

## INEBRIATE OF AIR: A SHORT HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN RADIO DRAMA,

By Sarah Montague.

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"But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction--what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" Thus begins Virginia Woolf in her famous long essay, *A Room of One's Own*, which was adapted from a speech she gave at Girton College, Cambridge, my alma mater. She goes on to explain that she cannot write about women and fiction without offering "an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." In other words, she could not address the ostensibly simple topic of the lecture without first addressing the vital issues of women's need for privacy, autonomy, and economic independence.

But, you may say, we asked you to speak about audio drama on public radio--what has that got to do with Virginia Woolf? And my answer is that my search for a coherent history of contemporary audio drama brought me to the same conclusion, that I could find no coherent picture, but discovered instead a fragmented landscape filled with figures harried by lack of autonomy, lack of money, lack of recognition, illumined briefly by this or that project, this or that media feature, this or that major grant, before subsiding again into the shadowy mass of an invisible culture. But if these are shadows, they are shadows with the substance of fire, and by the light they shed we can try to make our way through an uncharted landscape.

To talk about broadcasting at all is to dwell in the realm of paradox: the 'free' territory of the airwaves is the stepchild of war, industry and legislation, and as a result radio is a medium that almost from its inception was at once visionary and constrained, as anyone who has read Tom Lewis's *Empire of the Air* or encountered the companion radio and television documentaries will know.

While the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and resulted in the creation of its most visible faces, PBS (the Public Broadcasting Service) and NPR (National Public Radio), community radio stations had been growing sporadically around the country since the formation of the Pacifica Foundation—and its flagship station KPFA--in 1946. Existing municipal and university-based stations also morphed into the unwieldy amalgam that makes up the country of public radio--a Shangri-La of good intentions often decayed into a ghetto of strangled forms.

It is from the community base that some of the earliest post-television era radio drama projects were launched, often by people with a background in, and exposure to, European radio theatre. This tradition, trace elements of which can be seen in the varying textures of American work, included not only relatively straightforward narrative drama from

what is now BBC Radio 3, but German Horspiel, a more experimental form that confronted the way language and its inherent moral modalities had been shattered by the war.

As David Ossman, to whom I am indebted for sharing his recollections, pointed out, radio drama is young enough for many of its seminal contemporary practitioners to be still in the field. These include David himself, who has worked in a variety of spoken word forms at KPFK, NPR and WGBH, and, of course, indelibly, with Firesign; Erik Bauersfeld, whose programs with KPFK and other venues have included adaptations of classical literature, English translations of German radio plays such as Jurgen Becker's *Houses*, in which the implacable din of a construction site becomes a parable of post-war German reconstruction, and a celebrated collaboration with director Jose Quintero on the plays of Eugene O'Neill.

Everett Frost, later to mount several major series, including one featuring the works of Samuel Beckett (many, like *Not I*, originally written for the radio) also did his early work in California, at KPFA before coming to New York.

One of the most significant contributions to the history of radio drama was the long-running series *Earplay*. Theatrical memory is filled with colliding and contradictory attributions (an astonishing number of people claim to have met Diaghilev, or founded the Group Theatre) and radio history, such as it is, is no different, so there are varying accounts of this groundbreaking umbrella series. It was originally based at WHA in Madison, Wisconsin, and sources generally agree that it was created in 1971 by Karl Schmidt. Others involved in the project included Tom Voegli, Howard Gelman, and John Madden, whose early exposure to the bold realm of radio may have made it all the easier to imagine Shakespeare in love.

The history of radio drama could as easily be presented thematically as chronologically, and *Earplay* exemplified one of the major themes—the attempts of a form orphaned by television to reconnect with the worlds of theatre and entertainment, and to foster the easy discourse between the medium and working writers that has enabled the BBC to dominate the field. *Earplay*, which was distributed by and ultimately identified with National Public Radio (itself established only in 1970) commissioned work by established writers such as Archibald MacLeish and Edward Albee, and featured works by Donald Barthelme, Friedrich Durrenmatt, Tom Stoppard and John Mortimer. It also gave exposure to new writers, among them Arthur Kopit and David Mamet, who declares in a piece in his essay collection *Writing in Restaurants*, "writing for radio, I learned the way all great drama works: by leaving the endowment of characters, place, and especially actors up to the audience."

*Earplay* lasted until 1981, and its contribution has been usefully summed up by Paul Keith Jackson, in an unpublished dissertation at the University of Wisconsin, *Investigation Into Earplay*. Jackson writes, "The first and final tasks of *Earplay* were identical: to locate and to educate a segment of society in the realm of radio-art, and to insert that art form into the cultural configuration of the American consciousness.

However, the seventies appeared to represent a period which fomented populist escapism. Therefore, the subtleties of acoustic art and intimate, provocative earplays were lost on a bewildered citizenry constantly faced with other non-artistic priorities that directed its energies elsewhere."

Parallel to the life of Earplay, Yuri Rasovsky, of whose career I shall speak more fully later, was doing vigorous battle with the same demons at his National Radio Theatre of Chicago, founded in 1972, and series like Hyman Brown's CBS Mystery Theatre and Sears Radio Theater successfully infused the generic formulas of the Golden Age with new energy.

Several national series, though in different ways and from different motives, took up Earplay's mission to use the existing worlds of film and theatre to reanimate radio drama. Marjorie Van Haltern created The Radio Stage in 1986, commissioning original works specifically for this medium where sound and language meet and meld. She later described it as "a safe clearing in which to work, a place to write and realize a work that could not be made for any other 'stage' than one of pure sound..." I took over the series in 1992. Participating writers have included Wendy Wasserstein, Eric Overmeyer, Adrienne Kennedy, and Polly Pen, among some thirty we have produced through collaborations with companies like David Mamet's Atlantic Theatre, The Public Theatre, and the McCarter.

On the West Coast Susan Albert Lowenberg transformed an unsuccessful attempt to create a non-profit stage repertory company with Hollywood actors, LA Classic Theatre Works, into one of the most star-studded and visible radio ensembles in the country. Relying mainly on multi-cast staged readings of existing works from the classic and contemporary repertoire and literature (by authors such as Sinclair Lewis, Noel Coward, Henry James, George Kaufman, and Arthur Miller), Lowenberg has successfully reproduced her original California model in several cities across the country. The series also owes its success in part to the impassioned support of Ruth Seymour and the staff of KCRW in Santa Monica, a station that has also championed the causes of such dark and disillusioned voices as that of monologist Joe Frank.

This is a salient reminder of the architecture of public radio, which requires some alliance between creative producers and station or network managements. NPR, which suffered crippling financial setbacks in the early 1980s and has evolved into an elaborate and—it must be said--sometimes pusillanimous bureaucracy--became much more passive in its relationship to radio drama after the demise of Earplay. But NPR Playhouse, the umbrella under which it acquires and presents drama, has been a vital home to many of us over the years, and has been kept gallantly afloat by its producer, Andy Trudeau. Bouyed by the phenomenal success of Garrison Keillor's A Prairie Home Companion, American Public Radio (now Public Radio International) also became a proactive distributor of performance programming, including Duck's Breath Mystery Theatre and a number of major drama "specials."

Among NPR-distributed productions, Tom Lopez's anarchic, acoustically rich works, among them an adaptation of Stephen King's *The Mist* (directed by Bill Raymond), *Ruby*, a long-running series about an intergalactic gumshoe, and the lush *Dreams of Rio*, have helped to shape contemporary radio. But many more experimental works have found themselves shut out by a system more and more concerned with Arbitron ratings and audience accessibility. In response, a number of independently distributed projects, such as Helen Thorington's and Regine Beyer's *New American Radio*, evolved.

The prolonged fight for access to the national airwaves (it has been estimated that some 3000 hours of material are put up on the satellite for the span of any given 24-hour programming day) and the complex internecine politics of the public radio system, mean that it would be misleading indeed to define contemporary radio drama only in terms of nationally distributed work. All over the country radio theatre projects have grown up around local theatre companies, evolved from writing workshops, or spontaneously generated in the hearts and minds of artists. You heard many examples of works from such groups last night [author's note: these included The Atlanta Theatre Company, the Sci-Fi Channel, and others] Over the years others have included Cape Cod Mystery Theatre, and Sue Zizza's *RadioWorks*, an umbrella series that offers production and distribution opportunities to younger and newer radio dramatists, for whom finding a market is even more daunting than for beginning stage writers.

Several stout souls have even attempted--and occasionally succeeded--in finding a foothold in the commercial networks again, and maverick stations like WBAI in New York have produced and broadcast five-hour street theatre events staged for radio.

But, you are now thinking, she began by saying that she could not present a history of radio drama, and here she is, dozens of programs later, still talking. But in some ways all I have been able to give you is a list. A history--especially a cultural history--requires continuity, artifact, a critical framework, and the inherited sense on the part of its community that it is a community. Instead, our world of sound is strangely muffled. Tramping through a fragmented field of material, in libraries, books, on the Internet, and the tongues of my colleagues, I was reminded again and again of the parable of the blind philosophers and the elephant: producers, playwrights, journalists, administrators, each defining the form entirely in terms of whatever small segment he or she has encountered or created. Journalists obediently parrot the potted history offered by whomever they are interviewing; producers work all over the country in complete ignorance of one another; and the Museum of Television and Radio has a passive and erratic acquisition policy that presents a woefully incomplete picture of contemporary radio theatre.

And the money, privacy, and autonomy I mentioned? The room of one's own of the air? This has presented the greatest peril of all, but also the challenge from which the next phase of our evolution might come.

Radio drama is difficult to fund, and labor intensive, and series have come and gone like the more transient elements on the periodic chart. This has made radio theatre perpetually the culture of rescue and rediscovery rather than of continuity and evolution.

And broadcast radio itself is coming to seem increasingly resistant--when not actively hostile--to its own forms. Hampered by fiscal crises, bound up by audience surveys, driven by membership drives, endlessly repackaging the safe and familiar--it has little time or space for a form that one writer has described as "an icicle through the ear." So, increasingly, we have come to think in terms of audio drama, a space both private and public, capable of being created, and listened to, by us all. And each year MRTW reminds us that we are a living culture.

Arguably the most famous product of contemporary American radio theatre is Arthur Kopit's *Wings*, which was commissioned by Earplay in 1978, and subsequently went on to Broadway and dozens of regional stage productions, establishing director John Madden's reputation. The story of a former aviatrix and wing-walker who suffers a stroke is told through her own lyrical, disjunctive aphasic speech, a style that becomes emblematic of radio's peculiar magic. Martin Esslin has likened the experience of listening to radio drama to a dream, which the protagonist of *Wings* describes as "something that happens in the night when you have your things closed." Let us continue to be open to such dreams.

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