**Radio drama production**

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**The invention of radios**

**The idea of wireless communication predates the discovery of "radio" with experiments in "**[**wireless telegraphy**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wireless_telegraphy)**" via inductive and capacitive induction and transmission through the ground, water, and even**[**train tracks**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Track_(rail_transport))**from the 1830s on.**[**James Clerk Maxwell**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Clerk_Maxwell)**showed in theoretical and mathematical form in 1864 that electromagnetic waves could propagate through free space. It is likely that the first intentional transmission of a signal by means of electromagnetic waves was performed in an experiment by**[**David Edward Hughes**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Edward_Hughes)**around 1880, although this was considered to be induction at the time. In 1888**[**Heinrich Rudolf Hertz**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Rudolf_Hertz)**was able to conclusively prove transmitted airborne electromagnetic waves in an experiment confirming Maxwell's theory of**[**electromagnetism**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electromagnetism)**.**

**After the discovery of these "Hertzian waves" (it would take almost 20 years for the term "radio" to be universally adopted for this type of electromagnetic radiation) many scientists and inventors experimented with wireless transmission, some trying to develop a system of communication, some intentionally using these new Hertzian waves, some not. Maxwell's theory showing that light and Hertzian electromagnetic waves were the same phenomenon at different wavelengths led "Maxwellian" scientists such as John Perry,**[**Frederick Thomas Trouton**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Thomas_Trouton)**and Alexander Trotter to assume they would be analogous to optical signaling and the Serbian American engineer**[**Nikola Tesla**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikola_Tesla)**to consider them relatively useless for communication since "light" could not transmit further than**[**line of sight**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line-of-sight_propagation)**. In 1892 the physicist**[**William Crookes**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Crookes)**wrote on the possibilities of wireless telegraphy based on Hertzian wavesand in 1893 Tesla proposed a system for transmitting intelligence and wireless power using the earth as the medium.Others, such as**[**Amos Dolbear**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amos_Dolbear)**,**[**Sir Oliver Lodge**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Oliver_Lodge)**,**[**Reginald Fessenden**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reginald_Fessenden)**,and**[**Alexander Popov**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Popov_(physicist))**were involved in the development of components and theory involved with the transmission and reception of airborne electromagnetic waves for their own theoretical work or as a potential means of communication.**

**Over several years starting in 1894 the Italian inventor [Guglielmo Marconi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guglielmo_Marconi" \o "Guglielmo Marconi) built the first engineering complete, commercially successful**[**wireless telegraphy**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wireless_telegraphy)**system based on airborne Hertzian waves (**[**radio transmission**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_transmission)**).Marconi demonstrated the application of radio in military and marine communications and started a company for the development and propagation of radio communication services and equipment.**

**Radio waves were first identified and studied by German physicist Heinrich Hertz in 1886. The first practical radio transmitters and receivers were developed around 1895-6 by Italian Guglielmo Marconi, and radio began to be used commercially around 1900.**

**The meaning Radio Drama**

**Radio drama (or audio drama, audio play, radio play, radio theater, or audio theater) is a dramatized, purely acoustic**[**performance**](https://findwords.info/term/performance)**, broadcast on**[**radio**](https://findwords.info/term/radio)**. With no visual component, radio**[**drama**](https://findwords.info/term/drama)**depends on dialogue, music and sound effects to help the listener imagine the characters and story: “It is auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension.”**

**Radio drama achieved widespread popularity within a decade of its initial development in the 1920s. By the 1940s, it was a leading international popular entertainment. With the advent of television in the 1950s, however, radio drama lost some of its popularity, and in some countries has never regained large audiences. However, recordings of OTR ( old-time radio) survive today in the audio archives of collectors and museums, as well as several online sites such as Internet Archive.**

**As of 2011, radio drama has a minimal presence on terrestrial radio in the United States. Much of American radio drama is restricted to rebroadcasts or**[**podcasts**](https://findwords.info/term/podcast)**of programs from previous decades. However, other nations still have thriving traditions of radio drama. In the United Kingdom, for example, the BBC produces and broadcasts hundreds of new radio plays each year on Radio 3, Radio 4, and Radio 4 Extra. Like the USA, Australia ABC has abandoned broadcasting drama but New Zealand RNZ continues to promote and broadcast a variety of drama on its airways. Podcasting has also offered the means of creating new radio dramas, in addition to the distribution of vintage programs.**

**Thanks to advances in digital recording and Internet distribution, radio drama was experiencing a revival in 2010.**

**The terms "audio drama" or "audio theatre" are sometimes used synonymously with "radio drama", however, audio drama or audio theatre may not necessarily be intended specifically for broadcast on radio. Audio drama can also be found on CDs,**[**cassette tapes**](https://findwords.info/term/cassette%20tape)**,**[**podcasts**](https://findwords.info/term/podcast)**,**[**webcasts**](https://findwords.info/term/webcast)**as well as broadcast radio. And also it is a dramatized, purely acoustic performance, broadcast on radio or published on audio media, such as tape or CD. With no visual component, radio drama depends on dialogue, music and sound effects to help the listener imagine the characters and story: “It is auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension.” Radio drama achieved widespread popularity within a decade of its initial development in the 1920s. By the 1940s, it was a leading international popular entertainment. With the advent of television in the 1950s, however, radio drama lost some of its popularity, and in some countries has never regained large audiences. However, recordings of OTR survive today in the audio archives of collectors and museums, as well as several online sites such as Internet Archive. As of 2011, radio drama has a minimal presence on terrestrial radio in the United States. Much of American radio drama is restricted to rebroadcasts or podcasts of programs from previous decades. However, other nations still have thriving traditions of radio drama. In the United Kingdom, for example, the BBC produces and broadcasts hundreds of new radio plays each year on Radio 3, Radio 4, and Radio 4 Extra. Podcasting has also offered the means of creating new radio dramas, in addition to the distribution of vintage programs.**

**Historical background of Radio drama production**

**Radio drama traces its roots back to the 1880s: "In 1881 French engineer Clement Ader had filed a patent for 'improvements of Telephone Equipment in Theatres'" (Théâtrophone). ... A Rural Line on Education, a brief sketch specifically written for radio, aired on Pittsburgh's KDKA in 1921, according to historian Bill Jaker.**

**Radio dramas first became popular in 1920 when they were invented. The first radio drama started in america. One of the first radio drama written in UK was Danger by Richard Hughes it was broadcast broadcast by BBC in January 15 1924. Radio dramas became very popular in the 1930's the were many different genres. In 1938 Orson Welles's famous war of the worlds was broadcast.**

**in 1951 the first broadcast of BBC’s The Archers the longest running radio soap in the world which still runs today. Radio dramas continued to grow in popularity.**

**Until the 1960 when people started to get televisions. After televisions had caused a decline in the popularity of radio dramas they never recovered and became as popular as it was however radio drama does still continue on radio 3 and 4 and even since television it has had had some famous plays such as Hitchhikers guide to the galaxy and radio plays are a lot cheaper to make than television.**

**There’s a long tradition in the 1920s and 1930s of reading aloud from works of fiction, and there’s also a number of newspaper records we have of local theaters and dramatic societies playing scenes from ongoing stage productions for radio shows on stations such as New York’s WJZ and Chicago’s WGN in the early 1920s. And what about opera broadcasts? Aren’t they drama?**

**When it comes to written-for-radio dramatic pieces, tradition says that the earliest radio drama in the US was a show called The Wolf, an adaptation of a stage play by Eugene Walter Based on a play by Charles Somerville that aired out of WGY Schenechtedy in 1924. In the UK, many point to Richard Hughes’ The Comedy of Danger, which aired on the newly commissioned BBC around the same time. Throughout the 1920s there are many accounts of dramas written or adapted for the radio ranging from Shakespeare to children’s programming, but it’s important to remember that this also took place against a backdrop of debates about how radio was undercutting theater ticket sales, and there was a tension between the two industries.**

**Radio drama became a mainstay of programming formats with the coming of networks in the mid-late 1920s. By 1930, my colleague Shawn VanCour has established, the radio drama was about 14 percent of network programming. Many of the shows of this period that have survived are skit-like serialized shows that have a similar structure to vaudeville and racist minstrel shows (*Amos & Andie)*or comic strips (*Clara, Lu and Em)*.**

**Gielgud, in charge since the pre-war days of Reith, had liked good plain stories, the classics, Shakespeare. Esslin, born in Budapest and educated in Vienna before coming to Britain as a refugee from the Nazis, was multi-lingual, prodigiously well-read, a world-leading expert on the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ - a category which encompassed the work of playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett. In short, he was far more in touch with contemporary developments – someone poised to bring energy and change.**

**In his oral history interview, however, we find Esslin giving a surprising amount of credit to his predecessor. Yes, Gielgud was old-fashioned. Yes, under his regime the influence of the Radio Drama department had certainly fallen from its war-time high. But Esslin tells us that the seeds of decline had also been sown in wartime - and suggests that, whatever his faults, Gielgud was at least alert to the danger posed by new, rival production-teams inside Broadcasting House...**

**As Esslin points out, Gielgud had long realised that even if he didn’t like or even understand the new generation of playwrights, it was his professional duty to allow younger producers in his department room to follow their own, more adventurous instincts. As one of them later said, Gielgud’s great quality was that in the end, grudgingly or not, “he trusted people”.**

**Another factor worked in Radio Drama’s favour. Its old rival, the Features Unit, was disbanded in 1964, after suffering its own loss of energy from the untimely death of key members. A handful of talented survivors now joined Drama – a welcome infusion of new blood.**

**And there was BBC Radio’s ability to find a place on its schedules for dramatic writing too ‘weird’ or unsettling to put on television or the stage. British theatre was still heavily constrained by censorship: The Lord Chamberlain’s archaic powers over theatre weren’t to disappear until 1968.**

**Television was getting lots of attention in the press, but it was an expensive medium - and one very much broadcasting to a large family-based audience: by-and-large it had to play safe. Radio, having been kicked out of the prime spot in the sitting-room corner by TV, was increasingly listened to alone rather than by whole families. It was liberated to serve more specialized audiences. Quite apart from being cheaper, it could simply take more risks.**

**Television certainly had nothing like the Third Programme or its successor Radio 3 – a network that could assume its listeners, by the very act of choosing it, were going to be tolerant of difficult or unfamiliar things. So even under a conservative head such as Gielgud, Drama producers had the Third as a place where new talent could be nurtured, new styles or techniques tested.**

**One classic example of this – proof that even under Gielgud’s more cautious regime something entirely novel and exciting could emerge – came in January 1957, when the Third Programme broadcast a play hailed instantly as the most important piece of radio drama for years: All That Fall, by Samuel Beckett. Getting the author of Waiting for Godot to write this play for radio rather than the stage was a great coup – which owed much to the behind-the-scenes work of Barbara Bray, Radio Drama’s Script Editor.**

**In this extract from her oral history interview, Bray describes Beckett’s relationship with the radio medium, how All That Fall had a critical role in the development of radiophonic techniques, and the play’s genesis in a meeting between the author and the then head of Third Programme, John Morris…**

**One of the other great talents nurtured by Barbara Bray – often working alongside her colleague, the producer Donald McWhinnie - was the young Harold Pinter. But as Bray points out, there were in fact plenty of writers who could thank radio for their first break.**

**What made the difference, she argues, was Radio Drama’s ability to spot and nurture most (if not all) emerging talent – or, as in the case of Pinter, to provide a desperately-needed lifeline in the early stages of a writer’s career. In radio, words were usually at the heart of it all.**

**And in another oral history interview, we get a vivid picture of how vitally important the Script Unit, over which Bray reigned, was – not just to the BBC, but to British theatrical culture as a whole.**

**In this recording, John Tydeman, who was Head of Radio Drama in the 1980s and 1990s, describes what he sees as the Unit’s extraordinary, if sometimes under-appreciated value...**

**.. One illustration of this service to British cultural life had come near the start of John Tydeman’s own career at the BBC, when, as a young recruit to Radio Drama he’d read a script which arrived in the strangest of circumstances. It would eventually be broadcast in 1964 as The Ruffian on the Stair – a play which announced the presence of a striking new talent on the British scene. After Orton’s death, Tydeman worked with John Mortimer, Tom Stoppard, and Sue Townsend, among others – all writers we might easily imagine as too famous or successful to bother sticking with radio. But they did. They liked its intimacy, its collaborative style of production, its respect for the written word.**

**In her interview, Barbara Bray points to one final attraction: radio’s ability to repeat a play. Listeners might not like repeats as a matter of principle. But, as she explains, in BBC Radio they’d always had a vital role in building-up acceptance for unusual productions.**

**Indeed, scheduling was a vital part of radio drama’s survival. Since the earliest days of the BBC, it had been part of the Corporation’s thinking that instead of meeting public tastes, it should develop them, improve them. In the commercial world, demand shaped supply. In the BBC, the reverse held true: supply was intended to shape demand. For it has long been a guiding principle inside the BBC that taste – specifically, audience taste - grows upon that which it is fed.**

**And it’s here that Martin Esslin gives us a final surprise in his interview.**

**Here’s someone celebrated for his championing of Absurdist drama – not always the most easily digested of forms. An aficionado of the Third Programmed if ever there was. But actually, he spent most of his 14 years as Head of Radio Drama – from 1963 to 1977 – championing the cause of the more down-to-earth daily drama on Radio 4**

**Features of radio drama**

* **Radio drama uses sound to convey ideas to the audience. The sound may be in the form of dialogue, sound effects, or music.**
* **Actors can play more than one part from moment to moment as only voice needs to be altered.**
* **Actors use voice alone to convey character. They do not need to use action, gesture, or facial expression as the audience cannot see it.**
* **There is no need for blocking or stage business in a radio drama. Actors may however need to plan movement to and from the microphone.**
* **Radio plays can be set almost anywhere. There are no physical limits to be overcome. Setting is easily created using music and sound effects.**
* **Radio drama includes lots of dialogue. As we cannot see what the actors are doing, they must tell us what is happening. The writer has to find ways for the characters to comments on where they are and what they and others are doing.**
* **Radio play scenes are often shorter that stage plays.**
* **Radio drama may not be 'live' in front of an audience. A radio drama is usually recorded and played to the audience at another time. This means that, like a film, scenes may not be played in order and scenes can be played more than once to get the best 'take' if necessary. The drama can also be edited to add in sound.**
* **Actors don't have to learn their lines. Actors can read their lines from the script as this is not seen by the audience. Actors do have to be very familiar with their lines and to have rehearsed how they will use their voice to tell the audience about the character and the action.**
* **Radio drama usually features a small cast. Small numbers of characters are used in each scene because it is too hard for the audience to distinguish between voices if there are a large number of characters. The audience may also forget that a character is 'on stage' if he/she does not speak for some time as they cannot be seen. For this reason characters need to speak quite often and be involved in the action.**
* **Radio drama is well suited to monologue and for plays where setting is limited and physical action is unimportant for example inside a prison cell or a cave.**

**Phases of radio drama**

**Interested in writing, directing, or producing radio drama? Then, grab a mic and a recorder and get going – nearly everybody in this field is producing it themselves. There are less than a handful of paying gigs for this kind of work out there, and if you want to make it, you better believe you’ll have to earn your stripes producing on your own first.**

**The fun part about this challenge, however, is that you CAN produce on your own, and create quality audio drama for much less money than you’d think. As a showcase of quality radio drama for over  eight years, Radio Drama Revival has collected this list of resources by top radio drama producers so that you, too, can get your start in radio drama.**

## STEP 1: THE RADIO DRAMA SCRIPT

**Writing for radio is very different than other medium. Your tools are limited – voices, sound effects, and music – but your palette is limitless – the human imagination.**

**A good script is the heart of quality radio drama; in fact, it is the only thing that makes a *radio drama worth producing.***

## STEP 2: PRE-PRODUCTION

**OK, you’ve got a hot, killer script in your hands, a blueprint for the next “Sorry, Wrong Number” waiting to happen, and now you want to take it to the next step. As anyone in film will tell you, minutes spent in pre-production will save you hours later. Planning is everything.**

**Casting if you’ve never casted before can be hard. For Final Rune’s early plays, I started putting posters up around at my college, which got a few people through the door… On each subsequent production I knew a bit more about what I wanted from each of the actors, and I also started attending more plays, and being introduced to more actors working professionally, which lead me to be comfortable inviting specific people to be in my shows. Now I even write with a specific person’s voice in mind.**

## STEP 3: PRODUCING THE RADIO DRAMA

**Here’s the hard part… You’ve got actors in a room, you’ve got a script, and now how the heck do you make the thing a radio drama?!**

**Luckily, this area is rich with resources because nearly any sound-recording article, regardless of being radio drama specific or not, can help you out. There are basically four methods of recording a radio drama: 1 – RECORDED IN A STUDIO The traditional way of recording a radio drama involves actors, one or more microphones, and a device that’s either recording the dialogue or broadcasting it live as you’re saying your lines. 2 – RECORDED LIVE BEFORE AN AUDIENCE You have a bunch of actors on a stage, and they are performing for a live audience, and perhaps a listening audience as well (I’ve never really seen the point in performing a radio play to a live audience without a listening audience, but that’s another story…).**

**This is perhaps the most complex form of recording, because you need to account for a variety of mics (up to 4 for the performers, 2 or more for sound effects, then you’ve got live music, perhaps, and probably a computer for supplementary sound effects). 3 – RECORDED REMOTELY This is a fantastically innovative new production method, whereas producers collaborate with voice actors around the globe who record lines independently and then mix them together in post-production to create the final product. I’ve heard of some groups who do this via live Skype sessions, so that actors can still act “against” each other, though others have voice actors record completely independently.**

## STEP 4: POST-PRODUCTION

**Now you have a bunch of audio tracks, now it’s time to turn them into an actual audio drama. This requires you learning a post-production tool – Audacity, Reaper, Audition and ProTools all come to mind – and getting comfortable with how to turn your work into a broadcast-ready WAV or MP3 file (let’s not talk about .AAC, okay?)**

**For the life of me I couldn’t find any good guides to using Adobe Audition for dramatized work. To be honest, I use it for everything (including production of Radio Drama Revival) even though I have Pro Tools 8, Adobe Audition is way faster at most things and Version 3 is very intuitive. I’ll write that article, too, and be back to you with it…**

**This section to expand as I dig up more articles on sound effects, sound design, etc…**

## STEP 5: RELEASING IT TO THE WORLD