Radio Drama

Radio Drama brings together the practical skills needed for radio drama, such as directing, writing and sound design, with media history and communication theory. From the early audio broadcasts of 1914 and the development of General Electric’s New York WGY station in 1922, through Orson Welles’s startling Hallowe’en broadcast of War of the Worlds in 1938, to more recent radio spoofs and the subversive challenge from ‘media guerrillas’, Tim Crook explores the history and contemporary practice of radio drama. Challenging the belief that sound drama is a ‘blind medium’, Radio Drama shows how experimentation in radio narrative has blurred the dividing line between fiction and reality in modern media. Using extracts from scripts and analysing radio broadcasts from America, Britain, Canada and Australia, the book explores the practicalities of producing drama for radio. Tim Crook illustrates how far radio drama has developed since the first ‘audiophonic production’ and evaluates the future of radio drama in the age of live phone-ins and immediate access to programmes on the Internet.

Tim Crook has written, directed and produced award-winning radio plays, series and documentaries. He is the Head of Radio at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and is the author of International Radio Journalism.
Radio Drama
Theory and practice

Tim Crook

London and New York
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of plates</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Part I

### PRACTICE MEETS THEORY

1. **A New Media History Perspective through Audio Drama**

2. **Radio Drama as Modernity**

3. **The Electrophone or Théâtrophone: broadcasting audio drama before the radio**

4. **The Six Ages of Audio Drama and the Internet Epoch**

5. **From Sound Houses to the Phonograph Sound Play**

6. **A Technological Time-line**

7. **A Culturalist Approach to Internet Audio Drama**

## Part II

### SOUND THEORY AND PRACTICE

8. **Radio Drama is Not a Blind Medium**
9 Sound Design Vocabulary 70
10 The Cinematic and Musical Inspiration 90

Part III
THE NEW RADIO DRAMA FORM: SKITS AND LIVE IMPROVISATIONS
11 Blurring Fiction with Reality 105
12 Radio Drama Panics: a cross-cultural phenomenon 115
13 Moving from Burlesque to Propaganda and News 121
14 The War of the Worlds Effect: Spoonface Steinberg? 136
15 Spoonface Steinberg: constructing the Holocaust as a means of identification 144

Part IV
THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF WRITING AUDIO DRAMA
16 The Writing Agenda for Audio Drama 151
17 Creating the Character and Effective Use of Characterisation 183
18 Writing Dialogue 188

Part V
CONSTRUCTING THE RADIO DRAMA/DOCUMENTARY FEATURE
19 The Phantom Distinction 201
20 Making the Documentary Feature 213

Part VI
THE PRACTICE AND THEORY OF DIRECTING AND PERFORMANCE
21 Directorial Responsibility 235
22 Managing the Production 240
23 Experimental Direction and Performance 246
Contents

Notes 251

Audio drama bibliography 269

Index 288
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Eva Stenman-Rotstein, Swedish Radio Drama Director</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Christine Bernard-Sugy, Head of Radio Drama at Radio France</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kate Rowland, Editor of BBC Radio Drama</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Losing Paradise</em>: international co-production</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>A Dream Play</em>: classical radio drama in the studio</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Beo’s Bedroom</em>: multicultural casting and content</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>The Trojan Women</em>: CBC/BBC co-production</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Location recording with the studio manager, LBC, London</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Location recording with musician and performers simulating the beach ambience</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>The Great Los Angeles Opportunity</em>: location recording with the director</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This book is the result of a personal odyssey lasting twenty years. Radio drama and radio drama-documentary expression are undoubtedly the most understated creative, dramatic and literary art forms and seem to have suffered an element of cultural neglect in terms of the volume of critical publication rather than the quality. I think that this area has been under-explored from the point of view of academic study compared with other dramatic media. This medium of drama offers the dramatist considerable control and a fast route to the centre of human consciousness and psychological engagement. It is probably the most efficient and cost-effective way of reaching a huge audience, but it is also one of the more interesting and enjoyable storytelling forms to access the world of media and communications theory. Through audio drama you can explore the rich and intellectually fulfilling world of cultural history, semiotics, psychology of communication, sociology, study of audiences and other theoretical concerns centred in the field of human communication and society.

I have tried to write an enabling book to open doors and windows in the world of practice and theory and to give students in media and communications an exciting and enjoyable journey that truly articulates an interplay or integration of the thinking and the doing, the education as well as the training.

I have sought to explore key subjects such as media history, sound, writing, directing and the distinction between fiction and reality for audiences with as much international perspective as I have been able to research. I realise that I have neglected much. I could not pretend to offer a comprehensive text on the entire subject. I have also had to leave out considerable amounts of
research and writing that I had undertaken for the project. Detailed questions of representation and political economy have not been engaged: they deserve a separate volume. I have explored radio acting through the perspective of directing since a book focusing on radio performance has recently been published. I also think that much could be gained by performers appreciating the director’s perspective and recognising the common aesthetic and professional concerns.

I would like to thank the following people and organisations who have been a source of inspiration, help and challenge to me in the writing of this book.

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I apologise profusely for failing to acknowledge anyone who recognises any influence on this text. Every effort has been taken to secure permission for the quotation of extracts. Where this has not been achieved I offer an advance apology and explain that the trail of research has not been able to reach you. I beg your indulgence to include the information for the purposes of scholarship, review and educational learning.
Part I

Practise meets theory
Chapter 1

A new media history perspective through audio drama

There’s no romance in television: it’s just the Wal-Mart of the mind. Radio is infinitely sexier.

(Garrison Keillor, *Radio Romance*, 1991)

And more particularly:

I live right inside radio when I listen. ‘The Medium Is The Message’.

(Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964)

Radio drama has been one of the most unappreciated and understated literary forms of the twentieth century and the purpose of this book is to demonstrate that this neglect should not continue into the twenty-first century. Academics, media theorists and writers in most cultures have not fully appreciated that the medium of sound has provided an environment in which a new storytelling genre has been born. It has developed with sophistication and explosive energy; it now occupies a significant position in the cultural lives of societies throughout the globe. Even where the dominance of long-form popular dramas has transferred to television, the audio drama narrative is central to the short narrative communication of radio commercials. Huge traditions, styles and movements have been established and remain largely undocumented. Even now, radio drama is regarded as an adjunct of radio production practice. The shelves of the library at Goldsmiths College, University of London disclose the following ratio of critical publication space between novels and poetry, theatre texts, film/television and radio drama: 64, 21, 14 and 1.¹
There are strong signs that this neglect is being challenged. The international radio academy, which includes practitioners as well as philosophers, is gathering to debate, discuss and present papers. In Britain, drama lecturer Alan Beck at the University of Kent has undertaken the first and most significant comprehensive research into the history of British radio drama, which will have an impressive output in CD-ROM publication. Many aspects of previous academic evaluation of the subject are unreliable. This is not due to intrinsic failings in individual approach. It is more a case of underdeveloped radio theory and a continuing struggle to legitimise sound art or radio drama in terms of its equality as an art form.

I began with hubris from Garrison Keillor and the phrase for which Marshall McLuhan is most remembered: ‘The medium is the message’. If this is the case, radio or audio drama has to begin with the medium of recorded sound and the dynamics of its transmission. These phases clearly predate radio. There is no evidence that I can find of researchers or writers who have even considered the significance of ‘electrophones’ during the period from 1900 until the advent of licensed broadcasting. So much store is placed on the first ‘drama broadcast’ or transmission of the ‘first radio play written for the wireless’. This is perfectly valid. History requires datelines to frame development. Fortunately texts exist to point to defining moments. The BBC’s first Chief Engineer, Captain P. Eckersley, in his *The Power behind the Microphone* (1942), describes a radio drama experiment transmitted on 17 October 1922 from the research station at Writtle, near Chelmsford, Essex:

We did a wireless play. We chose the balcony scene from Cyrano: it is played, on the stage, in semi-darkness with virtually stationary players and so it seemed very suitable for broadcasting. ‘Uggy’ Travers, a young actress and her brother came to help. We sat round a kitchen table in the middle of the wooden hut, with its shelves and benches packed with prosaic apparatus, and said our passionate lines into the lip of our separate microphones … It was all rather fun. Doubtless at times I was horribly facetious, but I did try to be friendly and talk with, rather than at, my listeners … We failed to take ourselves seriously, and broadcasting, as we saw it, was nothing more nor less than an entertainment, for us as much as the listeners.

Evidence of an early experiment in the broadcast of audio drama emerges from a study of the history of radio in California by John Schneider, which is available on the World Wide Web. In his narrative about the history of KQW and radio programming pioneer Charles ‘Doc’ Herrold, Schneider states:

About this time [1914], Herrold’s station attempted its first remote broadcast. The event was a play being performed in the auditorium at Normal College (now California State University at San José). The carbon button microphones Herrold used had very limited
A new media history perspective

pick-up range, and his students improvised a reflector to collect the sound out of an old wooden chopping bowl. The signal was transmitted to the bank building through an ordinary telephone connection. Newby related: ‘We would use a phone, and they would take the receiver off of the hook and we would hold the receiver on the other end at the microphone of the transmitter. And it would go through; voices would go through pretty good.’ He told of another incident when they tried to broadcast a harp recital. They had to keep the microphone very close to the strings to pick up the harp with enough volume, and the mike upset the harpist so much that she couldn’t play a thing.5

American radio history is complex and chaotically documented. It would be a brave scholar who confidently asserted that the first US radio drama had been identified with a particular date and on a certain radio station. There are some references, for example 1922 has been marked as the year when General Electric’s New York station WGY in Schenectady broadcast ‘the first dramatic series . . . and the first sound effects were used in “The Wolf”, a two and a half hour play on the same station.’6

Photographs of WGY’s engineer and the WGY players with a microphone disguised as a lamp to minimise performers’ jitters appear in the American publication The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting.7 Since opera is effectively musical theatre, it can be argued that there are earlier licensed and regularly scheduled instances of audio drama transmission. KYW in Chicago began in 1921 as a specialist opera station and did not include time signals, weather bulletins, news and phonograph records. The early pioneering programming concentrated on six days a week broadcasts of the Chicago Civic Opera Company.8 On 15 March 1922 WJZ in Newark brought the entire touring company of the opera production of Mozart’s Impresario into a 10 by 40 foot makeshift studio and broadcast the production as a radio/studio based event rather than a remote broadcast.9 The 27 October 1923 edition of Radio Digest disclosed:

The radio play, a new form of dramatic interest, is increasing rapidly in popularity. Go to a movie and then come home and listen to a Radio and you will have received two exactly opposite theatrical effects. Perhaps, in the near future, you may have both movie and Radio broadcast to you . . .

Of course, scenes and acts from current plays are often broadcast, but many eastern stations now have their own theatrical groups and give plays especially adapted for Radio use. Pretend you are blind and listen to these plays. The better your imagination, the better the play.10

Dates for the first transmission of radio drama on BBC Radio depend on what you define as a radio play. It is generally agreed that the first play written for radio was A Comedy of Danger
Radio drama: theory and practice

by Richard Hughes, which was transmitted on 15 January 1924. Research by Alan Beck has highlighted a personal account of the play's genesis in an edition of *The Listener* magazine in 1956:

the climax came when we said we wanted an explosion. The engineers had helped all they could, but this was the last straw. Even popping a paper bag would blow every fuse in Savoy Hill. But Playfair was something of a genius, and utterly unscrupulous. Reporters and critics were going to listen in a room specially provided for them, with its own loud-speaker. It would never do for them to hear no more than the diminutive 'phut' like the roaring of a sucking-dove, even if that was all the public would get. So Playfair staged a magnificent 'explosion' in the room next door to the press-room. Our 'explosion' got top marks with the press. They never discovered they had heard it through the wall. And so – presumably for the first time in history, anywhere in the world – some sort of 'listening play' specially written for sound somehow went on the air, thanks to Playfair's ingenuity and the helping hands of all Savoy Hill. Radio drama had emitted its first, faint, infant wail.¹¹

The engagement of public relations by the play's director/producer Nigel Playfair resulted in national newspaper coverage in the *Daily Mail* on Wednesday 16 January 1924:

In a brightly lit room a young woman in evening dress and two men holding sheets of paper in their hands declaimed to a microphone their horror at being imprisoned in the mine. Outside the room a young man sat cross-legged on the floor, with telephone receivers on his ears, and as he heard through the receivers the progress of the piece he signalled to two assistants on a lower landing to make noises to represent the action of the play.

However, Lord Asa Briggs in his formidable history series of the British Broadcasting Corporation states that 16 February 1923 signified the transmission of extracts of Shakespearian classics such as *Julius Caesar*, *Henry VIII* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, while the first abridgement for radio of an entire Shakespeare play was *Twelfth Night*, transmitted on 28 May 1923.¹²

It would appear that the first radio play produced and broadcast in Australia was a melodramatic production of the myth of *Sweeney Todd, The Barbarous Barber*, on the Melbourne station 3LO, which went out on 21 March 1925.¹³ About a year earlier the Sydney station 2FC broadcast a direct transmission from Her Majesty’s Theatre, Sydney, of the Royal Comic Opera Company staging *A Southern Maid*. This was achieved by placing a microphone near the centre of the footlights with a special speech amplifier under the stage.¹⁴

I think that radio drama has shared with stage theatre an evanescent art form status. If the script does not survive and there is no permanent recording how are we to evaluate the artistic
experience? The title of the first chapter of Lance Sieveking’s publication on radio drama *The Stuff of Radio* (1934) is ‘Ghastly impermanence of the medium’. Most early radio plays created by the BBC and other international broadcasting organisations have not survived as mechanical records.

Very few mechanical records are made of stage productions. The script has tended to survive for both forms in the same way that manuscript musical scores have preserved the code of historic operas and musical presentations. Without permanent record, radio drama is an ephemeral art form. It exists in the moment of its produced performance. Peter Brook defined the experience of stage theatre as RRA: ‘repetition, representation, assistance’. The third ingredient of his definition, ‘assistance’, is where stage theatre and audio theatre experience their significant differences.

It is interesting that French writers have asserted that film was born in 1895 and became the ‘seventh art’. However, it is my belief that rather than audio drama becoming *l’art huitième*, the position of media nascence should be reversed. Sound art or storytelling through recorded and transmitted sound was spawned before the technological gestation of film. Sound drama achieved its artistic independence as a dimension of theatre before film.

A theoretical framework for evaluating radio or audio drama is largely dependent on the physical and psychological relationship between performance/presentation and reception/perception. Is sound drama only a sound phenomenon delineated and separated from image-based narrative? I would argue that it is not. I would argue that it cannot be said that the ear cannot see. Blind people see. I realise that this is an oxymoronic statement but I would additionally argue that their brains construct an imaginative world based on image and fully separated from the eye as camera. Their experience is as rich and fulfilling as those who have the eye as camera. Profoundly deaf people can hear in their minds. The music created by deaf people has narrative, mood, emotion and aesthetics. I have been engaged in an interesting debate with a stage theatre director on the meaning of the word ‘theatre’. My position is that ‘theatre’ as a dramatic etymological concept is not exclusively owned by stage or physical theatre. In Latin theatre is a feminine noun, *theatrum*. In Greek it is a feminine noun, *theatron*. *Theoamai* means ‘behold’. The theatre director asserts that *theatron* means ‘spectacle’. I disagree. I believe that a more appropriate translation is ‘drama’. Sound theatre exists as a dramatic storytelling form communicating action as well as narrative.

I stress these issues because if we are talking about radio or audio drama, the state of listening is linked directly to the technological and psychological experience of hearing radio signals. The same can be applied to audio or sound signals. Can theatre encompass the idea of a staging or amphitheatre in the mind of the individual as much as in the physical auditorium or cinema? I believe that theatre as a concept is not intrinsically linked to and dependent on the spectacle. It is as much about listening as it is about spectating. Inside the