

"It Must Make a Clean Break"



WHAT exactly will radio drama be like five, ten or twenty years from now? There are probably few prophets in our midst. The truth of the matter, of course, is that nobody knows. Personally, I doubt whether any useful purpose is served in trying to forecast the future of the wireless play. I should prefer instead to ask whether it has a future at all?

At the moment nobody seems to be quite certain about what broadcasting can do for drama. May I further suggest that the B.B.C. appears to be as uncertain as the rest of us? The present situation with regard to radio drama may be fairly summed up, it seems to me, in the celebrated words of Mr. Sean O'Casey's Paycock: "Everything is in a state of chass." On the one hand, radio producers are trying—quite legitimately and benevolently, though not always successfully—to bring the theatre within reach of everybody; on the other, they seem to be trying, by a reasonable show of experiment, to create a distinctive type of broadcast play. Both are laudable aims, but the unfortunate thing is that they are widely divergent ones; they are, in fact, totally irreconcilable. It is this wavering between two irreconcilable aims which accounts for the present unsatisfactory state of wireless drama. In entertainment, as in so much else, it is impossible to make the best of both worlds.

Artistically speaking, the trouble is, of course, that there is as yet no recognised theory or aesthetic of radio drama. Leonardo da Vinci said that practice must always be founded on good theory. This is a weighty truth in matters of art, and it has peculiar relevance to the broadcast play. We must discover an aesthetic basis and work out a technique of expression for wireless drama before it can stand on its own feet and rank as an independent art.

Put more simply, we must in the first place be quite clear about what we want and expect from it if it is to develop in a satisfactory way. And the point I wish to make in this article is that radio drama is an extremely vague thing to-day, that we have only the vaguest ideas about what we would like it to be, that what passes as radio drama nowadays is either a borrowed form of entertainment or else raw experiment, and that it cannot develop satisfactorily unless it evolves a coherent method of its own, peculiar to it and to nothing else.

There is no future—no "real" future, as metaphysicians would say—for radio drama, it seems to me, except on the condition that it makes a clean break from its origins—from stage drama and the theatre and the conventions of theatrical art in general. It must lose its own life to find its soul. It must be born afresh.

Tribute must be paid, of course, to the value of popularising ordinary drama.

The skill and the enthusiasm with which stage plays are adapted for wireless performance are not wasted; the broadcast performance of a play



like "Journey's End" is a boon for hundreds of thousands of people. Shakespeare, too, more than passes muster as a radio dramatist, and the microphone does something for playwrights like Strindberg and Ibsen and (possibly) Tschekov.

Experimental productions are of genuine pioneering value; they are attempts at creating an autonomous form of radio art, and their degree of success is less important than their ability to suggest a technique of radio expression. But none of these experiments has done a great deal to clarify our ideas about the wireless play in general. There have been hints, indications, promises, but never a consistent method to make us say to ourselves: "Ah, that is what radio drama ought to be like!" The truth is that we are always expecting or hoping for more than we get.

What do we really want? It is hard to say. Samuel Butler said that life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises, which is another way of saying that we should arrange our affairs much better if we could prophesy them. It may be easier, therefore, without trying to teach the radio dramatist his job, to remind him of the conditions under which he works.

The microphone is not the stage. Listening to a wireless play, a man has only his ears to guide him—his ears and his imagination. He has nothing else for all practical purposes he is deprived of four of his five senses. He can see nothing—there is nothing to be seen. There is no physical illusion, no stage, no actors in the flesh, no trace of the excited atmosphere of the theatre before the curtain goes up. The audience the microphone creates is not an audience in the colloquial sense of the word;

Says

R. D. CHARQUES

in Answer to a Question

"Is There a Future for Radio Drama?"

it is a sort of infinite series of listeners, unseen and unseeing.

The conclusion to be drawn from this state of affairs, elementary though it may be, cannot be too strongly emphasised. It is this: the naturalistic play designed for the picture-stage (or for any other theatrical stage for that matter) is out of the question so far as wireless drama is concerned. It simply will not do for the purpose of the microphone, although in certain cases—"Journey's End," for instance, with its poignant memories of Armistice Day, or a dialectical comedy of Mr. Shaw's—it may prove effective up to a point. Generally speaking, however, the last thing in the world that radio drama can accommodate is the ordinary type of naturalistic play.

Take the case of what is called "drawing-room comedy," for example. If you tried to transfer a play by Mr. Lonsdale or Mr. Milne to the microphone, it would mean putting a considerable strain on the ordinary man's imagination. You would be asking him, in effect, to picture a dinner party

of eight, at which the hostess wore red velvet and her daughter-in-law gold brocade, while one man, distinguished for a Grecian nose, wore a white carnation in his button-hole, a fashionable waistcoat and was disrespectful to the parlourmaid, who was blue-eyed and freckled. . . . So that the ordinary man would get up ten minutes after the play began and go out for a stroll. At any rate, his protest that he was not sitting in a theatre would be a perfectly reasonable one. 'I want to hear drama,' he might say; 'I don't want to be bothered with a thousand things I have to visualise. Just consider me as a pair of ears.'

The moral of his complaint may seem to be that we must await the practical advent of television. This is possibly true. I think, however, there may still be a way out, television apart. Radio drama is unsatisfactory at the present time, because radio dramatists seem unable to face the fact that their only medium of expression is sound.

(Concluded on page 7.)

Experimental productions are of genuine pioneering value." Our illustrations depict two scenes used in connection with the experimental television play, "The Man with a Flower in His Mouth." This was successfully broadcast by 3LO a few months back.

