thinking behind this is presumably to know how to write dramatic stories well first and then explore the intrinsic characteristics and needs of audio drama. The eight essentials are: 1.Developing your idea; 2. Know what you want to write; 3.Beginnings

(and Endings); 4.The muddle in the middle; 5. Characters bring your words to life; 6. Scenes; 7. Dialogue; and 8. Writing is rewriting (BBC Writers' Room 2020). The explanations and more detailed guidance is accessible via the links in bibliography. All the points focus on the dramatic purpose of what can be seen as the engineering or building blocks of the scriptwriting process. There can be no muddle in the middle without scenes and the scene by scene structure can be determined by answering four questions: 1. What effect does this scene have on the character within the moment? 2. What effect does it have on the subsequent events of the story? 3. What impact does it have on the world of the story? 4. What else is going on below the surface and beyond the text? (ibid) Writer and dramaturg Paul Ashton produced ten online blogs to cover his recommended perfect framework for successful scriptwriting: 1. Medium, Form and Format; 2. Get your story going! 3. Coherence; 4. Character is Everything; 5. Emotion; 6. Surprise! 7. Structure; 8. Exposition and Expression; 9. Passion; 10. Be Yourself (Ashton BBC 2008-9). In many respects the short titles are self-explanatory, though it is certainly recommended to read the detail behind each one. The importance of surprising the listener as a way of maintaining the storytelling drive and imperatives within a play is well worth elevating as a key hope and expectation on the part of any audience to drama. The unexpected not only charges the listener with interest but also demands a reaction and response from the play's characters. How and why do they respond and critically how they are changed by what has happened.

This is very much a checklist way of disciplining the writing process. It is fashionable and widespread in contemporary creative writing teaching. John York's top ten questions to unlock and refine stores are highlighted by the BBC Writers' Room: 1.Whose story is

it? 2.What does the character need? (what is their flaw? what do they need to learn?) 3.What is the inciting incident? 4. What does the character want? 5.What obstacles are in the character's way? 6.What's at stake? 7.Why should we care? 8.What do they learn? 9. How and why? 10. How does it end? (York BBC 2022) This might be viewed as boiler-room style learning, but the question set offers an effective template to judging dramatic purpose in any form of fictional writing.

The Writing Radio Drama section of the BBC Writers' Room resources in 2022 takes on a much more philosophical and poetic tone than the BBC's previous generations of 'bish bash' and 'do this' and 'don't do that' bullet-point prescriptions on writing for sound. My effort here to summarize the page in list form is somewhat unraveled by the elegant precision of inspiration and instruction in the original content:

1. **Pictures.** They are better on the radio. There's nothing you can't do, nowhere you can't go … The true 'budget' is that spent between you and the listener - the cost of two imaginations combined.
2. **Sounds.** Radio is not about sound - it's about significant, meaningful sound… The intimacy of a speaker with the listener can be immensely powerful… Use background sound to create an atmosphere that will help the listener's imagination create an entire world. Choose a setting with a distinct aural environment and use those sounds to underscore the story. Use sound to cut between places and times.
3. **Listeners.** Radio has the fastest turn-off rate of all drama so make the audience want to stay. Try to hit the ground running… Everything must earn its keep… emotionally tie the audience down. Simple often works best.

4. **Emotions.** No drama works without emotionally engaging characters. The audience must want to spend time with them and want to know what will happen to them.. Each must be there for a reason… remember, a character who never speaks/appears can still be a strong absent-presence in radio.
5. **Endings**. Know your ending and leave us satisfied… Finish with a strong resolution (one way or another) to the issues raised. Don't be afraid to move at pace, like TV or film, if the story or genre demands it.
6. **Drama not prose on the radio.** Don't over-explain – keep it lean and dramatic… Boil it down to the minimum, the essential. The silence, the pause, the space between the words is important… Think too about inarticulacy… Every character needs their own 'grammar'.
7. **Sensitivities.** Language is more naked and potent on the radio, so less is definitely more. Audiences can be as sensitive to religious oaths as to bad language. Gratuitousness of any kind won't work – though something contentious put in meaningful context might.
8. **Liberating medium.** Radio drama is liberating, not restrictive - it can mean more variety, more locations, more action, more imagination, and more originality… use it to its full potential.

(BBC Radio Drama 2022)

Special Characteristics and early 'Secrets of the Radio Drama: Reith and Shaw

I have outlined how radio drama began to be systematically written and produced in Britain at the BBC during the 1920s when it was a private company controlled by radio

manufacturers and operating in a broadcasting monopoly; in other words having no competition. It was clear its first managing director John C. W. Reith was an enthusiast. This is evident from chapter 5, part three of his book *Broadcast Over Britain* which was published in 1924. Reith described 'radio drama' as 'a separate art in itself.' (Reith 1924:165) He said very few theatrical plays were suitable for the new medium because 'so much depends on the eye, the acting positions,' (ibid) although musical theatre such as opera was an exception.

Reith recognized, as did others, that radio drama requires its own techniques in writing and acting and to the term 'radio drama', he added 'radio-dramatist' and 'radio-actor.' (ibid 166) As he was responsible for hiring his programme makers and he listened to the output of his London station, 2LO, and many of the other local and regional BBC stations around the country when he went touring to visit the staff and station managers, Reith came to a quick understanding of what worked in terms of the radio play:

> The appeal is to the ear first, and thence to the other senses as well. In order to avoid unnecessary explanations, the dialogue must portray the setting. Brief references must be made by the characters to the scene, and the entrances and exits similarly revealed. Other aids to the imagination, such as music, incidental sounds contingent to the situation, pauses and various dramatic devices are introduced wherever possible. Most plays written for the stage require specific adaptation for wireless presentation. With radio plays there must be a sharp contrast between all the voices of the players, and the characters should be as few in number as possible.'
>
> (ibid)

Reith argued that if illusion and imagination were restricted to simulation by sound and hearing only, plays rooted in realism meant that the listener's concentration was less tested since 'we perceive the scenes as vividly as in a theatre, and can, in spirit, participate in that which is being portrayed. The background of sound is of immense effect.' He realized that the familiarity of the contemporary world meant that realist drama could transport the listener into true regions where the effect is 'tenfold. In this respect there is a distinct advantage over the theatre.' (ibid 167)

Reith realized that the distractions to the listener and the challenge in concentration had to be respected in the writing and making of the radio play. Unlike in theatre, the lights are not lowered, other people present are not ritually intent and silent and there is not a direct money contract of paying for your ticket. He thought the radio play simply has no chance with other people moving about the room, or the telephone ringing. Reith thought a radio play would have more success in being contained in less than forty-five minutes. He thought it unlikely listeners could stay mentally tuned into an entire Shakespeare play. (ibid 168)

Reith fostered a creative hothouse of experimentation, innovation and pioneering discoveries of the radio drama form during the 1920s. They ranged from a fellow Aberdonian, R.E. Jeffrey, whom he recruited from the BBC station there to head drama productions, to young men who had survived the Great War of 1914-18 as flyers in the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service such as Cecil Lewis and Lance Sieveking who wrote, adapted and directed in the new studios situated in Savoy House by the River Thames embankment. A continuing debate about the new art form endured in the pages of the BBC's listings magazine *The Radio Times*, which was first published at

the end of 1923, and in 1926 the first book on writing radio drama was published. It was written by Gordon Lea, with a foreword by Jeffrey as the BBC's productions director:

> It is my hope that Radio Drama in its *real* form- not a bastard cultivation from the stage- will become a source of inspiration to its heterogeneous broadcast audience. A little has been done; much remains to do. Public-spirited playwrights especially are required; the broadcast has no nightly box-office. A new form of drama cannot be developed without a new form of play as its vehicle.
>
> In this book we have something which will help to realize the high aim which the B.B.C. has set before it in this most difficult branch of radio art.'
>
> (Lea 1926:12)

A popular writer of thrillers and respected radio writer of this period, Frank H. Shaw, whose reputation has not endured in either prose literature or drama, set out in a short article what he described as the 'Secrets of the Radio Drama'. He overlapped much of what Reith had reflected on two years before. Radio plays should be short on the basis that in the social environment as opposed to the proscenium arch theatre with dimmed lights and a difficult to negotiate exit, life is not an unbroken stretch. The performance cannot be paused while taking a call, answering the door, or even a call to nature. So 'brevity is the soul of wit.' (Shaw 1926)

Shaw said the radio play should, like any other dimension of drama, contain a 'definite story, a good plot, characters that introduce themselves smartly, an overwhelming climax, and no suggestion of anti-climax.' Climax once reached is the point when the play needs to end 'as if clean-cut with a knife.' (ibid) He argued that the sound play cannot work without a strong and convincing plot, characters delineated clearly, brisk action

throughout, moving remorselessly forward to middle-climax, a slight suggestion of anti-climax can be permitted but only 'as a taking-off place for the final and ultimate climax.' (ibid)

Shaw confirmed the advice and conventions given out and followed by professional audio drama directors the world over. A small cast is the best. The listener dependent on hearing and imagination is 'apt to grow confused by many voices, unless they differ very considerably one from another.' (ibid) He advised on the construction of divergent and contrasting personalities even to the extent of exaggeration. He advised against the declamatory in style. He also realized that 'radio drama must depend for its success on its audible atmosphere, at least as much as on its story and dialogue.' (ibid) In 1926 he was alluding to the technique of modernist realism that would be the vogue form from the middle late twentieth century to the present:

> …it should carry throughout an excellent stamp of restraint. Long orations are out of place; dialogue should be eminently crisp and telling, with- as in the case of the legitimate stage-play- no single unnecessary word. The brain of the listener must not be confused and be clouded by verbal torrents leading nowhere. Dialogues must be "snappy," conveying definite meaning. Furthermore, the situations must arise so naturally that the credulity of the listener is not strained.
>
> (Shaw *Radio Times* 1926)

Shaw wrote with confidence and determination. His faith in the new medium was such that the criticism that a listener can always turn off the loud speaker or remove the ear-phones and wait for something more to his liking, was met with the intriguing riposte:

‘Therein he scores over the stall-holder in the West-end theatre- the management in the theatre does not offer a substitute performance.’ (ibid)

Seeing with the Mind’s Eye, studio production, perceptions of the future, art and excelsior: Archer, Drinkwater, Jeffrey, Smyth, and Thorndike

On August 29th 1924, William Archer, described as ‘the Distinguished Dramatic Critic’ was already fulminating about ‘The Future of Wireless Drama.’ He listened to a live performance of BBC 2LO’s production of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s ‘The School for Scandal’ from its first headquarters Marconi House- the location of the earliest and most rudimentary of studios soundproofed by multiple drapes of curtains and picked up by what were nicknamed as ‘meat-safe’ microphones mounted in boxes on wooden chair-legs. He roamed around the production areas, sitting with the performers during two of the acts, sampling the output on headphones and then through an early valve powered loudspeaker.

Archer immediately appreciated the concentration on the word through speech. He could hear everything and see no one. Archer expressed his frustration that contemporary theatre was blighted by the loveliest actress and ugliest, most magnetic actor ceasing to please when he had been left straining his ears to catch whispered remarks and feeling envious of those members of the audience close to the stage who could be seen laughing heartily to lines he had missed.

Archer realized that wireless drama was fostering an enhancement of the art of using the voice to express character and perform the plotting of stories. The need to cast voice

to character and not face or physique was apparent. He immediately realized the problem of same voice casting so that he felt: 'the Sir Peter and the Joseph Surface (both very good) had voices of such similar timbre that in their long duologue before the Screen Scene it was sometimes not easy to tell which was speaking.' (Archer 1924)

He observed the need to carefully rehearse wireless drama scripts with the skilled producer/director in the room to judge with critically listening ears. In particular the volume of a performers' voice needed to be modified in order to achieve expression. He quite rightly predicted that radio drama acting would become a highly developed vocal art with suitability of appearance, age usually being disregarded: 'Old actors and actresses may renew the triumphs of their youth and a large class of people who have no "stage appearance," or who are even debarred from the stage by some deformity' had a future in the new medium. (ibid)

On the subject of writing, Archer concluded that traditional stage classics such as *The School for Scandal* were imperfect with the script so reliant on physical movement, facial expression and theatrical business. What was missing from listening could be supplied by the repository of his own familiarity with the memory of stage performance. A listener who did not know the play would make very little of it. In conclusion, the new wireless drama had to depend upon its writing to exploit the emotional interplay of vocally contrasted characters. And in the context of comedy he suggested the presence of a reaction of a live audience to it would prevent a sense of flatness being experienced by isolated small groups of wireless audience scattered all over the country.

The Radio Times had earlier in 1924 (29 February) given a director/producer's perspective of radio drama's strengths and weaknesses. Victor Smythe convened a

regional repertory of radio drama production in Manchester which was part of a pattern of local station early BBC development in the 1920s. He saw the need to achieve voice balance and atmosphere in what was clearly a studio based art. Smythe advanced the concept of 'seeing through the sense of hearing' (Smythe 1924) a longstanding debate in the perception of listening that is with us today. But the director/producer had realized the nature of radio drama's blind medium status by accompanying a blind man to the theatre during a play which heavily depended on action, and he was intrigued to learn that the gentleman's blindness was not the handicap he thought it was; 'little had been lost' in his friend's appreciation of the action. (ibid) Smythe extended his research by enquiring of a doctor friend about the status of hearing as a sense in the psychological matrix of perception and he was assured that hearing as a sense can be intensified by the focus on listening to broadcast performances. Smythe's curiosity would be followed up by broad, systematic, empirical and academic research on the part of Professor T. H. Pear of Manchester University in the late 1920s culminating in the publication of *Voice And Personality* by Chapman and Hall in 1931.

Smythe outlined observations that began to acquire a consensus throughout the 1920s: radio plays needed a coherent story; strong dialogue based on the word in action was important; avoid farce because of its reliance on action; consider voice balance when casting particularly in relation to volume; music is a useful device in filling up the gaps of a plot overlooked by dialogue and as imaginative suggestion; establish an atmosphere for the world of the play through direction in the studio and if necessary set the studio with props.

Smythe realized that actors in radio are supported by a physical realism within the sound studio that can support the psychology of their performance as much as the quality of spot effects: 'If a telephone is a "property" in the play, use it. If a meal is supposed to take place, a few cups, saucers and plates, knives and forks used judiciously are sufficient for the microphone to pick up a very effective impression of the scene.' (ibid)

In September 1924, the dramatist John Drinkwater discussed his reflections on radio as an art form in a front cover article for *The Radio Times*. He saw how radio widened the sound horizon from the gramophone to an 'infinitely larger and more varied scale,' (Drinkwater 1924) and saw it having altogether greater promise than cinema, although it needs to be appreciated his article was a few years away from cinema's fusion with sound. Drinkwater realized that communicating through the ear 'is the most delicate and subtle of all approaches to man's comprehension' (ibid). Drinkwater was certainly Reithian in his wish for wireless to embrace the broadcasting of poetry and music and avoid 'pandering to the lowest common denominator of mob intelligence' (ibid). The commercial necessity that 'makes a large section of our Press and much of our public entertainment a daily disgrace and revolting to the common decencies of life' (ibid) clearly marked Drinkwater out as a writer who did not think radio drama should serve a popular fare.

Drinkwater's rather superior elitism let rip on the idea that hearing 'banal ballads', 'drivelling patter', and 'imbecile melodies' is not proper listening. (ibid) He invited George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy (two of the greatest living playwrights of the time) to turn their gifts to radio.

Dame Sybil Thorndike discussed ‘Where Radio Drama Excels’ on the front cover of *The Radio Times* in July 1925 and after having performed *Medea of Euripides* from the BBC’s new studios at Savoy Hill. She realized that the task needed an artistic interplay of imagination and personality. Radio was about ‘kindling that imagination by word-pictures and poetry that are as fresh and as thought-compelling as they were’ (Thorndike 1925) in Shakespeare’s distant day. Radio drama did not deny imagination but revivified and inspired it. Thorndike believed that the kinds of plays best suited to sound broadcasting were those with mystic or divine characters: Mysticism is a quality in the drama that is in every case better conveyed to the mind by the ear than by the eye; it should be felt, rather than interpreted, by the medium of sight.’ (ibid) Thorndike defines what became the time-honoured memory of sound drama that the colours were always better on the radio: ‘Each member of a wireless audience is required […] to bring his own individual imagination into play, devising his own settings and conjuring up images of the situation based on his own emotional experience’ (ibid).

The BBC’s first Director of Productions, R.E. Jeffrey wrote a number of articles for *The Radio Times* discussing what he wanted to achieve in terms of ‘The Need for a Radio Drama.’ On July 17th 1925 he started to define the playwriting technique needed to overcome the many obstacles and turn to advantage the medium’s limitations. Jeffrey decided that an early solution was educating the listener to turn the lights out and listen to radio plays in darkness so that the play of scenery in their own imaginations was given its full potential. He was worried about the psychological and mental antagonism of the world around the listener: ‘we have to endeavour to present situations and emotions that will penetrate deeply into the human consciousness’ (Jeffrey 1925).

Jeffrey believed thrilling melodramatic situations were more effective than subtle ones- an idea that has certainly not been decided in radio drama's history. He talked about the need for writing to stimulate the power of imagination of listeners. He thought that publication of 'radio players in modern dress, sitting with manuscripts in their hands and postured in nonchalant fashion around the microphone' (ibid) combined with 'the extraordinary objects in the background for producing noises incidental to the play' 'baulked', stifled. and distorted the imagination (ibid). In production Jeffrey introduced the projection of radio drama scripts onto screens so that the actor had greater physical freedom to perform without any constriction of the throat- a methodology that neither endured nor lasted.

Like Drinkwater before him, he was preoccupied with lowering standards of public taste and decency 'they will not follow the trend of the present stage play, with its predominating sex, or, rather, sexual, interest' (ibid). He reminded his readers: 'It must be remembered that radio plays are presented at the family fireside. Their ethics must be unquestionable' (ibid). By the time of his article he was struggling to make clear that radio drama writing was not going to be lucrative, but he was able to report that leading writers of the time such as Richard Hughes, Reginald Berkeley and Edgar Wallace had 'written for broadcasting, have amused or thrilled hundreds of thousands of listeners' (ibid).

We need to move on to November 5th 1926 and September 28th 1928 to find any clear framework of advice from R.E. Jeffrey for aspiring radio dramas playwrights. By then the BBC had mounted national writing competitions and he felt he had a clear idea of technique for the sound dramatist. In 'Seeing With the Mind's Eye' Jeffrey had decided

that ‘it has now been established beyond all doubt that every listener who really and truly listens is able to see with his mind’s eye every movement and scene of a broadcast play.’ (Jeffrey 1926) He argued that after four years of ‘careful experiment and study’ (ibid) he was able to confidently assert ‘we know now that mere dialogue, if unattended by considerable action becomes tiresome to even the most attentive listener’ (ibid). Scripts needed to be filleted with lines ‘inessential to the action of character or plot’ (ibid) cut ruthlessly. Writers and producers of radio plays were ‘now thinking in forms, not words. We know now that words when heard are instantaneously translated into forms by the subconscious, and it is thus that we see them’ (ibid). Jeffrey for all his prejudices and mistakes, for which he is somewhat castigated by radio historians, had settled upon the essential knowledge that sound drama was a thinking and emotional dramatic medium. It was truly cinema of the mind particularly when he was talking about presenting to ‘the mind of the listener a continuous and ever-changing series of pictures’ (ibid). As Jeffrey emphasized ‘true drama is emotion, and emotion stimulates its own picture, not through the eye, but through the sub-conscious- the mind’s eye’ (ibid).

Jeffrey advised that ‘Good radio plays must possess the quality of reality. They must bear some relation to life as we each and all understand it’ (ibid), and this certainly did not rule out the appeal of the fantastic or the strange. Jeffrey was an eloquent and poetic theorist when he spoke about striking ‘chords which we, too, in our imaginative moments have vibrated’ (ibid). Jeffrey sought the attuning of minds to the listening experience and he was certainly idealistic in his ambition: ‘It gives to those who listen mind pictures painted by sound and imagination only, pictures which will live longer in the memory than those seen by the eyes and painted by the brush of the artist’ (ibid).

Companion Website Resources

David Pownall and Radio Plays

https://kulturapress.com/2022/08/09/david-pownall-radio-drama-laureate/

BBC Audio Drama teaching and learning

https://kulturapress.com/2022/08/10/bbc-audio-drama-teaching-and-learning/

Additions and updates for Chapter 1 Radio Drama is Born and In Its Cradle

https://kulturapress.com/2022/08/12/updates-for-chapter-1-radio-drama-is-born-and-in-its-cradle/