Off Mike

RADIO WRITING BY THE NATION'S TOP RADIO WRITERS

Edited by

JEROME LAWRENCE

The men and women behind the most prolific typewriters in the world take down their hair and let us in on some tricks of the trade.

Goodman Ace
Gertrude Berg
True Boardman
Abram S. Burrows
Norman Corwin
Harry W. Flannery
Jerome Lawrence
Robert E. Lee
Ranald MacDougall
Nila Mack
Bill Morrow
Carlton E. Morse
Arch Oboler
Don Quinn
Sherwood Schwartz
Everett Tomlinson
Bob Welch
George Wells

$2.50

OFF MIKE

Radio Writing by the Nation's Top Radio Writers

Edited by Jerome Lawrence

This book lets the foremost radio writers of our time speak for themselves, and they have a wonderful time doing it. Their light-hearted, free-wheeling style covers a multitude of trade secrets.

The book starts off with a section on comedy. Sherwood Schwartz, BOB HOPE'S writer for four years, tells us "How to Write a Joke." Then Bill Morrow, who has "spent eight of his fifteen years in radio under JACK BENNY'S toupee," contributes a chapter called "Eight Years at the Mast, or The Wreck That Jack Built," which, despite its title, contains some serious and extremely valuable suggestions for continuity in comedy shows. Don Quinn's chapter follows: "Situation Comedy: *'Tis* Funny, McGEE," in which the dramatic comedy show is contrasted with the straight-gag type. Finally, "The Typewriter in the Back Room at DUFFY'S TAVERN," under the nimble fingers of Abram S. Burrows, discusses, among other things, writing comedy for guest stars.

A section on radio drama comes next, with a chapter by Norman Corwin (currently of COLUMBIA PRESENTS CORWIN) leading off. Then Arch Oboler, writer for LIGHTS OUT, TO THE PRESIDENT, THIS FREEDOM, and PLAYS FOR AMERICANS, presents some useful information in "A Dialogue Between You and Oboler." To conclude the section, True Boardman, of SILVER THEATRE fame, writes about "The Original Radio Drama: For Money!"

(Continued on back of jacket)

Distributed by Duell, Sloan & Pearce, Inc.

(Continued from front flap)

Everett Tomlinson, one of the Program Directors of CBS, covers the subject of staff writing and continuity in an article called "Coffee and Cakes *Every Week!*" which explains what a staff writer does for both large and small stations and the future promise that the position holds. George Wells, writer for radio's top commercial dramatic show, THE LUX RADIO THEATRE, does a chapter on radio adaptations called "Radio's Strangest Bird," which tells you how and how not to rewrite novels, stories and plays for the radio. Harry W. Flannery, the foreign correspondent and one of radio's top news men, gives us a study of radio news called "Analyzing Analysts." Then comes a section on the series show: "One Man's Radio Program," by Carlton E. Morse, writer of ONE MAN'S FAMILY and I LOVE A MYSTERY; "Daytime Radio: Yoo Hoo, Mrs. America!" by Gertrude Berg, who both writes and acts in THE GOLDBERGS; and "Through Darkest AFRA with Pun and Pencil," by Goodman Ace of THE EASY ACES.

Nila Mack, who is the creative force behind the most famous program for children, LET'S PRETEND, presents some interesting and sensible clues on "Writing for Children." A section on wartime programs follows, with Ranald McDougall (THE MAN BEHIND THE GUN), Jerome Lawrence (COLUMBIA WORKSHOP, THEY LIVE FOREVER, SCREEN GUILD THEATRE, THE ORSON WELLES SHOW, and the editor), and Bob Welch (producer-director of FRED ALLEN, KATE SMITH, EDDIE CANTOR, THE ALDRICH FAMILY, and JACK BENNY), who write on "Documentaries for Civilians," "Writing for Troops," and "G. I. Humor," respectively. And the book concludes with a chapter on writing for television by Robert E. Lee, author of TELEVISION: THE REVOLUTIONARY INDUSTRY.

OFF MIKE is both the last word on the subject of radio writing and so engagingly written by such famous people that even those who have no desire to try writing for radio will have a wonderful time with the book.

ESSENTIAL BOOKS

270 Madison Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

Distributed by DUELL, SLOAN & PEARCE, Inc.

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NEW YORK 270 MADISON AVE.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, INC., BINGHAMTON, N. Y.

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I. OFF MIKE

OFF MIKE

"OFF MIKE" is strictly a radio expression, which is found in a script in parentheses—like this:

CHARLES (*off mike*): I'm going now, Gwendolyn, never to return!

But most off mike phrases are never distinguishable at all. What you hear sounds remotely like "walla-walla-rhubarb," or as if somebody were throwing-up into a handkerchief.

It seems high time to say that the garbled voice in the background usually is the writer, either chortling gleefully—or strangling.

"Off Mike" has several connotations. The contributors to this book are the people who have been off mike seven days and nights a week, pounding the typewriters, making with the words—words by the millions. We're putting them *on* mike for a change. True, some of them (Gertrude Berg, Harry Flannery, Goodman Ace) are also performers. But what we're talking about here is their *off mike* conduct, the scandalous love-life between them and that verbose mistress, the typewriter.

"Off Mike" might also imply that what they're saying is strictly off-the-cuff, and that's true—at least for those writers who own any cuffs.

It's "Off Mike," too, because here we say much that no network would care to have said out loud. The microphone's been turned off. The writers have been turned on.

If you expect this to be a "how-to" book, stop right here. You'll certainly get a lot of helpful hints and learn a lot of short-cuts, but don't expect to breeze through this book and emerge a full-fledged radio writer, replete with a contract, a swimming pool, and stomach ulcers.

When I was working on staff at CBS a number of years ago, a stout lady came in one day to offer us, without charge, and out of the goodness of her heart, a fool-proof formula for writing. With her method, she said, we would never be stuck for ideas. We listened.

"Every time I search for an inspiration," she said, "I fill my bathtub three-quarters full of *tepid* water. I hop right in, raise one arm, then the other, then just *let go!* The inspiration just *flows.*"

Well, we told the good, helpful lady, that was all very fine. But it seems that most networks and advertising agencies don't supply bathtubs for their writers. And we can just picture something like this happening: the program director calls us in and tells us there's a special program that has to be researched, written, produced, and on the air in three hours. "Okay, Charlie," we say, "we'll be right back. We have to scoot home and take a bath!"

Unfortunately, radio writing isn't that simple. It takes a lot more than luke-warm baths. In the first place, you should be able to write—and it will save you a lot of grief if you write speedily.

You also need good buttock muscles and the undying determination to keep them pinned to mahogany.

And you ought to know what goes on in radio, in every part of radio. If you've chosen radio writing as your particular niche, you ought to know what goes on in radio writing. You should sit at the feet of the masters

and learn the tricks of the trade which they have learned the hard way, by trial and error, by sweat and indigestion, by pounding out scripts by the thousands. That's what this book is about. Pull up a chair.

When the publisher asked me to do a book on radio writing, I told him I wouldn't presume to. Radio's far too varied a field for a single writer to attempt to cover all its many phases. And so I suggested this symposium of radio writers, each representative of his spot in the radio picture. But, I said, these must be the men and women whose hands are grimy with radio writing, the active writers of the moment, the people who are keeping the listening public amused and informed, instead of the theorists who sit off and watch radio go by from a classroom or an ivory skyscraper.

Naturally, no book of this kind can include all the top radio writers. Your own favorites may not have written chapters. There are hundreds of excellent writers, far too many to ask them all to contribute. This, shall we say, is a cross-section of the field. Each of the writers in this book is an expert, a proven workman, successful to a high degree in one particular phase of radio.

Not one of these representative writers is of the so-called "genius" type. They are among the nicest, warmest, friendliest people in all the world. They are a tribe unto themselves, to be sure, but they are unaffected people, taking a job as a job. In short, these are the craftsmen.

Each has a perfectionist complex. Each wants every one of his radio shows to be the best of its kind, and this week's show to be better than last week's. They are hard workers, sincere in their desire to see radio grow and mature.

I feel this book is so important right now, because the strides forward that radio will take belong in the hands of its writers. Technically, we can span the world. At a flip of a switch, we can pick up New Guinea, Cairo, a ship at sea, or a plane in the stratosphere. The greatest voices of the entertainment world and the world's greatest music are now on the air. Production has reached a fine hair of perfection. Frequency Modulation will make every harmonic, every overtone of a violin string crystal clear. Television is closer than tomorrow. How much farther can we go in those directions? The wide road of progress that lies ahead will depend upon the writer, and upon the awareness of the radio industry that it is the written word that makes a radio program great or makes a radio program trash.

When I went to each of the writers included in this book, I said, "Take down your back-hair and talk to us. Nothing fancy. Just talk. Let us know what goes on behind that typewriter."

Their talk has poured in, and I think it's pretty wonderful talk. It will interest you if you're a beginner and want to know how some of radio's greats function. It will interest you if you're a writer and want a shot in the arm. It will interest you if you're a listener and just want to peek behind the scenes of one of the most fascinating industries in the world.

Okay, Norman, Arch, True, Bob, Nila, Sherwood, and all the rest of you. That's your cue. *Take over!*

II. RADIO COMEDY

SHERWOOD SCHWARTZ

SHERWOOD SCHWARTZ, one of the finest comedy writers in the business, was born in Passaic, New Jersey, of parents with a fine sense of humor, who immediately proceeded to prove same by putting together "Sherwood" and "Schwartz." At the age of eleven, after carefully studying a copy of *Esquire*, he moved from Passaic to New York City. Here he completed pre-medical school at New York University and then left for California for post-graduate work in biology and psychology at U.S.C. Naturally, with this background, he went to work at once as a radio writer for Bob Hope. He remained in this capacity for four years, or just about long enough to run completely out of insults for Crosby's horses.

HOW TO WRITE A JOKE

By Sherwood Schwartz

WRITING a joke is really quite a simple affair. All anyone needs is a pencil, a piece of paper, and a clever friend. Even a plain stick, some soft cement, and a moron would do. But let's not talk about that. My private life is my own.

Speaking generally, a most important prerequisite for writing a joke is absolute quiet. The rumbling of trucks, the rattling of windows, the squeaking of shoes, and even the whir of a yo-yo can be very distracting. This came to a climax in the sad case of one poor comedy writer who was annoyed by the beat of his own heart. It might be noted in passing that this same physiological phenomenon bothered a lot of other people too. At any rate, this unfortunate man finally went berserk searching for a sound-proof sport shirt.

But let's suppose the room is quiet. Being rational people we pause to face our task logically. We ask ourselves, "After all, what is a joke?" That's a very, very sensible question. So we try to disregard it. But if it must be answered, the answer is really quite simple. A joke is merely a couple of nouns, a few verbs, an adverb or two, several adjectives, and a funny face the comedian makes which is what really gets the laugh. Ah! Now we see the tremendous importance of the comedy writer. He has to fill in all those moments of silence between funny faces.

Now that our goal is in sight, we immediately review in our minds the topics which lend themselves to humorous treatment most easily. There are quite a few such topics, of course, but the one which seems to stand out in front of everything else is Lana Turner's sweater. Here, indeed, are a few yards of fuzz that have continued to tickle a great many fancies.

So we stop to consider Lana's sweater. This naturally leads to what's only natural. So if we're smart, we seek less aggravating fields. That's one mystery we can't unravel.

Topics for radio humor are practically endless. There are always a whole variety of timely references which make a happy joking ground for the comedy writer. These include personalities in the news, like Frank Sinatra, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, and Henry J. Kaiser; events in the news, like the shortage of Scotch and Kleenex; song titles of the day; various advertising slogans like "L.S.M.F.T." and other popular phrases like "basic seven"; a whole host of military expressions like "Sad Sack," "out on maneuvers," and "G.I."; and several hundred more reflections of everyday life, reflections which constantly change from day to day, as the events themselves change. Oh, yes. And thank God for Superman and Mr. Anthony.

In addition to these timely topics for radio humor, there are the many standard topics which form the basis for all humor, whether in vaudeville, legitimate show, night club, radio, or elsewhere: mothers-in-law, bathing suits, restaurants, clothing, prize-fighting, fishing, courtrooms, old maids, horse racing, automobiles, picnics, money, animals, school, drinking, beauty treatments. These are just a few of the long list known to all.

However, there is one group of topics which deserves special attention, because it leads to the type of joke which is so important to radio in particular. This is the character topic: thinness, stoutness, meekness, boldness, tallness, shortness, stinginess, sexiness, unsexiness, and so on through the "nesses." These character traits, after repetition, form the radio personality. These personalities are created by the character jokes and determine the kind of situation that can logically arise.

Following this to its conclusion, we find it is also the fundamental governing force for the entire plot of the comedy show. So jokes in radio take on a special significance. They must fit the established character of the person for whom they are written, and they must also fit the situation and the comedy plot as well. They are jokes that must be "in character" and "in situation."

So much for background. Now how about writing the joke? Well, there are two basic problems we must face before we sit back and wait for a laugh. The first of these is the problem of developing the joke thought, or "dreaming up" the funny idea. The second problem is much the easier to discuss and explain, for there are certain general rules about language and structure which can be applied. The first problem, however, is concerned with psychology, with the association of thoughts and the fundamentals of humor. This is so much a problem of the individual mind, so much a problem of singular creativeness, that generalities of any sort are extremely difficult. But there are some things we can say.

If this were chemistry, or mathematics, or some other exact science, the development of the joke thought could be very neatly subdivided. The joke would be composed

of A: straight lines, and B: punch lines.* But such precision, unfortunately, cannot be applied. In the "dreaming up" process, the straight lines and the punch lines are often interwoven indistinguishably. We might compare this with the slightly gentler art of fishing. Let us imagine the straight line is the bait, and the punch line is the fish we are trying to catch. To complete the analogy, our mind is a sort of rod and reel with which we cast our bait. Sometimes we drop the bait and bingo! a beautiful fish is dangling from the hook. On the other hand we can sit for hours without getting a nibble. Very often the bait has to be changed several times before we get a bite. In such cases it's good to take a look and make sure the rod and reel aren't beginning to warp. Once in a while there's a tug on the line as if you've got a whale, and after you reel it in, it turns out to be nothing but an old herring. Sometimes we pass up a small fish and take a chance that a bigger one will come along. Perhaps it's unfortunate that a Comedy Fish Commission can't make a law to enforce this—if they're under a mediocre titter, you have to throw 'em back. Only too often, after an audience has given a punch line a polite hand-over-the-mouth laugh, we feel like jumping up and yelling, "You should've seen the one that got away!"

Let's see how this fishing works out in practice. We start with the straight line. This can be almost any sentence which would normally fit into a given situation. If a father is looking at his son's report card, it might be, "Well, son, I see you got a good grade in

* This footnote is to inform the reader that "straight lines" are the expository, situation-setting, or unfunny lines, while the "punch lines" are last lines, the funny lines. It is also to give the author the satisfaction that there are, after all, two technical words in his business.

geography." If two men are discussing their respective girl friends, one might say to the other, "Did you take her out last night?" Or "Did you meet her father yet?" Or "I hear she's pretty fat."

Suppose we use that last one. It's long been favorite bait. Let's cast. We're looking for a punch line to describe how fat this girl is. Let's see. Is she fat as an elephant? That's not even a fish. That's an old rubber boot that's been lying there for a long time. Does she look like an elephant that lost its girdle? Let's not reel in on that one. How about her looking as if someone wrapped a skirt around Mount Baldy or Boulder Dam? Fish, yes. But pretty average fish. Maybe she looks like twins under one hat. We're casting into a different section of the stream now, comparing her to humans. But calling someone twins is not particularly new or clever, hat or no hat. Maybe she looks as if someone wrapped a skirt around the Ritz Brothers. We're back to wrapping skirts again, but this sounds like a funnier mental picture. But let's continue. Perhaps a reference to something more timely, like the women welders, or riveters, or WACS, or WAVES would be better. What ties up with one of those groups? How about the welding? Maybe she became a welder, and she's so fat, she doesn't need a welding outfit for the steel plates. She just sits down on the two ends and they're united forever. Maybe. That's certainly a newer kind of joke than the others. How about the WACS? They have some sort of slogan, haven't they? Yes: "Release a man for active duty." That's it. Say, about this fat girl. She could release seven men for active duty. I don't know about you, but I'm going to start reeling in. Let's take a look at our fish now. That girl is so fat, she joined the WACS

and released seven men for active duty. Maybe it's not as bizarre as some of our other thoughts, and perhaps it doesn't present as funny a picture as that idea about the welding, but it's timely, it's funny, and besides it serves as a subtle patriotic message.

Maybe you disagree with the final choice. Maybe none of your thoughts would have been even remotely like the above ideas for jokes. Maybe you will also disagree with the joke examples used in this chapter, which are purely the work of this writer. That's why this is so difficult to describe objectively. It depends on what you read in the paper. It depends on what you had for breakfast. It depends on a history lesson that you had in the seventh grade. If any comedy writer has ever gone that far.

Now, if we will look back to the fishing expedition above, we will notice a definite similarity in all our bait. The reason for this is that we were after a specific type of fish. We were fishing for exaggerations. This process of exaggeration is a favorite with comedy writers. The town was so small that— My brother is so thin that— That guy is so tight that— are all familiar phrases. Sometimes this phrase is camouflaged, but it is pretty easy to spot.

1ST: You should have seen the traffic coming home from that football game.
2ND: The traffic was really slow, huh?
1ST: Well, just to give you an idea, I had to leave my car twice to make payments.

Then there is a great portion of radio comedy that depends upon insult. The insults range from purely physical indignities to degrading remarks about clothes, position, mental condition, work, and almost anything

else. They compose a high percentage of the jokes on many comedy shows. They are especially effective with celebrities, since the average audience loves to see a big-shot taken down a bit.

SHE: Ah . . . Cary Grant.
HE: I don't see why you're always making such a fuss over Cary Grant. Cary Grant's a man, and I'm a man. We're both men, aren't we?
SHE: That's right. And a Cadillac and a Ford are both cars.

Another approach employed quite frequently is the use of the punch line to paint a funny or silly picture. Again, our bait is different and we are after another kind of fish, but the process is the same. The major object is the creation of this ridiculous picture in the minds of the audience by means of words.

1ST: I was over at the county fair yesterday, and I bought a cow.
2ND: A cow?
1ST: Yeah. You know what a cow is, don't you?
2ND: Sure. That's an animal that carries around a bowling ball with the holes inside out.

Plays on words have long been standard fare in radio comedy. Often referred to as "corny," they have nevertheless earned their share of laughter and probably more. In this classification the ordinary pun is at the lowest end, with the other types of plays on words not much higher on the humor scale.

1ST: You don't sound very bright to me. What's your I.Q.?
2ND: Huh?
1ST: I.Q. I.Q.
2ND: Thanks. I I.Q. too.

And a step or two above this we find a much more subtle type of play on words.

1ST: Tell me, how does it feel to be kissed by Madeleine Carroll?
2ND: Have you ever heard of a process called "Slow Baked"?
1ST: Yeah.
2ND: Well, I'm fast fried!

Whimsical humor forms still another part of radio comedy. Here the humor derives from incongruity, and there is almost always no concrete punch line. It merely follows a humorous impulse of the mind which often appears dissociated with what has gone before.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, may I leave you with this thought for the day. Whether you're rich, or whether you're poor . . . it's always good to have money.

Jokes that are wild and zany add their own particular flavor. These are often difficult jokes for an audience to understand, because the association between bait and fish, straight line and punch line, is sometimes quite difficult to follow. However, they, like whimsical jokes, add a fresh touch to a series of the more usual types of radio humor.

1ST: I'm a guard from the insane asylum down the road, and I'm looking for an escaped lunatic. Did he pass this way?
2ND: What does he look like?
1ST: He's very short, very thin, and he weighs three hundred and fifty pounds.
2ND: Short, thin, and weighs over three hundred pounds?
1ST: Well, don't act so surprised. I told you he was crazy.

These are some of the most widely used forms of jokes. Naturally, there are many more. But the most important thing to remember in this connection is that most jokes are neither one nor another of these forms. They are combinations which contain elements of two, three and sometimes more of them. It is this great variety of possible combinations which forms the tremendous diversity of jokes.

HE: Are you the society lady I've been expecting?
SHE: Yes, of course. I'm the very cream of society. I'll have you know I'm a Vanderbilt.
HE: You're a Vanderbilt?
SHE: Certainly. Just look at me.
HE: Sister, Vander never built nothin' like that!

This is certainly not a highly complex joke. Yet it contains at least three of the forms which we have discussed. It is a play on words. It is certainly an insult. And it also forms a mental picture of some sort of unshapely figure.

Well, we have a glimpse of the first major problem in writing a joke, the various developments of the funny idea. Now let's consider the second problem, wording that idea to its best advantage.

There is one all-important point to remember. It is something we have mentioned previously. That is, the joke must be kept in character. Besides putting a definite limit on the type of joke a certain comedian can tell most successfully, this also means that the joke must be worded in a certain way to suit style and radio personality. Thus, the flip manner of Bob Hope, the dry and multisyllabic wit of Fred Allen, the pushed-about Jack Benny, the boastful yet friendly naïveté of Fibber McGee, the Malapropic attempts at speech of Ed (Archie) Gardner, and the double-jointed conversations of Edgar Bergen all require specific treatment of joke ideas.

However, regardless of the distinct needs of the particular comedian, the language should be radio language. That is, it should be written for reading aloud. Word or letter combinations difficult to pronounce should be avoided. Tongue twisters which result in

stumbling not only ruin the joke itself but sometimes several jokes which follow. Momentary "fluffs" of this kind can hurt any type of radio script, but probably none suffers from this more damagingly than comedy. For this reason, many writers like to read their material aloud to make certain the jokes won't suffer in the transfer of words from the printed page to the air waves.

But enough about generalities. Will our joke be a two-line joke? Or will it stretch half-way down the page? How can we tell how many straight lines are necessary? How can we decide how many people in the cast should take part in those lines? The answers to all these questions are based on one principle. The least contrived way, the most natural way, is the best way. If the idea involved is fairly complex, or if it needs establishing by repetition or other means, there will be more lines necessary than if the idea is a simple one. There should never be a sacrifice of words at the expense of clarity. On the other hand, superfluous talk will very often weaken a joke.

HE: How did you like that Christmas gift I sent you?
SHE: That was some present. Three peppermints.
HE: It wasn't my fault. I was going to give you a beautiful wrist-watch.
SHE: Well, why did you give me those peppermints instead?
HE: I couldn't get the iron claw to drop in the right place.

Suppose we try to condense this:

SHE: What's the idea of sending me three peppermints for Christmas? You said you were going to give me a wrist-watch.
HE: I couldn't get the iron claw to drop in the right place.

Here we have chopped away necessary transitions, and instead of allowing the audience to follow the

thought by careful construction, we have tried to jam a funny answer down their throats. In the case of needed repetition this same rule holds true.

HE: Tell me, how do you like the South?
SHE: Oh, I've been having a lovely time here. I met the nicest man yesterday. He took me to dinner, and he was a typical southern gentleman and even while we were dancing he was a typical southern gentleman. Then he took me home in a cab.
HE: And what happened?
SHE: He got a bit northern.

In briefer form this might be told:

SHE: You know, I just love the South. I met a typical southern gentleman and he took me home in a cab.
HE: What happened?
SHE: He got a bit northern.

Here the joke has been weakened by destroying the mood created by repetition. The effect of surprise was also lessened by making this joke too short. Now let's see how this works the other way. Let's take a very simple joke:

1ST: I hate to say this, but you're one step below an idiot.
2ND: Well, don't trip on your way down.

Suppose we enlarge this and make it read:

1ST: I hate to say this, but you're one step below an idiot.
2ND: Me? Did you say I was one step below an idiot?
1ST: Yes, that's what I said, and you heard me.
2ND: Well, don't trip on your way down.

We have merely succeeded in cluttering up the joke with useless words, and making quite an issue of a very direct thought. In addition, we have placed a completely pointless sentence between the key matter of the straight line and the punch line. This prevents the audience from following the thought.

But whether the joke is written in two lines, four lines, or a full page, there should be only one joke idea established. The attention of the audience must remain sharply focused on one thought, and for this reason all confusing elements should be eliminated. Here is an example of the incorrect use of words.

1ST: I went for a ride in one of those green and brown three-and-a-half-ton tanks.
2ND: Really? Are they fast?
1ST: Fast? Listen, those brown and green three-and-a-half-ton tanks have four speeds forward. First, second, high, and "You'll be sorry."

Instead of the image-producing words, "brown and green" and "three-and-a-half-ton," neutral words should have been used. Brown and green and three-and-a-half-ton are so specific they immediately conjure up an image in the minds of the audience. This mental picture has nothing whatsoever to do with the joke idea and merely distracts their attention from the main point, which is neither the color nor the weight, but the speed of the tank. With fewer descriptive words, the joke is much stronger.

1ST: I went for a ride in one of our big new tanks.
2ND: Really? Are they fast?
1ST: Fast? Listen, those babies have four speeds forward. First, second, high, and "You'll be sorry."

For this same reason, audience attention, the use of simple English is invariably best. Words people are familiar with don't worry them. If a strange word is used it takes their minds away from the thought at hand, and they very often lose the thread they must follow in order to understand the joke. If the audience is comfortable with the language, their only concern is

following the joke, and this is as it should be. Naturally, technical terminology of any sort is inadvisable unless it is for a special audience which is sure to understand.

Simple language does not mean ordinary or dull language. On the contrary, colorful words will often improve a joke. A joke about ice cream can often be improved by using the words "pistachio" or "tutti-frutti" instead of "vanilla." In this same connection, specific names instead of generalities are of good service. Instead of the term "an aircraft factory," the specific "Lockheed" or "Douglas" generally adds strength. The same is true for "Evening in Paris" or "Chanel No. 5" instead of "a perfume."

HE: I was pretty good out there on the dance floor. Did you see me doing the rumba?
SHE: Yes.
HE: Tell me, why was everyone staring at me?
SHE: Well, you see, the rumba is a special dance all by itself. You can't just do the minuet and add a bump.

Instead of saying "another dance," we've used the specific "minuet." And instead of other possible descriptions for the action in doing the rumba we've used a "bump." This is hardly accurate, but it's a picturesque and funny-sounding word. The joke has been measurably strengthened by the use of both these terms.

Another point to remember is that there are usually two key words or phrases in a joke. There is a key word in the straight lines, and there is a key word in the punch line. These two must be closely associated in the minds of the audience in order that they "get" the joke. Therefore, the sentences should be phrased so that the key words are as close together as possible. There is one important limiting factor. That is, that the key word in

the punch line must be placed as near the end of the line as can be managed. The reason for this is that the joke is usually over as soon as this word is spoken. If it were in the middle or beginning of the punch line, some of the audience would laugh too soon and the remainder of the sentence would be covered up.

HE: Why are you always raving about Charles Boyer?
SHE: Ah, when I kiss Charles Boyer, it's wonderful. That kiss has the kick of a mule in it.
HE: What about me?
SHE: Well, that's like kissing a jackass, too.

Here the two key words are "mule" and "jackass." It is the association of these two words which is the basis for the joke. "Mule" is the key word of the straight line. And "jackass" is next to the last word in the punch line, for reasons which we have noted above. Compare this with:

HE: Why are you always raving about Charles Boyer?
SHE: Ah, his kiss has the kick of a mule in it. Kissing Charles Boyer is something wonderful.
HE: What about me?
SHE: Well, it's like kissing a jackass to kiss you, too!

Well, there we have some of the difficulties involved in writing a joke. Not all, by any means, but some of the major points of joke formulation and construction that face the writer. I hope that some of you will follow a few of these suggestions in writing your first joke. Then, when you get up in a crowded room to recite your masterpiece to your friends—when you confidently yell out the punch line, and then pause—and when all is silent and not the slightest snicker greets your ear, I want you to remember one thing. The title of this chapter is "How to Write a Joke," not "How to Write a Funny Joke."

BILL MORROW

BILL MORROW spent eight of his fifteen years in radio under Jack Benny's toupée. From this marathon of writing one of the nation's most riotous radio shows, Bill has accumulated four dollars and a large box of dandruff. Born in Sandwich, Illinois (as the crow flies, if the crow is sober, Sandwich is about ninety miles from Waukegan, that national shrine to Jack Benny), Bill Morrow at thirty-six is acclaimed one of the nation's funniest men-behind-the-typewriter.

EIGHT YEARS BEFORE THE MAST
or
THE WRECK THAT JACK BUILT

By Bill Morrow

EIGHT years ago I had hair, rosy cheeks, and the tendency to put one leg in front of the other when I walked. Then I went to work for Jack Benny, and look at me now. (Please send ten cents for photo. After all, how much can you make out of one chapter in a book?)

Anyhow, those of you who are interested in comedy writing, tune in to Fred Allen's program. If you just want to waste time, stay right here.

The needs of the radio comedy writer are motive, inspiration, and a typewriter. If the writer has ability, he should insert paper into the typewriter. Come to think of it, ability or not, put paper in the machine and hammer away. It has always worked for me.

Contrary to conditions existing a few years ago, in these enlightened times the radio writer has achieved *importance*. The comedian plies him with champagne and caviar, gypsy music and dancing girls, costly jewels and king's ransoms. Not so in the Dark Ages of a few years ago when the comedy writer was regarded as a serf—a slave that was locked in a hotel room to pound out enormous quantities of jokes at least twelve hours a day. The writer's meals were either thrown over the transom or slipped under the door, depending on the

calibre of his work. This treatment of the writer was a throwback to the days of the old court jester. The court jesters were idiots. Well, we still may be idiots but our agents aren't. Anyhow, we're getting paid now. So much for *motive*.

Now comes *inspiration*. Tempted as I am to make inspiration sound like something born from a writer's genius, I must admit that it comes from the characters. For bright comedy the writer must have bright and human characters. The writer must know his characters well. He must develop them carefully. He must also guard them with his life—lest they become distorted and blurred by lines and situations that do not fit them. Make this a rule: "No matter how funny the line, if it doesn't fit, forget it!" Beware also of suggestions from the advertising agency, the sponsor, relatives, and even the characters themselves. If the suggestions are good, incorporate them. If they tend to undermine the characters, gather your comical chicks under your wing like a mother hen. Stand firm and peck away fiercely at your adversaries. Gad, this is a serious business!

We have now arrived at the typewriter. What to write for these coddled characters? For this, I shall set down a few examples of things that Eddie Beloin and I did on the Jack Benny Program over a number of years, and how they happened.

To begin with, the Benny show had continuity. We would hit on something and if it played we would continue it and let the story carry the burden of the work. Bob Hope once described the "continuity" of our show. Said Robert: "They have continuity. That means, let's go to Palm Springs and to hell with the jokes." And to Palm Springs we went, many times. And to Catalina and

to Mexico and to the mountains and to Yosemite and to here and there. If we got some jokes out of a trip, that was gravy. But we always had a good time.

We never set out for Palm Springs or any place with a definite idea of what we were going to write. We put down no set of ideas to cramp us. We went places, enjoyed ourselves, and *incidentally* wrote something about it. Our good times were reflected in our shows. Our audience, in fancy, traveled with us and had good times with us. We did not plan our continuity either. For instance, several years ago we arrived in Yosemite from Oakland, California, where we had done a show for the March of Dimes. Immediately we donned ski clothes and started to dash for the great outdoors. Brother Benny, contrary to his usual carefree self and apparently sobered by this wonder of nature, suggested that we lay out some sort of show for the following Sunday before we became lost in the snowdrifts. He seemed to think that we couldn't get very much out of this locale: perhaps one feature spot on skiing, and that's all. Well, we all went out and forgot about the show. That night we played games in the hotel lobby. The next day about noon we started to write. Instead of just one feature spot on skiing, here is what we got:

We opened with the gang riding down an Oakland street in Jack's Maxwell. (Just a comedy Ford record from the NBC sound library, but what a prop!) The record pulled up at a sporting goods store in Oakland and came to an angry stop—it was very early in the morning. Then followed a few pages of shopping for winter sports equipment and clothing. Apparently the clerk thought Jack was getting ready to shove off for the South Pole, because as a lady interrupted and asked

if he was busy, the clerk replied: "Yes, I'm waiting on Admiral Byrd." From the store they went to the open road and when Jack reluctantly asked what the gas gauge said, Rochester rasped: "It's right between EMPTY and POSITIVELY." As evening approached they pulled into an auto court and the lady in charge informed Jack that cabins were three dollars a night. He pointed out that her sign said seventy-five cents a night. "Yup," was her rejoinder, "that stops 'em every time!" So, despite the fact that all were weary and tired, Jack decided to drive on—as a matter of principle. Whenever a stop was made for everybody to get a chance to stretch, Dennis Day would invariably be the last one back. He would pop out from behind a convenient tree and make a mad dash for the car. This is a good example of a *running* gag.

The next week we opened still driving along the highway to Yosemite. The antiquated Maxwell having no radio, Rochester was made to sing. A stop was made at a roadside restaurant, and when Jack informed the waitress who he was, she exclaimed: "Gosh, would you mind autographing this piece of Ry-Crisp for me?" Back on the road Jack took a turn at driving and was stopped by a policeman for holding up traffic. Jack, the opportunist, pleaded that the passengers were his family and after much scrimping and saving he was taking them on vacation to Yosemite. The officer, being a family man, let him go. As Jack pulled away, Rochester piped up with: "Can I drive now, Daddy?" Finally they arrived at the gate to Yosemite only to find the park closed for the night. The Ranger said there was an auto court just twenty miles back. Jack groaned: "I *know,* we stayed there last night." Benny announced they'd have

to sleep in the Maxwell, and, to make the ending happy, it started to rain.

The week following, it was still raining and they were still trying to get to sleep. Came the dawn, Jack blew a bugle and, like a scout-master, awakened his little troupe. Arriving at the hotel in Yosemite, he donned his heavy sweater with the words "Waukegan Ski and Knitting Club" on it, explaining, "On bad days we had to stay inside." After much stalling on Benny-the-athlete's part, he was forced to make a ski jump which resulted in his crashing through the ski-house and straining a ligament in his leg.

So, after three weeks, we finally reached the comedy spot, which we thought at the start was the only one we had. But don't go away—that's not all. The next week, according to the script, we were still in Yosemite, with Jack convalescing from the accident, Rochester at his bedside reading to him, and the whole gang coming in to visit. A slightly balmy doctor came in to look Jack over, while his nurse was clomping around the room on skis. This happened to be February 14th, Jack's birthday, and instead of doing a regular studio birthday celebration, we incorporated this into the Yosemite continuity.

There you are, kiddies, instead of one seven-minute comedy spot, there are four complete shows—with laughs. This might sound like stretching a good thing too far, but the programs turned out okay.

This perhaps proves that it is unwise to arrive at conclusions and make comedy a problem. Start writing and see what happens.

The Buck Benny series was another happy accident. It was an idea that Professor Beloin and I dashed off

one summer, a sort of reserve sketch that no one seemed to go wild about when we presented it on a dull week. (The week was all right, but we were dull. So we opened the drawer.) In desperation, we tried a small part of it, and the thing ran for sixteen consecutive weeks. Long after it was dead for radio, we made the picture, *Buck Benny Rides Again,* out of it.

That's not all. We had the Quiz Kids booked for one show and they stayed for three. We dragged in a polar bear for a quick routine, and, as far as I know, he's still nipping at Rochester's derrière. The feud with Fred Allen is still going, and none of us even heard the original insult on the Allen show. In all these running routines, remember one thing: don't let them run away with *you.* Milk them, but don't kill the cow.

Now don't get the idea that all was serene during these palmy days. There were plenty of storms. We had a producer on our show named Bob Welch, who was still timing the Eddie Cantor program, on which he hadn't worked for two years. (Seriously, I really love that boy. A producer with Bobby's comedy flair is a great asset, which he sat on all week.)

Here's another friendly tip. Try not to think of radio as Marconi's monster who gobbles up more words than you can possibly ever write. Relax. You don't have to write them all. And don't get the idea that the first draft of your script has to be a gem. It doesn't have to be funny or even make sense. Getting that original framework down is important, though. Just regard it as a big blob of modeling clay to be slapped around and molded into the finished product.

Another tip on taking terror out of comedy, and restraining yourself from using that necktie the comedian

gave you for Christmas as a hangman's knot, is to get a collaborator, somebody compatible you can work with. Two persons writing together can give each other friendly reactions to lines and can offer mental hypodermics to each other if the real stuff is not available. Also, if one of the team is bogged down, the other can carry the ball. Finding the *right* collaborator is difficult but very important. Unfortunately, writers don't mate as easily and produce offspring in such quantity as our furry friends, the Belgian hares.

In closing, I should like to say that on many occasions I wake up in the morning with an idea. So if you want to write comedy programs, my advice to you is simple: always wake up in the morning.

DON QUINN

DON QUINN has written *Fibber McGee and Molly* for ten years, ever since it started. For the last three years he has sat on the most coveted throne in American radio—the top Crossley spot. Born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he served in the United States Navy in World War I. (Fibber, who was in it too, calls it the "Big" War.) He was a commercial cartoonist in Chicago until 1930, went broke, went to visit Jim and Marian Jordan, turned them into Fibber McGee and Molly, and went to work. This year, *Variety* gave Don a special citation for his outstanding contribution to radio. Quinn and family live in Encino, over the hill from Hollywood, and he spends his summers in his orange grove contemplating his navels.

SITUATION COMEDY: 'TIS FUNNY, McGEE!

By Don Quinn

EXPERTIZING for a group of specialists in any field holds dangers akin to those attendant upon going over Niagara Falls in a Dixie Cup. But if the sound man will kindly produce an effect of creaking vertebrae, I will stick my neck out for a few more or less astute observations.

Situation comedy is vulnerable to as many definitions as the word "corny." No purist I, so let's say for the purposes of this thesis that situation comedy in radio is an allegedly humorous period of time devoted to the development of some simple basic plot. Let us also agree that the minute any reference is made to the studio, or the orchestra, or picking up the option, or "Aren't we having fun on the radio tonight!" it is that much less qualified for the situation-comedy category.

It would be an Irishism to state that a successful situation comedy program must have a large and ever-lovin' following, but it is true. Many radio programs have tremendous audiences, week after week. But they are audiences who would feel no slightest pang of regret, experience no sense of personal loss, if said program were never broadcast again. Conversely, the shows which live and build over the years are those for which the listener feels an abiding love and friendship. If you are a star on one of these happy productions, you are,

by acclamation, a paid-up life member in good standing of millions of American families.

They will stay home from bridge parties and movies to tune you in. They will agonize over your misfortunes and gloat over your triumphs. And, what is a far more important thing, they'll buy your sponsor's product whether they need it or not. You'd better mind your P's and Q's, too, because you're in their homes on sufferance, though you may stay for years and years if you remain nice people. It is, in this writer's opinion, a burning shame that the sharpest wits of our time (to name one name, Fred Allen, the comedian's comedian and gag-writer's Mahatma) are not using the medium of situation comedy as a base from which to fire their barbs at the fools and fallacies of the time. Should Mr. A. ever decide to drop his variety-cum-guest-cum-commentary formula in favor of building himself a radio character, I venture to predict there would be some fast shuffling among the highest-ranking Crossley holders. This gratuitous suggestion is made in the belief that an idea, a gag, a message or a theme gets a warmer reception when delivered by an established fictional character than by a comedian working as a mere comedian. May God forgive me for the "mere"!

Over a period of approximately a decade with one situation-comedy program, certain tenets have emerged which have assumed the proportions of commandments to this writer. They are few and they are clear and they boil down, for the most part, to the one double-barreled basic rule: KEEP IT CLEAN AND KEEP IT FRIENDLY!

To achieve the aforementioned affection of the listening public, it must be felt that the broadcasting

group likes its audience, likes itself, and likes what it's doing. Animosity is a detectable quality over the air, and irritation is a communicable disease. The program which has established friendly relations within itself, with its advertising agency and its sponsor, has a running start over the show which must be revised at the last minute to give the star all the laughs, or which has just had a wire from the advertising agency to "take out the thunder effect—it isn't funny," or which is constantly threatened with intra-cast bloodletting.

This cardinal rule, to keep everything pleasant, applies equally to the theme and development of the script and to the people reading it. Should there be a routine of insults, everyone involved must have an even break and the vilified have an opportunity to retaliate. Even then the attack must carry an undertone of "We're just kidding, folks." Any line or any attitude which has a tendency to make the listener wince or cringe is bad and should be given the coup de scissors. The most successful situation-comedy shows are those which have the least trouble with the network censors (who understandably prefer to be called Continuity Acceptance Editors).

Another great advantage the situation-comedy program has over the straight-gag type of performance is that a joke of medium laugh content (which includes most of them when tied into a situation) will ring up many more appreciative decibels than the same joke sold without context. This fact should give the fast-working comics pause. It's a great relief to turn to the slow-motion acrobats after holding your breath and straining your nerves at the flashes on the high trapeze. Entertainment should relax and not exhaust, and if

you'd care for a hair of the dogma that bit me, come over some time.

When Red Skelton says, "I dood it!", or Fibber leaps to avoid the hall closet avalanche, or Henry Aldrich grates, "Coming, Mother!", they are utilizing one of situation comedy's most precious chattels—the recognition device. This repetitive phrase or piece of business can be a priceless asset when used with discretion. It can also be ground glass in the chutney if allowed to become hackneyed, or if too many changes are rung on it. The recognition device can be used to end a bit, point up a spot, punctuate a routine, or serve any number of sly purposes, because it is a guaranteed laugh-getter. The more ingeniously the device is worked into the script, the stronger it grows and the longer it will last. On the other hand, should it be used carelessly and without sufficient excuse, it can cause a breach in the dyke, through which the sponsor may—and probably will—point an accusing finger. To point up the aforesaid statements by means of an example with which I am familiar, Molly McGee exclaims " 'Tain't funny, McGee!" at surprisingly rare intervals, and the device has not lost its potency in seven years. But do you remember, "Vas you dere, Sharley?"

If I seem to be pinning blue ribbons all over the bulging torso of situation comedy, it is not only because it is the one small corner of a large field with which I am familiar, but because I am convinced of its many advantages over any other type of comedy radio program. Take the commercials.

Will anyone argue the fact that an advertising message which has been adroitly worked into the script is many times as effective as a formalized, and-now-a-word-

from-our-sponsor approach? I don't think so. The gag commercial is an integral part of the "keep it friendly" blueprint. The audience feels that the sponsor has so much faith in the quality of his product that it will survive any amount of kidding. The humorous introduction is disarming, and the announcer, or whoever delivers the message, is a pleasant acquaintance rather than a stranger voicing unctuous fears over the state of your health or household. The comedy commercial, however, like the recognition device, must be approached with respect. No matter how much fun it might be, no sponsored product must be perverted to fantastic uses. Whatever is being sold must never, never be held up to ridicule. The circumstances under which the subject is introduced, the person who introduces it, everything surrounding it may be made the butt of devastating wit if available, but the product—ahhh, the product! It's our bread and butter, kids; let's keep it right side up.

Somewhere above, avoidance of tangles with the Continuity Acceptance Department was advocated. This is a matter of self-preservation as much as it is of diplomacy and nicer working conditions. Like Gilbert and Sullivan's cop, the censor's lot is not a happy one and should not be complicated by the necessity of telling you or me to "please delete the bit about the dog and the fellow named George Twelvetrees," or "cut the line about the man going blind." The only reasonable censorship, it has been said, is self-censorship, and any radio show with a rating of .01 or more will have enough trouble with pressure groups and self-appointed guardians of public morals without begging for more with offensive material.

Should the time ever come when the Purple Heart

is issued to radio script-writers deeply wounded in the line of duty, this correspondent will be bemedaled like Unser Hermann Goering. I have been scarified by the American Medical Association for daring to suggest that there is such a thing as a quack doctor, and flayed by the American Bar Association for assuming that some lawyers were shysters. Cautious as I have learned to be, I have been the recipient of poison pen notes from professional Irishmen, professional Southerners (never say "Civil War": say "The War Between the States"), professional religionists of several denominations, racial protestants, including the Scandinavian, and dozens of other highly vocal busybodies. All this in spite of a determined effort to be fair, neutral and inoffensive in all things.

Sponsors can hardly be blamed for taking even crank letters seriously, as they have tremendous investments at stake; and no one, to my knowledge, has ever had the foolhardiness to test the statement of every such letter writer. The statement is usually to the effect that he (the writer or his group) controls the buying habits of umteen million people and never again will they purchase a drop, a stitch, a can, or a box of the sponsor's product, so help them! I personally think most of them are crackpots who couldn't control the buying habits of a destitute Kaffir, but I haven't got a million dollars invested in a radio show.

Of recent years, the volume of nasty epistles has dwindled almost to negligibility, but only at the cost of eternal vigilance. Every word of every line in every script must be scanned for possible offensiveness to groups, races, religions, and parties. And it's worth the effort because all such care is exercised in the direction

of good will, the priceless ingredient of situation comedy shows—or any other kind. Keep it friendly and it will keep you, I always say, and if anyone present is considering the formation of a new radio show I'd like to offer the following suggestion.

Get your stars, writers, stooges, production men, sound engineers, and agency executives together in a large room. Then ask, in a loud, clear voice, *"Is there a doctrine in the house?"*

ABRAM S. BURROWS

ABRAM S. BURROWS is chief writer of *Duffy's Tavern.* He's been putting Malapropisms into Archie's mouth ever since that bright day when Archie was born on the CBS sustainer, *This Is New York. Forecast* was Archie's weaning, and finally he grew up and became fully mature with his own long pair of sponsors. Abe's other radio credits include the *Rudy Vallee–John Barrymore Show,* the *Texaco Star Theatre,* and much work for Colonel Stoopnagel. His work on *Duffy's* has placed him high in the ranks of comedy writers. At parties he sits at a piano and rattles off original zany songs on request, the most famous of which is "I'm in Love with the Girl with the Three Blue Eyes."

THE TYPEWRITER IN THE BACK ROOM AT DUFFY'S TAVERN

By Abram S. Burrows

LEAVE us face it, boys. When Ed Gardner sees this chapter, the first thing he's going to say is, "When the hell did Burrows get time to do it?" Because when you write a comedy program, you're chained to your typewriter. Occasionally, when you knock out a good script, the boss gives you another link for the chain. A successful comedy writer is one who can go to the bathroom without having the boss unlock him. But before I start taking bows for terrific industry and stick-to-it-iveness, to say nothing of comedy brilliance, leave *me* face something. I work for a character who not only is a character but who knows plenty about comedy writing. So take a rule. A guy is only as smart as the comic he works for.

I know there is a lot of loose talk in this book about radio's occupational hazard, the mighty ulcer. But nobody has been thoughtful enough to tell you how to get one of your own. Very well. You can join us on a trip that will end twenty mimeographed pages from now. You will be required to bring along as basic equipment a package of Tums, some benzedrine, and lots of coffee. And incidentally, if en route you should think of any jokes, for Pete's sake, speak up!

The first thing that happens is a little guy calls you up and says: "Fred Allen is going to be your guest next

Tuesday." The little guy who tells you this is now through for the week. He doesn't have to do another thing until the following week when he calls you up and says: "Your guest next week will be Cary Grant." (It is not too late to stop reading this chapter right here and go get *his* job. He probably never heard of Tums.)

However, there we are. We have Fred Allen as a guest. *Duffy's Tavern,* let us remind you, is a story show. That is, we get one basic plot, and stick to it all the way through. Most comedy shows start off with either a monologue by the comic or a scene between the comic and his cast. This is followed by an interview with the guest star, which leads into a third spot, which is a sketch or afterpiece, with the entire cast taking part. But on *Duffy's Tavern* we go on plot from the gun, generally observing the rules which apply to sound farce construction. That is, we plunge Archie into a jam immediately, get him in a little deeper by the time we reach the second spot, and try to get him out before the show goes off the air.

So we call a conference to get a story-line for Fred Allen's appearance. We look under the rugs. No story-line. We look out the windows. No story-line. We go out to lunch. No story-line. But finally somebody remembers that St. Patrick's Day is coming, and on St. Patrick's Day, Duffy, the unseen proprietor of the Tavern, always holds what he calls his "Spring Semi-Annual St. Patrick's Day Musicale and Pig Roast." So we say, why not let Archie try to hire Fred Allen as the M.C. for the Pig Roast? Then Duffy won't want Fred, and Fred will have to audition for him. This will give us a splendid opportunity to louse up Allen and have a lot of fun while Duffy is insulting him.

Okay. We have our premise, our springboard, our basic situation. We then lay out a three-page synopsis describing what everybody does and when: Archie, Eddie Green, Finnegan, Miss Duffy. We also decide where to place the commercials (without these, it's futile work), and the musical numbers.

Leave us pause again for a maxim or two. The average comedy show, after you deduct commercials, opening, closing, musical numbers, and musical transitions, contains a grand total of eighteen to twenty minutes of dialogue. Therefore, if you want laughs, you had better keep that plot simple and uncomplicated. Build it so that there is room for plenty of sock comedy bits. You have to know what your comic's strong points are, and in your plot include lots of opportunities for him to parade these strong points before the microphone. For instance, Archie is wonderful when he's lying about his background, literary, social, athletic, or musical, so in our plots we always try to include something in this vein. He's a great comic lover. He's a great one at Malapropisms. (As he once said to Carole Landis: "You are a lovely pale gossamer, who should be placed on a pedestrian and worshipped.")

Well, sir, we're all set now. We have a premise: a nicely typed story-line. Now all we need is a script-full of jokes. We have to tell our story and make sure we don't go more than three lines without a belly-laugh. The first question that comes up immediately is: "Don't you have a joke file?" The only answer I can give to this is, I find it easier without one. The drawbacks of joke files are many. First, while you're trying to find a joke that will fit your particular situation and trying to make it fit your dialogue, you could be thinking up half a

dozen original gags which flow right out of your dialogue and make your script sound smoother. Another serious drawback is the fact that many comedy writers with natural comedy minds start relying on files as a sort of mental crutch and eventually injure their natural comedy sense. Besides, with priorities, where are you going to get a file anyway?

Okay, forgetting files, the next question is: "How do you set about getting jokes?" Well, if you want to be a comedy writer, no doubt you or your friends or your wife class you as a wit of the first water. No doubt your wife, sitting home with you of a Sunday night listening to the Jack Benny show, has said, "Honey, you say much funnier things than that all the time! Like when I bought that hat, and you said it looked just like a victory garden." Well, sir, in every joke the straight line is the hat, and the punch line is your own classic remark about the victory garden. When you're sitting alone writing jokes, you have to keep throwing straight lines at yourself. Keep throwing them until one of them lights a spark. (However, that spark must flame a lot brighter than that victory garden crack, or you'll never get a job on the Jack Benny show.) For instance, when Archie is talking to Eddie Green about being in love with a girl, he says: "Eddie, I'm in love again." Remember when you were a kid and your brother told you he was in love, you always had a wisecrack? Well, we have a wisecrack, too. Eddie Green says to Archie: "So you're in love again. Boy, that love bug must use up all his red points on you!" This joke was actually constructed by someone throwing the straight line ("Eddie, I'm in love again") over and over until a witty answer came up. If you can't think of a funny answer, maybe there's

something wrong with the straight line. Keep changing that, until something bubbles. What you do learn after years in the business is how to throw pregnant straight lines. (I use the word "pregnant" advisedly, because the pains are not unlike childbirth.)

So we play this game of put and take until we're cross-eyed, and finally we've assembled a bunch of jokes which we've put together, polished, and rewritten. Then we have a preview of the program with an audience present to find out what we've got. Those people out there don't know it, but they're guinea pigs; in this case, however, the guinea pigs are dissecting *us*. After the preview, Ed Gardner and I sit down to massacre and manicure the script. We rewrite, cut out, chew up, rephrase, shorten, lengthen, and sometimes throw the whole thing out and start from scratch. On the next day, which is the day of the show, there is a dress rehearsal, after which there is a shorter version of the above horror bill. But finally it's show time, and you have to go on with what you've got. You are rewarded when the audience laughs, and you go home and sleep contentedly because you have done your job well and have earned the right to get up the next morning and pick up the phone and have the little guy tell you: "Abe, next week your guest is going to be Hedda Hopper."

We've made writing a comedy show sound pretty horrible, but it's really not. It's a stimulating, exciting form of writing, which, when you get the knack of it, comes fairly easily. Besides, for those of you who are crass materialists (and that includes me), it pays well.

Uh-huh, you're interested. Well, how do you crack the charmed circle? How do you get a job on one of the big comedy shows? Well, you wouldn't ask for a job

as a plumber's helper without knowing how to fix a sink. So, before you try to get a job as a comedy writer, make sure that you know how to put your material down on paper. Learn something about writing. And the best way to learn something about writing is to write. Put it down on paper until you find it's easy to put it down. Read all the plays you can lay your hands on. Listen to all the radio shows. Don't apply for a job with just a ready wit, figuring you can toss your stuff off verbally. Because, if you do, you'll receive your check verbally. Crystallize your wit on paper. And when you think you're ready, pick out a comedian you think you'd like to write for. Write something that you think is in his style. Then write him and ask him if you can submit it. In most cases, it's smarter to send the material to the comedian or his chief writer directly, instead of to the advertising agency or the network. Another way of cracking the comedy racket is through an agent or artist's manager. If you send your stuff to a good agent, and he thinks well of it, he may sell you to the comic. And don't be discouraged. That comic is looking for you as diligently as you're looking for him.

Well, now you know. You have to be a natural wit: i.e., the life of the party. You know that you need twenty pages of jokes. You need a smart comic to write for. You need benzedrine and coffee. Well, frankly, Butch, if you know all that, all *you* need is that little guy to call you up.

III. RADIO DRAMA

NORMAN CORWIN

NORMAN CORWIN is one of radio's most famous author-directors. Originally a newspaperman, he attracted nation-wide attention in 1938 for his series, *Words Without Music* on CBS. *Pursuit of Happiness* brought him added laurels, and in 1941 he embarked on the titanic job of writing and directing the cycle, *Twenty-Six by Corwin,* which won the American Writers' Congress Award as the best series of 1941. In December of 1941, he presented on all networks his brilliant and now historic *We Hold These Truths.* It won him the Peabody Award for the outstanding dramatic broadcast of the year. In February, 1942, he received the annual Advertising Award for "distinguished services to radio" and in the same month opened the biggest series of radio history, *This is War.* He subsequently became the first radio craftsman to be awarded a grant by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He went to Great Britain to write and produce *An American in England.* His most recent cycle is *Columbia Presents Corwin.* To his friends he is not only a poet but the world's best composer of limericks. Get him to tell you the one he made up about the geometrist's wife from Poughkeepsie.

RE ME

By Norman Corwin

NECESSARILY a report of this kind must be personal. I am sorry about this, because my methods of writing are a glowing example of what to avoid. Moreover, the author, by accepting an invitation to pontificate about his art, admits that he considers himself an authority. This is a form of low-grade narcissism, and I am against it.

If I were confident that my knowledge and counsel would be of help to a student or colleague, that would be another matter. But I have always looked with the eye of a dead salmon on any advice given by one writer to another. No advice that I know about has ever written a great play, and no amount of sticking to the rules will make a good writer out of a bad one. Rules are fine things up to a point, but it seems to me that the best results come from knowing the rules well enough to condemn and break them.

Are you interested in the way I work? Very well, I will tell you about it. But when I have finished you will be no more advanced on the subject of writing for radio than when you began, because I am a messy, brutish, instinctive thinker, a painful revisionist, a switch-hitter, an inspiration-clutcher, a self-whipper, a sentimentalist with cross-fertilizations of realism and practicality. My longhand copy looks like the scrawlings of a cretin, and

when I compose on the typewriter the result is something that has to be decoded by an expert from the L. C. Smith Company.

I envy the tidy mind and the organized routine. I admire writers who arise with the sun, bounce out of bed, throw open the casements and embrace the morn, their long hair snapping like an E pennant in the breeze, if there is a breeze. I wonder long over such things as clean copy and prefabricated sentences and regular meals and strong inner discipline. I believe in fastidious methods and have even tried them with some success, but the peculiar pressures operating in my case have made it almost impossible to stick for long to a given plan.

The trouble with me as a methodical writer is that I direct and produce what I write. There are so many crises and emergencies in the course of a series such as *Twenty-Six by Corwin* and others I have done, that the well-ordered life goes to hell twice weekly on light weeks, and daily on crowded ones.

The work-load I most enjoy carrying is one unlikely to be encountered by most radio writers. I take no pride in any distinction attached thereto, for it would be a dubious one, and foolhardy in the extreme. But the fact of the matter is that I am savagely happy at it, and there is nothing to be done with me.

When I was writing and producing a script a week I would spend my first day thinking, my second in despair, my third working on the early pages, my fourth revising what I had written in the first three, my fifth racing the clock to finish the script in time for the mimeographers, my sixth casting and conferring, my seventh rehearsing and broadcasting. Sometimes the concep-

tion, the basic idea, even the subject itself, did not occur on the first day, or else I might make a false start. Sometimes I was into my fourth day before an idea or an approach would take shape. In such a case I would practically have to turn out the script overnight—and that can be real hell. My first drafts have almost always had to be my last drafts.

If I were to suggest any tactics they would be those recommendable to any artist in any medium—the pursuit of the sane life and the good cause, the unceasing search for knowledge of the world and the truth of its issues, a striving for simplicity and directness, a curiosity about Man and his ways. These are the large things, these are the endless quests.

The small things are personal and variable and opinionable, and bear no relation to the science of writing. For example:

I often read aloud as I write, especially if the material is intended to have a lyric quality. I mold cadences in this way, sometimes reading a passage twenty times and polishing it here and there each time, until it flows smoothly on the tongue.

If I get stuck, I try to hoist myself by all kinds of petards. Thus, if I am working fruitlessly in old clothes, I will shave and dress and try it again. And if I happen to be dressed splendidly on the scene of inaction, I will change into dungarees and an old shirt. I sometimes wander from chair to lounge to desk to table and back to chair, testing each for the most productive posture, as though inspiration were a matter of furniture design. It is not.

Reading helps me sometimes, and I am fired by music. A slug of Shostakovitch or Beethoven or Brahms has

helped me over many a hurdle on a tough night, and I don't know what I'd do without a phonograph.

But enough. This is nonsense. It means nothing. Each man to his own habits, delusions, and stimuli. As for rules, get a simple textbook. Techniques are no mystery. I have far greater respect for the technique of weather forecasting than I have for radio production. If I am to be pressed for a list of do's and don'ts, I yield these very crude and fundamental ones:

Don't try to show how much you know about radio writing by ordering a forest of microphones in the studio, or specifying elaborate sound routines.

Don't stink up a love scene with music behind dialogue.

Do the opposite of what a sponsor or an agency executive tells you, if you want to write originally and creatively.

Work hard on research before you tackle a subject you know little about. Authenticity is as much a force in documentary drama as it is in good news reporting.

Don't speak down to your listener. You abase both yourself and him by so doing, and approach the lower depths of the soap operas.

Avoid distractions. Work where it is quiet. Rip out your telephone.

Take a walk in the park every day, and think things over in the open.

Eat and sleep regularly, and straighten out your love life.

Get mad at injustices, and never let yourself become jaded to the point where big issues don't matter to you.

Study. Read. Search out people. Inquire.

Go to movies. Listen to the radio. Read *PM* and the *New York Times* and a borrowed copy of a Hearst paper to see what they're saying toward the left, in the middle, and back in the Dark Ages. Don't get sucked in by panaceas.

Don't carry a script to bed with you.

Be a good boy.

Sing in your bath.

Be nice to your parents.

Conserve fuel.

Buy War Bonds.

ARCH OBOLER

ARCH OBOLER defies description. He is a dynamo. He is one of radio's bad boys and good angels. He first became nationally famous as the author of the thriller, *Lights Out,* then graduated to a sustaining series on NBC which rocked the kilocycles. His other series were equally famous: *To the President, This Freedom,* and *Plays for Americans.* He writes day and night, rotating secretaries like crops. And he writes best when he's spitting mad. He has won innumerable awards, has scared hundreds of children, and is one of radio's greats. In order to describe his very distinctive writing, his colleagues have invented a new verb, the infinitive of which is: *to oboler.* The conjugations are easy: *I obol; you obol; he, she, it oboles.*

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN YOU AND OBOLER

By Arch Oboler

YOU: Mr. Oboler, please wake up.

OBOLER: I didn't know that I was sleeping.

YOU: You had your eyes shut.

OBOLER: I was looking for an idea.

YOU: Where?

OBOLER: On the borderline between the conscious and the unconscious. You see, I think one of the faults in today's radio dramatic writing is that the ideas come from conferences, headlines, and memories of other stories one's read or movie-screened.

YOU: You mean I have to become a Yogi and concentrate on my navel?

OBOLER: I mean that if you want to say something dramatically over the air and say it well, you must give your subconscious time to gestating ideas, instead of rushing to typewriter and pounding off the first idea which comes to mind—which is generally a vague plagiarism of an oft-done theme.

YOU: But radio eats up so much material! Is there time for all that mental incubation?

OBOLER: That is one of the factors which stand between radio writing and really good writing. The medium is a quicksand into which millions of words disappear without a trace. All the stories printed monthly in

magazines, if assembled into one script, would not be sufficient to keep a network's monitor loudspeakers chattering for a week.

YOU: You mean I should forget about radio writing and write for some other medium?

OBOLER: Don't look quite so dismayed, my friend. Who said anything about *not* writing for radio?

YOU: You did.

OBOLER: On the contrary. I was simply pleading for more thoughtful writing. I was pleading for some sort of arrangement where the originality and freshness of the young writer would not be eroded by the river of words that radio demands. You see, there are two sorts of radio writing—and one of them is a hamburger business. The writer's creativity is thrown into one end of the machine and it comes out neatly packed, with the advertiser's labels at the front and the back and in the middle.

YOU: And the other sort of radio writing?

OBOLER: The sort that has something to say in terms of the world we live in and the people we live among —and says it effectively; radio writing which doesn't attempt to imitate the Never-Never-Land of most of our motion-picture plays. Unless you have something more interesting to do, would you mind sitting there quietly while I digress for a few lines? I believe that it is this sort of unreality in our motion pictures which prevented us, as a nation, from facing at once the realities of fascism. I'm talking of the days when, as a group mind, we looked at the horrors of murder in Spain, in China, in Ethiopia, and in Germany, and didn't actually see them. We couldn't see them because before our eyes was the fantasy of a Hollywood-

born belief that right must always triumph, that the poor but virtuous one would eventually become a millionaire, and that as long as a woman was pure in heart, the Marines would always arrive in time. We were not prepared for the realism of ruthlessness —and the phony Hollywood motion-picture romance, aided and abetted by the soap-opera level of radio drama, was largely to blame for our mass self-hypnosis.

YOU: Speaking of soap operas, would you please get off the soap-box, Mr. Oboler, and talk about these idea plays? Where do these ideas come from?

OBOLER: They are a composite of where you were born, and what you have done all your life, what you have read, eaten, whom you have loved, what you have laughed and cried about.

YOU: But surely you don't want all radio writing to be real, and earnest, and full of the woes of the world.

OBOLER: Who's talking about the "woes of the world"? There is a sort of real humor and aliveness which comes out of a thoughtful level of writing; there is a freshness of approach and of execution that gives the production a lift which the false adrenalin of production hoop-la cannot begin to accomplish.

YOU: All right. So maybe I'm this new mature-minded writer you're talking about. Will they broadcast my plays?

OBOLER: Yes. It may not be easy; you may have to beat on a few doors, but fortunately, radio's need of material is so great that even the good writer gets a chance once in a while.

YOU: I know that you direct your own plays. Why?

OBOLER: As a matter of self-protection. The same sort

of once-over-lightly treatment that afflicts most radio writing is also a production disease. Someone has said that it is a wise writer who recognizes his own word child after it has passed through the hands of producer, director and actor. Unfortunately, we cannot eliminate the actors altogether, so the writer who assumes either or both the production and direction posts, removes at least a few of the factors between the direct expression of his own ideas and the listener.

YOU: Where can I get a chance to do all these things?

OBOLER: From the look in your eye it is quite obvious that you're primarily interested in being what is known colloquially in Chicago circles as a big-shot on the networks. Very seriously, if radio writing is an art medium, you have the same long road of apprenticeship ahead that anyone has in any other art medium. Techniques have to become part of you to such an extent that you no longer have to think about them; you have to grow up into the ability to write freely and fully. Above all, there is a process of self-discipline which you must go through: the discovery that techniques are important only insofar as they further the effectiveness of what you are writing. The more integrated you become in your art medium, the greater the simplicity.

YOU: That all sounds rather heavy-handed. Isn't there ever any fun in radio writing, Mr. Oboler?

OBOLER: Very definitely. There is an emotional uplift in a piece of radio work well done which is as truly satisfying as a satisfactory painting or novel, or a piece of granite sculptured to the mind's ideal. If I have appeared to be cynical in this conversation with you, believe me the cynicism is not extended to the me-

dium. Radio has an immediacy of emotional impact to millions of people, and this makes it a source of continual excitement. Its writing faults are those to be found when business and art become lovers. The writer with the talents and obstinacy enough to fight his way through the wall of mediocrity (whose only gates are sign-posted, "The radio audience has a mind of a twelve-year-old child")—that writer can have the satisfaction of at least a few flashes of exultation at a mature job well done. In twenty years of doing business, radio has brought forth and kept alive only a handful of writing talents. More ability is needed. I hope it is *your* ability.

YOU: Thank you.

OBOLER: You're welcome. Now pardon me.

YOU: Where are you going?

OBOLER: Back to sleep. I want to dream about television.

TRUE BOARDMAN

TRUE BOARDMAN wrote *Silver Theatre* for five years, which established him as radio's outstanding writer of half-hour commercial dramas. He has probably written more original radio plays for stars than any other writer in the business. He was born in Seattle, where his father was leading man and his mother the ingenue of a stock company. He grew up in Hollywood as a kid star in the silents. He acted on Broadway, in stock, and on radio, then turned to writing. He has done considerable motion picture writing. But he counts his most important productions to be his two daughters, Penny, age 9, True Ann, age 5. Penny is perhaps his frankest critic. When she was 5, she sat patiently in the rear seat of the family car one day, while her father in the front seat was swapping story ideas with Hector Chevigny, a close friend and one of the West Coast's top radio writers. And Father was going on. The gleam was upon him. "Hec, I've got a great idea for an original! This fellow's a flier. He lands in a certain field, a forced landing. He's hurt. A girl runs up to the plane. They see each other and it's *like that.* They fall in love."

Chevigny nodded thoughtfully. But from the rear seat of the car came the voice of Penny. No thoughtful nodder, she.

"Love! Oh, daddy, you're always writing about that stuff!"

True Boardman's chapter is, among other things, about *that stuff.*

THE ORIGINAL RADIO DRAMA: FOR MONEY!

By True Boardman

THE idea of a score or more of the country's foremost radio writers combining their ideas on the art (I use the word loosely) of radio writing is probably meritorious. But more certainly it is dangerous. What are we all thinking of? After all, we make a living out of this business. Once let the public at large discover that all anyone needs to turn out a radio script is a stub of a pencil and a piece of butcher paper—and we are dead pigeons. Of course, it *is* hard to get butcher paper these days. Maybe we're safe at that.

My particular contribution to this literary round-robin is "How to Write a Radio Original"—a *commercial* radio original. My good friend Jerry Lawrence looked a little sheepish when he broached the matter to me. There is—and who of us shall deny it?—a faint, and not always that, aura of disgrace about being a radio writer who consistently and determinedly writes for those anomalous creatures known as sponsors. It's seldom anything spoken. But the radio-workshop boys have that look in their eyes when they meet us that seems to say, "For money! You should be ashamed. There are words for that sort of thing." And so there are.

More or less seriously, the simple fact is that if you

really intend to write commercially for radio, you must accept, as a prerequisite, the necessity to compromise. Unjust, illogical and arbitrary as it may seem, the man who pays $10,000 a week for a program (not all to you, I hasten to add) has certain basic rights in what the program says and how it says it. In effect, if and when you have a sponsor, you are blessed with a collaborator, an ever present pen-pal who not only contributes eloquently phrased prose about soap or dog food or peanut butter to the sum total of your half-hour's endeavor, but who also casts a long shadow across your own actual writing. And for the most part, it's a dark shadow. From your point of view as a literary creator, the sponsor's influence is mostly a negative one. You write—when you write radio for the long green stuff—in a prison. The thickness of the walls and the strength of the bars vary with different sponsors, but four walls are always there. This theme is taboo; that narrative device is against policy; you can't deal with such-and-such a type of character.

Personally, I've been exceedingly fortunate in this particular regard. Over a period of years, the bulk of my commercial radio writing has been for one program and one sponsor, and it so happens that this particular sponsor and, what is perhaps even more important, the agency which represented the account, were very liberal as such gentry go. After a couple of years those walls dropped lower and lower until I began to cherish the illusion that the bars had disappeared altogether. Then one week I tried to sell them a fantasy. It was, I thought, a genuinely charming yarn ideally suited to the radio medium, a story for which I had that enthusiasm which every writer feels occasionally for some particular idea.

But no. Suddenly the walls were high and stony, the iron bars were firm. This was a commercial show for down-to-earth people; the stories would stay on terra firma with them.

Granting, then, that our wings are clipped to start with, where do we go from there? How does the show ever get written? Well, element number one in this little recipe would appear to be a plot. Where does one get a plot? A key question. And fair enough. The only trouble is that, truthfully, I don't know the answer. The fact is that I've always got a good many of mine from my wife. Not that she gives them to me. Not at all. But I get them from her none the less. The process goes something like this.

I will say in a somewhat despairing tone, "Niña, here it is Tuesday and I have to turn in a completed script by Thursday at 9:00 A.M. or the contract will be broken and we'll both have to go back to acting in soap operas. What will I do?"

She will ask, "Whom do you need a story for?"

"Charles Boyer," I will say.

"Oh, Boyer!" she brightens. (I wish she didn't brighten quite so brightly for Charles Boyer.) "I have just the story for him!"

I relax. I know now all is well. She goes on, "The scene is a casino in Shanghai or maybe Mexico. Boyer is the croupier. Several people are playing and one man loses all he had and leaves the table. Then a lovely young girl comes up to play—an English girl—somebody like Vivian Leigh. She sees Boyer and is startled. You see—"

"I've got it! I've got it!" I interrupt.

"You mean you know why she's startled?"

"No! Never mind her. That other fellow, the one who left the table broke. There's my story. It's a great springboard. Thanks, darling!"

The particular story cited, when finished, turned out to be about an American advertising man in Monte Carlo who lost his last chip, then went out to Suicide Point and started to leap. An American girl was there watching and waiting hopefully to see at least one person jump, so that the famed point would live up to its reputation. The meeting of those two under such circumstances was the beginning of a rather successful farce comedy. And oh, yes, Cary Grant played it, not Charles Boyer. But, as I say, the idea really came from my wife.

If you don't happen to have a wife around at the moment or even a reasonably exact facsimile to give out with ideas that suggest ideas, you'll find numerous other sources. The words left over from last night's game of anagrams, a stray, half-finished cross-word puzzle, or the torn bit of a news story in the paper lining the garbage can—almost anything will do. To be strictly realistic, the principal element to finding a plot is that celebrated adrenal stimulant of all writers, a deadline. When you're really stuck for an idea, it nearly always springs up from somewhere, if for no other reason than that it has to. It may be some incident you remember that only needs a twist and dramatic form to make it a story. And then, of course, when you're really in a bad way, there are always the classics. A certain gentleman named Shakespeare will always rescue any desperate clutcher at a literary straw. To date, I have written *Hamlet* twice, *King Lear* once, *Julius Caesar* four times, and *Romeo and Juliet* oftener than I should confess.

Faust, too, has done yeoman work on occasion, as well as the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad.* The same people in the same basic situation with clothes of a different age and dialogue to suit. It's almost always a sure way out.

Incidentally, there is an idea for someone: a series of modern stories admittedly based on the classics. Hamlet in full dress is one thing. But what about Hamlet in overalls or in khaki? And Juliet in gingham or—khaki?

But back to the specific and the practical. This chapter is supposed to tell how to write original dramas for commercial radio programs. In honesty, all I can do is list a few principles that I personally have found helpful. To say that they add up to any magic formula is, of course, nonsense. Contradicting, in seriousness, what I said jokingly awhile back, either you have a certain flair for writing, and specifically for writing radio dialogue, or you haven't. Lacking it, the following points won't be of much value; having that flair (I prefer to think of it as a literary guardian angel), they may help to shorten some of those long midnight hours when most of your best writing will finally get done. Anyway, for what they are worth to you, here are a few suggestions.

The normal commercial dramatic show is, of course, the "half-hour" complete drama. (The serial type is being considered elsewhere in this book.) Here then is your first, and in many ways your paramount, limiting factor—time. Thirty minutes' air time on a sponsored show normally means a total of twenty-four minutes for the play itself. Twenty-four minutes to establish characters, create a situation, develop conflict, and produce a satisfactory resolution to the whole business, mean-

while contributing a few good scenes and some worthwhile dialogue along the way. The answer? The solution to this perpetual race against a stop-watch? Merely simplicity. A direct and uncomplicated story-line, as few characters as possible (and those distinctive), and a judicious use of the particular techniques which are the tools of the radio craftsman: music-scoring, sound effects, the filter mike, and the montage.

Let us consider the story-line first. How complicated a story *can* you tell in twenty-four minutes? The answer depends on what you mean by "telling." As I recall, both *Gone with the Wind* and *Anthony Adverse* have been done in a half-hour on certain ones of the "let's-give-'em-a-quick-brush-over-of-something-they're-sure-to-go-for-on-accounta-its-gotta-great-title" adaptation programs. The result, of course, has borne as much relation to the original as powdered milk does to the stuff that comes from cows. Dehydration may be necessary in many fields these days, but in writing an original for the air it's a process to be avoided. Instead of filling your every available second with plot, give yourself room. Let your yarn have and retain a natural richness and flavor. Let your characters talk a little longer about a little less. We'll know them better, like them better, and perhaps even come to feel they bear some resemblance to real people, and that's difficult if they have to synopsize four chapters in every speech.

Actually, the narrative counterpart of the half-hour original radio drama is the short story. It's well to remember that, I believe. Normally, the media complement each other closely, and while yardsticks are not always trustworthy in matters literary, there is possibly no surer way to judge the adaptability of a given idea

to the half-hour play limitation than to ask, "Could this also be a short story? If it were going to be read instead of heard, could that reading be accomplished at one sitting with complete satisfaction by the reader?" If the answer to those questions is in the affirmative, the chances are excellent that you're on solid ground to start building your radio play.

As to subject matter, there can be no question of dogmatism of any sort. You'll write either what you're inspired to write or what you have reason to believe you can sell. If you're very lucky, you may occasionally do both at once. Again speaking practically, if you want to sell originals, you'll be most apt to prosper with either mystery yarns or love stories simply because those two types fill most of the available markets. Apparently our gentle public, to whom we provide vicarious living by our works, prefer to live as either Don Juans or Jack the Rippers.

Second only in importance to directness and simplicity of story-line is careful selection of setting. In radio, perhaps more than in any other dramatic medium, your locale can and should work for you. A background rich in color, particularly one filled with easily identifiable sounds, can be from the outset a tremendous help to you as the author. Let any considerable portion of your action take place in a plane, on a train, or on shipboard during a storm and some of your job of creation is automatically turned over to the sound effects engineer, a most valuable ally in this business.

Geographical location is another extremely important consideration. A specific plot woven around an Italian family can be credible, dramatic, and inspiring; the identical story in a Swedish locale might seem in-

congruous and even farcical. The distinction can be almost as great between an English and American locale. Several years ago I wrote a Christmas play for my older daughter entitled *Blessed Are They*. It is a simple, unprepossessing little miracle story laid in London on Christmas Eve. It has been done now six different Christmases and by various sponsors. Two of the sponsors, in what I presume to have been a spirit of "Hear America First," requested that the locale be changed from London to New York. I refused. *Blessed Are They* was English in concept, not American. It concerned Father Christmas, not Santa Claus. The policeman on the corner was a bobbie, not a cop. Subtle differences, perhaps, but all part of what made this particular story. Ultimately, even the sponsors seem to have agreed.

A third fundamental principle of construction for an original which I personally have found helpful is to have certain emotional ties already established between key characters before your curtain rises. The fewer people who have to meet for the first time and learn to know all about each other during your precious twenty-four minutes, the better off you are. Leave that, whenever practical, to your two main characters. If you can make the confidante of your heroine her sister just as easily as making her a stranger, so much the better. We then need no explanation of the situation. This is another of the rules put down to be violated, but it is worth keeping in mind as a time saver.

Actual structure of the plot will axiomatically follow the old and fundamental rules: introduction, rising action, crisis, falling action, dénouement. In radio, however, you'll find your introduction, that first scene, is the hardest challenge you must meet. Your listener

must be told *where* this story is happening, to what kind of people it is happening, and what the chances are that it will happen interestingly enough to keep him from tuning over right now to Frank Sinatra or the Quiz Kids. That first scene sets everything: locale, mood, tempo, and, to a large degree, audience. You will rewrite it oftener than anything else in the script, and with better cause. It has to be good.

Once under way, that opening scene finished, the sailing is normally smooth. For by the time you know enough about your story and the people in it to get your "plant scene" written well, the rest is usually little more than putting on paper the words already formed in your mind.

An eager student once asked me, "How long is a good scene in a radio drama?" I wish I knew. Personally, I've had half-page scenes that carried dramatic dynamite and ten-page scenes that carried about as much explosive power as a damp firecracker. And vice versa. Again an arbitrary rule is impossible. But this I believe is a sound principle. Each separate scene must (1) introduce a new story element or definitely advance one previously introduced and (2) be complete within itself. The first is easy; the second less so. For in the actual writing of a script, reducing to sound and dialogue a story that is now crystal clear in your own mind, it's easy to forget that in each new scene you face on a smaller scale the identical problem you faced with that first scene of the show on which you expended so much care. Each new scene must be planted firmly and immediately as to its locale and the characters involved. And after your first couple of hundred scripts involving about two thousand scenes, you'll simply decide you

have exhausted every possible fresh and original way of establishing your locale and will succumb at last to the temptation you've had from the very beginning and start a scene with your hero saying: "All right, Jack Dalton, here I am in the front parlor of our old ancestral home, Belinda, my true love, at my side clutching a damp handkerchief as she weeps at your infamy, and even that loaded gun in your hand will not prevent me from protecting her honor, even if it means my life, you low-down cur."

Quite seriously, the structure of each individual scene *is* important, and, just as a special tip, much of the effectiveness of said individual scene can depend on its tag line. If the final speech of even a minor scene is right, if it carries a special significance, your overall show is helped immeasurably.

The last point I'd like to suggest is not limited by any means to one specific form of radio drama, or even just to radio. It has to do with the very fundamental basis of all dramatic forms, namely, the creation of characters. What I shall say is certainly no secret (even though I believe I learned it personally from that literary guardian angel I mentioned earlier, the guy who really does my writing for me when I relax and let him take over). It's simply this: nothing is dramatically interesting about people except their emotions. And if we even hope to bring characters to life, we can do so only by interpreting what they *feel* and *think*. Certainly words alone do not reveal the man. If this seems a paradox when dialogue is our primary medium of expression, as it is in radio drama, so it must be. But the fact is that dialogue itself can be either informative or interpretative. A well written scene in radio can "say"

that the central character is completely unafraid of death; that is, the words he speaks can say that, but they can be written in such a way that his utter terror is evident in every syllable.

On this matter of writing emotion rather than words, one last point. Have tremendous respect for the dramatic pause, and *indicate* it in your script lest the show's director fail to sense where it belongs in your scene as conceived. The value of the unspoken in the radio play has long been neglected.

There you have a few ideas for what they are worth to you. There are glaring omissions: the great value of proper music scoring, the use of the montage, particularly in building to the crisis scene, and probably a host of other points which should have been mentioned. On the law of averages, it's safe to assume that other contributors to this collection will have included them.

Finally, I would like to offer one last suggestion that is more properly a warning. If you insist upon writing, write something else besides radio. After all, we're only sure of one life, and why sacrifice it on the altar of a never-absent deadline? There are even *honest* ways of earning a living that are easier and you can keep your hair past thirty. Of course, I know this is a waste of time. It's a futile warning and you still believe in your heart about the stub pencil and the butcher paper. Well, come ahead! Let the angels rush in where so many fools already tread.

IV. STAFF WRITING AND CONTINUITY

EVERETT TOMLINSON

EVERETT TOMLINSON was head of the Continuity Department of Columbia Broadcasting System in Hollywood and is now Assistant Program Director. He started at KNX years ago as a receptionist, worked his way up the hard way, and has written just about everything there is to write on a network. He has helped and aided innumerable writers to start and grow just as he did. His specialty is building low budget programs. It takes a master like Tommy to solve the ever-present problem of a low budget program: the sponsor wants a symphony orchestra, Bob Hope, Greta Garbo, Jumbo the elephant, and the whole MGM lot, and you have to keep him happy with a pipe organ, an idea, and a romantic baritone, age 53.

COFFEE AND CAKES . . . EVERY WEEK!

By Everett Tomlinson

STAFF is a deceitful word. Combine it with writer and it poses as a description of one of the largest groupings of craftsmen in the radio field. Actually, it doesn't describe at all. Any writer hired on a regular weekly salary to write an unspecified amount of radio material is a staff writer. The girl who taps out glowing praises of So-and-So's Loan Company in Walla Walla is a staff writer; so is the musical expert who writes program notes for a transcontinental symphony broadcast. The kid a year out of college who takes a job in the continuity department of his home town hundred-watter is on staff; so is his former professor who now writes educational features for coast-to-coast consumption. Staff writers dictate to secretaries in the tinseled surroundings of New York and Hollywood agencies; they also do their work on apple crates in small-town transmitter rooms. Sometimes they are considered important cogs in the program machine; more often they are the piece that was left over when the machine was put together. One staff writer may be creative, the other hack. More important, the same staff writer may frequently be called upon to be both. Staff writers are all kinds of writers, and staff writing is every kind of writing. It follows that the same principles which will make drama, variety or comedy good on a major com-

mercial, will make drama, variety or comedy good on a staff-written sustainer. Sound craftsmanship is sound craftsmanship wherever you find it.

But being generic isn't the worst sin of the term "staff writer." It's the connotation that counts, and too often staff suggests a kind of purgatory the novice must endure before ascending into the heavenly realm of big-time commercial broadcasting and four-figure incomes. No one who has worked on staff will deny that the analogy has its points, but it is misleading.

To begin with, while the income a free-lance earns in a good week may dwarf the staff writer's weekly pittance, an annual total of all four-figure free-lance and staff incomes would probably reveal that staff is the greatest source of revenue for writers that the broadcasting industry affords. It's a matter of caviar thirteen or twenty-six weeks a year for a small group of writers, as against coffee and cakes *every* week for a larger group. But to justify the staff writer's position on the basis of security of income is dodging the issue. Several other facts are far more significant.

Because the staff writer has more broadcast time at his disposal than any other writer, he has the greatest opportunity to speak to an audience.

Because much of his effort is underwritten by a relatively tolerant broadcaster, rather than by an exacting advertiser, he has opportunity to explore new methods and new techniques.

Because he may be called upon in any normal * week to turn his talents in many different directions, he continually has the opportunity to broaden the scope of his creative thinking.

* The word is used loosely, normal meaning not unusually abnormal.

Most important of all, because he usually works *in a radio station,* he has an *unequaled opportunity to learn how the broadcasting industry really works.*

Now, all this seems to support the argument that staff is really just a super-school of hard knocks, where the beginner learns how, then sweats at thirty-five or fifty dollars a week eager for the day of his graduation. Unfortunately for the overall quality of radio fare, too many staff writers themselves subscribe to this theory. My advice to them is to cancel the subscription. Staff writing can be and, with some writers, is a career. Where a system of supplementary fees for commercials has been instituted, it can become a moderately lucrative career. In all cases it offers opportunity for creativeness at least equal to that enjoyed by the free-lance. In spite of the fact that the staff man is frequently given too much to do, and too little time to do it, the greatest limitation is the limitation of his own ability.

Crying for a chance to do better things when you've got a clean sheet of paper in your typewriter and a wide open half-hour on the air to fill just isn't very good sense. The highest paid writer starts with the same raw materials. And to argue that broadcasting executives will not accept a new departure in programming—*provided it performs its function of attracting and pleasing an audience*—is next to insanity. And therein lies the first concept that any prospective radio writer, staff or otherwise, should master. The function of a radio program is to *reach an audience.* A year or two on staff brings this lesson home with a vengeance.

But let's be more specific about the staff writer. Exactly what is his job? Well, in hundreds of stations around the country his principal job is writing com-

mercial copy for local advertisers, but even in this case he is usually given some time on the air for more creative endeavors. If nothing more, he will have a quarter-hour of phonograph records which call for introductions. Not inspiring? No, but the *Hit Parade* is really nothing more than musical numbers plus introductions. Many successful transcontinental programs are made of the same basic ingredients: music plus copy. But the copy (with exceptions, of course) is good.

In nearly every instance it has escaped the first trap of musical continuity, over-elaboration. The novice writes, "A silvery moon sends its shimmering beams like lacy fingers through the garden as lovely Dinah Shore mounts the podium to sing . . . *Stardust.*"

The more experienced continuity writer would handle that situation this way. "Here's Dinah again . . . and her song is *Stardust.*"

To the novice, Miss Shore is personally undergoing the emotion of each song. If the title is *Am I Blue,* then Dinah's blue. If the next song happens to be *Oh, Boy, I'm Happy,* then Dinah suddenly becomes radiant with joy. The wiser professional treats a song as a song, not as an emotional crisis in the life of the artist performing it. The novice takes fifteen minutes of song and superimposes an "idea" on it. What is and never will be anything more than a program of popular songs, suddenly tries to be a "Musical Ride with Paul Revere" or a "Song Journey to Mars." The old hand at the game has stopped trying to use "cute" ideas as a crutch. Either he begins with an idea into which musical numbers may be introduced naturally, or the only idea of his copy is to be functional, to identify song and singer for the listener in the most straightforward way possible. His copy is

designed to enhance a good performance, never to camouflage a second-rate one. The key is merely to keep it simple, and that's one of the lessons you learn on a small station staff.

In the larger radio centers, life for a staff writer becomes infinitely more complex. Here he is usually much more than the man who dashes off the introductions to the songs, although he does that too. "Brain trust" is the name sometimes flippantly applied to large station staffs, and even though the mental accent is put on "trust" rather than on "brain," the writers in this case are expected to serve as an idea factory. There are programming problems to be conquered and plans to be made for the overall scheduling of the station. There are sponsors with unusual advertising problems to be dealt with. There are advertising agency men shopping for "package" programs (programs created and produced by the station, with agency supplying only commercial copy *and* criticism).

There's the cooking and health expert down with the flu and a substitute program in the same vein to be written. There are sponsors of current programs who are suggesting some slight changes that will ruin the whole basic idea of the series.

All these and many similar problems eventually filter down to the desk of the staff writer. He is harried by a thousand details, but no one can say his life is not exciting. If he successfully copes with each problem as it comes along, he's ready for anything. Inevitably, the staff writer in such a station realizes that, unlike many free-lancers, he's essentially in the broadcasting business with writing merely his specialty. He develops a pride in "his station," and when that hap-

pens he gets the sense of competition with all other stations in his area.

If the staff writer works for a regional network or at a major network key station, he becomes a program builder. While many a free-lance writer listens to and analyzes the program he intends to aim his material toward, the staff writer begins with no program, analyzes what an audience wants to hear, and tries to design a new series that will meet that desire.

Look in at almost any large station and you'll find a scene like this. The program director, face buried in his hands, listens uncomfortably while a writer speaks.

"This advertiser," he's saying, "obviously sells his product to women. Now I've got an idea for a daytime serial that's sure-fire woman's appeal."

His next word is forestalled by another writer.

"Wait a minute," he cautions. "This advertiser sells to *young* women. And young women aren't home to listen to the radio in the daytime. We need a nighttime show with romantic appeal!"

"Okay! Okay!" says the program director, peeking out through his fingers. "But what are we going to offer him? We've got to have this thing on a record by day after tomorrow!"

An appalling silence falls over the room; then someone meekly ventures, "How much has this client got to spend?"

"A hundred dollars a week!"

"A hundred dollars a week! But that won't buy anything but an organ and a singer."

So it goes. These staff writers have learned several important lessons.

(1) A program must be designed to reach an audience,

usually the largest possible, but sometimes a specific group: the girls who buy inexpensive cosmetics, the men who buy high-priced automobiles, the women who buy a certain kind of ketchup, or the kids who will get mother to buy a given brand of bread for this free airplane on the wrapper. Elementary, but it escapes the larger percentage of beginners.

(2) A program is limited by the available budget. With ten thousand dollars a show to spend, getting audience is one thing. With fifty dollars a show, it's something different. The staff writer has to cope with this difficulty, and he has to do it in a way that will bring credit to his station. When an advertiser has a very small amount of money to spend, a workable idea for a five-minute program utilizing one man is worth more money than a carefully designed opus that will require a symphony orchestra and a galaxy of Hollywood stars. Axiom for hopefuls submitting samples to radio stations: write programs that are practical from the standpoint of production costs.

(3) The staff writer has also learned that what *he* likes, and his *personal* idea of a great program may not necessarily reflect the tastes of his audience. He becomes an avid reader of audience survey statistics. He watches the success or failure of programs other than his own. He learns that the people are the real authors of media. This study presents a challenge to any writer. Whether his purpose is to raise standards of public appreciation, to sell a product for a sponsor, to inform, to educate, or simply to entertain, he must first attract an audience. An audience is out there ready to listen. A clean sheet of paper is in his typewriter.

V. RADIO ADAPTATIONS

GEORGE WELLS

GEORGE WELLS wrote radio's top commercial dramatic show, the *Lux Radio Theatre,* rain or shine, for almost ten years, and is rated the best adaptor in the business. He was born in 1909 in a theatrical trunk, smack in the middle of a split week. He was educated in the New York City schools and in vaudeville. He reads over all his scripts in loud dramatic tones, playing all the parts. To his own ears he sounds fine. He is a frustrated actor.

RADIO'S STRANGEST BIRD

By George Wells

THE radio adaptor is a strange bird. His feathers change from week to week, and his song is a blending of the lark and the loon.

One moment finds him wheeling high over sunlit waters, trilling the sweet melodies of *A Christmas Carol* or *Lost Horizon;* at the next he dives to the muddy lake bottom to come up with a fish in his beak. But the fish may be a vehicle for Bob Hope, in which case it will be devoured with great relish. Therein lies the adaptor's advantage over other birds who write, for he can feed his soul and his stomach as well.

From light comedy to dark tragedy, from romance to slapstick, the adaptor must flit with willingness and ease. Adaptor is an expressive title for this writer, since each time he sharpens his pencil to adapt a new story he must first adapt himself to a completely new mood. If he is fortunate enough to have a steady job, the bird will moult some forty times per year.

The adaptor is a writer, but he is something more than that. He is also a constructionist, an idea man, a director, and as much a part of the finished radio play as the author of the original. This is a seemingly untenable position from which he will refuse to retreat without many more scars than he already bears. These abrasions are the result of soul-searing encounters with

the person who says, "Oh, I heard your show last night; it was fine. Of course, I thought the book–play–short-story–motion-picture was terrific. I read-saw-went-to it three times, and your show was good, too, but then it should have been after the book–play–motion-picture–short-story, don't you think?"

No.

This person is looking upon the adaptor as a paper-work tailor who needs only a pastepot, a pair of shears and five yards of good dialogue to fashion a handsome ready-to-wear radio vehicle. On the contrary, however, the better the original material, the tougher is the job of suiting it to radio. The writer, pinched by time and fighting always against a stopwatch, holds in his hands the brain and heart of a fellow-craftsman. The material is his sacred trust and he trembles inwardly for fear he might stumble and let the precious substance fall. In the interval between the sharpening of the pencil and the final broadcast there are so many pitfalls, so many dark and devious bypaths—in brief, so many opportunities for falling flat on his face, that if the adaptor manages to deliver a clear and fairly faithful representation of the original, he lays down the heavy burden with a happy and very grateful sigh of relief.

How can these pitfalls be avoided? From 1934 until the latter part of last year this writer adapted plays for the *Lux Radio Theatre*. After nine years, and around four hundred weekly moults, he is still not certain. However, if the reader insists upon knowing something about radio adaptations, these notes may be read without any lasting harm. By the way, there are no rules for adapting. If you run across something that sounds like a maxim just toss it out.

Cutting is a very ugly word sometimes used as a synonym for *adapting*. Even around the studios we often hear the radio script of a play or motion picture referred to as a "cut version." This hurts the adaptor to the quick, because it implies that in transferring a play to the air condensation is the prime requisite. Let's face it, fellows, it is.

Practically all the important radio programs which use adaptations rely, for their source material, upon successful plays, motion pictures or novels. The average play runs about two hours, not counting intermissions; the average movie about ninety minutes; the average novel anywhere from two hundred pages to *Gone With the Wind*. The problem of fitting one of these into a showcase of twenty-three or forty-five minutes, depending upon the program for which it is adapted, means that the writer is forced into some plain and fancy methods of condensation. It is the variation between plain and fancy that makes the difference in the finished product.

It is my contention that almost anything can be condensed by almost anybody. In fact, if everyone will promise not to take me up on it, I will offer to cut *War and Peace* to thirteen and a half minutes flat. This would be accomplished by the plain blue-pencil method —a sin committed by unloving hands in which all mood and character are hacked away, leaving only the gleaming, ravaged bones of plot. And who'd want to listen to it? Not I. And certainly not Tolstoy.

If the original is a good piece of theater, condensation will rarely improve it—but care exercised in the use of the cutting shears and a tactful, understanding

approach to the story elements can do much to offset the damage.

To condense material and still preserve the flavor is not a trick. It is more the result of patient trial and error and the application of a generous amount of the adaptor's own dialogue. There are a multitude of scenes and situations, defying direct cutting, which may be considerably condensed if entirely rewritten. Here the adaptor is winging toward disaster, for the bird must be completely attired in the new plumage before his hazardous flight of fancy. If the original is by James Hilton, he must strive to write in the style of Mr. Hilton. If it is a work by Conrad, he may have to dress in sea boots and oilskins. His quill must laugh with Mark Twain and chuckle with Sir James Barrie; it must be dipped in bitterness for Eugene O'Neill and in sentiment for Dickens. Some day, to his surprise, he may have to write belly-laughs in competition with Joe Miller. Heaven help the adaptor if he fails to match the style. His own lines will stand out like skunk cabbage in a bed of sweet William.

People occasionally inquire exactly how an adaptor goes about the business of framing a story for the air: where does he begin? Probably the best answer is to be found in *Alice in Wonderland*. "Begin at the beginning and go on until you come to the end: then stop."

The primary step, of course, is an intensive reading of the original, to fasten firmly in mind the principal story points and to catch the tempo and mood. This is the study period during which the entire show is blocked out, scene by scene and situation by situation.

The writer must decide what to keep or discard, what to play down or build up, what characters to add or eliminate, and—a very important consideration—at what point the breaks will come so the sponsor may insert the selling message. So far everything is going along swimmingly.

Then follows a twenty-four-hour nightmare while he tries to hit upon an opening scene. "Begin at the beginning" does not mean that the introductory scene of the radio version must be the same as in the original. It is often desirable, without interfering with the mood, to open with an attention-getter—a short scene that whets the appetite of the listener and discourages him from switching over to the hillbilly ensemble on a rival network.

An attention-getter we used in the comedy *Love Crazy* consisted of about twelve lines of dialogue, planting firmly and loudly that the character portrayed by William Powell was on the tenth floor of an apartment house with his head caught in the elevator door. We then flashed back and played the events leading up to the tragedy, with the hope that those listeners who liked Mr. Powell—and they can be counted on the fingers of many millions of hands—would be forced to stick around for a while to learn how and why he got himself into this predicament and by what means he was extricated.

With the first scene out of the way the adaptor is really in the groove. Until he hits the second. Now he is beginning to introduce his characters, their loves and hates, their past histories and their physical peculiarities. At this point he prays for the engineering and electrical wizards of our time to please get going on that

television deal. In a play or movie, important physical characteristics are conveyed in a flash, merely by permitting the actor to parade before the audience. The radio adaptor may expend half a page, thirty precious seconds, to let the listener in on the fact that the second lead dresses like a racetrack tout and walks with a limp. This will have to be done for other important characters, all in natural dialogue and never interfering with the action. When the leads have been introduced properly the adaptor finds that instead of condensing he has somehow managed to add three and a half minutes to the original. He tears out whatever hair he has left and continues.

The adaptor is particularly tormented by the problem of translating visual business into dialogue. Dropping his guard for an instant he falls dazedly into the *look-see* system—a form of allegedly dramatic conversation in which a character carefully describes all visual incidents to a companion, or stooge. This treatment is supposed to make everything clear to the radio audience and usually does, including a vivid impression that the character regards his companion as four years old or totally blind. "Look!" says the character. "That car at the curb! A blue sedan with white sidewalls!" The companion, or stooge, admits to noticing all these items, whereupon the character supplies him with additional information. "See that man in the front seat? A gun in his hand!" The fact that the companion, or stooge, must obviously be able to see these things for himself is no deterrent to the character—or to the look-see dialoguer faced with the problem of giving the picture to the audience.

Although there are times when look-see stuff is in-

evitable, the adaptor will do well to regard it with suspicion, resorting to it only when all other devices fail or when he is so groggy from meeting a deadline he can't dream up anything better.

In adapting the excellent Broadway play *Libel* for the *Lux Radio Theater* we were faced with a situation particularly worrisome. The third act of the play, a courtroom scene, contained one of the most gripping pieces of visual business I have ever witnessed in the theater. A human exhibit was introduced into the testimony, a man without sight, hearing or tongue, whose face had been bashed into an unrecognizable mound of scars. He was alive, but without the ability to move or the capacity to think—a living, breathing mass of flesh. When he was wheeled onto the stage, white and motionless as death, staring through the two black holes in his head, the audience froze in sheer horror. To catch the excitement of that moment by the use of look-see dialogue would be impossible. Words themselves were inadequate for the dramatic impact we wanted.

The solution was simple. Before the exhibit's entrance his appearance was described by a doctor on the witness stand, going into far more detail than did the stage play, but without picturing the creature exactly. The impression left with the audience was chiefly that the man was a horrible spectacle. After a proper buildup the judge ordered the exhibit brought into court. As the door opened to admit him there was a dead pause. Then a woman spectator gave a piercing shriek of pure terror and had to be led from the court.

We had accomplished our objective. The radio listeners pictured the man through the woman's fear and built their own mental image of the creature, making

it as horrible as they could or dared. A new device? No. Effective radio? We thought so, judging by the comments received.

Although this discussion applies to all radio drama, it is even more important in an adaptation. Many listeners have already seen or read the original material, and they want to be emotionally affected in the same way they were before. Despite all changes the adaptor makes to fit the material to the air, he must be certain the dramatic impact remains constant. It cannot be made dramatic by an overuse of look-see dialogue, or by treating the listener like a village moron. A hint is all the listener needs to spark the fire of his imagination. From there on he will build his own picture, far better than the writer's ten thousand words.

While the adaptor struggles with visual business, a few other annoyances have crept into his life. An agent calls with a friendly message that the scene in which the star does so-and-so is the guest star's favorite and must be included in the script. Invariably the scene in which the star does so-and-so is one which the adaptor had already eliminated in the fond hope of saving a little time. He stops his work, goes back and puts in the scene where the star does so-and-so. But, come to find out, that was the air-raid scene which depended largely for its effect on the constant wailing of sirens. The networks do not, at the present time, permit any sirens—air-raid, police or fire engine. An impasse. Now the telephones start ringing. From adaptor to producer, from producer to star, from star to agent, from agent to producer, from producer back to adaptor. In some strange fashion the confusion is ironed out and the work goes on. Crises such as this are common. On some dark days they occur

every hour on the hour, right up to broadcast time. There must be a god watching over radio who sees that programs manage to get on the air every week. Certainly it is too great a responsibility for mere mortals.

Despite interruptions, the adaptor is now well along into the script. He'd better be, since the first rehearsal is looming over a murky horizon. He is working hand in hand at present with the musical director, for music is as much a part of constructing the radio adaptation as dialogue. The adaptor will use it to bridge scenes, to lend color or mood to a situation, and even to tell the story itself. Every night adaptors send heavenward a chorus of thanks for Mendelssohn's *Wedding March.*

A dance orchestra will help plant a night-club scene; an organ means a church; a brass band a parade; while a piano ad-lib with a crowd murmur in the background suggests a small café with checkered table-cloths. These are time-savers, for a music cue carefully handled may eliminate ten seconds of scene-setting dialogue. When six scenes are set by music alone the adaptor has gleefully hoarded up a full minute. If you think a lot can't be said in one minute, remember that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address can be read in less than two.

At last the adaptation is finished. Provided the star for whom it was fashioned has not been taken sick, or if his or her house was not burned down overnight, we are ready to go into rehearsal. The first reading with the full cast assembled is unadulterated agony. The adaptor, who thinks he has suffered up to now, discovers he has been kidding himself. He perches tensely on the edge of his chair, holding down his thumping heart, while the script topples all over the stage. Something is

obviously wrong. When the reading is finished, a dozen pairs of eyes turn to where he sits wearing a green smile. They stare at him in mute accusation. The story is practically the same, the stars are the same. The fault must lie with the adaptor.

"Give it a chance," he stutters brightly. "Wait until the music gets in. Wait for the sound effects. This way it's like a play without scenery, like a movie without lighting." He ends with a cheery laugh, in which no one else joins. They turn away from him in silence, their faces sad with disbelief. But now the producer is taking over. With a calm, steady voice he calls for a microphone reading while the adaptor tries to sidle out unnoticed. He succeeds.

Strangely enough, everything usually turns out all right. By broadcast time the producer has brought the cast to fever heat, the music is casting its spell, the sound effects are painting pictures. The adaptor sits in the control room listening with his ears. He can't listen with his brain since that is already busy with the show for next week.

Yes, he is moulting again. He moves about in a world of his own, speaking to no one, stepping on cracks in the studio floor. After the broadcast, an admirer comes up to him and chuckles, "That boat scene went swell, a lot of laughs. I remember it from the movie." The adaptor smiles sadly and passes on. There was no boat scene in the movie.

The adaptor may not have a passion for anonymity, but that is what he is going to get. No matter how many times his name is mentioned on the program he can never receive equal billing with the author of the orig-

inal. This is as it should be, but the adaptor does not mind. He is thinking of that bright new plumage he will wear next week as he soars skyward, bursting into the rich, full notes of a new song.

The radio adaptor is a strange bird.

VI. NEWS WRITING AND NEWS COMMENTARY

HARRY W. FLANNERY

HARRY W. FLANNERY is a CBS analyst, former CBS Berlin correspondent. His European broadcasts were also heard from Paris, Brussels, Budapest, and Athens. A former newspaperman, he is author of the best-seller, *Assignment to Berlin*. He is 44, now lives in and broadcasts from Los Angeles, and is one of the few Notre Dame graduates who did not play football.

ANALYZING ANALYSTS

By Harry W. Flannery

PEOPLE are smarter than they used to be—about some things.

I say that because it's years since I've been asked what used to be an everyday question.

You see, like many other news analysts (the type is known as a news commentator except on CBS), I am on the air but fifteen minutes a day. Almost everyone used to remark: "You broadcast only fifteen minutes a day! What do you do the rest of the time?"

By now, most persons have come to understand that almost every word said in front of a microphone is written beforehand and that the mere business of typing takes a little while. Even so, few persons realize how much time it can take to prepare a program of news analysis. A conscientious news analyst can work every waking moment and continue to mumble over the problems of the day in his sleep. But you can be sane, though a news analyst.

There are two main types of news programs, excluding the dramatized *March of Time* variety. The first is theoretically straight news without an accompanying background of information on the event, the personalities involved, or comment. It happens that many of these programs now include background stories on people or events, but they still are largely distinguished from news analysis programs by the absence of com-

ment. This type is almost always written by someone other than the man whose voice is heard on the air. On the small stations, the material for such programs comes from news teletype machines.

The three major news agencies of the United States, along with the British news agency, Reuters, and a small agency that was organized primarily to serve radio and that now also serves small newspapers, Transradio, all furnish news to radio stations on teletype machines like those in newspaper offices.

Associated Press and United Press offer news written in radio style. Larger radio stations and the broadcasting chains employ rewrite men who use news from several agencies and their own correspondents. In processing the news, radio writers generally keep in mind that they are writing for the ear instead of the eye. That means they must write more informally, more like the way people talk. The sentences must be shorter. They must introduce one idea at a time and avoid phrases that can be misunderstood or combinations that are difficult to pronounce. Recurring sounds are special hazards, with some of the most interesting slips that pass in the mike resulting from unavoidable combinations in proper names. There were the occasions when an announcer, in introducing famous speakers, eloquently declared: "We now present the former President of the United States, Hoobert Heever," and: "And now, from Rome, speaking over the Vatican Radio, His Holiness, Pipe Pous."

The difference between writing news for newspapers and for radio is made more clear by comparing a typical newspaper sentence from the New York *Times* with a radio rewrite. This is from the *Times:*

Apparently still ignoring the Allied amphibious forces that landed inland from the expanding Nettuno beachhead south of Rome to a point within seven or eight miles of the Appian Way, the German Army in Italy has replied to the over-all threat of the Fifth Army with a series of whip-like blows along the Garigliano River–Gustav Line that hurled the Americans back across the Rapido River after a last ditch clash of bayonets, it was officially announced today.

That's a good newspaper lead since it answers the who, what, when, where and why; and since it appears in a paper, the reader can read it over and study it until it is clear—if necessary. But try reading that aloud to someone. It's obvious that the radio version should begin in some such fashion as this:

In Italy, the Germans seem to be ignoring the Fifth Army forces that landed on the Nettuno beachhead near Rome. But they are counter-attacking on the Gustav Line front farther south and inland. Today's communiqué says a series of whip-like blows has hurled American troops back across the Rapido River. The Americans were forced to fall back after a last-ditch bayonet clash.

Radio news uses the present tense because that fits the medium best. It's generally advisable also to prepare the listener for the kind of story by immediately naming the scene of action, as "in Italy." If the name of the person involved in a story is familiar to the listener, such as President Roosevelt, General MacArthur, Wendell Willkie, or Winston Churchill, such an item can begin with the name. If the name is not familiar, it is advisable to begin with the action. Thus:

Some of the men who are getting aid to China over the aerial Burma Road have been given a presidential citation. These men have been flying more cargo over the highest mountains and most threatening terrain in the world to get more cargo

to the Chinese every month than used to go by land over the Burma Road. Russell Brine, of Keokuk, Iowa, was given the citation, because . . .

News over the radio must avoid the danger of being misunderstood: this means careful choice of words and use of phrases. Thus, it is not advisable to construct a sentence in this fashion: "Marvin McIntyre, secretary to President Roosevelt, is dead," since an inattentive listener might hear only: "President Roosevelt is dead." For the same reason, a good radio news writer avoids using the term "a million," since that sounds like "eight million." "One million" is better.

Names of places not likely to become well-known in the news are avoided, and so are unfamiliar names of persons. Thus we may refer to the Czechoslovak minister of foreign affairs without giving his name. Crime stories, unless they gain unusual national attention, and sex crimes are not used, because the audience includes all members of the family. However, radio has changed from the days when it never used such words as "venereal" and "rape." The war has brought an occasional quoted "damn" and "hell" into news stories. Before the war no radio news program could quote anyone as using such language, without receiving hundreds of telephone calls in protest.

Good writers seek to make it unnecessary to use the awkward "quote" and "unquote," by making the quotation plain through the use of such phrases as "what he called." So that the announcer may not be credited with controversial statements, it is sometimes necessary to break quotations at intervals with "he went on," "Butler declared," and "according to the Senator." In quoting

Nazi newspapers and spokesmen, during the time I was CBS correspondent in Europe, I was especially careful to name my source.

Reporting from the capital of a potential enemy was more difficult because of this necessity, since all our news statements came from unfriendly sources constantly attacking Great Britain, the United States, the neutral countries, or "the imperialistic, Jewish, warmongering, capitalist spokesmen." There was the additional hazard of trying to get facts past three censors who looked over each script, one representing the High Command, another the Foreign Office and a third the Propaganda Ministry. Shortly after I arrived in Berlin, the Nazis began to use censors who had long been resident in the United States so that slang and American idiom could no longer be used to hide thoughts from them. Even so, there were occasions when we were able to give you "the inside dope," such as on the statements Max Schmeling made about the British on Crete. That was because my censors, who had motored to Athens two weeks before I flew there, did not know that the former heavyweight champion had been reported in the Nazi press to be saying the very opposite of the quotations I obtained in the Athens hospital. I found it good tactics, on other occasions, to introduce an item in my script that was bound to arouse their ire, so that their attention would be distracted from another story that I wanted to get through.

Most of our battles to get the whole story to you took place before we went on the air, since a Nazi employee always sat across from us while we were in the broadcasting booth. He watched to see that we did not deviate from the approved script and had a switch by him that

he could use to cut us instantly if we attempted any change. Although I broadcast during many air raids, I could never mention that, and you could not hear the terrific roar of the bombs and guns because we were then obliged to use a lip microphone that was sensitive to sound only within a fraction of an inch. To prevent our using inflections to cast doubt on Nazi statements, they made recordings of every word we said. They also learned that I was using the word "claimed" to indicate the dubious nature of a Nazi declaration, and that was shortly forbidden. I learned in March of 1941 of the Nazi plan to attack Russia but never was able to find a way to mention that although I tried to insert some indication of that news in a dozen different ways. The censors were apparently watching for it with special alertness. As I look over my scripts, I see I was able to get out much more than I had supposed during those difficult days. There were, for instance, numerous warnings that Japan would actively join the Axis and attack the United States.

I've often been asked how overseas reporters are able to come in so perfectly on cue. The programs were beamed to the United States over one of the Nazi shortwave bands, which was opened for us five minutes before program time to give the radio engineers in the United States time to adjust their receivers to a favorable level. During this period, the Nazi attendant played a Nazi marching song record—always the same one—and repeated over and over again a routine that never varied:

This is DJL in Berlin, calling the Columbia Broadcasting System in New York. DJL calling CBS, calling America. We will begin broadcasting at two minutes and fifteen seconds after

two o'clock, Berlin time, continuing until four minutes and thirty seconds past two. The speaker will be Harry W. Flannery. Here is a time check. At the sound of the gong, it will be three minutes and thirty seconds of two o'clock.

All except the time check was written on the form given the attendant, who was so afraid to change a word that I twice had to summon the short-wave manager to correct errors in my broadcast time.

Because we operated on a time cue only, beginning at the previously scheduled time, for the program that was heard in New York at 8:00 in the morning, I never knew whether reception was good enough for the program to be picked up. Once, after a broadcast, I received a cable from Paul White in New York saying:

LOHENGRIN SWELL BUT WHERE WERE YOU?

The efficient Germans had beamed the program somewhere else, so that I had talked that day maybe to Japan, while a musical program went to New York.

When I was in Paris or Brussels, the program went out over DJL in Berlin just the same, since the Nazis had taken over the facilities in those countries. Broadcasts from Switzerland went out over the Swiss short-wave, with the censor there most friendly and co-operative. He hardly read the script, and we spent the rest of the time smoking and chatting. The Hungarian authorities in Budapest were also lenient, but Nazi censors went with me to Greece and Crete.

For the night program, broadcast from Berlin before two in the morning and heard just before six in New York, we operated on word cues, and with the earphones I could hear New York say: "We now take you to the German capital. Go ahead, Berlin." London and

some other capitals use the audible system for all programs, and that is more satisfactory. During the period CBS used a question and answer system on the night program, both questions and answers had to pass the censors.

After the heavy hand of Nazi censorship, it took me months to become able to write freely back in the United States. There are some persons, who do not understand the situation, who believe that CBS news analysts never speak with complete freedom. However, after having been with CBS since 1935, I can say I was never told what to say, and although we have followed an editing system to check phrasing and facts, I have never had a sentence changed from its intended meaning, nor any deleted.

The controversy over programs of news analysis or comment has arisen from two widely opposed views on the best way to present such broadcasts. NBC, the Blue Network and Mutual, in varying degree, have believed commentators should express their personal opinions, with Fulton Lewis the most notable in this class. Those who support this idea believe that a program of comment that attracts listeners must bristle with opinions, and any other program is as unsavory as dishwater. They declare that the people expect commentators to express their opinions, and believe the public tunes in because of them. (They disregard those persons who will not listen to a man that differs from them, especially on a subject which is as personally touchy to most people as their religion—politics.) Hans Kaltenborn has made himself the champion of this group, although he wrote me some years ago, when he was on CBS, that: "My constant effort is to let facts speak and subordinate

opinion." For the most part, I believe he still follows this method, with the controversy arising because of misunderstanding of CBS policy.

The question about expression of personal opinion concerns controversial issues only. Since that is true, any network permits expression of almost any comment, within the limits of almost unlimited good taste, about Hitler and Tojo, against those who obstruct the war effort, and for the Allied nations. Some commentators have made this style of program most successful. It lends itself to ringing phrases and rousing oratory. Listeners like this kind of program because it helps morale when we are having difficulties on some front and believe we should take out our fighting spirit in talking about the doom of Mussolini, Hitler or Tojo. It is also advisable to refer often, in this type of program, to the mothers and sweethearts back home. Before the war, this kind of commentator praised virtue and raised hell with vice.

It's not so easy to draw the line on what can be said on controversial issues. As I see it, the news analyst called upon to discuss the situation on the war fronts, on production, the prevention of inflation, political candidates, the farm problem, taxes, labor, and every other subject that becomes news, cannot be equipped to give the final word on every subject. Since it is his business to study the news, he can become better informed than most other men, but he can become an authority on but a few subjects. He can therefore best serve by giving the public the benefit of his investigations, attempting, insofar as possible, to present both sides fairly and let the listener form his own opinion. Thus, Bill Shirer is expected by the public and the network to analyze

a trend in news affecting Germany in the light of his experience. Major George Fielding Eliot is put on the air to analyze military events according to his knowledge of military strategy and tactics. I can speak with more authority on events in those parts of Europe and Latin America that I have visited and studied.

The CBS policy, which provides that its analysts must avoid statement of personal opinion on controversial issues, is the ideal toward which we aim. It is not an absolute rule, as I have suggested, and cannot be. It must be governed by common sense and cannot be set down accurately. Actually, CBS analysts do not avoid expressing opinion so much as they avoid being opinionated, which is different, and we also try to shy away from the tendency to become a crusader, from the temptation to think of ourselves as sages sent forth to save the world with our wisdom. We must avoid catching the disease that may be easily contracted by talking to millions every day—microphonitis. It has been fatal to the career of a number of men.

Since Westbrook Pegler makes his living by being against things, it is natural that I do not often agree with him, but he once made a worthy comment on this subject. "Of all the fantastic fog shapes that have risen off the swamp of confusion . . ." he said, "the most futile and, at the same time, the most pretentious, is the deep-thinking, hair-trigger columnist (or commentator) who knows all the answers just offhand and can settle great affairs with absolute finality three days or even six days a week. . . . He is an expert on the budget who can't balance an expense account, an economic expert who can't find the 5:15 on the suburban time-table, a labor expert who never did a lick of work in his life, an ex-

pert on the mechanical age who can't put a fresh ribbon in his own typewriter, and a resounding authority on the farm who never even grew a geranium in a pot."

In this effort to analyze the news, the conscientious news analyst must read not only a complete news wire each day, but must also seek every opportunity to talk with authorities and attempt to read such newspapers daily as the New York *Times* and *Christian Science Monitor,* all the leading columnists, the special articles in the *Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, Harper's,* the *Atlantic Monthly,* the *New Republic,* the *Nation, Free World, Time, Newsweek, Fortune* and *Life.* He will take other special magazines such as *Flying* and the *Infantry Journal.* He must read the most significant books on the war and foreign policy. He tries to read the reports of the Foreign Policy Association and the Institute of Pacific Affairs. He attends the meetings of the Council on Foreign Relations. He glances at the daily deluge of literature that comes to him from the British, the Chinese, the Russian, and the exile governments. And he makes his task more impossible by going on lecture tours and writing articles for the magazines. The result is that he acquires a larger library of partly read books than any of his neighbors, and he has a desk that is always running over with piles of discouraging papers and pamphlets. If he is like me, his correspondence is never up-to-date, and he is always vowing that he will take care of that "this week."

Practically, serious-minded and still sane news analysts read what seems to be most important, interview only those persons who appear to have something worth listening to, and get most of the material catalogued so they can study a special subject when it is most news-

worthy. Thus, I spend the morning in the office at my house, listening to the radio to determine what appears to be the most important subject or subjects of the day, and then reading all I can on that subject. Sometimes all the information gathered together in the morning is thrown away when I sit down to write, because of some later, more significant happening. I remember that on the night the Darlan assassination was flashed, the bulletin came over the wires in the last few minutes before I went on the air. There was no time to write any comment, but that was the news. I tossed all my prepared script into the waste-basket and ad-libbed about the assassination and what it meant.

To maintain reason and hold wife and family, some news analysts go on vacations—where they find new social, economic and political affairs to be studied. Some go to golf links and find that the events of the world can still be discussed between strokes. Elmer Davis had the best method. He played the kind of bridge that required concentration on the cards alone and that won him the respect of such an expert friend as Ely Culbertson.

The only system I find effective is to avoid taking myself too seriously, and to recall those persons who used to ask:

"On the air only fifteen minutes a day! What do you do the rest of the time?"

VII. THE SERIES SHOW

CARLTON E. MORSE

CARLTON E. MORSE has been author-director of *One Man's Family* since its inception in 1932. The program has consistently been number one dramatic serial in national and sectional radio polls since its beginning. He also writes and directs *I Love a Mystery,* and that's a true title—he's crazy about mystery stories. Morse spent eight years on NBC's writing production staff and has written between eighteen and twenty million words for radio in the past fifteen years. Previously he was columnist, reporter, book reviewer and copy desk man on various newspapers in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Seattle. He is bald, blushes beautifully, and writes like a bat out of hell.

ONE MAN'S RADIO PROGRAM

By Carlton E. Morse

THERE are as many ways of writing commercially salable radio serials or series or "strip shows," call them what you will, as there are writers capable of turning them out. The only actual limitation placed on a serial dramatic show is the obvious one: that the author, and incidentally the listeners, will be dealing continuously, day by day and week by week, with the same group of principal characters.

Characters and characterization, therefore, become of paramount interest to the script writer of serial shows. In fact, if his characters have a universal appeal and are truly and humanly drawn, the serial writer has just about everything he needs. Plot, yes, but only enough to motivate characterization. People like to listen to and be with those who appeal to them, no matter what they do. This is true in fiction as well as real life.

The characters of a serial must have the same fascination, the same interest-appeal to a radio listener that friends and acquaintances in a neighborhood have for an old resident. The radio public has the same likes and dislikes for radio personalities that it has for the people next door, the grocer down on the corner, the friends across the street. I emphasize this because of all the elements which may go into a strip script, definite, clean-cut, personable characters are the most important.

One of the most interesting and at the same time most nearly fool-proof methods of developing characterizations in a serial drama is through the process of "building." That is, the author conceives the vague outline of a character; he hands this to the actor selected to play the part; the actor, inspired, adds something to the role, which in turn stimulates the writer to develop the character further! I have had actors take characters which I had intended for leading roles and inside of a few weeks, through uninspired interpretation, completely kill the part so far as I was concerned. On the other hand, I've had a keen, intelligent actor *force* me to build his "bit part" into a leading role through sheer force of personality and inspirational interpretation.

It is my belief that a radio serial is destined to live so long as this coöperative character building goes on between writer and actor. There is nothing that will kill a serial faster than indifference on the part of actors. If the actors become bored with the job they're doing, so does the writer, and the show is dead. And actors and writer know the show is dead long, long before the public does or the Crossley rating registers the fact.

How character builds a show is well demonstrated in the cast of *One Man's Family*. I had worked with the group of players I finally selected for several years before the *Family* came into being. Therefore, I had the opportunity of creating characters in my mind and selecting the actors to play the roles before a line of dialogue was written. Then, with each character clearly in mind, and a mental picture before me of the actor who would play the role, I began to write. Actually, not only was I writing fictional characters but I was also writing something of each of the actors into the part.

I knew almost exactly how J. Anthony Smythe would play Father Barbour. I knew his limitations and his little characteristics of speech and what kind of comedy and what type of emotional scenes he portrayed best. The same with Minetta Ellen in the role of Mother Barbour. I knew she couldn't miss on her quiet, sympathetic scenes with her children. I knew she was best at a dry, unpretentious sort of humor. I knew she was more effective with short, pungent dialogue than with long speeches. Michael Raffetto as Paul I knew could talk well on serious matters. His full, generous voice lent itself to thoughtful conversation, even scraps of poetry or philosophy at times. I knew that Bernice Berwin as Hazel would be serene and gentle and a good young mother, just as I knew Kathleen Wilson as Claudia would run the gamut of emotional experiences from hilarious and slightly bawdy comedy to deep emotional love scenes and wild tempestuous unhappiness. And with the aid of Barton Yarborough I knew that the character of Clifford could experience light, easy-going comedy, a sensitive nature, and touches of remorsefulness and something of the morbid. And over the period of twelve years that these people have worked together, we have built characterization, clean and definite, along these lines. It has always been a pride of mine that anyone familiar with *One Man's Family* could turn on the show in the middle of the program at any time and, beginning with the first line heard, tell what characters were speaking without names being mentioned.

Next to characterization, I suggest that the tag situation of a continued serial is of greatest importance. Call it "cliff-hanging" if you will, but a good tag is of much more importance than simply leaving the heroine in a

desperate fix. A good tag is not the cream off the top of the milk. It's not the daub of jelly on a loaf of stale bread. An audience who has to listen through twelve minutes of dull routine for the "flash" finish isn't going to be a listener long. The tag is the logical conclusion of eleven or twelve minutes of delightful and satisfying dialogue and situation. But it's more than that! It tops off what has gone before and at the same time it promises infinitely more tomorrow. Not in so many words, not by making the announcer say, "Listen tomorrow for the most hair-raising and exciting blah, blah." That doesn't excite a listener's desire to be beside his radio tomorrow. But a subtle, thought-provoking, emotion-arousing tag *can* rouse that desire. A serial writer is limited in the composition of effective pay-offs only by the breadth of his skill and imagination. There are no fixed laws for arousing curiosity in a radio listener. A feeling for what the audience wants is a matter between an author and his typewriter and cannot be explained or taught.

Next in line of importance in the construction of an audience-getter may well be the lead-in. The lead-in is the greatest bugaboo the serial writer has to face. And he has to face it every day . . . well, at least every day he turns out a script. The lead-in is a necessary evil demanded by the sponsor and the agency representing the sponsor, and is admitted to be necessary by the writer himself.

The lead-in is supposed to "catch-up" the listener who missed yesterday's episode. It's supposed to tell him succinctly, quickly, in simple direct English, what has gone before. But I have listened and listened to lead-ins on serial programs and ninety-nine times out of a hun-

dred they are none of the things mentioned above. They are invariably too long; they are too involved; they assume the audience knows either too much or too little, and mostly they end leaving the listener more confused and filled with utter boredom not only for that show but for the radio as a whole. Let's shut the damn thing off and neck.

I *hate* lead-ins. The perfect lead-in could do so much for your story, but whoever heard of anything perfect in this world? All I would advise is, keep them short, keep them simple, and say less than you feel perhaps you should. My sincerest word to a new writer is to get down on his knees and pray over his lead-in every night. Who knows? Some super power may grant to one of you the privilege and honor of discovering the perfect solution! But don't count on it.

Just a brief paragraph about a signature. The signature is a musical theme, a sound effect, or a word or phrase used as an attention-getter at the very opening of the show. In my mind this is not too important a problem. On the other hand, it does help to establish and identify the show in the minds of your audience. I still remember walking down the streets of a small town listening to the theme music for the old *Amos 'n' Andy* program clicking on in first one house and then another. Neighbor after neighbor would hear the theme music coming from next door and run to turn on his own radio. The signature also may be used, and often is used, as a sign-off. This may be used as a time-buffer. Spread the signature five, ten, or even fifteen seconds if the show is short, or compress it if the show is long.

Believe me, this does not tell anyone how to write a radio serial. No one can be told how to write a serial, a

comedy, a book, a play, or any other form of self-expression. Writing is a matter of sitting down to a desk or a typewriter and *sitting* there until the required number of suitable words have been transferred from the thought-process to a sheet of white paper. The facility and the skill with which this is accomplished depend first on the individual capacity of the writer in question; second, upon his willingness to sweat and grind and stay at it until the seat of his pants is shiny and his backside has permanently taken on the impression of the seat of his chair.

I insist on saying this because the great belief of the layman is that anyone can write if he could only find the time to get around to it. That's the number one falsehood of all time! Few, if any, writers are born. A man may be born with tendencies toward writing, with the possibilities of becoming a writer. But he will never be a writer of a radio serial or anything else unless he glues his bottom to a chair, bends his back to the typewriter, and concentrates his limited intelligence to turning mental pictures into words and words into a finely woven web to snare ideas and hold them captive on a sheet of paper.

GERTRUDE BERG

GERTRUDE BERG is so well-known as Molly Goldberg in the daytime serial, *The Goldbergs,* that her audience often forgets that she also writes it. Gertrude Berg has departed from the standard strip-show formula (all the women suffer and all the men are heels), to bring dignity and honesty to a "soap opera."

DAYTIME RADIO: YOO HOO, MRS. AMERICA!

By Gertrude Berg

Just what it is that categorizes one brand of radio show as daytime entertainment, and another as nighttime, is a bit obscure. Is it something inherent in the quality of the show, of the listening audience, or what? I suppose it's inevitable that after the early experimental years of a new creative medium, a certain amount of stabilization sets in, since the perspective is greater and things fall more properly into place. But the point here, as regards daytime and nighttime radio, is whether there's anything inevitable, instinctive, or creatively logical in such definitions. I don't think there is. To me, it appears that such definitions do not come out of the work itself but rather out of administrative convenience. At most, it's a way of reference for the sales department. I don't believe that the quality of a show has anything to do with it. After all, no matter how you slice it, it's still writing.

So, then, all that one can really talk about is good or bad writing, plus a few gimmicks of the radio serial.

The kind of writing that has ended up being played mainly in the daylight hours is the soap-opera, an unfortunate nom-de-guerre, by the way, for it unfairly carries an unmistakable aroma along with it. Certain shows, whose approach is the approach of the tub-

thumper, whose blood-and-thunder is overwhelming, have cast a shadow that dims the better material being played. But it's not fair to judge the lady by the company she's forced to keep.

As a writer of a daytime serial, the problems I've come across haven't been very different from the problems of any other kind of story-teller. In fact, one discovers in fifteen years of radio writing that the fundamentals don't change; they merely adapt themselves. Perhaps the analogy of water is a good one. Whether it's liquid, solid, or gaseous, it's still H_2O.

Anything I say grows out of my own experience and what I believe should go into a good radio serial. These are some of my ideas.

It is impossible to improve on reality. The most a writer can hope to do is to discover a meaning in it, a philosophy if you prefer that word. I believe it's his job to mold and organize the experience of living, to heighten it in such a way that it appears as a personal revelation, a clear understanding in the chaos and confusion all around. In the serial he uses the weapon of character to project that philosophy, and also the problems that form the core of his plots.

The good radio story should never escape reality and the problems of real people. And it shouldn't attempt to solve them by good old Keystone methods: Bang! Bang! Blood-and-thunder! These are the weapons of the writer who has nothing to say. This kind of pyrotechnics is cheating.

It's not a strange phenomenon that certain radio serials go on for years and remain favorites. These programs reflect a definite characteristic of American life, and the stories they tell always have some relationship

to actual events that occurred in one way or another in the listener's life.

As for characters, well, if you begin on the premise that reality can't be improved upon, why then, neither can real people. You can't fake a character if you're writing a serial. He has to be around for a long time. If he's not credible, how can you expect anyone to identify himself with his particular tragedy and joy? The portrait has to be full and three-dimensional. You can't just tag him with a narrow quirk of some kind. When a writer has something to say, to say it effectively he must produce a unity. Each person involved is part of the warp and woof of it, and if he's out of place because he isn't fully realized, there goes your unity. There goes your effect.

A radio serial is really the story of a group of lives from day to day, and to sustain it, to keep it fresh, is a taxing job. You come right back to it if you hunt out the secret. The writer must have something to say. He must present a definite way of life.

Of course, these remarks are, of necessity, general. But there is one specific problem that seems to have more meaning for the daytime serial than any other form of writing. And that is the slow unfolding of the tale and the sustaining of suspense.

Because the only limitation placed on a serial script is its playing time and not the length of the story, the writer can move along with great leisure. In my own experience I had one story running for nine months. But it's not merely a problem of moving along from day to day in the lives of your characters. If it were only this, each script would take up exactly where the previous one left off, and the flow would get unbearably

monotonous. Suspense would remain an academic principle.

Suspense, maintained in the slow progression of a radio serial, is obtained by treating each script as a unity, complete and almost able to play alone. With each program another inch of the tale is organized, wrapped up, and delivered. Each script has one very definite point to make. It can be infinitesimal, but it must be made. If perhaps we think in terms of carefully erecting a structure from foundation to roof, we'll get a better idea of what I mean.

I want to say a few words about suspense itself, as an element in the serial. It's not only things happening, but things happened and things to be. At each organized inch of the tale, it's the entire story in suspense and not the incident. I think the proof of this is in what happens when a writer introduces an incident that has no vital relation to the overall theme. Suspense vanishes like a flash of lightning.

Up to now, I've been speaking about the serial in relation to the writer, but what about the serial in relation to the people listening? How does it fit into their lives? What can it do for them?

Most important, I don't believe in writing down to an audience. If you are writing about their familiar experiences, you can't lie to them about what they already know. All you can do is organize it for them, and in this sense, the educational power of radio is enormous.

In the lives of the democratic states, this is a crucial period. The daytime serial can be a very effective force in bringing to the American people a deeper understanding of the democratic way of life. I do not speak

of blatant propaganda. I speak of sincerity and deep conviction in the writing that Freedom is worth fighting for. The serial, by dramatization, by revealing the meaning of democracy in people's lives, can do far more than any speech can do. For the first time, perhaps, the full potential and stature of the radio serial becomes apparent.

GOODMAN ACE

GOODMAN ACE is writer, director, and star of one of radio's favorite series shows, *Easy Aces*. At 18, Goody was the youngest movie and drama critic in captivity, working on the Kansas City *Post*. Jane, his real as well as serial wife, was his childhood sweetheart. One night, in 1930, when he was broadcasting some Hollywood gossip, the actors on the program following his failed to show up. He and Jane ad-libbed charming nonsense for fifteen minutes about a bridge game. The switchboard was flooded with calls. *Easy Aces* was born. Though his show has millions of listeners, his favorite remark about his rating is: "We have our Crossley to bear!"

THROUGH DARKEST AFRA WITH PUN AND PENCIL*

By Goodman Ace

THE character in this chapter is not fictitious. At times I wish to heaven he were.

For the past fourteen years I have been sweating out the scripts for a radio program entirely misnamed the *"Easy" Aces*. Of course, when I say "I," I mean with the aid of my clever wife, whose wise counsel ("No, you can't go down to the Friar's until you finish that script") has given me inspiration, courage, and an incipient ulcer.

In those fourteen years we have amassed a fortune which has been split nine ways: Dr. Joseph Diamond, Dr. Jack Weiner, Dr. Foster Kennedy, Dr. Louis Ungar, Belmont Park, Dr. Eugene Franken, Dr. Edgar Mayer, Henry Morgenthau, and my sister's husband who sells insurance. What is left goes for the purchase of that amazing product we advertise, which, like a doctor's prescription, is composed of not one but a number of medically active ingredients that give quick, speedy relief from the pain of a headache, neuralgia, and the labors of writing the stuff that goes between those commercials.

With this pleasant fore-thought we come now to the serious business of writing a comedy series for the radio.

* For the uninitiated: AFRA is the American Federation of Radio Artists.

Until the beginning of 1944 I wrote scripts for three fifteen-minute broadcasts a week. Then our sponsor got the idea that it would improve our rating if we became a half-hour program once a week. That it has not improved our rating is something I will discuss in a later chapter to be titled "High Crossleys and Low Foreheads."

Since changing to a half-hour program everyone (my mother for one) has asked me, "Isn't it easier to write one script a week than it is to write three scripts a week?" The answer is "No." It is only easier to write no scripts a week than one, and our sponsor seems to be starting a trend in that direction, as far as we are concerned, at least.

I know the reader is dying to know the reason for this great paradox, so I will now explain why it is not easier to write one script a week than three scripts a week.

The formula for a three-timer which we have employed with such huge success (Hi there, Hooper) is this: Jane, let us say, is going to start a community victory garden. That's all the idea I have. Where it is going we don't know yet, and there is really no rush about it, because they have just picked up our next thirteen-week option. So the first night there is a scene between Jane and Mr. Ace. Jane says: "You know, dear, I've been thinking." (That gets a laugh right there.)

Mr. Ace says, "Thinking about what?"

"I think I'll start a community victory garden in that empty lot on the corner up there," Jane says. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to get all our tomatoes, radishes, beans, peas, and corn au gratin?"

"What do you mean au gratin?" asks Mr. Ace.

"Free," she replies.

This goes on for eleven minutes, the remainder of the fifteen minutes being devoted to that amazing product which like a doctor's prescription, etc., etc., etc.

That's the first night. The second night's broadcast is a scene between Jane, Mr. Ace, and Jane's friend, Marge. Marge speaks:

"Jane, I hear you're going to start a victory garden."

"Yes, Marge, I am; a community victory garden. I'll get all the other women in this neighborhood to dig the garden with me. It's for the war, you know; the boys in the Army. We must all put our shoulders wheel to wheel till the duration is over."

And Marge laughingly replies, "Yes, Jane, I think a community victory garden is just the thing."

Then Jane calls up some of the women in the neighborhood to ask if they will help with the community victory garden, but they're apathetic about the whole thing. However, Jane is not to be put off.

"So they won't help with the community victory garden," she says. "Well, I'll figure out a way to make them help if I have to work my head to the bone."

At this point the announcer, looking at the clock, notices he will just have enough time to tell about the amazing product which, like a doctor's prescription, is composed of not one but a combination of medically active ingredients, and then to add that the mention of the boys in the Army on this program does not constitute an endorsement by the Army or the Navy, or the Marines or Coast Guard, or the WAC's, or even the 4-F's.

And, personally, I'm glad he must come in at this point, because, you see, while the listener would like to know what Jane is going to figure out to make the other women pitch in and help dig the community vic-

tory garden, I, too, would like to know, and it gives me an extra day to figure it out. They'll know tomorrow night.

But the best-laid plans, you know. Comes tomorrow and I haven't figured it out yet. So there is now a scene between Jane and her next-door neighbor, Dorothy, to open the script. Jane is heard saying:

"So, Dorothy, I think a community victory garden would be just the thing. Don't you?"

"Yes, Jane, I do," answers Dorothy. "I'll help."

And Jane says "Good," at which point Mr. Ace comes home from the office and Jane tells him Dorothy is going to help.

"But how about the other women?" Mr. Ace wants to know. "Surely you and Dorothy can't work that big lot alone."

And Jane says, "If I could only think of a way to make those other women help me with the community victory garden."

And Marge, coming in at this point, says, "Well, Jane, did you get the other women to help you with the community victory garden?"

And Jane tells her she has only Dorothy so far.

"Good for you, Dorothy," says Marge.

"Well, Marge," says Dorothy, "I think we should all help in whatever way we can to win this war. And if digging a community victory garden will do it, I'll do it."

Jane says, "Of course, a community victory garden is only a kick in the bucket, but it'll help. And I'm going to get all the women around here to help dig that garden."

Whereupon Mr. Ace says, "That is easier said than done." He usually gets all the clever lines like that.

But Jane replies, "You just leave it to your Uncle Dulcy. I've got a scheme. I'll have those women eating out of the hollow of my head. And we'll have that community victory garden going quicker than you can say Bill Robinson."

Well, by the end of three broadcasts the listeners know for sure that the Aces are digging a community victory garden. But how Jane is going to get all the other women in the neighborhood to help her dig the garden they don't know—they and Mr. Ace. But Mr. Ace now has the week-end in which to figure out just what scheme it is that Jane has in mind. He has her bury a five-dollar bill in the dirt, and she announces a treasure hunt for five dollars. The women flock to the empty lot loaded down with rakes, shovels, and hoes. But that in itself is too easy; it needs more complications. So the first day's treasure hunt ends almost at once when one of the women unearths the bill and they all scoot for home. That doesn't work out so well. So the next day (another day, another script), Jane announces another five-dollar bill is buried there, and the women dig the entire day. The garden is practically completed when Jane announces she forgot to bury the bill.

But, of course, that technique—the cliff-hanging technique (Remember Pearl White!)—doesn't work at all in a half-hour show. Before any of the story is set to dialogue the writer must have a complete plot—beginning, middle and a satisfactory finish—in mind, and tell it quickly and get to the point.

This may be an easy trick for those who have been writing half-hour stories all their radio lives. As for me, I can't think of any. I know only one thing: the two

basic stories that listeners seem to like most must concern romance or finance. If you can combine both—a poor girl trying to marry a rich man—then so much the better. I know this from fan mail. Why people will sit down and write violent letters about my letting a character who doesn't even exist run around with a rich man, who doesn't exist, because he was divorced from a wife who doesn't exist, and left two children, who don't exist, in Springdale, which doesn't exist, is beyond me. But recently I had a letter from a woman who said she could not condone divorce. And if I wanted her to continue listening to our program I would have to kill off this man rather than have him divorced. Killing is okay.

Well, that is the formula for radio script-writing. It sounds easy. Just think of a story which contains romance or finance. As for me, there are weeks when I can't think of one for love or money.

VIII. WRITING FOR CHILDREN

NILA MACK

NILA MACK is the creative force behind the most famous program for children, *Let's Pretend,* which has been given every award radio has to offer. This year marks its thirteenth anniversary on the air. While the program has been growing older, so has the audience, and the adult fans now vie with the youngsters. Though CBS in New York is Nila's home territory (a charming cubby-hole on the eighteenth floor, lined with pictures of her celebrated alumni), her background is the theatre. She appeared both on the stage and in silent pictures. Her most important movie was *War Brides* with Mme. Nazimova, her last appearance on Broadway in John Golden's play *Eva the Fifth* at the Little Theatre. Children worship her . . . all ages from six to sixty.

WRITING FOR CHILDREN

By Nila Mack

A STRANGE thing has just happened. I slipped this paper into the typewriter, titled it "Writing for Children"—and then it struck me all of a sudden. I don't! When I write it's for people of all ages who enjoy fun and fantasy. No picture comes to mind of pigtails, towheads and hair ribbons, but rather the whole family reading or listening and each one finding something in the story for his own personal enjoyment.

Naturally, there are a number of things to keep in mind. First and foremost is clarity. To achieve it, there is quite a list of musts, beginning with the geography of the scene. The listener must be informed either in the dialogue or by the narration whether it takes place indoors, outdoors, upstairs, downstairs, or in my lady's chamber. And personally, I think, "Well, here we are!" is one of the tiredest lines in radio.

Once the locale of the scene is established, the identity and number of the people taking part should be clearly told. It isn't enough to indicate the characters' names only on the left-hand margin of the manuscript. The listener is not reading from the printed page, nor can he see how many there are as the scene begins. He only hears. And unless it is made clear to him before, he is startled and confused when a new voice comes in range of his ear.

Here is a brief example of how to prevent that from happening. A player who has been in previous scenes and is therefore recognizable will begin: "I have asked you three to come here to my office so that you can hear the boy's story. The matron has him in the outer office. Mrs. Harned, will you sit here?" (She ad-libs a "Thank you.") "Reverend Stewart, will you sit here?" (He throws in a "Thanks.") "And Judge Lowman will sit at my desk, please." (The Judge responds with a "Certainly.") That one speech indicates the scene is in an office, and there are four people in it. Their responses could be much longer than an ad-lib "Thank you," of course, but time is a precious factor in radio, and even though they have said only one or two words, their presence in the play is established and the listener is prepared to hear them, however late they may take part.

Perhaps my most significant bow in writing for children is my earnest effort for simplicity. The montage technique, wherein we'll say a chase is depicted by the sound of a train quickly dissolved into the roar of a plane, followed without break by the motor of a speeding automobile, can be terrifically effective and exciting. But it moves a little too fast and is a little too involved for youngsters, so I try for another way. And always I strive for simplicity of words to tell my story. This last is not my own invention. Mr. R. W. Emerson put down some very effective ideas that way long before I started learning how to write for radio.

Now comes a very important part of a radio program, the sound effects. I have found that children are particularly fascinated by them. But while I employ a lot of them, I'm always on the cautious side, because they can make or break a story pattern.

Few sounds have been truly captured by being recorded. Few retain their complete fidelity when played back on the record turntables. Trains, airplanes, all kinds of whistles, automobile motors, are a few that are not distorted and need no explanation. Yes, I've heard that one about, "If you want the sound of running water, why don't you use the real thing? So they did and it worked. Haw!" It doesn't always. Recordings are made of the real thing, but when they are blended into dialogue, and a proper level obtained to support the voices instead of drowning them, lots of things happen. An approaching subway train could just as well be the roar of an angry sea, yet both recordings were made of the actual sounds. That's why I'm cautious, and I make it my business to give the listener a little hint in the dialogue of what they're about to hear and believe. If the scene demands a crackling fire in the fireplace, the cellophane sequence isn't quite enough for me. I quick-like throw another log on with the first line of the scene. I might not be so explicit in an adult story, but that extra synchronization of sound and dialogue enables the little fellow to follow the story for and by himself without having to ask questions or being embarrassed by somebody talking down to him in answering.

I take a great deal of license in the handling of sound. For instance, I am not of the school who feels there is great drama in "footsteps are heard." There are always exceptions. I remember a dramatization I heard a number of years ago where footsteps told the entire story. I've forgotten its name, or who produced it, but the policeman's steps on the sidewalk as he walked his lonely midnight beat, nearing the scene of the crime, stopping, and then coming on, were very dramatic and

held terrific suspense. But for a scene in a house, I can do without footsteps for the most part. The same goes with a rain effect or high wind. I prefer to establish it clearly at the beginning of the scene, then pull it down to a barely audible level with occasional high spots, rather than clutter the dialogue continuously.

One of the great joys in radio is a good, experienced sound man. I know, because I have them. It takes long training, coupled with imagination, technical skill and quick, sure hands. A newcomer in the field can cause plenty of headaches. Your script calls for a "knock on the door." It takes months before Johnnie-come-lately learns to give you the slightest difference between going into a sickroom and the banging by Paul Revere.

One of the most interesting and hard-working days I've spent at CBS was creating unusual sound effects. Walter Pierson, head of our Sound Department, is a most coöperative fellow. I told him a few of my sound problems. Fortunately for me, he is an imaginative person, for when I spoke of needing the effect of "moonbeams shimmering," a "flying trunk," a "magic carpet," he didn't blink an eye. He only asked what day it would be convenient, set up the studio equipment, and when I arrived, there were ten sound men and Pierson ready to go.

All day we worked. We blended music with manual apparatus. Two or three recordings were mixed into one. The Hammond organ came in for a severe workout. But at the end of the day when we finished, I had a lovely path of moonbeams on which the Princess of the Moon descended to visit her earth parents. I had a flying trunk (on the second-hand side) that flew and zoomed, and when it finally landed and bumped its

way to a stop, it made the audience laugh. I even had a believable, charming sound to use when the Emperor in the story of the *Chinese Nightingale* tied silver bells on every flower in the fabulous garden.

The most amusing incident of the day was when the crew knocked themselves out getting the effect of a million bumblebees being put through a military drill. That was really funny. But when *Drake's Tail* went on the air, he had a bumblebee army that was formidable.

Of course, these sound effects are highly specialized and for the most part useful only in fantasy. And fantasy brings me to my favorite subject. It is extremely interesting to me to see the numerous approaches made by some writers who tackle fantasy, and their conflict between mythical and factual. It seems they go along with it up to a point and then get cold feet. I have in mind an adaptation of *The Happy Prince*. The writer went eye-to-eye with the story as the gold-leafed statue spoke, but when it came to the little swallow flying down to his feet and speaking to him, the writer couldn't take it. His compromise was to give all the lines to the statue and let the swallow fly about his business.

Another treatment of fantasy is one I've had many discussions about and a few heated arguments. The leading character is drawn beautifully and tenderly but is completely mythical. She is, as I see her, a compilation of many faces and personalities created in an artist's mind. Yet at the end of the story, her death at sea is announced in the morning *Times*. My contention is, with that factual stroke, the mythical girl is lost, and the beautiful illusion and mood of the book are destroyed.

One of the most—shall we say startling—approaches to fantasy that I've ever encountered happened to one of

my own scripts. It was during one of the earlier régimes at CBS. One of the more than a little temperamental directors and our boss were having a private feud. I was simply dead tired at the time, so I asked for a vacation. I was amused to hear that during my absence the temperamental director had been assigned to do *Let's Pretend,* of all things!

The day of the broadcast, with a little misgiving, I reached out from my bed and tuned in. It wasn't until I came back that I heard the whole story. It seems that some special lengthy announcement had to precede the program, thereby throwing the timing over, and at a pretty late hour to cut. It was then that my friend had the idea. The scene was the furious battle. On the turret of the castle, the Princess, the King, and the Queen watch with anxiety as the hero's warriors, vastly outnumbered, attack the enemy. And through the dialogue of the three we hear how the battle goes. Then it was that the director leaped to a typewriter, and in a few minutes came back with his masterpiece. He cast one of the faster-talking kids as an announcer. He, in his best Ted Husing air, did the sports commentator's well-known, "He's up, he's down, he's won. Just a moment and we'll try to get the microphone over to the King and Queen. No, we can't get through for the crowds milling around Prince Huberth. Come over to the microphone, Prince. Here he is—the bravest soldier in the kingdom. Prince Huberth!" Cheers, curtain. On the nose for time.

To this day, I'm not sure whether the director wrote that with his tongue in his cheek for me or his thumb on his nose for the boss. But, as I said at the beginning of this, I was up in the country, dead. I had no grave so I just turned over, period.

The world of fantasy allegedly belongs to children. Yet during the years I've worked for and with them, I've seen them get tangled up, too, in their attempts to draw the fine line between fantasy and fact. The results have been interesting and amusing. There was Patricia, about twelve, busily rehearsing her part in the story of *The Goose Girl at the Well.* The other important parts in the story are Falada, the magic horse who speaks, and the wicked servant who betrays the Queen's trust in her. The three set out on their journey at the end of which the Princess is to be married. As she leans over to drink from the stream, she loses the magic handkerchief and that automatically destroys Falada's power. He still is able to speak but can't protect the Princess, whereupon the servant makes her change places and the Princess is forced to assume the role of the servant.

Patricia went along smoothly until that happened, when she suddenly turned to me and said: "Look, if she is a Princess, why wouldn't the Queen send a whole retinue with her and the servant couldn't do that?" My answer was: "I'll furnish a full retinue at my own expense for every talking horse you bring me." The child caught it instantly and laughed at herself. She had accepted fully the premise that the handkerchief was magic and that Falada could speak, but she thought the absence of a retinue pretty irregular.

Again, there was my sound man's eight-year-old son who fancied himself pretty quick on the trigger. He was a *Let's Pretend* fan, partly because he was devoted to the program but mostly so he could criticize his father's work.

After a broadcast of *Faithful John,* he told his father

it was a swell show. He'd liked the three crows talking over and predicting the curse, he approved of John's shooting the horse that would have carried the prince into the clouds, he was sorry that such a good guy had to be turned to stone for so long and was glad when he was able to break the spell of enchantment, *but*—and then he began teasing his father. "A fine thing you did, pulling that whistle on the boat." "What's the matter with that?" his father asked. "Why," he said, "they didn't have steam whistles in those days!" His father said, "In *what* days?" Junior checked back over what he'd heard and accepted, then took the count.

There is one person who doesn't get cold feet when dealing with fantasy and that is Disney. When he starts, he sees it through. That's one of the reasons everybody loved *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. As long as I have a memory I'll never forget the scene in which the baby bluebirds sang their song and hit a very sour note, whereupon their proud parents turned crimson with shame and humiliation. Or, when Snow White said she had no mother, and the deer pulled her baby fawn over to her and gave him a few tender licks to tell him he was secure and safe. Now maybe a four-year-old wouldn't catch those lovely touches, but there were plenty of other things to keep him interested. And those same touches were probably the reason youngsters couldn't get near the theatres because of the adults jamming the doors.

That's the way I like to aim when writing for children.

IX. WARTIME PROGRAMS

RANALD R. MACDOUGALL

RANALD R. MACDOUGALL became famous coast-to-coast as the writer of *The 22nd Letter* and *The Man Behind the Gun*. When we asked him for some facts about his background, he submitted the following, which we print with great delight in its entirety:

At the age of fifteen I left high school to become a Western Union messenger. At seventeen I became a punch press operator in a leather factory, and held this job for two miserable years. Also during this period I began writing fairly humorous poetry for fairly humorous magazines of the *College Humor* type, and during what little spare time I had, played a good deal of water polo. All these things combined gave me a walloping case of double pneumonia at the age of nineteen, following which I went to Florida in search of a warmer climate. I found it, and remained there for some time, working as a commercial fisherman, a waiter, a grapefruit peeler in a canning factory, and as a bookkeeper.

After this I returned to New York, determined to make a profession of writing. I was twenty years old and had a heavy tan. The tan secured me a job as usher in the Radio City Music Hall, and while it lasted I was on display in the main lobby just as you come in. I was the young man who said, "The elevators are at the end of the lobby and to your *left*, please," or as an antidote to monotony I occasionally used the phrase, "There is immediate seating on all mezzanine floors, please," accompanying this information with a graceful wave of the left arm across the body. If you saw any of the pictures at the Music Hall between *Showboat*, starring Irene Dunne, and *Top Hat*, starring Fred Astaire, I was the usher who told you where the hell to go. With the gradual disappearance of my healthy look, I was pushed farther and farther into the background at the Music Hall, finally winding up as operator on the backstage elevators, and then out on the street.

I walked across the street to the National Broadcasting Company and was given a job as mimeograph operator. This necessitated running off hundreds of radio scripts. Inadvertently I read a few and became convinced that I could do as well. In fact, I was convinced that no one with a passable command of the English language could possibly do worse. So I began writing radio scripts. The rest is history, of a particularly dull sort.

I am now twenty-eight, and a writer at Warner Brothers. I like it; it's much better than being an usher at the Radio City Music Hall.

DOCUMENTARIES FOR CIVILIANS: THE MAN BEHIND THE MAN BEHIND THE GUN

By Ranald R. MacDougall

DOCUMENTARY radio programs may be roughly divided into two groups: those that are good, and those that are not. In a general sense, the student of such matters will find that the more closely the writer of documentary programs works with an educator, the less likelihood there is of the result being good. There are various reasons for this, the foremost being that the professional educator is more occupied with instruction than with entertainment. It is useless for the writer to plead that a certain amount of entertainment should be used as a sugar coating for the pill of knowledge. The educator will immediately produce thousands of letters from teachers in Green Pond, New Jersey, all stating in firm tones that the program is doing a wonderful work and should be continued exactly as is. The program is therefore continued exactly as is, year after year. No doubt this brings much pleasure to the educator, and to the thousands of teachers who all seem to live in Green Pond, New Jersey. Unfortunately, however, the general public is not listening. The radio loudspeaker is not at all like a school-room. In the school-room your pupils are held down to their desks by the entire weight of society. Playing truant requires a certain amount of

imagination, courage, and the physical effort of overcoming inertia and the fear of reprisal. Let a radio listener, on the other hand, hear something to the effect that in 1834, a man named James Watson discovered the principle of the delayed action quotient of electrical impulses, and the radio listener immediately has an electrical impulse all his own to tune in Jack Benny. This is very discouraging to the writer of the educational program who beat his brains out trying to work Watson's discovery into the script in a logical and conversational manner. The fact that the writer himself is probably listening to Jack Benny also does nothing to alleviate that feeling of pouring beautiful prose into a vacuum. Nor is the writer led to inspiration by the attitude of the radio network itself. Documentary programs come under the heading of public service, and although generous with both time and money in work of a public service nature, the networks are perhaps understandably reluctant to give the best of one or much of the other to programs that will not produce revenue. Seemingly, at times, the networks are content merely to list their educational programs in impressive booklets, without caring particularly that these programs are not being listened to by the public they are meant to serve.

The situation has existed for years and continues to exist. It has been aggravated in recent years by the inflexible limitations of seventeen broadcast hours per day and the wild scrambling of sponsors to secure the best hours or get as close to them as possible. As a result, the educational program has gradually come to be heard earlier and earlier in the day, and later and later at night. And customarily, with the endless jockeying of time that goes on within the radio industry, it is

the educational program that gets moved, either to another time and day, or off the air entirely.

An example of this was *The Man Behind the Gun*, which, although it had achieved as much popularity as any documentary program ever presented, was moved three times in twenty-six weeks, and twice more afterwards. This is not an isolated example.

In spite of these drawbacks, or perhaps because of them, some of the most imaginative and stimulating work being done in radio today is that in the field of documentary writing. Without a large budget to permit the use of name stars, a huge orchestra and the other appurtenances of the big-time commercial program, the documentary writer is forced to wrest his audience from nothingness by sheer ingenuity and imagination. As a result, those documentary-educational-propaganda programs which are good are very good indeed and represent more than any other dramatic offerings on the air the endless potentialities and progress of specialized radio writing. Faced with the problem of saying something important in an important manner, the documentary writer has created for radio an entirely new literature and art form.

Good writing is good writing, and there is a certain affinity between the various forms of the spoken word such as radio, the stage and motion pictures. Documentary radio programs, on the other hand, can be and very often are unique to the medium. This is largely a matter of technique.

In the early days of documentary radio writing, and even to this day, the technique of such programs was to engage a narrator with chest tones and surround him with eager actors who leaped to the microphone from

time to time, said something of a fairly human nature and then retired to the background while the narrator carried on as though he had never been interrupted.

Gradually, as a certain sameness crept into educational programs, the narrator began to assume various weird and wonderful disguises. He became Mr. Citizen, or Joe Public, or the Man Next Door, or perhaps, in an extreme case, Mrs. Housewife. The next great step in the development of the narrator, and through him the quality of educational programs, was the use of an alter ego. Narrator One would start to say something and leave his sentence hanging in mid-air. Narrator Two would then leap in with a determined baritone voice and put the finishing touches to the sentence. After a time it became a rather common occurrence for even the simplest sentence to be divided up among four or five men. But in spite of his false beard it was always possible to recognize the narrator. He was the man who told you what year it was that Watson discovered whatever it was he discovered, in.

Inept as this fumbling was, it indicated that the documentary writer was searching for methods of giving speed and lift to what might otherwise be dull, unadorned information, and gradually he succeeded. Today there are as many methods of disseminating information on the air as there are subjects, and techniques vary according to necessity. Poetry is used, or blank verse, or the sort of first person singular narration that made Orson Welles famous. In extreme cases, extreme methods have been used. In writing of a surrealist artist's life, one writer did a surrealist radio program. The result was well worth the effort.

The Man Behind the Gun program has been out-

standing among documentary programs of recent years, largely by virtue of widespread publicity and fortuitous timing. It might be interesting to examine the physical history of the program.

It began as an offshoot of *This Is War,* first and greatest of the radio programs devoted to the war. One of these programs concerned itself with the Air Force and featured an eavesdropper technique. That is, the listener was placed in the position of accompanying a bomber on a specific mission and was permitted to overhear the ordinary technical conversations and directions attendant to such a flight. Amazingly, this "Army 24987 to tower. Requesting take-off clearance" sort of chatter proved enormously interesting to the radio listener. It gave him, too, a clearer understanding of the complexities and scientific exactness of modern warfare. With this in mind, an entire series of such programs was plotted out. The series was to concern itself with the operation of such implements of war as submarines, tanks, aircraft carriers, and so on. It went on the air, without notice or fanfare.

Quite by accident, during the writing of the third program, the "you" technique was discovered. Instead of the conventional narration to the effect that "the radio man listens on his earphones, waiting for a report from the scouting force," it was found that a more personalized narration was incredibly more dramatic and interesting. Thus, "You're sitting there, with the earphones digging into your skull, waiting and listening . . . listening for the sound of a circuit key being opened somewhere in the thousands of miles of sky all around you . . . waiting for the sound of static . . . the sound of the scouting force calling you. And

the sweat drips down your forehead and into your eyes, and the earphones weigh a ton and are digging into your skull an inch at a time, and still no sound. No sound anywhere."

That this narrative technique was impressive and successful became apparent immediately, in the number of imitative programs that suddenly came into being. Fortunately for the unique nature of the original, the imitators had not the same background of material. In order to do the programs authentically it had long been necessary for both the writer and the producer of *The Man Behind the Gun* to visit army camps and naval bases all over the country, gathering material, sound effects, and local color. Naturally enough, this week-to-week traveling and the necessity of returning to New York after each trip in order to put on the program, put a severe strain on both writer and producer. Many of the programs, if not most of them, were written on trains, airplanes, and in one case on a PT boat headed for New York at an incredible speed. The producer, in turn, faced with the necessity of creating sound effects not then in existence, had to make use of some astounding substitutes for the real thing. In one case, for example, the sound of a destroyer dropping depth charges was created by playing the record of a cement mixing machine at 33⅓ revolutions instead of the usual 78 of the ordinary phonograph. On one occasion, too, it took several hours of experimentation to discover that the nearest approximation to the noise of a parachute snapping open was a piece of silk being snapped in front of the microphone. Little wonder that sound men have nervous breakdowns at the mere mention of the *Man Behind the Gun* program.

One of the distinctive facets of the series is a liberal use of authentic slang and terminology. The word "Snafu" was used for three months before the network censors discovered its meaning. Likewise, such expressions as "She was stacked up like a brick courthouse" were in common usage on the program for a considerable time. These euphemisms were useful in giving the program a certain outdoor flavor and a man-to-man authenticity. Incidentally, they sometimes created havoc among the actors on the program. Several of the actors particularly, who were notoriously susceptible to a "break up" on the air, dreaded being given any of these whitewashed lines. Invariably they would dissolve in helpless laughter and have to be carried away from the microphone. This happened with considerable frequency, and not always because of the presence of sordid implications in a line. One of the lines that gave the most trouble to the entire cast, and became greatly famous because of it, was contained in a plaintive speech by a sailor aboard the aircraft carrier *Yorktown*. He has just returned from a shore leave during which he had been given a grass skirt as a souvenir, and he is thinking wistfully of his girl friend back home wearing it. He says, "Boy! Imagine Consuela Schlepkiss in a grass skirt, walking down Flatbush Avenoo." The actor never, either in rehearsals or on the air, got past Consuela Schlepkiss.

So it may be seen that writing documentary radio programs is not necessarily a one-way street toward insanity. It can be fun, and what is most important, the result can be not only instructive but highly entertaining to the listener. This becomes increasingly important in terms of radio's service to the

public. Only by striving for a maximum audience can radio do a good job of instructing and educating the people it serves. That these people want instruction and welcome it is no longer in doubt since the beginning of the war. Radio has assumed in the public mind a stature and responsibility and connection with the war effort that no other medium can claim. It is to be hoped that radio will recognize equally its responsibility in shaping and preserving the peace to come. Documentary programs of an honest, uninhibited, and thoroughly international nature would do much to assure the understanding by the general public of the causes for which we fight and the peace that we should desire. For many years now, radio has not permitted the use of the word "fascist" as a generic term. The only logical explanation for this is a fear of offending fascists. It is time for radio to formulate an editorial and educational policy that will not admit of such wishy-washy tendencies. Radio has come of age. It should cast its vote.

JEROME LAWRENCE

JEROME LAWRENCE is one of radio's most prolific writer-producers. He has written for almost all of the major dramatic programs on the air, and boasts a five-foot shelf of his bound scripts. He was a Phi Bete at Ohio State University (used the key once for a nail cleaner and then tossed it into a safe deposit box), worked on newspapers awhile, wrote a kids' book called *Oscar the Ostrich,* sweated out his apprenticeship in small stations, worked as a writer on a network staff, worked in pictures for a spell. His radio credits include *Columbia Workshop, They Live Forever, Screen Guild Theatre,* the *Orson Welles Show, A Date with Judy, Free World Theatre,* and many others. For the past two years he has concentrated on writing for troops, and is a pioneer in the field of radio orientation. In his overseas writing, he has written material for just about every star in the business, from Ronald Colman to Gypsy Rose Lee.

WRITING FOR TROOPS: THE TYPEWRITER GOES TRAVELING

By Jerome Lawrence

An Army writer sitting in a padded cubicle puts a piece of paper into his typewriter. Within a very few days, the thoughts he thinks and the words he writes will be heard in New Guinea, Kiska, China, Italy, Australia, India, Iceland, everywhere American troops are stationed. This is certainly the greatest thrill in the world to a radio writer, to any kind of writer.

Eleven years ago, when my first script was broadcast over a little station in southern Ohio, I pictured people listening to my story in living-rooms all over Franklin County.

I was sure I was talking to the world.

When I graduated to the networks and my first script was broadcast coast-to-coast, Franklin County became forty-eight states. What more could a radio writer ask?

And then I graduated to international radio, and forty-eight states became a world. The Franklin County living-rooms became fox-holes and slit trenches, nissen huts and shelter-halves.

This all has been made possible by the Armed Forces Radio Service of the Morale Services Division of the United States Army. In this war, radio has followed the serviceman around the world. Thousands of transcriptions have gone out every week, to be broadcast short-

wave from America, as well as long-wave over stations set up in Casablanca and Cairo, New Guinea and New Caledonia, Chungking and New Delhi, in approximately four hundred spots on the surface of the globe.

We have learned a great many things writing for troops, certain fundamentals which we will all certainly carry over into civilian radio after the war. I pass them on to you for what they are worth.

The myth of an audience composed of morons has been exploded for all time. We have learned that you can't talk down to a soldier audience. You can't say to yourself, as you sit down to your typewriter, "Well, I'll put my common sense and education on the shelf and come down to the level of a ten-year-old." This cross-section of American life doesn't like being talked to like ten-year-olds. They're adult men fighting an adult war, and they have no liking for the pompous voice—or the pompous writer behind the pompous voice—who condescends to talk down to them.

In short, you must be absolutely honest in your approach. They'll spot a phony every time. There's no room, either, for the "guess-work" writer. You've got to know the facts. If you're writing about infantrymen, and you start talking about a rifle they never heard of, even though it's the only slip in an entire script, they'll disbelieve everything else you say. Remember, you're writing for experts. You have to be an expert yourself.

In writing for troops, we've found that we have to forget many of the tricks of artifice we learned in commercial radio. The most successful programs are the ones that are simple, honest, direct, with a lack of histrionics. The best approach, we have found, is the straightforward approach: guys talking to guys.

But there's one art we have learned: the art of understatement. This is a war that is being fought by men who are not hammy. They express their emotions simply. "I'm okay," or "Good fight," is what they say. The writer who attempts to turn this quiet valor into purple passages will fall flat on his face. You'll be a lot more honest, a lot more accurate, and certainly more effective if you play your piece muted and pianissimo, instead of with a brass band blaring. We're talking about typewriter-music.

We have also learned about what we call "personalization." This is the secret behind the most popular Armed Forces Radio Service program, *Command Performance.* This is simply a specific approach to a specific group. *Command Performance* is a program consisting of anything that is asked for by servicemen in any part of the world. The acts, the music, the numbers requested are directed to these groups and individuals. "This," says Bob Hope, or Bing Crosby, or Dinah Shore, "is for you, Jim, and for Skeeter and Mushmouth at APO 696. . . . We're riding a G.I. beam to you Jungle Mudders in Panama . . . and to the whole mess crew at the Coast Guard Station at FPO 54." This is as fundamental an approach as *Milkman's Matinee* or *Hank, the Night Watchman*—record-spinning programs where numbers are dedicated to Joe and Mabel and the boys in the back room at Barney's Beanery. Yet *Command Performance* has proved the fundamental audience pull of this approach. It's audience participation, taken one step beyond the studio. It's audience participation in foxholes and on cruisers and on coral islands.

Somebody said a long time ago that the most effective radio was one person talking to one person. That's what

we mean when we talk about "personalization." We have used this technique in almost all our programs to troops overseas. We never feel we're talking to thousands or millions of men at once. When we put a sheet of paper into our typewriters—we think of *one guy* listening. We aim for his ears.

Though the majority of our overseas programs have been entertainment, we have done a great many information programs, such as *Know Your Ally, Know Your Enemy,* and dramatized reports from the battlefronts of the world. We have also done many specific jobs. For example, a recording was needed on malaria, with hints to the men on how they could best prevent it. This was a radio "natural." We have also invented a new art-form: the training transcription, a half-brother to the training film.

On almost all these we have used what we call the "loose documentary form." This is a narrative form and is strictly uninhibited radio, cutting loose and doing what it wants to do. Here, more than in any other treatment, we realize that radio has wings. It has no stage to keep it within the limits of a proscenium arch, no camera to confine it to things that may be seen. The imagination of the listener is our most ardent and helpful collaborator. For example, in *Know Your Ally: Great Britain,* we wanted to give our listener a picture of England as seen from the air. So the narrator simply said:

NARRATOR: How does England look from the air? You . . . you're a bomber pilot . . . and right now you're flying over the English Midlands.

With a sweep of music, our listener is in the air. He's *actually* flying with us toward the Kent and Sussex

coasts, over the great silver marker, the white cliffs of Dover.

Or, for example, in *Report from the Aleutians*, we wanted to illustrate the weather. Here is how we did it:

NARRATOR: Brother, the men in the Aleutians have another enemy besides the Japs . . . *the weather.* Consider, for example, the Williwaw. One Williwaw, please. . . .

(*Sound: High cold wind, an actual sound-record taken in the Aleutians.*)

NARRATOR: (*talking over the wind*) Mister, that might sound cold, but you oughta get the feel of it, cutting through the seat of your fatigues. It ain't no sun-kissed breeze! A Williwaw—and we don't need Mr. Webster to give us a definition—is two-thirds of a hurricane, four-fifths of a sleet storm, nine-tenths of a tornado, all added together and stuck in a mud-hole. It whips up at a minute's notice and creates the worst kind of cold hell you ever saw. Okay, that's enough Williwaw for now.

(*Sound: Cuts*)

The most logical premise for *Know Your Ally: Great Britain* was the mistaken notion Americans have about the British, and vice versa. We simply made a couple of members of our unseen audience speak up, like this:

NARRATOR: What about Tommy? What do you know about him really? *You*, soldier, what do you know about the British?

SOLDIER: (*vaguely*) Gee whiz, I dunno. Uh . . . they're kinda stand-offish—and they talk sorta snooty . . . and they take a week to catch on to a joke . . . that's what I heard anyhow. . . . And, well, I guess that's all I know about them, really.

NARRATOR: Uh-huh. That's about the size of it. And do you know what the average British soldier used to think of you? Listen. . . .

BRITISH SOLDIER: Well . . . I'd say Americans spend the majority of their time shooting each other—or kissing each other. Lots of cowboys and Indians, and refrigerators and things. . . .

NARRATOR: Uh-huh. And we're as wrong about them as they are about us.*

The script then proceeds to clear up these misconceptions. And those soldiers? We didn't have to establish them as characters or introduce them. We merely had to tune them in, call them up. The listener suddenly hears himself speak.

There are many ways to use this documentary form. There's a frankness in this approach, a directness, and yet it has all the go-anywhere feeling of fantasy. Watch out for one thing. In your delight with the freedom of the medium, don't overdo it. A well-constructed, fully-dialogued, soundly-plotted radio play is just as important a part of the radio picture. I might add, parenthetically, that the loose documentary is the easiest kind of radio writing. But don't let the easiness of it allow you to lose a building tempo, a rising action, a logical point-making purpose in your total script. A loose documentary may have charm and power. It may also have sloppiness and lack of backbone.

Writing for troops entails tremendous responsibility. It is no mere passing fancy for a bored commercial writer. That guy you're talking to is no toothpaste prospect! He's a man who happens to have given up everything he values to protect a way of living he believes in and to pull triggers against a great evil. You have to *respect* that guy. You can't cram eyewash down his gullet. He wants no glad-handing and mighty little orientation, and what he gets must be *strictly on the*

* These examples are given simply as examples. The implication should not be that we consider these techniques new or original. If we were to salute the father of this form, we would say, "All hail Corwin!" Or, for that matter, "All hail the Greek Chorus!"

level. Mostly, he wants as much of home as can be crammed into a microphone.

You've got to have dirty hands to type a script for guys overseas. These listeners are immeasurably the most important audience in the world. *Immeasurably.* They've got to get it straight because they just happen to be dying.

You, sponsor, with your finger on the radio and television pulse of tomorrow, do you want a perfect sample of the changing and expanding tastes of your listeners? Then find out what that serviceman likes right now. Remember his hatred for the phony. Remember his respect for fact. He knows that the Nazis and Japanese have been dishing out radio garbage, the worst kind of untruth. He's going to be wary of the same type of dishonesty if he ever spots it on domestic radio—and he'll have none of it!

That serviceman is also going to come home wanting to hear many of the stars and programs he heard during the war, and he's going to return with a more international outlook than he ever had before. Radio of tomorrow must span the world, not merely for news pick-ups, but for entertainment: from Paris, from Cairo, from Sydney.

The radio writer who is not keeping up with the world is committing a species of literary hara-kiri. Radio is a medium of *now.* The radio writer who lets the war pass him by will find himself out on a strange limb when the war is over. Millions of men will come back, talking a language he doesn't understand, wanting a radio approach he doesn't know how to give them. There are many ways that radio writers not in uniform can remain aware: by following the news (the correspondents

of this war are writing inspiredly), by dwelling on war themes occasionally, in a fighting, honest way.

There are many ways to fight a war; there are many ways to fight a peace. The man behind the typewriter shoots bullets, too.

BOB WELCH

Bob Welch started out in life, according to him, as a very young man. And it's doubtful whether he'll ever grow old. He has been producer-director of some of the Nation's top radio shows, among them, *Fred Allen, Kate Smith, Eddie Cantor, The Aldrich Family,* and *Jack Benny.* Welch is very often heard at least ten minutes before he's seen. He has a laugh that can be favorably compared to the noise given off by a female hyena, who has just been nuzzled by a male hyena, who didn't trim his mustache. It sounds something like *"Hee hee, ha ha, ho ho."* Confronted with the question, "What do you think of comedy?" Welch answered, "I think it's very funny." Frankly, for years Bob has been helping to make audiences from coast to coast go *"Hee hee, ha ha, ho ho."*

G.I. HUMOR

By Bob Welch

THE first big comedy program I did from an Army camp laid an omelette complete with chicken livers. This was before Pearl Harbor. On the morning of the show, the entire troupe set out for the camp, including orchestra, cast, script, and (we thought) the usual quota of belly laughs. The program went on the air at six-thirty, and at six minutes of seven we had reached the last page of the script. We had allowed the usual "stretch" for laughs. Well do I remember a chuckle from a PFC in the first row. We later found out he was laughing at something he had heard on a different network earlier in the week.

The following morning, gloom was spontaneous. There is no sadder sight in the world than the face of a funny man the morning after the night he wasn't funny. As in all post mortems, we realized that "something was wrong somewhere." We reviewed the jokes in the script and even had a few polite titters among ourselves. It was then that we realized that, though this would have been an above-average show for a normally mixed audience, it wasn't on the beam for a G.I. audience.

The next time we decided to broadcast from a camp, I went there well in advance. I mixed with the enlisted men, found out what their pet likes and dislikes were, and in general "cased the joint." Our show at that camp

had them in the aisles, but not walking out.

Let's face it, boys. There are going to be G.I.'s around for a long time. We might as well find out what provokes their laughter and what merely provokes them. In short, what makes Uncle Sammy run? What happens to that serviceman's laughter glands? (Which, for obvious reasons, we shall call the Joe Miller glands.) A writer ought to know these things: for patriotic reasons and for economic reasons.

From the very moment you board a train for your induction station, with your little bag of non-essential gadgets which your well-meaning friends have told you to be *sure* to take, something chemical starts happening. There's a new acid in everybody's blood, caused by a strange combination of fear, worry, nervousness, and excitement. A few seconds later, however, a soldier with an arm band which seems to scream out, "I am a dirty so-and-so and I am out to get every one of you guys!" walks through the car.

As with Americans always, the hundred or so human beings on the train are at once banded together. Who will be the first brave soul to mumble as this monster goes by, "Oh, yeah!"—or some other red-blooded remark? As the door to the coach closes, an uproar goes up among the occupants. Language such as no one has ever heard fills the smoke car. Mob psychology has come into play. You have a common enemy.

At the very first stop the train makes, you can't wait to stick your head out of the window and holler at girls. You know for sure now that the Army is in your blood. And you are striving to prove to each other that you are "ready."

Is it any wonder that, having the course of your blood-

stream rerouted, your reactions to things are going to change? Perhaps without your knowing it, but they will change.

You will sit down to your first meal, and though it might consist of steak, potatoes and gravy, ice cream and coffee, you will join the others in a group gripe session to the effect that "The cook is a bum! He couldn't boil an egg! . . . That was no cow meat, it was a gopher! . . . The gravy was borrowed from the dispensary. . . . And the coffee? Why, you know for a fact that they put at least three teaspoonfuls of that stuff in each cup!"

With all this, the G.I. is laughing. He doesn't know it, maybe, but he is having a hell of a good laugh out of the names he is calling chipped beef on toast. And if he happens to be able to make up a few himself, he is practically a "wit," according to his tent-mates. I have heard Irish Stew called everything from "De Valera's Dilemma" to "Spuds with Slop." And strange as it may seem, the G.I. laughs like the devil and eats twice as much. It's not at all unappetizing to walk into mess and, as you ask an early bird, "What's today's slop?" get an answer like, "Cow leavings with onions!"

From the very first day, you mustn't refer to anything by its real name. If you do, you're a long hair.

The medico is "Saw Bones." An officer is a "gentleman by act of Congress." A PT boat is a "pewter scooter." A top sergeant is "the Devil's disciple," and lots else. But with it all, the G.I.'s are brought closer and closer together. A common gripe unites them, and that gripe can be anything from a top sergeant to a saucer of powdered eggs and turnip greens.

And the laughs get bigger and bigger.

G.I.'s like to have their humor apply to something

about them. Here is a typical joke which, if told to a Marine camp, will have all the enlisted men lying on the floor. Not that it's so terribly funny, but it stresses the point that the Marines have a very strong bond between each other, and they like to have people know it.

FIRST MARINE: Hey, Jack, I wonder if you have time to run down to the saloon? One of our boys is having a brawl with thirty-five sailors.

SECOND MARINE: Well, what the hell? Can't he take care of that many by himself?

FIRST MARINE: Sure. But he's getting hot. He wants someone he can *trust* to hold his coat.

There is a good reason for Bob Hope's success with G.I.'s. If you recall, his first spot is almost invariably built around the boys in whatever camp he is appearing. If he's at an air base, he will most surely have at least one joke that starts out, "Those planes are so fast that . . ." or "These pilots learn to fly so quick that . . ." And, knowing that the majority of the "inmates" are restricted to the post for periods of six or more weeks, he invariably includes a joke or two about what happened when a girl walked into the PX the other day. The Colonna spot and the guest spot follow the same pattern.

On the other hand, an intimate show, built on some flimsy situation which to an air audience would be delightful, might smell up the joint, as the saying goes, to an auditorium full of young guys who have been up to the seats of their fatigues in hard work all week. G.I.'s seem to want to laugh like the devil from the moment they enter a hall till the M.P.'s usher them out.

So, as we started to say a couple of pages back, the comedian is wiser today when he heads for a camp. He

calls his writers together and "builds" a different type of show. He finds out some of the local color: where the soldier spends his spare time, the names of some of the more unpopular non-coms, where the G.I. gets gypped. He will then adapt or "switch" a joke so that the soldier gets the impression that it is being directed at him.

Take, for example, a mythical camp. We shall call it "Camp Short." Let's say there is a bar in town where 3.2 beer costs eighty cents a glass. Its name is the Sunset Grill. The soldiers consider it a gyp joint, but there's no place else to go on a six-hour pass. Why not use this in a joke?

Let's say the line is: "Funny thing happened on my way to Camp Short. I stopped in at the Sunset Grill for a short beer. I handed the bartender a dollar bill and said, 'Keep the change!' The bartender said: 'What change? You owe me another quarter!' "

Here again we have the G.I.'s banded together and getting a laugh at the expense of a common enemy, in this case the Sunset Grill.

In building a spot, we don't forget that there are plenty of "don'ts." Just as in building a show for a strictly civilian audience you must stay within the confines of good taste, so it is with the G.I. A soldier's rifle, for instance, is his insurance policy. He wants you to know that it's the best darned rifle made. A joke about his rifle "shooting around corners, like a dog leg on a golf course," would be in bad taste as far as he is concerned. Same holds with jokes about the blood bank, or ambulance crews, or rationing. It is wise not to joke about the soldier's girl running around at home with 4-F's. He has a lean resentment for most young men who are still running around the states in pin-stripes,

but this resentment can build into repulsive proportions if we egg it on.

At the same time, remember that there are quite a few million civilians listening. Don't, just for the sake of a few gags, give the impression that the average soldier, sailor, or marine is sex mad or stupid. Let's face it, our service men are no dopes.

All these points we have mentioned gain in magnitude when we design comedy material for troops overseas. What was a "camp" suddenly becomes an area, an island, or a theatre of war. You can make a fox-hole ring with laughter with the same formula for G.I. humor. Talk *to* him and talk *about* him. A soldier who has just returned after twenty-four hours of front-line duty in a fox-hole would probably get a huge belt hearing this gag:

PRIVATE: Hey, Sarge. I dug my fox-hole. Now where do I put the dirt?
SERGEANT: Simple. Dig another hole and dump it in.

Many an old Army man will bear me out when I say that, though according to the popular expression, an Army travels on its belly, a few belly laughs help too. Laughter helps a tense soldier unwind and helps him return to the front lines a better fighting man.

But nobody can set himself up as an *all-time* authority on G.I. humor. Today's laugh might be tomorrow's tragedy. So stay on the beam. Stay hep to the headlines. These are *young* men you're writing for, so you can't afford to grow old. Talk his language, no matter what he does to it.

In closing, may I add a few words of advice on comedy

writing? Please keep this confidential—it's a trade secret:

Shop around until you find a typewriter with a terrific sense of humor.

X. WRITING FOR TELEVISION

ROBERT E. LEE

ROBERT E. LEE is the author of the definitive book on television, *Television: the Revolutionary Industry*. In four years as producer with the advertising agency of Young & Rubicam, he ran the gamut from soap operas to *The March of Time* and *Screen Guild Theatre*. As a free-lance writer, Lee has scripted for *Columbia Workshop*, the *Kate Smith Hour*, *Orson Welles*, and scores of other network shows. He was one of the founders of the War Department's vast overseas radio service. At this writing, Lee is booked for a long run with the U.S. Army Air Forces. Agent's note: he'll collect his own commission!

VIDEO—THE CHALLENGE

By Robert E. Lee

Most of today's television programs aren't written. They just happen. This is really no one's fault, for the energy which might have gone into creating material for the infant industry has been wisely channeled into more essential war tasks. But after the war, television is going to be big. It is going to demand the best writing talent in the entertainment industry. On which side the television writer will part his hair, if he has any, is a matter of conjecture only. But there are a number of aspects of television writing about which we can conjecture, even at this early date, with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Television writers will probably fall into two main categories: those who write original fiction for video adaptation; and the television craftsmen, whose typewriters draw the actual blueprints for visual broadcasts.

These two categories have their parallels in today's motion-picture studio: on the one hand, the writers who prepare original stories for the screen, and on the other, the scenarists, who translate stories (their own, and others') into scenes which can be photographed, dialogue which records. The same division will no doubt hold among the men who fuel the telecameras which will ultimately light millions of sight-radio-receivers across the nation.

The writer who dreams up originals for translation into the video language has the less important and less interesting job. For the fascination of television writing lies in its new technique—in exploring methods of circumventing its shortcomings and exploiting the dramatic usages of the new art. But one can, if he likes, let someone else worry about specifics and simply write sound, dramatic fiction. Whether it's told as a Greek play or a Looneytune, a good story is a good story. And television will buy.

Often, the telefiction writer may successfully approach the sight-radio market obliquely—shaping his stories for magazine publication or for legitimate theatre, with an eye to selling television rights later on. However, the stories which video buys out of other media will differ in this respect from those which attract the movie-story shopper: the time parcels in visual broadcast will, more than likely, conform to the fifteen-, thirty- and sixty-minute pattern established in sound radio. This means that tele will be interested in short stories rather than novels, in one-acters rather than full-length plays.

But the creative artist on whom the industry will place the highest premium is the man who can turn out a script, in broadcastable form, which will "purr" before the telecameras. His work is cut out for him. The video playwright must be more than a writer. He must *know* the whole gamut of television—what is easy and what is difficult, what is possible and impossible. He must be, first and foremost, a writer, but beyond that, he must understand the peculiarities of electronic photography, the scope and limitations of sight transmission. Above all, he must appreciate the difficulties present on the

television sound-stage—the enormous flexibilities (and handicaps) of video's producers, stage-managers, actors, musicians, engineers. All this knowledge must be combined in the writer's brain, in order that he may put down on paper the words and movement which will make fullest use of video's sweep and power.

It's apparent, then, that the real television writer doesn't have any "ivory tower" job. He has to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty, right on the tele set. Like the reporter whose blood-pressure goes up with the smell of printer's ink, the man who writes for television will get a boot out of the mechanics of his medium. He has the world's most lavish and complex Tinker Toy outfit to play with, and he'll want to know how all the blocks fit together, in order to build along the most interesting and varied lines.

If you're expecting a neat list of "do's" and "don'ts" for television writing, this chapter will be a disappointment. There aren't any. Not that would be valid for more than fifteen minutes. This technique of television is—and will continue to be—in a highly fluid state. It won't stick to rules. It's spontaneous. There are a great many things that video can't do today that it will be able to do tomorrow. And some techniques which are accepted procedure this year will be outmoded next—because you or I or some youngster back from New Guinea has thought up a better way of doing it. Television production will not—we hope, never—admit of standardization.

How, then, will a newcomer learn to be a television writer? Certainly not by reading a book. We hope this will prove helpful in orienting prospective video writers concerning the terrain of the new industry, and it may

guide their thinking. But the way to become a television playwright lies in the path of becoming, first, a writer. Experience in writing for sound broadcasting —first over local stations, later for the commercial network shows—will be invaluable. Then the man who sincerely wants to learn to write for television will desert his typewriter for six months or so and go to work for a television production organization. He'll keep his eyes and ears open, observe everything which goes on to make the tele production tick. He'll observe what he thinks is bad video writing, what seems to be good, how it might be improved. Then, after he's immersed himself in sight-broadcasting, after he knows whereof he speaks, the prospective scripter will go back to his typewriter and turn out something tailored to the medium.

Here are a few conclusions that a neophyte may draw from observing on a commercial television set. He can expect to see frequent and extensive use of the motion-picture camera as an aid to the iconoscope. A great deal of video drama will be photographed first, broadcast later. At least, electronic and chemical photography will combine to give the television writer more scope, more ubiquity, more time-depth to work with. Problems of instantaneous video connections will no doubt foster a linking of television stations into film networks first, relay or cable systems later. An untiring effort must be made to create a form of expression in television which is *totally different* from present-day movies. Otherwise, video may become nothing more than a poor carbon copy of today's Hollywood. And the film industry may be depended upon to fight such a development tooth and claw. It's up to the writers to make the material of sight-broadcasting fresh and new and different, to step

on as few cinematic toes as possible and to build in television a truly new art.

The writer who is receiving his first introduction to television will observe three specific types of handicaps. First are the physical handicaps, imposed by a lack of space and lack of time to work. Scene changes, revisions of costume and make-up, entrances and exits must all be written with an eye to the physical requirements of the sound stages in use. Often we can skirt these most harassing physical problems by prephotographing. But under any circumstances, they must be taken into account.

Second are the optical handicaps, which may soon be largely overcome. Because of the size of the television mosaic, the optical system of a telecamera uses larger apertures and longer focal lengths than the standard 35 mm. motion-picture camera. These require more careful, and sometimes more strenuous, lighting, and it means that the *depth of focus* of the present-day iconoscope is severely restricted at short ranges. There is only a narrow plane before the lens which can be kept sharply in focus at a given time; the action must take place within that plane. This limits freedom of movement and requires a great deal of consideration in the plotting of business. When we learn to focus the cathode beam more sharply, we may be able to reduce the size of the mosaic and overcome this handicap. However, it is a restriction which must be considered by the television writer; it is obvious that, to understand such a problem fully, the writer must have grappled with it *on the set*. Vicarious experience won't be of much value.

The third handicap is inherent in the electronics of scanning. Video is a technical trick, the same as motion

pictures. We must learn exactly how the tricks are done, from a scientific point of view, or some day the rabbit will refuse to come out of the hat. Scanning is an intricate geometric design for building up a complete picture from a single flying spot of light. The vagaries of the human retina which make this ruse possible must be understood. Some scenes which will pass lucidly through a movie lens will be miserably jumbled in the complexities of tele-scanning. We must realize how the image is built up in order to understand what images can produce the desired impressions on video audiences.

Let's suppose that you're an established radio writer. You're sitting down at your typewriter to pound out your first masterpiece for television. How do you go about it?

First, remember you're writing not *one* script but *two*. One is in sound and music and voices—the medium to which you're accustomed. The other script is pantomime, business, action. And these two scripts must be arranged side by side, synchronized in your typewriter to produce an effective result. As for script form, you may find it wise to divide the page into two columns, lengthwise: left column, video channel; right column, audio channel. Then imagine that the left-hand margin is marked off in seconds of time—a scale that you can stretch or compress according to the wordiness or conciseness of each script segment. The finished page contains a brief of what the audience will see and what they will hear. (Suggestion: Keep your stage directions brief, almost telegraphic. Remember, this is to be the working "cue-sheet" in rehearsals and broadcast. Nobody has time to wade through excess verbiage.)

Next, the radio writer will have to discipline himself for writing in terms of light-pictures as well as sound-pictures. The inertia-less beauty of sound broadcasting has spoiled many of us with its flexibility, its knack of whisking audiences to the remotest outposts of the imagination. Now that we have television, grease-paint and props must be dragged along, too. It will be well for the radio writer who is cutting his teeth on television to draw a great many pictures; draw diagrams of the scenes as he plots them—who stands where, how such-and-such an action takes place. He doesn't have to be a Menzies or a Hitchcock, but he must *force* himself to *visualize*. This will be insurance against confusing or unproduceable sequences, which must be rewritten in the studio or pitched into the waste-basket.

Television sound will surely be FM—which stands for the highest-quality, noise-free reproduction in modern broadcasting. Use that sound. Radio writers have learned to make full use of the suggestiveness of aural stimuli, because, until recently, that's all we've had. But now that science has unlocked the door to sight-radio, let's not forget our rich discoveries when we had the microphone alone. For in the full, dramatic use of sound, television can surge far ahead of motion pictures in audience satisfaction. Did you ever go into a neighborhood movie-house, close your eyes, and listen to the sound alone? Almost invariably it is atrocious. The reproduction is bad, the original recording usually devoid of depth, color, perspective. Television will have the world's finest sound channel at its disposal. Often, sound alone may be so effective that it will be played against a dark screen during certain sequences.

One of the extremely important considerations for the

scripter rolling his first video opus into the typewriter is the matter of *presence*. It's something you have in radio but which you lack to a large extent in motion pictures. Television will have it to an enormous extent. The video screen is practically in the watcher's lap. The FM loudspeaker is an arm's length from his ear. This intimacy, this presence of the performer *in the home* is a powerful factor in television. The new tele writer must remember that and harness the advantages of it in his scripts for the iconoscope.

Purposely we have left only a vague line between the work of the writer and the producer in television. It should be so. The spheres of video's writer and producer must overlap almost completely, to insure efficient collaboration on a well-integrated result. The two should form a smoothly working team—thinking side-by-side as much as practicable, both at the typewriter and at the monitor screen. Each may be a specialist in his own phase of the production, but the quality of what comes out is dependent upon *both* members of the team—the straightness of their mutual thinking, the understanding and respect which each has for the other's concepts. Ideally, the functions of writer and producer should be combined in one person. But this is often undesirable or impossible. Then, the two should strive for coöperation which will culminate in the best possible show.

The responsibility for frequent lack of such coöperation in the past lies almost equally with radio's producers and writers. There have been far too many writers who were disdainful of the studio, who have preferred their mountain retreats to the control rooms, who looked down on producers as stop-watch menials.

And there have been the other literary offenders who made themselves so obnoxious in the control rooms that they had to be ejected bodily before the producer could get anything accomplished.

On the other hand, the industry has often been sucked in by "producer-legends"—auras of infallibility which were fancied to surround certain cue-throwers whose touch was magic. And such producers, getting a bit high on such heady publicity, were inclined to look on their writers more or less as a queen bee regards her drones. An even more frequent offender was the producer who lacked writing talent and jealously defended his ducal prerogative in the control room, to the disgust of the scribes who could have helped him put on a better show.

Another potential stumbling-block to good television scripts is the broadcast executive who doesn't understand, or refuses to understand, writers and their work. A recent and presumably authoritative book, written by someone who should know better, included an outline of the steps in building a television show. Incredibly enough, *writing was not included as a major factor in the making of a video production!* Presumably, scripts will be left (wrapped in swaddling clothes) on the networks' doorsteps. Or perhaps they will be typed by some obliging cockroach (not a member of the Radio Writers' Guild) while the producers sleep. Such negation of the work of the writer drains one's confidence in the minds which, to date, have been steering the uncertain course of infant television drama. There is this consolation: when the new industry is ready to put on long pants, we can expect abler men to take over.

There's no room for quibbling and pettiness in tele-

vision. There's no room for the know-it-all hack, the executive with a blind spot for writers, nor the producer who has descended from heaven. The lights are so hot, the cameras are so complex and the time is so short that television's writers and those they work with must boost their mutual respect, form a working partnership to achieve one thing only—great entertainment.

XI. SLOW FADE: WE TURN OFF THE MIKE

SLOW FADE: WE TURN OFF THE MIKE

LOGICALLY, this is the spot for a summing up. But there cannot be one. For this book proves that writing is an attitude of mind of the *individual.* Instead, we'll just start a slow fade on a potentiometer (lovingly called a "pot" in the industry) and let the mike dwindle away to a pipsqueak.

This book has illustrated, at least as far as the editor of it is concerned, a genuine admiration for other workers in the radio writing industry. This is for me a healthy attitude. It can be for you. The chronic cases, the malcontents, the writers with the most violent cases of indigestion, are the ones who are pained by anyone but themselves writing anything worthwhile. They feel, deep down in their black subconscious minds, that *they* should be writing all the programs; at any rate, all the good programs. This is poppycock. Go and write the best you can—with honesty and guts. Make your fifteen minutes or half-hour count. Fill it with good words. Fill it with sense.

Writing is very much like being in love. It has to be a projection of your own particular and distinctive brand of charm, intelligence, integrity, and general attitude toward life. If the chemistry that brings those things out is gone, the honeymoon's over.

A friend of mine, while in the weary punch-drunk state that most radio writers get into around 3:00 A.M. of a deadline night, once said: "Every good writer has

the inalienable right to stink occasionally." Let us not relax on such a thought, brothers. Let's stink as seldom as possible.

Looking back over the book, I find only a couple of pieces of advice that weren't dished out but that I feel should have been:

Avoid, as though they were the seven plagues, all caricatures of racial and religious types. Radio can do very well without the shuffling, shiftless, unreal Negro, the stereotype distortion of a Jew, the explosive Russian, the sniveling Chinese. The recent Writers' Congress, in a declaration of principles, summed it up well:

> We propose to know and understand the people whom we are portraying; to depict members of all races as individuals with all the wide range of character and personality traits common to human beings of every color and creed.

Hunk-of-Advice Two: Once you've established yourself as a good radio writer, don't desert the industry for greener fields . . . at least, not for good. Take a fling at movies, if you like, but come home soon, all is forgiven. They may seem like greener fields; ah, but we have wide and wonderful pastures too!

The absolutely last hunk of advice: Run, do not walk, to the nearest available office and join the Radio Writers' Guild.

And here comes another simile. Writing for radio is like riding a bicycle. Nobody can tell you how. You've got to get on and ride. Have fun riding, pal! Get on the handlebars sometimes and do a little trick riding, but not until you've learned to stay on and balance yourself the normal way—or you'll crack your skull wide open. Eventually you'll tire of tricks and just want to

ride for the sheer joy of it. You know, wind in your face, muscles singing.

That brings us to the end of this book, with only one more thing to say.

Tomorrow has a good chance of being just about the best tomorrow the world has ever seen. A lot of people with a lot of tragic, suffering yesterdays are hanging on to life and fighting to the death in the certain hope of that bright day. To chart that tomorrow belongs in the hands of the literate, the articulate, the men and women who can crystallize thoughts into words, who can boil down the mass hope and fill the air with it in loud and clear tones.

In our plays, in our commentaries, yes, in our jokes too, we can say the important things. We can point the way. We can help build the future.