

THE RADIO RECORD

Published Weekly
REGISTERED G.P.O., WELLINGTON, N.Z., AS A NEWSPAPER.

Price 3d.

VOL. I, No. 49

WELLINGTON, FRIDAY, JUNE 22, 1928.

Imagination and the Listener

THE experiment has recently been made in New Zealand of transmitting "over the air" radio plays. This innovation has generally been received by listeners with appreciation, but there have been a few who have made some criticism of such plays as being unsuitable for broadcasting. The following article from a Home magazine shows that, to the successful transmission of such plays, the listener must bring some imagination. Evidently those who have made the criticism mentioned must be regarded as lacking in imagination! How can the alleged deficiency be corrected? The author of the article indicates that to overcome our "sophistication" a conscious effort must be made by listeners!



THE importance of the part played by the imagination of the listener in the production of broadcast drama is emphasised by Mr. Norman Edwards in "Modern Wireless."

COMPARISONS are not always odious, nor invidious, if they are made in a spirit of constructive criticism. Criticism is essentially intelligent analysis and intelligent comparison, and when we examine the relative appeal of the broadcast play, the stage play, and the kinema play, it becomes obvious that the critical faculty must be dominant because of the very diversity of appeal apparent between these three forms of artistic expression.

GREAT DIFFICULTIES.

AND at the very outset of any critical comparison between these three media, it must be obvious that the broadcast play labours under great difficulties, and that, of the three media we have mentioned, there is ample evidence to show that the kinema is to-day the most popular because it makes an appeal to the eye and, in doing so, makes no very great demand upon the intelligence. The legitimate stage would come second in order of popularity for equally obvious reasons; and the broadcast play, although potentially the most intelligent and difficult media, third.

It has been written somewhere that when our judgment 'pens our imagination decays; and if we add "sophistication" to the judgment, this dicta offers a very good explanation for the difference between the appeal of the Kinema and the stage and the appeal of the broadcast play. Perhaps it may be more adequately expressed if we say that if the progress of civilisation is inevitable it is equally and inevitably at the expense of imagination.

TOO STOLID.

IT is recorded that in the early days of the Athenian drama, imaginative spectators were furious because Aeschylus frightened them out of their wits with his Furies; and Herodotus tells us that when Phrynichus produced his tragedy on the fall of Miletus, he was fined a thousand drachmas for torturing the feelings of his audience!

Can we imagine a modern audience being tortured to such an extent, even by such a fine actress as Miss Sybil Thorndike, that a fine be imposed upon her because of her genius for harrowing the feelings of her audience? And can we imagine the Postmaster-General, as Guardian of the Rights of Listeners and all License Payers, fining the R.B.C. for "emotional damage" to the listening audience of to-day?

If we could sit in a theatre in such a position that we could see the actors upon the stage, and at the same time watch the machinery of the limelight, of the scene-shifting process, and the many mechanical devices employed for the delusion of the audience, we should be intelligently interested, but it is doubtful whether the actors would produce any imaginative reaction in us. A child at a party may watch a grown-up of the Olympian world put on an ugly, grotesque mask. It knows that the mask is only a

mask, but the child's imagination is too much for its reason, and sometimes it will scream in sheer terror.

The analogy may be used in connection with the broadcast listener. He knows that the thrill, like the child's mask, is artificial, but, unlike the child, his reason completely subordinates his imagination, so much so, in fact, that it is very rarely indeed that his imagination can give him that sensation which, whether pleasant or harrowing, is essential for an aesthetic and emotional appreciation of a work of art.

But if the listener is caught unprepared, when his armour of sophistication is unbuckled, then the result is often different.

CRUDE METHODS.

In our theatres to-day we find imagination run riot—but a raving, ranting imagination, born of an effort designed legitimately, but executed, because of its extreme necessity, in an illegitimate and crude way. Imaginative effort, as made to-day in the London theatres to pierce the stolid, blasé envelope of sophistication which wraps the average London playgoer as completely as the linen bandages swaths an ancient Egyptian mummy.

We find that in many of these plays the appeal to the artistic imagination is nil; but just as the imagination of a child may be so acute that a crude mask worn at a party may stimulate its imagination to the detriment of its reason, so, in many of the crude plays and thrillers of to-day, the sophistication of the audience is so acute that the crudest methods have to be adopted in order to produce the desired effect, namely, the stirring and stimulation of sluggish and atrophied imaginations.

This is a difficulty which might well intimidate less adventurous spirits, because broadcasting necessitates a sound knowledge of psychology; and without it no adequate appeal to the most undeveloped of the five senses—that of the sense of hearing—can satisfactorily be made. It is easier, far easier, to stir the imagination by vision than by sound; and when, as in the case of broadcasting, sound only may be utilised, the handicap is accentuated a thousandfold.

"ARTISTIC PURITY."

IT is legitimate to create an atmosphere for the public enjoyment of art. There are certain members of the so-called intelligentsia who maintain and insist that the plays of Shakespeare, for example, should be presented without scenery, and that at the most only black-drapery, etc., etc., should be used for scenery and background effects; and they maintain also that the characters interpreting the roles in any of Shakespeare's plays need not necessarily be dressed in the costumes of the period dealt with by the play.

This form of "artistic purity" may be very good theoretically, but it is not, on the whole efficacious in practice. This has been proved more than once, and only quite recently by the production of "Macbeth" in modern clothes, but, unfortunately, "Macbeth" produced in modern clothes and modern settings made an appeal only to a very limited audience.

"MERELY RIDICULOUS."

PRIMARILY, the contrast merely tickled one's sense of the ridiculous. It would have been more satisfactory to test Sir Barry Jackson's theory by broadcasting "Macbeth." That would have been a truer test of the poetic and intellectual appeal of the beauty of Shakespeare's language than the rather abnormal experiment of dressing the characters in the play in modern clothes.

A natural atmosphere is, for the normal man, only natural when he goes to a theatre, and when he listens to broadcasting it is not to be expected that he will enjoy even a thrilling melodrama by wireless if he is sitting in a drawing-room, in the full glare of electric light, with possibly the tea things surrounding him, a blazing fire in the hearth, and his wife and children scattered round him.

WRONG ATMOSPHERE.

HAVE you ever read a ghost story on a fine summer's afternoon, lying in a hammock in the garden, and have you ever read a ghost story late at night by the light of a flickering candle, with the wind moaning and wailing outside, and sometimes whistling down the chimney? If you have read, for example, "The Monkey's Paw," by Jacobs, or one of Poe's "thrillers," or even that wonderful unfinished poem of Coleridge's "Christabel," you will know full well the emotional difference between your experience of reading such a story or such a poem in broad daylight and in reading it late at night.

THE SPELL IS BROKEN.

READING such a story in the daytime you perceive, perhaps intelligently, the skill of the author, but in perceiving that skill the spell is broken. Pleasure in reading a book, says Lord Macaulay, may be the effect of ideas which some unmeaning expression, striking a train of associations, may have called up in one's own mind as they have furnished to the author, the beauties one admires.

So with broadcasting. It would perhaps naturally enhance the listener's perception of the artistry of a broadcast play, dealing, let us say, with a tragedy in a coal mine, if one could take the loud-speaker down into the coal cellar and there, painfully reposing upon jagged lumps of coal, listen in semi obscurity (certainly with no more illumination than that afforded by a guttering candle), to the vocal appeal of the play as reproduced by the loud-speaker!

THE BEST "ATMOSPHERE."

BUT, seriously, we suggest that a play should always be prefaced with hints as to the atmosphere in which the listener will find it most conducive to enjoy that play. Advice, we are well aware, has often been given to listen to a broadcast play in darkness. That is excellent advice, for in darkness the imagination awakens. Milton suffered from the great affliction of blindness, but would he ever have written such a magnificent masterpiece as "Paradise Lost" if blessed with sight while living in an age of depravity, licentiousness, and bankrupt artistry?

The example is an extreme one, but legitimate. The artistic appeal of broadcasting is still so much in its youth that we have not yet had time to train ourselves to a finer perception of an appreciation of its artistic possibilities, and until that training has been accomplished and more experience gained in apprehending this new form of art, we must, within legitimate bounds, adopt artificial means for stimulating our imagination when listening to broadcasting, and especially broadcast plays.

AND, therefore, by attempting to create an atmosphere in our own homes when we are listening to a broadcast play or a poetic recitation, or even a fine symphony, we shall merely be adopting an expedient which, although it may offend the purist, would at least enable us more enjoyably to train ourselves to an appreciation of what, after all, is theoretically the most intelligent and the most satisfying medium of artistic entertainment.