

DOSSIER ON DONOVAN JOYCE

TEN thousand pounds a year is the sort of money we could be fairly industrious for ourselves, we decided the other day when a big, bearded Australian told us that was what he was paying his top writer of radio serials. But how industrious would we need to be? How much work did Lindsay Hardy, —author of a string of successes from *Dossier on Dumetrios* to *Knave of Hearts*—tie himself down to for £10,000 a year and the Rolls Royce that goes with money of that sort? Without blinking an eye Donovan Joyce told us: 520 quarter-hour episodes, or roughly 10 a week. And disinclined to share our dismay he assured us that he himself had once written eight episodes in a spell of 17 hours at the typewriter.

This glimpse behind the scenes of the industry which provides thousands of New Zealanders with their nightly radio entertainment was one of a number we had when we talked with Mr Joyce, founder and principal of Donovan Joyce Productions, while he was in New Zealand recently on "a long overdue visit to one of our best customers." In the 13 years he had been making radio programmes, he explained, the NZBS had bought every programme but one. Since his last visit broadcasting in New Zealand had grown greatly commercially, and he understood more stations were on the way. With the Service using more programmes he was particularly anxious to refresh his memory about the kind that pleased it most and the kind that didn't.

Mr Joyce's interest in broadcasting goes back about 28 years. "In 1929," he told us with some amusement, "I was fired from the Broken Hill Proprietary with a testimonial which said I was 'seeking other fields for which I was more temperamentally suited.' That was the first time I realised that big business wasn't my forte." Turning his hand to anything which would keep him from starving in those depression years, Mr Joyce often read radio talks written by people whose voices were not suitable for broadcasting. Other jobs he remembers were in advertising, the theatre and journalism.

"Then I got into commercial radio," he said, "first at two or three country stations and later in the city. A station manager in those days did just about everything—he put programmes together, wrote copy, sold advertising, compèred and announced, did his own turntable work and washed the cups. It was also an advantage to have a technician's ticket."

Donovan Joyce was evidently something of a success as an announcer, for he recalled from the middle 1930s a job he had as a free lance making commercial announcements at two guineas a quarter-hour. "The first night I did three programmes, and the second night five," he said. "I ended up making about £80 for the week, and naturally I was interested when the manager told me he liked what I was doing and wanted to offer me something better, 'of a permanent nature.' But what he had in mind was £12/10/- a week."

After that Mr Joyce took what turned out to be a significant step when he became a writer of dramatic productions.

One of his first efforts, *Forty Glorious Years*, a series of one hour programmes, had a big audience, but hardly anyone in the business considered it very much. More recently it has won praise and Mr Joyce believes it was simply 20 years before its time.

Back at the start of the 1940's there was no wages award for radio actors, and Mr Joyce, who was then working

less work a writer does the better it'll be—and the more it'll be worth," Mr Joyce said. "This point of view was well received by Sydney's 15 top radio writers when I put it to them, and we're now paying £12/10/- for a quarter-hour and £30 for a half-hour script, compared with the average fees of £7/10/- and £15. There's a shortage of writers, and the new fees make

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on adaptations of one-hour stage plays for broadcasting, told us of the get-together each week after the production when a little over £20 allocated for the complete show would be divided. This would include about two guineas for the adaptation.

"You can go ahead but you can't go back," Mr Joyce said as he recalled how, when that job fell through, he started his own production unit in 1944. At that time he had some ideas about programmes, but knew nothing about making transcriptions. If he had taken to heart the first reaction to his first programme—when a prospective customer "flung off" the disc he had been asked to audition—he would have given up right away, but that same show, *Passing Parade*, went to 208 half-hours and sold throughout the world.

"In those days a top writer got about £4/10/- for a half-hour, and Lindsay Hardy, who's now under contract for £10,000 a year, was eight years ago earning only a little more than that," said Mr Joyce. Hardy's shows, besides *Dossier on Dumetrios* and *Knave of Hearts*, include *Twenty-six Hours*, *Deadly Nightshade*, *Office Wife*, *The Lilian Dale Affair*, *Stranger in Paradise* and *Walk a Crooked Mile*. Hardy cut his teeth in radio with Donovan Joyce and dedicated his first book to him.

"In Australia there's at last a growing recognition that within reason the

it possible for those whose work is up to standard to give their full time to it."

There was also a growing idea, said Mr Joyce, that a story should be told in as few episodes as were necessary and no more, rather than multiples of 52. This was going to improve radio story-telling. Soap opera had no predetermined ending, but was a series of rolling plots. "I believe," he said, "that we get a more live production from writers and cast by keeping a plot to a reasonable length—up to 208 episodes." Better direction should go along with better stories better told, said Mr Joyce. "The moment you go back you've had it."

As an instance of this attitude applied to writing, he mentioned that while Lindsay Hardy knew there would be a market for a sequel to *Office Wife* he

wasn't interested in writing one at present because he believed he had outgrown that type of story.

Mr Joyce also commented briefly on the suitability of different types of programmes for certain listening times, and, incidentally, intrigued us by referring to something he called "drip drama"—"the sort of programme that will make women cry without upsetting them too much." Listener research, he pointed out, had upset some ideas about programming that were once held, and red-blooded drama, for instance, usually regarded as evening listening, had actually won a higher rating when broadcast in the morning.

This seems likely to have a bearing on the future of broadcasting in Australia in competition with television, for Mr Joyce considers that as fewer and fewer sound radio programmes are wanted at night in television areas the tendency, for some years at least, will be to transfer programmes from the evening to the three or four hours from noon onwards. A change of this sort, Mr Joyce thinks, may call for more rather than fewer programmes of the sort he produces. Television must, of course, have a growing effect as it got a stronger grip, he agreed, but it was nevertheless true that radio had a stronger hold than ever on American audiences.

As a last question we asked Donovan Joyce what he would say to critics who declared that though radio serials might have a "moral" ending characters in them were nevertheless allowed to break all the Ten Commandments.

"I believe that characters in radio productions must be credible—must have the same weaknesses as other people and have the same experiences," said Mr Joyce. "But it's possible to be realistic and mention most aspects of life without giving offence. Sensational incidents should never be introduced merely for their own sake—they must grow naturally out of the development of character." Keeping these points in mind when he produced radio programmes, he had never had any complaints touching on good taste from his customers in Australia, South Africa, the United States, Canada or New Zealand—and New Zealand, he thought, was a very selective buyer. In speaking of the need for realism, however, Mr Joyce made it clear that he didn't use the term in too down-to-earth a sense. For, commenting that freedom of movement of characters in a story was essential, he added: "You must have characters, for example, who can buy plane tickets to wherever they want to go... and they mustn't be worried by such problems as who's going to take care of the children..." For listeners it was escapism—fairy tales. There was, after all, still magic in the phrases "Once upon a time" and "Over the hills and far away."

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