



8-1951

A Survey of Published American Radio Drama

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Recommended Citation

Wright, Kenneth D., "A Survey of Published American Radio Drama. " Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 1951.
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kenneth D. Wright entitled "A Survey of Published American Radio Drama." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Paul L. Soper, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Percy G. Adams, Robert L. Hickey

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

August 6, 1951

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kenneth D. Wright entitled "A Survey of Published American Radio Drama." I recommend that it be accepted for nine quarter hours of credit in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English (Speech).

Paul H. Seger
Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Percy S. Adams
Robert L. Hickey

Accepted for the Council:

E. A. Watson
Dean of the Graduate School

A SURVEY OF PUBLISHED AMERICAN RADIO DRAMA

A THESIS

**Submitted to
The Graduate Council
of
The University of Tennessee
in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts**

by

Kenneth D. Wright

August 1951

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Radio broadcasting is a product of the twentieth century, taking its place beside the automobile, the airplane, two world wars, and now television as an influence upon the people of the world. Radio has had a short but colorful life, a reign studded with court fights, money-making, good and bad drama, music and showmanship, and a fair share of public acceptance and criticism.

Radio broadcasting is a composite of music programs, news reports, dramatic programs, commercial announcements, and comedy features. The American people listen to all of these programs at various times. Radio has become a part of our culture, be the adjunct a good or an annoying one. As it pertains to drama, radio broadcasting is another medium of projecting the spoken word in dramatic form, joining the stage and the more recent medium of the movies.

The numerous books on radio drama now available are concerned with the techniques of putting on a radio play or they contain a number of plays for reading enjoyment. There is, to my knowledge, no book on the literature of radio studied as a whole. While there are several collections of radio plays, they are limited to the printing of some ten to twenty-five plays by different authors.

This paper will be a limited survey of radio dramatic literature. Only published radio plays will be treated and not all of those, since the number is too large. Nearly 300 of the more important printed plays have been studied and many of them will be mentioned in this work. There will be included some comment on the nature of radio drama, some material on theories, techniques, and limitations, and a considerable amount of critical material from contemporary books and periodicals.

Why should the content of radio drama be studied? Why not confine the study to techniques of production or perhaps to the printing of certain radio plays? The answer lies somewhere in the rather vague concept of radio as a social force in America. To many millions of Americans, radio plays are synonymous with the word "drama"--their only contact with the dramatic form of story-telling, except for the movie theatres. Radio means inexpensive, constant, easily accessible drama in the home, and the people listen. They learn facts, gather impressions, and assume ideas from this radio play-acting. They are influenced in some way, either for good or for ill. It seems important, then, to study what the people hear and what they have been hearing as represented in the published plays.

No conclusions will be drawn concerning the effects of this learning process through radio drama. No attempt will

be made to evaluate the good or ill effects in developing the taste of the people for dramatic forms. The paper will contain information on the plays; the conclusions on effects must be left to scientific research.

There will be no material on production in this paper and no plays will be reprinted here in their entirety. There will be numerous quotations from the plays, however, and some quotations from critical writings. Chapters or sections will be devoted to the reputation of radio drama; the nature, theories, and techniques of the art; the work and critical comments of seven major figures; some treatment of lesser writers; and a concluding summary.

CHAPTER II

THE REPUTATION OF RADIO DRAMA

Literary and drama critics have long sneered at the new art or technique of presenting plays on the air, and even the most avid of radio's defenders cannot deny that much of the broadcast fare has been barren indeed. The constant need for speed in writing and production, the failure of the businessmen who determine program policies to conceive of radio as an art form, and the timidity of sponsors about presenting controversial issues have all contributed to the stifling of broadcasting as a medium for courageous, artistic, and intelligent drama.

Many critics, however, judge radio drama by the testimony of the lowest level of such drama. Many of the better plays, broadcast without sponsorship by the networks, are produced with low budgets and written by writers with ideas incompatible with advertising restrictions. Consequently, such plays are heard in the late hours of the evening or at other undesirable listening times. It is possible that most of the critics are drawing their conclusions from the sponsored daytime serials and the pedestrian commercial scripts at the highly desirable evening times. If that is so, they might very well miss the better dramatic programs that must be relegated to late hours because they are sustaining.

Another factor which makes it difficult to hear all or even most of the occasional mature dramas is radio's puzzling adherence to the principle that a play can be heard once and no more. With few exceptions, the practice has prevailed, thus preventing a critic from ever hearing a program he missed the first time. Moreover, it is certain that the promotion money of the networks has been spent on advertising and building interest in the sponsored programs, with little or none spent on trying to find listeners for the documentary sustaining features or for adult noncommercial drama.

Against this background, it is well to examine some of the critical articles on radio drama. Four years ago, the Commission on Freedom of the Press released a series of studies on radio and newspapers in America. The radio report called The American Radio and written by Llewellyn White, is a book of great interest to all radio listeners. In this book, Mr. White is severely critical of radio and he says of radio drama:

Except for the work of three or four pioneers like Corwin, Welles, Oboler, and MacLeish, there has been literally no radio drama worthy of the name that has not been lifted bodily from the theatre. The sum of it has been piddling.¹

¹Llewellyn White, The American Radio (Chicago, 1947), p. 218.

Whether or not that judgment be unduly harsh, it is demonstrably true that radio has not drawn many great poets and dramatists into its circle.

Striking close to the root of the trouble with radio drama, Milton Kaplan has this to say of verse plays:

The radio verse play becomes a play of ideas, but ideas of themselves do not constitute plays. Very often there may be dialogue, action, oratory, exhortation--but no play To make up for the consequent loss of dramatic tension, the dramatist frequently turns to mechanical devices, to stunts and sound effects.²

Any listener who has been annoyed by the shouting and strong music of an empty radio play will appreciate Kaplan's statement. This same critic has strongly indicted radio for the innocuous nature of most of its drama, calling for a greater vigor and force:

There is a great need for a stronger and bolder drama. Complete subservience to the dictates of every tiny group in the audience may mean a literature stripped of the capacity for indignation and censure. The radio play does not have to violate good taste, but if it is to be great drama, it must sometimes probe into the public conscience, even at the risk of puzzling or offending. The dramatist should be an artist of quicker perception and keener sensibility than the members of his audience. He must lead, not follow, public opinion.³

²Milton A. Kaplan, Radio and Poetry (New York, 1949), p. 237.

³Radio and Poetry, p. 247.

Many of the writers themselves share Kaplan's view, as will be seen later when some of the authors are treated separately.

Radio has friends, too, among the critics, and none more able and outspoken than Saul Carson, radio editor of New Republic. In one of his columns, commenting favorably on Morton Wishengrad's plays, Carson remarked:

Just read The Tender Grass to see how meaty radio fantasy can be; see the clever use of whimsy in a story like How They Knocked the Devil Out of Uncle Ezra; and observe how listenable even in print is a powerful drama like The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto.⁴

But despite Carson and a few others who believe in radio drama, the opposition seems to have all the best of it in the critical articles.

Another leading publication, The Nation, has a radio editor who often flails the same radio industry she hails on other occasions. Mildred Adams, in reviewing Millard Lampell's collection of radio plays, took occasion to deplore radio drama as a whole:

It is not my intention to criticize Mr. Lampell, his scripts, or the familiar radio mixture of bathos and sales appeal decked out as public service which appears within the covers of his book. Far more important are the questions that the scripts raise Why has radio writing so little claim to any real literary merit? Can anything be done about it? Or are conditions of the industry such that

⁴Saul Carson, "The Listener As Reader," New Republic, June 9, 1947, p. 35.

radio writers must, as craftsmen, content themselves with developing skill in a bastard form of expression which lies somewhat between vaudeville, sermon, newspaper, and advertising patter?⁵

It is clear that Miss Adams is interested in radio drama and concerned about it. To dismiss her criticism as due to the distaste of the journalist for radio would be a serious mistake for the broadcasters.

Serious, too, would be the mistake of overlooking the advantages and possibilities of broadcasting. John Anderson, in discussing these potentials, remarks:

Foremost among these is language--the written and spoken word. As a medium of sound the radio is above everything else the domain of music, whether by Beethoven or Brahms, Whitman, Sandburg or Benét. It needs writers of clear vision, sharp imagery and simple eloquence.⁶

In the light of this statement, it is painful to consider the dearth of Bach and Mozart music, the Whitman, Milton, and Shakespeare poetry, and the accumulated philosophy of the centuries. Radio fails to be present and accounted for when the great thinking and writing of the past and present are seeking expression.

Cognizant of this, Jerrold Lapham is more pessimistic than most critics concerning radio's ultimate place in drama:

⁵Mildred Adams, "The Poor Young Art of Radio," The Nation, May 4, 1946, p. 544.

⁶John Anderson, "Notes on Radio," Theatre Arts, June 1943, pp. 342-343.

Radio cannot be discussed as a pure vehicle of expression, unhampered by the realities of commercial enterprise, the personal prejudices of sponsors, the influence of the advertising agency, or the entertainment standards of the radio audience. Under ideal laboratory conditions, radio drama may have artistic possibilities, but to worry about these possibilities, with radio business what it is, must be largely a waste of time.⁷

It must be noted that Lapham is talking about American radio, the commercial brand of broadcasting now existing in this country. He admits that radio might be an artistic medium under ideal conditions, but he refuses to discuss such a possibility in the face of present day American broadcasting. It does strike many people that great drama and commercialism are incompatible, but criticizing the system under which radio operates is not to condemn radio as a medium.

Lapham concludes with the remark:

In any case, it is as futile to talk of the aesthetics of radio as it is to point out how greatly the draftsmanship of comic strips might be improved. Who cares? Certainly not the millions of eager fans who adore the funnies. So with the radio programs. They are not intended to appeal to the intelligent minority.⁸

Mr. Lapham must know that many auditors, many writers, and many professional radio craftsmen do care, and will continue to work toward lifting the level of radio drama. The system

⁷Jerrold H. Lapham, "What Hope Radio Drama?" Theatre Arts, January 1934, p. 44.

⁸Lapham, p. 47.

may not be conducive to fine drama, but the answer does not lie in hopelessness and inertia.

CHAPTER III

NATURE OF RADIO DRAMA, THEORIES, AND TECHNIQUES

Following an examination of the critical material on radio drama, it is well to look at the nature of the form, the several theories about it, and some of the most used and overused techniques of writing radio plays.

In the study of the 300 radio plays, it was found that several methods of writing occurred repeatedly. The technique of using a narrator is an example; fully three-fourths of all published radio plays have a narrator telling the story at the beginning, through the body of the play, and at the end. Other forms used widely are the monologue for short plays, music and dialogue together, verse, the cantata form, and sometimes straight dramatic action without interruption. All these forms are represented many times in 300 plays, of course, but the plays involving a narrator alone or with tableaux interspersed are in the majority.

Radio plays include all the recognized types for any form of drama--comedy, plays on serious themes, war and patriotic plays, straight propaganda, fantasy, educational plays, and a very few that might be called tragedy.

Many writers have examined radio drama as a means of expression and they have seen different problems and limitations. Some feel that entertainment at the sacrifice of

content is the key, others are fearful of disturbing the peace of the home with disputed issues, and many others see radio drama as potentially a mature art for the expression of vital and exciting ideas.

Writing about the nature of radio drama, Milton Kaplan, in a work previously cited, states:

The contemporaneity of radio, the immediacy of its impact, the heterogeneity and size of its audience, and the complete dependence on the ear shaped the pattern of the radio poetry play, a pattern that is becoming more and more sharply defined. It is a pattern of the spoken word, of special sound effects, of timing, of music, of suggestion, repetition, and emphasis. It is a pattern of simple language, of quickly shifting scenes, of thumbnail characters, of allegory.¹

It would be difficult to find a more accurate and complete picture of radio drama. Here are the elements that most writers and critics consign to radio--immediacy, the great audience, dependence upon the ear alone, fast pace, music, undeveloped characters, and action that flies around the world and from century to century in a few minutes' time. Kaplan has defined the nature of radio drama adequately.

Others have given us impressions of the nature of radio drama, as well as theories about how it should be written and what it should say. Albert Crews, in a radio writing textbook, offers three ways in which radio differs from the stage and

¹Milton A. Kaplan, Radio and Poetry (New York, 1949), p. 8.

films.² He reminds us that radio drama appeals only to one sense, and that audiences react differently to a drama they only hear than to one they see and hear simultaneously. In the second place, he comments on the fact that in radio the play comes to the audience, rather than the audience to the theatre. This, he states, tends to make audiences subject to distractions in the home and gives them no obligation to hear out the play, since they have not paid any money or gone to any trouble to hear it in the first place. The third difference cited by Crews is that the audience is made up of groups of one or two people. There is a oneness between audience and performers which is not found in any other medium. Such analyses as this one help us to understand the nature of radio drama.

Equally helpful are comments about the content and writing style of radio plays. Frederick Morton has written in Theatre Arts:

The best plays and the best scenes in them are almost invariably the simplest, the most universal, the most dramatic, and all of these qualities are a compound of sound and sense. But simple does not mean ostentatiously low-brow. The universal is never the banal.³

²Albert R. Crews, Professional Radio Writing (Boston and New York, 1946), pp. 223-224.

³Frederick Morton, "Radio Propaganda: New Style," Theatre Arts, February 1943, p. 97.

Morton goes on to say that one of the great differences between radio and the theatre is the handling of character development. He says that character evolves from reactions to situations in a stage play. In radio, the character seldom evolves, but to save time is merely stated.

Along the same lines of approach regarding theme and development, William and Kathryn Cordell make the suggestion:

As in other realms of artistic expression, the value of the radio play will depend upon the significance of its theme and the quality of the craftsmanship that goes into its composition and production. Both of these desired elements can best be secured, as in other arts, by a growing body of informed critical interpretation and encouragement.⁴

It will be apparent to the reader in the following pages that the Cordells have expressed an important thought in the matter of the significance of theme. American radio has not been noted for the lofty inspiration of its drama. The excellence of production techniques has been praised far more than the quality of the writing. It has been said that American radio is justly famous for its many first-rate second-rate programs.

One of the longer and more interesting treatments of radio drama is the article by Richard Hughes in the Virginia Quarterly Review. He traces all literature from the time it was spoken by one person to another as the sole means of

⁴William H. and Kathryn C. Cordell, "The Future Theatre of the Air," Sewanee Review, XLIV (October 1936), 417-418.

transmittal, through the invention of the printing press and gradually to the present day, when literature is written entirely for the reading eye. He concedes that radio has returned the emphasis to the spoken word, but that now there is no literature to be read aloud since it is written for the eye alone. He recognizes that most critics think radio will either produce no literature, or else it will eventually contain the only literature in a future world of commercialism and practicality. Hughes will not accept either theory, saying:

My own belief, and hope, is different. I do not believe that either of these things will happen. But I do not believe that there is any need, or any room, for a separate radio literature. Writers of genius are too few, for one thing; supply could never catch up with demand, so long as books continue to be written as well. But I do believe that the effect of radio on literature generally will be as profound, if almost as slow, as the effect of the printing press. There will be a second revolution. Writers will come once again to write as much for the ear as for the eye, as a matter of general habit. This would certainly be the outcome of most advantage to radio, since in this way all literature would become fit material for broadcasting. Literature, too, would profit, in my opinion.⁵

Mr. Hughes is thinking of the highest level of radio, to be sure, and for that reason the friend of radio can well hope that other critics will share these views. When all literature becomes material for radio and when the radio industry

⁵Richard Hughes, "The Second Revolution: Literature and Radio," Virginia Quarterly Review, XXIII (January 1947), 43.

sees fit to present this material, the day of mature broadcasting will be reached.

These comments have been concerned with the nature and theories of broadcast drama. Demanding even more attention from the critics have been the techniques of writing plays for the air. A curious line of reasoning has grown up in the radio world that drama writing for the air requires highly specialized techniques that call for every kind of twist and turn and antic in the book of literary legerdemain. Max Wylie, one of radio's best writers and critics, comes to grips with this reasoning at once:

Radio writing has no more significant distinctions, no more esoteric techniques, no more regulations and unvarying practices than has, for example, playwriting or scenario writing there is no substitute for good writing. In the case of radio itself, the truth of this can be perceived at once when one realizes that the finest broadcasts which have been heard in this country since the inception of the industry have been the work of the superior writer-- and I have deliberately avoided saying the superior 'radio' writer.⁶

Much of the hope for intelligent, significant radio drama is based on this concept that good writing is the keynote, not gyrations of sound, music, fury, and bombast.

Wylie's attempt to show that radio writing is just writing and not sound juggling is often opposed by other

⁶Max Wylie, Radio Writing (New York and Toronto, 1939), p. 3.

competent critics. Saul Carson of New Republic says in effect that radio cannot produce real drama:

Radio can be highbrow as all get-out Radio can also be poetic, set mood, define character, weave plot, play upon emotions. It can do all of these things and more. But show me a radio writer, or director, who attempts to do them all in one radio drama, and I'll show you an amateur or a fool.⁷

Carson does not intend to say that radio cannot be genuine drama, but unless a play has elements of poetry, character, plot and emotional power it will be a rather inadequate affair. If Carson is right, and if radio cannot do all of these things in one play because of time limitation, it would seem that serious writers must turn to another medium.

A reviewer for Newsweek wrote a story in praise of the Columbia Workshop, asserting that radio drama is a specialized technique, demanding sound gadgetry and musical footnotes. He speaks of the fine mechanical equipment purchased by the Columbia Broadcasting System for the program:

But behind all this there was something else--a theory that radio drama, in both writing and presentation, was something radically different from drama of stage and screen, and therefore must be handled with a new and highly specialized technique.⁸

⁷Saul Carson, "Translating the Classics," New Republic, October 25, 1948, p. 26.

⁸"CBS Workshop Jubilee," Newsweek, July 3, 1939, p. 21.

Despite this emphasis on mechanical contrivance, the Columbia Workshop has been responsible for much of the finest writing in radio. The producers and writers were not concerned with a highly polished technique alone; they found time and inspiration to work on the content and originality.

Arthur Hopkins came from the Broadway theatres to produce a series of radio programs and brought with him some ideas more in line with Max Wylie's assertion that radio must not depend upon sound properties and unusual stunts. Hopkins' views are expressed by Flora Schreiber in The Quarterly Journal of Speech:

To keep the illusion was the guiding principle, the compelling conviction behind the series. Just as the Mr. Hopkins of the theatre argued that properties are distracting and that they destroy theatre illusion, so, too, the Mr. Hopkins of radio argued that the radio play as generally written and produced offers serious distractions such as music and sound obtrusively handled. A particular distraction is the narrator, stepping out of the framework of action to talk directly to the audience and thereby breaking the spell of the play.⁹

Many writers and directors agree with Hopkins' ideas. Later sections on the critical opinions of the seven leading authors will include further comments about the techniques of radio playwriting. There are many such opinions, of course, on this many-sided question, but most comments seem to indicate

⁹Flora Rheta Schreiber, "Radio As Arthur Hopkins Presents It," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXI (December 1945), 440.

that radio is a specialized field of drama, calling for intricate sound and word imagery. This is not to say that good writing therefore becomes secondary, but most critics see the need for elaborate production to supplement the writing.

It has already been stated that radio plays lean heavily on the narrator and on sound and music interpolations. Another characteristic of radio drama, also mentioned earlier, is the lack of well-rounded, complete characters. Not only is character development singularly lacking, but the full character is not even stated in most of the plays. Too often the characters are merely voices. They could be honest or evil, in love or bitter misanthropes, genuine or affected. It is true the dialogue or the narrator's words give some clue to the character, but it is often not sufficient to enable us to attach ourselves to the character or to reject him. The audience needs to know more about the people in radio plays.

One of the apparent requirements of radio drama seems to be constant action, everything moving forward at a fast pace, life running its course with an apprehensive eye on the studio clock. Arthur Miller, who wrote several radio plays before his stage success, has a most penetrating comment to make on this continuous movement:

The radio, for some reason I do not pretend to understand, demands that the story being told always be in motion, always discernible, never for a moment allowed to recede from the consciousness of the listener. On the stage, however, it is possible and often desirable that elements which are not strictly story-advancing material be written into a scene. I suppose that stage allows for more embroidery because the characters themselves are visible and possess in themselves a narrative interest. Whether this is the explanation or not, it is the reason for my conclusion--taken after much labor in the radio vineyards--that really fine radio drama or first-rate radio comedy is an impossibility. For the story element of a play, although of decisive importance to its structure, is but the skeleton upon which the more attractive values of dramatic literature are hung.¹⁰

In the article from which this quotation was taken, Miller clearly shows that he realizes that radio's time limit is partly responsible for the lack of embellishment beyond the pure story-line. The theory is an interesting one; perhaps radio drama would be more genuine and believable if some of the time could be diverted from the story to the elements of embroidery, such as character portrayal, scene description, and dialogue not related directly to the action.

Another characteristic of radio drama which disturbs some critics is the level of original concepts with which the author starts. The ancient Roman treatise, On the Sublime, attributed to Longinus, states that one of the most important

¹⁰Quoted in Theatre Guild on the Air, ed. H. William Fitelson (New York and Toronto, 1947), pp. 205-206.

elements of the sublime in writing is a lofty concept in the beginning. This remains true in the radio theatre; the final value of a play can be no greater than the original idea. Too many radio plays start with mediocre ideas and trivial aims.

This chapter has attempted to identify the characteristic form of radio drama and to analyze critically the nature, theories, and techniques of the medium. In the ensuing chapters, individual authors and plays will be discussed at some length, chief attention being given to seven writers found to be the major radio authors. Special sections will be presented on Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Vincent Benét, Norman Corwin, Morton Wishengrad, Arch Oboler, Norman Rosten, and Millard Lampell.

Before offering this specific material, it will be of value to note several comments from informed critics on the reading and the auditing of radio drama. Merrill Dennison says the listener can provide his own stage, costumes, illusions, and ideas about the appearance of the actors. He thinks the lack of vision is an asset--an idea that is by no means without advocates. He admits that the listener does not always listen, however, and remarks:

Until the listener in his own home is prepared to place on himself those restraints imposed on him in the theatre there is little hope that the broadcast play can realize its possibilities.¹¹

The solution for many of the difficulties of presenting good radio drama seems to Dennison to be proper listening. He is not sure the people will ever listen properly, but:

. . . given a willingness to listen quietly, attentively, in a room free from even the distraction of too bright lighting, the broadcast play can become as aesthetically satisfying and as emotionally arresting as the stage play.¹²

Not only does radio listening require some effort on the part of the audience, but the reading of radio plays in print would seem to require some background knowledge. Saul Carson states:

But there are some who argue against the content of the radio play in book form. This, they insist, is not literature But they forget to add one element. These critics who interpret the theatre so glibly, when the theatre comes in book form, apply their own knowledge of the stage itself to their criticism. But they tackle radio plays in print without ever having heard them on the air.¹³

Good writing will still impress the reader as good writing even if he is reading a radio play without knowing anything

¹¹Merrill Dennison, "The Broadcast Play," Theatre Arts, December 1931, p. 1011.

¹²Dennison, p. 1011.

¹³Saul Carson, "The Listener As Reader," New Republic, June 9, 1947, p. 35.

about the radio drama form. But Carson may be partially justified in censuring the critics for scorning radio plays in print without knowing how they sound over the air.

Another writer and critic, Arch Oboler, feels that the reader of radio drama must bring to his reading some knowledge of listening skills needed to thoroughly appreciate the play for the air. Oboler writes:

The critic of the printed radio play, then, must be a radio listener versed in the listening idiom. He must be as well acquainted with the mechanics of radio and the meaning of the radio terms and directions, which make up a large part of the printed radio drama, as is the critic of the literature of theatre with the business of the theatre.¹⁴

Although such comments may be used occasionally to gloss over the criticism of a bad piece of writing, there does seem to be some benefit to the reader if he understands something of what the play should sound like as he reads it. With this in mind, along with the foregoing comments on theories and techniques, the reader should be able properly to evaluate the plays to be discussed in the following pages.

¹⁴Arch Oboler, "Oboler on Reading," New Republic, September 1, 1947, p. 37.

CHAPTER IV

SEVEN MAJOR RADIO WRITERS

It is difficult to choose seven writers of radio plays for special attention when there are hundreds of playwrights engaged in the work. But it is necessary for purposes of organization and limitation of material to select a few from the many. The seven chosen for special attention are important radio dramatists, but they are not the only worthwhile writers. There are a number of skillful, intelligent writers with only two or three plays each in print, and these plays will be discussed in the following chapter. The seven to be discussed in this chapter--Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Vincent Benét, Norman Corwin, Arch Oboler, Norman Rosten, Morton Wishengrad, and Millard Lampell--all have a considerable body of material in print, both plays and critical comments on the art of radio drama.

Archibald MacLeish

Archibald MacLeish is not primarily a writer of radio plays, of course, but he has written enough plays, most of which have been published, to enable us to form some opinion of his radio work. For this study, thirteen MacLeish radio plays will be considered.

Poet, diplomat, librarian for the Library of Congress, and sensitive writer of the American scene, Archibald MacLeish brought good writing and sound concepts to the radio studios. Three of his published plays are in verse; the other ten are more often than not poetic although not written in verse form.

The Fall of the City, one of MacLeish's finest plays and acclaimed as the ultimate in adult radio drama, was written and produced in 1937 on the Columbia Workshop. It represents MacLeish's faith in radio as a medium for verse drama, although he faces the possibility that the medium may not be used for verse. In a letter to Joseph Liss, MacLeish wrote:

It's economically unsound of course but so is the whole art of verse in this--and I suspect any other --time. What is lacking is not the possibility. What's lacking is the will plus a few directors as deeply interested in the problem as the problem deserves.¹

In his preface to the play, MacLeish asserts that radio is the right medium for verse because it is a medium of sound only and poets should be especially adept in the use of words without visual aid.²

Verse established its place in radio in The Fall of the City. This imaginative, powerful drama tells the story

¹Quoted in Radio's Best Plays, ed. Joseph Liss (New York, 1947), p. 5.

²Radio's Best Plays, p. 6.

of a city awaiting the heel of a conqueror. A studio director tells the listener of the situation--all the world is watching one city in which a dead woman has arisen to utter a prophecy. He then switches to the square of the city and an announcer describes the scene through the remainder of the play.

The people are warned by the resurrected corpse to beware the dictator; they wait, and their leaders speak to them of appeasement. The mood is tense, the air seems to be hot and charged; the locale is not revealed, but the reader or listener gets the impression of an ancient city. MacLeish is masterful in his imagery as he writes:

There are people here from away off--
 Horse-raisers out of the country with brooks in it:
 Herders of cattle from up where the snow stays--
 The kind that cook for themselves mostly:
 They look at the girls with their eyes hard
 And a hard grin and their teeth showing³

After the speeches and the disturbing message of the runner telling of the coming of the conqueror, the play moves to an exciting climax. The people throw away their arms in their fear, and the poet tells of the last minutes of freedom:

The last defenders are coming: they whirl from the
 streets like
 Wild leaves on a wind: the square scatters them.
 Now they are fewer--ten together or five:
 They come with their heads turned: their eyes back.

³Radio's Best Plays, p. 9.

Now there are none. The street's empty--in shadow.
The crowd is retreating--watching the empty street:
The shouts die.⁴

The people watch, the conqueror comes out of the shadows into
the sun. The announcer sees him, waits, sees the visor rise,
then whispers:

There's no one! . . .
There's no one at all! . . .
No one! . . .
The helmet is hollow!
The metal is empty! The armor is empty! I tell you
There's no one at all there: there's only the metal:
The barrel of metal: the bundle of armor. It's
empty!⁵

But the people are prostrate, wanting to believe that they
are conquered, wishing to be relieved of their liberty, and
the city falls.

The Fall of the City was greeted with enthusiasm by
radio critics, who saw in this verse play the beginning of a
new type of radio drama. To some extent this hope has been
realized in the fourteen years since the first production of
MacLeish's play, but the fulfillment has not been completely
satisfactory. Radio still has the trite idea, the clever,
empty talk, the mangle-mangle of sound and music.

Euphemia Wyatt in Catholic World called the broad-
cast "a distinct and very exciting moment in American

⁴Radio's Best Plays, p. 29.

⁵Radio's Best Plays, p. 30.

literature."⁶ She thought the setting of the play was too mysterious, even distracting, and commented: "Certainly the learning to enjoy poetry on the radio will take as much concentration and patience as the learning to write it."⁷

Oliver Larkin saw the play staged by Smith College seniors in 1938 as a dance drama and uses his review for some interesting comments on radio and stage plays:

. . . the radio play which competes with the stage play loses more points than it wins. It achieves a vividness and a purity of revelation at the peril of brittleness. It plunges its characters from the middle of things into a denouement that leaves us breathless, excited, but often less deeply moved than the slower . . . stage action. Exquisite in bringing us the unearthly, the subjective, things imagined or felt, its range falls short of great characterization or great tragedy. And its danger for the listener, as for the poet, lies in its encouragement of over-simplification.⁸

Larkin clearly favors The Fall of the City as a radio, rather than a stage play. He finds the illusion easier to keep on the air, and finds the crowd is vastly better when heard and not seen. He also believes that the empty armor scene is more effective on the radio than on the stage.

⁶Euphemia Van R. Wyatt, "Post-War Poets and the Theatre," Catholic World, August 1937, p. 600.

⁷Wyatt, p. 600.

⁸Oliver Larkin, "Air Waves and Sight Lines," Theatre Arts, December 1938, p. 895.

Another MacLeish play that has become well-known is the prewar verse drama, Air Raid. Not as strong or gripping as The Fall of the City, nevertheless Air Raid has good poetic feeling and the people are purposely made more realistic than in the earlier play. The play is symbolic of the feeling of complacency on the part of ordinary people toward this new kind of warfare that grinds up women and children along with military objectives. The mood is generally right for the play and the ideas are undeniably good. The announcer is used throughout, standing on a roof awaiting the threatened air raid and listening to the small talk coming up from the street below. He hears the women scoff at the idea of the enemy killing women and children, he hears the warning of the officials to take to the cellars, and he sees the vicious attack on the helpless villagers. The play is at its best in the lines showing the complacency and wishful thinking of the people:

Ah they'll go over. There's nothing to fear: they'll
 go over.
 They always do: they go over. Don't you fear.
 Don't you fret. Don't you peer in the air--they'll
 Go. They will. You'll forget they were ever by
 Sunday.⁹

And an old woman shrieks, "We needn't crick our necks to watch it."¹⁰ There can be no doubt that MacLeish wrote Air Raid to

⁹Archibald MacLeish, Air Raid (New York, 1938), p. 31.

¹⁰Air Raid, p. 31.

help awaken this country to what was happening in Europe. The production was first broadcast on October 27, 1938; MacLeish was one poet who did not sleep until Pearl Harbor.

In the collection of plays called The Free Company Presents, about which we shall hear more later, MacLeish had a poem called The States Talking.¹¹ It is pure patriotism, showing the grandeur of America while keeping the shortcomings hidden. There are no characters and no action, and the play is certainly not up to the standards of the two earlier verse dramas. But the result is satisfying mainly because the idea of the states talking together, answering Hitler in good, solid Americanese, is an interesting one.

MacLeish has ten plays bound in a volume called The American Story, and some of his best radio writing is contained in this work. It is not necessary to comment on all ten of the plays. They were written for the National Broadcasting Company's University of the Air for the purpose of showing the parallels between the early settling of North America and that of South America. Probably the best of the plays is Socorro, When Your Sons Forget, the beautiful and tender story of the martyrdom of José Galán, the hero of Columbian independence.¹² This is a masterful play of another

¹¹The Free Company Presents, ed. James Boyd (New York, 1941).

¹²Archibald MacLeish, The American Story (New York, 1944).

fight for liberty and admirably serves its purpose of reminding Americans that we are not the only fighters for independence.

The real importance of all ten plays in The American Story is in the technique used by MacLeish. In every play the bulk of the script was taken from letters, speeches, narratives, and travel records of the people involved or their contemporaries. History by radio becomes alive and vital when the actual words of the history makers are used. In The Discovered, actual writings of the Incas were used to tell the story of the fallen civilization; in The American Name, many writings of Amerigo Vespucci were used; the journal of Columbus formed most of the script for The Admiral; and MacLeish is especially successful in using the journals of William Bradford for the settlement of the Pilgrims and the chronicles of Pedro de Valdivia for the story of the white man in Chile in a fine play called Between the Silence and the Surf.

Archibald MacLeish helps to prove Max Wylie's statement that there is no substitute for good writing on the radio. MacLeish is not essentially a radio writer, but he is assuredly a writer and at times a good radio dramatist. In reading his thirteen published plays, it is not difficult to see that a good poet may become a good radio poet without

knowing much about music sneak-ins, board fades, echo chambers, and flags waving over the air.

Stephen Vincent Benét

During a relatively short life from 1898 to 1943, Stephen Vincent Benét became one of America's great poets, and included in his work are fourteen published radio plays. Like MacLeish, Benét is a radio writer only by adoption, turning to the new medium after he was successful as a poet. After hearing Norman Corwin's production of the famous Benét Pulitzer Prize epic, John Brown's Body, the poet realized the value of radio as a medium for verse.

Most of the Benét radio scripts are bound in one volume called We Stand United and Other Radio Scripts.¹³ Raymond Massey wrote a highly favorable review of this book for The Saturday Review of Literature, saying,

A lot of highly successful radio writers have found that the word which is perfect for the ear cannot stand the scrutiny of the eye. But Steve's words stand up--eye, or ear, or mind, or heart. In this collection, the honesty, skill, and integrity of a great patriot shine out as surely in his radio plays as in his books.¹⁴

¹³Stephen Vincent Benét, We Stand United and Other Radio Scripts (New York and Toronto, 1945).

¹⁴Raymond Massey, "Stephen Benét's Radio Artistry," The Saturday Review of Literature, April 14, 1945, p. 24.

The nine plays in the collection are plays with a purpose-- plays designed to influence Americans in the war effort. In a foreword to the volume, Norman Rosten says of Benét:

Propaganda was nothing new to him. He was always selling Americans the idea of America, and he was so engaged at the time of his death¹⁵

In the work of all seven of the major radio writers chosen for this paper, as well as of many of the minor figures, there is a heavy strain of this propaganda. This is a good time to look at it squarely, as we consider Benét, and later Corwin, Oboler, Rosten, Wishengrad, and Lampell. In the foreword just mentioned, Rosten says:

Propaganda? That word used to be the big bogeyman of the thirties. It was trotted out as exhibit A. We were told to shun it or be damned everlastingly in the best circles. Critics and their cousins wrote long essays proving the corruption of Art. We were doomed. It was the decline of the west for certain. Well, all that is changed now. Propaganda is no longer a literary problem. It is the Idea which fights.¹⁶

Benét had something to say on the subject, too, speaking out in defense of his plays:

I am neither afraid nor ashamed of the word propaganda. I am neither afraid nor ashamed of the fact that American writers are speaking out today for a cause in which they believe. I cannot conceive it to be the business of the writer to turn his eyes away from life because the fabric of life is shaken.¹⁷

¹⁵Benét, p. v.

¹⁶Benét, We Stand United, pp. v-vi.

¹⁷Quoted in Liss, p. 137.

Thomas Mann, exiled from the Germany of Hitler, wrote about this propaganda idea in 1943, in an introduction to a collection of plays called the Free World Theatre:

I have used the word 'propaganda' on purpose and without reluctance because it deserves to be freed from the suspicious connotations which it has assumed in our day One can propagate good as well as evil, and when the modern means of exerting mass influence fall into the hands of criminal governments and deliberate spoilers of the people, they will use these means for their ends, that is, for evil.

This they have done, and it is only natural that the conception of propaganda has suffered by it.¹⁸

It will become clear in the study of the writers in the remaining pages that the subject of propaganda is an important one.

Stephen Vincent Benét took up the propaganda war and turned out some good and some mediocre plays. The best play in the We Stand United collection is not a propaganda play at all, but the moving, poignant A Child Is Born. True, there are traces of propaganda, but the story of the birth of Christ is a beautiful play in its own right. The language is moving and eloquent, and this is one of the rare radio plays in which we meet and learn to know several real characters. The Innkeeper and his wife are developed beyond the usual radio

¹⁸Arch Oboler and Stephen Longstreet, Free World Theatre (New York, 1944), p. x.

treatment. The wife is most eloquent in the climax when she prepares to go to the stable to see the boy Jesus:

We are the earth his word must sow like wheat
 And, if it finds no earth, it cannot grow.
 We are his earth, the mortal and the dying,
 Led by no star--the sullen and the slut,
 The thief, the selfish man, the barren woman,
 Who have betrayed him once and will betray him,
 Forget his words, be great a moment's space
 Under the strokes of chance,
 And then sink back into our small affairs,
 And yet, unless we go, his message fails.¹⁹

Another fine play in this collection is the anti-Fascist play, They Burned the Books. This is a propaganda play worthy of Benét's artistry. Splendid ideas are well expressed; the whole play is coherent and powerful. Benét uses the Nazi book-burning episode of 1933 on which to base a play that speaks wonderfully of free minds and lofty thoughts. The poet stands firm and declares:

This battle is not just a battle of lands,
 A war of conquest, a balance-of-power war.
 It is a battle for the mind of man
 Not only for his body. It will decide
 What you and you and you can think and say,
 Plan, dream, and hope for in your inmost minds
 For the next thousand years.²⁰

This is not great, soaring poetry, but it is good poetry and good radio drama.

¹⁹Benét, pp. 179-180.

²⁰Benét, We Stand United, p. 107.

As we read the gripping slavery play, Freedom's a Hard-Bought Thing,²¹ we see in Cue, the strong young Negro, the embodiment of the man with freedom in his body too deep to be uprooted. Nightmare at Noon²² is not a play, but a poem for a single voice, rising above the comfort and good times of complacent America to warn of approaching Fascism. Benét also has a delightful fantasy in print, Daniel Webster and the Sea Serpent, adapted for radio by Sheldon Stark.²³

Of the remaining published plays by Benét, the only one of unusual merit is The Undefended Border. The play is a brief history of the relationship between the United States and Canada on the border between the two countries, and aside from a somewhat idealized picture of the friendship between the two nations, it is a smartly written, well-paced radio drama.

The beautiful Western Star is the first book of an epic Benét left unfinished at his death--the story of the settling of America. He is again the American poet, the interpreter of the American promise, when he writes at the close of Western Star:

²¹Boyd.

²²The Treasury Star Parade, ed. William A. Bacher (New York and Toronto, 1942).

²³Columbia Workshop Plays, ed. Douglas Coulter (New York and London, 1939).

End the song, end the song,
 For now the flood goes west, the rushing tide,
 The rushing flood of men,
 Hundred on hundred, crowding the narrow ships,
 Massachusetts begins, and Providence Plantations,
 Connecticut begins, Virginia spreads out.

. . . Exile, rebel, men against fortune, all
 Who are driven forth, who seek new life and new hope
 As the wheel of England turns, they are coming now
 To the exile's country, the land beyond the star.²⁴

Stephen Benét meant much to radio in the few years that he wrote radio plays. There is no doubt he would have meant much more if he had lived beyond the days when thinking was channeled into the path of wartime ideas and wartime propaganda. It would have been interesting to read and hear the Benét who might have written more plays like Western Star and A Child Is Born in the postwar world he never lived to see.

Norman Lewis Corwin

The two poets we have considered above both came to radio from the success of other forms of writing. But Norman Corwin is a radio writer, born in the rush and sophistry of the radio medium, briefly trained in newspaper writing, but still essentially a radio writer. In that respect, at least, he is a writer much different from MacLeish and Benét.

Norman Corwin is a curious mixture of cleverness, sincerity, tongue-in-cheek humor, patriotism, cynicism, and charm

²⁴Liss, pp. 154-155.

in writing. His plays are sometimes delightful, sometimes boring, often bombastic, and occasionally moving. Out of this impossible tangle of contradictions, it will be difficult to discuss Corwin properly in the space available.

Perhaps a good place to start would be with some critical notes on Corwin and, following these, some of his own comments on the radio form of drama. Harriet Van Horne calls him a poet, and begins her article on him with the statement:

If one agrees with the English critic, Herbert Read, that the dividing line between prose and poetry is found not in the form employed but in the quality of the experience conveyed, then Norman Corwin, radio's master craftsman, is a poet of commendable stature even when he abandons the verse form.²⁵

Miss Van Horne is not alone in praising Corwin, although most critics do not share her unbounded appreciation.

John Mason Brown, well pleased with Corwin, writes of radio's development toward maturity, and states:

If you wish to realize how fully radio has matured in an incredibly short time, and to comprehend its special possibilities when it is operating at its distinguished best, you have only to hear or read Mr. Corwin's On a Note of Triumph. It provides an exception, both exciting and brilliant, to the average dramatic entertainments offered on the air.²⁶

²⁵Harriet Van Horne, "The Bard of Radio Row," The Saturday Review of Literature, April 22, 1944, p. 30.

²⁶John Mason Brown, "On a Note of Triumph," The Saturday Review of Literature, May 26, 1945, p. 22.

This review well illustrates the reception generally given to On a Note of Triumph,²⁷ Corwin's great play written to commemorate the end of the war in Europe. It may be his best work; many think it is the best, but at least one critic failed to respond to the victory program. Bernard De Voto is outspoken in his censure of it:

Good writing, whether poetry or prose, would have worked this same material into symbols deeply felt and so capable of evoking a deep response. But these associations are commonplace and this imagination is vulgar. It is a flip rhetoric, a rhetoric so flip that it degrades the emotions presumed to have created it.²⁸

De Voto resented the intrusion of the announcer, found the writing to be tinny, and the entire play to be lacking in elevation.

This criticism of Corwin is interesting because some of it applies to much of his work. He is a clever writer, glib and intelligent, given to making his dialogue pert and sophisticated. At the same time, it is not wise to overlook the fact that victory in the war was a people's victory. Corwin wrote On a Note of Triumph for the victors; he used the language he felt the people would appreciate. He introduces the conqueror who turns out to be a private in the army

²⁷Norman L. Corwin, On a Note of Triumph (New York, 1945).

²⁸Bernard De Voto, "The Easy Chair," Harpers' Magazine, July 1945, p. 36.

of the United Nations. This was Corwin's play for the ordinary people and most of them thrilled to it as evidenced by thousands of letters commending it. America has a flip rhetoric, be that good or bad, and Corwin was writing the language of this country in On a Note of Triumph. There is far less excuse for this smart cleverness in many of his other plays, and more reason to be critical of it. But in his V-Day script, it seems the thing to do in view of the occasion.

Close to On a Note of Triumph in popularity and critical approval is the Corwin anti-Fascist play which he calls Untitled.²⁹ This is the grim story of a dead soldier and the effect his death had on a few people. Many say it is Corwin's best, a play of forceful ideas, several well-developed characters, and strong dialogue. The technique employs the same type of narration punctured by tableaux and music as that used in On a Note of Triumph and dozens of other Corwin plays.

In these two plays, considered the best of fifty published plays read for this study, Corwin puts into practice many of his own tenets for radio drama. In an article for Theatre Arts, Corwin says:

. . . a script longer than an hour would wear out its welcome. Any scene within a script cannot run very long without becoming static. The attention must be trapped at the beginning and held constantly,

²⁹Norman L. Corwin, Untitled and Other Radio Dramas (New York, 1945).

for with radio it's a continual scramble to have and hold listeners, to win them away from the opposition stations, and to keep them won.³⁰

Corwin praises the use of the narrator and makes the statement that some of the country's best writers do not know the technique of radio writing and are therefore ineffective on the air. Although these views are quite acceptable to nearly everyone within the industry, they are not shared by many critics and writers outside of radio. If a radio play cannot hold interest more than one hour, if individual scenes must be short, if holding the listener to the station is the prime consideration, and if a knowledge of the technique of studio production is the first requisite for successful radio writing, it might be said that radio is indeed a poor medium for the drama.

The article quoted above was written in 1940. Eleven years later, Corwin opens an article on radio writing with this sentence:

To the writer who wants to make a living from radio in these years of its decline, I offer two words of advice: be mediocre I cannot see the Columbia Workshop rising from the dead. I cannot see any program on any American network where a writer, on merit alone, can get a hearing before a national audience.³¹

³⁰Norman L. Corwin, "The Sovereign Word," Theatre Arts, February 1940, p. 132.

³¹Norman L. Corwin, "Radio Writing, U. S. A.," The Writer, February 1951, p. 35.

This is a despondent, disillusioned writer speaking against radio. Corwin was and is one of radio's best; if he feels that radio has no place for writers of merit, it is difficult to look with much optimism upon radio's future.

After examining these critical articles about Corwin and by Corwin, a return to a discussion of the plays will be more profitable. On a Note of Triumph and Untitled show the clever, forceful Corwin in a characteristic vein. A second victory program was written for broadcast the week of the Japanese surrender, appropriately titled 14 August.³² Much shorter than the V-E program, it is not nearly so good in many ways, but in certain clear, vibrant passages it is often better writing. The play follows the Corwin pattern of remembering the dead who were not present to celebrate the victory, and of pausing in the victory toasts to think of the work ahead in establishing the peace. No person can quarrel with the ideas, and Corwin's treatment of them is generally good listening.

We Hold These Truths was produced in late 1941, one week after the Pearl Harbor awakening. The Crossley survey agency reported that the program, overflowing with Hollywood stars, was heard by sixty million people. Corwin has written

³²Corwin, Untitled.

here a solid play based on the Bill of Rights, and the theme is established in the opening lines:

One hundred fifty years is not long in the reckoning of a hill. But to a man it's long enough

One hundred fifty years is a twinkle to a star, but to a man it's time enough to teach six generations what the meaning is of liberty, how to use it, when to fight for it.³³

With this theme, learning about liberty and when to fight for it, the play moves from one important idea to the other with adequate writing often touched by patriotic fervor. Corwin has a curious habit of dramatizing unimportant points that could have been simply stated in passing. Speaking of Washington, the citizen says:

Citizen: . . . Washington is like some other cities you have seen--has street cars, haberdasheries, newsstands, coffee shops, and slums. At busy intersections there are neon traffic signs, which, when the light's against you, say:

Sign: (Very flatly). Don't walk.

Citizen: And when the light changes:

Sign: Walk.³⁴

He dramatizes the traffic sounds, and when the citizen asks a rhetorical question about whether a brass band greeted James Madison when he returned to Virginia, the band actually plays

³³Norman L. Corwin, More by Corwin (New York, 1944), p. 57.

³⁴More by Corwin, pp. 57-58.

until the citizen says, "No. There will be no band." Then the music stops abruptly. The play is not mediocre in every respect, but at times it seems to play with words and techniques which delay the movement.

The tone and breadth of Corwin's feeling for America is best expressed in the closing speech of the citizen in We Hold These Truths, as he says in part:

From men beneath the rocking spars of fishing boats in Gloucester, from the vast tenancy of busy cities roaring with the million mingled sounds of work, from towns spread thinly through the Appalachians, from the assembly lines, the forges spitting flame, the night shifts in the mines, the great flat counties of the prairie states, from the grocers and from salesmen and the tugboat pilots and the motor-makers--affirmation! Yes! United proudly in a solemn day!³⁵

This cataloguing is a modern technique, similar to the method used by Walt Whitman in his poetry.

Corwin wrote propaganda, of course, and wrote it with vigor and without inhibition. One of Corwin's better propaganda plays has the intriguing title, They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease. You feel something different from the hammering Corwin technique, with the opening lines:

Assume it is morning.
You know what mornings are.
You have seen thousands of them:
They rise out of the East, huge as the universe
And stand in the sky till noon.³⁶

³⁵More by Corwin, p. 86.

³⁶Norman L. Corwin, Thirteen by Corwin (New York, 1942), p. 57.

The whole tone of the play is more subdued; the ideas depend more upon irony and less upon bludgeoning. He speaks of the unidentified enemy's airfield as a meadow mowed by men, buzzed by bees and lingered on by lovers, but

Here, where last year stood the windrows of the hay,
Is now an aviary of such birds as God had never
dreamed of when He made the skies.³⁷

The enemy flight begins, the target is an open city, and it is completely destroyed. On the return flight, the bomber is shot down, in an unfortunate display of the dramatic theory that evil must be punished. It is difficult to understand why the cynical, realistic Corwin has the enemy suffer in the last minute of the script, since no hint has been given that the innocent victims had any planes in the air. For the most part, however, They Fly through the Air with the Greatest of Ease is a good play.

Some of Corwin's best published plays were those written as part of the series about a Yankee in England during the war. The report on the English town of Cromer is a play of fine mood, sensitive to a people at war, and filled with characters that actually live and breathe.³⁸ Cromer is a sincere play; there is no touch of cleverness and no word antics. The people were seen and known by Corwin, and his own feelings become part of the script as he writes of the town.

³⁷Thirteen by Corwin, p. 58.

³⁸Thirteen by Corwin, p. 27.

An Anglo-American Angle and Home Is Where You Hang Your Helmet³⁹ are two other plays in the English series worthy of attention. They are vivid notes on the Britain of 1942, always sincere, and always intelligent. It is true that the purpose of the series was to create a better feeling toward England on the part of Americans, but even if the propaganda predominates, the plays do not fail to have strength and value.

Aside from the many war plays produced by Norman Corwin, there are a number of other important comedies and dramas. He wrote simply and very effectively of Ann Rutledge,⁴⁰ the girl in Lincoln's youth. The play is a series of tableaux, and, because of the disjointed action, Ann never quite becomes a fully developed character. But the story is well written and shows a feeling for the land and the people.

An unusual play, Daybreak,⁴¹ is said by many critics to be Corwin's best prose work. It is simply an account of a fast plane going around the earth with the rising sun. The latitude and longitude are called off at various spots, and occasionally the sounds of the earth's peoples will reach the

³⁹Corwin, Untitled.

⁴⁰Corwin, Thirteen by Corwin.

⁴¹Thirteen by Corwin.

plane--the crew of a tramp steamer in the Atlantic, some lobster fishermen, a New York subway explorer, and a pair of lovers in Kansas. The play admirably illustrates how air travel has reduced the size of the earth and should make the reader aware of the one-world concept.

Corwin is often praised as a humorist, and many of his plays, especially the prewar plays, are placed in the comedy class. Old Salt appears to be one of the best of these.⁴² Grandpa is a real character, and the action goes from beginning to end without the interruption of a narrator. Grandpa tells some of the tallest sea stories in radio literature and his idiom is often hilarious.

My Client Curley is considered the classic of Corwin comedies, and it is truly a good-humored play, better than most radio comedies.⁴³ Curley, the dancing caterpillar, seems to come to life without ever saying a word or making a sound. Corwin had the natural denouement, of course, in this case, because it was inevitable that Curley would turn into a butterfly. El Capitan and the Corporal is warm and real, catching the wartime tempo perfectly.⁴⁴ It is a train board romance which seems to end happily, although deferred by the

⁴²Thirteen by Corwin.

⁴³Thirteen by Corwin.

⁴⁴Corwin, Untitled.

war. One other Corwin comedy rings true, the satire on daydreams, You Can Dream, Inc.⁴⁵

From dramatized history to war propoganda to clever comedy, Norman Corwin has gone his way. He is the acknowledged leader of the radio playwrights, the prolific craftsman who wrote one play a week for months at a time. He was usually successful in his drama, always effective with most of the people and usually so with the critics. Albert Williams, one of radio's most astute critics, says:

As a poet to be judged by more competent critics Corwin's work might lack maturity, as indeed any work by a man of his years might The playwriting in his half year series '26' was equal in volume to six full-length plays He did not do it as a virtuosity, but rather because a radio series has to be done all at one time or not at all.⁴⁶

Much more could be said about Corwin and about his work. He is one of America's interesting radio personalities, and his work is sometimes brilliant and often satisfying. His plays make an important contribution to the literature of radio, and until they are replaced by more mature, more artistic drama, they will probably remain as worthwhile examples of radio writing in the first half of the century.

⁴⁵Untitled.

⁴⁶Albert N. Williams, "The Radio Artistry of Norman Corwin," The Saturday Review of Literature, February 14, 1942, p. 6.

Arch Oboler

Arch Oboler was born in Chicago in 1909, and after his studies at the University of Chicago ended, radio became his first and last career. A sketch called Futuristics was written by Oboler and broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company for the opening of Radio City in New York. This was his first radio play and it resulted in a contract to write sketches for the Rudy Vallee program. Later he became the staff writer for the horror program called Lights Out. From that time, Oboler has been one of radio's most prolific writers, turning out fully as many plays as Corwin but without as much recognition from public or critics.

Oboler has found some friends among the critics. Leonard Allen calls him a liberal in his thinking and an artist at using fantasy to portray modern ideas. He calls Oboler

. . . the playwright whose sustained artistry and prolific contributions are credited as factors in the campaign to raise radio drama from its dubious position as a stepchild of literature.⁴⁷

The Oboler plays run deeply into the field of propaganda just as did the work of Benét and Corwin. All of these men wrote much of their work during the war and used their programs to appeal to the people for support of the war effort. Oboler expressed his feeling about propaganda in this manner:

⁴⁷Leonard Allen, "Arch Oboler: Literary Light of Radio," The Christian Science Monitor, August 31, 1940, p. 5.

For the radio writer to use radio simply as a disseminator of fun and laughter is not enough in these times. Simply to use radio as a means of making money is to confess that from writer to network, to business organization we are all failing to use a great means of expression to the fullest extent of its potentialities at a time, historically, when as a medium of idea expression it is needed the most.⁴⁸

Like Corwin, Oboler often gave way before the needs of the moment, and some of his plays are exhortations to the people without any real drama. Other plays of the time came to life and made good drama as well as effective propaganda.

Before considering Oboler's plays, it is well to understand what the author thought about writing for radio. He writes in an essay attached to his book, Fourteen Radio Plays:

The very first premise for writing good radio should be actually having something to say that hasn't been said before quite in the manner in which you say it!⁴⁹

He considers the story of prime importance, taking precedence over the techniques and sounds. Of the beginning of a play, he writes:

Resounding musical chords aren't enough; wailing sound effects aren't enough; the only effective way to audience attention is to plunge right into the essence of your story.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Arch Oboler, "Thoughts on Radio Playwriting," The Writer, April 1947, p. 132.

⁴⁹Arch Oboler, Fourteen Radio Plays (New York, 1940), p. xvi.

⁵⁰Fourteen Radio Plays, p. xvii.

Finally, he made this comment about radio playwriting:

. . . the fact remains that the basis of good dramatic writing will continue to be having a story to tell, and then telling it, in terms of techniques, as simply as possible.⁵¹

Not many critics will have any quarrel with these announced aims of Oboler, but a study of his plays seems to indicate a gap between asserted principle and practice.

One of Oboler's best plays is a charming little piece with an O. Henry ending. Baby⁵² is the story of Peggy, an expectant mother, afraid to confide in her husband because of their poverty. But all ends happily when she goes home to find him excited over a new salary increase. He plans to save the salary difference each week for the thing he most desires--of course, a baby. The action is mostly in the mind of Peggy; so the play is really more of a story than a dramatic action.

This Precious Freedom⁵³ is a good play, with Jim, a well developed character, experiencing the bitterness of unemployment and ingratitude from his family. It is a depressing story of harsh realism, and seems to be sincere and well planned. One of Oboler's war plays turns out to be

⁵¹Fourteen Radio Plays, p. xxix.

⁵²Fourteen Radio Plays.

⁵³Fourteen Radio Plays.

fairly interesting--the sketch called V Day. A pathetic little German boy watches the conquering soldiers enter Berlin and seeks his father, a German who has been forced to flee from Germany. He knows his father will be in the parade because he had told the boy he would:

Boy: He said--he said--'I--I will be back, Peter. You will find me when free men march through Berlin again.' And my mama says you are free men, and you are marching, so please, mister, where is my father?⁵⁴

Oboler is a writer of sincerity, sensitive to the American scene, but often his plays show more enthusiasm than artistry.

One of Oboler's plays, The Ivory Tower,⁵⁵ is a propaganda piece from the German viewpoint. It tells the story of the people in Germany who were disturbed by the Nazi party and its hold on the nation. It was written especially for the actress, Nazimova, and the story of the small-town teacher in Germany before and after the rise of Hitler is told by a series of flashbacks, one of the unflinching characteristics of Oboler's work. Elsa Heinrich teaches brotherhood and truth before 1933, then with misgivings begins to teach the Nazi doctrine of lies and hate. The climax of the play comes when Hitler visits the town and Elsa's class is chosen to sing for

⁵⁴Free World Theatre, ed. Arch Oboler and Stephen Longstreet (New York, 1944), p. 264.

⁵⁵Arch Oboler, Oboler Omnibus (New York, 1945).

him. When she hears the Nazi blood song from the mouths of the innocents, she denounces Nazism and awaits the inevitable punishment of the Gestapo. The Ivory Tower is the best Oboler play by many standards, including unity of plot, suspense, and characterization.

The story of Tschaikowsky's patron, Madame Philaretovna, is told with feeling and understanding in This Lonely Heart.⁵⁶ The play is perhaps too long for its sustained mood of sadness and yearning, but the full-hour length is needed to tell the story properly. The action is told by a series of tableaux, again by flashback, with Nadejda Philaretovna narrating the story of her life and strange relations with the musical genius she never met. Noteworthy on the program was the use of the full National Broadcasting Company symphony orchestra playing Tschaikowsky's music.

Bathysphere⁵⁷ is a good plot and is well handled except for the ending. Both the Leader, presumably Hitler, and Eric are well developed characters, but if Oboler meant the Leader to be despicable, he did not succeed. The Leader is strong, courageous and understanding in his attitude toward the young scientist who took him beneath the sea in a bathysphere and threatened to sever the lines to the ship.

⁵⁶Oboler, Fourteen Radio Plays.

⁵⁷Fourteen Radio Plays.

The Leader convinces Eric that killing him would not free the state, that others would carry out the same policies. Eric crumbles before this argument and the two return to the surface, with the victory definitely going to the Leader.

Mirage⁵⁸ is a play of strange foreboding, posing the question of what a person would do if he knew the exact day and hour of his death. A mysterious old man writes in the sand on the beach the dates of the death of two young people. The two are at first shocked to learn the dates of their death, but after thinking about life and death, they decide to forget their narrow social existence and live a life of mental and spiritual freedom for their few remaining days. An example of the type of play written for the Lights Out program is Oboler's Catwife.⁵⁹ It will be found sordid, revolting, and without interest by most readers. In Chicago, Germany,⁶⁰ Oboler paints a harsh, bitter picture of what might happen in Chicago if Hitler won the war. It is what can be expected of such a theme, patriotic and trite, although the dialogue is interesting.

⁵⁸Fourteen Radio Plays.

⁵⁹Fourteen Radio Plays.

⁶⁰Bacher.

Oboler often closes his propoganda plays with a long oration, repeating many of the ideas in the play and expounding similar ones. Strange Morning⁶¹ is marred by this device, since the story is told well in the body of the play. The peroration is unnecessary and distracting. The fervent Suffer Little Children⁶² is gripping, with good dialogue, but the patriotism is overdone and somewhat nationalistic.

Among the other Oboler plays that should be mentioned are The Women Stayed at Home,⁶³ improbable story of an American girl harboring and loving a German soldier; Dark World,⁶⁴ a play showing the adjustment of a blind person to the world; Mr. Ginsburg,⁶⁵ the prizefight story; The Day the Sun Exploded,⁶⁶ the satire on a successful world peace conference; and Mr. Whiskers,⁶⁷ a play about Walt Whitman visiting a modern army camp; a play that is far better in theme than in treatment.

⁶¹Oboler, Oboler Omnibus.

⁶²Arch Oboler, This Freedom (New York, 1942).

⁶³This Freedom.

⁶⁴This Freedom.

⁶⁵Oboler, Fourteen Radio Plays.

⁶⁶Fourteen Radio Plays.

⁶⁷Fourteen Radio Plays.

In the Oboler plays, it is difficult to find insincere writing, but equally difficult to find writing of power and vision. Radio demands writers of speed and persistency and Oboler fills that demand in a satisfactory manner. If his writing lacks art, polish, and subtlety, it is well to remember the purpose of most of his plays. To Arch Oboler, as to most radio writers, the prime interest was motivating a nation to participate in a war; with that aim there can be little quarrel.

Norman Rosten

Norman Rosten is an American poet who has been awarded several scholarships by leading literary groups. He received his college training at the University of Michigan, where, in 1938, he won the Avery Hopwood Awards for both poetry and drama. He was given the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in 1940, and a Guggenheim Fellowship for study during 1941 and 1942. Rosten was finding his mark in the poetry of America, and after winning the Poetry Society of America Award in 1943, he reached the climax of these honors with the award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Rosten published a volume of verse, Return Again, Traveler, before starting his radio career, which began during the war, with the Office of War Information. During the war

and since, Norman Rosten has been an active radio writer, often writing his plays in verse.

In his foreword to Benét's book of radio scripts, Rosten satirizes the usual radio play with biting humor:

Often radio is innocent enough, with the hero shouting, 'We'll come back. We strike in the night as avengers! (Burst of machine gun) I'm hit . . . keep going, Mike. Tell Mary that . . . (whine of shell approaching and over) . . . and I'd go through it again because . . . (Plane in power dive, register, build to terrific crash) Tell her also . . . (Sudden burst of rifle fire and rocket guns) . . . and I'll always feel that way, and if she asks for my last words, tell her . . . (Music surge in, hold, bring to higher level, sustain tremolo, then rise to climax and out) . . . that's all I have to say, Mike.'⁶⁸

But not all of his critical thinking about radio was confined to satire. Speaking of poetry on the air, Rosten writes:

It is a matter of breaking the established clichés of diction and allowing, if only occasionally, newer rhythms on the air. I think if poetry is given a chance it will prove it is no dead or esoteric thing. And by chance I do not, of course, mean the 'poetry' of the singing commercial.⁶⁹

The radio play generally considered Rosten's best is the powerful Ballad of Bataan,⁷⁰ written for the Treasury Department in May 1942, just before the fall of Bataan to the Japanese. The play eulogizes the men and women who fought on Bataan for five months against overwhelming enemy forces.

⁶⁸Benét, p. vii.

⁶⁹Quoted in Liss, p. 233.

⁷⁰Bacher.

Rosten reviewed the heroism and the tragedy of Bataan and Corregidor, sounding a note of pride in the lines:

They were rookies, most of them.
 This was their first war.
 They crouched at the noise at first
 and handled their guns like farmers.
 But they caught on fast.
 They knew the land and their footing.
 They fought stripped to the waist and grinning.
 This was their corner of the U. S. A.⁷¹

Then after malaria had won the victory for Japan and Bataan fell, the poet sings a final note of praise:

Our fathers of the living past,
 these are your sons! Remember them
 with Bunker Hill and Valley Forge.
 Tom Paine, Jefferson, Lincoln: your words live again!
 Your words are poems shining on our bayonets
 and our bayonets are fixed!⁷²

Written to arouse the American people, Ballad of Bataan holds a place as one of radio's best verse dramas, although it is more a poem than a play.

A much earlier verse drama by Rosten was the beautiful Prometheus in Granada, written in memory of the Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca.⁷³ It is the story of Lorca's execution by the Franco forces in 1936. The style of narration is radio style, using bits of tableau interwoven with narration.

⁷¹Bacher, Treasury, p. 15.

⁷²Treasury, p. 20.

⁷³William Kozlenko, One Hundred Non-Royalty Radio Plays (New York, 1941).

It is a tight, gripping drama and often the poetry is excellent. The rebel soldiers seize Lorca and bind him to a great rock on the mountain top. The Captain orders him shot, but the soldiers will not fire, and Lorca says:

They cannot kill us:
We know too many songs.⁷⁴

Then the planes come and machine gun bullets kill the poet on his rock.

Rosten saw the possibility of using verse drama to tell a story that seemed to be prosaic. In The Big Road,⁷⁵ he tells about the soldiers who built the Alaska-Canada Highway, and relates the harsh, realistic tale with sensitive verse. The radio script is actually only part of a long narrative poem of the same title, about which Rosten says:

I have attempted to celebrate man through the saga of exploration and construction, using the road both as myth and history. The Alcan Highway, built by white and Negro army engineers, built out of the need of war, is a hopeful symbol of man's destination of brotherhood. From the Roman concept of plunder, the roadway breaks through siege of terrain and war, connects and liberates, and opens upon bold vistas of the future.⁷⁶

The play is frank, often humorous, always showing respect for the men who built the road. It is an interesting mixture of realistic verse and expressionistic solo voices and chorus.

⁷⁴One Hundred Non-Royalty Radio Plays, p. 257.

⁷⁵Liss.

⁷⁶Liss, Radio's Best Plays, p. 234.

Concerning the Red Army⁷⁷ was written by Rosten for Russian War Relief in 1944 and was one of the first dramas about Soviet Russia. It is forceful propaganda, attempting to build interest in one of the allies of the last war. The picture of Russia is favorable and the play includes a review of the battle for Russian soil by the Nazis. The technique is running narration broken by tableaux to illustrate the points made by the narrator.

Rosten wrote another play for the Treasury Department series, not considered as effective as Ballad of Bataan, but generally well-received. He called it Paris Incident, setting up a story of heroism and sacrifice by a woman of the Paris underground.⁷⁸ The girl is named Joan, of course, being a French heroine, and the story reveals her underground activity, her seizure by the Germans, and her death. The mood is one of exalted patriotism, best illustrated by Rosten's closing lines:

Did you believe, Darlan, that she feared
As the bullets struck her body?
Tied to the post, her eyes upon heaven,
Did you think she wept, Monsieur Laval?
No, she was not afraid, nor did she weep.
She is not the France that is broken;
She is the France whose spirit touches ours;

⁷⁷Erik Barnouw, Radio Drama in Action (New York and Toronto, 1945).

⁷⁸Bacher.

Whose tears and sufferings are ours;
Whose final victory shall also be ours!⁷⁹

Another of Rosten's published radio plays, Miss Liberty Goes to Town,⁸⁰ is a happy, spirited piece about the Statue of Liberty and General Grant. They tour New York to find out if the people are fighting the war. They are satisfied and go back to the harbor and the tomb, secure in their faith in America.

Norman Rosten is a young poet, and the radio public may expect other and greater work from him if he chooses the medium for further serious attention. He sees radio as a potential medium for good drama, but is cautious:

The way I see it, the war gave radio a shot in the arm. The war lifted radio out of its bog of mediocrity to a place of distinction. It spoke of man and his world--and radio can speak when it wants to--boldly, honorably. It has become an instrument of social action. It has done some swell shows on the veteran, the problems of peace, world unity, etc. With peace here, however, I wonder if radio drama won't slide right back to its weary formula of love and the creaking door. I hope not.⁸¹

Morton Wishengrad

One of radio's less publicized but most talented writers is Morton Wishengrad, the son of Russian immigrant

⁷⁹Bacher, Treasury, p. 165.

⁸⁰Treasury.

⁸¹Barnouw, p. 167.

parents. A graduate of New York University, Wishengrad was a labor leader who entered radio by chance. The need for a script on labor's effort in the war resulted in Wishengrad's first radio play in 1942. From this start, he moved on to other plays for other programs, reaching the height of his radio career in the series called The Eternal Light.

Wishengrad has faith in radio, expressed in his remarks:

The 'degeneracy of radio' has become one of the more fashionable critical stereotypes. Like all stereotypes it bears a resemblance to the truth--the way a shadow grotesquely resembles the object which creates it. Just as the critics sometimes confuse themselves with God, so do the unwary sometimes confuse the mal-administration of radio with the medium itself.⁸²

He points out that a medium cannot be condemned because it is put to poor use by the people who administer it, and concludes:

The radio medium is exactly that--a medium for dramatic and universal transmission of a spoken word, a sound, or a melodic line. It has all the advantages of ellipsis and imagination; it has no walls; and its greatest assets are its narrow limitations. 'It is working within limits that the craftsman reveals himself.' Goethe said that a long time ago but it still holds true. There is nothing wrong with the radio medium. And there is very little wrong with radio that good writing can't fix.⁸³

In 1943, the National Broadcasting Company presented Wishengrad's play about liberty and oppression, The Last Inca.⁸⁴

⁸²Quoted in Liss, p. 220.

⁸³Liss, Radio's Best Plays, p. 221.

⁸⁴Radio's Best Plays.

It is a powerful, convincing story about Tupac Amaru, a prince of the Incas who attempts appeasement and collaboration with the Spaniards. Tupac makes the universal discovery that freedom may not be compromised. Wishengrad saw in Amaru's fate the disturbing forerunner to the iron rule of Hitler. Amaru fights for his people after his disillusionment with the promises of the Spanish Corregidor, and gains an uneasy truce. But the Corregidor merely awaits the opportunity to capture Amaru, and finally the hero is taken by the Spaniards as he sits in church with his family. His wife and sons are strangled as he watches, then his tongue is cut out and his limbs torn from his body by horses. Wishengrad's feeling for people is contained in this speech of Amaru at the end of the play:

I affirm before God that no race has been created without beauty and without ugliness. And if there is ugliness among us, there is also beauty, and if there is enmity there is also friendship, and if there is hate, there is also love. Do not tolerate the Indian. He tolerates another man who thinks another is less than he. Give us only your friendship and your love and only . . . only let us live and go our way in peace.⁸⁵

The other Wishengrad plays in print are contained in one volume called The Eternal Light,⁸⁶ the title of the radio

⁸⁵Radio's Best Plays, p. 230.

⁸⁶Morton Wishengrad, The Eternal Light (New York, 1947).

series on which they were presented. These twenty-six plays include much of radio's finest, most mature writing. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America initiated the series on the National Broadcasting Company network for the purpose of interpreting Judaism to America. Helene Hooker of the Hollywood Quarterly, in reviewing the published plays of The Eternal Light program, states:

Over the air we have heard the fight against anti-Semitism more dramatically than we have ever seen it on the screen. This achievement of intellectual integrity has quietly developed within the framework of an industry that has peddled some of the most infantile and unrealistic literature that the human mind can conceive; where escapism sells soap; and where . . . sadism passes for comedy.⁸⁷

She praises the Wishengrad program for its method of informing without preaching. Miss Hooker compares Wishengrad with the better-known Norman Corwin, stating that Wishengrad is high-minded and writes accordingly, while Corwin is often sentimental and mediocre. She continues:

To sum up, I am forced to conclude that Wishengrad is a radio writer, exercising a knowledge of his craft and a gift of imagination that makes him a pleasure to read. Sensitive and articulate, he writes with poetic feeling, with variety, and with insight. On the other hand, Corwin, with his immense sense of the theatrical, his keen instinct for the timely, and his enormous bag of tricks, is a radio personality, a virtuoso, a producer who puts what he wants to say into words that are sometimes

⁸⁷Helene M. Hooker, "Radio Growing Up," Hollywood Quarterly, III (Fall 1947), 97.

deeply moving, often colorful, and exceedingly effective, but sometimes hollow and bathetic.⁸⁸

A reading of The Eternal Light scripts is an introduction to a radio drama that is tender, passionate, and always intelligent. Moses Mendelssohn, for instance, is a fine religious play, enriched with philosophical teachings and convincing dialogue. The idea of religious freedom in the Germany of Frederick the Great is advanced by the ugly, misshapen Moses, who, because of his convictions, defies the Emperor and the Court.

Mendelssohn is a vivid characterization, a rare thing in radio drama. Wishengrad has the girl, Fromet, wise beyond most women, speak of the soul inside the dwarfed figure of Moses. She loves him and he cannot understand what she sees in such an ugly creature. She speaks to him of the princess who persuaded her father to put all his fine wine in gold and silver vessels, instead of the old earthen jugs ordinarily used. The sensitive writer is seen in the lines of Fromet:

So she persuaded her father, the king, to transfer the good wine to vessels of gold and silver; and the wine turned sour. (Pause) Don't you see, Moses Mendelssohn, she discovered what I know. Goodness and wisdom are like wine. They keep best in a plain vessel . . . like you.⁸⁹

⁸⁸Hooker, p. 98.

⁸⁹Wishengrad, p. 20.

The court is pleased with Mendelssohn's philosophy but the King sends a baron to talk to him about changing his faith. He refuses, of course, and must defend Judaism before the Court. He makes an impassioned defense and is allowed to live in peace, although the controversy does not end.

The most dramatic of the plays is The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto, a play written in ten days from material taken from the files of the American Jewish Committee. It concerns the Jews under Nazi cruelty, telling the story forcefully, clearly, and without hysterics. Here is what Wishengrad said he was trying to do:

In The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto I wanted to present the tragedy of the people who gave the world its monotheism, its morality, and its concept of the sacredness of human life. I wanted to present the Jews as they are, without self-pity, without anger, and with the terrible conviction that, to paraphrase Theodor Herzl, if you cannot march, you must at least remain standing.⁹⁰

There are many effective touches, written without swagger or theatrics--Dvora's flower box in the window of the squalid Ghetto, the symphony orchestra that played until the Germans took the instruments, and especially the episode after Dvora's death when Isaac stripped her and left her in the street so the Germans could not identify her and take away the bread card. The action is tense and dramatic, and

⁹⁰Barnouw, p. 33.

always there are the human feelings expressed in language that rings true.

The resistance of the Jews is described and their eventual annihilation. Then comes the final summing up:

Hear him with reverence. For he sings a prayer for the dead--twenty-five thousand dead. It is no ordinary prayer and they are no ordinary dead. For they are the dead of the Warsaw Ghetto--in the year nineteen hundred and forty-three For on the page of their agony they wrote a sentence that shall be an atonement, and it is this: Give me grace and give me dignity and teach me to die; and let my prison be a fortress and my wailing wall a stockade, for I have been to Egypt and I am not departed.⁹¹

The Tender Grass is a beautiful fantasy, especially enjoyable if the reader understands the Feast of the Passover. The prophet Elijah sings the Kiddush for the family of Shalom, whose seven sons are mute as the result of a curse put on them by the birds of the world. But the humility and reverence of the family cause the birds to lift the curse, and on the following Passover the sons answer "Amen" when the prophet sings the Kiddush. In bare outline the story fails to show the imagery and tenderness of Wishengrad's style.

Wishengrad knew well how to use humor and fantasy in a mixture that results in an integrated play, advancing serious themes with understanding. In The Parable of Reb Yisroel, we are entertained by the story of the angels disputing over the

⁹¹Wishengrad, p. 45.

degree of saintliness of Reb Yisroel. But the underlying thought is serious and the wise words of the Rabbi are impressive. The narration is intelligently handled in this play, beginning with the opening speech:

That morning in question I happened to be standing outside the Heavenly Gate. As usual there was a great throng waiting to be tried by the Heavenly Tribunal. Some groaned and bit their fingernails; others radiated an aura of confidence. Now it has been my experience founded on four hundred and sixty-two years of personal observation that sinners who await the heavenly trial are frequently expectant and self-assured while righteous men and women invariably tremble at the imminent prospect of judgment.⁹²

The religious folk movement known as Chassidism, which began in the middle of the eighteenth century, has provided many charming tales and legends. Wishengrad has used some of these as the basis for some of his plays, notably in A Chassidic Tale, which assembles several well-known parables and legends of Chassidism. The Chassidics believed in a happy, singing, spirited religious worship, a marked contrast in their time to the melancholy rites usually practiced. In this play, Wishengrad takes the man, Avrum, a wagon driver, and throughout the play makes him complain about Eliezer, the Chassidic rabbi. Avrum dislikes music and laughter in religion; he censures Eliezer for encouraging scholars to play

⁹²Wishengrad, The Eternal Light, p. 49.

checkers, and he goes to hear the rabbi speak only because, as Avrum tells it:

First, it's none of your business, and second, I, Avrum Isaacson, listen to anyone I want to listen to. So I developed the very bad habit of listening to Rabbi Eliezer.⁹³

It quickly becomes obvious, of course, that Avrum is being converted to Chassidism by the wisdom, the humanness, and the warmth of Eliezer. The play includes numerous examples of epigrammatic wisdom. Avrum speaks at the close in words of heartwarming humor:

Mind you, I haven't changed my opinion . . . only as Rabbi Eliezer says, to sin against your fellow man is worse than to sin against God. So, Rabbi Eliezer, can you hear me? It's me . . . Avrum Isaacson. If I have . . . well, mind you, Rabbi Eliezer, I haven't changed my mind. But, well, you know how it is. Besides, I liked the singing.⁹⁴

A Rhode Island Refuge and Thomas Kennedy, two plays about Jews in America, are especially good. In the Rhode Island story, Wishengrad has an excellent play of sincerity and easy pace which tells of the deep feeling for America shared by the Jews who came to this country to escape persecution. In the beginning, only Rhode Island under Roger Williams would allow Jews to worship freely, and the play shows the loyalty of Benjamin, Meyer, Mordecai, and other

⁹³The Eternal Light, p. 211.

⁹⁴The Eternal Light, p. 212.

Jewish leaders toward the colony in the war with England. The script closes with a letter from George Washington praising the Jews of Rhode Island for their devout loyalty and way of life. The play is noteworthy because of its intense but restrained patriotism. There is none of the bombast and shouting of the usual radio patriotism.

Thomas Kennedy, one of the best plays in the series, is the authentic history of a man who fought in the Maryland House of Delegates for religious freedom. The theme of the play is Jefferson's comment, "We are not to expect to be translated from despotism to liberty in a featherbed."⁹⁵ Kennedy refuses to take the oath as a delegate to the House because of the lines, "upon the true faith of a Christian." He fights the good fight and eventually succeeds in having a bill passed insuring religious freedom for all people in Maryland.

The plays discussed here are representative of the twenty-six in The Eternal Light. The writing of Wishengrad in this series is good radio drama, but it is far more important as common sense, truth, and a highly literate expression of faith in humanity.

In a preface to The Eternal Light, Morton Wishengrad expresses his view of radio drama--one that explains the choice of subject matter for his plays:

⁹⁵The Eternal Light, p. 67.

It comes finally to this: The radio medium cannot rise above the culture of which it is essentially an expression and an instrument; but it can, at least, try to express the occasional peaks of that culture and not merely its mediocrities.⁹⁶

Millard Lampell

Youngest of the major radio playwrights is Millard Lampell, Air Force sergeant, who has fourteen plays in a volume entitled The Long Way Home.⁹⁷ He also has two other plays in anthologies. Lampell had a varied career before and during the war. He was born in Paterson, New Jersey, and after attending West Virginia University, he joined a group of folk singers and toured the country with a guitar. But radio writing became his profession in 1942, the year he wrote his best work, The Lonesome Train. When he joined the Air Force, his assignments included work on two series of radio programs, First in the Air and Wings for Tomorrow.

The Lonesome Train⁹⁸ is a ballad-type of poem and Lampell's words were written for a tune composed by Earl Robinson. The song tells the story of Lincoln's assassination and the melancholy train journey from Washington to New

⁹⁶The Eternal Light, p. xxii.

⁹⁷Millard Lampell, The Long Way Home (New York, 1946).

⁹⁸Barnouw.

York and back to Springfield, Illinois. It is a mixture of narration, speeches by various individuals, and choral singing.

The ballad singer is straightforward:

They carried the news from Washington,
That Abraham Lincoln's time had come;
John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln dead,
With a pistol bullet through the head!⁹⁹

The narrator carries the story forward, telling about the people gathered around the tracks watching the train pass.

Then the balladeer changes the mood as he sings:

They tell a story about that train,
They say that Lincoln wasn't on that train;
When that train started on its trip that day,
Lincoln was in Alabama, miles away!

(Speaks)

Yes, sir, down in Alabama . . .

(Sings)

In an old wooden church,
Didn't have no paint,
Didn't have no floor,
Didn't have no glass in the windows . . .¹⁰⁰

In successive scenes, Lincoln is with a congregation of Negro worshippers, in a hospital telling a soldier why the war was fought, and finally in the back of the crowd in his home town telling yarns while the funeral train goes by.

Lampell is aware of Lincoln's unpopularity with some people as he writes:

⁹⁹Barnouw, Radio Drama in Action, p. 242.

¹⁰⁰Radio Drama in Action, p. 244.

Earl: And some wanted him dead for a long time.
A cotton speculator turned away from the
coffin, saying:

Speculator (Speaks). All right, boys, the drinks
are on me.¹⁰¹

And later, when the train pulls into Cleveland, the singer
realizes:

Ballad Singer. Some in the north and some in the west,
And some by the President's side,
Cursed him every day that he lived,
And cheered on the day he died!

Earl. The Copperheads . . .
A New York politician who didn't like Lincoln . . .
An Ohio businessman who didn't like Negroes . . .
A Chicago newspaper editor who didn't like
people . . .¹⁰²

The Lonesome Train was played hundreds of times by recording
on American radio stations in the days after Franklin
Roosevelt died.

Lampell's last assignment for the Army was to write a
play to commemorate the end of the war. He wrote October
Morning, a play of reminiscence and hope for the future.

Lampell says of the play:

For me it marked the end of an era in more ways than
one. Not only was it the end of my Army days but it
was the end of the time when radio networks would be
open for writers who offered anger and dignity.
Radio is exciting, flexible, a wonderful form for

¹⁰¹Radio Drama in Action, p. 246.

¹⁰²Radio Drama in Action, pp. 247-248.

verse and for combinations of words and music. But radio is also the juke box of the corporations. As long as they keep sticking nickels in the damn thing, it will play the tunes they pick.¹⁰³

Lampell tells the story of Dave, who comes back from the war and wakes up on an October morning:

It was early morning, and I lay there,
 Letting the smell of the room surround me,
 The clean linen smell of the sheets, and the warm
 body-smell of wool blankets, and the sweet October
 smell of the flowers on the table beside me;
 And no one cried for help;
 There was no moaning of the wounded,
 In the morning.¹⁰⁴

Dave takes his young son for a walk, tells him about the war and thinks of the men who fought it and those who died in it. Then Dave tells his son how disturbed he is by the faint whisper of certain Americans, like the man on the train who said:

Man. The way I figure . . . the next war . . . maybe
 ten years . . . maybe Russia . . . who knows?¹⁰⁵

October Morning closes with an appeal to diplomats and statesmen to secure the peace.

The remainder of Lampell's published plays are in the volume, The Long Way Home. There are fourteen plays telling the story of the Air Force men who returned to America from

¹⁰³Liss, pp. 105-106.

¹⁰⁴Liss, Radio's Best Plays, p. 107.

¹⁰⁵Radio's Best Plays, p. 116.

overseas assignments. Emphasis is on the men who returned wounded and spent months in Army hospitals before being released to civilian life. In a review for the Hollywood Quarterly, William Matthews mentions the optimism of the plays and the happy endings of most of them, and concludes:

Considered for their immediate purpose, they are sensible, understanding, humane in attitude, considered as literature and for their place in the development of radio drama, they are very competent examples of the Corwin school, but pretty jejune in both idea and form.¹⁰⁶

Study in Bitterness shows a returned soldier's disappointment and irritation over the attitude of civilians toward the war. His mother fails to understand his feelings over the death of his best friend, and he leaves home abruptly when he discovers she is making a cake for German prisoners of war.

A more dramatic play with a more significant theme is The Boy from Nebraska, a straightforward drama about prejudice in America. The boy is Ben Kuroki, a Japanese-American who suffers from the insults of his adopted countrymen after returning home from eleven flying missions over Germany. Kuroki stands the prejudice for a time, then requests assignment back to a combat unit overseas. Lampell ironically writes:

¹⁰⁶William Matthews, "The Flyers Try Their Feet," Hollywood Quarterly, II (October 1946), 107.

Narrator: Have you heard the story of the boy from Nebraska? He was missed by flak over Germany, but he got it right in the teeth from a man in Arizona. He flew past the Focke-Wulfs all right, but the gentlemen from Oregon nailed him. He made it through the Ploesti raid, but he didn't quite make it through New Jersey. And the point is, there are wounds in this war that don't get the Purple Heart.¹⁰⁷

Another story of prejudice is contained in Case History.

This time a young Negro officer is sent home for a rest after flying seventy-four combat missions. But in this country he developed serious headaches, and the play is a case history probing into the reasons for his condition. The story is told in tableaux, the pilot telling the doctor about his life of poverty and prejudice. The doctor discovers the headaches were caused by a mental condition when the officer was removed from combat flying. He tells the pilot:

So now you know. You went to war to prove that Negroes had dignity and courage, and suddenly the weapon for proving it was gone. The airplane was taken away, firing machine guns at Germans was over.¹⁰⁸

The doctor convinces the officer that there are other ways of proving the courage and intelligence of his race, and persuades the young Negro to study law.

The Long Way Home, the play which gives its title to the entire collection, is centered in a bitter soldier who

¹⁰⁷Lampell, p. 64.

¹⁰⁸Lampell, Long Way, p. 107.

returns to his wife with the resolve never to have children. A train trip across America, seeing and hearing the American scene, convinces him he is wrong. The Schoolteacher from Illinois is a vehicle for explaining the Army convalescent program for wounded men and to comment on the reasons for the war. The other plays in the collection are similar in theme and mood. Lampell uses the narration technique and tells the stories of various servicemen who returned to America with real and imagined problems.

CHAPTER V

OTHER AUTHORS AND THEIR WORK

The seven major figures discussed in the preceding chapter were chosen because research shows that they have written more important radio plays and attracted more critical comment than the other radio playwrights. But there are other plays that must be mentioned in a survey of published radio drama. Most of the authors found in this chapter wrote radio plays after becoming established in other fields, and remained with radio only a brief time.

Alfred Kreyborg was an established poet in 1938 when he wrote The Planets.¹ This verse play is a modern allegory dedicated to peace. An astrologer looks through his telescope and meets the planetary gods, Mars, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune, and sees the influence each has upon the peoples of the earth. The story moves from 1913 through the first war, through the prosperous 1920 to 1930 decade, through the depression years, and then into the second war. The play is propaganda for peace, and Kreyborg bitterly denounces the folly of sending youth into battle:

¹Alfred Kreyborg, The Planets (New York and Toronto, 1938).

None but the
 creeping graybeard,
 cunning in power,
 would send forth
 armies of boys
 to bloody the earth.
 And none but the young
 have to go,
 the innocent young,
 shooting or shot
 by the young foe
 over there.²

The poet introduces Venus and shows her light shining on two lovers. They are shadows in the night, but finally embrace each other--the shadows merge:

Shadows they were--the shadows now are one,
 And one with earth: the earth's a shadow, too.
 And birth's a shadow--yes, tomorrow's here
 And yesterday's today--the earth is round.
 And round the sun they go who cling to earth:
 Their dizzy bodies go, the aching clay.
 These are immortal, nothing less, these two,
 Are one who'll bring the earth another day.³

Of more importance because of the panic it caused than for its intrinsic value is The Invasion from Mars, adapted by Howard Koch from H. G. Wells's, The War of the Worlds.⁴ Orson Welles produced it in 1938, setting off a mass panic throughout the eastern part of the country. The play is simple, using various announcers to describe a supposed invasion, and

²Planets, p. 6.

³Planets, p. 17.

⁴Hadley Cantril, The Invasion from Mars (Princeton, 1940).

finally a long narrative by a scientist to wind up the story. The cylinders from Mars are discovered in New Jersey; they open and the Martians march triumphantly over the country. They win a complete victory only to die by a disease for which they are unprepared.

In a collection of plays called The Free Company Presents⁵ are found several plays interpreting the American philosophy, including some by well-known theatre dramatists. Marc Connelly has in the collection a play entitled The Mole on Lincoln's Cheek, a piece emphasizing the importance of allowing truth to be taught to children, even when the truth is not beautiful. No narration is used in this play except for scene setting, and the dialogue tells the story. Robert Sherwood is represented by An American Crusader, the story of Elijah Lovejoy's martyrdom for the cause of a free press. Paul Green has a dramatic, poignant story called A Start in Life, which is about a Negro in the South who suffers insult in the presence of his young son. Maxwell Anderson's fantasy, The Miracle of the Danube, tells of Christ's recurring visits to a Nazi officer and the final salvation of the German. William Saroyan concentrates on the people and the ideas of America in his propaganda play, The People with Light Coming Out of Them.

⁵The Free Company Presents, ed. James Boyd (New York, 1941).

The foregoing stage writers wrote their radio plays after many stage successes, but Arthur Miller wrote for radio before his Broadway plays, All My Sons and Death of a Salesman. He has four radio plays in print in three different anthologies. In William Kozlenko's collection of plays are found Miller's Comedy, The Pussycat and the Expert Plumber Who Was a Man, and his story of a famous Shakespeare forgery, William Ireland's Confession.⁶ The cat story is a fast-moving tale of a cat who learns to talk, gets into politics, blackmails all the city and state officials to support him, then falls before the honesty and courage of one ordinary citizen, a master plumber, who exposes him. William Ireland's Confession tells of a young Londoner who forged several Shakespeare signatures to letters and finally wrote a full play in what all the experts agreed was Shakespeare's handwriting and literary style.

In Joseph Liss's Radio's Best Plays, Arthur Miller is represented by The Story of Gus,⁷ a play of the merchant marine. Gus finds peace and love on the land after he retires from the sea, but he forsakes both to return to the merchant marine when the war begins. Miller's play, Grandpa and the

⁶William Kozlenko, One Hundred Non-Royalty Radio Plays (New York, 1941).

⁷Radio's Best Plays, ed. Joseph Liss (New York, 1947).

Statue is found in Radio Drama in Action.⁸ It is a whimsical story of a man who didn't like the idea of cluttering up New York harbor with the Statue of Liberty. To Grandpa Monaghan, the Statue was French junk that the French people just wanted to dump off on us. He changes his mind before the play ends.

There are many more plays, of course, in the published literature of radio. This survey has attempted to treat the best of them, the selection being based on critical reviews, audience reception as reported in the notes in the anthologies, and on general recognition of the authors by the public and the radio industry.

⁸Erik Barnouw, Radio Drama in Action (New York and Toronto, 1945).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to survey the field of published radio drama, to analyze it as a distinct dramatic form, and to report on the best examples of this form. Of the 500 radio plays in print, some 300 were read for this study. From that number a selection was made based on reviews and studies of form and content.

The selection of Archibald MacLeish, Stephen Vincent Benét, Norman Corwin, Arch Oboler, Norman Rosten, Morton Wishengrad, and Millard Lampell was based on their standing with the radio networks, the number and tenor of critical reviews of their work, and the general recognition extended to them. These seven writers have a considerable body of radio drama in print from which to draw conclusions.

It may be concluded that radio has attracted hundreds of writers, including a number, such as MacLeish, Benét, Kreymborg, Miller, and Anderson, who were successful in other forms of writing. Many of the plays studied were written in the period from 1937 to 1945, when the threat of war and the war itself turned the national attention to the spirit of America. Most of the plays in this period were propaganda plays, aimed at arousing interest in the war effort.

Some radio dramas, such as The Fall of the City, Air Raid, The Big Road, and The Planets, have been written in verse, but most of them in prose. The device of the narrator is used in a majority of the plays in print, as are also the flash-back and tableau. The language for the most part is that spoken in the normal relationships of people, and radio plays generally treat of timely themes.

An intriguing and perplexing question about radio drama that has been raised in this study is, "Do inherent limitations of the medium make first-rate drama on the air impossible?" The present investigation warrants only a partial answer.

Radio drama is for the ear only; the time available for the broadcast of a play is relatively short, and the listeners are often subject to distractions. These appear to be the major limitations, but there are many others of significance. On the other hand, each of these limitations has a complementary advantage. Since radio drama is aural only, the auditor may use his imagination to set the scene, supply physical attributes of characters and actions, and otherwise endow what he hears with theatrical illusion. The brief time needed to hear a play on the air makes it possible for people to listen to drama more often without requiring an entire evening. The home environment is responsible for distractions, but it also tends toward convenience and comfort in listening.

It seems certain that a conclusive answer to the question of radio's limitation as a dramatic art medium must wait upon further investigation. Radio as a medium of communication is recognized for its effectiveness and power. But as a medium for creating and improving a new form of the drama-- drama of words without sight--the radio industry has been hampered by commercialism, timidity in approaching vital issues, and preconceived notions of what the listening public want or will accept in their homes.

This study shows that much good radio drama has been written, but that some of the people who have written it are pessimistic over the future of radio drama as an art form. That future lies at present in the hands of businessmen to whom experimentation and originality in drama are antithetical to the primary business of showing a profit.

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