

## A PLAY FOR AFRICAN THEATRE

Every month the BBC African Service broadcasts a play lasting half an hour in the "African Theatre" series. As this title suggests, the plays should express some aspect of African life and thought. Immediately, perhaps, stories of village life, tribal quarrels, ju-ju rites, myths and legends spring to mind for Africa is rich in such material but the scope is, of course, much wider and nowadays we particularly welcome plays dealing with current ideas and problems. The range is wide and providing the play is primarily concerned with a recognisably African theme the only further requirement is that it should be good enough to broadcast.

### The Radio Play

It has these advantages: It can span centuries and continents at one extreme, it can travel around inside a man's skull at the other. It gives the writer greater freedom from the bounds of time and space than any other medium, and an intimacy with the audience that is unique. Its disadvantage is that it cannot be seen. This may seem a very obvious thing to say but it is surprising how many writers seem to forget it. To all intents and purposes, your listener is blind, so the prime requirement of radio drama is that he will be able to follow and enjoy the play through words and sounds alone.

### Words and Sounds

Note the order. The words first, sounds second. Dialogue is the author's principal means of communication and it should contain all the information the listener needs to understand what's going on. Sound effects are used to indicate specific things: a telephone ringing, a door closing, a pistol shot etc., and they can convey atmosphere: waves on a sea shore, cicadas in the heat of the day, wind and rain on a stormy night for example. They are useful to underline, but it is the dialogue which should establish action, setting and characterisation.

### Character

This is perhaps the most difficult element to achieve successfully. It is also the most important, because however ingenious your plot may be it is the people who propel it along who really hold the listener's interest. If, as written, they all talk exactly alike, if their dialogue is "literary" not natural, if there are no clues to personality in what they have to say, then they will not spring from the page as living people however hard the actors try to make them sound convincing. Good characterisation depends very much on the author's power of observation and his ability to translate this power into words alone. At the beginning of a play it is best to limit the number of characters involved so that you can give each one enough to say to establish an immediate interest, so that the listener can get to know them and recognise them as individuals. Then, ideally, the main characters should be "built-up" so that we learn more and more about them as the play progresses.

### Plot

Within half an hour there isn't much time to start, develop and end a story which has too many threads running through it. As a rule it's best to concentrate on your basic situation and allow it to grow clearly until it is resolved. A sub-plot is a good idea as a relief from the main argument but it should be woven in carefully so that it doesn't gain the upper hand and muddle the intention. It follows from this that you won't want too many characters. In practice, we find that a cast list of up to 9 or 10, including main and subsidiary characters, is as much as you would require within the time. And, of course, you can use many less. Similarly, though radio can take you anywhere you like, it's a mistake to have too many different locations unless the story absolutely demands this. They all have to be explained in the dialogue, and there is a danger of confusing the listener who might be wondering where he is when he

should be concerned with what the characters are saying. The shaping of your story is important. It's a good plan to jot down a synopsis before setting to work on the play proper. This will give you an idea of how to space out the incidents you wish to emphasise, where you can place your climax, and how you can vary the appearances of your characters. You also have to give your play a convincing conclusion - often far from easy - but if the end is weak then your listener will feel let down and, after all, that's his last impression from the whole 30 minutes.

#### Technique

One has to face it: this can only be acquired with experience and stems basically from the author's ability to imagine accurately in his mind what his play will sound like when produced and to write it down in the form of a practical radio script. It might be helpful to mention one or two devices. The first, and most often used, is the fade. Fading into a scene is useful when you want to convey that the action has already begun. It can be economical in that it saves unnecessary explanation providing all is made clear in the ensuing dialogue. For example a scene between two people quarrelling might be more effective if we join them when they are already worked up rather than starting from scratch. The "fading in" material must not, of course, contain any important information until the scene is established. Not like this:

(FADE IN)

A

KOFI: Lisa, it's already midnight and you've been going on at me for hours. Why don't you shut up! We argue and argue and we get absolutely nowhere.

Better like this:

B.                            (FADE IN)  
KOFI:                    We've been arguing and arguing for hours, and we've  
                          got absolutely nowhere.    It's nearly midnight and still  
                          you keep going on at me.    Why don't you shut up, Lisa!

In 'A' the name of a character and the time are given at the start of the first line. In 'B' the dialogue is practically identical but there is enough material with which to fade up before these two vital pieces of information are given.

Fading out of one scene and into another can help you denote either the passing of time or a change in location, or both together, as in this example:

KOFI:                    Hurry up, Lisa, or we'll be late at the church.    Why,  
                          woman - aren't you ready yet?  
LISA:                    Er ... yes, I think so.    Oh!    I must make sure my lovely  
                          new hat is straight.    There.    Don't you think I'll look  
                          prettier than the bride?  
KOFI:                    Remember, it's not your wedding.    Now, come on!    We're  
                          going to be the last to get there, I know we are.    (FADE)  
EFFECTS:                (FADE IN: ORGAN PLAYING "HERE COMES THE BRIDE")  
KOFI:                    (whispering)    There, we've just made it.  
LISA:                    (louder)    Where do we go, Kofi?  
KOFI:                    Ssh!    Keep your voice down.    Here, quickly, into this  
                          pew.

In the extract above there is plenty of material on which to fade. The producer will probably start fading on the line "Now, come on!" and be out by the end of the speech. There would be

a short pause and since we know where we are going from the first scene (we call this "signposting") bringing in the organ indicates that we have got there. The producer might also add some other sound effects to underline that we are in church - the creak of a door before Kofi speaks, the squeak of a bench. And he will almost certainly change the acoustic to suit the atmosphere. But, as set out above, the script has quite clearly established all that is required. The fade in/fade out technique is basic to radio but too much of it, particularly at either end of a series of short scenes, can be boring. It is always possible to end one scene "full up" and fade in the next, or vice versa. For instance:

BEN: Njoroge has gone too far this time. I've given him his last warning to keep quiet. This time he's out. He's sacked.

(FADE IN)

NJOROGE: It wasn't my fault, boss, it wasn't my fault. They tricked me into telling them about the plan.

The lines ending the first scene above are strong and fading would weaken their impact. Fading in the next scene indicates time lapse and the repetition of "it wasn't my fault" gives enough material to fade up and establish that the offending Njoroge is trying to justify himself. Another device you can employ within a scene is to fade out and back to the same character. For instance:

HEADMASTER: First I would like to remind you of the many successes achieved by our pupils during the past year. We have had a record number of passes in both the Senior

National and the Ordinary National Examinations.

Out of the 12 candidates entered for .....

(FADE DOWN - PAUSE - FADE UP)

.... and so, with pride which I hope you will agree is justified, we can look back with satisfaction on one of the most successful years in this school's history.

The actual point at which the producer will fade will depend on the value of the material but this example shows how, when it is necessary to indicate a time lapse within a scene, you can dispense with unwanted dialogue.

Bearing in mind the desirability of limiting the number of locations or settings in the play a telephone conversation is useful when one character has to communicate with another in a different place. But be sparing with them. Too many can be tiresome and they should never last very long. The voice at the other end has to be "distorted" technically to get the right effect and the result will be monotonous if prolonged.

Perspective in sound - the relation of the characters to each other and to the listener in terms of space - is something the author must consider if the producer is to interpret his script successfully. Take a scene between a man sitting at a table and his wife washing up at the kitchen sink some distance away. At any one time you can have only one focal point and in this case it is the husband. The actor playing him is therefore placed nearer the microphone than the actress. Assuming that they are both static it would be a mistake to suddenly reverse their importance by letting the wife take over the bulk of the dialogue. Some way would have to be

found either to manoeuvre the husband towards the wife, taking the microphone with him as it were, or having her approach him. From scene to scene, and even within a scene, you will be changing your focal point constantly but it must be clear from the script that these changes can be managed naturally and convincingly. Again, we come back to the author being able to hear in his mind's ear what he wants to express on paper.

### The Script

It's a help if you type it but handwritten scripts are perfectly acceptable providing they are clear and legible.

Start with a list of the characters with a brief description of them if possible.

Number the pages consecutively throughout.

Please only use one side of the paper.

Have a reasonable margin between the names of the characters and their speeches.

Clearly differentiate between any technical directions for sound effects etc. and those parts of the script intended to be spoken.

For half an hour a script should have approximately 24 foolscap pages - or something like 4,000 words: it's better to send too much than too little because the producer must always have more material than he can use, since it is quite impossible to judge accurately the length of a play until it's performed in the studio. If you can suggest possible cuts by bracketing them in the script this is a great help.

Occasionally we broadcast a "double bill" of two plays within the half hour, so shorter scripts are also acceptable - 12 pages or so. This will only allow a fairly simple story, but if the idea is a good one, the characters interesting, and the material suited

to the length, then it can work very well.

Plays originally written for the stage almost invariably require a good deal of adaptation. In the first place they are usually too long - save in the case of one-act plays - and secondly their visual aspects must be recreated in terms of sound.

Although we are interested in looking through stage scripts as possible sources for "African Theatre" we prefer that authors should make the necessary adaptation themselves. But it would be a waste of time submitting any play which depended heavily on its visual appeal. There would be no point in transferring it to radio.

### Conclusion

In this brief guide a lot has been missed out. It doesn't pretend to be comprehensive and several points have not been examined as thoroughly as they deserve - for instance the need to "signpost" the action clearly as it develops: but this, we hope, has been implied sufficiently in some of the examples.

All it aims to do is set out some principles which might be useful to budding playwrights with little or no knowledge and experienced writers in other fields who may like to try their hand at a radio play.

Finally, one must concede that there is no set formula for the ideal radio play. Rules can be broken, new ones made - the proof of the pudding is in the eating, whatever the ingredients. But one thing can be said for certain: the best radio drama is that which stimulates the listener's imagination to such a degree that he will believe in the situations and the characters created by the author even though they are only words and sounds coming out of a radio set. And if the author has a good story, a sense of character, and thinks with his ears as he writes down his play the chances are that he will achieve this result.

If you would like to submit a play please send it to:

African Theatre,  
BBC African Service,  
Bush House,  
London, W.C.2.