

Baking the Crust of the Radio Pudding

RADIO drama, without sound effects, would be pretty much like a beef and kidney pudding without the crust. Every big studio has its sound effects department, manned by experts who steer strange-looking equipment about, control an imposing library, and turn their inventive minds to all sorts of odd gadgets.

You will find a good deal of temperament round such a department, for it is one thing to be asked to read a good line or sing a song, but it is something else again to be ordered to create a San Francisco earthquake or an Arctic explorer travelling on snowshoes. The men selected for this job are imaginative, theatre-conscious, and not all thumbs with a hammer. It would be well if they have graduated from a stage juggling act, too, for sometimes hands, feet, and head are working full time.

In the CBC studios at Toronto, where many of the elaborate dramatic productions for the Canadian air are staged, the sound-effects department is in the dexterous hands of Charles Emerson, who was a well-known theatre figure before he entered radio. For years he was a stage manager. He also did his share of character acting and served his apprenticeship as property man in repertory and on the road.

So, when a dramatic script is turned over to him to plot the sound effects. It goes into the hands of a man who knows instinctively what the requirements will be. To him it is a show which must be rehearsed in the same thorough manner that the director rehearses his cast. If he hasn't got all the contraptions needed for accurate reproduction of the sounds called for, he gets busy and invents them.

"Sometimes we hit on the perfect solution just by a fluke, like the bowler and the bill fold," explained Charlie recently.

It seems that by playing a little tune with the tips of your fingers on somebody's hard hat you get a perfect copy of a motor-boat "putt-putt," and by squeezing a soft morocco leather pocket-book you get that romantic creak of a ship braving a storm at sea.

THERE are many more secrets of the sound-effects department. For instance, it just takes that little piece of cellophane off your package of cigarettes to establish the presence of a cosy grate fire or a slap in the face with a bucket of water.

It takes two halves of an empty coconut, dry, to make horses' hoofbeats on gravel, a sink plunger to duplicate the same sound on turf.

When you listen to that romantic scene in the park, in the rain in the spring, it is dried peas in a sieve that make the rain. The thunder-clap that follows is a sheet of galvanised tin.

and when the wind whips up into a real gale you have Mr. Emerson swinging hard on a crank which revolves a wooden-slatted drum over which is laid a piece of thick canvas.

THE CBC's portable sound platform is as neat a package of tricks as you could wish to see. There is a wooden upright about five feet tall. At right angles, attached to the base on hinges, is a platform (hooked up when not in use). On this travelling equipment are doors, windows, bolts, bells, blinds, latches, bird-cage hangers, and a place to leave the milk-bottle.

Then there are the dozens of recorded sound effects, a regular industry by itself now. From Hollywood come some of the finest sound records, made in studios and on location with just as much care and hazard as the movies encounter.

When you hear the cry of a baby, it is the real thing; so are the dog barks, the bird songs, the monkey chatters, the lion roars, the sawmill screams. The sound-recording men go to Los Angeles streets for the authentic noises of a busy thoroughfare, they hurry into a theatre lobby to get the polite hubbub of a first-night gathering, and they go down the Mississippi to get that genuine swish of the old stern-wheelers that ply the grand old river.

But when you hear a pistol shot, keep calm, for nothing can happen to your favourite star . . . just a walking stick given a smart whack against a cushion.

When the Canadian ear catches that glorious sound of fresh crunching snow—it's a bag of salt, and when the villain sneaks up the side drive, it's a bag of lima beans, uncooked, of course.

THERE are scenes when only realistic "business" can be counted on to create the perfect illusion, and it is there that Emerson, who was a stage property man, excels. The actors are seated round the table for a breakfast scene. Enter the perfect butler (Charles Emerson) with shining tray. Quietly he sets down the muffin dish, the coffee cups, and the grapefruit.

You, at the living-room radio, can actually "see" the deft manner in which he helps the company to cream and sugar. And that is "excelsior" for the sound-effects man.

Yes, sometimes things go wrong. A gadget breaks in the middle of a scene—and the show is on the air so nobody can speak a word not in the script. But they can look; all eyes are riveted on the sound-effects man. It is his worry to do something and according to Emerson that is why a sound-effects man can never loaf on the job.

He must fill the breach no matter what the emergency, and he has to do it in a split second.

INSTEAD of giving money to the bookies, why not give it to the Church? The Church can always be considered as a sure winner.—*Lady de Villiers.*

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