

DRAMA ON THE AIR

George Robertson

THE FIRST TIME I saw a script for a radio play, it seemed like a wonderful, special language, as unique as a poem, more direct, more immediate than a story. I suppose I was at university then. A year or two later, in a class of “creative writing”, we listened to the news that the CBC would pay \$75 for a half-hour radio play. Here was the ideal: to be able to say what you wanted, create characters you believed in, and to get paid for it. Assured that the technicalities of the medium were not really formidable, we listened at home on Sunday nights, and wrote. I adapted a story by Elizabeth Bowen which was turned down, kindly, because it was not really the kind of story that made “good radio”, and later I wrote a play of my own which was “better radio” but not, I think, much better, and got paid for it. I think I have never viewed writing with such innocence, joy, and desire as then. My mind teemed with characters (many of them my friends slightly disguised) and situations (invented) and I took pleasure in seeing the words they spoke to each other separated, double-space, on the page, like some relentless mathematical equation, fascinatingly alive, that was summing up the meaning and mystery of the world. Radio, it seemed, was *the way, my way*, of imposing my imagination upon the startling world around me.

Since then, radio itself has got in the way. A novel, a story, even a play for the stage, can be bent and twisted and shaped according to the passion of the artist and to the need of the subject. I think a developing writer — and a good writer is always developing — has to feel the tension and conflict of himself against the medium. With radio, and even more with

TV, it is always the medium that wins any such battle. Eventually I retired in confusion from the lists, and became instead a producer of radio plays. *Now* I believed in the radio play as an article of faith: it *must* be possible to write good plays, unique plays, for radio, otherwise I couldn't believe in my job. But I recognized that most writers, like myself, felt defeated and frustrated by the medium; regarding it quizzically, as one would an unexpected cat that bites when you stroke it: until television came along, causing writers to transfer their fascination and horror to that still more exacting (and financially rewarding) medium.

What has gone wrong? In theory, radio and television ought to be engaging the most experimental minds of our time. Could they have predicted the rise, thirty years ago, of two forms of communication that were also (let us be charitable) art-forms, vehicles for dramatic thought that would speak with the language of the time and address themselves to millions of listeners and watchers, would not the writers of that day have hailed the future as a kind of author's Utopia?

One does, in fact, still hear professions of this faith. It need not take the form of enthusiasm for reaching a large audience; it is sometimes couched in the form of a recognition of the artist's need to engage whatever materials come to hand, in short, of keeping up with the times. Thus, Henry Green in the *Paris Review* wonders now whether novels will continue to be written at all; and he shows no alarm at the prospect of their demise, for, as he says, we must all be on the lookout for new forms of communication. We have also heard people, usually producers of radio or television programmes, speak of the exciting challenge of the limitations of their medium. Both "exciting" and "challenge" are good CBC words, and they probably have their counterparts in New York and London as well.

Now it is all very well for the producer to talk of the limitations of the medium: but it is rather useless to ask writers to be "excited" by the formal and technical demands of radio and television. To recognize them, yes, but not to revere them; one should encourage the writer, if possible, to destroy them. The best radio is always on the borderline of not being "good radio". But there is a sort of morality espoused by producers and executives in the broadcasting arts, a belief that writers have for too long been slopping around in the loose and permissive garments of the novel, the short story, the play, or verse; that they are being somehow reaction-

ary in not engaging themselves with the new media. In fact it is radio and television that are, by their nature, reactionary. Nothing wrong with that: they fill a need, and that is to emit signals night after night to fill the darkness with comfort, forgetfulness, reiteration of the accepted mores of the Establishment, and — lest it seem as if I were condemning them absolutely and out of hand — to entertain, and at times (unpredictable) to stimulate. Perhaps the void they fill was not there before they came: but that is another and far graver subject. The fact is, they are with us, and it is better to have good radio than bad radio. So producers, as I did, will continue to propagandize for their art, and continue to attempt to seduce writers from more conventional pursuits. Writers have never been more in demand, more respectable, better rewarded. Why is it then that among the most successful of those who have elected to write for radio and television, the feeling persists that they are not really *writing* at all?

An immediate answer is that neither radio nor television give to the writer that feeling, so necessary and terrible to his ego, that he is wrestling alone with his subject; that if the victory is his, it is his alone. For some writers, I think this is the highest "excitement". Whereas the radio or television writer, however lonely he may be at the moment of pitting himself against the blank paper at the beginning of a script, knows that in time the battlefield will soon swarm with friends; all of them tilting, it will seem, in different directions. When his work is done, he can really only wait or watch fearfully while the *important* people (it must seem at this stage), the director, the actors, the technicians, transform his cold pages into a living entity spewed out into the general air.

The broadcasting arts, like the cinema, are not really writer's media at all. The work of shaping and refining, in which lies so much of the pleasure and creative satisfaction, falls finally to the director. It is he who must have almost a plastic apprehension of his craft, without which any good script or acting performance can be made ludicrous. Writers who have had experience of radio and television instinctively recognize this: they either treat their writing as the result of a good day's work (if it sells) and are only interested in the result insofar as it reflects on their prestige, and their ability to sell the next script — or else, in the case of a few enlightened people who have not yet lost interest in writing as a universal pursuit, and are therefore still engaged with novels or verse or

whatever, they treat broadcasting as an occasional occupation: they are the knowledgeable amateurs. I assume a measure of skill in either case. But I would rather have radio plays by this sort of "amateur" than the other sort of "professional", and would rather be that sort of writer myself.

But I believe that only a very cunning person can be that sort of writer, for radio and television have produced their own mystique, and exact, as well as a knowledge of the techniques involved, a sympathy for the few kinds of dramatic statement that can be made. It is the understanding of this small but fertile landscape, seen through the jungle of electronics, and not the tidy do's and don'ts of the writers' handbooks, that will continue to keep drama on the air alive. It is ironic that so few of the people producing both radio and television appear to understand the difference. For instance, much is made of radio's ability to be everywhere and anywhere, to vault oceans in a second, and to supply the perfect, because imaginary, backdrop for every setting. Granted that this freedom from the visible and tangible has its certain uses; but it is so often either too much used, or not at all. The flexibility of radio must not be used as an excuse for failing to write scenes that are really *related*, that follow inevitably and yet (for such is the paradox of good dramatic writing) unpredictably. Too often the transparency of radio is made simply to cover a failure of the writer's imagination. How do I get out of here? I KNOW, FADE OUT. FADE IN, ONE DAY LATER. Or else this transparency, which in the degree of extravagance with time and space which it permits has positively poetic qualities, is hardly used at all. One scene follows another, inevitably perhaps, but all too predictably, and one feels that radio somehow might have been used to juxtapose and create tension between situations that are instead left hanging side by side, like beads on a string.

But among the writers who place too great a strain on the flexibility of radio there are those who feel it should be used in the service of "action", constant movement and event, interspersed with necessary plotting dialogue; and they ignore what is really to me radio's chief asset, its ability to convey and conduct a line of argument. Words speak to us directly, free of distractions; the stronger if they clothe an idea, embody a humour. Yet how often words are made to act like lumbering trucks, dumping a thought now and then at our feet, a thought which could be seen coming minutes away. How seldom are words alive of themselves;

how seldom do they have fire and substance; and how, when we rarely hear them, do they carry us on, exultant, in a new wonder at the power of radio. But this requires of a writer, intelligence; or better a power of thought married to style. We have to adapt Shakespeare, the Jacobean, and a few others, to hear that.

Similarly in television, the first lesson we are taught is the need to "be visual". Yet a conversation of moment between two people on television is often far more *visually* interesting than many purely visual actions, including, perhaps, a fistfight. I admit this is an extreme opinion, and obviously not always true. But it is necessary to state it because for a long time anything as static as a conversation had to be decked out with movement: if not the foreground, then the background was busy. In this case, producers were asking the eye to rob the mind, not to serve it. In truth, the "visual" quality of television is hardly more important than another which television shares with radio: its intensity, the degree to which it forces itself, in conditions more or less private, on our attention, and the degree to which it can then select detail, however minute, for our inspection. Television is, or ought to be, superb at conveying certain kinds of intellectual and emotional stress: again, it is the substance of what is happening between people at their most intimate and revealing level which is of paramount importance, and it is this that television, well-used, can so triumphantly achieve. Argument (and by argument I mean the movement of ideas and feelings, not just of words) is both limited and heightened by being seen. It is limited by being restricted to corporeal and reasonably real beings, and thus some forms of drama are better served on radio. Socrates could well enough be photographed in his cell, but I would prefer not to see him fleshed except in my imagination; there are certain identities that we degrade by making corporeal, and radio offers a nice compromise: the voice but not the body. The production of *Oedipus Rex* by the Stratford Players, both on stage and on television, in masks, was an attempt to solve the problem, and in this respect at least, I think successful. A mask, like the voice alone, imposes a stylization on the personality behind it, one which we recognize to be valid if the intellectual content of the drama is sufficiently pure and intense.

But argument is also heightened in television, in a way which no other medium can command except the film (with its intensity and selective-

ness) and then in a more calculated way, and comes from the infinitely varied possibilities of the human face and body, creatively used. The best of scripts can go so far, and then must stop at the wild and uncertain territory of the actor's and director's interpretation. If they are in sympathy with the play (assuming it is a good play) they can only add to it. The actor makes the word more-than-alive. This is television's famous sense of immediacy, and not to be scorned.

Does this emphasis on the primacy of the word seem to be a radio producer's view of television? Perhaps. But surely both radio and television plays are, must be, before everything else, drama. And drama is impossible without both communication and tension between human beings, or between human beings and ideas. And does not one person abstract ideas from another: ideas to hate, admire, love, or envy? A fight between cowboys — even cowboys — is always more than an instinctive aversion to each other's person: each has abstracted from the other an idea, or group of ideas, to hate, or fear; and these ideas, whether spoken or not, are given words. A play, however visually evocative and revealing, cannot be built without this foundation of meaning.

What has happened is that many writers are content to make the same tired patterns in the sand; radio and television drama has become an imitation of an imitation of an imitation of life — you can take it to any power you like. And we are back to one of the functions of the broadcast arts, to lull us to sleep with the old nursery rhymes. If drama is to be more than this, it will come not from writers who are more and more skilled in the intricacies of production methods (which can only teach the writer to fear real experiment, not to attempt it) but from writers who have an original view of the world and pursue the consequences of that view to the top and bottom of the souls of their characters. With this clearly seen, there is argument enough for any play, of any kind. Of skill, it takes only an intuitive understanding of the self-evident features of the media themselves: for radio, its transparency, its ability to superimpose word and music and sound, its freedom from space and time, and its directness of utterance; for television, its lack of magnitude but its intensity, its selectivity of detail, its power to render nuance, to juxtapose; and first of all, to show in large completeness the human face. If this much is perceived, most of the rest follows. There remains the dramatic instinct, the ability to quicken the experience of life into form and shape, without

which even an interest in radio and television drama is a waste of time. This is all.

And yet the monumental appetites of the broadcast arts can be sated only by a steady diet of the mediocre; the mediocre served up with great professional skill. Small wonder that writers are inhibited from venturing into art-forms so conscious of their own complexity. More than cunning, a sort of insane disregard for logic will keep a few people still trying to write well for radio and television. We can only hope that such Quixotry will some day bear fruit.