

Far from being the poor relation of television or film, radio may be the last bastion of truly original drama. Director Izzy Mant has spent eighteen months on attachment at BBC Radio Drama. She explores a few myths about the medium of the imagination and explains the process behind a new interactive radio drama.

Doing it on radio

The studio manager silences us into a reverential hush with a cry of 'Take 36! Julia McKenzie and Ronald Pickup stand to attention in front of their microphones. I glance at the clock and notice we only have another two weeks left to record this scene; it's looking tight. The cue light flashes, the man with the coconut shells makes the horse noises. Ronnie loosens his bow tie, clears his throat and begins...

Hands up those of you who thought this to be a description of radio drama. Well I certainly did before I moved from stage directing to radio eighteen months ago. In fact, my preconceptions about the drama studio turned out to be completely inaccurate; except for the bit about Julia McKenzie and Ronald Pickup. You can get fabulous casts for radio plays, from top-notch theatre actors and the pick of film and television talent, to gifted drama school graduates who haven't yet been 'found' by other media. Actors love radio partly because they don't have to learn their lines or do their make-up, but also because they know something I didn't before I started: radio drama is fast, fun, physical, full of innovation and infinitely variable.

In the film *Educating Rita*, when Dr Frank

Bryant (Michael Caine) asks Rita (Julie Walters) how to resolve the staging difficulties of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, she famously suggests, "Do it on the radio." This joke exposes the biggest myth of all about radio drama: that it is a place for plays that are difficult to stage, a watered-down second choice, theatre without the footlights or film without the photography. Writers frequently boast that their friends have urged them to adapt their script for the radio, when what their friends are actually trying to say is that the script is all talk and no action, that the writing is very conventional or that it's just plain dull. This is not to say that adaptations of existing stage plays, novels or short stories can't make successful radio plays. They can. The point is that radio is not a last resort for scripts that don't quite work on other platforms.

On the contrary, radio can be a creative starting point. Both Rose Tremain's Whitbread-winning novel *Music and Silence* and Lee Hall's film and stage hit *Spoonface Steinberg* started life as radio plays. Radio is a place for innovation where the sheer quantity of output (at least one play a day on Radios 3 and 4) demands masses of new talent and original material, and this material works best when it genuinely

exploits the possibilities of the platform. Radio is liberating not limiting. At its best it means more action, more locations, more contrasts in sound, more imagination and more originality. Perhaps Michael Caine shouldn't have given Rita such a poor mark after all.

My own preconceptions about radio drama were that it must be the exact opposite of the work I'd done in theatre, which had been enjoyably diverse in subject and style. As Artistic Director of Theatre Machine, I've developed, workshopped and produced a wide variety of new writing. In my search for good new writing I've always combined an emphasis on high standards with a broad taste that defies categorisation. So plays premiered by Theatre Machine have ranged from a two-hander set in a Dublin borstal (*Choirboys*), to the headline-grabbing portrait of table dancing that became ex-Big Breakfast presenter Kelly Brook's stage debut (*Eye Contact*).

Theatre Machine's artistic policy is to be open-minded about where writers, subject-matter and audiences come from, and only elitist about quality. This has led to some interesting contrasts, such as on one occasion presenting a play by an ex-con to the privileged schoolboys of Winchester College



The short in the machine. *Dark House* pilot

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and, on another, presenting a play by a home-counties liberal to an audience of lager-toting *Loaded* readers.

I thought radio might be dull and homogenous in comparison but I soon discovered that there was as much opportunity for innovation and variety in radio as I had enjoyed in the theatre. Anyone who has listened to radio drama will know that alongside the plays about grannies sipping tea in English country gardens there are plays about subjects as diverse as the largest prison massacre in recent history, a mother sent to prison for her child's truancy, and an imagined future where all of Liverpool's tower blocks are stacked into one giant building. They will also know that the audience isn't made up entirely of grannies sipping tea in English country gardens. Besides, grannies are more broad-minded than some might think.

Another preconception was that radio was not a physical medium. Perhaps because of my background as a dancer, my stage productions have tended to be choreographic, energetic and rhythmic. That was something I thought wouldn't be possible in radio but the first play I directed in studio, *The Beautiful Couple*, showed that it was. This was a play with characters caught in thunderstorms, two sex scenes (one in the sea and one in the shower), and an attempted suicide off a balcony. It required some ingenuity. The balcony railing was a shopping trolley and for the watery sex scenes the actors gamely splashed around in buckets of water. I discovered straight away that radio actors do not just stand in neat circles round the microphone. They fight, they dance, they kiss, they run up and down stairs, they clamber over shopping trolleys and they become passionate in buckets of water. With

no visuals to push it past the watershed, you can indeed 'do it' on radio.

Radio is just as physical as stage or screen, perhaps even more so. What would otherwise be conveyed through a look might be described by an approach, a retreat or a turn. The actors' physical activity has a noticeable effect on the voice. Radio actors, writers and directors can and should exploit this. The microphone is amazingly sensitive. It can 'hear' a hug, a handshake, a nervous fidget, even a loaded silence. If a character is supposed to be walking, lifting an object, or reaching for something on a high shelf it won't sound convincing unless the actor is actually performing those activities. If two characters are wrestling you will probably know which of them is winning, not just by what they say, but by what their voices betray about their physical state.

Position also matters. Michael Maloney and Emma Fielding, both experienced radio actors, recently spent an afternoon lying on their backs on the floor in the name of radio drama while I gave notes from their feet. The scene required the characters to be staring at a starscape on the ceiling. If they had performed the scene standing it would have affected not just the tension in their larynxes but the nature of the emotional interaction between them. On another occasion I directed a scene set in a hairdressers and noticed for the first time the comic potential of the vocal constriction produced by those uncomfortable sinks.

As well as being energetic from the actors' point of view, radio also has an energetic pace for the director and crew. For the average 45 minute play, you have two days in studio so you have to perfect each scene in a handful of takes. Different directors have different ways of working but

I often like to record the rehearsal of a scene. Sometimes the first performance the actors give has a spontaneity and authenticity that no amount of notes and re-takes can recapture. This approach can make life difficult for the SMs (Studio Managers) who are juggling spot effects (sounds created live in studio), grams (sounds or music from an electronic source) and the mix from several studio microphones in order to get the scene right first time.

The art of radio drama is conjuring vivid pictures and ideas out of a collection of sounds and the listeners' imaginations. I have come to realise how important the skill of the Studio Manager is in this process. Most dramas have three SMs. The spot SM stays in studio setting props, moving microphones and creating practical or 'spot' effects. They also sometimes act as the actor's extra hand when a prop or script needs holding, for example, during aquatic lovemaking. The Grams SM stays in the 'cubicle' playing music, effects and atmospheric backgrounds from CD or a keyboard. The Panel SM has the job of bringing all the elements together on the studio mixing desk. They tend to be constantly busy either in the cubicle, pushing faders, or in the studio pushing walls, doors, stairs and actors into place for the next scene.

The studio manager is not just a manager. He or she participates in the creative vision and collaborates closely with the director. A good SM is the Gary Rhodes of sound: an expert in finding just the right ingredients, in just the right proportions, to produce the right flavour. My first studio production – the one with the sex scenes and suicide – was set in a Spanish hotel. It was important to me to make the setting tangible, to bring out the play's atmosphere of oppressive ▶

heat. The SM knew that from the terrace of a Costa Brava hotel you'd hear children playing, chart music from a nearby beach bar, the sea, the air, certain birds and specific insects, and the slight echo of voices off the surrounding buildings. When the actors played against this soundscape, the heat and atmosphere followed naturally.

So my uninitiated vision of radio drama turned out to be pretty much false. No actors in black tie, no officious Studio Manager, no reverence, no paralysis and no man with coconut shells (horses hooves tend to be played off Grams).

What should writers who have not thought about writing for radio take into account? Radio writing can be pacy and exciting; it can exploit the physicality of the medium and shouldn't be constrained by perceived limitations in what's technically achievable.

The good news is that in the medium of the imagination, almost anything is possible. A radio play can take the listener all over the world, into Space, inside a character's head. It can be set in the present, past or future. The characters can be people, animals or even plants. (One radio play featured three garden weeds as *dramatis personae*.)

The bad news is that the lack of visual stimulus can make radio an easy medium to turn off but this only means that the radio writer has to work a little harder to grab and hold the listeners' attention. In my view, punchy openings are no bad thing and they should be followed up by a story as gripping and suspense-filled as you'd expect in a great screenplay.

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A few practical tips: variety and contrast often work well such as exterior to interior, fast to slow, noisy to quiet. Be aware of the difficulty in distinguishing radio characters, particularly if there are many characters of the same sex and similar age. Though there's no limit on the number of characters you can have, smaller cast plays tend to be easier on the listener, not to mention easier on the budget. Another particular danger is clunky exposition. Though few writers would go so far as to write a line like "The gun I am holding in my right hand is loaded", it is still easy to fall into the trap of overwriting. You do not normally need to have a character say, "You are smiling at me," or, "I'll just close these curtains." If the context is clear, your audience will understand what is happening from voice, movement and sounds.

Potential radio writers should have some familiarity with the available slots and what works well in them. The best way to do this is, of course, to listen to radio drama. The most common slot for writers new to the medium is the 45 minute play on Radio 4 at 2.15pm on weekdays. What Radio 4 looks for in this slot is a complete story that is imaginative, accessible and entertaining. With a play a day, there's room for variety: drama documentaries, biographical plays, or

plays incorporating an element of poetry, alongside more traditional formats. There's also the slightly lighter, slightly longer *Saturday Play* at 2.30pm till 3.30pm. The *Woman's Hour* 15 minute series on weekdays at 10.45am is the place for short-form narrative drama. This should ideally have individual stories in each episode or short-term stories that mature over five or ten episodes. There are two main slots for comic drama series, the half-hour comedy drama/sitcom slot at 11.30am and the half-hour entertainment slot at 11.00pm.

For contemporary, ambitious, original writing there's *The Friday Play* (60 minutes from 9pm), which combines work from established writers with work from writers new to the medium. And on Radio 3, *The Sunday Play* (7.30pm) can be anything from radical new drama to the classics, or transfers of new theatre productions, and *The Wire* (first Thursday of every month) is a slot for new drama from writers doing original work in film, literature or stage. The World Service also produces a *Play of the Week*, but these are either existing international stage plays or special commissions. Writers should submit scripts to the 'writersroom' (address given at the end of this article). Further information and tips are also available on their website.

So if you want to entertain or provoke an audience through drama, why should you do it on the radio? Radio is an exciting platform for the future. Radio listenership is on the up. Radio is sexy. Radio fits the busy pace of modern life. People listen to the radio in their cars, whilst doing domestic tasks and while surfing the net. So radio drama can touch people when they least expect it. In this life so full of care, it gives us a reason to stop and stare.

Once I'd realised the possibilities of the platform, I wanted to experiment with it, to see how it could be developed further and to see what could be done differently. One of the things audio drama does particularly well is taking the audience into the headspace of the characters. I wanted to see if we could push this identification further by giving the audience some choice over whom they identify with and when. This



Recording the *Dark House* pilot

element of control would be most effective, I guessed, in the genre that really makes pulses race: Horror. I collaborated with composer and Sound Designer Nick Ryan to conceive a drama that would put this to the test, a drama that used the intimacy and imaginative power of radio to take listeners on a journey of their choosing through a dark space and the minds of the people in it. In September this year you'll be able to hear the fruits of that process in *The Dark House* on Radio 4.

The Dark House is a 45 minute Horror in which the audience's response determines what is heard. It's 3D Radio. Three main characters each give a different perspective: there's a frightened child, a mysterious stranger, and a young radio reporter about to endure the worst night of her life. They're trapped together in a haunted house as an eerie mystery unfolds. During the broadcast, the listeners can phone, text or vote online to determine which character's thoughts are heard.

As events in the house become increasingly chilling, the drama will whoosh from inside one character's head to another, according to the majority vote. For example, at a certain point we may be hearing events unfold from the hallway where the radio presenter is trying to reach the child who is calling from behind a door some way off. We might want to find out what the child's doing behind that door, who she really is and whether she can be trusted. If enough of the audience start voting for the child, then the drama will suddenly turn from the hallway and into the child's room. We will then hear events from this position in the space and hear the thoughts of the child. Until the next time the vote switches...

The idea is to create a theatrical sense of shared experience in a live radio event, and to experiment with giving the audience an opportunity to respond to their fear. There will be three, pre-recorded, concurrent streams of the drama and Radio 4 will cut between them on the night, as the audience response tips the viewpoint one way and another, so even those of us working on the show will not know exactly what pattern of perspectives and switches will be played out on the night. It's up to the audience, *en masse*, to decide.

It will be fascinating to see how listeners choose to take control of their fears and how much consensus there is. We're hoping to capture these results and make them available on the website afterwards, along



Izzy Mant directing a radio play

with the full three streams of the drama so that people can listen again and cut between the characters in their own way.

In piloting and testing *The Dark House* we have also experimented with recording and editing techniques to create an imaginative sound to the typical radio play. I wanted to intensify the listener's feeling of intimacy with the foreground character. Nick Ryan, the Studio Manager and I tried various methods in studio and found we could produce a filmic immediacy by giving the actors tie-clip mikes and only mixing in a small amount of signal from the studio microphones to fill out the sound where necessary. This also gave the actors the freedom to move around intuitively without worrying about their position relative to fixed microphones. Another possibility would be to record on location, an approach which has been used to exciting effect in many radio dramas. In editing, we evolved a system of post-production effects to create rooms and corridors that have a more specific, and more frightening, sound than we would have been able to achieve in studio. Thanks to Nick Ryan's innovative approach to composition, the music score is integral to the overall sound design, eliciting vivid images in the dark.

The Dark House is just one example of ways in which radio drama is looking forward. For me it represents the conclusion of a process of discovery that started with realising that radio actors don't wear black tie. Try writing for radio and you might find yourself converted, as I was. Of course knowing how to tell a story applies to drama across any platform. But if you want to tell a story that captures the imagination, that can go wherever you want it to and will inspire a large and broadminded audience, then do it on the radio.

Send scripts to: the New Writing
Co-ordinator, BBC writersroom,
1 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JA,
www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/

Izzy Mant is a theatre director and producer. As founding Artistic Director of Theatre Machine she has brought many new plays and new writers to the stage. She has just completed an attachment to BBC Radio Drama as Development Producer. Alongside her script development work, she has started to become involved in the field of interactive drama and narrative gaming.