

Both Kicks and Ha'pence

For Those Who Know "Mike"

says

Elsie Lloyd



O I get microphone fright? Well now and again one has it badly. Some one misses his cue, or a noise fails to present itself just as everyone expects it, and we all feel suspended in mid-air—waiting—waiting—

It is terrible sometimes, though (thank heaven!) not often. I remember one occasion, when a particularly tense episode was to be punctuated with a revolver shot. One of the party stood near the microphone with a piece of folded cardboard in his hand—the sort of thing with which schoolboys shatter the silences at moments when everything should be still.

The play had run smoothly until the time for the shot, and we had received telephone messages of congratulation. But the "revolver" refused to function, despite perspiring efforts of the man who held it. Not even an Edgar Wallace "plop" came from the cardboard, and the party waited with agonised perplexity, until someone relieved the tension by stepping briskly to the "mike" and smartly clapped his hands together.

My first impression was one of fear, but of what I simply couldn't say. Real fear, it was—I absolutely trembled—which seemed very strange to me, since I had played many times before in amateur shows in London.

The trouble is, I think, that one doesn't know where he stands when facing the microphone (figuratively, I mean) for the first time. With a visual audience you "feel" you have them with you, but with an unnumbered radio audience . . .

NOW, of course, I know exactly where I stand. I actually have an idea when broadcasting that I do "feel" an audience somewhere. I believe there is "something" coming through to us. This sounds somewhat spiritualistic, I suppose, but there it is.

Broadcasting is enjoyable work, and people are very kind, particularly those at 2YA. But we gets lots of kicks, plenty of them, as well as many letters of appreciation from all over New Zealand, which help us considerably (the letters of appreciation, I mean) to do our best.

I well remember one night when my husband and I were making love to each other in a play from 2YA. Someone rang up to say the love-making wasn't at all convincing. How could it be, when my husband stood beside the microphone, grinning hugely, while I depicted him in terms of loving extravagance?

Which brings to my mind the word "atmosphere," and of the difficulty one sometimes has faithfully to produce it.

Not only must voice inflection convey situation or sentiment, but one has to create mental pictures for thousands of people who cannot follow our gestures, helping listeners to live in the period or circumstances portrayed by the sketch.

Imagine the difficulty of depicting extreme fear to a microphone! Sometimes when we are working very hard I wonder what people are doing; whether they are saying: "Let us shut off this stuff," or whether they are feeling kindly disposed. And then the station telephone bell rings, and Mr. Announcer gives us some cheery message.

Quite a lot of people think it the simplest matter to broadcast—a matter of gabbling a few lines from a book—but it is far from that. Everything, noises and all, is carefully rehearsed before public presentation, and everything is most strictly censored.

Nothing which might hurt people's susceptibilities is allowed to pass the "mike," unless, of course, it is thought that by too heavy censorship a character or some situation might be upset. One cannot have a tippler saying "Dear, dear!"—he would say something desperate. Women are more appreciative of plays, but that is because they are more easily moved in their emotions. Make them cry, and they enjoy it. Men like detective plays. They

like to sit guessing who committed the crime, but they like to get the surprise at the end. Some people, particularly those in the backblocks, like to have thrills running up and down their spines. People out back, who cannot get to the talkies often, and who are not so critical as city folk, who see and hear so much, like thrillers.

So we really endeavour to reach people who cannot see town shows—they are the people we work for, and for city people who like to sit 'round their fires listening to the radio players.

It is gratifying to receive kindly letters of congratulation. But there are a few who seem to stand at their telephones, awaiting the opportunity for violent criticism. One's main difficulty before the sensitive ear of the "mike" is absorbing a part completely alien to everyday life; especially those sort of things which would never happen to him (or her). The other is wondering how we sound.

I would love to hear myself over the air, because I feel certain it would be more helpful than anything else I know. It would be nice to have a record taken, so that we could obviate mistakes which sometimes creep in, careful though we may be.

Artists awaiting their turn at the studio often listen-in to each other's broadcast, then they try to help with frank criticism. I mean frank criticism.

For example. One man attempted to make a noise like a fog-horn, but succeeded only in making a noise like a cow looking for its young. We told him so.

One fights shy of destructive criticism, the sort which sweeps over the telephone wires with: "That was awful . . . the whole thing . . ." but we do welcome constructive criticism, which helps us enormously.

It is harder to please broadcasting audiences than to play before people in a theatre.

If one is giving a play "on the boards," and the subject is one which does not appeal to theatre-goers, they merely stay away. But with a radio audience it is vitally different—and difficult. In paying their annual license fees, radio listeners feel they are entitled to something good, and if what they receive isn't good they switch off their sets and that's all there is about it, except that complaints are sure to follow—and rightly so.

The theatre audience simply stays away—that is the tenor and substance of their complaint.

To overcome the difficulty of pleasing everybody (or almost everybody) we give wide selection, and thus are able to contribute a different type of play every time we broadcast.

Sometimes listeners offer most helpful suggestions. "The voice of So-and-so is coming through distorted," comes the information over telephone. Mr. Announcer, or someone connected with the studio, conveys the information to the artist, who steps farther away from the "mike."

Many artists have told me that for a long time they found it extremely difficult to convey an impression of extreme fear in some episode which demanded it.

Remember, one is faced with an ice-cold, dispassionate instrument that gives one no quarter.

It is hard to play in cold blood, as it were, but before the microphone the fear you express as a dramatic character enjoins you to be really afraid.

If you are not, if you do not really live and breathe the life of your character subject, you have failed.

In "Danger," three people are trapped in a coalmine, where water is rising. To place oneself in the fear-full state of mind demanded by the play, it is essential one sees in a vivid mental picture himself (or herself) as one of the three drowning people. And then someone says that radio artists simply read their parts!

