

"AFRICAN THEATRE WORKSHOP"

A B.B.C. AFRICAN SERVICE PROGRAMME IN WHICH
EDWARD BLISHEN AND OTHER EXPERTS DISCUSS THE
DO'S AND DON'TS IN WRITING A 30-MINUTE RADIO PLAY.

PRODUCER: ... Stand by, then, please, everybody. We're going to go ahead and record this play in a minute. But you will remember, Jenny, won't you, that on page 8 you wait for the gun shot and the effect of the door opening, before you approach the microphone and give us your speech eleven. O.K?

JENNY:
(studio) Yes, O.K.

PRODUCER: Right, fine. All set in here? Music ready? Start recording.

SM: Right - grams first -

GRAMS: MUSIC ... FADES

BLISHEN: Well, that's what it sounds like when a radio play reaches the studio and is just about to be broadcast or recorded. What we're going to do in this programme is to look at the steps that lead up to that moment - the writing, the creating, of the radio play.

The first thing radio does is to give the writer freedom. He is speaking to the ear alone - and so he has this power to appeal directly to the imagination of the listener. But really to possess this power, this freedom, the writer must first master a very specialised technique, and second he must always bear in mind a point that arises from the position of the listener, as someone using his ear and not his eye - a point that's made by Molly Hardwick, who for many years has written dramatic scripts for radio.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK: You must always remember that your listener cannot see and imagine that he is blind.

HARDWICK:
(Cont.)

You must create for him a scene, a time, a place, and people. He must know where we are, what it's like, who is in the room, who is not in the room and all about it, and this you must do somehow, to compensate.

BLISHEN:

So that's where we start, with this feeling for the great possibilities of freedom that radio offers - and this other feeling, for the problem of always supplying those hints, those signposts for the ear, so to speak, that will compensate for the listener's ... blindness. A special kind of freedom. But it's got to be worked hard for. And it all rests, plainly, on grasping the difference between writing for radio and other kinds of writing. To give a cheerfully melodramatic example - in a novel, you could write:

READER:

"I can't take any more" he said.. He moved backwards, blindly, and as he went he felt for the desk behind him, for the drawer, the top drawer. Why couldn't she leave him alone? Why was she always taunting him? He found the drawer with his groping fingers, opened it, felt for the cold metal. She, on the other side of the room, turned as pale as he was, not knowing what he was doing, knowing only that something terrible was in the air. She had taken half a step towards him, had suddenly half-guessed his intention, when he lunged forward with the gun and fired.

BLISHEN:

Now, in the theatre, where the audience is using its eyes, the scene might sound like this -

READER:

"I can't take any more".

DISC EFFECT: Footsteps, Heavy Breathing, Half Scream, Other Unsatisfactory Noises, Gun Shot.

BLISHEN: On radio that would be hopeless - we should have only the dimmest idea of the action: the scene would have to be re-interpreted for the ear.

READER: HE: "I can't take any more."

SHE: "What ... what are you doing? What are you going to do? Your face ... I can't bear that look on your face ... what are you feeling behind you for? Don't frighten me ... No! Not that! In the drawer - the gun!"

DISC EFFECT: Scream and Shot.

BLISHEN: Well, in that sort of difference between one kind of writing and the other, writing for the eye and writing for the ear only - in that sort of difference lies the clue to the special technique that a writer of radio drama must master. The technique. Well, first of all there's got to be a story. Drama, of any kind, is all sorts of things - an expression of a view of life, a study of character, it examines human problems, but always it must tell a story. The listener's interest is primarily held by the story. And our interest in a story has to be sustained - by the story being let out by the writer, as it were, bit by bit, from beginning to end of the play. The point is well put by the dramatist Bernard Kops who has written many radio plays.

TAPE: BERNARD KOPS

KOPS: You must hold back, you cannot lay all your cards on the table, you cannot, for instance, make all the characters reveal themselves immediately.

BLISHEN: Suspense - of some kind - a holding back - there must be, in storytelling in a radio play as elsewhere. And the feeling a writer has for his need to keep the listener in a state of suspense -

BLISHEN: this feeling lies behind the work he must do in
(Cont.) giving the play a shape.

TAPE: BERNARD KOPS

KOPS: After all, if you have a half-hour play you have a beginning, a middle, and an end. You have perhaps three sections. You have the introduction of the characters, you have the throwing of the characters together, and you have the conclusion. You don't really want to solve the play too soon, if you are going to solve the play at all.

BLISHEN: And the story, and the shape of the story, and the listener's interest in the story, all rest on ... conflict. This is a very important term. Take any play you can think of - any play of quality - and you will find that its interest lies in some conflict or other. In 'Hamlet' there's the conflict between Hamlet and his uncle, between Hamlet's need to be revenged and that part of him that holds back from revenge. The character of Hamlet himself, fascinating though it is, could never have been made the subject of a play without the conflicts that create the story of Hamlet, that hold our attention, that make us want to know - as any conflict does - what the outcome will be. It's worth saying that nothing is easier than to bore your radio audiences - and there's no easier way to do it than to fail to give your story shape, suspense, conflict. Or - to introduce another important term - to fail to control its pace. Monotony of pace in anything - in a car journey, in a piece of music, in ordinary speech - monotony of pace sends you to sleep, so a play, however short, mustn't move all the time at the same rate. The pace of any particular scene ought to be related to the nature of the scene: you can regulate pace by use of pauses, by the very style

BLISHEN: in which you make characters speak - quick here, (Cont.) slow there, always responsive to the emotional content of a scene - and, throughout the whole play, subtle variations of pace.

BLISHEN: Now, let's look at the opening of a radio play. What has the writer got to do in the opening? He has to catch the listener's attention, to establish the fact that something is going to happen which the listener will want to follow to its conclusion: and the writer also has, in Molly Hardwick's words "to create for the listener a scene, a time, a place, and people." Now Shakespeare, towards the end of his working life, knew how to do this beautifully. And he, by the way, almost without scenery, had to do on the stage very much what the writer has to do in radio. Take the opening of 'Macbeth'.

DISC EFFECT: Thunder and Lightening.

READERS:

1st WITCH: When shall we three meet again,
In thunder, lightening, or in rain?

2nd WITCH: When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

3rd WITCH: That will be ere the set of sun.

1st WITCH: Where the place?

2nd WITCH: Upon the heath.

3rd WITCH: There to meet with Macbeth ...

BLISHEN: So much in just forty one words - scene; vital information - a battle is taking place: a signpost pointing to the chief character - Macbeth: and the instant establishment of what is to be

BLISHEN:
(Cont.)

the mood of the whole play - in this case, violent, dark, eerie. The quality of a good opening doesn't lie just in an arresting first speech: it lies in what is laid before the audience in the first moment or more - and for illustrations, too long to quote here, you might look at, for example, the opening of a play by Ibsen or Tchekhov - especially the former - Ibsen, try 'The Master Builder' or 'Rosmersholm'. The trick is to knit the necessary information cunningly into the action. And it's important to remember, by the way, that your beginning does rouse expectations, and these must be fulfilled; just as it is the instinct of the audience to believe that the people with whom the play begins are of importance. Here's a whole area that the writer has to be sensitive to - the audience wants to identify with certain characters, and sympathise with them, it will take sides for and against, and the writer must use these desires that are in his audience, profit from them and not - for that's fatal - not frustrate them. Beginnings, then and then next the main shape of the play, the way it develops. Bernard Kops likes to know where he's going but not to know in advance all the ins and outs of his journey through the play.

TAPE: BERNARD KOPS

KOPS:

I like to know the main theme of the story but not all the facets of the story, so that whilst writing it I am struggling with it and I am surprised by the twists and turns of the plot.

BLISHEN:

But he is quite definite that you must know what you're about, in a general sense.

TAPE: BERNARD KOPS

KOPS

Even if I don't know what the story is going to be exactly, I must know what I'm writing about, because I think that if you don't know what you are writing about you get bogged down and your play loses its way and nobody quite knows what it's all about.

BLISHEN:

Well, vagueness in the writing - vagueness in the listener! And so to endings - which must round off the experience your play has given the listener - and must bring the events to a climax, even though, if you take Molly Hardwick's advice, you might think you shouldn't leave the whole point of the play to be expressed in a final line.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK:

If you have a half hour play which is a plot play it is very unwise to make an anecdote of it by packing the whole thing into the last line, that is a review sketch technique. You must not do that, because something awful might happen, the listener might just miss the last line. You must let him know before the end what has happened.

BLISHEN:

Good endings, like good beginnings, are difficult to illustrate in a short space, because they take time to build up, the best endings are built up to; but again, look at the ending of any play of quality, and note especially that though it is a good thing to send the listener away with questions in his mind, you shouldn't send him away with so many questions that he's just plain baffled. Now, of course, given the special conditions of writing for radio - the fact that you are constantly seeking devices for making your blind listener see - you might well decide that you need a storyteller,

BLISHEN:
(Cont.)

a narrator. He's by no means necessary: but he's an honourable member of the cast of some of the best radio plays - and he may take one of two forms. He may be a non-participant in the action, an observer, who sets the scene, narrates the framework of the story. The poet, Dylan Thomas, used such a narrator in one of the most famous of all plays written specially for radio, Under Milk Wood.

DISC: Extract from 'Under Milk Wood' by Dylan Thomas.

Come closer now. Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night.

Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the combs and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall, and the yellowing dickybird-watching pictures of the dead.

Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movements and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams.

BLISHEN:

Alternatively, your narrator may also be a character in the play - but here you must be careful. You must not let him do the sort of thing that Molly Hardwick warns against, sort of thing an incautiously handled narrator or indeed any character left alone during a radio drama might be made to do.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK:

There is a danger that an inexperienced writer will use soliloquy, he'll make the character talk to himself. Now in real life this is a thing .

HARDWICK:
(Cont.)

which we hope we seldom do, and if we do it in radio it isn't convincing. Man does not stand there and say "Oh dear, I have missed my train now what shall I do. I have just opened an important letter and I must catch the next one". It won't do, and we must devise another means of his conveying his feelings. Sometimes, of course, one can bring into a scene another character and give him someone to talk to. Sometimes, as I have often done, one can invent a device of a journal and make him write down speaking his words what his thoughts are.

BLISHEN:

A form of indirect narration, in fact.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK:

Sometimes again - one comes back to this all the time - one may use a narrator to tell us what the man is thinking but if one is clever one will not make him stand there, poor man, and talk to himself.

BLISHEN:

Talk. Well that brings us to - dialogue.

TAPE: BERNARD KOPS

KOPS:

Well of course dialogue is radio and you have nothing else to present your characters with, the characters have got to live and breathe by the words they say consequently they must all speak with their own true voices. It's pretty apparent when you read through the various characters where you have been wrong and given them words which they could not possibly know or say. Often I have found, for instance, going through a first draft of a radio play, that a man might say a line which really his wife should have read, because it was essentially

KOPS:
(Cont.)

a feminine fault. Or the child might have said something that he could not possibly have known, sort of emotionally, and I think that these are the things that each character has got to be sharply defined perhaps in radio more than in any other medium.

BLISHEN:

Sharply defined because the characters can't be seen. There are no visual clues for the audience at all. It must all lie in the voice. So the writer for radio must be a good listener himself -- he must listen, as he goes about his daily round, for those habits of voice that belong to persons of a particular age, or particular character. Especially in a half hour play, long speeches are to be avoided: they tire the ear, make us restless. Nor must too many points be packed into a single speech, like this:

READER: HE:

I am weary. I've been going on too long at the same thing. I need a change. As to what you've been saying, about our future, I can't agree with you. The fishing trade needs new methods. I think my son has been away too long -- that's another thing. Why doesn't he come home? Now, about this afternoon. If you are going to meet the new boss, there are several points I must ask you to put to him. Let me detail them ...

BLISHEN:

And, oh dear, he does go on to detail them: his long speech being instantly responded to with a long reply from the other character, methodically answering point after point as, in fact, in real life we rarely do -- we usually pick up the last point made to us. Only rarely do monologues constitute drama. One of the reasons is that they drain the sense of conflict from the play. Better to break it all up -- like this:

READERS: HE: I am weary. I've been going on too long at the same thing.

SHE: You've said that every day for as long as I can remember.

HE: Maybe I have. Because it's true. I need a change.

SHE: Take one, then.

HE: You don't care for change. Look at what you said about our future. The fishing trade needs change. It needs new methods.

SHE: I like it as it is. And your son likes it that way, too.

HE: How do you know? He has been away too long. That's another thing. Why doesn't he come home?

SHE: Perhaps he is tired of hearing you talk about the need for change.

HE: I'm not arguing about that. I'm not arguing any more. You just listen to me. This afternoon, when you meet the new boss, tell him ...

BLISSREN: And so on. You see, the lively exchange of voices rather than the monologue: and the sense of the duel, the conflict, kept alive.

Now - techniques special to radio. You must set the time - it's usually best to do this casually a reference to the darkness can save your blind listener from a frustrating uncertainty as to whether it's night or day. And, since you are not able to use the visual properties of the normal theatre, you must set the scene. Again, this can be unobtrusively and economically done:

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK: Quite often I have found that the loudly ticking clock is a very useful device in this case, or

HARDWICK:
(Cont.)

perhaps the open window with traffic sounds coming in, or the bird in a cage singing, anything you can think up which will paint the picture in the mind and be recognised again and again.

BLISHEN:

As you see from that - simple devices are sometimes the best. You can move from scene to scene in radio in a flash, scene can melt into scene, so long as you remember the need of the listener always to know where he is, where he is going, who is there. And how many scenes can you allow yourself? Well, here again, you have the freedom that radio offers - within discreet limits.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK:

You can change your scene pretty often. I don't think I'd lay down a hard and fast rule for it. Not, of course, a multiplicity of sounds so that one is confused by them, but you can change a scene quite often, you can flash from one scene to another with great effect and in fact scene changing is a very good thing.

BLISHEN:

Providing you give the right sort of signposts to the audience then, which may be no more than that clock ticking, or that bird in a cage, you can slide from scene to scene in radio as you hardly can in any other medium. But a warning about signposts. A listener takes them very literally. If you suggest that he's going from one place to another he expects - unless you make it very clear that this isn't going to happen - he expects to go there at once, and not two or three scenes later. Here's an example of how to do it wrong. You've reached the end of a scene that's taking place in the street. You come to the last speech, the hero addresses the heroine, we'll go to the end of the scene, and then straight into the next.

DISC EFFECT: Street Atmosphere, Discreet
Traffic Background.

READERS: HE: All right, you'll give me your answer in half
an hour's time, in the night club.

SHE: Yes, in half an hour's time.

HE: (FADING) In the night club then. Goodbye ...

DISC EFFECT: Heavy Sea Sounds, Gulls, Etc.

VOICE: Are you there - Ibrahim, are you there? (FADE)

BLISHEN: Instant reaction of the listener - this is
obviously a very curious nightclub, floating
somewhere out at sea ... the signpost, you see,
said 'night club' but the destination turned out
to be wildly different. Of course, it should
have gone like this:

DISC EFFECT: Street Atmosphere Etc.

READERS: HE: All right, you'll give me your answer in half
an hour's time, in the night club.

SHE: Yes, in half an hour's time.

HE: (FADING) In the night club then ... goodbye.

DISC EFFECT: Night Club Atmosphere,
Highlife, Etc.

HE: Darling, what have you decided ...? (FADE)

SHE: Well, I have thought about it a great deal.

BLISHEN: The secret is ... think all the time of the
expectations that your signposts are rousing
in the listener ... and see that those
expectations are fulfilled. And characters?
How many of those? Well, the answer here follows
from that statement of Bernard Kops's that
"each character has got to be sharply defined
in radio more than any other medium".
Molly Hardwick tells us what this actually means
in radio terms.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK: There's a popular notion that in radio as you don't restrict yourself to actors on the stage, you may have as many characters as you like but this is not true, because the ear can only take in so many characters, a cast of say, six, seven or eight, is ideal for a half hour radio play.

BLISHEN: And she adds another very important point.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK: Preferably with as different accents as possible, it helps a great deal to have vocally different characters but not too many.

BLISHEN: The unaided ear of the listener to radio must be able to distinguish between the voices. A cast of eight light tenors just won't do. Though it's not always just a matter of the quality of a voice - you might simply have to have, say, two characters of the same age, and the same background, and so on, but you can still create the difference through what you give them to say - through letting their words be dictated by their characters. We're always, you see, making this same point - you have freedom, but must use it with cunning, constantly thinking of that blind listener. Any aspect of the freedom may so easily be abused - may turn an opportunity into a disaster. As with sound effects. Sound, as we've already seen, can do a great deal. It can convey time, place, scene, in a sort of shorthand of sound: as music, it can be used to touch in a hint of mood, to underline the emotional quality of a particular moment, perhaps to move from scene to scene. But, there are points in a

BLISHEN: radio play where sound effects are out of place.
(Cont.) They can't be dabbed in just anywhere.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK: It's wrong to introduce sound when it may distract from speech, if you have a car approaching up a street you must not drown what a character is saying, that speech is important. Only when you have a throw away line, an unimportant line, can you creep up an approaching movement - don't distract the listener's ear.

BLISHEN: Well, again - feed the listener's ear, but don't foil it. And now let's look particularly at your script - the finished script of your radio play. The script of a play, in radio as elsewhere, is not yet the play. You must hope for sympathetic actors, a sympathetic producer - these are the people who will turn your blueprint into actual radio drama. But you can help them, or hinder them, by the preparation of your script, of which an important part (and this fact is sometimes disastrously overlooked) is the title. The right title often has to be hunted down quite hard - it should be attractive. It should suggest the nature of the play without giving anything vital away. If your play were a mystery based (as I don't recommend it should be) on the old chestnut about the detective being himself the murderer, it would be rash to call the play 'The Murderous Detective', and it shouldn't be plain ugly or dull or over-clever 'Tribulations of an Engineer' or 'Matrimonial Metaphysics' or something of the kind.

Now, what does the producer hope for when she reads through the script of a new radio play? Obviously she first hopes, though it isn't

BLISHEN:
(Cont.)

essential, the play will be typewritten.
Shirley Cordeaux, the producer of "African
Theatre", gives further advice.

TAPE: SHIRLEY CORDEAUX

CORDEAUX:

Well, it seems a crazy thing to say, but I often think that I can tell whether it's going to be a possible play for African Theatre by the thickness of the script as I smooth it out on the desk. Now, obviously you cannot tell the quality of the writing from the number of pages, but you can say that if it's about the right number of pages - which is twenty pages - it doesn't matter what size of paper - twenty pages - with about thirty lines of writing on each page, more if you are writing it by hand and you've got big handwriting - then that is about the right length of play for African Theatre - a half hour play. You can say, you see, that there are themes which are too big for a half hour play, and there are other themes which are too small for a half hour play; so that if I know from the feel of the script that it's about right, then I know whether it's going to be a possible play or not. This discipline of twenty pages is important; it's important to every writer that he should be able to discipline himself to write to a given length, a given timed duration, and if, as you are writing your play, you arrive on page nineteen, and you find that you haven't got to the climax, then it's no good, you've got to give up and go back, and find out where you've gone wrong - work out the proportions of the scenes again - so that by the time you reach page twenty you have got to your climax and you come to your natural end.

CORDEAUX: This discipline of writing to a half hour is
(Cont.) very important.

BLISHEN: And there are certain things Shirley Cordeaux is
always glad to find in a script:

TAPE: SHIRLEY CORDEAUX

CORDEAUX: I love to see on the top page the title of the
play, the author's name, and a list of the
characters who are taking part. And if there can
be, as well, a small physical description of the
various people in the play, that helps enormously,
I find. You see, if you write, "Joseph is
Israel's brother; he is a tall, strong young man
of twenty-six. He has spent five years in a
town, and he's bored with life back in his home
village" - that gives me a picture of Joseph
straightaway, and I can find a tall, young, strong
voice of twenty-six to take the part ... those
are the only directions, the physical descriptions
of the characters, that I like to see of a
physical nature. If I find somewhere in the
middle of the play a direction which says: "Joseph
creeps up behind Israel silently, and hits him on
the head with a stone; Israel falls to the
ground," then I feel like giving up: because this
isn't a radio play ...

BLISHEN: And Molly Hardwick gives a little extra advice
about that problem of knowing if the play is of
the right length.

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK: You may read aloud with great effect what you
are doing, quite often your own voice will tell
you that you are doing wrong or you can time

HARDWICK
(Cont.)

your pauses or imitate your effects, you can be your own dramatist in fact.

BLISHEN:

Well, now let's just look back at what we've said. Radio gives freedom, but a writer must learn the tricks of handling and controlling this freedom. He must remember that his listener is blind. He must put what he has to say into the shape of a story. That story must rest on some kind of conflict, and the listener's interest will rest on his concern for the outcome of that conflict. The play must have shape - situation introduced, with the people concerned; situation developed, climax reached; situation resolved. In other words, the play must have a theme, a sustained theme, one that will catch and then hold the attention of your listener from beginning to end. The opening, must catch the attention, and must do all its work of indicating scene, introducing characters, foreshadowing the story, cunningly - the giving of vital information being knit into the forward-moving action. The play must not end in mid-air, or fizzle out, but at the same time, you mustn't pack everything into a last line which might be missed. In dialogue, avoid long speeches - use dialogue as an instrument of conflict, and remember that the difference between one character and another can be felt, only through the quality of a voice, its pace, its style of speech. Signpost - always signpost: see time and place are firmly indicated - not too many characters. Use sound effects inventively, but discreetly; don't ask for the impossible. Your script is your link with the producer and the actors; give them such aid as they need, but be prepared to leave to them those points that lie within their province.

BLISHEN:
(Cont.)

Time your play, and test it in other ways by giving it as it were a concert performance in your own voice, sound effects, pauses and all. Finally, on the basis of her long experience Molly Hardwick sums up what she feels to be the most important do's and don't's that should be borne in mind by the newcomer to radio drama. What common mistakes should the writer take care to avoid?

TAPE: MOLLY HARDWICK

HARDWICK:

Obscurity, ignoring the fact that the listener can't see, over-writing, writing far too long speeches, over-literariness. An actor will sometimes come to you and say, "Look here, I can't say this." And he can't indeed when you look at what he's been given to say, so you must be right. You must also convey your dramatic points very sharply, you must not let very important lines slip past you - you must lead up to a good line and convey it quickly.

BLISHEN:

Convey your points sharply indeed - writing this programme, to last half an hour, I have myself come again up against what is the exhilarating quality of writing for radio, but also its very exacting quality - everything you do must be sharp, quick, properly stressed, and half an hour is at once very brief, and it's time for a good radio play.

----oOo----