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Viewpoint

BY JONATHAN RABAN

A CLOSE STUDENT of those advertisements which say that your pen can pay for your holiday, and that Mrs Y. of Dagenham has earned £1,000 from her first script for the television, I nearly became a television dramatist, once. I whored after producers and script editors, and came away with a fistful of commissions. My plays were disasters. One was abandoned after costing (it entailed setting a Norfolk village on fire); one was rejected on its second rewrite by the BBC ("The trouble is that nothing actually happens, though we do like your dialogue"); one reached the screen, skulking under a pseudonym after I had removed my name from the credits.

The script of this last one looked fine on paper; it was full of rather racy, colourful exchanges, rapidly intercut and peppered with professional touches like "Slow fade on empty budgie cage" and "Wipe to int living room". Even in the ruinous rehearsal hall on the wrong side of Vauxhall Bridge, there were still twitches of vestigial life in it. Neither the director nor the actors, dutifully striding from chalk-mark to chalk-mark, gave any sign that they were trying to resuscitate a terminal case. They were cheerier each day, applauded each other's laugh-lines, and got themselves up in in-character costumes. After a fortnight of rehearsal, we dragged the partly fleshed bones of the play to Manchester, where it was to be recorded in the Granada studios.

On the monitor screens in the director's box, it looked terrible. Lines which would pass innocently enough in a short story or novel become, on television, vastly amplified and over-extended. They have to support both the actor's delivery and gesture and the intense, promiscuous scrutiny of the camera. Everything is projected, blown up, illustrated. A brisk little row, with two people casually sniping at each other in an orderly marital fashion, is whipped-up to epic and murderous proportions: eyes blaze, feet stamp, doors slam. One can feel the actors struggling like swimmers to reach their invisible audience against the tide of machinery and technicians. "You are a bastard", says the girl; the line in my head was offhand, almost friendly, but isolated on the screen it comes across as the sort of remark which might reasonably start a Mediterranean family vendetta. I'd been quite pleased with the way I'd found objects for the camera to dwell on; they punctuated the play on the page, almost-symbols. But "slow fade on empty budgie cage" turned out to mean an unbearably long drawn out study of an Alcatraz parrot, in which there was time to count every artistically planted grain of seed on the cage floor.

My play was wildly over-written. In performance, it was slow, loud and thumpingly plattitudinous. Television deals best, I suspect, with language at one of two extremes. It can thrive on the rhetorical totalitarianism of a writer like David Mercer, who rants through his characters with such a deluge of straight

verbal metaphor that the illustrative process of acting and filming just has to tag along behind as best it can. Mercer's best work—*A Suitable Case for Treatment*, for instance—is so explicit and watertight in its wordiness that the cameras can do little more than transfer what is already there in the language on to numbered cans of tape. Or, as in good series-drama, it can use words as mere noises, like footfalls. The reality lies in the situation, in relationships which are more seen than heard. Elwyn Jones's superbly gruff and crackly handling of the Barlow and Watt double act in *Softly, Softly* depended on our knowing the characters so well and seeing them so clearly that dialogue was practically superfluous. Flat, grunting, matter of fact, it was picked up by the microphone as an afterthought. The picture of the characters is the thing, and it is language which has turned into the illustration.

My own play sank midway between these possibilities; it was at once too inexplicit and too much of a word-show. Where good dialogue in a printed story may be deliberately leaky, with lots of holes and crannies for the reader's imagination to come through, good dialogue on television has to be caulked and polished—by the time it is there on the screen it must be complete and impervious as an epigram. The qualities which make the plays of Mercer and Dennis Potter so successful on television make them read like communiqués from the imaginative police. Feel this! Think that! Cut to bloodied corpse of dead bear!

On the third day of the Manchester recording, grizzling in whisky in the bar of the Stables Theatre, I heard one of the technicians say, "I'm on this awful play. It's got a cat in it." I cut for home, got lost in fog over the Pennines, my exhaust pipe split, and my car limped down the motorway to London, growling like a tank. Better to stick to book reviewing than turn into the worst TV playwright in England. On the day the thing actually went out, I holed up in the only pub I could find which didn't have a television set and prayed that none of my friends would break the cover of my pseudonym. I still sometimes happen on copies of the script in the dusty bottoms of drawers; it's fat, pink and soggy—just the thing to give an unwary dustman a nasty turn.

More recently, ginger and chastened but still hooked on writing dialogue, I've tried radio plays. No one I know listens to Radio 3, which seemed a signal advantage to begin with; and since I already done a few talks and chat programmes, I wasn't overwhelmed by the machinery of the business, which, by television standards, is minimal, friendly and perfectly comprehensible. You are simply invited to fill an hour or ninety minutes of empty time with voices. They can get into discussions, they can monologue, they can even speak in verse, if you want. The microphone, unlike the camera, is supremely attentive to what is written in the script; it doesn't stray, yawning, on to trays of

birdseed or mention, in a sly aside, that the director has a thing about Louis Quinze chairs or Victorian nutcrackers. It allows the actor to concentrate on interpretation and delivery, gives him the pure theatre of mind and ear in which to perform, without demanding that he be a tumbler and a tumbling act in the bargain. Some actors shrink from radio, precisely because it leaves them exposed at the most vulnerable, sensitive and expressive level of their craft; many of the finest actors—Gielgud, for example—love the sheer exactitude of radio and the opportunities it affords for laying and pointing words as finely as if they were bricks in a wall. Radio, unlike the smooth completeness of television, is a conspiracy between performer and listener. It is, in consequence, delicate, ambiguous, all tact and gossamer. For the writer, it is the only other medium which is as permissive and hospitable as the printed page.

The only established convention of radio is time; no proscenium arch, no unities, no budgeting of sets, no camera angles. If the words can congeal into something shapely and meaningful which lasts an hour, it is a radio play. For Louis MacNeice, the form was an epic extension of the verse eclogue; for Henry Reed, it is a cabaret; for Giles Cooper, it is the clarity and terrible illusionism of a nightmare; for Dylan Thomas, in *Under Milk Wood*, it was really a dramatized and lengthened version of a twenty-minute descriptive talk ("Quite Early One Morning") written in the rhythm of spoken prose with the licence and imaginative elisions of verse. The one cloud on this open horizon at present is the stereo studio—a place whose control room has been deftly modelled on the pilots' cabin in the Concorde. There a worrying amount of production energy is channelled into making voices come out of first the left hand, then the right-hand speaker. It may not sound much, but it could be the beginning of a quite useless and limiting convention. ("Wouldn't it be a good idea if during this monologue we could hear him pacing from one side of the aural fireplace to the other...?") The moment a word is physically placed in space, a degree of literalism enters the play which is entirely alien to the basic nature of radio.

Writing a script is a libidinosely free-style affair. I've just finished my third radio play; it has a narration in rhyming doggerel, it's full of page-long monologues, it zig-zags gaily backwards and forwards in the period between 1942 and last year, and the characters end up machine-gunning giant lizards out of a helicopter in Mexico. When it gets on tape early next year, it may be another humiliating disaster; but if it is, it won't be because these things aren't possible on radio—the fault will be that I haven't written well enough, haven't sufficiently prepared the feast for the ear which even a middling radio play must be. The week of production will put the words through a fine and critical sieve; there is bound to be chaff, things wrongly and cruelly said, failures of imagination, stupidities and cheap remarks. But there will be no distortion. The language won't be blown up way beyond its proper size, slowed to a snail's pace,

or diminished to a trivial sound-effect to accompany some breath-taking coup de décor.

Yet the very delicacy and respect for words in themselves which are radio's chief strengths do tend to make it rather a squishy medium. As a listener, one has no text to mull over, to give one the sense that here is an object with an independent life of its own. Radio excites the most private and suggestible areas of the mind; we invent it as we listen. I find reviews of other people's plays, let alone my own, hard to relate to the reverie or mental jag which the play was for me. Mercifully undistorted by the machinery of transmission, the radio play turns into fodder for the distortions of the head. It can be turned inside out, made to say the reverse of what author, producer and actor intended, made cosy by one listener, turned into the stuff of nightmare by another. Much more than the printed page, radio isolates the word from the direction and control of syntax, leaves it rattling round the brain without accent or tone to govern its resonances. A few weeks ago a play of mine about two girls in Notting Hill Gate was broadcast, which several people found disgusting and brutalizing. I had written-in scenes of masturbation and imagined rape, but I thought I'd kept them well in control by whipping them down a narrow path of sardonic comedy. Not so. Over the air, for some listeners at least, these incidents—matters of just a few words—broke loose from their context and set up shop on their own, where they did a flourishing trade in dirt and innuendo. Television defines very exactly what it shows: a rape is a rape, and the libertarians and the clean-up ladies are at least able to agree that they've seen the same thing. On radio, simultaneously so cloudy and so precise, you can never be sure quite where the line falls between what you have heard and what you have made up.

This tendency of radio, to break down into atomic particles, single, disconnected words and phrases, is its dark reverse side. In the hands of the inattentive listener and the meretricious programmer, the radio set turns into something like a sunray lamp, a machine before which you back in a barrage of tiny, pointless aural stimuli. Switch on a local station in the United States, and you will hear a phoned-in contribution from a lady in Worcester about Black loafers on welfare ("Good to hear from you, Betty-Jean..."); a mention that the clam-diggers are striking; half a pop song; a political advertisement ("My name is Wayne K. Clarke, I am standing for election as tree-warden for Coney County, I will beautify our town for less money"); a sentimental poem; an encomium, chanted by a mass choir, on the dynamic virtues of the Thunderbird; and a thirty-second interview with the high-school baseball team switch-hitter; all this in three minutes flat. Unfortunately, that too is part of radio's real nature. Elated at discovering it such a lovely and elastic medium to write for, I tried reviewing it for the *Listener*—another failure to chalk up—and found it was like describing one's bathwater... warmish, dullish, quite dirty, all right to lie about all day in, but what did you want to know for, anyway?

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