

1 Introduction

JOHN DRAKAKIS

We are not so ready to believe the radio play to be different from the stage play, yet the blind medium of radio in its unique power upon the ear of stimulating the imagination makes for a kind of drama which can embrace subjects film and theatre may never approach. Its subtle and mercurial manipulation of sounds and words, allied to its quality of immediacy and intimacy with the listener, give it possibilities of development that await only the right dramatist. We think now of Mr Louis MacNeice, of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and of Mr Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall* as tentative but real steps towards the discovery of radio drama's proper form. (J. L. Styan)¹

THE SPORADIC AND INCOMPLETE history of the radio play is effectively a history of becoming, dominated from the outset by the search for material, a sound theoretical basis, and suitable forms of artistic expression. From its inception in the early 1920s, radio drama was in direct competition with established theatre drama, and it has always, implicitly or explicitly, sought to measure its achievements against those of the theatre, and of literature generally.

More recently, and especially since its partial eclipse by television, commentators, both from within and outside the BBC, have become increasingly aware of the historical importance of radio, not simply as a medium of mass communication, but also as a primary agency through which our own cultural and artistic values are disseminated. This is likely to prove of particular significance to the history of drama in the twentieth century, since, in addition to providing a new and potentially exciting outlet for playwrights, the intrinsically 'dramatic' nature of radio itself contributed to the more general process whereby the terms 'drama' and 'theatre' began to take on separate meanings.² Until the advent of a medium which could approach its audience directly, and in their own homes, drama in the formal sense of the term was the preserve of the theatre, where, indeed, the concept of a 'mass audience' has some literal validation.

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Paradoxically, however, what was for radio a natural reliance upon 'sound' and the spoken voice was also the condition towards which, *mutatis mutandis*, the presentation of Shakespeare in the theatre had been moving for some time. Begun in the 1880s by the director William Poel, a number of theatrical experiments were undertaken to remove naturalistic stage-settings in an attempt to recreate the conditions of original Shakespearean performances.³ These experiments involved, as directors and actors, individuals such as Tyrone Guthrie and John Gielgud, who themselves became associated with radio drama in its early stages.⁴ But even more important, the terms in which the debate about Shakespearean performance was conducted during the 1920s bear a striking resemblance to those in which the early broadcasters themselves defended the new medium. Issues such as the question of the intimacy of the relationship between actor and audience, the swiftness of the transition from one scene to another made possible by the removal of naturalistic backgrounds, the primacy of poetry and the rhythms of performance generated by the variety of the spoken dialogue,⁵ all appeared as part of the early justification for radio drama itself. Indeed, it is tempting to speculate that the first drama broadcast, of three scenes from three separate Shakespeare plays, on 16 February 1923, and produced by Professor Acton Bond of the British Empire Shakespeare Society, was allied to the contemporary debate about the priorities of Shakespearean performance. It is also worth remembering that experiments with literary form, as evidenced in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, both published in 1922, reinforce the view that the development of radio drama requires to be seen in the larger context of experimentation in all the arts during this period.

The choice of Shakespeare for the first serious drama broadcast helps to bring into clearer focus a central paradox which radio, and its successor television, have had to learn to live with. Commenting on the first two years of drama broadcasting, the Director of Programmes, John Reith, expressed his irritation with the excessive 'theatre effect' which much of it contained, and with the apparent failure to discover 'the actual radio effect': 'It seems to me that in many of our productions there is too much striving for theatre effect and too little attempt at actually discovering the actual radio effect when the play is received in distant homes.'⁶

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This early and often-repeated assertion of its own uniqueness – a firmly held conviction from the outset that radio had its own ‘proper form’ distinct from the theatre or from film – existed along with what was to become a more general moral commitment to mediate the entire tradition of literary and artistic achievement. Indeed, within ten years of its inception, the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht commented on the extent to which radio generally in its early stages was a substitute for other forms of communication: ‘The radio was then in its first phase of being a substitute for theatre, opera, concerts, lectures, cafe music, local newspapers and so forth.’⁷ The early radio adaptations of Shakespeare, carried out by Cathleen Nesbitt under the direction of C. A. Lewis, rather confirm this view. For example, in addition to the quarrel scene from *Julius Caesar*, adaptations included the trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice* (23 May 1923), a recitation by the actress Ellen Terry of the Hubert and Arthur scene from *King John* (31 May 1923), excerpts from *Henry VIII* (7 June 1923) and *Romeo and Juliet* (5 July 1923), and readings from *Macbeth* by John Gielgud and Ben Webster (18 October 1923). The first full-length Shakespeare play to be broadcast was *Twelfth Night* (28 May 1923), produced from Savoy Hill, and including in its cast Nigel Playfair, Gerald Lawrence, and Cathleen Nesbitt. Adaptation in nearly all these cases, it was admitted, took the form simply of ‘cutting’.⁸ The first novel to be adapted was Charles Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* (April 1925), followed in February 1927 by Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*.⁹

This process of adapting plays, novels, and short stories has, over the years, grown to such an extent that radio must be considered a primary means by which many people gain access to the literature and drama of the past.¹⁰ Thus, historical self-awareness and the natural desire to assert an individual identity in the face of alternatives were never clearly disentangled from the larger, clearly irresistible task of generating in radio audiences an awareness of a cultural heritage and the aesthetic judgements that supported it. From the very outset radio drama insisted upon being judged on its own terms, but ironically its appeals, both implicit and explicit, were largely to the courts of established literature and drama; indeed, a good deal of the subsequent theorising about the poetic possibilities of the radio play, and the kind of listener concentration it demanded, did much to reinforce the comparison.

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No comprehensive critical history of radio drama exists. What accounts there are usually take the form of personal anecdotal histories by individuals directly involved in the evolution of the medium itself. The result is that, often, technical inventiveness is given pride of place over the business of establishing a clear set of aesthetic criteria by which any radio play might be judged. Nonetheless, such personalised histories offer intriguing insights into the complicated workings of the BBC, described in one such account as *The Biggest Aspidistra in the World*.¹¹ In each account, however, certain landmarks are clear. Setting aside the broadcast of *The Truth About Father Christmas* on 24 December 1922, it is generally acknowledged that the first play to be produced especially for radio was Richard Hughes's *A Comedy of Danger* (15 January 1924).¹² In July 1924 a separate department for the broadcasting of plays was set up under R. E. Jeffrey, and this was followed in July 1925 by the appointment of Howard Rose. Together Jeffrey and Rose were responsible for much of the early development of radio drama at the BBC.

During the first few years of broadcasting, presentation seems to have been something of a compromise. For example, theatrical conventions continued to be adopted, and actors themselves had some difficulty in coping with the demands made upon them by live broadcasting before a microphone. Indeed, in the early days actors broadcast in costume. Rose's own comment that 'our theatrical upbringing died hard with all of us' and Val Gielgud's account of some of the conventions which continued to be utilised in broadcasting plays up to 1926 indicate the sorts of obstacles that radio drama confronted in its early years:

As late as 1926 long plays were regularly prefaced with four or five minutes of conventional stage 'overture', and music was always played between the acts. It took a considerable time for it to become clear that the use and value of music to Radio Drama was basic, and not incidental; almost as long as it took to persuade actors that, because the radio audience was a very large one, larger than the audience in any theatre, it was unnecessary for them to project their voices and their personalities as if they were playing in some super-equivalent of Olympia.¹³

In 1928 radio drama took a major technical step forward with the introduction of the 'dramatic control panel'. Hitherto the use of single studios for complete broadcasts had presented problems: handling large casts was difficult, as was the business of

controlling sound effects. In these conditions it is hardly surprising that orthodox act-divisions did not disappear immediately, since production itself could not but be stylised. But the development of a device which permitted the simultaneous use of a number of studios, enabling the sound to be controlled from a central panel, and allowing it to be 'faded in' and 'faded out' as required, opened up new possibilities which affected not only the presentation but also the structure of broadcast plays. Lance Sieveking's *The First Kaleidoscope*, sub-titled *A Rhythm Representing the Life of Man from Cradle to Grave*, and broadcast live on 4 September 1928, was the first to use the new dramatic control panel that made it possible for radio to reproduce 'in effect, all the basic grammar that gave the cinema such fluidity'.¹⁴ Nor was the comparison between radio and aspects of film lost on its first users; Tyrone Guthrie, who had used what he called the 'Mixing Panel' (a reference that was to anger Sieveking) in *Squirrel's Cage* (1929) and *The Flowers Are Not for You To Pick* (1930), described its effect as one resembling 'that of superimposed photography in films'.¹⁵

The introduction of the dramatic control panel enabled radio drama to dissolve both temporal and implied spatial boundaries, thus extending its powers of aural suggestion, and offering parallels in sound only of what dramatists such as Strindberg and Brecht had already begun to explore in the theatre and that film had utilised almost from its inception. The dissolution of conventionally marked scenic divisions, which Poel had adopted in order to sustain the rhythm of Shakespearean performance, also opened the way for montage effects and for the exploration of 'stream of consciousness', both of which have remained structural features of radio drama down to the present time. Moreover, the disturbance of traditional principles of dramatic design, which had relied upon the strictly sequential relationship between plot and character within an action which was temporally constrained, helped to isolate some of the more intricate elements of aesthetic structure. The emphasis upon quality of controlled sound and 'rhythm' – the systematic association of poetically conceived images and effects – slowly emerged as integral parts of the structure required to enable the listener to hold in his mind related sequences of sound for which there could be no objective visual validation.¹⁶ Insofar as particular radio plays sought to recreate by suggestion a *reality* which could

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be visually apprehended, the activity of visualisation took place in the imagination of the listener.

Notwithstanding the possible advantages accruing from a medium which had dispensed with the faculty of sight, early practitioners remained defensive about radio drama. L. Du Garde Peach, one of the earliest radio dramatists, insisted in this connection that 'Where there is nothing to look at there must be something to think about.'¹⁷ Moreover, this early awareness that radio as a medium of communication sought to extend 'one single sense in "high definition"'¹⁸ made possible the analogy between radio and music. Lance Sieveking, for example, who defended vigorously what are now regarded as the clumsy virtues of the dramatic control panel, conceived of it as a musical instrument to be played by the drama-producer, and his highly personalised account of the broadcasting of his own Morality play *Kaleidoscope* casts the producer in the role of music-maker, and, by implication, the play itself as a kind of orchestral performance:

My fingers knew well enough, even if my head did not. Just as they do on the piano or 'cello. Without consciously reading the directions on my script I faded the tiny football matches out off the horizon, and wiped the narrator off the map with the singer, and then cut the music off sharply. Now it was play, play, *play* the instrument if ever you did anything in your life.¹⁹

The progress of radio drama in its very early stages was hampered by inadequate technology. Raymond Williams has suggested that in larger social terms the 'public technology' of radio formed part of a larger need to provide kinds of broadcasting 'which served an at once mobile and home-centred way of living: a form of mobile privatisation'.²⁰ Williams views these developments in technology, and, by implication, in art and psychology, as applications 'of a set of emphases and responses within the determining limits and pressures of industrial capitalist society'.²¹ Whatever the precise social impetus, some of the inherent aesthetic potential of radio drama was realised with the concept of the multi-studio principle, made possible through the development of the dramatic control panel and first used by Sieveking. This gave to radio the kind of freedom that in 1929 prompted further exploration of 'the symphonic possibilities of the medium'²² undertaken by dramatists like Tyrone Guthrie, whose own *Squirrel's Cage* deployed the use of sound in ways that

he himself associated with 'superimposed photography in the films'.²³ Thus, by 1930 a basic grammar of radio production had been formulated, with the use of terms like 'fade-in' 'fade-out', and 'cross-fade'.²⁴ Some of the vocabulary was borrowed from film, but literature, theatre drama, and psychology contributed also. While sound effects could be regarded as aural transformations of the film's camera angle and focus, forms such as 'stream of consciousness' found their way from psychology through expressionistic drama, the prose of writers such as James Joyce, and the poetry of T. S. Eliot into radio's rapidly expanding lexicon of terms and structural concepts.

In 1929 Val Gielgud was appointed Productions Director of the BBC's Drama Department, and he continued the proselytising zeal that had characterised the activities of his predecessor, R. E. Jeffrey. Gielgud's brief was a wide one: 'apart from having to observe the amber warning-lights at the crossroads of Sex, Religion, and Politics, I could drive straight ahead with reasonable confidence of security'.²⁵ Indeed, it was Gielgud, exacting in his standards, though sometimes quirky in his judgements, who presided over the steady development of radio drama for the following twenty years. In the year of his appointment the *BBC Handbook* set out the case for radio as a national theatre, with its 'means of spanning the unprofitable dramatic ground which lies between the commercial and the artistic; between the business theatre of today and the national theatre of tomorrow'.²⁶ Already by 1930 the BBC was expected to mount twice as many productions each year as were being mounted on the London stage,²⁷ and by 1945 some four hundred plays a year, excluding serials, were being broadcast.²⁸

This notion of a 'national theatre of the air', providing not only original radio plays, but also adaptations of theatre classics, translations of plays by foreign dramatists,²⁹ and adaptations of works of literature, was, and has remained, an important part of the philosophy of the BBC.³⁰ In terms of original writing, during the period 1931–41 productions of radio plays increased some seven-fold, and it was at this time that much of the theoretical and experimental foundation was laid down for future development. In 1932 production moved from Savoy Hill to Broadcasting House, and in October 1933 Laurence Gilliam was transferred from *Radio Times* to undertake responsibility for 'Special Programmes'. A few months later, on 1 January 1934, Gielgud was

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made Drama Director, and thus began the separation of Drama from Features.³¹ Gilliam was to remain Head of Features until 1964 when, after some opposition, the department was abolished, although much of the pioneering work involved in making *use* of the medium of radio for the purposes of drama was done under his direction and during the period 1936–63.

This relatively early division into the categories of radio play and feature, represents in certain respects a distinction without a difference, although the role played by Features cannot be ignored. During the very early years of broadcasting no clear distinction had been made between the two,³² but despite the formal division of labour which took place after 1934, writers such as Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas, and writer–producers, such as Edward Sackville-West and D. G. Bridson, could be claimed simultaneously to be original dramatists and writers of features. While Bridson's *The March of The '45* (February 1936) was a dramatic reconstruction of a series of actual events,³³ and thus best exemplified the principle of the feature, Sackville-West's *The Rescue* (November 1943) was in fact an adaptation from Homer's *Odyssey*, while both MacNeice's *Christopher Columbus* (October 1942), and Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* (January 1954) are clearly works of fiction. At each end of the spectrum the roles of journalist and dramatist could be clearly distinguished. Both Gielgud and Gilliam seem to have been agreed that the key to the difference lay in the question of dramatic form; Gielgud described a feature as: 'any programme item not basically in dramatic form, designed to make use of radio dramatic technique in its presentation to the listener',³⁴ and Gilliam, in a more epigrammatic vein, asserted that 'Features deal with fact, Drama with fiction.'³⁵ The primary value of the feature lay in its documentary nature, although the possibility of dramatisation constituted an option which was always open to the writer–producer, and emphasis was placed upon its full use of the technical resources of radio to accomplish its aim. Needless to say, not all features were successful, as the following report upon the script of a programme entitled *The People Versus Johnny Jones* makes clear:

A feature programme conveys fact and opinion and observation. If it chooses to do so dramatically it can only do so convincingly when the fact, opinion and observation is related to a credible background. This script isn't an individual case history – it isn't a generalized picture

drawn from knowledge of several individual case histories. It isn't even a purely hypothetical illustration and reconstruction. It's all of these at once. The author sets out to tell the story of Johnny Jones – what he actually does is enumerate the provisions of the Children and Young Persons Act, illustrate its working in a series of doubtful awards, and he does this against a human background which, to say the kindest, is fanciful. The attempts to generalize from so peculiarly an individual case are, as a result, quite dangerously misleading.³⁶

The report's objection is to the distortion of fact to which the process of fictionalising is always prone, and what it describes is a documentary drama, poorly executed, which in its extreme form is distinct from a feature. There does, however, seem to have been no formula for determining the balance between fact and fiction in a radio feature, with the result that there still exists a large grey area within which the terms 'feature' and 'play' are interchangeable. The producer Douglas Cleverdon, writing with a full knowledge and reflective awareness of what had been achieved under the aegis of Features, divided the two forms according to the traditions from which they emanated:

A radio play is a dramatic work deriving from the tradition of the theatre, but conceived in terms of radio. A radio feature is, roughly, any constructed programme (that is, other than news bulletins, racing commentaries, and so forth) that derives from the technical apparatus of radio (microphone, control panel, recording gear, loud-speaker). It can combine any sound elements – words, music, sound effects – in any form or mixture of forms – documentary, actuality, dramatized, poetic, musico-dramatic. It has no rules determining what can or cannot be done. And though it may be in dramatic form, it has no need of a dramatic plot.³⁷

Cleverdon's view, formulated with the experience of having produced *Under Milk Wood* behind him, simply reinforces the level of uncertainty involved in the problem of definition. He places his emphasis firmly upon style and method of production rather than upon content as such, and like his predecessors he focuses upon the purely formal distinctions.

On the other hand, a writer such as Louis MacNeice sought to emphasise the dramatic possibilities inherent in the feature form. For MacNeice the feature was more than simply a piece of documentary journalism; rather, the selection of material for both the feature and the play should subserve a *dramatic* function: "The radio feature is a dramatised presentation of actuality but its

author should be much more than a *rapporteur* or a cameraman; he must select his actuality material with great discrimination and then keep control of it so that it subserves a single dramatic effect.³⁸ 'Actuality' broadcasting, begun by Laurence Gilliam in 1934, and taken up by D. G. Bridson,³⁹ involved the recording and broadcasting, unscripted, of the voices of ordinary people. MacNeice's own formula for extending and allying this technical innovation to the principle of a unity of action places him firmly within a dramatic tradition. The two seemingly opposed emphases, the one on dramatic form and construction, with its obviously aesthetic appeal, and the other upon the full utilisation of the technical resources of radio in the task of reproducing reality, are precisely what gave the feature a kind of dual identity, while at the same time allowing it access to the dubious claim of being 'pure radio'.⁴⁰ The flexibility claimed for the feature was, and is, a primary quality of radio as a whole, but it required the exceptional talents of a Louis MacNeice or a Dylan Thomas to demonstrate precisely how this flexibility might be enlisted in the service of the creative dramatist.

Throughout its early history broadcasters had been conscious of the competing claims of radio and theatre drama. R. E. Jeffrey, Gordon Lea, and later Felix Felton had all sought to emphasise the unique challenge which radio presented to the dramatist, and the writing of plays specifically for the medium became a *desideratum*. Richard Hughes, Lance Sieveking, L. Du Garde Peach, Tyrone Guthrie, and Val Gielgud himself had all laid something of a foundation, and by 1933 the radio play had established itself sufficiently for Gielgud to consider mounting a festival of radio drama.⁴¹ But writing for the medium was, clearly, not enough; in order for it to attain a status comparable to that of the live theatre, it required its own *avant-garde*.⁴² Thus, in 1937 Gielgud felt that the time was ripe to introduce an *Experimental Hour*, designed specifically to encourage new writing for radio.⁴³ The experiment failed, Gielgud was forced to admit, for lack of good material, and with the onset of war experimentation of this sort faded away. Ironically, the major legacy from these years was the 'microphone serial', begun in 1938, firmly established by the end of the war, and regarded in retrospect with some contempt by Gielgud as 'flattery of the ego of the common man'.⁴⁴ Serialisation began with the adaptation of literary classics, but with *The English Family Robinson*, *Mrs Dale's Diary*, *The Archers*, and in 1946