Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Theses and Dissertations | Graduate School

2016

The Visual Staging of Audio Plays

Alex P. Burkart
Virginia Commonwealth University, burkartap@vcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

Part of the Acting Commons, and the Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from
http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/4106

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

The Visual Staging of Audio Plays

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Alex Paul Burkart
BFA, Webster University, 2008
MFA, Virginia Commonwealth University

David Emerson Toney
Assistant Professor/Artistic Director, Department of Theatre
Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA
April 18, 2016

Acknowledgment

Special thanks to my incredible mentors at TheatreVCU: David Emerson Toney, Dr. Noreen Barnes, David Leong, Ron Keller, and Thomas Cunningham

Susan Schuld for giving me the opportunity to stage my first radio play.

My family: Emily A. Fisher, Paul and Susan Burkart, Nathan, Tyler, Meg, and Jess

My past mentors, who ignited my love for theatrical performance: Doug Finlayson, Kat Singleton, Byron Grant, Steven Woolf, Josh Burton, and Edie Baran

Ken Regez for sharing your voice and blazing passion for nostalgia

My fellow graduate students, for being the sturdiest of sounding boards.

Ben Miller for your incredible musical talents

Erica Hughes and Lydia Millet

The designers and crew of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* at TheatreVCU, December 2015

And most definitely the fearless students who dared to take my 491: Radio Drama and Voice-Over Technique class; you taught me more about myself as a teacher and an artist than I ever imagined.

Table of Contents

Abstract…….....iv

Introduction: A Familiar Voice……1

Chapter 1: The Evolution into Radio Drama or The Birth of Theatrical Sound…….6

Chapter 2: Radio Drama Theory, Technique, and Production……...14

Chapter 3: Application with *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*……26

Afterward: A Simple Breath…….63

Bibliography…….65

Appendix A: Diagrams and Illustrations……..68

Appendix B: Schedules and Production Notes…….73

Appendix C: Pictures and Designs……85

Vita……89

Abstract

THE VISUAL STAGING OF AUDIO PLAYS

Alex Paul Burkart, BFA Webster University, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016

Chair: David Emerson Toney
Assistant Professor/Artistic Director, Department of Theatre
Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts

The Visual Staging of Audio Plays explores the directing practice of radio dramas that are staged for viewing purposes rather than their typical solo-auditory purposes. The thesis is comprised of three separate parts: a brief history of theatrical sound, an introduction to radio drama theory and practice, and application. The application portion is a detailed first-person account of my personal experience staging *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* by Joe Landry for TheatreVCU's Mainstage winter special event in 2015. It is also in this section where I integrate history, theory, and practice to formulate technique for directing the genre for stage.

Introduction: A Familiar Voice

When I was eight years old my mother signed my twin brother and I up for a children's community theatre production of *Alice in Wonderland*. "The twin card" has often been played throughout the duration of my artistic career and this was perhaps the first throw down because we ended up taking home the parts of Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum (Jr). Having never been in a play before, and my hometown being quite limited in the knowledge of Stanislavsky's "system," I found myself pretty much reciting words from memory, never actually assigning need or action. It would be a long time, not until my undergraduate education, when I would even start exploring with the acting definitions that have become staples in actor training, but at that time it probably didn't matter: all I needed was purple tights, clown make-up, and tap shoes (yes that was my costume).

Every now and then I pull out an old VHS cassette tape that sits on rarely visited shelves in my parents' house that has this performance documented (I'm sure it will resurface sometime during my professional career much to my protest). When I watch it however, I rarely find myself watching my performance. This is not because I was a rotten actor either; it is mostly because all of the actors that were around me at that time were such key influencers for where I would end up going. Where I am now. Even though it was a children's community theatre, adults from the city would also frequently audition and participate, resulting in casts ranging in ages eight on up. When I watch this tape, I see my third grade teacher who played the Duchess, an accountant playing the Mad Hatter, and a girl only five years older than myself (at that time)

as the Dormouse. Finally, there was the March Hare: an individual who had been unbelievably kind to me, even amidst my inexperience and youth, someone who was so relatable and courageous he could make an audience erupt into laughter at the drop of a hat (or at least that is how I remember). This man's name was (and still is) Ken.

I remember my mother telling me at the time that Ken's job was "on the radio." Oftentimes as she drove me and my brothers around town in our rusty blue Subaru, she would flip the dial on the car radio until she got to the local station, and sure enough- there Ken would be- his voice being broadcast for us all to hear and experience. I can't recall exactly what Ken talked about when he was speaking on the radio, mostly because I didn't care. What I was most fascinated with was the fact that a friend of mine could be sitting in the car with me by a simple flick of a switch. No, of course I could not speak back to him (unless I wanted to have conversation with air), but there was a sense of ease having his presence there. I can't put my finger on exactly why this was the case, but it was. And then there was the whole other issue with celebrity. In a town of roughly 60,000 people, your own show on the radio was enough to have you considered a local celebrity. Everyone knew of Ken even if they really didn't know him personally. But I did. And with that, there was an escalated degree of self-importance on my part.

After my stint in *Alice in Wonderland*, my mother continued to nurture our relationship with Ken. He would invite us over to his home where he had an old projector in the basement and an impressive collection of old film reels ranging from The Three Stooges to early 3D films (he even gave us old-fashion 3D glasses). In an age where most of my friends would go home and play for hours on their Super Nintendo systems, I learned to appreciate the entertainments that came before.

As a strapping young boy soprano, I made my next major appearance in tights on the same community theatre stage playing the role of Peter Pan in *Peter Pan* (my twin brother played my shadow). Ken this summer would invite the director and I into the radio studio, giving me a chance to see the work that went into broadcasting to the radio waves. I remember being incredibly excited that Ken was going to share this experience with me, and my voice too could now sit with people in their cars on often too humid summer days in Southern WI. It was upmost flattery when people would say "I heard you on the radio."

Besides my excitement, I don't remember too much from my first experience "on the air." I remember wearing large headphones and speaking into a microphone. I remember having side conversation with Ken and my director before going "on the air." I remember him cuing us that it was almost time- and then speaking into the microphone, answering Ken's questions thoughtfully, while making sure to maintain just the right amount of energy. That's about it.

A couple of years later, Ken would leave his post at the local radio station. I started listening to a station out of Madison that played Aqua, Hanson, Spice Girls, and all of that 90's iconic popular music. Listening to talk radio wouldn't cross my mind again for some time. Perhaps my fall out of listening to talk radio was because of the lack of familiarity with the new "celebrity." I couldn't get the same feeling of having my friend in the car with me that I had before. Or maybe it was because I turned into a teenager, obsessed with what was popular. Talk radio wasn't popular.

When I moved to Los Angeles many years later my girlfriend would introduce me to a podcast known as *Serial*. *Serial* had a simple premise: it was one story that had been broken down into hour-long episodes making up a series. Every week a new episode would be posted in the form of a podcast. Getting me to listen to the "broadcast" was

actually a bit of a challenge. My girlfriend pretty much had to twist my right arm off for me to listen to the first episode, and I finally gave in (mostly to quiet her down). As in most circumstances, she was right, it was amazing, and I was totally hooked. What "amazed" me about it however I couldn't quite put my finger on. Yes, the story was very interesting, but there was arguably a great deal of repetition in the weekly broadcasts- there was not always something new to be excited about. The only conclusion I can now make is that there was something about the investigator (Sarah Koenig) that was inherently likable. Listening to her voice made me feel as if she was again right there next to me, talking passionately about something she had been studying for a great deal of time. When the series ended, I wasn't nearly as sad to let the story go as I was sad to let her voice go. There it was: a revival of that element once seeded so many years ago by my dear friend Ken.

So, the question is: "what do these examples have to do with audio plays?" The answer in the least general way is simply everything. It is never enough to only be a voice. There needs to be an extra component- one that connects you with the audience you are speaking to and allows them to see you as not a character, but a real person: a familiarity of voice. When radio plays are not successful it is because they never allowed the audience to feel for the person portraying the characters as well as the broadcast story itself. Therefore, the biggest challenge directors encounter when working on audio plays is to not only deliver a successful story, but to provide some outlet for the audience to capture the other side of the microphone. In today's theatrical world playwrights like Joe Landry have figuratively "thrown a bone" to this challenge, they give the audience the opportunity to not only fish out this familiarity audibly, but visually as well, and this is where the core of my thesis materializes. How does a director exactly go about

extracting this familiarity of voice and character to not only be listened to, but to be watched? *The Visual Staging of Audio Plays* seeks to answer this question so we can all feel as though the actors and entertainers on the other side of the microphone, or perhaps on stage in general, are none other than our dearest friends and cohorts.

Chapter 1: The Evolution into Radio Drama and Beyond

Or The Birth of "Theatrical Sound"

Before venturing into the intermingling of visual stage directing practice with the imaginary world of radio drama it is important to note the history from which the genre was formed. After all, the staging of radio dramas for the key purpose of watching is a much newer concept that embraces not only the world of the audible play but also the visual world of the radio studio. Understanding the history provides an important key towards activating the influences of the style and nostalgia that are arguably the reasons for radio drama's resurgence into watchable theatre.

The history of the actual invention of radio is murky at best due to the number of people associated with the technology's development (Hand 5). Because of this, it is easier to break down the source into a more basic arc, which I will refer to as "the history of theatrical sound." In his text *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*, Tim Crook has divided the evolution of sound drama into six distinct ages (or epochs) signposted by major inventions: oral culture, the phonograph, the electrophone/cable, radio (wireless), film and television, and the Internet. Each age expands its influence onward from its initial start date, exampling how the evolution of sound is not a linear chart where the past is forgotten, but rather a pyramid of intricate layers, each new addition stacking on top of and taking in everything that came before it. All six "epochs" are critically important to the understanding of what present-day audiences have come to expect from audio plays, therefore engaging an important wire connecting "traditional radio

plays" to modern "theatrical radio plays." When discussing "traditional" vs. "theatrical" I simply mean radio plays that are for exclusive listening vs. radio plays that are staged in theaters for viewing audiences. As I continue to overview the history and evolution of radio drama, I have divided the following history up as well into Crook's "epochs" or "eras," as I believe he has most effectively captured the progression.

Era One: Oral Culture

The initial seeds for radio drama date back to the creation of theatrical presentation: or the time in which stories began to be told. Tim Crook labels this era as a nondescript time (as the beginning of "oral culture" or "single voiced narratives" cannot distinctly be carved out). Ancient civilization's participation in this tradition has gone on for thousands of years, and it will be forever uncertain when it actually began. What is certain however, is that the use of sound to tell story is embedded deeply into history, and has remained a significant influence to mankind's identity (Crook 22). The era of "oral culture" is relatively simple and acts somewhat like a cell: a basic unit or building block to the ultimate life that would be shaped into the species we know as theatrical performance and for the purposes of this thesis: the genre of "radio drama."

Era Two: The Phonograph (1878-present)

The second staple in the progression Crook labels the phonograph. Invented in 1877 by Thomas Edison, the phonograph was a machine consisting of two needles, one that would record, and one that would play back. Edison later would try to market his machine as more of a practical tool: providing easier letter dictation, reading books to blind people, recording telephone conversations, teaching foreign languages, etc. One of the leading uses of the device however would be the ability to record music and transport it: most notably in the early 1900s when Edison would create a special model that soldiers could take with them to war ("Edison

Invents the Phonograph"; Cohen 69). What made the phonograph important to the evolution into radio however was as Crook writes: "The phonograph made possible the first experience of recording and playing back human sound and the sound of natural phenomena, synthesized sound and sound symbolism" (Crook 22). The major breakthrough in the ability to record sound and send it to other people feeds directly into the idea that radio (and other telecommunications) could be enjoyed because of the sheer fact that the audible experience was transportable. This nature would create a demand paving the way for a history of recording and audible entertainment including digital music players, audio books, podcasts, radio, film, and television: all now readily accessible entertainments.

Era Three: The Electrophone and Cable (1902-present)

This era is not landmarked by the invention of the telephone, as it is situated by the use of telephone cable to create the first "broadcasting" of audible entertainment to mass audiences, most notably through the electrophone (Crook 23). The invention of the electrophone began in France in 1881 when Clement Ader invented a system of microphones and receivers that he used to transmit music through a telephone line. People could then buy subscriptions to various switchboards from which they could experience their entertainment, similar to the modern idea of "on demand." Three years later in London an "Electrophone company" was formed using the same switchboard system as Ader, broadcasting news and entertainment. "Subscribers were issued with special headphones and an optional megaphone attachment was available for 'hands free' listening" (Estreich). This idea of cable being used to broadcast media to audiences is responsible for many of the current telecommunications that exist today, most obviously Internet and television, and it was through this electrophone system that people had access to entertainment that could be experienced simultaneously from multiple locations. In addition, the

"on demand" type of subscription system continued to develop the idea of network customer satisfaction, which would ultimately fuel a base for all programming.

Era Four: Radio and the Birth of Radio Drama- Wireless (1908-present)

Wireless communication, which is associated with radio, was starting to be developed around the late 1800s when Heinrich Hertz started experimenting with electromagnetic waves. These waves would be used decades later mostly as a navigation device for ships "generally limited to Morse code transmissions" (White). In 1912 however, a man by the name of Frank Conrad experimented with radio waves, broadcasting "music and spoken word." In 1920, Conrad would found KDKA, a radio station that became one of the biggest influencers of broadcast entertainment. 1920 also benchmarked the opening of the golden era of radio, which is often framed as "late 1920s to early 1950s" (Hand 5, 18).

The earliest radio plays were nothing more than "broadcasts of stage productions." This included "Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, extracts from Verdi and Puccini operas, adaptions of popular stage melodramas, and, most of all, productions of Shakespeare." It wasn't until 1922 when *The Wolf* by Eugene Walter became noted as the first live radio play staged for radio presentation. Due to the success of the performance "a total of 43 productions (entirely based on stage plays) were broadcast" (Hand 15).

What made radio different when compared to future entertainment broadcasts was that it was "live." As opposed to later technologies such as television and film, which could be optioned for editing prior to broadcast, this medium in its early stages functioned very similar to live stage performance. Richard Hand and Mary Traynor write in their text *The Radio Drama Handbook* that everything including "voices, music, and sound effects" was live, with the only exception being "…that phonograph records were sometimes used for particular sound effects

and short announcements" (17). This idea of the "live" nature of the genre would essentially dissolve as technology progressed, but it is one of the key elements that are consistently illustrated in the visual depiction of today's staged radio plays.

Another element that became important to the world of radio was the ability the genre had to provide celebrities with a degree of "masking" for their craft. Hand and Traynor make mention of this in *The Radio Drama Handbook:*

> One of the delights of *Suspense* is that it gave famous Hollywood actors the chance to act against type. Hence we find a young Frank Sinatra playing a psychopath in "To Find Help" (18 January 1945). In a later revived production (6 January 1949), Gene Kelly- always typecast as a song and dance man on screen- takes the Sinatra role with evident relish. Lucille Ball is best known as a much-loved "kooky" comedienne, but in the violent play; "Dime a Dance" (13 January 1944), she narrowly escapes the hands of a serial killer. The musical star Judy Garland finds herself in a similar predicament in "Drive-In" (21 November 1946). (19)

Due to the fact that this genre appealed to celebrities for artistic fulfillment, people were able to tune in and listen to these actors deliver a "live" performance, increasing the amount of personalization with the stars, as the listeners were only electromagnetic waves away.

Live radio broadcasting also brought another important concept to the face (or ears) of audiences: immediacy. Before the invention of the radio, plenty of communities were disconnected from current events, including popular entertainment. Hand and Traynor credit radio with being the medium that placed these "isolated communities" "in the loop." What this did for both broadcasting and entertainment of the day was establish a "dramatic potential" for pretty much everything. News and sporting events along with radio plays provided a sort of thrill, as it was something that was happening live (9-10).

Era Five: Film and Television (1926-present)

The invention of film and television expanded upon the entertainment potential of wireless communications. Taking the foundation of recorded sound, these mediums not only

became worlds of visual storytelling but audible storytelling (Crook 25-26). Silent films sprung to life with vibrant sound, people now learning to associate the two simultaneously. Perhaps in a way the integration of the two was actually the beginning of radio drama's fall in popularity, as audiences no longer had to rely on imagination to visualize story.

A major contribution that film and television has given the world of radio however is a type of "behind the scenes" approach that has ultimately led to the staging of the genre for watchful audiences. Visual technologies made it possible to depict what was actually happening behind the microphone, a world that had been shielded by a figurative "fourth wall." It is perhaps through television and film that a greater sense of nostalgia developed for the art of radio. Hand and Traynor list several popular films that have captivated the radio world including: "*Radio Days* (Woody Allen, 1987), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel Coen, 2000)… *Annie* (John Huston, 1982) and *Talk Radio* (Oliver Stone, 1989)" (Hand 21).

Era Six: "Internet and Digital Communications" (1994-Present)

The final age discussed by Crook is the Internet or digital age, which is where we as a society currently rest. Evolution of wireless communication into digital life has connected all meters of the world's surface. What this has ultimately done for radio is increased the broadcasting spectrum by an incredible margin. Smartphone apps such as iHeartRadio, Pandora, Google Play Music, as well as satellite radio players such as SiriusXM have made listening possible anywhere Internet access is available. Audiobooks can now be downloaded, streamed, or bought in a compact disc form, illustrating the marketing of a modernized reader's theatre. The digital age has also created the possibility of radio dramas having mass digital broadcasting. One of the most influential companies producing today is the "Independent Radio Drama Productions" company that was established in Britain. The website featured a "UK Internet Play

of the Month" with high end recording techniques, as well as a detailed website that could be accessed by audiences across the globe at any time (Crook 27). Ultimately, what this proves is that the human desire for aural-centered entertainments has never dissolved, despite the ambitious evolution of technology (see Appendix A.1 for visual reference).

Era Seven and Beyond?

Despite the observation that audio-based entertainments are still somewhat popular, we must ask if radio drama is actually a "blind" medium? By blind medium I mean one that is experienced without vision. As the accessibility of radio drama in its "aural" form increased over time, a second form of the genre was being born and that is what I call the "visual" form. Visual radio drama can be defined as the idea of theatrically staging radio plays for a viewing audience; patrons will therefore be watching in addition to listening. In a way this transfer from "aural" to "visual" even echoes the eras and epochs listed before, as they too morphed from audio-based invention into visual stimulation. This idea of visual radio play is exampled most easily by the work of Joe Landry. In his scripts Landry sets a play in a 1940s radio studio. He has written the characters as actors who portray radio artists broadcasting a "live" radio show. Audiences are encouraged to participate alongside the actors as the play unfolds with their laughter and applause, which is also assumed to be essential for the success of the "broadcasting." Landry has written several plays using this same style: including *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*, which will become the subject in a later chapter devoted to the application and analysis of radio drama theory when fused with visual directing process and practicum. Even though Landry is one of the more notable artists writing live radio plays for the stage, he is not alone in his efforts. Many local communities have companies that produce live radio plays (both original material and classics). On the Air Radio Players in Richmond, VA has become an integral part of the

community's local theatre scene, producing original work with classic production techniques including live Foley artists, music, and voice actors. All productions are performed on a proscenium stage for a live audience, recorded, and then later uploaded to the web where the "aural" performance can be accessed at any time by patrons: a perfect blend of the relevancy technology delivers with the history of production. Staged radio plays are also springing to life on much larger platforms including LA Theatre Works and SAG-AFTRA.

What is most certain is that all forms of staged "visual" radio dramas hold onto a degree of historical appreciation when being performed, and for this reason the timeline becomes important. In an age where technological advances could certainly deliver elaborate sound effects and mixed voice acting, there is a reason that these companies and playwrights continue to encourage the idea of everything being "live." It is almost as if a seventh "epoch" has finally emerged as an "era of remembrance." With a tip of the hat to every structure below it, the Internet and digital generation finds entertainment in seeing what's been; and the remembrance of an event that once brought everyone to huddle around an old radio. Perhaps the stage in a way can be exactly that (a form of radio), where a degree of communitas is brought to everyone who circles it, each engulfing themselves in that single element that thrills and delights, a component that has become increasingly rare: the quality of that which is actually "live."

Chapter 2: Radio Drama Theory, Technique, and Production

Before venturing into the visual world of radio drama it is important that one understands the rules of the game. Oftentimes during the rehearsals for *It's a Wonderful Life* I would find myself pounding my head against my desk because the rules, unlike other theatrical forms, are incredibly hard to justify breaking. This chapter is dedicated to learning the rules before playing the game. Hopefully this will help with the understanding of why I made the choices I did when staging my project at VCU, as well as define the terms that frequent the later parts of this thesis.

Radio Drama Sound Theory

The most important part of any radio drama, whether it be staged for a viewing or listening audience is that there is an investment in the listener (Hand 34). The term "*visual"* in audio plays does not actually only refer to what we see. Many texts including Neil Verma's *Theatre of the Mind* stresses the importance that radio plays create an opportunity for people to visualize story in their minds, creating an "imaginary" world. Because of this we get a parallel definition on the term "visual," and that is not based on our sense of sight, but our sense of hearing. If we see corn flakes crack, we visualize them as the actual corn flakes, but our mind can visualize them as something else when targeted only with sound: such as ice breaking, or walking through snow.

Because of the emphasis on the listener in radio plays, the most immediate concept to explore is what people can hear. Crook references a "hierarchy" of these components through the semiotics work of Andrew Crisell, dividing these aural "signs" into: words, sounds, silence,

and music (Crook 80). I tend to disagree with this idea of "hierarchy" as I find it impossible to warrant one being more important than the other. Words, sounds, silences, and music I see metaphorically as different colored paints on an artist's palette; saying one is more important is equivalent to saying that "red is more important than blue." However, I do believe that they are all worth investigating for basic understanding of terminology.

Words are exactly what you would assume them to be. They are the written symbols in the script that denote story to an audience. Michel Chion breaks down the idea of "word" even further, and Tim Crook applies it to radio to "categorize" the different types of words in radio drama as follows: theatrical ("dialogue or the performance of action by a character"), textual (or narrative), and emanation (words that are "not completely heard or understood," such as background restaurant chatter). All categories of words are often used in radio drama and are incredibly important as they "…carry 'extra freight' because dialogue in radio drama needs to communicate additional information which would be visible to a cinema or theatre audience" (Crook 81-82; Hand 41).

"Sounds" to me is a very general term, and it can be argued that most things in aural-centered theatre are essentially sounds, even a simple breath. When referred to in this section however, "sounds" categorize into: sound effects (SFX), acoustics, and perspective.

Sound effects are aural components embedded in dialogue that "signify an event" (Hand 44). If the sound does not signify an event, it does not classify as a sound effect. Sound effects usually become the most interesting component in theatrical staging of radio drama for viewing pleasure as the Foley[1] provides a rewarding juxtaposition of what creates the sound against what

[1] The term *Foley* is named after Jack Foley (hence the capitalization of the word), who was a sound editor for Universal Studios. When sound entered the world of film, Jack was responsible for pulling the studio through the competitive industry winds, turning their motion

the sound connotes when embedded in words. *The Radio Drama Handbook* and Tim Crook's *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* cite the vocabulary of Sieveking when categorizing sound effects as follows:

> • The realistic, confirmatory effect: for example, if a character has introduced the idea of a storm, the sound of a "ship laboring in a storm" will confirm the idea.
> • The realistic, evocative effect: for example, a rural, rustic atmosphere of church bells, bees buzzing, creating a sense of peacefulness.
> • The symbolic, evocative effect: The purpose is to represent or express confusion in a character's mind, so we could describe this as a symbol of mood or feeling.
> • Impressionistic effect: Sieveking likens this effect to the world of a dream.
> • The conventionalized effect: for example, objects and phenomena such as cars, trains or horses. This is a sound which is instantly recognizable. (Hand 44-45; Crook 70-73)

Acoustics refers to "the nature of the space in which the drama occurs" (Hand 44). When trying to determine whether or not sound specificity could be enhanced with acoustics, I would have myself consider the environment or channel in which the sound is being presented: multiple hard surfaces are more likely to create reverberation, larger empty spaces often create echo, and soft or liquid spaces can muffle or eat sound. An example of using acoustics to define space is if someone was communicating via a telephone- the sound is going to be affected differently because the sound is being channeled through the telephone itself. A director may manipulate the acoustics to clarify this moment by having a performer talk into a tin can.

Perspective can be defined as "…the spatial relationship between characters within the drama" (Hand 44). Directors can manipulate aurally the idea of perspective by specifying actor-working distance from the microphone. The farther away a performer is from the microphone the more distant they will seem aurally from the immediate action. An example would be a

---

picture *Show Boat* (which was supposed to be a silent film) into a "talkie." He was able to do this by simultaneously integrating sound effects with orchestral music. Jack's technique consisted of creating recognizable sounds with props and actions such as canes, burping, and rocking chairs. In radio drama we often refer to the sound effects performers as "Foley artists" ("The Story of Jack Foley").

crowd protesting outside a city hall. If a play's main action takes place between a mayor and their assistant within the city hall, a director would situate the central actors in front of the microphone, then stage the protesters at a further distance from the microphone to create the perspective of the people being outside. Perspective, next to sound effects, I found becomes the second most important tool to consider when practicing visual staging as it provides a useful outlet when motivating physical actor movements throughout the performance space.

The next major component of sound is music. Music is essentially an effect made up of notated rhythms and notes that are arranged to work as a link (or transition), mood indicator, or "indexical function." Indexical function is simply the music that occurs naturally in everyday life (Hand 50). Film and television often effectively uses all functions of music: transitions can be heard in a large number of sitcoms and cartoons, mostly happening between scenes to indicate some sort of lapse in time or shift in environment; mood music is often used to help the audience understand genre- an example would be the striking violins heard during the classic shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*; and indexical function has existed in any film that features a character who plays an instrument, such as Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*.

The final component is silence, or "lack of noise." Silence proves to be a very useful tool in radio dramas when executed correctly as it provides an "aesthetic" for the production, often establishing genre as well as directorial taste and style. An example would be the common practice of directing actors in comedy to eliminate most pausing in dialogue. Silences are also capable of carrying assumed dialogue, atmosphere, shifts or transitions, or emptiness (Hand 57).

Microphone and Performance Technique

Venturing from basic sound theory we can now examine the practices of production and technique that help take these sounds and connect them to the audience driven world.

The most important instrument used in radio drama to communicate material is the microphone. Microphone technique in production is vital when painting pictures with sound that are to be interpreted by audiences. A simple step in either direction from the microphone can connote a completely different meaning. Distance from the microphone is actually however affected by a different component all together, and that would be the type of microphone being used.

Often when referencing different types of microphones, people will categorize them based on a component called *directionality*. Directionality is used to describe the microphone's ability to pick up sound. There are three main types of directionality: omnidirectional, unidirectional, and bi-directional. The biggest difference between these types of directionality is the shape of the microphone's "field," or the area in which the instrument will be most sensitive to sound. Any sound made within this "live area" will be best channeled through the technology and either broadcast or amplified. Sound that happens in the "dead area" is made outside of this field; it will still get channeled through the instrument, but the farther away the sound is from the microphone, the quieter the broadcast or amplified sound will be. For a diagram on the "live" and "dead" areas of unidirectional vs. omnidirectional microphones, please reference Appendix A.2 ("Directional Properties").

In order to understand actor formations around certain microphones we must understand the fields cast by this idea of directionality.

Omnidirectional microphones are capable of picking up sound on all sides of the microphone. Because of this, you are able as a director to place actors on all sides of the microphone and trust that the sound will be picked up. Even though this gives considerable flexibility in the visual staging aspect of performance, omnidirectional microphones constrict the

imaginary "audio" world, as less specificity can be achieved with the broader range of sound sensitivity ("Directional Properties").

Unidirectional microphones are sensitive to sound from one dominant direction. In radio drama these types of microphones are often used because they contain a powerful "dead area" that can be used to depict movement, location, or distance. Unidirectional microphones can be divided even further down into cardioid and hypercardioid polar patterns (or fields). Cardioid microphones have a basic heart-shaped field formed at the front of the microphone allowing some sound to be picked up on the sides of the microphone, but mostly from the front. Standard handheld microphones are often cardioid unidirectional. Hypercardioid fields are even more focused than the cardioid, constricting the side sensitivity considerably. These types of microphones are also referred to as "shotgun microphones" ("Directional Properties").

Bi-directional or "figure of eight" microphones are capable of picking up sound on two sides of the microphone. They are not as common as the unidirectional and omnidirectional microphones and are usually only used during interview-type broadcasts ("Directional Properties").

Since the microphone fields dictate where actors can be in relationship to the microphone, there are standard visual performance configurations notated by *The Radio Drama Handbook* for each type of directionality. In addition to the list below, I've included diagram A.3 in the appendix for reference:

- Omnidirectional visual performance configuration is when "up to six actors surround the circumference of the microphone."

- Figure of eight configurations have "up to two actors on each side of the microphone." The two actors most center to the microphone in this position will often sound closer than the two on the outside of the microphone.
- Cardioid positioning has "up to three actors at the front of the microphone."[2]
- Hypercardioid is perhaps the simplest, but the most limiting visually. It consists of "one actor at the front of the microphone" (Hand 134).

The most important concept to take from this list is that depending on the microphones being used for performance, the theories of staging are going to be different. For my production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* we used unidirectional (cardioid) microphones, so the majority of this thesis will be centered on that directionality field and visual configuration. I do however believe it is worth investigating how to break these limitations, as they are often the main culprit in directorial staging difficulties. These explorations would most definitely be suitable for a future study.

Actor configuration is only one small part of what is considered when performing at a microphone. "Working distance" is a term used when referencing the actor's distance from the microphone. "…Speech based radio tends to be static. The presenter establishes where her voice sounds clear and, from then on, remains in this position." Radio drama however is completely opposite. By controlling actor distance, the director can create "movement, depth and perspective" (Hand 167). *The Radio Drama Handbook* lists five main "working distances" for actors at the microphone: narrator, close, dialogue, leaving/arriving, and distant.

---

[2] Hand and Traynor seem to put a cap on the number of actors who can perform around a cardioid field. I found out later that breaking this rule and forming a saturated figure (that I named cardioid+) actually proved to be quite useful and fun while staging *It's a Wonderful Life*. I will discuss this in further detail later in the application section of this thesis.

- The *narrator* position at the microphone is commonly used when a single actor is standing stationary in front of the microphone. It is about a half an arm away from the microphone (Hand 168).
- The *close* position is about "a hand's length" away from the microphone. This is often used when the actor needs to communicate a message of intimacy to another or their audience (Hand 169).
- *Dialogue* position is an "arm's length" away from the microphone. This is used when more than one actor has a dialogue exchange in front of the microphone. Eye contact with each other in this position becomes difficult, as the actors often have to face front into the microphone and relate to one another indirectly (Hand 170-171).
- The position of *leaving/arriving* is actually fluid and refers to the actor moving between two different "working distances." The benefit of working with the leaving/arriving position is that it creates movement behind the microphone. For example: an actor moving from a distant position to a dialogue position will create the imaginary illusion through sound of a person entering a scene. It is very important that actors in this fluid position continue moving as they speak in order for the image to work. In the world of radio "a silent character is an invisible character." Because of this, "movement is invisible in radio, unless you are making sound when you move" (Hand 172-173).
- The final position is *distant*. An actor is in the distant position when they turn their back to the microphone or purposely pitch their voice into the dead area of

the field. Voices in this position sound exactly as they are named, distant (Hand 171).

One term I often refer to when discussing my process in teaching radio drama microphone technique to actors is "fluidity of text." *The Radio Drama Handbook* uses the similar terminology of "reading fluently." Both of these concepts can be defined as the actor's ability to read with confidence and ease behind the microphone (Hand 169). I prefer the vocabulary of "fluidity" because I feel it directs actors away from habitual line-readings, and some actors may choose to portray a character that is not necessarily "fluent." When discussing the visual staging of audio plays I refer to text fluidity often, as an actor with absence of it tends to have absence of the components that make them visually successful actors: they often appear wooden and stiff and they don't take in their environment or partners. Actors who are most successful at reading fluidly are likely the ones who work with the most ease, therefore relating much more to their acting partners, the given circumstances, and the audience.

Branching further off of relationship to audience, a critical component in audio drama practice is establishing not the people sitting in front of the actor as the audience, but the microphone itself. Similar to acting for camera, microphone voice acting uses a much smaller scope when compared to typical stage performance, which requires skillful projection to a large theatre. Since the primary audience for radio dramas are typically those listening, the main focus becomes the microphone itself, since it (like the camera) does the projection and distribution of message. Because of this, actor microphone relationship becomes critical with actor consistency of speaking into the microphone. If their focus diverts to the physical audience (rather than the microphone) it can easily toss the words to the dead area and disrupt the overall action of the play. Neil Verma in his book *Theatre of the Mind* eloquently captures this idea by writing "The

microphone ceased being an amplifier and became a surrogate theatergoer; by mimicking line of sight, the microphone transferred a visual orientation of perception into audioposition" (Verma 38-39).

Radio Drama Production

The final main component that I'd like to examine before venturing into application is an abbreviated and selected look at the production of radio dramas. Radio dramas that have been crafted specifically for live viewing (such as those written by the talented Joe Landry) provide the opportunity for people viewing to not only listen to the story being produced, but to watch the action of the radio players putting on the performance. In order to communicate this, it is important to understand the concept of "active directing" and "studio etiquette."

As recently discussed, all movement by the actors on stage if silent is invisible to only the listening audience. Because of this, it is fully possible that a director can instruct their actors on stage as long as that direction is silent. The act of a director instructing these actors silently can be defined as "active directing." "In the early days of radio a whole system of directing hand cues and symbols developed." Typical cues as listed in *The Radio Drama Handbook* are as follows:

- Stand By: director keeps hand above head with palm facing outwards.
- Cue to start: director points at performer.
- Softer or quieter: hand, palm down with fingers outstretched, repeatedly moving downwards.
- Louder: hand, palm up with fingers outstretched, repeatedly moving upwards.
- Move away from microphone: raised hand, palm outwards, gestures pushing performer away.
- Move closer to the microphone: director pulls raised hand towards self.
- Slow down: smooth sideways motion with the hand as though stretching something elastic.
- Faster: rapidly draw circles with finger.
- Cut: slicing gesture across neck. (Hand 187-188)

Another point worth considering when examining the works of the radio studio is studio etiquette: or the behavior that is considered "professional" during performance. *The Radio Drama Handbook* lists several standard rules:

> • Don't wear noisy clothes or jewelry.
> • When asked to "give level"… read a little of the script in character.
> • Make sure you check what signal the producer will give you to start your line. In less formal circumstances, it could be a nod, thumbs up or wave.
> • If there are several actors or a spot SFX technician using the same microphone, step away from the microphone when you are not speaking to give them room.
> • If you make a mistake, don't make a big fuss.
> • Be careful with your script. Gently place used pages on the floor.
> • At the end of the recording, stay silent until you have the "all clear" from the producer. (Hand 188)

When considering radio play production, it is also important to understand the structure of the radio studio itself, as they were much different from typical radio studios. "Typical studios had 'dead' walls hung with monk's cloth to nix reverb, but drama studios always had at least one 'live' end with hard walls that reflected sound for scenes taking place in imaginary enclosures." Radio drama studios also had a high assortment of different microphones that were mounted in a variety of different configurations. It has even been remarked that actor rehearsal is not nearly as important as "rehearsing the microphones" (Verma 41).

Examining typical ground plans for radio studios it is easy to see the number of hard surfaces that were used in the space. Often audio-mixing was done at a separate table in another room all together, apart from the acting studio. The pliability of the space is also something to be noted: this can be exampled when comparing the studio layouts for successful radio performances of *The Lone Ranger* and *The Shadow*. Studio layout for *The Lone Ranger* included a sound cave and effects studio completely separate from the acting studio. The "sound cave" was essentially used for creating sounds that were positioned farther away from the immediate audible action. "Trays" of gravel and water were used, in addition to wood flooring, in the

effects studio to also create "…a range of walking surfaces to suggest settings." *The Shadow* consisted of a much more open layout with microphones and sound effects in the same studio space, sandwiched by a wall of curtains and an alley backdrop (Verma 44-45). What is perhaps most important to note is that construction of space is always relative to the demands of the production.

Moving into Application

After considering the theory and practice of radio drama performance as well as basic history we can start to actively apply the concepts to the visual staging of the genre. The most difficult aspect of the staging is the number of rules established by the theory and techniques listed in this chapter. Oftentimes, when faced with challenges, directors can find reasoning for breaking a rule in staging theory. However, breaking a rule in radio drama is difficult to justify, as it will often affect the quality of sound. Because of this, breaking rules must not only be justifiable in the visual world, but the imaginary audio-based world as well. This was the dilemma that left me with countless headaches time and time again, ultimately resulting in success and failure. Now take what you learned from the previous two chapters and venture down my rabbit hole, which is perhaps the most trying part of this project: the actual visual staging of plays with the predominant element of sound.

Chapter 3: Application with *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*

My First Exposure to Radio Drama

When I was asked to direct *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* by Joe Landry it was in conjunction with a Voice-Over and Radio Drama class that was originally taught by Susan Schuld, the head of the Voice and Speech program at Virginia Commonwealth University. She was leaving at the end of the Spring 2015 school term for another teaching post and another instructor was needed to take over the class for fall of 2015. My focus of study had been primarily acting/directing but I had taken several classes in speech and served as a teaching assistant for her, so she knew enough about my work to encourage me to take over the responsibilities. I was familiar with the process of voice-over auditioning after living in Los Angeles for six years, and having friends who worked as voice-over artists, agents, and booth operators. Because of this, I had confidence that I could put together a great class in developing character voices for this type of performance, but it left an equal empty component as well: I had never directed or even seen a radio show.

A few weeks after receiving my assignment I noticed an event on Facebook advertising a local Richmond company, On the Air Radio Players, producing a night of original radio plays. I decided to venture out for my own interest and preliminary research.

The first thing I noticed about the experience is that the pre-show felt similar to waiting for an orchestra concert to start. There was no set with exception to a row of empty chairs, five microphones, a Foley table, and a piano. The stage was black with basic lighting. The space

itself was a proscenium, and everything was faced directly out to the audience, completely absent of any sort of angle. I took a picture of the stage on my smartphone and have it included in the appendix for reference (C.1) (*You Heard It Here First!*).

Once the show started and the actors were on stage, not much changed. Actors sat in the chairs, would stand, walk to the microphone, say their lines, and then go back to sitting. Very little actor personality was exposed. The voices were sometimes successful, and often unsuccessful in the fact that they were unspecific and sometimes unintelligible. In a way it actually felt almost sterile (as in too clean and perfect), unimaginative, and I was ultimately bored, often finding myself staring into space, not listening, or caring about the story or characters.

Brecht, who I often cite as an influence on my directing work, writes about the genre of radio performance in his book *Brecht on Theatre*. I find his observations to be quite successful in describing the feeling I received while watching this performance:

> Nor is radio in my view an adequate means of bringing back cosiness to the home and making family life bearable again. But quite apart from the dubiousness of its functions, radio is one-sided when it should be two-. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers. Any attempt by the radio to give a truly public character to public occasions is a step in the right direction. (Brecht 52)

The "emptiness" that I felt from the production was because the communication was one-sided. It did not allow the audience to see the performers as "public characters." It had no occasion to it, and no lesson to be learned. In general, it did nothing to warrant having a live-viewing audience; the same experience could have existed with an audio-only broadcast.

Despite this criticism, I did find myself scribbling several things on a napkin post-show in my car that I could take away from the production.

1.) The Foley sound effects in radio plays are by far some of the most interesting elements to watch as they function almost as a "secret" with the audience. We know what is really making an effect, but to the listening world it connotes to what the story makes of it.
2.) Group noise and crowd scenes are often effective by using people conversing in the microphone's "dead zone."
3.) Music is essential towards making the play move forward.
4.) Commercial breaks help break the monotony of the performance.
5.) When the actors are only functional and not defined, the performance is lackluster. If the performers do not acknowledge the audience being there, an unwarranted disconnect happens. (Perhaps this is what Brecht was referring to in the previous quotation.)
6.) The audience with their applauding and laughter is just as much a part of the action as the events on stage.

It is important for me to note that the observations above came from no knowledge of the art of radio drama production; they come from a place of ignorance. Perhaps that is why I look at them so closely, because these initial thoughts are the closest opinions to what a general audience would think: without coating the form with theory and jargon. In the simplest of thoughts, the one thing I knew for certain was that I had to find a way to make my production entertaining, and the biggest landmine would be to let it become glorified "reader's theatre;" a trap I would find myself almost stepping into time and time again.

After watching my first "radio show" I reached out to director Valerie Rachelle who had staged *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* by Joe Landry at Oregon Cabaret Theatre in Ashland, Oregon. Ms. Rachelle received an MFA in Directing from University of California-Irvine and I was familiar of her work because of examples I had seen in Los Angeles and Ashland, so I was confident that she would offer some concrete advice. What I noticed immediately from her answers to my list of questions was that almost all of her responses discussed the *visual* aspect of the storytelling: "I think the most challenging thing about a stage radio play is making it visually clear," "Staging is very important in order to keep the action moving and the audience clear on characters, objectives, conflicts etc.," "I always start with visual research...," "… I always start with images," "I think the only difference with a radio play [opposed to a radio drama that is only broadcast] is making it visually interesting and clear so the audience has not just an aural journey but is taking in the life of the studio along with the play" (Rachelle).

After this, I knew that the key would rest somewhere in the visual storytelling. Radio plays as outlined in the history and theory section of this thesis were performances focused on the listener, often relying on audience imaginations to create visual life. We, however, no longer rest in the epochs only associated with the listener, we are in an era that needs the visual stimulus as well, and the proof of this was in my own initial response to the genre. Elaborating on and welding together Rachelle and Brecht's thoughts, I came to the conclusion that some sort of visual world would need to run in conjunction with the audible world, a world that would be a private gift to the viewing audience; that would allow them to be a part of the "secret" process; and would need to create a channel between the performer and viewer.

Preliminary Work

Since I had to also teach a class on radio drama I started to search for a text to integrate into classwork as well as help me as an artist understand production of the genre. After reading the first two chapters of this thesis you can probably guess that the text I decided on was *The Radio Drama Handbook*. This would become much more than a book to me, it would become a crutch and my most useful window into understanding radio practice and studio functioning, that is perhaps why I cite it so often as a source. Information from the most influential parts of the book I've included in the previous parts of this document, but if you, my reader, ever feel adventurous enough to stage a radio play, I suggest that it be your first stop.

When I volunteered to take on the project of staging the radio play, I thought that it was going to be one of the easiest projects I had ever done. I mentioned previously that the biggest trap is for the radio play to stumble onto the ground of becoming a glorified staged reading, and I perhaps mention this because initially that is what I thought this project would be. After seeing the community production, I knew that this production *might* have to be more, but I wasn't quite convinced, as *It's a Wonderful Life* is a much more celebrated story when compared to the original work that was being showcased at On the Air Radio Players. It was actually unexpected circumstances that really pushed me off the plank and into the deep end of the pool of potential that this world could be.

The other selected shows that made up the first half of the TheatreVCU 2015-2016 season were in drastic contrast in content compared to what my "family friendly" show was offering: *Junta High* is a play that features a school overrun by teenage terrorists and cheerleader suicide bombers, and the Mainstage musical was the cult-classic *The Rocky Horror Show*. Obviously, the radio play stuck out like a sore thumb. It was because of this that ticket sales for

It's a Wonderful Life began to spike, even resulting in the Virginia Historical Society and the Pollock Society nearly buying out the final performance. Due to the increased interest in seeing the play, the department decided to amplify the production value, creating a ballooning effect that made this project perhaps one of the most challenging and thoughtful productions I've directed to date.

Prior to the ticket sale and interest spike, I drafted up an idea of what I wanted the world of this radio drama to be. At the time I was limited to four unidirectional cardioid microphones and a cardboard box full of makeshift Foley props that my mentor and predecessor had given to me. The quality of the materials was incredibly low: the applause sign was nothing more than a piece of cardboard with the word "Applause" written on it. This contrasted greatly to the full Foley table, five microphones, and upright piano that were sported at On the Air Radio Players. Even though the value left much to be desired, I didn't worry, as I had been used to working with almost nothing from my past experience starting up a small 99-seat showcase theatre company in Los Angeles.

My biggest concern was that I needed the permissions of the show to match the cardboard box I was staring at. I knew that if this was what I'd be working with I could toss out the expectation that I'd be receiving period microphones, which led me to my initial decision that the world could not be the 1940s, as suggested by the script, as nearly all of my props would counter that permission.

With the production also being associated with a class, I had another element that derailed the 1940s permission, and that was the fact that I would have to use my entire class of eleven (rather than the script suggested five) to tell the story. Visually the group of students was incredibly eclectic in personal flare and style, a component that is a usual staple in my directing.

Due to it being so eclectic however, there were several students who would never fit into the 1940s world without exceptional costuming, and that would include wigs.

The first answer I had for all of this was to create a world in which modern celebrities were telling the tale of *It's a Wonderful Life* "on air." Thinking of the importance of celebrity during the golden age of radio programing (discussed in the research chapter), running parallel to our present day fascination with live celebrity entertainment such as the recent live musical broadcasts of *The Sound of Music*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wiz*, and *Grease*, I figured I might be able to create something nostalgic yet still relevant. I could ask my students to dress up as if they were celebrities going to a 1940s theme party to give the nod to the time period, but I could still keep them in modern day. The best way I could define this was 1940s radio drama with contemporary cracks.

After deciding what my initial visual concept would be for the production it was time to break the script down into eleven equal parts. I had sample recordings from the students who were interested in the class so I'd be able to cast it over the summer. At this time, very few of the students had enough vocal elasticity to play multiple characters, so almost everything was cast based on their natural "home" speaking voice. "Vocal elasticity" is a term I use to discuss the artist's ability to transform their voice into numerous characters. "Home voice" refers to the range and qualities of the actor's everyday voice. In voice-over technique both are used and both are valued.

Continuing to look at the script, a challenge I faced was the fact that my class was split into six females and five males, while Joe Landry suggests a cast of two females and three males. I knew that because of this, several of my women would have to play male voices, which I was not initially enthusiastic about as there is a tendency to play at the idea of another gender's voice,

a habit I continuously fought during classroom exploration. Ultimately what I ended up doing was pulling eleven main characters from the radio play: George Bailey, Mary Hatch, Clarence, Joseph, Violet Bick, Billy Bailey, Potter, Rose Bailey, Zuzu, Harry Bailey, and a Foley Artist. After pulling these main focuses, I went through the script again filtering all the other characters under these eleven tracks until each had received a balanced amount of text or involvement in the show: the Foley artist became a split track to provide more textual opportunity for the women working the sound effects table. The tracks can be found listed in the appendix (B.1).

After all eleven tracks had been completed; it was now time to sort the actors. I will take time to restate that at this stage in the process my actors had a severe lack of experience in voice acting work, enough so that I knew significant challenges would more than likely arise during class when they would have to face the project of developing (for some of them) over six distinct characters. Knowing this, and knowing that half of my class time from the beginning of the semester would have to be dedicated towards rehearsal, I decided to cast off of the visual "types" that the students naturally offered. When discussing "type" it is always important to note that what I write is in no way objective. I may see a man as a romantic lead while others see him as a character, but it is this directorial filter that I think ultimately makes casts quite unique: almost like a fingerprint. My cast "typing" tends to often be quite off-center, as are most of my aesthetics. Actors who are different fascinate me, and I tend to have the habit of accentuating the components that make them different.

After the actors were sorted by visual type to a specific track it was now time to find a thread that would pull all of their characters together. This thread is essentially the base character or the voice actor that contributes to the visual world of the radio studio.

There were two distinct character worlds that I wanted to create to help flesh out the radio studio, that of the celebrity, and that of the supporting cast and staff. Joe Landry's celebrity world is very apparent in the initial script: the character of Freddy Fillmore comes out and introduces them to the audience in the very beginning of the play: Jake Laurents, Jazzbo Heywood, Sally Applewhite, and Lana Sherwood. Each of these characters in the script, in addition to my tracking, were assigned to arguably the most central characters of the plot for *It's a Wonderful Life*, keeping gender assignments in consideration: Freddy Fillmore (Joseph), Jake Laurents (George Bailey), Jazzbo Heywood (Clarence), Sally Applewhite (Mary Hatch), and Lana Sherwood (Violet Bick). Since my initial concept was to buff the play into more of a contemporary setting, I went through and gave a modern-day celebrity essence to each of the characters: this would be important, as it would also inform the actors of a place to start. These were as follows: Freddy Fillmore/Ryan Seacrest, Jake Laurents/John Krasinski, Sally Applewhite/Amy Adams, Lana Sherwood/Jennifer Lawrence, and Jazzbo Heywood/Ellen DeGeneres. The idea to make Jazzbo/Clarence an imprint of Ellen came as a solution to the gender split that I discussed previously. Clarence's entity as an angel, likability factor, and the fact that celebrity factor sometimes causes productions to make exceptions regarding elements such as race and gender, made it the most logical part to bend.

The supporting and crew world would require a lot more creativity than the celebrity world, as there was absolutely nothing written into the script to define their identities or relationship to one another and the space. To start sorting these players out I came up with a series of archetypes and/or jobs that would be influential to the radio studio world. This included: the stage manager/director, the "gossip," the "has-been," the "new girl," the "romantic," the "jealous," and "the drunk." Going into the project I knew that I would have to

avoid playing any of these stereotypes with my directing, as it is dangerous to play states and conditions for it derails the characters' mission to reach objective; character is much more potent when revealed through behavior. Nonetheless, these models gave a starting point when finding the individual's place within the studio world.

After assigning these archetypes to a distinct character track I typed up a sheet to hand out with script distribution that would happen the first day of class. The information is a part of the pre-production packet located in the appendix (B.3).

This band of characters however was not fully complete. When the show had been last performed at VCU the professor had a student who was able to play the piano in the class. This student had been assigned to all of the musical transitions throughout the piece. I did not have a student capable of playing the piano interested in the class however, and so the music component of the piece had not yet been addressed. My initial solution was to use a pre-recorded track CD that was suggested by Joe Landry on his *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* website (www.wonderfulliferadio.com). It was later suggested by TheatreVCU's administrative director Bonnie McCoy that we employ the department's music director, Ben Miller, to play piano for the show. This brought great relief, as live piano was much more true to the genre of radio drama, and in my opinion much more compelling to watch when compared to a CD track.

The inclusion of Ben as the piano player for the production would change the overall group of characters that I discussed. This was because Ben would be onstage for the duration of the show and therefore we would have to develop a character for him as well. I didn't know for some time what Ben's character would be, and most of what was in final performance came from in-class exploration. What I did have, however, was an idea for "the new girl" character to enter the space in the beginning, bringing on a plate of cookies. I thought that with this I might be able

to etch a relationship between the two of them: something that would hopefully spread out into something more specific.

After understanding the initial demands of all of my students for the *It's a Wonderful Life* portion of the class, I started drafting a syllabus for the complete course. Since most of the students had little to no experience with voice-acting work it was important for me to move toward establishing a strong foundation that they would be able to practice regularly during the initial once-a-week rehearsals. The class was structured so they would start with learning a basic understanding of radio drama, including a listening of Orson Welles' famous *War of the Worlds* broadcast, then venture into exploring with their own voices, and finally develop character voices. In order to ensure that we had enough time to rehearse the play, I divided the class into two components: on Tuesdays we would have class exploration time, working directly toward the course learning objectives I had outlined on the syllabus; on Thursdays we would rehearse for *It's a Wonderful Life*. I also required that the students complete a series of voice-over observation papers as well as write and perform in a radio show based on *Scary Stories to Tell In the Dark*. These assignments would help me as both an instructor and director make sure that the students were actively thinking about the techniques and genre outside of class. Based on the materials I had been given, I was still under the assumption that the production would not be a big affair, so I did not find the course content to be too overwhelming. I've included a sample syllabus in the appendix (B.2).

After designing the syllabus, I had roughly 16 rehearsals to fully stage *It's a Wonderful Life* and a two-day tech rehearsal. Due to the limited amount of rehearsal time, and even at that only having little under two-hours-time for each session (resulting in 32 hours), I knew I would have to be incredibly prepared. Because of this, I sat down and did basic pre-blocking for the

show. I find that many directors argue against pre-blocking. Personally, I do not mind that element as it helps me visualize the patterns of movement so I can effectively avoid monotony with blocking. As a director, I make sure to never allow pre-blocking to lock me into place. I use it as a base and a frame, and from that frame I often make significant changes, taking my cast's ideas and impulses always into consideration. Many directors do some sort of preliminary blocking: William Ball in his text *Sense of Direction* even makes mention of using soldiers on a half-inch scale model to block his shows (Ball 94).

My preliminary blocking for this process went through many phases. Most of this was due to the fact that I was struggling with ground planning. Ground planning for this production was difficult for several reasons. In my research for the project most pictures of past visually-staged radio drama productions were performed on a proscenium. I however, did not have a proscenium stage to work with; I had a three-quarters round. The architecture of the stage was not ideal for ground planning this production. This is mostly because in radio drama the actor focus is not on the audience as much as it is on the microphones. As discussed in the section on theory and production, in order for a voice actor to be in a strong playable space (one that is not distant) they must be in the microphone's "live area." Since we were dealing with unidirectional microphones, this meant that all of my actors would have to be facing forward constantly in order to be heard. Combining this with the fact that microphones could not be moved during the play meant that substantial sight lines would be inevitable in the staging. Usually, I find proper ground planning can help with sight lines, but time and time again did I find myself failing. One option was to move both microphones back to the curtain line on stage. The problem that this would cause however was a vast area of negative space in front that could not be used, as movement in that region would upstage the important focus that needed to be on the

microphones. Another option was to move both microphones to the front of the stage and have the actors sit behind the microphones, similar to the ground plan that was used at my first radio play experience (see Appendix C.1). By doing this however, I would be deliberately cutting off both sides of the thrust; I knew that this would not be effective and it would only be product of laziness, so I threw it out. The ground plan I resulted in positioned the two actor microphones on a diagonal with the front microphone being center in the stage's bowl. In order to optimize the full playing space, I pulled the actor sitting area apart into two clumps and positioned them at diagonals down-stage facing the microphones to deplete their power and throw the focus to the microphones. I figured this would also create the potential for interesting diagonal crosses that the actors could make when approaching the microphone. The backspace I reserved for the Foley table and the piano player. By placing important positions in four quadrants, this would hopefully set myself up for success when using the complete playing space. For visual reference I've included a copy of my ground plan in the appendix (A.4).

When conducting later investigation out of frustration in search for other ground plan options, I found a drafted picture of an actual radio drama studio that is quite similar to my final product. This provided significant relief for the visually untraditional staggering that I had decided on. I've included the picture in the appendix (C.2). Additional research, as referenced with the layouts for *The Lone Ranger* vs. *The Shadow*, also provided more concrete security as it proved that ground plans for the genre were relatively flexible.

During the pre-blocking phase, the first element I wanted to consider was the definition of microphone one and two (or the two actor microphones). Being downstage center, I knew microphone one would connote more power than microphone two, so this would have to correspond with the stage pictures I would build. My initial impulse was that microphone two

would designate "heaven." It would be from this microphone that Clarence and Joseph would speak. Later when Clarence would descend down to earth, we would then move her to microphone one or "earth." Pottersville, since in the world without George Bailey is fictitious, would then move up to microphone two. It was with this rule that I would base all of my pre-blocking, building the shapes to give the impression of different locations. Looking back at this rule now that the process is done, I realize how my inexperience with the genre was definitely hurting my ability to come up with practical staging. I will go into this in further detail later.

Pre-Production and Rehearsals

After the school term started, a production meeting was organized and so I could discuss with a skeletal production team my vision for the world. In order to prepare for the meeting I completed a thorough production packet, which I provided for all of the designers. I've included a copy in the appendix (B.3). Two hours before the meeting, the chair of the theatre department asked me to have a meeting with him to review my plans for this piece. It was at this meeting when I would start to actually realize how big this show was getting, and see glimmers of how large it would actually become.

At the meeting I reviewed my plan of action for the piece, explaining that my biggest obstacle was finding a way to establish the permission that we would be visually using contemporary microphones and SFX equipment in a 1940s setting. I explained my solution for developing a 1940s world with contemporary cracks that would also hopefully work towards making the piece feel less museum-like and more relatable. I would also integrate this into the costume design by asking for more "timeless" pieces rather than costumes that were exclusively locked down into the 1940s (an example would be modern silhouette with 1940s design). At this time there was no set designer and I had been led to believe that the space would be simply black

with a couple Christmas trees in back. My recommendations however were easily turned over as the chair of the department wanted the piece fully set in the 1940s. After explanation of my reasoning due to the limited amount of equipment for an at the time very low-budget production, the chair promised me full-period microphones, Foley props, and costumes (the set design would swell at a later date).

Honestly, I wish that this meeting had taken place much earlier in advance than a couple of hours before the first pre-production meeting. In order to get everyone on the same page, I did some quick edits to my handout, adapting it to the idea that the character world would be 1940s versions of familiar celebrities. Ultimately I think this did encourage greater visual creativity, but I do usually prefer more than a few hours to gather my thoughts, and the changed concept created some actor process complications, which will be discussed in further detail later.

One main concern that came out of this preliminary meeting was that my class had already started and my syllabus had already been handed out to my students. The amount of extra work that would come from creating a visually period show would not fit into the allotted course schedule. I tried for hours to find room to re-allocate the time, but as an instructor it was important to me that this was not just the "*It's a Wonderful Life*" class, but a class in developing voice-over and character voice techniques that they could take with them into the real world. The solution to this problem was out of pure luck. A contingency that I had issued to my students when they were expressing interest in the class was that the class was initially supposed to be a service learning course where we would take an abbreviated version of the radio play to local adult day care facilities and nursing homes. Because of this, I had written a clause into the syllabus that substantial outside of class expectations might be asked of them. With how fast the production was growing, I knew that I wouldn't have time to effectively teach and develop this

abbreviated version and ensure a production worth selling tickets to, so I decided to cut the service learning aspect of the course. This decision did not come easily. Service learning is one of the aspects of performance that I most appreciate, and if we only had the voices to worry about developing and not a cast of eleven period performers, full-period costumes, and Foley props, it would have been totally feasible. However, with the pressure of the increased production value along and the fact that several societies had bought out the final production, too much was simply riding on the small radio show to lose even more time on the service aspect.

With all of this considered, there was one other final challenge that arrived with the decision to visually move full-1940s. Because my class had already started, I was already dictating the world to them. As soon as everything changed, I did my best to articulate how the visual and character aspects were evolving to my students, but I found them still confused months later regarding whether or not we were in the 1940s or present day. I firmly believe that as a director one of the most important things you can do on day one is establish the world the actors are about to enter. The sudden change of these rules led to confusion, and ultimately I believe it was one of my key failures on the project.

The first pre-production meeting was very successful, mostly because my handouts created organization for the designers to follow and they weren't able to see all of the loose threads in my mind that had only recently been cut from their holds. I was advised by the chair of the department to not discuss components such as a color palette for my world as those were design properties. This was a way of working I was not used to as most of my prior experience came from self-producing where I had more control over all elements of design simply because we didn't have enough money to hire a designer. I had also been taught and become accustomed to using color palette as one of my keys into the visual world; the striking of this element took

me a while to get used to, and I still think that it is one piece of the puzzle a director should be able to request without fear of dictating designer vision. Fortunately, I was able to find indirect visual descriptions, such as "classic," that supported my world but were still a bit more general to communicate my ideas.

As I mentioned before, class at this time was half concentrated on technique and skill development and half concentrated on the staging of the play itself. I explained to my cast immediately the new elements that were being added to this production and they all agreed to donate an extra week of rehearsal outside of class to make sure that the show delivered to the expectations that were being laid out by the department.

During blocking rehearsals, we worked in a predictable format. We started with me outlining the pre-blocking I had written down, taking time always to express that this is nothing other than a flimsy frame that I am encouraging all of them to break. Past experience working with professional actors proved that this was an effective way of staging on a shortened time-frame, as it would cover all of the bases to make sure the entire show got blocked, but still allow potential for actor choices to come up with a better plot. Working with undergraduates however was a completely different experience. It wasn't until about halfway through the staging process that the actors felt comfortable enough to break free from the frame and make choices, most of them clinging to only what I would give them. It was difficult to decipher why it was so hard getting them to play, and my main suspicion was that they had no idea what it actually felt like to be a part of a radio studio space.

The First Seven Rules for Visually Staging Audio Plays

The fact that I kept the technique portion of this class is something that I believe to be one of my greater successes in this process, and the outcomes of the exercises proved to be

incredibly influential. I mentioned before that one of the main assignments I had the students work on was the writing and performance of a radio show in which they had to play at least three characters and base them on the Alvin Schwartz books *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. Initially when I created this assignment I saw it nothing more than an opportunity for the students to practice vocal elasticity and specificity. What it actually offered however was much more. Watching these small thirty-minute radio shows, I started to notice the juxtaposition of the studio world vs. the broadcasting world. Several moments the students would snicker at a choice the other was making, other moments one of the actors would contort their body into different positions to create a different character, and other moments students would be trapped in the efforts of voice acting and creating the atmosphere of the scene itself. Watching these projects, I was able to see the complete visual world that we were missing in *It's a Wonderful Life* and the solution to the students being so hesitant on making choices against my initial frame. After the performances I was able to have the most productive conversation with my students about the creation of these two worlds and how to integrate them into *It's a Wonderful Life*. This "how" I have listed as a series of rules (or recommendations) that I have created for visually staging audio plays. There are seven rules in the initial batch; I would later add two more while investigating the technical elements of the process. The seven are as follows:

1. The first rule when staging visual radio plays is: *display of effort*.

"Display of Effort" essentially means that the more multi-tasking oriented choice is almost always more interesting to watch. This is perhaps why Joe Landry's production is so successful when being played by five actors as opposed to the eleven in my class: watching five actors play over thirty parts is a significant display of multi-tasking or effort. Watching a Foley artist have to tip a bucket of water over and crush corn flakes at the same time is interesting to

watch as it has more multi-tasking or effort. In order to materialize this effort I purposely staged moments in the radio studio where an actor almost missed their cue at the microphone, or moments where two actors had to fight over a leading place in front of the microphone. One of the moments where I used this effort to my advantage was by embracing the height of one of my actors (they were significantly shorter than the rest of the cast). As a solution, and abiding by this rule, I integrated the use of an apple box to raise the actor up to appropriate microphone height. Not only did this apple box provide an extra level to play with during the staging process, but also it created effort, as the stage manager had to frequently strike and reset the apple box during the play. Another way to example this effort is through the already discussed term of *active direction*. Throughout my staging I worked out a series of hand signals, based on my prior research, where the stage manager would orchestrate the action and sounds on stage. If I had more time, this is definitely one element I would have continued to work on in terms of clarity, as there is so much potential storytelling involved in the effort.

2. The second rule is: *base characters are the important characters*.

A "base character" is the voice actor character. It is the one who works in the radio studio. Character voices are not base characters; they are imaginary, as they only exist in the aural world. The purpose of this rule is that ultimately all voices have to stem out of a single person, almost like the base character is the tree trunk and the branches and leaves are all the voices they have inside of them (see Appendix A.5). The base character is highly important because it is the one we see. If the production was only being broadcast for listening purposes this rule would have no significance, but for visual purposes, this character is simply everything. They hold the shared secrets with the audience, which urges them to continue watching. This character may snicker at another actor's choices, they may have side arguments (without sound

of course), they may secretly try to sabotage a jingle singer group that they have been kicked out of: the possibility with these characters is essentially endless and depends on the collaboration of the cast in order to work effectively. It is also a possible remedy for Brecht's criticism, as it is this character that is capable of communicating with the audience.

3. The third rule is: *things (or sounds) are never what they seem to be*.

This rule is one of the more fun ones to execute when staging radio plays. Basically what it means is that if you have to make a sound effect of breaking ice, find something else that is not ice to break. Obscurity always wins. Audiences seem, from my experience at least, to love the unexpected. One of the more successful examples that we did in *It's a Wonderful Life* was the use of a corn flakes box to create the effect of someone walking through the snow. In fact after one of the performances a patron told me (not knowing I was the director) that it was one of his favorite parts. What it ultimately does is makes the audience feel intelligent. They connect the dots of the sound to the story.

4. The fourth rule is: *always make time to share the story of the studio with the audience*.

A director has to be very creative in order to make this work, but it is the component that probably separates a radio play from a staged reading the most. What this means is that the audience must be able to understand all reasoning of why certain actions take place visually in the studio. If a base character wants to sabotage the jingle singers, we have to know "why." This is hard because the initial script you are working with will most likely not give any clues on how to materialize this behavior. The outlet I used was the pre-show.

Joe Landry writes a short and general pre-show into his script as follows: "*(Holiday music plays. We're in a radio studio… Over the next ten minutes, the ACTORS enter the auditorium, casually mingling with the audience, checking scripts, props, etc.)*" (Landry 11).

After reading this I knew it would have to be much more specific or it would simply be a waste of potential storytelling. The pre-show I came up with for *It's a Wonderful Life* took a bit of exploration, and if I had an extra week (or month) it is something I would have continued to spend much more time on. Ultimately what it did become was a functional hook for all of the base characters to connect their threads. Instead of only singing Christmas carols, I turned them into jingle singer warm-ups where we were able to expose several radio studio plot lines that would later be materialized visually during the radio play itself. The best example is the music director/piano player removing one of the girls from the jingle singer group due to inability to sing on pitch or rhythm. This causes a rift of jealousy in the rejected character that would materialize into several behavioral moments in which she would try to ruin their performances: most notably by making inappropriate sound effects during their first commercial break.

5. The fifth rule is: *click*.

I took a class during the fall semester of 2015 in mime technique with VCU's head of performance David Leong. Even though the class was listed as a "mime" course, it concentrated mostly on visual storytelling through direction and writing. The mime portion came into play when investigating how to capture clarity with physical movements on stage. One of the concepts that were coined by David during this class was the idea of a *click*. Essentially a click is a physical shift that allows an actor to change the way they move, triggering an audience-accepted change of character, time, or location. For example: if one actor has to portray two characters in a scene, they can play both characters by physically spinning into a new posture indicative of each individual. This spin between the two characters is the "click." I learned the idea of the click about halfway through staging *It's a Wonderful Life* and I knew that with the amount of characters my actors had to play that it would be something my radio artists could

totally play with effectively. One of my students had to transfer from Billy Bailey to Peter Bailey with only one line to spare. This became a perfect moment to execute a click. I had the actor spin behind George, transferring sides of the microphone, as well as push his glasses up on top of his head. This spinning motion paired with the visual aids of posture and costume (glasses), helped the audience realize that the actor was playing two separate characters. The trick with integrating clicks into the radio studio I found however would be finding motivation to enact them. In mime, the click is almost a disconnection and you do not necessarily have to prove why it is there. However, radio artists spinning randomly in space from one character to another can hardly be recognized as natural behavior. I found I could be successful with this by going back to the radio artists' base character and justifying the spin as a moment where that base character is "getting into character," similar to how you sometimes see actors take a private moment before starting a monologue (Leong).

6. The next rule is: *fight professionalism with unprofessionalism*.

It is important to embrace the etiquette of the radio studio, what is even more fun however is deciding whether or not the characters are good at executing this etiquette, or whether the character chooses not to have good etiquette. Ultimately what this does visually is that it allows the audience to read more into the characters' behavior. I had one character eat a cookie while they were talking into the microphone; not only was it a fun choice to define the character she was portraying both physically and aurally, but it also provided a private visual moment with the audience that was quite humorous, as it was completely unprofessional.

7. The seventh rule is: *don't limit the actors to their chairs*.

My first pre-blocking did not abide by this rule at all. I had actors walk up to the microphone and then report almost immediately back to their assigned chair. Watching the

patterns back was nothing but static. Chairs in the radio studio world are home bases, nothing more. The actors can report to the chairs on occasion, but it is always more interesting to have them elsewhere in the studio, as that is more likely to provide opportunity to reveal character through behavior. It is very difficult exposing behavior by having an actor sit until their lines arrive, not to mention the actors themselves start to appear bored, as that is what I noticed this picturization connotes.

Much in the style of Anne Bogart and her Viewpoints[3], there are more than likely many rules that I have forgotten to mention, and I encourage you to create your own if you are staging radio plays for viewing pleasure. Applying the rules above however did help my actors break free from their shells and start looking at this production more as a play within in a play (such as *Kiss Me Kate* or *Noises Off*), and that is where a well of creativity was nestled.

Rehearsal and Production Revisions

As the actors started crafting their own choices around the skeletal frame, I started to notice that some of my initial blocking impulses were clumsy. The strongest example of this was the rule I had made about "heaven" only existing at microphone two. Not only did I find that I had shut myself out of a significant amount of staging potential, but I had created an incredible amount of congestion around microphone one. As I continued to think about it I also noticed that there was no way to explain "why" the radio artists would have made this rule in the first place. Many of the actors were unable to speak into the microphone due to the piling, and it

[3] In *The Viewpoints Book*, Anne Bogart and Tina Landau write that their text "…is not definitive, not gospel, not absolute truth. It is written out of personal experience and belief… Our wish is not that these pages be read as a prescriptive instruction manual, but rather as an array of possibilities, a call to further examination and personalization on the part of the reader…We hope you use them, then write on them, then *re*write on them, then read them again" (Bogart x).

seemed not professional or practical. I immediately began to eliminate this rule, deciding that the base character life would be interesting enough and I would not have to rely on symbolic blocking rules to make the play specific.

On the note of symbolic blocking, there was one permission I did establish during the process that I found to be successful and that didn't surface until the chair of the department started adding more production value to my set.

Although initially this production was to not have a set other than a couple of Christmas trees upstage center, at a production meeting it was brought to my attention that we would also be incorporating a floor treatment that was to be a series of small tiles in a circle surrounded by larger tiles. I've included a picture of the final set in the appendix for reference (C.3). I seized the opportunity of the circles, seeing them more than a pattern on a floor but a series of layers, with the center circle being the hot core of the earth, and the outer circle being all of the layers on top of it. From that point on I started a general staging rule that anything happening in that center circle would be only connected to the broadcast story of *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the outer circle was the life of the radio studio itself. On occasion I found moments where the characters were at a point of limbo or purgatory between the two worlds. When this happened I would purposely stage the actor to situate themselves on the line between the smaller and larger circles. An example of this was when Mary Hatch sees George in Pottersville and tries escaping from him. In response, George grabs her, trying to hold her down in the broadcast world, instigating her scream that brings the police. This smaller circle also inspired me to play with the question of "What if Jake Laurents got so involved with the play that he actually became George Bailey?" I discuss this idea in further detail later when examining use of props and costume.

Microphone Configurations: Clusters, Trios, Duos, and Solos

As mentioned in the microphone technique section of this thesis we were using microphones with cardioid fields for *It's a Wonderful Life*. Trying to fortify the rule of not having any more than three actors in the cardioid field sets a huge trap risking static and repetitive staging. This production, thankfully, forced me to break this rule for several reasons. The first was that I was only granted two actor microphones to use for the duration of the piece (the others needed to be used for the piano and Foley table). Due to this limitation, I had no choice but to create microphone congestion for some of the larger scenes. The second reason for necessary rule breaking was stage size and shape. On the Air Radio Players used a typical proscenium that was much smaller when compared to the larger three quarters round that is VCU's Hodges Theater and because of this, they were able to create many of their atmosphere sounds from their home chairs. My production however, in order for any atmosphere sound to be picked up in the field, had to maneuver the actors to closer positions around the microphone. This often created larger clumps of six or more actors around one microphone, creating a saturated cardioid configuration, which I notate as cardioid+.

Breaking *The Radio Drama Handbook* rule of "up to" three actors behind a cardioid microphone in favor of a larger clump I think provided some unique staging opportunities for myself as a director. In real life, a radio studio for larger groups may have chosen to use an omnidirectional microphone, with actors standing on all sides. My restriction to cardioid microphones would make this option impossible as well as the fact that actors on all sides of the microphone would upstage any direct focus amongst the clump. For example: in *It's a Wonderful Life* there is a board of directors scene where the board president needs to withhold more power when compared to the rest of the board members; therefore the most logical place to

put her visually is directly in front of the microphone with the board members surrounding her. If I had optioned for an omnidirectional microphone configuration, there would have been actors standing in front of the central action, completely upstaging the focus. I believe that this is one of most prime examples of how staging audio plays for a watching audience is significantly different than a strictly listening one.

Ultimately being limited to cardioid visual performance configurations had its share of advantages and disadvantages. The cardioid+ formations allowed for picturization that connoted a visual display of effort, which played well into the radio studio world. The natural proxemics of the limited range also proved quite suitable for the play's more intimate and passionate moments. The main disadvantage, however, were the drastic sight lines that the zones created. Particularly with duo-formations at the microphone: although fully open to the center audience, the positioning instantly severs connection with at least one side of the thrust. Remedying these sight lines didn't come into play until tech. The entire rehearsal room I had been working in wasn't as big as the main stage itself, so it was impossible for me as director to navigate through the viewing space and fix problems until we got into the actual theater. It was then I was able to find a solution.

During ground planning I chose to stagger microphone one and two on a diagonal, originally to prevent static straight lines as well as open the action up to at least one side of the thrust (stage right in this case). However, I discovered during spacing and tech that I was able to open up to the neglected side of the thrust by having actors at microphone one when they weren't talking turn back and look at microphone two. I was very careful when I chose to have the actors do this, mostly because if it happened too much, the character at microphone one tended to look

disoriented or frantic. Instead I decided on using it as punctuation, and only when the actor absolutely had to look back at microphone two they did so.

Throughout the process of staging I did start recognizing that the number of actors in a singular cardioid microphone field would connote different meanings in picturization. Throughout the process I would start to tailor these groups to certain microphones based on the visual story I wanted to tell. I've divided the groups into: clusters, trios, duos, and solos.

- Clusters (group larger than three in a single cardioid field) are good for meetings, mob scenes, parties, gatherings, etc. The person in the center of the batch tends to be the leader, and there is good potential for a display of effort if there are two people fighting over this leadership position. I also refer to this group as a saturated cardioid or a cardioid+.
- Trio (three actors in a single cardioid field) has friendly nature to it. I would often use it when staging scenes with George, Bert, and Ernie or Young George, Young Violet, and Young Mary.
- Duos (two actors in a single cardioid field) are used for moments of love, intimacy, or confrontation. This is mostly because the actors in this position can easily look at one another when not speaking into the microphone. Mary and George, George and Zuzu, Potter and George, as well as Joseph and Clarence were all times I used duo configuration.
- Solos (one actor in a cardioid field) are used for moments of confession, reflection, or introduction. George's prayer to heaven was an example of strategically using a solo configuration for personal reflection/confession. Freddy Filmore also uses it for introduction in the very beginning of the play.

It is also important to note that whenever any character breaks free from one of these groupings they are no longer in the aural world, but they remain in the visual world. It is then the director needs to decide if the actor is visually still in the story being broadcast or if they have entered back into the radio studio world. During *It's a Wonderful Life* I used both. The actor playing the stage manager also played George's brother Pete. During the early scene where there is a sledding accident and Pete falls through thin ice, I had the actor jump free from the cluster configuration back into a kneeling stage manager position facing the microphone so he could continue to direct the group (now a friendly trio) on their vocal ad libs: this is an example of falling back into the radio studio story. An example of staying in the broadcast world was when George goes back to Potter at the end of the second segment of the play, asking for grace due to the missing funds. I chose to have George break free from a duo positioning and turn back and face his nemesis as Potter delivered his line "Merry Christmas George" solo, proceeding into a door slam. Using this maneuvered distance between George and Potter, with Potter visually still in power as he remained at the microphone, I created a visually dramatic effect for the broadcast story, while breaking out of configuration.

Microphone configuration is something that I played continuously with during the process, and did not solidify until our final dress rehearsals. This was mostly because visually it is where clarity of story becomes most important. It would make no sense to stagger two actors to two separate microphones during a scene of intimacy; it not only makes it harder for the actors but also makes it more confusing to watch.

Props and Costumes.

Props and costumes became vital to the visual life of the play. This is mostly because the script itself of *It's a Wonderful Life*, with the exception to the Foley props, does not need

costumes or props at all. During my preliminary research, I watched a YouTube video of actors simply standing on stage in suits and dresses reading from the red booklet copies provided by the publishing company. This video brought me back to the feeling of boredom, and so I knew that this would have to be remedied. The biggest issue when dealing with these elements is that Joe Landry does not define any of the characters for the director in his script. Besides Freddy Fillmore's introductions in the opening beats of the piece, we know absolutely nothing about the characters of Jake Laurents, Sally Applewhite, Jazzbo Heywood, and Lana Sherwood; this doesn't take into consideration that my staging had an added crew and supporting actors to consider as well.

My undergraduate directing teacher, Doug Finlayson, would often teach that props were some of the most revealing tools you can give an actor, as they visually reveal behavior. For example: a sports fanatic who is so angry that his football team lost, rips apart tickets to the Super Bowl in a frenzied fit. This action says numerous things about the character: how he reacts to loss, the relationship between him and his sports team, how in the moment he can actually be. Considering all of this, I knew that I'd have to start integrating some props into this show to bring some visual life to the stage and characters.

Radio shows prop-wise consistently demand three main props: scripts, microphones, and then whatever is on the Foley table. This is completely minimal, but it is important to note that this is where I started in the process, and was initially all I had to work with.

Microphones, since they cannot be touched or moved without severing the believability of the audible world, give very little play in the visual story telling. They are helpful in terms of building pictures and staging movement, but those two elements I find to be more ground plan and set issues rather than properties. Scripts and Foley props however are completely opposite.

I found scripts to be one of my favorite props in the directing process. So much can be revealed about a radio artist by how they treat their script. It is also the component that I feel as though I was least successful in exploring. Most of this was because class time was cut short due to the actual staging of the piece, so I was able to spend very little time coaching the students on script handling technique. The original plan for this production was to leave all copies of the script unbound, as this is what was typically done in radio studios (as referenced in the etiquette portion of this document). Unbound scripts would also permit certain actors to drop their pages on the ground, another typical radio artist technique, which would be not only an interesting character choice, but also an interesting visual choice. I was especially keen on the idea of George dropping his pages on the ground in Pottersville leaving him ultimately abandoned in nothing but a splatter of script paper. We were not however able to progress with this, as the actors at dress rehearsal were still receiving notes from me about how to hold their script in a way that they could talk into the microphone, and some were getting their pages out of order. Because everything slowed down significantly in terms of script relationship and technique, it was decided that we should bind all the scripts with brass fasteners. This simplified everything significantly. Despite this simplification however, I did manage to integrate one specific moment (and perhaps my favorite moment of the show) where the script revealed true character. This moment was when George Bailey comes back to Bedford Falls. I had frequent discussions with the actors playing Jake/George and Sally/Mary about the trajectory of their characters within this play. We were all gravitated towards the idea that the further into the story we got the more and more the radio characters were swallowed up by the story. To illustrate this, we developed a physical relationship between the two that would eventually end in a kiss. However, I also asked that the two have everything memorized from their meeting in Pottersville on.

There is a beauty in watching an actor who has been reading their script for the entire show deliberately decide to no longer look at their lines. It is a visual statement when the actor actually dedicates himself towards being in the moment, and ultimately living in the character. This echoes a lot of the theme in Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, as George never really took time to be present and notice all of the life around him. Once George goes back to Bedford Falls, I staged a moment where he would drop his script on the ground, an action which reveals that Jake is now George Bailey: an actor who once had to read all his lines, can now 100% of the time not only look directly at everyone he is speaking to, but look directly at the audience as well, a true transformation.

Foley props are the second built in prop system for radio shows, and because the actors are constantly interacting with them they provide a bountiful array of opportunity when revealing character. During the staging process, work with the Foley props was slow moving. This was mostly because our list of props was initially fluid and we didn't solidify what props we were using for the show until we entered tech. Tech however is when magic started happening. During the play I had two central actors who were in charge of most of the Foley effects. Coincidentally this was also the oldest character in the radio studio and the youngest. Antithetically we also decided to reverse the success of the artists with the younger one being more talented at the effects than the older one. This provided some fantastic opportunity for comedy within the piece. One of the Foley props we received at the very last minute was the thunder sheet, which we had major issues with sound-wise as when used it sounded like a cookie sheet rather than actual thunder. The actress manipulating the prop however decided to make the choice to comically let the thunder sheet get so out of control that it maintained the audible action of the moment but also accepted that the effect was never going to sound like actual

thunder. This moved both the radio studio story forward as well as the *It's a Wonderful Life* story. The other actress however was so coordinated at the effects that she often could work multiple props at one time. The clash of how the actors visually used these props was able to portray specific character.

Later when it was revealed that the production would have a costume designer in addition to two prop crews (one focused on Foley and another focused on studio life), I was able to dive even deeper into the visual world of this production. This was where I would be able to reveal who all of the other characters in the space were and their place within the story.

Since the radio show needed to maintain its professionalism, all props needed to be objects that had a home in the studio or that the actors could carry on their person. This included a pitcher of water and drinking glasses, a clipboard and pencil for the stage manager, a flask, holiday cards and cookies, a briefcase full of sheet music, and a book. I had the idea for of compact mirror for Freddy Filmore toward the end of the process, but it was too late to integrate it effectively. What is most important to note is that none of the listed props above were used as "decoration;" they were all used specifically in a moment to notate whom the person was. For example: a peculiar character is nearly late for most of his entrances, creating tension between him and the stage manager. We see throughout the play that this is because he has been taking sips from a flask, revealing visually that he is most likely a drunk.

Costumes became crucial when identifying character visually through behavior. One of the initial notes I gave the designer was that I needed objects on the clothing that the actors could play with: glasses, suspenders, broaches, boutonnieres, etc. How an individual reacts to what they are wearing can oftentimes be very revealing. Throughout the process one actress and I were having difficulty locking down exactly who she was in the world. The costume designer

gave her a pair of thick circular glasses, sparking the possibility that this character might have seeing issues. It gave the actress something to cling to and her stage life immediately illuminated. Even the clothing of the period itself gave actors moments to reveal something about their characters. I staged Jake/George to remove or adjust parts of his costume (jacket, vest, tie, sleeves) throughout the play to connote the peeling away of the radio artist persona and their investment in the life of the fictional character. In addition to all of this, the costume designer also did an incredible job captivating the era of the 1940s, which didn't hurt the visual aesthetic of the piece. I've included the designs in the appendix (C.4).

Tech Rehearsal: Lighting and Set

& The Eighth Rule for Visually Staging Audio Plays

We had been discussing the visual concepts for lighting and set at the production meetings, but it wasn't until tech rehearsal that the components really integrated themselves into this performance. Perhaps this is because both elements you can discuss figuratively, but unlike costumes and props, which you can see in full during the rehearsal and building process, it is hard to completely synthesize lighting and set until they are harmoniously in their wholes working together.

Lighting for this production we kept relatively basic. Since the entire play did take place in one location, the designer and I agreed that unnecessary light cues would immediately take us out of the world. Because of this, all cues were set at longer speeds during tech. The most notable cues also functioned around the idea that *It's a Wonderful Life* reminds us of the warmth that life brings. To represent this we started with a cooler wash (almost clinical) in the very beginning of the play and worked toward a warmer feel. In the very end I did ask the designer to vignette the play's main action, as it accentuated the floor treatment's innermost circle, fortifying

the idea that we have only been left with the play's core. The final bump off of the "On the Air" sign I also spent a little extra time with, as for me that is truly the final moment of the show, similar to a musical theatre button or the previously mentioned click.

Set-wise it was most important to me that we captivate the two worlds: the *Wonderful Life* world and the radio studio world. The set designer and I took several approaches to visually developing this. Since *It's a Wonderful Life* (the film) has gone down in history as being one of the most classic holiday movies of all time, we wanted to make sure to echo what we had already established with the props and the music: charming holiday spirit. In order to do this, the set designer brought in numerous real Christmas trees that lined the back of the stage. The "live" factor of the trees also added another sense for my viewing audience, that being smell. Immediately upon entering the space the smell of pine was naturally in the air. In addition to the trees, the department brought in string Christmas lights to hang as well as assorted decorations: colored bells, table runners, ornaments, etc.

The world of the radio studio was created by simply exposing all elements of production: similar to a Brechtian play. At a production meeting the sound designer brought up the possibility of using wireless microphones; this was something I immediately turned away as exposed wires demonstrates the effort of the studio (reverting back to the rules of visually staging audio plays). In addition to the microphone wires, we brought in work lights for the Foley table and upgraded the "applause" and "on the air" signs from cardboard to electric light boxes. For the performances, these light boxes were suspended above the stage and would blink on and off to cue the audience when to applaud. While working with these light boxes I was able to discover another important general principle when visually staging audio plays:

8.) *Everything must be visible in a single glance.*

Audience effort can be deadly when you are relying on them to participate, and the set needs to make the process as easy as possible. For example: when the "applause" and "on the air" signs were hung they were originally an extra ten feet higher. This created more effort for the audience because they could not watch the action on stage as well as the light box cues in a single glance; it was therefore impossible for them to enjoy the visual aspects of the show and readily receive their cues. In the end we brought the light boxes further down to make them more accessible. If you ask the audience to play the game of the show, don't make the game too hard to play.

When to Use the Microphone

& The Ninth Rule for Visually Staging Audio Plays

During my production's "pre-show" I staged several moments where the performers were singing Christmas carols. In order to give them a reason to be singing, I made the first song "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" a small flirtatious game between a performer and the piano player and the second song "Jingle Bells" a vocal warm-up for the jingle singers. During production meetings, I had expressed concern over these songs being heard over the piano and it was decided that the sound designer would try and pick up the voices via the piano microphone.

After getting into tech rehearsal however we learned that this would not be possible, due to the fact that the microphone had to be placed inside of the piano and would pick up the piano strings significantly more than the voices regardless. One of the options to fix this would be to bump the singing performances to microphone one or two and then mix them into the performance. Ultimately, after discussing this solution with the sound team it was decided that this would not be an effective route. The "why" creates a ninth rule in the visual staging of audio plays:

9.) *Any actor speaking into a microphone is communicating only to those tuning into the broadcast aurally*.

Even though the audience can see the actor performing, having an actor perform into a microphone that is exclusively used for "broadcast" is ineffective. It is important that visually we disconnect the use of the microphone in actor staging for any other purpose; and that includes the contemporary idea that microphones are used to amplify voices for a watching audience. Our final solution to the previously mentioned issue, and abiding by this rule, was to take away the piano microphone as well for these moments, making them more private moments on stage that the audience only happened to be present for. This also created the beauty of two versions of sound: that which is amplified (for the imaginary world) and that which is natural (for the visual world).

Performance and Reflection

It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play ultimately had a successful run at TheatreVCU. Many of my actors during the rehearsal process were becoming somewhat restless because they felt as though they were missing a scene partner amongst the action, and that was an audience. Radio players thrive on audience participation, and Joe Landry even sets this up by having Freddy Filmore invite the audience "to applaud, laugh, swoon or cry just as loudly as the spirit moves" (Landry 12). This permission proves that the rhythm of the play is not yet complete until we also involve their reactions. Visually what this also does is creates the unexpected, as audience reactions are some of the most inconsistent parts of the theatre. Some nights patrons may be enthusiastic about playing along and other nights they may have no interest; but every night the actors must accept their presence, take it in, and react. It wasn't until the audience was actually there that I had my final discoveries about how eccentric some of the characters could

be. One actor in particular made a choice to attempt shaking every person's hand in the audience during the pre-show. This was a visual choice, which revealed behavior that could have never happened without audience assistance.

Watching the show back I was relatively pleased with the work we had done. Visually the show was very fun to watch and I received several comments about the extra material we added that brought visual life into the radio studio. If I could do the process again, I'm sure there would be things I'd execute differently, but as a collaborative director I stay mostly content with the fact that this was a piece that the actors, designers, and I came up with together. If asked to direct another radio play however, I would immediately start integrating the rules I established in this thesis, as they deserve more attention and experimentation. I would also lock down a concrete understanding of the production value so I'd be able to maintain more consistency as a director. With this type of genre, I found it easy to assume it would be simple, but simplicity is also a forked road that leads one way toward specificity and another way toward generality. Perhaps the one major lesson from this is that radio drama is not glorified "reader's theatre." In typical reader's theatre it is not crucial to understand the life of the actors on stage, to see the efforts of the process, and establish ongoing communication with the audience. Perhaps it would benefit from becoming something more. Staged radio drama however, needs to be something completely immersive: it is not truly a 1940s or 50s broadcast that can be listened to while cleaning the house or making lunch, it is a theatrical event made for patrons who live in our current epoch. One that functions with viewership integrated into daily activity. The visual world is nothing to dismiss, as it is everything.

Afterward: A Simple Breath

After diving so far into an aurally based world you start to listen to everything differently as an artist. A simple breath into a microphone for me can now mean so many things in my imaginary world, as I not only think about what it means in the context of the delivery, but about what it means in the context of the radio studio world as well. Was that breath truly connected to a character? Or did it come from a silent (and therefore invisible) person? I now see radio everywhere. This last Christmas, *Saturday Night Live* broadcast their usual holiday special, showcasing sketches from their earliest days. Included in the series was a sketch I had seen multiple times of a pair of NPR hosts (played by Molly Shannon and Ana Gasteyer) with a character played by Alec Baldwin that distinctly plays into the double meaning of what is heard over the radio waves may not exactly be what is visually happening. I will go ahead and remind you that the iconic sketch is called "NPR's Delicious Dish of Schweddy Balls." I've laughed at this segment numerous times the last few years, but after this project I view it in new light; I did somehow figure out how to bring it up in this thesis.

What is most revealing however is when I think back to my friend Ken, realizing that having a personal relationship with him perhaps made his broadcast much more enthralling. I think as directors it is partially our duty, no matter the play, to establish this personal connection between the characters and the audience, otherwise Brecht is correct in saying that the art is one-sided. Thinking about the visual aspects of staging an audio-based world lays up a perfect

opportunity for the artistic team to create a functioning channel, and to give the audience the opportunity to accept all of the performers as their band of friends and cohorts. Great things can be communicated both aurally and visually through a simple breath.

Bibliography

Bibliography

Ball, William. *A Sense of Direction*. New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1984. Print.

Bogart, Anne, and Tina Landau. *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005. Print.

Brecht, Bertolt, and John Willett. *Brecht on Theatre; the Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. Print.

Chalman, Hannah. *Costume Design, It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*. 2015. TheatreVCU.

Cohen Stratyner, Barbara Naomi. *Performing Arts Resources: Performances in Periodicals*. New York: Theatre Library Association, 1989. Print.

Crook, Tim. *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.

"Directional Properties." *Microphone Directional Characteristics*. Mediacollege.com. n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

"Edison Invents the Phonograph." *Edison Invents the Phonograph*. America's Library, n.d. Web. 08 Jan. 2016.

Estreich, Bob. "The Electrophone System." *Electrophone*. Bob's Old Phones, July 2008. Web. 08 Jan. 2016.

Field, Kate. *Set Design, It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*. 2015. TheatreVCU.

Hand, Richard J., and Mary Traynor. *The Radio Drama Handbook: Audio Drama in Context and Practice*. New York, NY: Continuum, 2011. Print.

Landry, Joe. *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*. New York, NY (325 W. 38th St., Suite 305): Playscripts, 2006. Print.

Leong, David. "Advanced Problems in Acting: Mime." Virginia Commonwealth University, TheatreVCU, Richmond, VA. Fall 2015. Studio Class.

Moody Bible Institute - Radio Station WMBI - Studio Interior - 1939. N.d. *Chuckmans Photos on Wordpress Chicago Nostalgia and Memorabilia*. Web. 08 Jan. 2016.

Rachelle, Valerie. "Radio Drama Directing." Message to the author. 22 June 2015. E-mail.

Rochman, Davida. "Blog." *How to Mic a DSLR Video*. Shure Blog, 07 Apr. 2014. Web. 09 Jan. 2016.

"Texts and Technology Work Area." *ENG_6801 Time-line Summarizing Ong's Diachronic Analysis*. American Socrates, 03 Sept. 2008. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.

"The Story of Jack Foley." *The Story of Jack Foley*. FilmSound.org, n.d. Web. 19 Apr. 2016.

Verma, Neil. *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Print.

White, Thomas. "United States Early Radio History." *United States Early Radio History*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Jan. 2016.

You Heard It Here First!: A Live Radio Show! Dir. Margie Langston. The Cultural Arts Center, Glen Allen. 2 June 2015. Performance.

Appendix A

Diagrams and Illustrations

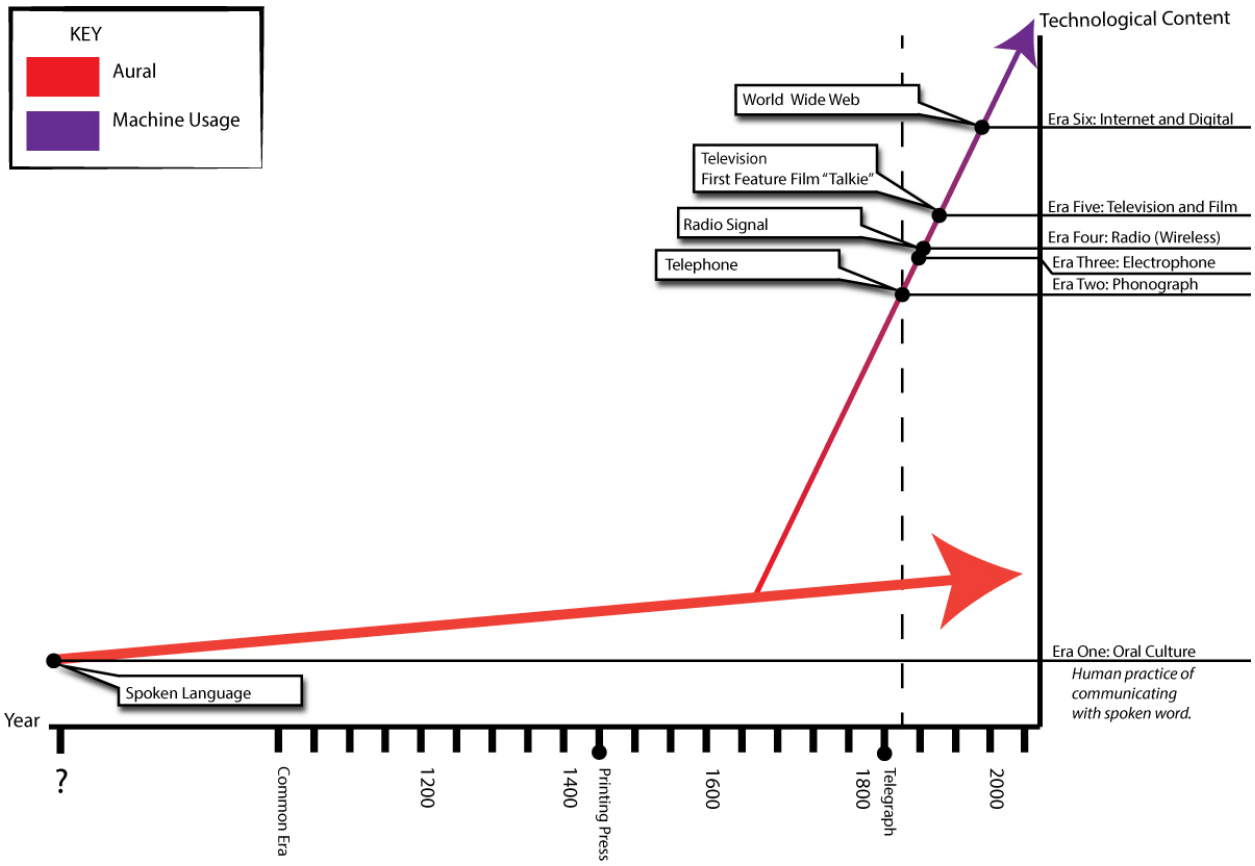
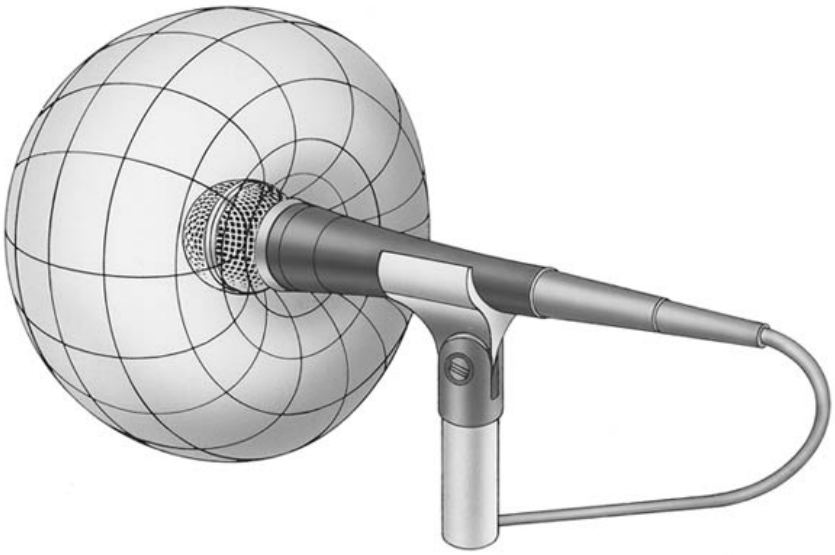


Fig. A.1. Diachronic analysis timeline integrated with Tim Crook's epochs of audio drama. American Socrates, 03 Sept. 2008. Web. 11 Apr. 2016. The figure is a welding of the diagram *Timeline Summarizing Ong's Diachronic Analysis* by American Socrates with the principles of Crook's epochs of audio drama. The arrows represent the progression towards our current day. The dotted line represents the entrance into an "electronic" period. Several other factors can also be noticed: as machine usage increases, so does technological content; all of Crook's epochs happen in the "electronic" period; and despite the increased amount of technological advances, there is still a fundamental rooting in "oral culture" ("Texts and Technology Work Area," Crook 22-27).

Unidirectional Microphone



Omnidirectional Microphone

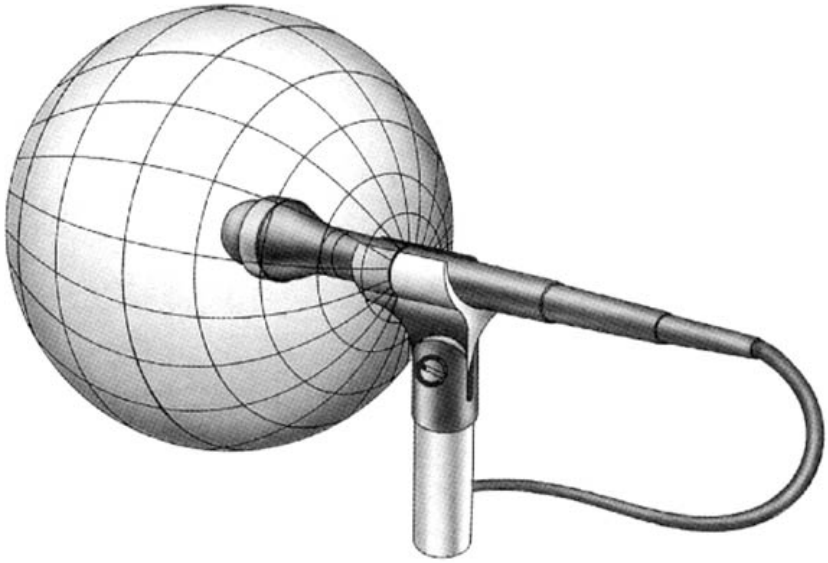


Fig. A.2. Unidirectional and omnidirectional microphones. Diagrams courtesy of Shure Inc., used with permission. Davida Rochman, Shure Blog, 07 Apr. 2014. Web. 09 Jan. 2016. Diagram of the live area around the microphone: unidirectional vs. omnidirectional. For *It's a Wonderful Life* we used unidirectional ball microphones that were masked with period microphone covers. "Live" areas (where sound can be picked up) are within the diagramed sphere. Sound produced in all other areas are "dead." Notice how the omnidirectional allows significantly more playing space visually when compared to the unidirectional microphone, but unidirectional microphones allow more play between the two zones (Rochman).

Fig. A.3. Diagrams of microphone actor configurations with different microphone fields. The empty circles notate actable fields for the microphone. Any area outside of the circle is "dead" area. Notice how different the rules are based on choice of microphone. Images based on polarity diagrams in *The Radio Drama Handbook*, illustrated by Alex Burkart (Hand 134).

Omnidirectional: Position up to six actors around the circumference of the microphone.

Figure of Eight: Up to two actors on each side of the microphone.

Cardioid: Up to three actors at the front of the microphone.

Hypercardioid: One actor at the front of the microphone.

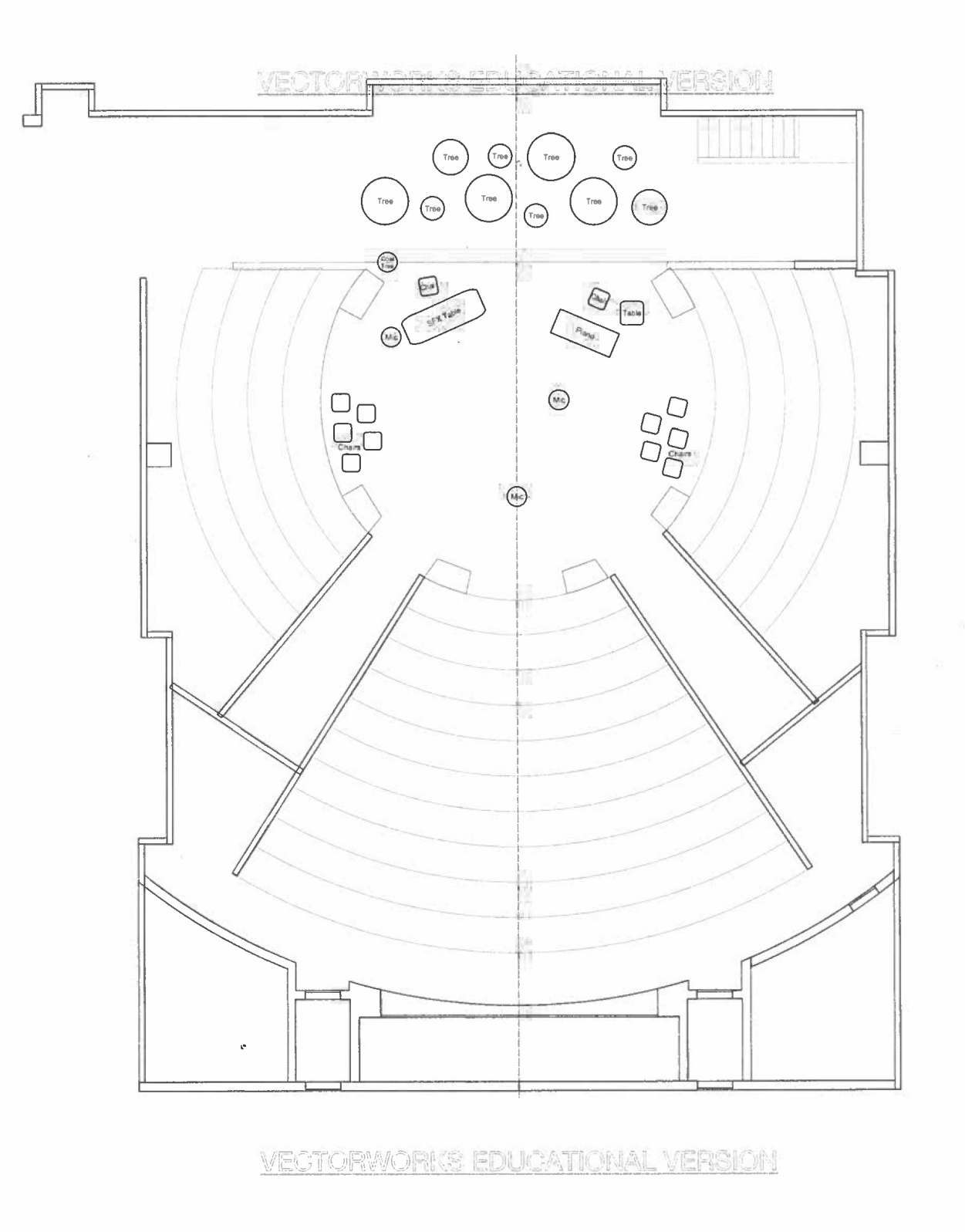


Fig A.4. *It's a Wonderful Life* ground plan. Kate Field, TheatreVCU, 2015 (Field).

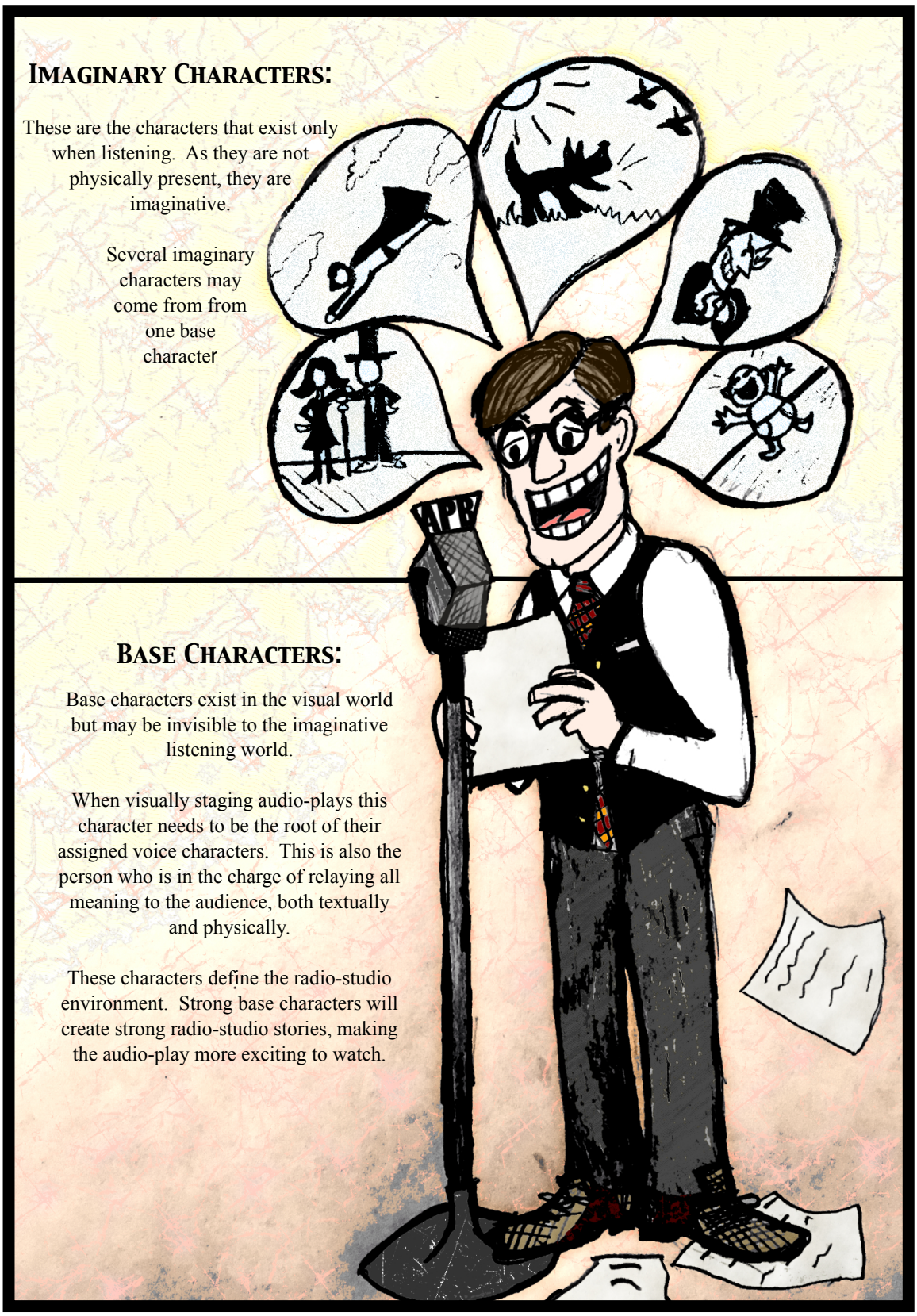


Fig. A.5. Base Characters and Imaginary Characters Theory. Alex Burkart, 2015 (Burkart).

Appendix B

Schedules and Production Notes

Fig. B.1. Character breakdown for *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*
The following figure includes the assignments of all voice characters to the eleven actors in my production.

Cast of Characters

Freddy Filmore:	Announcer, Joseph
Jake Laurents:	George Bailey, Young George
Sally Applewhite:	Mary Hatch, Young Mary
Jazzbo Heywood:	Clarence
Lana Sherwood:	Violet Bick, Young Violet, Jingle Singer, Woman
Man 1:	Potter, Ed, Tommy, Nick
Man 2:	Peter Bailey, Billy Bailey, Martini, Cop
Man 3:	Stage Manager, Harry Bailey, Pete, Sam, Schultz, Mr. Welch
Woman 1:	Jingle Singer, Bert, Zuzu, Matilda, Ruth, Charlie, S Sadie, Binky
Woman 2:	Foley Artist, Jingle Singer, Gower, Collins, Mrs. Hatch, Mrs. Thompson, Janie, Bridge Keeper
Woman 3:	Foley Artist, Jingle Singer, Rose Bailey, Ernie, Dr. Campbell, Hoarce the Teller

Fig B.2. Class syllabus
Below is the syllabus that I used for my Radio Drama class. It covers all techniques as well as my rehearsal schedule for *It's a Wonderful Life*. VCU supplementary material has been removed due to relevance.

THEA 491: VOICE OVER AND RADIO DRAMA

Tuesdays and Thursdays 3:00-4:50pm, B57
Instructor: Alex Burkart
323-717-1573, burkartap@vcu.edu
Singleton Performing Arts Center 249

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class is designed for advanced level acting students to explore with voice over and radio drama technique. Basic acting and voice and speech fundamentals will be stretched and applied through advanced studio work. The course will culminate in the production of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play* by Joe Landry, which is a special event for the Theatre VCU season.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this course, students will be able to…

- Demonstrate an understanding of voice-over and radio drama vocabulary and technique.
- Practice reading and performing voice over copy.
- Make vocal choices related to self and character.
- Create and perform live radio plays.

CLASS STRUCTURE

This class will be divided into two major components: practice and performance. Practice sessions will include lecture and studio work focused on developing technique. Performance sessions we will be rehearsal for *It's a Wonderful Life.* Each component will be weighted equally in the student's final grade.

REQUIRED TEXTS

It's a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play by Joe Landry (Instructor Provided)

RECOMMENDED TEXT

The Radio Drama Handbook by Richard J. Hand and Mary Traynor

REQUIRED MATERIALS

Various Common Household Items for Sound Effects (as needed).
Orchestrated Music Recordings for Radio Shows (as needed)
Pencil and Notebook
An Audio-Recording Device

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES

1. **Attendance Policy**:

   Attendance is mandatory. Students will not be permitted more than two absences. On the third absence their final grade will automatically drop one full letter and will continue to drop with each additional absence. Absence from class on a day of a final project will constitute failure on the project. Students who arrive late to class will be considered tardy. Two tardies will be equivalent to one absence. Lateness to class in excess of twenty minutes will be considered an absence. A daily sign in sheet will be used to monitor attendance. If absent, it is the student's responsibility to find out what was missed and make sure all assigned work is completed. If the student is going to be absent, they must notify the instructor by e-mail at least two hours before the class is scheduled to meet.

2. **Active Participation:**

   Active participation is expected with all class exercises and discussions. Students who do not participate will have their grade directly affected. If a student is for some reason unable to participate in an exercise, they must notify the instructor. Active participation means: being fully engaged, focused, positive and enthusiastic, respectful of others and the work, participating in class discussions, volunteering, professional behavior, and giving "constructive criticism" when asked.

3. **Assigned Coursework:**

   Students must complete all assigned work. All assignments and due dates are listed in the course calendar below.

4. **Final Performance**: ***It's a Wonderful Life- A Radio Play***

   All students will be required to perform in the final presentation of *It's a Wonderful Life- A Live Radio Play* by Joe Landry. All roles will be cast by the instructor. All students are required to accept any part assigned to them, and will be expected to work on the roles outside of class. Failure to come to rehearsals for the project or being un-prepared to work, will result in a lowering of the student's final grade.

5. **Student Handbook Regulations:**

   Students will be expected to know and abide by all of the information in the STUDENT HANDBOOK.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

1. Participation and Preparation 20%

In order to succeed in this class you must come prepared and ready to participate. This class will be incredibly collaborative, and we will only be able to succeed with a strong ensemble. Please refer to the policies regarding attendance and active participation above. In order to come to class prepared please refer to the assignments and activities listed in the calendar below.

2. Assignments 30%

There will be two major assignments (a radio show and a voice-over demo reel) that all students will be responsible for completing. All assignments will have equal weight in the overall grade and will be evaluated based on preparation and application of class concepts. Please see attached rubric for detailed scoring breakdown. Since all assignments will be group oriented, attendance on final showing days is mandatory.

3. Written Voice Over/Radio Drama Observations 20%

Students will be responsible for writing six voice over/radio drama observations throughout the course of the semester. Each observation should be about one to two pages long and must include: one (1) animated film/television show, two (2) radio or television commercials, one (1) radio drama, and two (2) more of the student's choosing. Students should actively apply the vocabulary and concepts being explored in class. Observations must be e-mailed to me by the dates listed in the calendar below. You are encouraged to consult *The Radio Drama Handbook* when writing all critiques.

4. *It's a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play* 30%

All students will be required to perform in the final presentation. Casting will be decided by the course instructor. Casting assignments may change at any time based on student professionalism and preparation. All students will be required to accept the part assigned to them. Grades will be determined by professionalism and application of course material to the work.

Note: Due to this class being associated with a MainStage production at VCU, I may request additional rehearsals outside of class. All dates will be cleared with students at least one week prior to the rehearsal.

GRADES

- **A.** Excellent work that is complete, organized, and creative. No spelling and/or grammar mistakes, with clear executed thought. Demonstrates an eagerness to learn and integrate concepts and discussion into their artistic process.
- **B.** Good work that is complete and organized. Few spelling and/or grammar mistakes, with a clear executed thought. Demonstrates a willingness to learn and integrate concepts and discussion into their artistic process.

- **C.** Average work that is complete. May contain spelling and grammar errors, and may have unfocused thought. Demonstrates an understanding of concepts during in-class discussion, but does not actively integrate them with the work.
- **D.** Poor work that is complete. Contains obstructive spelling and grammatical errors with unfocused thought. Demonstrates an understanding of concepts through in-class discussion, but does not actively integrate them with the work.
- **F.** Failing work that is missing or incomplete. Contains massive and frequent spelling and grammar errors with unfocused thought. Makes little initiative to demonstrate understanding of concepts, and does not integrate them with the work. Frequent lack of professionalism.

A Note About Professionalism:

It is my goal as an instructor to get students as prepared for a working career in the theatre arts as possible. Professionalism will be expected from everyone. Individuals found to be intruding on the learning process with unprofessional behavior will be dismissed from class and will have their participation grade directly affected.

To avoid unprofessionalism, please: turn off all cellular devices before entering the classroom, respect your fellow classmates, do not bring food into the classroom (covered beverages are fine), and come prepared to class on time and ready to work.

Classroom Setup:

This class will require frequent set-up and strike both before and after class. Please help with assembly and breakdown of all equipment to ensure that class time is used to its fullest potential.

THE RADIO DRAMA HANDBOOK:

I recommend that all of you pick up a copy of *The Radio Drama Handbook* by Richard J. Hand and Mary Traynor from the VCU Bookstore. The main techniques and explorations done in class are mostly based on this text, and familiarity with it will be incredibly helpful with observations and application. I have a desk copy that can be checked out from me individually as well.

CALENDAR

All dates and content are subject to change.

August

<u>UNIT ONE: Introduction to Radio Drama</u>

Thursday, August 20th

First day of class. Introduction to the course and syllabus.
Introduction to Radio Drama Handout (History and Practice)
Passing out of Radio Drama scripts.
5-minute Voice Plays (Time permitting)

Tuesday, August 25th

Listening Session: Orson Welles, *War of the Worlds*
In class discussion of *War of the Worlds*
Basic microphone technique for radio drama and voice-over

Thursday, August 27th

Radio Drama: First read through of *It's a Wonderful Life*

September

Tuesday, September 1st

Radio Drama: Staging *It's a Wonderful Life* (3-20)

UNIT TWO: Using Your *Own* Voice

Thursday, September 3rd

Who is your individual character? Please bring in an embarrassing story to share with our eager ears.

Tuesday, September 8th

Radio Drama: Staging *It's a Wonderful Life* (pgs 20-40)

Thursday, September 10th

Auditioning for commercials (voice-over)

Tuesday, September 15th

Radio Drama: Staging *It's a Wonderful Life* (pgs 40-60)

Thursday, September 17th

Radio Drama: Staging *It's a Wonderful Life* (pgs 60-88)
ASSIGNMENT DUE: Two written observations.

Tuesday, September 22nd -27th: No Class- Reading Days
UNIT THREE: Using Voices of Character

Tuesday, September 29th

Radio Drama: Staging *It's a Wonderful Life* (Working 3-20)

October

Thursday, October 1st

Vocal Viewpoints and creating character
Vocal Viewpoints discussion

Tuesday, October 6th
Radio Drama: Staging *It's a Wonderful Life* (Working 20-40)

Thursday, October 8th
Audio Books
Children's Book presentations –Instructor Provided

Tuesday, October 13th
Radio Drama: Staging *It's a Wonderful Life* (Working 40-60)

Thursday, October 15th
Auditioning for Animation
Cartoon copy auditions

UNIT FOUR: Application

Tuesday, October 20th
Music Session for *It's a Wonderful Life* (Jingles and *Finale*)

Thursday, October 22nd
Music Session for *It's a Wonderful Life* (Jingles and *Finale*)

Tuesday, October 27th
Radio Drama: Staging *It's a Wonderful Life* (Working 60-88)

Thursday, October 29th
ASSIGNMENT #1: Halloween Radio Show (3-4 people, 20-30 minutes)
ASSIGNMENT DUE: Two written observations

November

Tuesday, November 3rd
TBA

Thursday, November 5th
Radio Drama: Stage opening and work music for *It's a Wonderful Life*

Tuesday, November 10
Radio Drama: *It's a Wonderful Life* (Work through with music)

Thursday, November 12th
Radio Drama: Stumble through *It's a Wonderful Life*

Tuesday, November 17th
Radio Drama: Run-through *It's a Wonderful Life*

Thursday, November 19th
Radio Drama: Run-through *It's a Wonderful Life*
ASSIGNMENT #2: Voice-Over Reel (e-mailed no later than noon)
ASSIGNMENT DUE: Final two written observations

November 25-27 (University Closed) Happy Thanksgiving!

December

Tuesday, December 1st
Final Run: *It's a Wonderful Life* (Class)
Tech #1: It's A Wonderful Life (TBA)

Wednesday, December 2nd
Tech #2: *It's a Wonderful Life* (TBA)

Thursday, December 3rd
Debriefing
7:30pm Opening performance for *It's a Wonderful Life*
6:30pm actors called

Friday, December 4th
7:30pm Performance for *It's a Wonderful Life*
6:30pm actors called

Saturday, December 5th
7:30pm Performance for *It's a Wonderful Life*6:30pm actors called
Sunday, December 6th
3:00pm Performance for *It's a Wonderful Life*
2:00pm actors called. (Brief photo call post show)

Thank you for sharing your fantastic and expressive voices!

Fig B.3. Preliminary Production Packet for *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*
Students names have been changed to general Radio Player 1, 2, 3, etc.
Many of the characters changed as I started exploring and collaborating with the students. For example: Radio Player 8 became less boyish, and more staunch and strict. We thought this would add more color to the character when he later has a sweet spot for Radio Player 9.

Production Meeting Agenda: September 2, 2015

It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio play by Joe Landry

Director: Alex Burkart, burkartap@vcu.edu, 323-717-1573 Stage Manager: Lydia Millet

Why radio drama is relevant:

The beauty of radio in its day was that it was able to bring live entertainment to peoples' homes (similar to present day television broadcasting and internet streaming). It also provided a way for audiences to feel closer to celebrities, rather than traveling distance to see them perform.

The same fascination we have with celebrity has been one of the main reasons people go to see professional theatre today. Oftentimes producers put celebrities in Broadway shows to gain an influx in ticket sales and give people a reason to see their production.

Recent celebrity in theatre has transitioned to television broadcasting as exampled by Carrie Underwood in *The Sound of Music* and Christopher Walken in *Peter Pan*. These models have proven to be incredibly successful, proving the influence that radio and brought to home entertainment has created.

I. General Concept:
   a. Concept: *It's a Wonderful Life* is timeless holiday classic. Even though it came out in 1946, people know it (and love it) because they have watched the film year after year and it has *delivered holiday spirit into their homes*. This production of Joe Landry's radio play should do just that: allow the audience to experience the theatre as their home, where we will bring the holiday spirit to them through classic visuals and sound.
   b. To play into the timeless idea- it is important that the designs play into the nostalgia of the 1940s, but do maintain contemporary cracks to prevent the piece from feeling stuffy or dated.
   c. Present day radio voice-actors are putting on a 1940s radio show. It might be helpful to think of modern celebrities going into a vintage store and buying it out.

II. Costumes:

a. Should continue to play into 1940s style. In particular connect to the pieces from the 1940s that still maintain their popularity today. Think timeless.

   Actors need to be costumed for their voice-actor characters, not the voices they are playing. The more small costume pieces such as eyeglasses, ties, suspenders, etc. that can be used for the actors to physically fall into character the better. (See actor breakdown for ideas about the individual voice-over actors.)

b. The actors are also finding terrific physical adjustments to morph into each character voice- it is important that the actors are able to maintain mobility.

c. My piano player (Ben Miller) will need a costume as well, or will have to be at least guided on what to wear so he fits into the world.

d. Shoes will need rubber heels or cork to prevent excess walking noise that can be picked up by the microphones.

III. Lighting:

a. Lighting wise, we need to bring this world to the audience as much as possible. The stage will be black so we do need some sort of contrast to make the actors pop.

b. Traditional radio dramas were normally staged proscenium. To adapt to the Hodges almost "in the round" feel I have formulated a ground plan that wraps the studio around (like a globe). An image of a snow globe (another classic holiday staple) is what I have most in mind when creating the atmosphere.

c. Specials will be needed for mic 1 and mic 2. Lamps will be needed for the Foley table and the piano.

IV. Props:

a. Foley props are being supplied to us. They are the classic SFX equipment typically used for this production.

b. We need to make sure that it includes "On-the-air" and "applause" light boxes.

c. We will also need an apple box for some of my smaller actors to stand on for microphone technique purposes.

V. Music:

a. We are in the classic holiday music station land. Piano based instrumentals, with arrangements thrown back to the classic jingles and other popular artists such as the Andrews Sisters (We are going to work on integrating their "Jingle Bells" arrangement into the pre- show for the piece).

VI. Sound:

a. Sound wise we need everything as clear as possible. The sound part of

radio plays is an independent and imaginative world. It is incredibly important.

b. Ron is securing us three period microphones. Two will be used for the actors and one will be used for the Foley table. We will use one of the ball microphones for the piano (but it will need to be concealed).
c. We are currently using ball microphones for class. I have standard black windshields.
d. It is important that we can have wires long enough to stretch across the entire Hodges stage for blocking purposes. Currently in rehearsal we are having feedback issues with how much sound we need from the mics and cable length.
e. Also: is it possible to plug our microphones and speakers into an offstage control panel? I'd like for us to control the levels if possible during the show.

Staging wise, there are other ideas that I'm integrating into the studio to try and transport the audience into the timeless classic holiday. Besides the holiday tune in the beginning, pre-show wise, I'm having a character bring Christmas cookies to the studio to share with the cast (might be fun to sell in the lobby as well). I'm also integrating a real cork pop into the ending moment- it might be fun to share this bottle with the Pollak society? The more I can make this feel like a 1940s holiday Christmas theme party (with celebrities)- the better.

In class I'm currently working with my students on bringing the two worlds of voice and the visual studio to life, in addition to teaching them general microphone acting technique. I've attached my class syllabus if you are interested in looking at content. If you'd like to stop by a class during any of the run-throughs you are more than welcome to. After fall break, I will more than likely be scheduling some outside of class run-throughs post Rocky Horror.

Note: The Visual Staging of Audio Plays is my MFA Thesis. Design is a very important element to that visual storytelling and I thank you all greatly for your talents and time.

The Celebrities

Radio Player 1: **Freddie Filmore**

Very famous and successful broadcast announcer. Think Ryan Seacrest.

Radio Player 2: **Jake Laurents**

Regular star voice actor at the station. An untraditional leading man. Think John Krasinski.

Radio Player 3: **Sally Applewhite**

Successful film actress. Sweet, honest, and endearing. Think Amy Adams.

Radio Player 4: **Jazzbo Heywood**

Famous personality. Everyone wishes Jazzbo was their best friend. Think Ellen DeGeneres.

Radio Player: **Lana Sherwood**

Successful new talent at the studio. Has launched to celebrity status incredibly quick. Many people may assume she slept her way up there. Think Jennifer Lawrence.

The Staff

Radio Player 6

The station's most pliable actor. Known for usually playing villains but is actually one of the nicest people in the studio. A physical and vocal chameleon.

Radio Player 7

Has been at the studio the longest. Kind and warm, but clumsy. Probably drinks a lot after hours, or before, or during.

Radio Player 8

Stage manager, used to fill in for absent performers. Boyish and full of energy. A flirt.

Radio Player 9

Would be a star if she wasn't so good at playing children. Welcoming and open to the newbies at the station. Has a crush on Student 8.

Radio Player 10

Newbie (probably only been there a week or two). Still trying to make friends by bringing in gifts for the staff. Big dreams.

Radio Player 11

Next to Student 7 she is the oldest part of the staff. Sight is getting fuzzy, so probably relies on glasses for most parts. She is a talented Foley artist and that is mostly why the studio has kept her around. They are training Student 10 to replace her however.

Appendix C

Photographs and Designs

Fig. C.1. Radio Play Set. *You Heard It Here First!: A Live Radio Show!* Dir. Margie Langston. The Cultural Arts Center, Glen Allen. Photograph by Alex Burkart, 2 June 2015. Photograph of set at "On the Air Radio Players." If you would do a general search for various radio drama sets this is pretty much going to be your typical structure. Notice how almost everything is in straight lines on stage. This obviously cannot effectively transfer to a three quarters thrust, due to the amount of sight lines it would create (*You Heard It Here First!*).

Fig. C.2. Radio Station WMBI - Studio Interior – 1939, *Chuckmans Photos on Wordpress Chicago Nostalgia and Memorabilia*, Web. 08 Jan. 2016. Notice the diagonal of the microphones, tiles, and actor staggering all echoed in the final set design (Fig. C.3) (*Moody)*.

Fig. C.3. Set of *It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play*. Alex Burkart, TheatreVCU, 2015.

Freddy Filmore Introductions. Alex Burkart, TheatreVCU, 2015.

George and Mary. Alex Burkart, TheatreVCU, 2015.

THE CELEBRITES

Freddy Filmore/Joseph

Jake Laurents/George

Sally Applewhite/Mary

Lana Sherwood/Violet

Jazzbo Heywood/Clarence

THE CREW AND SUPPORTING CAST

Fig. C4. Costume Designs for *It's a Wonderful Life*. Hannah Chalman, TheatreVCU, 2015 (Chalman).

Vita

Alex Paul Burkart was born October 24th, 1985 in Janesville, WI. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre with departmental honors from Webster University's Conservatory of Theatre Arts in St. Louis, MO. He is a co-founder of the Los Angeles New Court Theatre in Los Angeles, CA, where he served as company Vice-President for three years as well as directed and produced. His performance work has been seen across the United States in theatre and film and he is the author of two full-length plays: *Throwing Stones at Sparrows* and *Atlas Pit*. He served as an instructor for Directing I and II, Radio Drama and Voice-Over Technique, Acting for Web Content, and Effective Speech at Virginia Commonwealth University, and has taught workshops and master classes on audition technique, the business of acting, and creating voice characters with Vocal Viewpoints.