

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING SENTIMENTAL?

Grace Gibson Finds it Profitable



GRACE GIBSON
No human appeal, no soap

"PEOPLE don't listen to the radio for education, they listen for entertainment: they want something that gives a lift," says Grace Gibson, an Australian producer of commercial radio serials who is at present in New Zealand on a flying visit. That was the first principle she worked on, and the second secret of success in commercial radio was, she thought, to tell a good story.

"It's the story that counts," she said laughingly when *The Listener* caught her for a moment between auditions of some new programmes in Wellington. "Tell a good story, tell it well, and your soap opera will always be popular. We don't tell a stale story or an uninteresting story, and we like to get plenty of human appeal."

Grace Gibson said she was born in Texas—which accounted for her American accent—and educated in California. She came to Australia in 1934, and was associated for some time with Station 2UE. During the war she returned to America for a two-year visit to collect new ideas and material, and when she came back in 1944 she set up her own production studios in Sydney. To her, there was not much glamour in radio. It was straight-out business, and big business at that. And as long as she was in it she reckoned she would cater for the popular demands of the average listener.

We mentioned that a listener had recently written in to complain about the sentimentality of a serial being broadcast at that time. "What's wrong with being sentimental?" Miss Gibson asked in a rich southern drawl. "A lot of people like it. It gives the housewife pleasure while she works, and goodness knows, the poor old housewife is tried hard enough these days. And in the evenings it's the same. You want to be entertained after you've been using your brains all day."

Documentaries Popular

What types of programme did she specialise in? All sorts, she said—romances, comedies, thrillers, and documentaries. She found documentaries were very popular, and she had produced a number of them, about such subjects as the history of Australia. "They sell well anyway," she said, "and that's what we're interested in. If a programme won't sell we won't produce it."

How did a production unit such as hers work? Miss Gibson explained that she bought her serials in not less than yearly supplies—208 episodes if it was to be played four times a week, and 156 if it was thrice weekly. The author was generally required to supply the first six episodes and a complete synopsis of the story. Once it was accepted and initial production details had been discussed with the staff producer, the theme and incidental music was written and recorded, sometimes as many as 10 records being made for one show. From

these records the music could be selected to give the required atmosphere to any particular episode.

Choosing actors and actresses was often the hardest part, she said, and it was not unusual to test 20 people for one part. Players were usually chosen for their ability to play a certain part well, and they were not necessarily required to be well-known names in their profession. "In the early days," she said, "name players were often an advantage because they stimulated interest in a new production. But nowadays listeners prefer a good story, and the names of the actors are not so important."

Rehearsals for a new show would extend over weeks, and actors were paid 22/- an hour (the minimum rate ruling in Australia) and 5/6 for every quarter-hour of overtime. An actor also got an extra 5/6 for playing a "double," that is, a second role in which he speaks no more than 40 words. Once the production of the serial was actually started, about an hour would be allowed to rehearse each 15-minute episode, although 30-minute plays required a full half-day's rehearsal.

When the first two episodes of a new show were recorded, Miss Gibson said, she would look for a sponsor. Prospective clients would have the records played back to them, after which, she said, it was just a matter of plain buying and selling.

Freelance Writers

Which were the hardest programmes to produce? "Australian acting talent is very good," she said, "but it's very hard to get good writers for comedies. Sometimes we work with the scripts of popular American serials, but for most of our scripts we rely on Australian free-lance writers, and of course the main thing is to have a good script. If you have a good script that's the main thing in radio production, I find."

Some of her serials were already being heard from New Zealand stations, she said. *Drama of Medicine*, *Hollywood Holiday*, and *Dramas of the Courts* were three of them. Australian-produced shows were also sold on occasions in America, South Africa, Canada, and Britain.

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