

Genesis and RENAISSANCE

A Brief History of

Audio Theatre

by

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INTRODUCTION

Audio theatre is a relatively new art form in human history; today it is just over one hundred years old. It may never be possible to pin down an exact date for the very first audio theatre creation, but as will be seen, the form actually originated in the second half of the 19th century, well before sound could be broadcast over the radio. “Radio theatre” became widely known in the first heyday of radio broadcasting, but audio theatre has established itself as a permanent form in the spectrum of performing arts in many media.

DEFINITION

Just what is “audio theatre?” I propose the following definition:

AUDIO THEATRE: A theatrical presentation intended solely for the audio medium, using voices, music and other sounds.

It is important to draw a distinction between audio theatre and audiobooks, or “Talking Books,” which are not theatrical presentations. Merely reading a story aloud does not make it a piece of theatre; even if the reader gives a stirring, emotional reading, it still remains a piece which was created for the printed page. To turn a piece of prose writing into a piece of theatre, it must be adapted in some way.

Storytelling is an ancient and venerable art form, which shares some characteristics with audio theatre, but is a distinct precursor. It is a linear form as well, and is indeed a performance art, but involves a single performer, and most importantly, was never intended or envisioned as a sound-only performance. Whether a storyteller could integrate all the four elements, and whether that would constitute a form of audio theatre if recorded or broadcast, is left as an exercise for the student. It is certain, however, that until the invention of the telephone, no storyteller ever contemplated performing without being physically present in front of the audience.

Of course, there are examples that blur the line somewhat. Consider an audiobook where multiple voices are used - one voice reading the narrative text, and other voices reading dialog. If there are no changes in the text, and no addition of sounds or music, what results is something that is neither flesh nor fowl. A “Multiple-Voice Reading” cannot, in my view, be considered full audio theatre, even though it contains aspects of a theatrical performance. Some sound design beyond merely putting a performer in front of a microphone is necessary, and although audio theatre actors need not memorize their scripts, they work hard to sound like they’re NOT reading.

Various terms have been used in the past for this art form, but when these terms are examined, it will be seen that they are clumsy, or not sufficiently inclusive. “Radio Theatre” excludes plays-for-the-ear which are not broadcast, but a great deal of audio theatre has been and

is today produced for distribution on recordings. “Radio Drama” appears to exclude comedy and other genres. Audio publishers have been using terms like “Full-Cast Dramatization,” which is awkwardly polysyllabic, and in using the modifier “full-cast,” refers only to one element – voices – of those which make up the art form. Similarly, “Multiple-voice Reading” is unclear, as it does not necessarily imply the full use of production elements, and a “reading” is not the same as a “performance.”

Some appropriate, easily-understood label is needed for this art form, if it is to be known, identified and understood in the same way by those who create it, distribute it, and enjoy it. After deep consideration, and consultation with leading figures in the field, I believe that the term that best meets everyone’s needs is “audio theatre.” It can be new or old, on one medium or another, in one style or another, but if it uses performance and sound design instead of simply having a voice reroute written words from the eye to the ear, it’s all audio theatre.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF AUDIO THEATRE:

The audio theatre medium is necessarily a linear one - it happens sequentially, spinning a yarn of time for the listener. In doing so, it weaves together four elements:

- **Speech** - which gives information, and presents human characterizations
- **Music** - which has a direct impact on the emotions, and is often knowingly so used, and which can also function mechanically, as “stage curtains” signaling beginnings, endings, and transitions in time or space. Its ability to signal emotional content, or emotional transition, at the same time, is a key uniqueness.
- **Sound Effects** - which help the imagination to paint pictures in one’s head. These can include “spot” effects like telephones ringing or guns firing; “background” or “ambiance” effects such as a city street or a forest full of birds; or acoustic cues involving the apparent size and shape of a space, or apparent distance and (in stereo) position from the listener’s point of view.
- **Silence** - in the sense of timing.

I have yet to identify a fifth element as fundamental as these four. Productions or performances which do not use all four of these elements can be open to argument as to whether they actually constitute “audio theatre” or not; those which use all four must definitely be considered part of the art form. The arguable cases form a fascinating body of work, upon which listeners, critics, academics and historians can feast and dispute to their hearts’ content.

THE YARN-SPINNING METAPHOR

The complexity of the thread to be woven from these elements is limited by the technology available for its transmission, much as the diameter of a skein of yarn may be controlled by its passage through a hole. “Fidelity” or clarity of reproduction, has much improved during the last century, and we will see the influence of this improvement upon the art form. The one-dimensional nature of audio theatre is somewhat expanded into a second dimension by the ability to present more than one sound – more than one stream of audio information – to the listener at the same time. Limited frequency-response, and limited dynamic range, constrict the audio theatre piece to a thinner thread, more sequential and less simultaneous, as if passed through a small hole as it comes off the spinning wheel.

ORIGINS - “RADIO THEATRE” BEFORE RADIO

Audio theatre certainly has roots in earlier performance arts. The prehistoric storyteller around the communal fire, an image used by Stephen Spielberg in the opening sequence to the television show, “*Amazing Stories*,” was using sound to convey a story. Drama from time immemorial has used dialog. But all earlier uses of sound in performance were combined with some kind of visual presentation, even if only the facial expression and body-language of the storyteller. Until about a hundred years ago, nobody imagined telling a story – much less bringing it to full life in the imagination – through the medium of sound, alone and unaided.

Because it reached its greatest popular flowering on broadcast radio, it is not well-known today that audio theatre in fact began to evolve before the broadcasting of sound over the radio had even been invented. It arises, of course, from the technological leaps of the 19th Century, during which it became possible, for the first time in human history, to present the ear with a sound from so far away that the source of the sound could not be seen by the listener; and, furthermore, to capture sounds and reproduce them again later – again, divorced from any visual clues to their origin.

TELEPHONE THEATRE

The invention of the telephone in 1876 led to various experiments in the transmission of sound over distance. By 1884, it was already possible to make long distance telephone calls. Shortly thereafter, the telephone began to be used for the transmission of entertainment from one place to listeners in many places.

Carolyn Marvin states, in *Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*,¹ pages 209-210:

"The most popular feature of the Paris Exposition Internationale d'Electricite of 1881 was such an arrangement, variously described as the theatrophone and the

¹ Carolyn Marvin, *Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press 1988 ISBN 0-19-504468-1)

*electrophone. From August to November crowds queued up three evenings a week before two rooms, each containing ten pairs of headsets, in the Palais d'Industrie. In one, listeners heard live performances of the Opera transmitted through microphones arranged on either side of the prompter's box. In the other, they heard **plays from the Theatre Francais through ten microphones placed at the front of the stage near the footlights**. Not only were the voices of the actors, actresses, and singers heard in this manner, but also the instruments of the orchestra, the applause and laughter of the audience -- and, alas! The voice of the prompter too.'*

Note that there was no attempt to adapt the presentation for the audio medium. Moreover, these presentations were technically undeveloped, and did not really constitute a mass medium available to all. Marvin goes on to say,

*"Efforts to reach extended audiences by telephone required elaborate logistical preparations. **Its application to entertainment, therefore, remained experimental and occasional.** In Europe entertainment uses of the telephone were often an aristocratic prerogative. The president of the French Republic was so pleased with the theatrophone exhibit at the Paris Exposition that he inaugurated a series of telephonic soirees with theatrophonic connections from the Elysee Palace to the Opera, the Theatre Francais, and the Odeon Theatre.*

"The King and Queen of Portugal, in mourning for the Princess of Saxony in 1884 and unable to attend the premiere of a new Lisbon opera, were provided with a special transmission to the palace through six microphones mounted at the front of the opera stage. In Brussels, the Minister of Railways, Posts and Telegraphs and other high public officials listened to live opera thirty miles away at Antwerp.

"Beginning in 1890, individual subscribers to the Theatrophone Company of Paris were offered special hookups to five Paris theatres for live performances. The annual subscription fee was a steep 180 francs, and 15 francs more was charged to subscribers on each occasion of use.

"In London in 1891, the Universal Telephone Company placed fifty telephones in the Royal Italian Opera House in Covent Garden, and another fifty in the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. All transmitted exclusively to the estate of Sir Augustus Harris at St. John's Wood, with an extension to his stables. By 1896 the affluent could secure private connections to a variety of London entertainments for an inclusive annual rent of ten pounds sterling in addition to an installation fee of five pounds. The queen was one of these clients. In addition to having special lines from her sitting room to the Foreign Office, the Home Office, the Board of Green Cloth, and Marlborough House, Her Majesty enjoyed direct connections to her favorite entertainments."

The new medium attracted more than just aristocrats, as Marvin says on pages 210-211:

"Commercial interest in a larger, less exclusive audience [for the theatrophone] was not far behind. 'Nickel-in-the-slot' versions of the hookups provided by the Theatrophone Company of Paris to its individual subscribers were offered as a public novelty at some resorts. A franc bought five minutes of listening time; fifty centimes brought half as much. Between acts and whenever all curtains were down, the company piped out piano solos from its offices.

"In England in 1889 a novel experiment permitted 'numbers of people' at Hastings to hear 'The Yeoman of the Guard' nightly. Two years later theatrophones were installed at the elegant Savoy Hotel in London, on the Paris coin-in-the-slot principle. For the International Electrical Exhibition of 1892, musical performances were transmitted from London to the Crystal Palace, and long-distance to Liverpool and Manchester. In the hotels and public places of London, it was said, anyone might listen to five minutes of theatre or music for the equivalent of five or ten cents. One of these places was the Earl's Court Exhibition, where for a few pence 'scraps of play, music-hall ditty, or opera could be heard fairly well by the curious.'

Then, on page 212 , we see that audio entertainment was catching on in the United States:

"Informal entertainments were sometimes spontaneously organized by telephone operators during the wee hours of the night, when customer calls were few and far between. On a circuit of several stations, operators might sit and exchange amusing stories. One night in 1981 operators at Worcester, Fall River, Boston, Springfield, Providence and New York organized their own concert. The 'Boston Evening Record' reported:

'The operator in Providence plays the banjo, the Worcester operator the harmonica, and gently the others sing. Some tune will be started by the players and the other will sing. To appreciate the effect, one must have a transmitter close to his ear. The music will sound as clear as though it were in the same room.'

"A thousand people were said to have listened to a formal recital presented through the facilities of the Home Telephone Company in Painesville, Ohio, in 1905. And, portent of the future, in 1912 the New York Magnaphone and Music Company installed motor-driven phonographs that sent recorded music to local subscribers over a hundred transmitters."

Entertainment via telephone was entertainment via sound alone, and in 1881, the concept must have seemed very futuristic, very high-tech indeed, as we would say today. Although relatively few encountered it directly, and even fewer did so regularly, a great many more heard about the idea of listening-across-a-distance, the new prospect of being entertained, in private or public, through the ear alone. Moreover, the initial contact with the idea was generally a wholly favorable one: something new, progressive, exciting, intriguing, and connected with the wealthy, successful prominente.

But all this was small-scale, in terms of actually delivering mass media. These early attempts to use the telephone network as a mass-distribution medium, a "broadcasting" medium if

you will, were doomed to remain a historical curiosity. The technical and social awkwardness inherent in the telephone medium were in fact economic burdens which insured that it would be abandoned as soon as a better and more profitable way to deliver the sound came along, and something very soon did.

ENTER RECORDED SOUND

The invention of the phonograph, just a year after the telephone, was widely heralded, but it took ten years before phonograph machines were available to the public in general, and another ten before they were really widespread. The original invention, of course, was a recorder-player machine. Once put on the market, it became evident that there was a large market for pre-recorded material, whereas the uses of a machine to MAKE recordings was, for the average person, limited at best.

Edison's original cylinder design led the market at first, but once the demand for copies of recordings began to soar, the inherent manufacturing problems of the cylinder started to make the flat disc machines more and more competitive. This competition, in turn, drove a competition to capture and offer the most popular recordings to the buying public, in order to entice them to commit to one or the other of the rival technologies. Early program material offered on recordings was mostly music, but included some voice recordings as well – usually the voices of famous people.

In the 1890s, aside from phonographs, the only “mass performance medium” involving sound that was available to the public was the traveling show: Variety, Vaudeville, Chatauqua, Minstrel Shows, Wild-West Shows, all brought the same performances to many people in many places. Their performers became far more widely known than all but a relatively few of those who starred in one location for a long time and did not tour.

Technology was beginning to provide the basis for other, creatively related forms – motion pictures and comic strips, for example – which would come to influence both the audience's expectation and the creators' techniques in audio theatre. But comics are not a performance medium, and films remained very primitive, not to mention silent, until after the turn of the century. So a century ago, when the vendors of recordings looked for products that would attract the largest possible audiences, they looked to the performers who were known to the largest numbers.

Singing acts, and other musical performances, were obvious first choices, and both cylinder and discs of such became very popular. The extra income derived from this caught the attention of those who had non-musical acts, and they looked for a way into the new market. Monologists and story-tellers were recorded, with success, and the acts which presented sketch-comedy were also considered.

This led directly to the first attempts to adapt performance material for the audio-only medium. It was quickly found that “sight-gags” which got a big laugh in a theatre were

unintelligible when only the sound was recorded. Speech, either mono- or dialog, was added to the recorded performance to describe scenes, and set up sight-, now sound-gags.

The use of sound effects was well established, if technically rudimentary, on the stage. The venerable thundersheet was indeed venerable – having been invented in 1708 by John Dennis.² Wind machines were a staple. The drummer in the orchestra generally handled descriptive and comedy effects with woodblocks, cowbells, birdcalls, slide whistles, and the like. All these were pressed into service for the early recordings. Inevitably, however, there came a need for an audio effect that had never been needed on stage, and someone had to invent a pure radio sound effect.

Vaudeville sketches soon appeared on both cylinders and flat disc recordings. They almost certainly pioneered in the use of all four of the basic audio theatre elements in a single presentation created expressly for the ear. Byron G. Harlan and Frank C. Stanley were making such recordings by 1904, and a favorite Vaudeville comic character of the day, “Uncle Josh” (Cal Stewart), recorded “*Uncle Josh at the Statue of Liberty*” perhaps as early as 1897.

I say “almost certainly” because it is known that there were some very early recordings of more serious dramatic speeches - Hamlet’s soliloquy is an obvious possibility - and it is just possible that some recording was made with an orchestra present, or even, having chosen a scene instead of a speech, with more than one actor. I think, however, that this is unlikely; the marketing possibilities for “serious” drama on an early recording would have been entirely concerned with the name value of the performer, who would probably not have wanted to share his brief cylinder with anyone else. However: is there, for example, a famous dramatic speech that cries out for a thundersheet rumble? My researches have not yet reached the Precambrian layer where the answer may lie.

PROPAGANDA PIECES DURING WORLD WAR I

There were recordings produced for mass distribution during the war years of 1914-1918, which used the four elements of audio theatre. Patriotic music, narrative speech, soldiers’ (characters’) voices, and the sounds of guns firing were heard. Thousands more people heard them, and encountered the experience of creating a scene in their mind by listening to something with their ears.³

THE ADVENT OF RADIO THEATRE

Regular radio broadcasting began, rather in fits and starts (albeit rapid ones), during 1919-1920, and the next three years saw intensive development of three things simultaneously:

1. Broadcasting and transmitting facilities throughout the country.
2. Receivers and receiving technology, and their dissemination among the populace.
3. Programming styles, practices, and conventions

² Sound Effects - Radio, TV, and Film by Robert L. Mott, published 1990 by Butterworth Publishers, a division of Reed Publishing.

³ Interview with David Ossman by the author, 1997.

Professor Martin Bensman says, in a brilliant essay on his website⁴:

Before 1923, in the present-day sense, there were no "programs"-no formal opening or closing, no exact or even approximate timing, no paid talent, no regular week-after-week scheduling. All programs were broadcast as one-timers and the idea of a program series hadn't yet been developed. Materials broadcast from studios were limited to talks, light music-usually vocals by soloist, or at most by trio or quartet. Practically no recorded music as direct electronic pickup not yet developed.

*There was extensive use of "remotes" by large stations-pickups of orchestras from hotels, dance halls; of band concerts; or even symphony orchestras, operas, **plays from stages-all as stunts**. Occasionally "play-by-play" broadcasts of sports events from baseball and football to polo or boxing. Only broadcasts at regular intervals were of weather forecasts; news broadcasting had not yet developed.*

No station was on the air more than four or five hours a day-even that not on a regular schedule, starting at same time each day or each evening. Usually, not more than one hour a day of daytime broadcasting by any station-and a majority of stations weren't even on the air regularly, every day of the week. Programs were strictly amateur-except for "stunt" pickups of music groups.

Starting in 1923, there was a major advance in the program field. While most stations still had "formless" programs, presented by amateurs, as before 1923, during the 1923-26 period, larger stations had developed definite program forms. Programs on these stations ran for periods of 30 to 60 minutes; had definite openings and closings; made extensive use of announcer-narrators; were built around program ideas.

Program types in general use included well-developed musical variety shows built around specialty orchestras; concert music, almost identical in form to radio concert music of today; and talks. One or two stations experimented with broadcasting one or two-act stage plays from studios but without adapting the scripts for radio. A number of stations presented an early type of variety show-usually for an hour or two full hours, once a week, around midnight-using vaudeville acts currently in town, a studio orchestra and depending heavily on work by a station MC and all on an "ad lib" basis.

It may not be possible, again, to be completely certain of the first audio theatre broadcast over the radio, but it seems clear that the real beginnings of Radio Theatre must be sought during the years 1921 and 1922. According to Elizabeth McLeod⁵:

⁴ The Radio Archive of the University of Memphis, at <http://www.people.memphis.edu/~mbensman/> created and maintained by Marvin R. Bensman, J.D., Ph.D., Founder and Director

⁵ Archivist with the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Radio Drama, Variety And Comedy

I know that there was a lot of experimentation going on at WGY and WJZ in 1922, and the WJZ presentation of "Perfect Fool" is usually credited as the "first Broadway show to be brought to the microphone."

I believe this show was a revue, not a book show -- comedy scenes and musical numbers linked by Ed Wynn in a sort of quasi-MC role. As such, it would have lent itself to considerable editing and revision for the microphone. For example, there would have been no need for high-stepping chorus girls in the radio version, and excision of their numbers would have shortened the play considerably! From what I've read, the presentation was done from the WJZ studio, and not from a theatre during a live performance -- Wynn, the story goes, came down with a bad case of flop sweat because there was no audience to respond to his jokes, so station employees were brought in to act as an ad-hoc audience. This is an oft-told story, but I don't know if it's factual.

As for original radio drama, I'm most inclined to say that it most likely started in September 1922 at WGY, the General Electric station in Schenectady. An article in "Radio Broadcast" for November 1923 so states, and I've found no positive proof of anything earlier.

Further information on WGY's productions is found in the 7/21/23 issue of Radio Digest. On page 5, there is a lengthy article on WGY, from which the following is extracted;

"WGY has specialized on radio plays, directed by KH. A censor with muffled ears to shut out all studio sounds listens in to the Radio sounds of the play and catches the slightest errors of phrasing or voice inflection.

The WGY Players sometimes write their own plays. Many plays are written especially for them, or are modified to suit the Radiophan's needs. For instance, a play which depends upon sight for its climax is worthless in radio. But the play which can carry emotion and implied action by the speaking voice is the Radio play at its best.

The WGY dramatic stock company rehearses weekly and usually three rehearsals are given before appearing on the air. KH directs these and frequently plays leading parts. Other announcers, whose voices are schooled in the work, are recruited into the plays. They carry a repertoire of about ten plays."

"KH" is the WGY program director and chief announcer, Kolin Henry. However, he seems to have shared the dramatic direction duties with another WGY announcer, Robert Weidaw, who appears to have done the actual on-air directing -- it was he who acted in the capacity of "censor" as mentioned in the

extract above -- a job which involved most of the functions which we associate with a radio director. Henry's role was more of a producer.

The WGY productions also featured elaborate sound effects. Credited with the operation of the sound equipment is a man named Frank Oliver, formerly the director and "scenic artist" of the Newark Theatre Guild. Oliver was a stage veteran of long standing, and was very familiar with the techniques used in theatrical productions. He served with them as "property man," and it was his responsibility to coordinate the sound effects with Henry and Weidaw, and to produce them during the actual broadcast.

The plays appear to have been very well received: the 9/8/23 Radio Digest includes on page 3 an announcement of a contest, challenging listeners to write their own radio plays, to compete for a cash prize of \$500. The winning play would be presented by the WGY Players during the winter season. The announcement also indicates that the contest is in honor of the first anniversary of radio drama on the station -- which would be consistent with a September 1922 start.⁶

In the same OTR Digest, there is also a post from Bill Jaker which contributes this:

I'm always cautious about "firsts", but I know that in 1921 a couple of agriculture professors from West Virginia University were invited to KDKA to deliver a talk on farm extension courses and showed up with a script for a playlet entitled "A Rural Line on Education". At first KDKA refused to let them ring a telephone bell, asserting that it would defraud the audience into thinking that they were hearing a phone call and not a radio program. The professors prevailed by reminding KDKA that its patriarch, Frank Conrad, had played music on his station 8XK from phonograph records, which a listener could mistake for live musicians. Not much happens in the play -- it's just a chat on the phone between two farmers with an operator making frequent, somewhat comical, interruptions -- but it was specially written for the audio medium at a time when the people at "the pioneer broadcasting station of the world" had never heard of such a thing.⁷

The economic reality behind the development was rooted in the fact that more and more stations were coming on the air, and more and more people were listening in. The "radio craze" of the 1920s saw millions of receivers sold in a very few years. Stations needed PROGRAMS that would attract and hold an audience, and especially, programs that would generate some kind of response from that audience – as there was no other way to collect data about listenership.

In a 1998 interview with the author, Norman Corwin (born in 1910) recalled that he encountered radio during the 1920s, but did not remember any of the very earliest theatrical experiments. He remembered Amos 'n' Andy, and his first memories of audio theatre really come from the later part of the decade.

⁶ Elizabeth McLeod, email post to the OTR Digest on 3/27/98

⁷ Bill Jaker, email post to the OTR Digest on 3/27/98

“The earliest broadcasts were analogous to the earliest movies, where the camera never moved. Everything came in front of the camera. In the earliest radio drama the stage directions were read as though you were reading a printed play. Maybe a voice would come in and say ‘Now, in the background we hear thunder,’ -- you see what I mean -- without providing it.”⁸

Corwin was not aware of the early Vaudeville-sketch recordings, and while he had some memory of World War I as a small boy, did not encounter any of the “propaganda” productions. It was his feeling that the traditions of the theatre were the direct influence on those creating the new Radio Theatre art form, and this is undoubtedly the case to a large extent. As he put it, “...the era of planned, deliberate, exploratory sound began with radio where you're actually broadcasting to a blind audience and so much has to be conveyed by sound.”⁹

But there is good reason to suspect that those who were working in radio programming in 1920-1921-1922 would have encountered some of these early recordings. They would have been at least a decade or so older than Mr. Corwin, and would well remember the days when the Phonograph was the latest high-tech mass medium; and they would have been adults during the War years, perhaps more likely to encounter the propaganda recordings.

Even if they were not intimately familiar with the early audio theatre recordings, they were very likely aware of the existence of such things, and aware that they had used particular techniques, developed for the purpose and peculiar to the medium, to achieve success. It may not be possible to document specific transfers of technique from the recording medium to the early radio medium, but it is surely plausible, even likely, that the pioneering efforts of the past thirty years proved suggestive, indicative, and inspirational to the early developers of Radio Theatre.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF RADIO THEATRE

Audio Theatre, called and thought of as Radio Theatre, became the hottest mass medium of the period, arguably reaching more people more often than any other. Dramatic and comedy broadcasts were pretty common by 1925, but when Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll began their “*Sam ‘n’ Henry*” series on the air in Chicago, they had no idea they were going to become a national phenomenon.

The development of networks in 1926-1927 led to a search for the most popular programming extant, so as to attract the widest possible audiences to the new hookups. Gosden and Correll got their chance because the characters they had created, and the concept of continuing characters heard on successive broadcasts, had become hugely popular in their market. Changing the names to “*Amos ‘n’ Andy*,” they proceeded to pioneer the idea of a continuing story-line in the audio medium, a concept developed earlier by comic strips and movie serials.

⁸ Norman Corwin, interview with Richard Fish, March 11, 1998. Hereafter, “Corwin interview.”

⁹ Ibid.

By 1930, one could walk down the street in most American cities, during the summer, and never miss a word of an Amos 'n' Andy broadcast, as the words came floating out of every open window. Movies pushed back their start times until after Amos 'n' Andy were off the air. President Hoover left strict word that he was not to be disturbed when Amos 'n' Andy were on. audio theatre had become a major mass medium for the first time.

And recorded sound was used in the art form in a new way: as the medium for distribution to broadcasting centers. According to Professor Biel,

Syndication of recorded programs began with "Amos 'n' Andy" in March 1928, and the Maytag program in December 1928.¹⁰

Elizabeth McLeod adds more information in the OTR Digest:

These shows were recorded on 12 inch 78rpm discs, first by Marsh Laboratories of Chicago, and later by Brunswick. They should not be confused with the numerous commercial records made by Amos 'n' Andy (and Sam 'n' Henry) on the Victor label from 1926-30. These Victor discs are not broadcasts, nor were they intended for broadcasting.¹¹

So here we see the use of recordings for distribution to both broadcasting stations and directly to the listener.

This “Golden Age” of radio theatre is generally held to cover about three decades, starting in 1930. It is by far the best-known development of the audio theatre art form, and has been written about very extensively. I do not propose to attempt, in this paper, to cover even a substantial fraction of the ground which has already been covered in hundreds, nay thousands, of books and articles. But it can be seen clearly that the 1930s were a decade of invention and development, the 1940s saw the full flowering of the medium, and the 1950s its decline as television displaced the mass audience.

There were many fascinating stories, and high peaks of achievement, during this period. Scriptwriter Howard Koch and producer-director-actor Orson Welles pushed the envelope of form a little too far in 1938, and the famous War Of The Worlds panic remains a premier demonstration of the power of audio theatre. Lucille Fletcher’s superbly worked out “*Sorry, Wrong Number*” play for “*Suspense!*” was made into a splendid motion picture, and motion pictures were turned into excellent radio theatre on “*Lux Presents Hollywood.*” Great performers, great writers, and top-flight technical genius created productions that lingered in the minds of many long after books, magazines, movies and television shows faded to black.

Norman Corwin became, and remains today, the Grand Master of Radio Theatre. This is certainly true within the United States, probably true within the Western Hemisphere, and arguably true within the English-speaking world. He developed a fluid, powerful way to use the

¹⁰ Professor Michael Biel, post to the OTR Digest, June 17, 1997

¹¹ Elizabeth McLeod, post to the OTR Digest, April 2, 1998

audio medium which liberated the audio theatre art form and “pushed the envelope” all the way up against the very technical limitations of radio itself.

Corwin’s achievements sprang partly from his own ideal mixture of talents: he is a master of the English language, a master of the art of listening, and a profoundly inventive person with a deep understanding of the value of conventions – when to use them, when to ignore them, and when to turn them on their heads. They also spring from Corwin’s extraordinary good fortune in finding a network (CBS) which would support his work and leave him alone to get it done.

“I was preceded by Irving Reis and William Robson,” said Corwin, “and they did quite a bit in developing sound, especially Reis who was an engineer before he became an actor. I was lucky enough to be on that front, that cutting edge, developing sound. And I did a number of things which sort of broadened the palette, added some colors to it.”¹²

His “26 By Corwin” series required a brand-new radio play to be conceived, written, cast, rehearsed, produced, performed and broadcast all within the space of seven days – and then the process repeated, without a break, for twenty-six weeks. The varied nature, and the invariably high quality, of these many programs represent an astounding achievement in any branch of theatre. Corwin experimented with form, with substance, with ideas, with words, with casting, with sounds, and with music. Wherever his mind chose to roam, he found a way to turn his thoughts into audio theatre that remains as brilliant, as exciting, as enjoyable today as it was half a century ago.

In a 1998 interview with the author, Mr. Corwin remembered that the major networks did not permit programs to be distributed, or even to be broadcast, from recordings. The recording technology of the period was audibly inferior to the fidelity produced by a live broadcast. Programs were recorded, frequently, as “airchecks,” so that the creators and performers could evaluate their results – and so that advertisers could verify their commercials. Aside from that, Mr. Corwin reports that recorded sound impacted audio theatre only as a source for sounds and sound effects which could not be produced live in the studio.

In his great masterpiece, “On A Note Of Triumph,” created for V-E Day, Norman Corwin reached a peak which may not be surpassable. In this program, he fused ideas and technique with a fluidity and a Mozartian “RIGHT-ness” that remains today an astonishing revelation for listeners: a revelation of content, and a revelation of the unleashed power of the medium. His ability to grip and hold the listener’s attention, to move the listener mentally around the globe with a flick of a word and a ghost of a sound, to inform and celebrate and educate and appall and entertain and inspire, all at once, has never been more effectively deployed.

This program, by popular demand, was not only repeated on the air, but also released on recordings soon after its performance. A set of 78-rpm discs was issued in one of the cardboard “albums” of the period, and enjoyed a brisk sale even in the face of the obvious inconveniences of that medium.

¹² Corwin interview.

Recorded sound played an important part in the creation of Corwin's work, but mainly in conjunction with live sound effects created in the studio. *"Sound in an important way was really I think the accomplishment of very few of us.,"* Corwin said recently. *"I think I carried it further than anyone else at the time, such as in "Wolfiana" with Charles Laughton, where I had a very rich background of interwoven music and sound. The effect being closer to the musical form of the rhapsody than any other analogy. [Q: Using sound as a musical element?] Yes. And music as a sound element! In that there are passages about trains, there are passages about ships blowing whistles in the night as they depart. And with Bernard Herrmann, I merely suggested what I heard in my ear, what I wanted, and he worked it out on his side, then I took that music and integrated it with the sound. Listen to this program for this purpose. You will see the plastic use of sound. There's one particular passage of the flight of a train, a train going like hell. And it goes through stations, little stations where it doesn't stop, and it kicks up dust and goes speeding along, and crosses over bridges, and the sound changes. I was able, with very good sound people and very good engineering, to use the same effect, because you can have a train going along, bumpity bumpity bump, and by simply changing the filter on the sound you can get a hollow sound like when the train goes over a bridge. That program particularly, that's really kind of an exhibit in the study that you're making."*¹³

Corwin, at times, sent engineers out with the relatively bulky portable disc-recording equipment then available to record specific sounds or backgrounds which were not available in the network's sound library.

Corwin did report one notable experience with field recording: in 1946, he was awarded the first Wendell Willkie "One World" Award, and the prize was a trip around what was left of the world. He took a wire recorder with him – the latest in portable gear, much smaller than a disc-recording lathe, but still bulky, balky, and fraught with possibilities no engineer likes to contemplate. Its fidelity was comparatively limited as well, but Corwin still used the field recordings as a key part of a very powerful series of broadcasts entitled "One World Flight."

THE 1950s AND 1960s

The economic impact of television in the 1950s caused a rapid decline in the amount of audio theatre being created and broadcast over the radio. In the United States, this decline went much further than in other countries – it went virtually all the way to zero. Radio theatre survived, in a reduced way, in every other country of which I'm aware – the British Commonwealth countries, Europe, Africa, and Asia. It "moved over" in the entertainment spectrum to make way for the Boob Tube, but only in the United States did radio theatre broadcasting die out.

By this time, audio theatre was thought of exclusively as Radio Theatre, and its massive popular flowering on the broadcast airwaves had completely obscured its existence as an art form independent of media. Alternatives to broadcast were available, but it has taken time and technological advance to bring us to the point where the art form can again reach its audience economically.

¹³ Corwin interview.

In fact, audio theatre had one of its great flowerings during the 1950s, over the venerable British Broadcasting Corporation. I cannot even begin, in the context of this paper, to treat the enormous contributions of the BBC to the audio theatre art form since very early on. But I must mention the incredible phenomenon called "*The Goon Show*," which was a beloved fixture on the BBC throughout the 1950s. Spike Milligan, as the principal writer, gets the major share of the creative credit, but Peter Sellers, Harry Secombe, and the BBC crew all contributed mightily to an utterly hilarious program which grabbed hold of the possibilities of audio theatre and shook them out like the downstairs maid does with the entrance-hall carpet runner.

The use of sound in the Goon Show was enormously creative. Sound effects were treated in a completely plastic way. Pre-recording was used for many effects in these shows; not only for special sound effect sequences, but sometimes for special effects on the dialog of the characters. audio theatre conventions were flouted, satirized, worked hard, ignored, and re-invented. The pace of the story, of the humor – the rate of presentation (see discussion below) – was extremely fast, although very linear. The Goons, as Firesign would do later, felt that their audience was ready for an increased rate of presentation, and achieved this simply by "putting the pedal to the metal" on the speed of performance. In terms of the yarn-spinning metaphor, Milligan & Company sought to pull the skein through the hole faster, more than they sought to enlarge the hole.

The comedy, and the audio theatre technique, of the Goon Show heavily influenced many people on both sides of the Atlantic. Most notably, in the United States, the Goon Show was a direct and important influence on The Firesign Theatre; and in Britain, it was a direct influence on the members of Monty Python's Flying Circus.

The 1950s are a decade of decline for American audio theatre, relieved by a few bright spots. In the early part of the decade there were attempts to "pump up" the medium to compete more strongly with TV. "*The Big Show*," starring Tallulah Bankhead, Meredith Willson, and others, is a famous example of radio attempting to bring in the big guns to attract audience away from the cathode rays. Science-fiction shows, notably "*X Minus One*" and "*Dimension X*," capitalized on a genre with growing popularity, and achieved some remarkable programs with excellent use of the available technology.

In the US, the political climate also had an impact; this was the period of the infamous House un-American Activities Committee, and "Tail-Gunner Joe" McCarthy's vicious attacks on individuals, groups, and ultimately on our entire democratic system. With entertainment figures all too prominently victimized by these slanders, the various entertainment media became very gun-shy about experimenting with programming, and control of programming decisions fell, or was pushed, completely into the hands of accountants and financial managers -- bean-counters who would never want to be accused of creativity.

It is a cardinal error to allow accountants to make policy decisions with respect to any enterprise which depends upon creativity. In seeking to reduce the risk of financial loss, they

inevitably truncate the upside by screwing up the creative atmosphere. I will now step down from my soapbox, tip my hat, and beg the reader's pardon.

Tape recording, with its editing capabilities, was by this time in wide use for production, and began to be used for distribution as well, although vinyl transcription discs were still very much in evidence. Multitracking and overdubbing, however, were still experimental technologies not generally available. Les Paul had worked with Ampex engineers to create a multitrack machine at the beginning of the decade (using, famously, the flywheel from an old Cadillac), and created a number of hit records (such as "*How High The Moon*") which featured speed-changed guitar tracks, and repeated overdubs of his guitar and Mary Ford's voice. They were hits on the radio, but the techniques did not translate into audio theatre for almost another twenty years.

There was, however, some fresh activity, especially and particularly from Stan Freberg. The "Last of the Great Radio Comedians," as he has called himself, debuted on the radio as late as 1957. However, he had already begun to create audio theatre pieces on recordings (78 rpm sides, originally) and found ready airplay and good sales. These were marketed as "comedy records," but used audio theatre techniques to make their impact. The most famous is probably the classic "*John and Marsha*" sketch, which was a parody of a radio soap opera. Even Freberg's song parodies used characters and sound effects, as when the lead singer (Daws Butler), in the hilarious send-up of Belafonte's "*Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)*," has to step back so far from the microphone that he ends up completely outside the studio and breaks a window to get back in.

The 1960s saw audio theatre make a big splash in another "comedy record," Vaughn Meader's "*The First Family*," an LP this time, satirizing the Kennedy White House. This became a runaway best-seller. A second album was produced, but this particular effort was abruptly halted by the assassination of JFK in November, 1963.

"Comedy Records" were actually big sellers during this decade, but while these were spoken-word audio, they were not audio theatre. Bill Cosby, Jonathan Winters, Shelley Berman, Allan Sherman, and many more had considerable sales. Some did use some audio theatre techniques. Shelley Berman, for instance, was famous for doing routines in which the listener heard only his side of a telephone conversation. Both Bill Cosby and Jean Shepherd did routines, or told stories, about the old Radio days. The success of these records showed that there was indeed an audience for spoken-word audio, but it was seen and treated as very much a minor part of the much larger group of recorded-music buyers.

In Chicago, Dick Orkin and associates at WCFL created a new series of audio theatre pieces, experimenting with the form in order to fit the demands of then-current tight radio formats. "*Chickenman*" was produced in extremely short form, as 90-second episodes, intended to take up no more time on a station than a single song, even when introduction, conclusion, and commercial were added. It was a superhero parody, and became very successful around the country. Because it did no violence to currently-accepted formats, it was accepted by Program Directors and DJs and thus had its chance on the air. Public response was excellent. But it was

not until the latter part of the decade that a new creative force appeared, which had a very considerable effect on the development of the audio theatre art form:

THE FIRESIGN THEATRE.

Peter Bergman, Phil Austin, David Ossman, and Phil Proctor all grew up with Radio Theatre as children, having been born in the late 30s - early 40s. They coalesced as an improvisational troupe around the nucleus provided by Peter Bergman and his late-night radio show on KPFK in Los Angeles, during 1966. Improvising, playing off each other's personalities and ideas, they developed a wild and wacky style of comedy that was in itself both a parody of what radio had become, and a reminder of what it had been. A very considerable audience developed around these regular shows, and sometimes their broadcasting studio would be filled with friends and fans sitting around on the floor, laughing and enjoying.

They were all aware of old-time radio. David Ossman was inspired, as a boy, toward a career in radio by one of Corwin's broadcasts, *The Odyssey Of Runyon Jones*. They were especially influenced by The Goon Show, and in fact created some performance pieces (e.g., "*By The Light Of The Silvery,*" the early version of their Sherlock Holmes parody) which were direct *homage a la Goons*.

In 1967, Columbia Records invited the group to make a "comedy record" for them. It's not perfectly clear what the Columbia executives were expecting, but what they got was a breakthrough in pure audio theatre. Firesign realized that they would need a lot of creative freedom to harness their multi-voiced, multi-layered humor for records, and a deal was struck by which the group received almost unlimited studio time (in return for accepting unusually small royalty payments, and relinquishing control over the recordings so produced).

The Firesign Theatre had never written a script for their comedy up to this point, but they realized immediately that scripts were now a necessity. They proceeded to make two pioneering contributions to the art form:

1. They **began to use the newly-available tools of multitrack recording**, overdubbing, and mixdown to control performances (vocal, sound, and musical) and audio balances with a very high degree of precision. This allowed them to go back in and polish, upgrade, hone and sharpen their scenes, jokes and set-pieces in a way that a performance-oriented person could never manage, even with the advantages of tape splicing.
2. They **accepted from the outset that this new material was intended to be heard primarily from recordings**. Therefore, the listener had the opportunity to listen to part or all of the piece more than once. And also, they could count on a very high level of Fidelity in their reproduction, compared to the AM radio they had grown up with.

The Firesign Theatre began to adapt their material to take specific advantage of these technical advantages, and boldly decided to try and explore the possibilities, and push the envelope of the art form. All four were motivated partly by good memories of radio theatre from

their childhood years, but never considered merely imitating what had been done at that time. The rise of television had changed the audience's perceptual habits, and the four members of the group understood this fully, having been part of that process themselves from the beginning.

THE "RATE OF PRESENTATION"

The common denominator here is the rate at which ideas and concepts are presented to the audience, which I shall call the "rate of presentation." The ideas and concepts can include definite information, emotional overtones, references to other things, cultural resonances, ironies, implications, and so forth. This rate of presentation differs from form to form, and also from style to style and artist to artist.

In the world of the printed word, ideas and concepts impact the reader's mind at a speed corresponding to his ability to read with comprehension, proceeding one word, phrase, paragraph at a time. The form imposes a speed-limit in its one-dimensionality.

Visual media present much more information, many more ideas and concepts, in a given space of time. Media which combine visual and sound elements increase this rate of presentation even further.

The rate of presentation in the audio medium falls between that of print and visual media. At its most basic, a single voice reading, it presents ideas even more slowly than the printed word can to a good reader. But it has the capacity to use other elements, such as music and sound effects, to present information to the listener on various levels. audio theatre, at its best, could be described as the highest use of the audio medium because it can achieve the highest rate of presentation: it can successfully present the greatest amount of information to the audience in the shortest space of time.

The Firesign Theatre realized that the vast increase in exposure to visual and audiovisual media which had happened across the previous twenty years had accustomed the mass audience to a higher rate of presentation than had been the norm in the Golden Age of Radio during the 30s and 40s. They saw that the new technology, and the transfer of distribution into the recording medium, made it possible to increase the rate of presentation in audio significantly.

To return to our original metaphor, the Firesign Theatre set out to ream out the hole limiting the diameter of the skein spun by audio theatre, and see just how big it could be made. The envelope could now be pushed in ways not possible before, and like Norman Corwin in the 1940s, they set out to push the envelope right to its practical limits.

THE 1970s AND 1980s

The Firesign Theatre continued to create and influence audio theatre throughout the 1970s, although they never had the marketing support which could have made them far more widely known. Their fame spread and endured, however, and the long-term loyalty of their many fans is powerful evidence of the impact of their audio theatre creations. They mastered their craft,

reached the region of the envelope-limits, and turned to exploring more what to say, and less how to say it. But their creative force drove home the impact of their mastery of the audio medium, because it produced a remarkable phenomenon: a very large proportion of fans began to have great chunks of Firesign's audio theatre creations memorized, apparently permanently. Their work stuck in the memory so easily and so tenaciously, that many people became permanently aware of the delights of audio theatre and impressed by its power.

Moreover, Firesign turned out to be inspirational. Their early success inspired many others to use audio theatre techniques, from Cheech and Chong to the Conception Corporation, the National Lampoon Radio Hour and the Duck's Breath Mystery Theatre. And the power of their work inspired a new generation of creators, performers, producers of audio theatre.

Significant among these is Tom Lopez, who founded ZBS Foundation in the mid-1970s and began to create original radio dramas for Public Radio. He was basically a writer, and eventually learned to be an engineer, director, and producer in order to get his writing produced. His works are long-form stories, broken up into episodes. In this sense, they resemble the form developed by Carleton E. Morse for the "*I Love A Mystery*" radio series in the 1940s, where a story would have a beginning, middle, and ending, but would be spread out over (typically) 15 15-minute episodes. (The resemblance is something more than chance, as Lopez, writing under the *nom de antenna* of Meatball Fulton, created a leading character named Jack Flanders who is rather a tip of the Fulton fedora to Morse's Jack Packard.)

Single radio dramas rarely last more than one hour, but by dividing the program into episodes it is possible to tell a story which lasts for three or four hours, or more (longer than a feature motion picture) without losing the audience along the way. Lopez's revival of the long form became very successful on Public Radio. In a 1998 interview, he mentioned to the author that they achieved their highest number of stations when the programs were distributed on vinyl LP records. When satellite distribution became available, the number of stations carrying his audio theatre works actually declined, as many stations had no practical access to satellite downlinks.

Lopez developed another aspect of the use of recorded sound for audio theatre, by going to specific locations to make field recordings for his dramas. The first attempt at this was a story called "Moon Over Morocco." Lopez traveled to Tangier, and recorded street sounds, countryside sounds, local musicians performing, and many other things. Then, back at home, he used the multitrack tape process to combine these backgrounds with actors recorded in the studio. Conceptually, the process resembles the motion picture process of rear-screen projection; with careful recording and mixing of actors, it is possible to "drop them into" the scene. This technique has been used with increasing success all over the world in ZBS productions which continue to grow in quality, complexity, and maturity.

During the 1970s, audio theatre had a number of outstanding manifestations, most of which were funded publicly, through grants of various sorts. The major commercial attempts during his period included Himan Brown's "*CBS Mystery Theatre*," which won a bigger audience

than the network realized, and a short-lived series written by Rod Serling called “*Zero Hour*,” which is now enjoying a new popularity on recordings.

Grant funding made a superbly useful contribution to this art form; it may be that audio theatre is the best example of public funding for the arts we’ve seen in this century, at least as measured by the results. An entire industry was supported, nurtured, incubated and ultimately preserved for a whole new lease on life in the private-enterprise marketplace, because money was available, through the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s Satellite Program Development Fund, and many other Federal, state, local, and private sources. To give a few examples out of many:

Tom Lopez’ ZBS Foundation was originally entirely supported by grant funding. Today his new productions are funded through the sale of recordings.

Producers like Otherworld Media created superb independent productions for National Public Radio, involving the finest available creative and performing talents. For example, Tom Lewis’ best-selling book about the origins of radio, “*Empire Of The Air*,” was made into a PBS video by Ken Burns – and then produced as a radio drama by Otherworld, with an all-star cast. Of the three versions – print, video, and audio – the audio theatre version is the most gripping, and tells the story in the most easily understandable way.

Yuri Rasovsky’s National Radio Theatre of Chicago did Homer’s *The Odyssey* in ten hour-long episodes, impeccably researched and produced.

Garrison Keillor’s *Prairie Home Companion* on NPR became a huge success with the public, and his blend of storytelling and music, refreshingly modern but clearly reminiscent of the variety broadcasts of the Golden Age, quickly evolved into radio theatre sketches. The phenomenon of this program was a clear indicator to many that an audience for audio theatre was not something to be found only in retirement communities.

The list of grant-funded audio theatre in America is a long and impressive one. It kept the art form alive, kept creators creating and performers performing, and ensured a nucleus of experienced professionals would be available when the time came again, in the 1990s, for the industry to make headway again in the for-profit arena.

THE NATIONAL AUDIO THEATRE FESTIVALS

One of the best examples of useful grant-funding has been a training and teaching effort. In the 1980s, more of the new generation of audio theatre creators began to look around for opportunities to practice the craft. Several hundred such people passed through the Midwest Radio Theatre Workshop in Columbia Missouri. This operation began in 1979, when a group of young people at Community Radio Station KOPN in Columbia, Missouri, were pining for the chance to do some radio theatre – having enjoyed some recordings of Golden Age programs – and found that grant funding was available for a teaching workshop.

MRTW convened from 1979-1999 as a five-day event wherein some 50 participants and a dozen or so staff gathered in Columbia, MO, to spend the entire time learning about and doing Radio Theatre. Each day was filled with seminars, workshops and classes on writing, acting, directing, etc. etc., and then, “after hours,” as it were, a two-hour live broadcast was prepared. Three or four original plays were routinely cast, rehearsed, prepared, produced and performed in a live two-hour local radio broadcast, recorded for later distribution via public radio satellite.

In 2001, a new nationally based organization takes up the challenge of organizing what has long been, in fact, a major event bringing people together from coast to coast. The National audio theatre Festivals, Inc., (<http://www.natf.org>) is a nonprofit corporation staffed by some amazingly talented and experienced people. As I attended 18 of the 19 workshops held to date, I am in a position to speak personally with some authority on the remarkable results achieved by this program over the years. Hundreds of people have attended, from all across the United States, from Canada, Britain, and Europe. Many have gone back home, as I did, and founded local radio theatre groups and businesses. More than a few have gone on to make significant careers in the audio theatre field. The leading practitioners of audio theatre have been brought into contact with each other, to the benefit of all. NATF is poised to grow into a truly national, fulltime effort in support of the whole industry.

AUDIO THEATRE TODAY

In the 1990s, audio theatre began a major renaissance. Economically, this is made possible by the fact that today, for the first time since the 1940s, it is clear to everyone that a large mass audience exists for spoken-word audio programming. This is statistically verifiable by examining the known facts about three important kinds of such programming, each of which has shown a large increase in visibility and popularity within the last few years:

1. **Talk Radio.** The programs of Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh, Bob and Tom, and a host of others have made it clear that listeners to commercial radio are just as interested in talk programming as listeners to Public Radio have been.
2. **OTR**, as the surviving recordings of Old-Time Radio programs from the Golden Age are acronymically known. OTR is no longer the province of a relatively few dedicated collectors trading tapes among themselves; it’s a major commercial item available in libraries, and on sale in bookstores and truckstops across the country. On June 1, 1997, the New York Times reported that some 3400 radio stations in the U.S. were programming at least some OTR in their regular schedules.
3. **Audiobooks** or “talking books.” This phenomenon has been the most remarkable phenomenon seen by the publishing industry in a long time. According to the Audio Publishers’ Association (the very existence of which is indicative), audiobook (i.e. single-voice readings) sales in the US alone now approach \$2 billion per year..

The APA’s own Listener Habits And Practices Survey reports that eleven percent (11%) of audiobook buyers look for “full production” – in other words, audio theatre. I believe that to

be a very conservative figure. It indicates a potential market of some 200 million dollars a year, merely by extrapolating the audiobook figures alone. In point of fact, the actual market must be larger than that: for examples, the survey makes no attempt to reach radio listeners or OTR buyers. audio theatre is a major mass medium, and an important entertainment industry, which is working back up to its rightful place in the spectrum of available entertainment. However you figure it, there is clearly a very large unserved and underserved market waiting for product.

There are today at the very least scores, and more likely hundreds, of audio theatre production efforts around the country. They range from small-town repertory companies, like the Heart of the Ozarks Theatre Company in the middle of Missouri, to major Hollywood productions like Otherworld Media's star-studded unabridged adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, or the "Alien Voices" audio theatre series produced by Leonard Nimoy, John DeLancie, and members of the Star Trek cast.

Steven Ziplow, founder of the Hilton Head Island Radio Theatre, has turned his commercial recording studio to a full-time effort to produce and market audio theatre for profit. His adaptations of best-selling novelist John DeChancie's work have won awards and proven very popular.

The Radio Repertory Company of America, a commercial effort based in New Jersey, are the creators of several programs. They have settled on 2-hour feature-length original stories, and their more recent productions feature "name" stars from movies and TV, such as Katey Segal ("Peg Bundy" on TV's "*Married With Children*,"), Marina Sirtis ("Counselor Troi" on "*Star Trek - The Next Generation*"), Claudia Christian and Patricia Talman (from "*Babylon 5*"), and Alex Tydings (Aphrodite on "*Xena*"). The combination of feature-length and star performers keeps their original stories selling, even without a known author's name on the package.

Audio theatre offers more opportunity for talent, with fewer budget and distribution barriers, than any other form. An all-volunteer group from Bloomington, Indiana, Last Minute Productions, created a dramatic radio series from scratch and found instant acceptance on a national level. After two runs on NPR Playhouse, it is estimated that a million people may now have heard at least portions of *Hayward Sanitarium*, an original audio theatre piece created without any budget for production at all, and created by young people with virtually no background in audio theatre.

The Firesign Theatre's 1993 reunion, after 12 years apart, led to a successful cross-country tour in which they filled auditoriums with 3000 seats. A second west-coast tour, two brand-new albums, and a grammy nomination later, the turn of the century found them planning new works and more releases.

Norman Corwin, after decades of relative obscurity, came back into the public eye in 1991 with his new production of "*We Hold These Truths*," on the occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the Bill of Rights. This was picked up for distribution by every network in the United States, both public and commercial. The re-broadcast of his "*On A Note of Triumph*" on its 50th Anniversary, May 8, 1995, generated thousands of responses from listeners. His new production of "*50 Years*

After 14 AUGUST” later that summer did the same. A series of 13 of his best programs from the 1940s was broadcast over National Public Radio in 1996, and this led to funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for a new series of six programs by Corwin. Major performers jump at the chance to appear in a Corwin program, and his casts are as impressive in today’s names as they were in context of the 1940s.

Public response to Corwin’s new programs is highly indicative. According to Andy Trudeau, head of Cultural Programming at National Public Radio, the average number of responses generated by an NPR program (of any type) which offers an 800-number at the end of the show is four. That’s (4), a single digit. Each of Corwin’s new broadcasts has generated far more calls, ranging in number from hundreds to thousands, to an 800-number.¹⁴

Technology continues to advance and improve. Digital Audio Tape (DAT), Sony’s minidisk (MD) and hard-disk based digital editing and multitracking have made production much easier, and the advent of the Compact Disc has brought the highest fidelity ever available to the average listener. The superb production values in Otherworld Media’s 2000 unabridged adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* benefit greatly from the digital production environment

The availability of production technology capable of producing state-of-the-art fidelity is another phenomenon impacting the audio theatre industry. In 1940, it took a major radio station or network to assemble all the technical resources needed to make world-class radio theatre. Today, the technology to do so is available for much less than the cost of a new car. As the technical capability needed to produce top-grade audio theatre becomes as widespread as the technical capability needed to write a book, possession of such technology is no longer a significant factor in determining who gets the chance to work in the field.

Production methodologies also continue to develop. Three basic audio theatre production methods are in use today:

Live Performance: this is essentially the same method used in all audio theatre up until the 1960s. Actors, sound effects performers, engineers and musicians gather and perform the script in real time, either in a sound studio or in a theatre with an audience. This production method is the most “theatrical,” and with its basic focus on an event – energy coming together at a certain place and time – has all the stimulating and exciting characteristics of any other performance. The Midwest Radio Theatre Workshop has practiced and celebrated this method each year, but many of its graduates have gone on to other methods as well.

Multitrack Studio: this is probably now the most common method, where voices are recorded separately, edited, and assembled on in a multitrack environment (either analog or digital). Music and other sounds are added, and all these elements are mixed and edited together to achieve the final result.

Location Production: where a single microphone is used in the same way as a movie camera, and the actors perform many of their own live sound effects (such as footsteps, door

¹⁴ Author’s personal experience.

openings, telephone answerings, etc.) as they read the lines. Scenes can be and are “shot” in various locations as well as in-studio, capturing the characteristic acoustic responses of different rooms, outdoor environments, etc. Multitrack and digital technology is usually also used to enhance and refine the results. Note that Tom Lopez’s work is a different approach, since his actors generally are recorded in the studio and combined with location recordings of sound effects on a multitrack recorder.

It should be noted that “location” work has its roots earlier in the century; Norman Corwin used this method, for instance, for a celebrated sequence in his *El Capitan and the Corporal* (1944) where the characters are heard running up and down flights of stairs in a train station. He told the author, “*I have to say that I was very keen about the natural sound, without forcing, without getting mechanical help.*” For that live-on-air broadcast performance, Corwin said, “*there was a stairwell right outside the studio, which went down one flight and up one flight. I had mikes at the top and bottom of the stairwell, and I had my actors run up and down those stairs! You can't beat that for actuality.*”¹⁵

The Firesign Theatre recorded one sequence from their first album in 1967 outside the studio, placing the microphone inside a parked Volkswagen. Their new album in 1998 uses location technique again, combined with multitrack technique.

But the new DAT technology, and now increasingly the minidisk as well, have made it much easier than ever before to work outside the studio and still capture excellent audio recordings. Entire programs, rather than just scenes or sequences, are now being done “on location.” Otherworld Media’s 1994 production of *Raymond Chandler’s “Goldfish,”* (a one-hour story), and Last Minute Productions’ *Hayward Sanitarium* series (currently 10 half-hour episodes) are excellent examples.

The ear of the listener has changed and advanced in the course of the last century. Today, the average listener is bombarded by soundtracks from movies and TV shows, and has become accustomed to the “sound” of these productions. As Norman Corwin put it, “*I think that what has happened recently is that radio sound has been trumped by the sound that has gone into motion pictures, where they have big budgets, and they have control boards almost as big as a football field with the ability to mix and blend and alter sound.*”¹⁶ Not only the character of expected and acceptable sound had changed, but the “rate of presentation” which is acceptable to the modern audience is now much faster than the rate which could be assimilated by an audience a hundred years ago, or even fifty years ago.

In the United States, therefore, we can see the overall pattern of audio theatre – it developed on recordings, preceded and inspired by telephonic “wired broadcasting” experiments, but did not come to full fruition as an art form, or full recognition as a mass medium, until the advent of radio broadcasting. With the advent the excitingly new medium of television, the audience for (and thus the marketplace value of) audio theatre appeared to decline, to a much greater extent than is in fact justified by its nature, inherent value, and audience appeal. This was

¹⁵ Corwin interview

¹⁶ Corwin interview.

largely due to the fact that most people thought of it as “radio theatre,” mistakenly, albeit quite understandably, confusing the art form with the medium.

The advent of convenient, widespread personal capability for playing recordings – first on 78 rpm records, then on 33-1/3 LP albums, then – most especially significantly – on tape cassettes, and now on compact discs, has given audio theatre a convenient, practical, full-fidelity medium of distribution as “audio on demand,” whereby the product can be enjoyed at a time and place of the listener’s choosing.

The invention of the internet and the World-Wide Web has brought a new channel of distribution for audio theatre, “broadcasting on demand,” if you will. Many websites now feature OTR programming available to the properly-equipped browser via RealAudio, MP3, or other software. More and more websites, such as the Sci-Fi Channel website at <http://www.scifi.com/> offer brand new audio theatre productions, either in part or in whole.

The audio theatre art form is having a renaissance of major proportions, and it is now proper to speak of the “audio theatre Industry.” Kept alive for decades by a few devotees and funded by grants, audio theatre is being weaned off the dole and coming back into the marketplace.

And, in the final analysis, the history of audio theatre shows today a symmetry amounting to irony. Starting on the telephone and the wax cylinder, but achieving its biggest audience over radio broadcast, audio theatre returns to popularity on its original media: recordings, and telephone wires.

Having come full circle, audio theatre is here to stay.

Appendix A:

Origins

An American audio theatre Timeline

Extracts from

Timeline of Communication History

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(found on the web at <http://www.mediahistory.com/time/alltime.html>)

Additions, marked by a single asterisk, by Richard Fish from various sources.

Additions, marked by a double asterisk, from *A Chronology of Early AM Radio Broadcasting*, put up by Jeff Miller on his website at <http://members.aol.com/jeff560/chrono1.html>Additions, marked by three asterisks, from *The Broadcast FAQ List*, compiled by Barry Mishkin on his website at http://www.olderadio.com/current/bc_faq.htm

1876: Bell invents the telephone.

1877: In France, Charles Cros invents the phonograph.

1877: In America, Edison also invents the phonograph.

1878: The dynamic microphone is invented in the U.S. and Germany.

1878: Hughes invents the microphone.

***1881: Opera and plays transmitted by telephone in Paris**

***1882: Prof. Amos E. Dolbear receives US Patent for a wireless telegraph

1883: Edison stumbles onto "Edison effect"; basis of broadcast tubes.

1884: People can now make long distance phone calls.

1885: Dictating machines are bought for offices.

1887: Berliner gets music from a flat disc stamped out by machine, lateral grooves

1888: Heinrich Hertz proves the existence of radio waves.

*1889: Widespread sale of Edison Cylinders and Berliner discs

1890: In France, Branly's coherer conducts radio waves. *(but cannot receive sound)****1890: Private telephone connections to theatres available in France*****1891: Private telephone connections to theatres available in England.**

***1892: Nathan Stubblefield claims wireless voice transmission.

1894: Berliner's flat phonograph disc competes with the cylinder.

1895: Marconi develops first generator of radio waves.

***1897: Vaudeville sketch recordings sold**

*1898 Poulsen's first magnetic recorder uses steel wire.

1899: The loudspeaker.

1899: Sound is recorded magnetically by Poulsen of Denmark.

1900: Pupin's loading coil reduces telephone voice distortion.

1901: Sale of phonograph disc made of hard resinous shellac.

1903: Technical improvements in radio, telegraph, phonograph, movies and printing.

***1904: Vaudeville sketch records using all audio theatre elements found.**

1904: A telephone answering machine is invented.

1904: Fleming invents the diode to improve radio communication. (*adds sound capability*)

1904: The double-sided phonograph disc.

1906: A program of voice and music is broadcast in the U.S.

1906: Lee de Forest invents the three-element "Audion" vacuum amplifying tube.

1906: Dunwoody and Pickard build a crystal-and-cat's-whisker radio.

1906: Fessenden plays violin for startled ship wireless operators.

1907: DeForest begins regular radio music broadcasts.

1909: First broadcast talk; the subject: women's suffrage.

***Jan. 13, 1910: DeForest broadcasts Caruso singing opera**

1912: Feedback and heterodyne systems usher in modern radio.

1913: The portable phonograph is manufactured.

1915: Radio-telephone carries speech across the Atlantic.

1915: The electric loudspeaker.

*1916: Art Satherly begins field recordings, folk songs

1916: David Sarnoff envisions radio as "a household utility."

1917: Frank Conrad builds a radio station, later KDKA.

1917: Condenser microphone aids broadcasting, recording

*1918: first wartime actuality sound recording - gas shell bombardment.

1920: The first broadcasting stations are opened.

1920: Sound recording is done electrically.

1920: KDKA in Pittsburgh broadcasts first scheduled programs.

****Jan. 2, 1921. First Religious Service Broadcast was made when the Calvary Episcopal Church at Pittsburgh broadcast its services through KDKA.**

****Mar. 13, 1921. 2XX Ossining NY vaudeville broadcast, Robert F. Gowen**

****May 20, 1921. 1XE (WGI) begins regular broadcasts. According to Donna Halper, Little Folks Magazine bought commercial time on Eunice Randall's children's story hour on 1XE as early as 1921.**

***November 14, 1921: KYW begins regular opera broadcasts in Chicago**

****Feb. 19, 1922. WJZ airs its first Broadway stage show, Ed Wynn's 'The Perfect Fool'**

1922: Singers desert phonograph horn mouths for acoustic studios.

***1922 The Happiness Boys debut on WEA, New York (first radio comedy team)**

*****August 3, 1922: Drama broadcast on WGY, Schenectady**

***September, 1922: Drama on WGY ("Radio Broadcast" 11/23)**

***October 16, 1922: "The Story Lady" debuts over WMAQ, Chicago**

****Apr. 3, 1923. WLW broadcasts original play for radio by program manager Fred Smith "When Love Wakens"**

1923: Ribbon microphone becomes the studio standard.

***1923-1926: Definite regular program forms develop for broadcasting.**

1924: Two and a half million radio sets in the U.S.

1925: All-electric phonograph is built.

***January 16, 1925: "Uncle Tom's Cabin" adapted for radio, KLX, San Francisco**

1926: Some radios get automatic volume control, a mixed blessing.

1926: Permanent radio network, NBC, is formed.

1927: NBC begins two radio networks; CBS formed.

1927: Negative feedback makes hi-fi possible.

***March 19, 1928: Amos 'n' Andy debut on NBC**

***1928: First Radio Distribution on Recordings (Amos 'n' Andy, 78s)**

*1928: first patent (German) for application of magnetic powder to paper or plastic backing.

1929: Something else new: the car radio.

1929: In Germany, magnetic sound recording on plastic tape.

***1929-1930 Amos 'n' Andy develop serial storyline form**

1930: "Golden Age" of radio begins in U.S.

Appendix B

Published Sources:

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Robert L. Mott, *Sound Effects - Radio, TV, and Film*, published 1990 by Butterworth Publishers, a division of Reed Publishing.

INTERNET:

OTR Digest, maintained by William Pfeiffer, an email roundtable forum publication. To subscribe, send email to old.time.radio-request@broadcast.airwaves.com with the word "subscribe" in the subject heading.

WORLD-WIDE WEB:

The Radio Archive of the University of Memphis, at <http://www.people.memphis.edu/~mbensman/>
created and maintained by Marvin R. Bensman, J.D., Ph.D., Founder and Director

Timeline of Communication History, at <http://www.mediahistory.com/time/alltime.html>
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