

A Day in the Life of 'The Radio Mystery Theater'

By TONY ROBERTS

New York Times (1857-Current file); Jun 18, 1978; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2001)

pg. D31

A Day in the Life of 'The Radio Mystery Theater'

By TONY ROBERTS

The scene is Studio G on the sixth floor of the old CBS Radio Annex on East 52d Street. It is 9 A.M., and five actors are seated around a table covered with scripts, eyeglass cases, coffee containers, pencils, newspapers folded to the crossword puzzle and scattered paper clips—some bent open by anxious fingers.

At the head of the table sits Himan Brown, a distinguished-looking man with wavy gray hair, a friendly face and a twinkle in his eyes. He is a veteran of decades of producing radio programs and beloved of an entire community of some of New York's finest actors, who sit around this table four times a week and provide the voices for the "CBS Radio Mystery Theater." Most of their income is earned from performing in stage plays, movies, soap operas, television programs and commercials. Some of them are stars, who can command large salaries and prominent billing; among the more notable performers who have worked on this series are Tammy Grimes, Mercedes McCambridge, Julie Harris, Patricia Elliott, Marian Seldes, Fred Gwynne, Kevin McCarthy, Paul Hecht, Robert Morse, Arnold Moss and Kristopher Tabori. But in Studio G, they all work for scale—\$73.92 per job after taxes.

Radio acting is often referred to as "instant acting," because it's the closest thing to what children do when they play cops-and-robbers, or cowboys-and-Indians. It requires instant belief. Mr. Brown is the sole practitioner of an entertainment medium, which, save for this program, no longer exists. There is no other network radio drama being produced for commercial exposure anywhere in the country.

The scripts for the 54-minute dramas—some 850 of them have emanated from Studio G during the past four years—generally have hefty dollops of intrigue and adventure. They

Tony Roberts, the actor, is currently on screen in "Annie Hall" and is in rehearsal for the Berkshire Theater Festival production of "Let 'Em Eat Cake."

are peopled with good guys, bad guys, creatures from the occult, villains with demonic powers, trolls, angels, Hardy Boy types who rescue damsels in distress and anyone having trouble getting into the right time warp.

Today's script is called "Say Good-bye to Uncle Louis," and it's about a murder and a conspiracy that implicates local government officials. The characters include a fat-cat gangster, a hard-nosed newspaper editor, a weak-willed mayor, an innocent and attractive eyewitness, and a determined young detective. Sitting next to Mr. Brown is Jackson Beck, whose penetrating nasal intonations were a staple of "Gangbusters," "Suspense," "Mr. Keene, Tracer of Lost Persons," "Grand Central Station" and dozens of other programs during the golden days of radio. He has a round, jolly face and an edge to his voice that is able to cut through police sirens, crowd noises, gunshots and the roar of jet engines.

On his right is Robert Dryden, an actor with as many different qualities to his voice as a ventriloquist. He is often asked to "double" or "triple" and has even been called upon to play all

'There is no other network radio drama being produced in this country.'

the parts in a scene. He speaks so softly during the read-through that his murmurings are barely audible above the chit-chat across the table:

"Did anyone see the review in this morning's paper?"

"Yeah, the guy's crazy! I saw the show at a preview and it's great. He must have been at the wrong theater!"

"Maybe he didn't like what his wife gave him for dinner."

And so on.

Frances Sternhagen sits at the other end of the table. A Tony Award-winner for her performance as the mother in "Equus," her most recent Broadway outing was the short-lived musical

"Angel." She is an actor's actor and delights in playing sweet, New England school teachers invariably discovered to be feeding arsenic to the township's best and brightest.

The program about to be recorded will be broadcast at a later date over 236 stations. (Since WCBS here in New York is an all-news station, the series is carried by WOR, evenings at 7:05 Monday through Friday, Saturdays at 8:05 P.M. and Sundays at 5:50 P.M.) Here's what happens during the taping session: At 9 sharp, the first "cold read-through" gets underway. Only Mr. Brown has read the story before, and as he passes out the scripts, he assigns the roles. He himself reads the narration, which will be recorded later by E.G. Marshall, the "host" of the program. The miracle of this first read-through is that Mr. Brown manages to get an accurate timing, despite frequent stops and starts. The stops and starts are usually for wise-cracks by the cast.

Baldy: If your information is valid, you could get quite a lot for it.

Miller: Yeah—but there's other things in this world besides money.

"The guy's obviously never been an actor," someone mutters.

Baldy: You know Southside Park?

Miller: Yes.

Baldy: You know where the merry-go-round is?

"The merry-go-round?" someone asks incredulously. "I guess he doesn't want to get cornered," someone else says. General groans.

During this first read-through, there is considerable horseplay among the cast. Who can make the best pun, or at least the fastest, off a particularly obtuse turn of phrase in the script? Who, by a slight modulation of his or her voice, will transform a sequence of dialogue into something unintended? Who can see the opportunity for script sacrilege first?

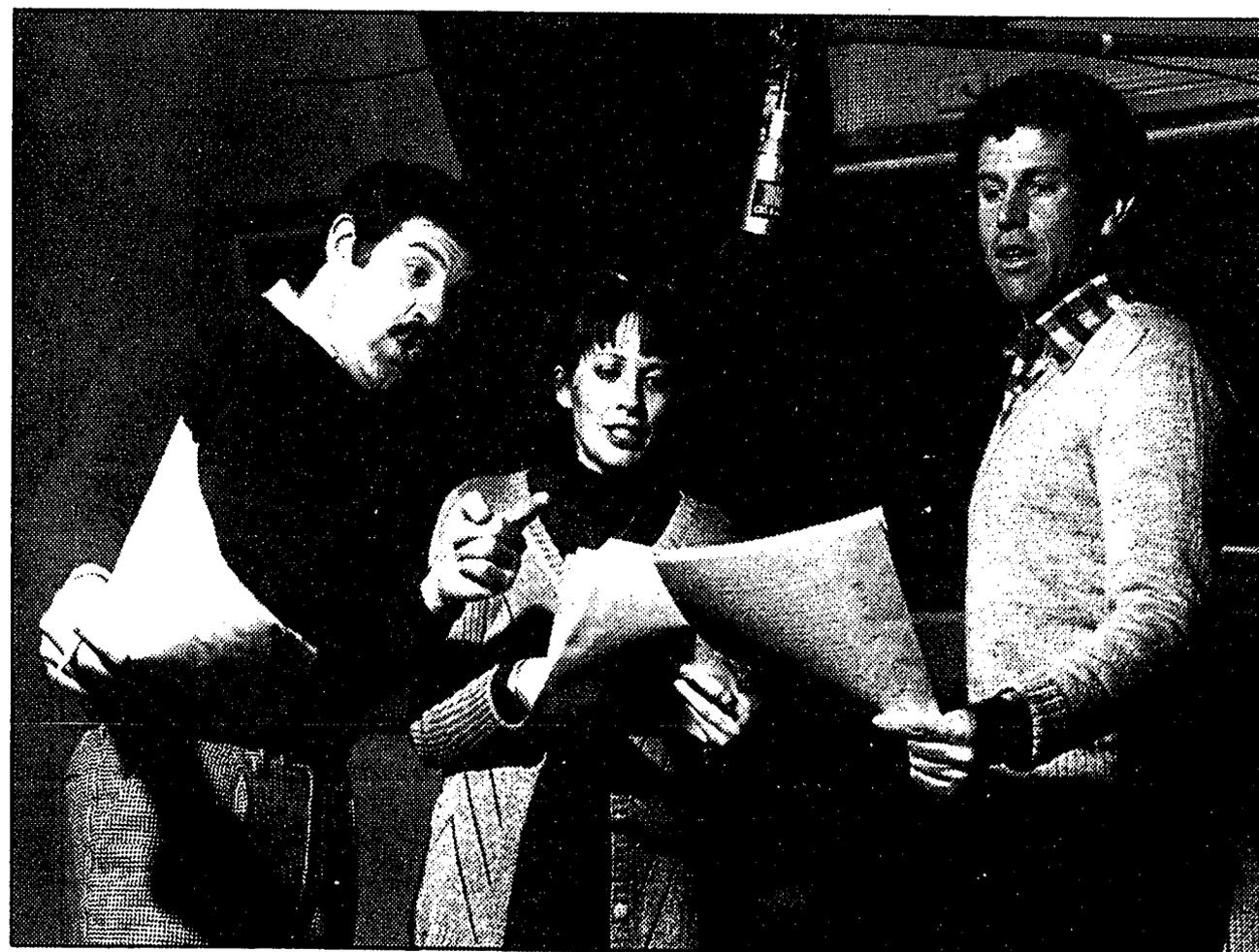
Burke: Twenty-nine. You're getting up there, Terry. You should be thinking of a wife. Children.

Terry: I can't be thinking of that!

Burke: And why not?

Terry: You know why not!

This last line is delivered with a suggestion of whatever aberration or perversion a listener might care to imagine.



Paul Hecht, Patricia Elliott and the author during a "Mystery Theater" taping

Terry: I'm Lieutenant Smith.

Helen: Oh, the detective.

Terry: Will you tell me again the circumstances that led to your discovery of Ezra Miller's body?

"Well, first I unbuttoned his shirt," a wag offers.

Terry: Mrs. Pauli, I like you. You're an attractive woman.

Helen: You sound as if you're building up to a proposal of marriage.

Terry: If I were the marrying kind, I could do worse.

Because these lines are purposely being read as if by two hearts entwined in the throes of passion, the assemblage bursts into laughter.

Usually the scripts are written long and cuts must be made. Mr. Brown announces them in a monotone: "Page 2, middle of the page, fourth line down, second speech. Cut the first three words and then cut all the rest down to 'And then what?' Got it? So, it's a blend

for the policeman. Next. Page 38, top of the page . . ."

"Getting the cuts" is considered a mark of the professional radio performer. If an actor misses a cut the first time, he or she loses points for getting into the Radio Hall of Fame. To confess that you "missed it" is to suffer a humiliation second only to what happens when you think that you did get the cut and find out during the taping that you didn't.

After this initial read-through and a five-minute break, Mr. Brown goes to the control room and calls the actors to their places. They position themselves, two or three at a time, around the boom mike, which is suspended about five feet above the carpet. Tape marks on the floor indicate the proper distance for the actors to stand away from the microphone, but no one pays any atten-

tion to them. They are like training wheels on a bicycle.

In one corner of the room is the sound effects man and his equipment: turntables, a false telephone bell, door latches, a sandbox for re-creating the thud of foot falls. At one point, this particular script calls for, simultaneously, three gunshots, an automobile's tires screeching to a halt and a police siren. The sound technician stands poised in front of two turntables with records on them. He holds a revolver loaded with blanks in one hand and adjusts the dials on his consoles with the other. The cue must be repeated two or three times until the timing is right; during this break in the action, the actors stand around awkwardly and look at their shoes a lot. Fred Himes, Mr. Brown's regular engineer, uses these moments to greet the performers by

Continued on Page 32

'Radio Mystery Theater'

mouthling "Hello" from the control booth.

Mandel Kramer, familiar to soap-opera viewers as the Chief of Police on "The Edge of Night," focuses every muscle in his body toward the microphone hanging a few inches in front of his nose. He is directing his imagination into some space that cannot be defined. He declares in convincing and ominously authoritative tones that he has just fired four bullets into someone and that now they'll never be able to testify against him.

Bryna Raeburn, an athletic-looking actress in her 50's, stands almost directly under the microphone; her feet never stop shuffling. The excitement she is getting into her voice is not only producing a vibrato worthy of the terror she wants to convey, it is getting into her legs as well, indeed, right down to her toes. While her feet plant and replant themselves, she adroitly buries a just-read page of script without its making so much as a crinkle into the microphone.

"Don't climb in on me!" a voice in

torment cuts through over the intercom system. It is Mr. Brown and he means that the actors are getting too close to the microphone, making it impossible to balance the sounds as they are being recorded. His occasional outbursts are legendary within the business, and many a performer has provoked his momentary annoyance by "climbing in" on him, "backing away" (becoming inaudible), giving him "too much paper" (script rustling) and even "overacting"—although this is rare.

"All right," says Mr. Brown, "as long as we're stopped, I want to go back to the top of the scene, because we had a little mistake in the control room. We're also getting noise from somewhere in the building. I tell you they want me out of here. They can rent it out to some rock group and get a fortune for it. All right, let's do it again, now—starting from page 44. It's going

fine, just don't climb in on me."

All this is said in one breath, with the last few words expressed in soothing tones, as though he were encouraging three-year-olds to walk up a flight of stairs. In Studio G, Mr. Brown is king. He is the producer, the director and the final arbiter of everything and everybody. He buys the scripts, hires the cast and oversees their getting on the air.

Radio acting is fun. The actor, working from a script he has read only once, is often as uncertain of where his performance is going as the people listening to him. He is hearing himself speak the words seriously for the first time, and he must make an unseen audience believe he means them. There is rarely a break-up during the actual taping, because the actors are too busy picking up "wave lengths" from one another, groping for a common reality. They are

listening to the music and the sound effects as well. Mental wheels click at a furious pace to gauge properly the build of a scene.

Hands will pretend to hold guns in them. Knees will buckle. Jaws will go slack after an appropriate sound effect. And lips will tremble when it looks as if all is lost.

"No, no, no!" Mr. Brown cuts in. "That's all wrong. You can't die before he shoots you! Wait for the gunshots! All right—let's do it again."

When the last line of the script has been "tagged"—given the correct, final emphasis—Mr. Brown bursts into the studio from the control booth and personally hands everyone a paycheck. He is relaxed now and exhilarated, too. It has taken less than two-and-a-half hours to do what would have taken five days and a staff of 15 to do in the old "Lux Radio Theater" days.

The actors, having played "let's pretend" together, are more relaxed, too. As they gather their belongings, one of them quips: "Gee, thanks for the check, Hi. I didn't know we were all getting \$275!"