Write a Play for Radio!

**VISUAL RADIO**

The Canadian sociologist of the mass media, Marshall McLuhan, described TV as a tactile medium, and radio as a visual medium. TV is tactile because it’s at its most effective in close-up - when we’re so near the image that we are, in our minds, touching it. Radio is visual because it’s only heard, forcing the listener to see what is being heard.

A child explained her preference for radio by saying, “the pictures are better.” They are: their uniqueness makes them so. A character in a radio play may describe a thorn tree, for example - but it’s the listener who will picture it, and that picture is unique to the individual.

The radio play is staged in the listener’s mind - and observed by the mind's eye. When you watch television, you can switch off imagination: everything is supplied and the viewer’s rôle is a passive one. The imagination is involved when you listen to a radio play: your rôle is an active one. NO OTHER DRAMATIC MEDIUM STIMULATES THE IMAGINATION OF ITS AUDIENCE AS RADIO DOES, AND THIS IS ITS PRINCIPAL STRENGTH.

TV keeps the viewer captive in a chair, enforcing the passive rôle of the viewer. Radio engages the mind actively, but frees the listener physically: you can do other things while you listen!

**A WRITER’S MEDIUM**

What does radio offer the playwright? "It is the ideal medium for the Writer: the quality of the writing is everything” (Martin Esslin: former head of BBC drama)

Above all else, this is a writer’s medium. Words are what make radio a visual medium, and in drama, the words are those of the writer. There are no visual aids: there is nothing but the words - and they must do the job effectively. Shoddy writing can’t be tricked-up with distractions like costumes, clever lighting or creative camera angles.

Because it is listened to, and viewed in the imagination, the radio play relies on the words to convey everything that’s happening in a radio drama. Sound effects and possibly music are used to enhance the images, only rarely to create them. A camera panning slowly around a room can tell a story, not only about the room - but about the people who live in it. The same situation on radio would have to be exploited in words.

Radio drama imposes more discipline on the writer and offers more freedom, than any other medium. The discipline is that everything must be conveyed through words only. The freedom comes from radio’s flexibility: there are no barriers of time or place and transitions between them are easy and instantaneous.

ALL YOU NEED TO CREATE HUGE BATTLE-SCENES OR SPACE ODYSSEYS ARE WORDS AND SOUND. ALL YOU NEED TO CREATE A DREAM-WORLD OR MOVE INTO THE MIND OF THE CHARACTER ARE WORDS AND SOUND.

Radio offers you flexibility of standpoint: the radio playwright can move directly and with no difficulty from objective reality to introspection; from a dialogue in ‘real-time’ to a remembered incident from childhood.

Logistically, radio has television, film and stage beaten hands down.

While drama is among the most expensive of all radio material, it is infinitely cheaper than its television counterpart, or a production in the theatre - and a mere drop in the ocean to the cost of making a film. This makes it an ideal medium for experimentation, for trying out new writers and actors.
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From the writer’s point of view, radio has

another distinct advantage: there is minimal intervention between the well-written radio play and its REALIZATION as a broadcast work.

The most original dramatic material written for performance in the theatre is bound to be affected by such considerations as lighting, costumes, set design, dimensions of stage, etc. etc. On TV and film, scripts are reconstructed and re-written during the shooting, more often than not. On radio - once the script has been finally accepted for broadcast, the intervention is minimal. All that stands between your idea and your words and their REALIZATION - are the voices of the actors, perhaps music and effects, a few microphones, a recording engineer and a sound effects operator - and a skilled director. The chances that the final product will faithfully represent what you have imagined are much higher than in other dramatic media.

DIALOGUE

Dialogue is everything - From delineation and development of character to exposition of story-line. If you can’t write good dialogue, you can’t write a good play: it’s as elementary as that.

Good, “speakable” dialogue is based on good listening. You cannot write real dialogue if you haven’t listened to any! It is part of the writer's job - a significant part - to observe, to listen, to absorb.

Your characters have to be identified by the way they speak: on radio, they can’t be identified by the way they dress! For example, if there’s a policeman in your play - he has to speak like a policeman: the dialogue he uses must be recognizably that of a policeman.

The more real the dialogue the more credible the character will become.

Because your play is likely to have a range of characters, each of them has to be identifiably unique.

Observation will teach you that we all speak differently. We all have different patterns and rhythms of speech, we use different idioms, we have unique idiosyncrasies and mannerisms.

Example: Let’s suppose that you want to convey the following piece of information through the “mouth” of a character in your play: “I was sitting in my car outside the supermarket when I saw your husband coming out with another woman.”

In the mouth of “Character A” - the dialogue might be something like this. “So, hey! - there I am, you know? Like, just sitting in my car, right? Outside, you know, the supermarket. And - OK, it was probably nothing - you know? Nothing to it, right? - but hell, I got a shock when I saw Zac with this young blonde chick and I thought, hey! that’s not Zoë!”

Character “B”: “Now, you know I’m not one to read things into situations. I mean, that’s not my style. I mean, it was all perfectly ordinary, I’m sure. But - it was certainly Zac, and the woman he was with certainly wasn’t you! I mean, there was no mistake. I was parked right outside, and they walked straight past my car. I mean, I couldn’t have been mistaken!”

Observe, Listen, Absorb!

In a naturalistic drama the language must be real - but - there is also the opportunity for stylized language, for poetry, for internal monologue and introspection, for fantasy and heightened reality.

THE ONLY LIMITS ARE THOSE OF YOUR ABILITY AND CREATIVITY AS A WRITER.

All drama - from farce to tragedy - is based on the exploitation of conflict. The conflict must emerge as a result of character and not story - and in radio drama, the character is created by dialogue.

Therefore, **dialogue is everything**!

Q.E.D.
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**SOUND EFFECTS, MUSIC AND OTHER TRICKS OF THE TRADE...**

Before we get on to the abovementioned, a word or two to writers new to the medium. Music, backgrounds and special effects (such as acoustics) are means of colouring the pictures created in the listener’s mind - but many fine radio plays rely on nothing more than dialogue so powerful and creative as to evoke the most vivid images, and so exploit the real visual strength of the medium. Bear it in mind.

And so to - SOUND EFFECTS (henceforth referred to as SOUND FX)

SOUND FX should always be used with circumspection, and should always be intelligible to the listener. For instance, let’s suppose you write the following as a direction for the introduction of a sound effect:-

FX: A LETTER IS DROPPED THROUGH THE LETTER-BOX.

Standing alone, that effect will have no meaning for the listener, and would have to be explained by means of dialogue, such as this:-

1. ZAC: Yo! The postman’s early!
2. ZOE: How d’you know that?
3. ZAC: (MOVING OFF TO DOOR) He just dropped a letter through the post-box!

It all seems a little contrived, and it would be better to cut the effect, and approach the incident from a different angle.

Let’s look at another example, a sequence of SOUND FX and movement intended for use at the beginning of a radio play.

FX: ZAC TIPTOES DOWN THE CARPETED STAIRS. QUIETLY, HE OPENS THE LOUNGE DOOR. HE TIPTOES OFF MIKE, TAKES A 16TH CENTURY HALBERD FROM THE WALL, AND TIPTOES ONTO MIKE AGAIN. WHEN ON, WE HEAR HIS HEAVY, NERVOUS BREATHING, AND THEN, WITH AN ALMOST ANIMAL-LIKE ROAR, HE RAISES THE HALBERD AND SWINGS IT DOWN VIOLENTLY, SMASHING THE TELEVISION SET.

It’s certainly an intriguing piece of action - but what does it mean to the listener? Without the directions on the page, how could the listener possibly know what was going on? Would Zac’s tiptoeing footsteps be audible? Would a door opened quietly be heard? How would the sound of a 16th century weapon be distinguished from any other object you care to name removed from its hanging place on a wall? How would the smashing sounds be identified as a TV set?

This is an extreme example, of course, but it demonstrates the pitfalls. The writer must always take the position of the listener, and aim for intelligibility in terms of sound.

There are two forms of SOUND FX - both of which are illustrated in the extreme example given above” the “live” SOUND FX and the recorded SOUND FX. For instance, the smashing of the TV set would be drawn from the library of CDs, or, if nothing suitable was found, “created” by the SOUND FX Operator, and put on tape. The footsteps, door opening, etc., would be done in the studio during the recording by the actor concerned, or one of the other actors in the play. Generally speaking, it is not the function of the writer to decide whether SOUND FX should be done “live” or not: this is the province of the Director, in consultation with the SOUND FX Operator. Further to explain this, FOOTSTEPS IN GRAVEL would usually be done “live” in the studio, but FOOTSTEPS IN SNOW would probably be provided from a CD or tape. In any event, this is a production decision.

Used effectively, intelligibly and creatively, SOUND FX can heighten atmosphere, and add
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depth and colour to the play. Used wrongly, they can prove a distraction and an irritation.

A word about backgrounds. Backgrounds differ from other SOUND FX in that they are sustained throughout a scene, like a stage backdrop - in sound. They place the action of the play - in both locale and time. An obvious example would be a period play, set in the 18th century. A background would certainly exclude motor transport of any kind! Backgrounds will be provided by the SOUND FX Operator, if required by the script and/or the director.

Here's an example of a simple background, as indicated in a radio drama script:
FX: INTERIOR OF SUBURBAN HOUSE.
DAYTIME. LOW TRAFFIC BUZZ. A DOG BARKING IN THE DISTANCE.

Note particularly the words “INTERIOR” and “DAYTIME”. They are both vitally important. “INTERIOR” tells the Recording Engineer that an interior acoustic is required, and also dictates the level of the background. “DAYTIME” tells the SOUND FX Operator that the traffic, for example, will be more concentrated than it would be at night.

The more information you provide on what you, as the writer, require for a particular scene, the better.

But be reasonable in your demands!
If you want a background of 3 000 soccer supporters chanting “We want Zac! We want Zac!”, you’re not likely to get it!
On the other hand - FX: AN EXCITED, ENTHUSIASTIC CROWD OF SOCCER SUPPORTERS IN THE BACKGROUND wouldn’t pose a problem. The former would require a special and highly expensive recording to be set up: the latter could be drawn from the CD Library - or from an Archives Tape.

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Music

Effectively used, music can make a valuable contribution in setting a mood, or aiding a transition as a BRIDGE (see TRANSITIONS) from one scene to another. It can also be used at the beginning and end of a play, to set a tone for the piece. For example, a happy-go-lucky piece of Township live at the beginning of the play would certainly create a specific mood and expectation.

Usually, the writer need only indicate music requirements in terms such as these:
FX: SUITABLY CHILLING MUSIC BRIDGE
or
FX: LIGHT-HEARTED MUSIC BRIDGE

or simply
FX: MUSIC BRIDGE

In all of these cases, the Director would then decide on the actual piece of music used.

If a particular piece of music is essential to the text, then the writer should indicate it.
FX: MUSIC: THE 1ST MOVEMENT OF BRAHMS’ 4TH SYMPHONY
or
FX: MUSIC: ABDULLAH IBRAHIM’S MANENBERG” (PREFERABLY SOLO PIANO VERSION)

Music can also be used behind speech, to heighten dramatic effect:
FX: SINISTER MUSIC: ESTABLISH, THEN DROP AND HOLD UNDER

1.ZAC: (QUIETLY) I knew the voice. I would never forget it. The first time I’d heard it was on the answering machine, telling me if I wanted to see Zoë ever again I had to do exactly what I was told. I knew the voice. And I hated it! I hated it!
FX: THE MUSIC COMES UP AGAIN AND FADES

Most Directors will want to choose the music for a production, and will reserve the right to do so. But suggestions will always be considered. There is, of course, no compunction on the writer to use music at all. If the play can achieve its effect without music (or BACKGROUNDS or SOUND FX for that matter) then there is no need to introduce it.
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TRANSITIONS are simply the methods used to end one scene and begin another, to mark the passage of time, change locale, etc.

They can be achieved in a variety of ways:
Let's have a look at each item.

**MUSIC BRIDGE or STING.** A MUSIC BRIDGE is an appropriate piece of music which acts as a bridge between two scenes. It could be played in “cold” at the end of one scene, and faded as the next scene begins or handled in a variety of ways e.g. faded in under the end of one scene, come up full volume and then fade to the next scene, or be cut as the next scene is introduced.

A STING is a short piece of “mood” music lasting anything from a few seconds to not more than a minute. It can take the place of a bridge, particularly when “dramatic action” is involved.

A CROSS-FADE involves cross-fading from one scene to the next. The CROSS-FADE could be a **total CROSS-FADE (i.e. speech, background, and any special SOUND FX which might be running at the time) or simply on background - or even on speech only.** For example, if the scene was set at a big party, and you wanted to shift the action to another area of the room or hall, you could simply CROSS-FADE on speech, keeping the background and other SOUND FX constant. You can also CROSS-FADE on music. As you can see, there are many varied ways to make good use of a CROSS-FADE.

**FADE OUT and FADE IN.** These are fairly self-evident, but there are variations on the manner in which the fades are done. They could be **TOTAL fades** - which means *everything* (speech, background, other SOUND FX) is faded **out,** or **in** together.

A **TOTAL FADE-OUT** is useful in a scene where, for example, you need one character to give another character information which your listeners already know, due to an earlier exposition in the plot. You don’t want to bore the listener with a repeat of the information, and so you might handle it like this:

1. ZAC: Hey - 'd you remember I was telling you about the guy that phoned me? And I couldn’t remember where I’d heard his voice before? Well, it suddenly came to me. It was the FX: BEGIN TOTAL FADE OUT
   time when I heard that message on the answering machine..........  

**FX: FADE TOTAL BY NOW.** Alternatively, the FADE OUT and FADE IN can be done on background and other SOUND FX (if any).

The CUT is a very “filmic” device for TRANSITION, which can work extremely well on radio, provided it is used sparingly, and executed properly and in the right place!

As the word indicates, a CUT involves a sharp, abrupt CUT from one scene to the next. It has great dramatic value and can inject action and urgency into the pace of the play. A CUT can be done on speech, music, SOUND FX, backgrounds - or on the whole lot together!

An FX BRIDGE can be employed in the same way as a MUSIC BRIDGE and can entail simply bringing up the background and using it as a bridge, fading it to the next scene. Alternatively, specific SOUND FX could be used in place of music, to achieve a particular result, or effect.

**It’s useful to vary the methods of TRANSITION; it makes for a more interesting exposition.**

**Please note:** It is not essential for you as the playwright to indicate the methods of transition, especially if you are new to the genre as a writer. Ultimately, the Director will use her or his expertise to achieve the best structure for the production of your play. As you become more expert, however, you should try to acquire as much knowledge of the scripting technicalities as you can. The best radio plays are almost inevitably those written specifically for the medium, and exploiting its
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potential. There is often an element of compromise in a play adapted for the medium - which is not to say that an adaptation or a dramatization cannot be effective radio, because it certainly can! But this brief guide is for those who wish to write original work for radio, and therefore the emphasis is placed on making use of the medium and the “tools” available.

Speaking of which.....

**PERSPECTIVES, ACOUSTICS & TELEPHONE CONVERSATIONS**

Sound PERSPECTIVE plays an important part in the realization of radio drama, introducing depth, movement and distance. On a basic level, the writer needs to be aware of perspective and indicate the positions of characters in relation to the central microphone, during the action of the play. The perspective of operative doors should also be indicated. Terms such as ON MIKE, OFF MIKE, SLIGHTLY OFF should become part of the radio playwright’s vocabulary!

In practice, achieving positional perspective is a simple exercise. Example:

1. ZAC: (ON MIKE: PROJECTING A LITTLE) Yo! Zoë! Come on in, doll!
2. ZOE: (OFF, AT DOOR) Aren’t you busy?
3. ZAC: (AS BEFORE) Too busy to see you? Never! Come in - sit down.

FX: DOOR CLOSED, OFF.

4. ZOË: (MOVING ONTO MIKE)This is a smart office, Zac! You must be an important dude here, hey?

...and so forth. All very logical and somewhat self-evident, but need to be indicated in the manuscript, so that your intentions are clear to the Director. Look at the same text, without the perspective indications.

1. ZAC: Yo! Zoë! Come on in, doll!
2. ZOÈ: Aren’t you busy?
3. ZAC: Too busy to see you? Never! Come in - sit down.

FX: DOOR CLOSED

4. ZOÈ: This is a smart office, Zac! You must be an important dude here, hey?

We don’t know what their relative positions are, do we? Which of them is supposed to have the dominant perspective? Is Zoë ON MIKE at the door of Zac’s office, giving her perspective prominence? Or is it the other way around, as in the example with the positional perspectives indicated? You need to indicate in your manuscript!

(It becomes even more important when you’re dealing with a stereo production!)

ACOUSTICS determine the sound of the scene, and/or components thereof. The technology is available to create a wide range of acoustics, and to “treat” SOUND FX and the voices of the actors. Which means that you don’t have to confine yourself to ordinary, straightforward, human speech. If your play calls for a talking refrigerator or a gigantic robot with a voice like an amplified hair-dryer - it can be done! Similarly, if a scene in a play requires that we are hearing the action from the perspective of the principal character, and that character hears everything as though through cotton wool - it can be done!

This, of course, is another of radio’s strengths: by the application of an acoustic (using such things as equalizers and digital delays) visual images can be created simply and effectively, whereas in any of the visual media, the logistics might well be prohibitive.

The TELEPHONE CONVERSATION is a useful device in radio plays - and with cell-phones now as common-place as gear-locks, more and more people are communicating in this manner in real life. It can be handled in two ways: (a) in which we hear only one side of the conversation, and (b) in which both parties are audible, one of them using a microphone which has been acoustically modified to match the sound of speech you hear in the earpiece of a telephone. We call it FILTER or TELEPHONE DISTORT.

Here’s an example of (a):

FX: TELEPHONE RINGS. THREE RINGS. RECEIVER LIFTED, ON MIKE.
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1. ZAC: Yebo!...Ja, Zac speaking .......
2. DOC: Who? ....Oh ja, Dr van Blerck, I didn’t recognize ....Sorry? ......

FX: RECEIVER DOWN ON MIKE.

1. ZAC: OK. Ja, of course. Ja, I’ll be there.

2. ZOË: What’s wrong? What’s happened?
3. ZAC: My Mother’s in hospital. In a coma..
   She’s had a stroke.

And an example of (b):

FX: TELEPHONE RINGS. THREE RINGS.
RECEIVER LIFTED, ON MIKE.

1. ZAC: Yebo!
2. DOC: (ON FILTER) Zac - this is Paul van Blerck.
3. ZAC: Who?
4. DOC: Dr van Blerck.
5. ZAC: Oh ja, Dr van Blerck, I didn’t recognize ....
6. DOC: (INTERRUPTS AFTER “DIDN’T”) It’s your Mother, Zac.
7. ZAC: Sorry?
8. DOC: She’s in hospital. She’s in a coma.
9. ZAC: She’s what? But - when - how? I mean......
10. DOC: Your neighbour phoned me, fortunately. Your Mother had gone next door. She collapsed. A stroke.
    I’ve had her admitted to the Park Lane. Which is where I’m phoning from. I’ll wait till you get here, all right?
11. ZAC: OK. Ja, of course. Ja, I’ll be there.

FX: RECEIVER DOWN ON MIKE.

12. ZOË: What’s wrong? What’s happened?
13. ZAC: My Mother’s in hospital. In a coma..
   She’s had a stroke.

Two examples to illustrate the ways in which a TELEPHONE CONVERSATION can be used. It’s also important to remember that, where there is a third person present, and the listeners have heard both sides of the conversation {as in example (b)} - the third person has not!

Generally speaking, it’s not a good idea to use both techniques in the same play. If the listeners have heard both sides of the conversation at one point, and one side of the TELEPHONE CONVERSATION only, at another point - it creates an inconsistency. It should be admitted, however, that not all writers/directors feel as strongly about this as the compiler of this brief Guide does!

**THE I.D. PROBLEM AND THE DREADED CONTRIVANCE**

Without visual aids to help, the radio dramatist must be aware that everything has to be clearly identifiable at all times throughout the play. (Unless, of course, the intention is to mystify the listener!) Remember, the actors have only their voices with which to identify the characters they’re playing and whilst the Director will try to avoid casting actors whose voices are similar in timbre and quality, this is not always possible. If the listeners are confused as to who is who in a play - you’ve lost them. They’ll become frustrated and irritated and they’ll probably switch off the radio!

If the writer has scripted the piece with care and attention to ‘character exposition through dialogue’, then there should be no problem. This aspect was dealt with in some detail under DIALOGUE. If all the characters use the same kind of dialogue in a realistic, contemporary play - the chances are high that it’s simply a bad play. The answer to the character-I.D. problem is not to be found in the following:

1. ZAC: Hello, Zoë! How’s it?
2. ZOË: No, fine thanks, Zac. And you?
3. ZAC: I’m doing fine, Zoë! How’s Zola?
4. ZOË: No, much better now, Zac.
5. ZAC: That’s good news, Zoë. Hey - how was your trip, man?
6. ZOË: Great, Zac. Paris was fantastic!
7. ZAC: Hey, I didn’t know Paris was part of the deal, Zoë!
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And so on! People simply do not use names with such infuriating frequency, but it's a common fault in bad radio plays. Avoid it!

Identification of Time and Place is another problem to be overcome by the radio dramatist. Let's say the writer wants to let the audience know that (i) Zac is an unmarried Kenyan, living in the Cape, but on a visit to Johannesburg, and (ii) it's May, 1996.

Example (a)

1. ZAC:  (A LITTLE SHIVER) It's so cold here in Johannesburg in May.
2. ZOË:  Ja, and so wet where you live. In Cape Town. How long have you been there, anyway?
4. ZOË:  And still unmarried, hey?

This has all the appearance of being contrived. The information doesn’t emerge naturally from the conversation, and has a feeling of “imposition” by the writer. A better way might be:

Example (b)

1. ZAC:  (A LITTLE SHIVER) I don’t know how you survive these Joh’burg winters!
2. ZOË:  Better than not being able to see Table Mountain through the rain-clouds, man!
3. ZAC:  Ja, but at least it isn’t freezing cold!
4. ZOË:  Ag, you Cape Town dudes! You’re never happy, hey?
5. ZAC:  I’m actually from Kenya.
6. ZOË:  I know that! So - still with Zola, are you?
7. ZAC:  Yep. It’s been - three years now.
8. ZOË:  Not married yet?
9. ZAC:  We’ll get round to it, I suppose.
10. ZOË:  (A LITTLE GIGGLE) What about next month, hey? She can be a June Bride. Everybody wants to be a June Bride!
11. ZAC:  I was kind of thinking we might link it to the Olympics.

12. ZOË:  What? What for? And you expect the poor girl to wait another four years? Come on!
13. ZAC:  Eight, actually. I meant the Cape Town Olympics!

**THE CONTRIVANCE TRAP**

With dialogue the means for telling the story, the writer must be careful to avoid falling into the dreaded CONTRIVANCE TRAP!

Here’s an example of it:

1. ZAC:  Yo! Isn’t that Zola Zulu over there?
2. ZOË:  It sure looks like her OK!
3. ZAC:  Hard to believe she’s a world-class athlete, isn’t it? Holds two middle-distance world records, hey?
4. ZOË:  And a Silver Medal in Barcelona - Gold in Atlanta..
5. ZAC:  Ja - despite that accident, too.
6. ZOË:  When she broke her thigh-bone skiing.
7. ZAC:  On holiday in Gstaad.
8. ZOË:  Ja - and the doctors said she’d never run again.
9. ZAC:  There was a hell of a fuss about it at the time.
10. ZOË:  And she sued the hospital.
11. ZAC:  And lost.
12. ZOË:  Ja - but she didn’t leave it at that. She took it further, and....

And so on and so on. Now, the writer’s intention here was to provide the listening audience with information about a middle-distance runner called Zola Zulu, and the method chosen was to have two characters discuss her. Nothing wrong with that in principle - but it’s patently clear from the
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dialogue that both characters are fully informed about Ms Zulu, so to present them as having this conversation is to fall head-first into the dreaded CONTRIVANCE TRAP! Would two supposedly normal human beings tell each other facts (which they both already know) about a third party? Quite simply - they wouldn’t. The writer’s contrivance is transparent: the listener will see through it. Use of this kind of tortuous contrivance to impart information to the audience is very often the hallmark of a badly-written radio drama.

**GETTING PAST FIRST BASE**

Having written what you believe is a broadcastable play, the first thing to do is ensure that somebody in SAfm’s Drama Department reads it! A considerable volume of material is submitted to the Department and if your manuscript is speckled with the residue of last week’s soup, or dog-eared and messily-corrected, written on flimsy, semi-transparent tracing paper - it will probably be returned to you un-read. It will most certainly go at the bottom of the pile.

So - demonstrate your pride in what you have created by getting it past first base: present it in a neat and legible form.

Type the play in double-spacing on A4 size, on one side of the paper only. Number the speeches in sequence from 1 to whatever on each page. If you’re using a Word Processor - print on A4. If you’re unable to type or have no access to a PC or a typewriter, a hand-written manuscript will be acceptable - as long as it is neat and legible, and its length can be assessed. But - it might well be worth your while to have it typed for you. The object of the exercise is to ensure that its appearance attracts the attention. Make sure that you’ve read the manuscript through several times, done whatever editing may be needed, corrected errors, etc. Then send it to

**The Drama Department,**

**SAfm,**

**P.O. Box 91162,**

**Auckland Park,**

**2006.**

with the briefest of covering notes (including your name and address!). **Do not** request an interview with someone in the Drama Department to discuss your masterpiece! If indeed it is a masterpiece - you can be sure the Department will initiate contact. **Do not** send an extract from the play and expect an assessment. **Do not** send the first half-dozen pages of a play you “intend to finish” if the Department gives you the “go ahead”.

A brief covering note, indicating what you believe is the play’s broadcast length, is all that’s needed. Let your play speak for you. **Do not** expect a reaction to your play (apart from an acknowledgement of its receipt) in a couple of weeks’ time. It may be several months before a final decision on it will be forthcoming. The play will be read by more than one person, and it takes time. **Do not** badger the Department for a quick decision. It won’t help your cause. Be patient!

**WHAT DOES THE DRAMA DEPARTMENT WANT?**

At the time of writing (February, 1997) the Drama output consists of the following:

   a) One 60-minute play per week
   b) One 15-minute serial, 4 days a week
   c) One 30-minute play per week.

But programme schedules change on a fairly
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regular basis, and the profile of the Department’s output is subject to such change. A phone call to the Department will bring you up-to-date with the situation! The number is Code 011 - 714-2781
Or you can send a fax to the Department at SAfm’s general fax number: 011 - 714-5829.
If you’re on e-mail, the address is: maloneja@sabc.co.za

If you intend submitting a Daily Serial for consideration, you should send a full synopsis of the story-line, an indication of how many 15-minute episodes it will contain (which should not exceed 40 episodes), and three sample episodes. Do not attempt to write the whole serial! You could be wasting an awful lot of effort!

If you have in mind to dramatize a novel for the 30’00 play, which could form part of a series, (in no more than 6 30-minute parts) you should provide a synopsis of the novel and a break-down of the manner in which you propose to dramatize it in series form, plus one sample episode. (The “Do not” cautions relating to a one-off play apply equally to serial submissions!)

What sort of material do they want? And what can you not write about? Let’s deal with the second question, because it answers the first. There are no taboo subjects, but the SABC subscribes to the tenets of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa, which means that it is a question of how a subject is handled. In a country where the rights of the individual are at last entrenched in the Constitution, you may not, for instance, set out to offend another individual’s religious belief. Which does not imply you may not write a play where religious belief is the kernel of the conflict. It is not what you write about - it is how you write about it. The best advice is simply this: do not apply self-censorship. Write your play to the very best of your creative ability.

The decision on the suitability of the play for broadcast should be left to the Department.

Remember that Drama is entertainment. It may be educational, informative, edifying and uplifting - but it must also entertain. A play which reads like a tract, or a political dissertation may work wonders for the playwright in getting rid of personal hang-ups - but it will probably bore the audience to death. Make a point of listening to the plays and serials broadcast by the Department. It’s an excellent way of discovering the wide range of subject matter dealt with, and it will also give the writer new to radio an understanding of the medium as it applies to drama.

The writing of radio drama is a specialized craft - but it can be learnt by a writer. As was said in the introduction to this brief guide you cannot be taught to write, but as a writer you can be taught to channel your ability to create plays for the medium of sound - where words are paramount, and where the discipline required is repaid with an artistic freedom not found in any of the other dramatic media. To a writer, that’s a very attractive proposition!

Go on - what are you waiting for? Write a Radio Play!

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SAfm Drama Department

SAMPLE OF SCRIPT LAY-OUT ON PAGES FOLLOWING...
THE PHOENIX CAMOUFLAGE

episode ONE

CAST

ZAKES BALOYI (A features writer, early 30’s) ..........................

CLARE THOMAS (Early 30’s: Wife of Roy Thomas) .................

VOICE (U.S.A.) (Late 50’s Pentagon big noise!) ......................

JERRY GOLDBERG (Easy-going, fairly flippant guy in late 30s

Friend of Zakes Baloyi) .............................................

PARA-MEDIC (Double with Jerry) (Rather crass individual) .......

CAS ADAMS (Detective Warrant Officer: 30s:

Sharp, cool, together guy. Friend of Zakes

Baloyi) ........................................................................

SONJA MOUTON (Afrikaans Sec. who gets zapped

in the 1st Episode!) ....................................................

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SAfm Drama Department
ANN: The Daily Serial on SAfm

FX: BENNY GOODMAN & HIS ORCHESTRA “CLARINET á LA KING”: ESTABLISH AND TAKE

UNDER & HOLD. NO OTHER B/G.

1. VOICE: Gentlemen - this war will soon be over. We all know that. We have the capacity, the will - and now, most importantly - the means to bring it to a decisive and crushing conclusion. When the time is right - we will end the war. But this war is not what concerns me: it is the next war, gentlemen, the next war - when the enemy will be different. It is expedient that they should, at present, be our allies. But that will soon change. And we cannot allow ourselves to be out-maneuvered while this present war approaches its end. The war in which we will unquestionably be the victors. What we are on the brink of achieving will ensure that we retain the ascendancy. (PAUSE) From now on, as we proceed, each one of us will be carrying a portion of the future; each one of us will bear the responsibility for the well-being of generations of freedom-loving people. From now on, we are this Project - and what we already know cannot be shared. What we are embarking on - cannot be shared. What we will achieve - cannot be shared. Never forget that, gentlemen. Never.

FX: CUT TO THE THEME - ESTABLISH AND DROP FOR

ANN: THE PHOENIX CAMOUFLAGE - an encounter with the impossible - by Jack Mullen


2/...
1. ZAKES: Zakes the Magnificent, hello.

2. CLARE: (ON FILTER) Zakes, hi. It’s Clare. Sorry to interrupt the poker game....

3. ZAKES: Clare! Ninjani! No problem. Howzit?

4. CLARE: ... I just need to speak to Roy.

5. ZAKES: (BEAT) Poker game?

6. CLARE: Sorry?

7. ZAKES: I just realized. You said something about a poker game.

8. CLARE: (LITTLE LAUGH: SLIGHT EDGE OF IRRITATION, THOUGH: ZAKES IS A GREAT KIDDER!) It’s OK. I know about it. Roy told me. It’s OK. He has permission. I just want a tiny word, that’s all.

9. ZAKES: Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold it, kiddo. There is no poker game tonight, Clare.

10. CLARE: (BEAT) (HAVE IT YOUR WAY) OK. But - can I speak to Roy, please?

11. ZAKES: Clare - I’m not kidding. Right? No poker game. And Roy’s not here.

12. CLARE: C’mon, Zakes....

12. ZAKES: OK - I know you think I’m playing silly buggers, Clare - but I promise you - there’s no poker game. Honest. (LITTLE LAUGH) Why does nobody ever believe me when I’m being serious?

1. CLARE: (BEAT) But - isn’t Roy there?

2. ZAKES: No, no, my lovely. No poker. No Roy. On my ancestors, OK?

3. CLARE: (JUST AN AUDIBLE SIGH)

4. ZAKES: (BEAT) Did he say he was coming here?

5. CLARE: (AFFIRMATIVE) Mmm-hmm.]
1. ZAKES: To play poker?

2. CLARE: (AFFIRMATIVE) Mmm-hmm.

1. ZAKES: Yo!

4. CLARE: You haven’t seen him? I mean - he didn’t pitch thinking there was a game, did he? And then - leave?

5. ZAKES: Hey - don’t you think I’d have told you already if he had?

6. CLARE: I - don’t understand it, then. He hasn’t been there?


(THERE’S NO REPLY FROM CLARE) Hello?

8. CLARE: I’m still here.

9. ZAKES: Thought we’d been cut off. Ja, ’bout six weeks.


11. ZAKES: Ja - bit erratic. Not every Thursday. Couldn’t get a regular to replace Roy.

12. CLARE: Wait a minute - wait a minute. Are you saying - Roy hasn’t been playing poker with you guys on Thursdays?

13. ZAKES: (BEAT) Ooops.

14. CLARE: Zakes? Is that what you’re telling me?

15. ZAKES: Hey, Clare - look - hey! Your business is your business. I mean - hey! (LITTLE LAUGH) I don’t understand marriages, anyway.

16. CLARE: Someone phoned me tonight.

17. ZAKES: Clare - look - really, I don’t want to get involved here. Really. Love you both, you know that. But - hey! -

4. CLARE: (IN SMARTLY) No - it was a man. I - I thought it was Roy’s voice. But it didn’t
make sense. That's why I phoned. It didn’t make sense.

1. ZAKES: What d'you mean - it didn’t make sense? Was the guy drunk? What?

2. CLARE: (TINY BEAT) Maybe it makes sense now.

3. ZAKES: Clare?

4. CLARE: All he said was - Good-bye Clare.

FX: MUSIC BRIDGE TAKES US TO AN OFFICE IN A HIGH-RISE BUILDING IN THE CENTRE OF JOH’BURG. NIGHT TIME. DISTANCE SPARSE TRAFFIC DOWN BELOW. AIR-CON DRONE, AND BUZZ OF COMPUTER JUST OFF. THERE’S AN EMPTY, ECHOEY FEEL TO THE OFFICE. STAFF HAVE GONE HOME - WELL, NEARLY ALL. SONJA MOUTON KNOCKS ON GLASS PANE OF DOOR, OFFISH. OPENS THE DOOR.

9. SONJA: (FROM THE DOOR) I’ve finished packing all the....(BREAKS OFF BECAUSE THE OFFICE APPEARS TO BE EMPTY) ... Mr Brown? (PAUSE) Mr Brown? It’s Sonja...

FX: SHE MOVES ON. AND WE BECOME AWARE OF A STRANGE, DRONING NOISE

Mr. Brown? (BEAT) (HALF TO SELF) He can’t have left. I would have seen him

FX: AND NOW THE DRONE IS RISING, INSISTENT

if he did. (UP - AND SHE’S GETTING NERVOUS) Mr. Brown - I’ve finished- I’m - I’m going now. OK? (SHE STARTS TO BACK OFF MIKE) Mr Brown? You’ll lock up, will you?

FX: THE DRONE INTENSIFIES: IT’S AFFECTING HER: - WE HEAR PANICKY, DISTRESSED NOISES FROM HER AS THE DRONE GETS STRONGER AND STRONGER: SHE’S EDGED ONTO MIKE NOW. SUDDENLY SHE GIVES A GASP, AND IS STILL. THE DRONE PEAKS AND WE CUT BACK TO ZAKES’S SANDTON PAD. AND NOW SIMPLE MINDS ARE PERFORMING “MANDELA DAY” (FROM ‘GLITTERING PRIZE”) IN THE B/G ON HIS MUSIC CENTRE, AND UP FRONT, WE HEAR ZAKES WORKING AWAY ON HIS P.C.
1. ZAKES: (DECIDING!) No - I can't leave it. Have to know. (SHARP LITTLE SIGH) What's Jerry's number again? (REMEMBERS) Scheduler! Don't need a PC and a memory!

FX: MOUSE NOISES! LITTLE PAUSE.

Yebo! Gotcha!

FX: RECEIVER UP: TEN NUMBERS KEYED IN. BEAT AND THEN CELL PHONE RINGING ON FILTER.

2. JERRY: (AFTER TWO RINGS: ON NOISY CELL PHONE FILTER, WITH MOTOR CAR B/G) Yeah?

3. ZAKES: Yo, Jerry! Zakes.

4. JERRY: Who?


6. JERRY: Look, I told you. I don’t need a gardener, I don’t want a gardener.

7. ZAKES: Dankie, my baas. Eh - have you anything for my sister?

8. JERRY: Zandile? (LUSTY, MACHO GRUNTS) Have I ever!

9 ZAKES: Listen, you disgusting horny honky - I’m looking for Roy.

10. JERRY: Roy Thomas? The well-known poker-school drop-out?

11. ZAKES: It’s a terrible line.

12. JERRY: It wasn’t going as a gag.

13. ZAKES: Where are you?

14. JERRY: Where am I? Let me see now - eh - Oxford Road. Heading your way, actually. But don’t get your hopes up. I’m not slumming tonight.


15. JERRY: Whatcha think - I was walking along Oxford Road? Of course I’m in my car.

(BEAT) Why are you looking for Roy?

6/...
Write a Play for Radio!

1. ZAKES: I'm not, really - well, I am - but....

2. JERRY: Hey - I like a man who knows what he wants.

FX: THE PHONE LINE QUALITY IMPROVES ON SP. 4

3. ZAKES: That's better! (BEAT) It's Clare.


5. ZAKES: Will you just shut up and listen for a second?

6. JERRY: (AFTER A PAUSE) Are you going to talk?

7. ZAKES: It's all a bit - weird, really. She phoned - expecting Roy to be here - playing poker. In the regular Thursday school, she said.

8. JERRY: Ooops.

9. ZAKES: (LITTLE LAUGH) That was my reaction!

10. JERRY: He hasn't played poker for - must be two months, at least.

11. ZAKES: Bit less than that - but - yeah, he's been out of it.

12. JERRY: And he's stringing her along? Listen, buddy, don't get involved in this. However it pans out - they'll both end up hating you. It happens.

13. ZAKES: But - is he? Is he messing around?

14. JERRY: Are you asking me?

15. ZAKES: No - I'm talking to my computer!

16. JERRY: I've no idea. Not a clue. And I don't want to know.

17. ZAKES: You know him better than I do, Jerry. I mean - is he the wayward type?

18. JERRY: (LAUGHS) “The wayward type”? Hey - who taught you your English? Queen Victoria?

19. ZAKES: My mother, broer. So watch your mouth, okay? Is he ?

20. ZAKES:
Write a Play for Radio!

1. JERRY: No. No, I wouldn’t have thought so. Roy’s - Roy is kind of - out of it. You know what I mean? His head’s too busy for his gonads to get a look in, you ask me.

   But - you never can tell, can you?

2. ZAKES: And there was another thing. Somebody phoned Clare - before she phoned me.

   Somebody who - she said - sounded like Roy.

3. JERRY: So? Why did she think he was at your place?

4. ZAKES: Because that’s where he said he was going. But - if it was him who phoned her - then he’s up to something, because all he said was “Goodbye, Clare”.

5. JERRY: Hey?

6. ZAKES: “Goodbye, Clare”

7. JERRY: And that’s all? Nothing else?

8. ZAKES: So she said.

9. JERRY: So she said. Those are the key words, man. “So she said”. Listen, bru - take my advice, okay? Stay out of it.

10. ZAKES: My instincts are working here. Can’t help it. I’m a journo.

11. JERRY: You’re a features writer: stick to your yuppie pieces for HIGHVELD STYLE, Zakes. Don’t get into marital dirt. Believe me -you’ll end up with the scars. (BEAT) Listen - when are we going to get together, man?

12. ZAKES: Think I should phone Cas? He might know something.

13. JERRY: You’re not listening to me, are you? Cas? I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe he knows more about Roy than we do. I don’t know. But Zakes - do yourself a favour - stay out of it, man. If Roy’s cheating on Clare - hey - it’s rough, but it’s their snooker table, right?

   8/...
Write a Play for Radio!

1. ZAKES: Yeah. Suppose so. (BEAT) Listen - I'll call you. Must organize a school.

2. JERRY: Great. Hamba kahle, buddy.

3. ZAKES: Sala kahle, broer.


4. ZAKES: (ON THE APPROACH) (SLEEPY) Yisikhathi sini?! Three a.m.!? How'm I supposed to stay handsome if I don't get my sleep!?

FX: RECEIVER UP.

Hello?

5. CLARE: (ON FILTER)(IN A FAIRLY IRRATIONAL STATE) Zakes - Zakes - he hasn't come home!

Something's happened to him!

7. ZAKES: Uxolo? Oh - Clare?

8. CLARE: I know it! Something's happened. He wouldn't just do this! He wouldn't!

9. ZAKES: Clare - calm down, baby, calm down!

10. CLARE: He wouldn't just walk out. He wouldn't just phone - and then walk out. That's not Roy. He wouldn't, Zakes!

9/...
Write a Play for Radio!

1. ZAKES: (TRIES SEVERAL TIMES TO GET A WORD IN DURING SP. 4 - AND FINALLY MANAGES AT THE END OF IT!) Listen to me! Listen to me! You’re getting yourself into a state - and it’s probably for nothing at all.

2. CLARE: (ANGRY) Nothing at all? He phones and says “Goodbye Clare” - and it’s now three in the morning, and he’s not home? And you say - it’s nothing!

3. ZAKES: Clare - what can you do about it right now? Hmm? Can you do anything at three o’clock in the morning? (YAWNS) Sorry - but - hey! - I was out like Baby Jake’s sparring partners. Shoo - like a light.

4. CLARE: I don’t believe it, Zakes. I just don’t believe he’d do this to me.

5. ZAKES: (HE’S GOT HIS ACT TOGETHER) Clare - who really knows about people? We think we know them - then something happens and we suddenly find out we don’t know them at all.

6. CLARE: I know Roy. I know him. We’ve been married for five years - and - (SHE STARTS TO WEEP)

7. ZAKES: Clare, listen - take a tablet - get some sleep. There’s probably a perfectly simple explanation - and Roy will show up. Sure. Get some sleep. I’ll talk to you in the morning - just get some sleep. C’mon, babe - nothing to be done at 3 a.m.

FX: BEGIN TOTAL FADE OUT

Okay? Okay? Bra Zakes will sort it out for you in the morning.

FX: A BEAT, AND THEN STRAIGHT IN, AMBULANCE SIREN’S LAST FEW SHRIEKS, SL. OFF. NIGHT-TIME ON THE HONEYDEW ROAD. BUT NOW, CAST AS POLICEMEN MUTTERING IN THE B/G. AMBULANCE DOORS OPEN AND SHUT. 1 PAIR OF F’STEPS MOVE ON, ON GRAVEL.

8. PARA-MEDIC: Howzit, guys. Jeece - the car’s only a mess, hey! Occupants?

2. PARA-MEDIC: Not surprised. (TURNS OFF) Sakkie - bring the bag! (TO CAS) Nobody could survive that.

3. CAS: (HALF TO SELF) Ja. Particularly when they’re missing a head.

FX: THEME IN AND DROP FOR

ANN: [CLOSING CREDITS: CAST, TECHNICAL TEAM, WRITER AND DIRECTOR]

FX: THEME UP AND TO TIME.

**USING THESE MARGINS, INDENTS, DOUBLE-SPACING AND A COMPARABLE FONT (THIS IS 11 POINT CENTURY GOTHIC) A 60-MINUTE PLAY WOULD RUN TO ABOUT 40 PAGES**