

Big or Small Casts for Radio?

Some of the Troubles that Turn Grey the Hair of Broadcast Drama Selectors and Producers

WHILE Parliament worries and worries about the details of broadcast control, the administrative side of the national service has to go on as if nothing had happened—or was likely to happen. And not the least of all the problems which face the staff of any broadcasting service or station is that of providing listeners with radio plays—enough of them, and good enough to appeal to a good proportion of the radio public. The limitations of radio drama have been discussed, pulled to bits, put together again, and enlarged upon by those in the game and out of it to such an extent that the question is as vexed a one as that of broadcast music.

As the possibilities of broadcast drama became vaguely apparent in the early days of the technical side, when programme arrangers looked forward with considerable trepidation to every dramatic number on their schedules, which was any more than simple dialogue, there was but one school of thought concerning radio drama. Its contention was that the only success to be achieved in this category was the presentation of plays which contained not more than six players, with sharply differentiated characters, in a story the appeal of which depended on speech rather than action.

These limitations no longer exist. There is still a tendency to say that the play of action cannot be produced for successful broadcast. Yet the most popular type of radio drama is the thriller, essentially dependent on its impression of action in order to convince the listener. Words—ideas put into dialogue form—are still recognised as the essential which should claim the closest attention of the radio playwright and producer. Even so, these tend to become boring, savouring of plain debate, if there is no implication of action with which the listener may exercise his imagination.

Val Gielgud, director of the drama production section of the B.B.C., swears that there is overmuch attention paid to the technical side of radio drama, that it has loomed too large. Instead of being a means to an end, it is considered by some people to be the end itself. Once you can notice the machinery going round, he says, the production has failed. His leaning is toward a simple story, well told and with a minimum number of characters in any one scene.

On the other hand, Lance Sieveking, one of the corporation's best known producers, says that a radio play should have just as many characters as are necessary for its proper presentation. If a big cast is called for, you just have to have it, but a lot depends on the play and a lot on the listener.

From the listener's end the small cast, the simple story and the reasonable form of action, is the best. If there is broadcast a play with a big cast and involved action or argument, it is appreciated only by the practised listener—and the number of those is limited. It is not possible, of course, to lay down any hard and fast rule, although the play, with half a dozen well-differentiated characters, is still considered the best, provided always that the plot is not involved and the argument not complicated.

Yet the success of many action plays and those with big casts cannot be denied. "Lost Horizon," for instance,



Val Gielgud (left), in charge of the drama department of the B.B.C., prefers a simple story, well-told, and with a minimum number of characters. Lance Sieveking, a revolutionary producer for the B.B.C., leans toward the opposite view.

which has been produced from three New Zealand national stations, is almost purely an action play, a sort of dramatic reporting. "Wings Over Westralia" has also proved that action can be intelligently interpreted to the ordinarily attentive listener, and that a big cast can be unconfusing. These plays were written specially for radio, which may explain their particular effectiveness. There is no reason why action should not be interpreted for broadcast drama, but, because of the difficulty of following a complicated plot through the loudspeaker, many brilliant stage plays would never be successful over the air. In some of them there is not much action at all, just words, words, words—which makes them just as hard to follow as when the action is involved.

Another feature of radio drama is the difficulty of satisfactorily including many women in the cast—a consideration which is reflected in the sort of radio plays usually encountered. Among women there is too little distinctiveness in voice alone to avoid confusion to the listener.

In men the radio producer is always able to choose a wide cast, and yet have each voice immediately spotted by the hearers as belonging to a particular character.

The range of women's voices—their speaking voices—is, unfortunately, limited in any average group to their disadvantage from the radio drama aspect. It is, indeed, sometimes found necessary for the operator on the control panel to use a dial for altering the pitch of female performers' voices to provide better differentiation.

One of the sorest spots of the radio drama director's life is that question of light entertainment within his province. Where, you may have asked yourself in an idle moment, is the humorous, farcical sort of radio play? There are plenty of them for the stage and screen, but none for the radio.

Appreciation of farce, to begin with, is essentially a community affair. You have to sit among an audience and laugh and cackle with them. To hear the same stuff coming over the air while you are at home alone, or with two or three others, merely annoys most people, for few are so built that they will laugh out loud at the radio, even if they think something is really funny. There lies one reason why the cleverest stage farce would be a flop over the air. The other is obvious.

Satire is another avenue which cannot be explored for broadcasts. Whatever is satirised is sure to be somebody's "corns," and, although the sensitive ones may pass it off

Two Schools of Thought Survive