VIC AND SADE, BOB AND RAY, JACK AND DOC: OLD-TIME RADIO PROGRAMS IN THE SCHOOL

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The golden age of old-time radio may have lasted only a few years, 1935 on through the early 1950's, but surprisingly enough old-time radio still seems to be news. The Atlanta Constitution announced in November,1976,that "The memorable faces and voices of more than 50 years of radio and television broadcasting are being collected in what is thought to be the nation's first museum for broadcasting [to be located in New York City]." The Los Angeles Times in December headed a story, "Don't Let the Lone Ranger Hear You Say That Radio Is Dead." Wire services carried brief notices about the death of actress Virginia Payne, radio's Ma Perkins, and the Los Angeles Times carried a tribute to Ma Perkins in early 1977. The Los Angeles Times also carried a story on Carlton E. Morse, writer of one of the most popular radio programs One Man's Family in August, 1976, and two lovely and loving columns on Paul Rhymer in his Vic and Sade, Don Weldon's "Paul Rhymer, Madcap Marquis of Vic and Sade" on April 11, 1976, and Charles Champlin's "Radio Waves Span Time" on February 4, 1977. The attention and publicity given even today to Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre production of H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds on October 31, 1938, continues to astound people who probably wonder why anything so old should be worth newspaper space or television recreation, witness the 1975 televised version (and the 1977 repeat) of the 1938 frightening of America.

If that weren't enough, people continue to turn out for discussions of old-time radio. When I passed through Chicago in late 1976, I picked up a copy of the Tribune, read about a University of Chicago Extension Division plan for a Festival of Chicago comedy, and wrote to the director asking if it would be possible to get a taping of a "Vic and Sade" discussion. When I received the tape several weeks later, I learned that the session had been very successful.

And more periodic reruns of old shows on local radio stations have proved popular and convinced a few doubters that old-time radio is not dead. Certainly, rebroadcasts of The Lone Ranger, The Shadow, Jack Armstrong, Fibber McGee and Molly and The Goon Show (BBC) have won new followers for a form supposedly long since decently buried.

And the 1976 publication of John Dunning's Tune In Yesterday: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio, 1925-1976, a popular selection of the Nostalgia Book Club, is another hint that there are plenty of people out there who still care deeply about old-time radio.

But what has old-time radio to do with school, particularly when the cry is heard, "We need to get back to the basics" or "Kids don't write enough" or "Kids aren't able to read the way I was when I was young"? Do radio shows deserve classroom attention?

It's impossible not to be sympathetic in many ways to what the back-to-the-basics people want, a demonstrably literate populace. I'm convinced that using radio shows can help to create greater literacy in some specific ways though I make no pretense that radio, or anything else for that matter,

is the panacea.

"The Theater of the Mind" is certainly overused as a descriptive term for old-time radio, but despite its triteness, the term still makes sense. Radio and reading had much in common, and old-time radio shows may even have been a catalyst for reading. Both radio shows and reading demand active imagination and listeners/readers willing and able to create worlds out of the words and people and clues provided on radio and in print. Television is literal and imaginatively dead-end while radio and reading are imaginative and open-ended. Readers of The Catcher in the Rye or Catch-22 or The Pigman must determine for themselves what the characters look like and how they sound and what settings they operate in from the clues Salinger or Heller or Zindel provide. No television or movie script needs to be produced to tell us what Holden looks like or acts like and luckily enough none has, but we do need a movie of The Catcher in the Rye. Salinger has provided clues aplenty picked up by millions of readers over the last twenty-five years. But radio shows also provided clues. I Love a Mystery was a great adventure series, and its best story was "Temple of the Vampires." I, and heaven knows how many other boys, did not need to be told what Jack and Doc and Reggie looked like or acted like. I knew. I was given some words by radio actors and a few sound effects, and the world I created made sense. And so did every other listener create a world. I used radio as I used reading, to create worlds far more exciting than my own, to develop my imagination, to escape, to find myself, to enjoy. So did other people. Radio could be used in

class to supplement and reinforce reading clues, context clues, character clues, ideas,settings, tones, moods, everything that goes to make literature out of printed symbols. I believe radio could be used to motivate writing in innumerable ways.

Here are a few possibilities.

Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" is widely taught. Robert Enrico's prize winning film adaption (available from Pyramid Films) is also widely used, either separately or in conjunction with the printed version. Less well known is a radio production on Escape, perhaps not as satisfying as either story or film, but intriguing in its differences. All too little has been done with what happens to a work in one medium altered to fit the demands and needs of another medium. Both the Bierce story and the Enrico film would benefit from a close comparison of the differences and similarities in treatment of the same plot. Many students do that kind of thing inadvertently, getting excited about a book and then being puzzled about the filmed version or loving a film and then reading the book. Whatever the direction of that process, students are often fascinated by what happens when a book is transformed into a film, a fascination deserving more attention than it usually gets in class.

Bob and Ray (Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding) are two extraordinarily gifted radio satirists. They later appeared on television and stage though predictably with less success. Both are comedians of the mind, using their voices to create a world of characters delightful and funny on radio but not

visual enough for television or stage. There are many reels of taped Bob and Ray shows, early ones on a Boston station and later ones on network radio. The world of Bob and Ray involved wacky people like Wally Ballou and Mary McGoon and satires like "One Feller's Family," a takeoff on One Man's Family, "Mary Backstayge, Noble Wife," a takeoff on Mary Noble, Backstage Wife, and "Mr. Trace, Keener Than Most Persons," a takeoff on Mr. Keene, Tracer of Lost Persons. Bob and Ray's comedy reads well today and listens even better. A collection of Bob and Ray scripts, radio and television, Write If You Get Work (Random House, 1975), might work well with students, just as their radio routines would work. Again, some discussion of radio material published for reading, rather than listening, compared with the radio production itself might be worthwhile, but with Bob and Ray the tapes would probably stand by themselves, and they would easily fit into units or discussions on comedy, writing, humor, satire, or parody.

Science fiction and fantasy are popular with many students, and if old-time radio generally did very little with either genre, a few radio shows provide some first-class material. Dimension X and X Minus One based many scripts on short stories by Ray Bradbury and Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov. Dimension X writers combined nine stories from Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles on August 18, 1950, to produce an abbreviated, different, but oddly effective version of the book. And on September 29, 1950, it produced "And the Moon Be Still as Bright," a lovely and effective version of"June 2001:-- And the Moon Be Still as Bright" from The Martian Chronicles.

On September 29, 1951, it produced "Nightfall" from Isaac Asimov's short story, and on September 1, 1950, it produced "The Roads Must Roll" from Robert Heinlein's story. Later in January, 1964, NBC Experiments in Drama produced "There Will Come Soft Rains," from "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains" in The Martian Chronicles, and "Zero Hour" from Bradbury's The Illustrated Man. One short story from The Martian Chronicles, "April 2000: The Third Expedition," has been done twice on radio, both under the title "Mars Is Heaven," the first on June 2, 1950, by Escape, the second on July 7, 1950, by Dimension X. Intriguingly, while much of the plot and most of the characters are straight out of Bradbury, some characters undergo a change in name or rank and one entirely new character is introduced in Escape, several minor plot details are altered, and the endings of both radio shows differ from the short story. Students might be curious, as I am, about the changes, particularly the ones that are apparently insignificant and alter nothing important. Why the changes in characters? Why the minor plot alterations? Why the quite different endings? These science fiction radio shows are worth studying in their own right, but some students might be interested in comparing them with two television shows, Star Trek and Space: 1999. Fantasy was on radio, notably in Corwin Presents and The Columbia Workshop, though these shows may seem somewhat dated. But a BBC four-hour eight-part adaptation of Tolkien's The Hobbit will not seem outdated, and the radio production will almost certainly appeal to Tolkien readers and might attract a few others to Tolkien or to fantasy.

How much secondary students watch Saturday morning kiddie shows is problematic, but likely more than we suspect. Kids' shows were much listened to on radio, not so much on Saturday morning as from about 4:30 to 6:00 each weekday evening. A comparison of radio shows like "Jack Armstrong," "Jungle Jim," "Buck Jones," "Little Orphan Annie," "Dick Tracy," or "Captain Midnight" with present day televised kids' show might have some possibilities. Several students have been fascinated with the differences and similarities of two award-winning kids' shows, Let's Pretend on radio and Sesame Street on television.

Comedy reigned on radio as it does on television and comparing radio shows like Fibber McGee and Molly, The Great Gildersleeve, and Our Miss Brooks with televised situation comedies like Gilligan's Island (off the network but apparently in syndication across America every day of the week), All in the Family, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and Laverne and Shirley might reveal much about the nature and changes in comedy or the values of our society. Equally attractive, comparing the work of comedians not in situation comedies like radio's Fred Allen (a genius who could not make the changeover to television) or Henry Morgan with television's Johnny Carson or his stable or comedians offers more food for thought than most of us will be able to digest though students might rise to the defense of television comedy. Finally, the old BBC Goon Show, which gave Peter Sellers his start, has several parallels with television's Monty Python Show.

Radio soap operas had millions of fans, but then so do television soap

operas. Radio's "Young Widder Brown," "Stella Dallas," "Ma Perkins," "Just Plain Bill," "Lorenzo Jones," "Life Can Be Beautiful," and "Front Page Farrell" compared with television's "As the World Turns," "Love of Life," "All My Children," "Search for Tomorrow," "Another World," "General Hospital," and "Edge of Night" might suggest how far we have developed (or regressed) in the last twenty or so years. Those who think high school students have little time to watch TV soap operas should read the letters to the editor and various columnists in the Soap Opera Digest. If these provide any index, teenagers do watch TV soap operas. What were the values of old-time radio soap opera heroines and heroes? What are the values of TV soap characters? How closely do their values, radio or television, approximate the values of the watchers? What problems exist for major characters on radio soaps as opposed to TV soaps? What techniques were used on radio to indicate moods and tones and what techniques are open to television soaps? What stereotypes were perpetuated on old radio soaps and what ones are on television soaps? What plot cliches were commonly used on radio and what ones are common on television? Listening to a few minutes of radio soaps may make listeners appreciative of even the worst of their televised counterparts. Few radio soap operas lasted more than a few months when they left radio and moved over to television, and students after hearing an episode or two of "Valiant Lady" or "Stella Dallas" may be able to guess why. Indeed, teachers trying to underscore the dangers and linguistic poverty of using cliches and trite

ideas and stale plot gimmicks and hackneyed situations to a bored or uncomprehending class could hardly do better than play a few episodes of a radio soap opera like "Valiant Lady," once popular though today it's impossible to understand why. Students will laugh at the cliches and triteness, and once they begin to analyze why they laughed and what they laughed at, they may begin to understand for the first time what harm dumb and sterile language can cause to emotions and ideas and situations some writer meant to be taken seriously.

For students interested in verbal comedy and wit, no radio show would be so appealing and funny as Paul Rhymer's "Vic and Sade," a fifteen-minute afternoon show lasting from the early 1930's through 1946 which sometimes became lost in the lather of soap operas. James Thurber thought Rhymer a comedy genius, and having recently heard many hours of "Vic and Sade" on tapes I'm not about to dispute Thurber. Using four actors, Vic, wife Sade, son Rush, and Uncle Fletcher, Rhymer created individual 12-13 minute short stories every weekday for about fifteen years, stories peopled with strange characters Vic or Sade or Rush or Uncle Fletcher knew like Rooster Davis, Mr. Chinbunny, Smelly Clark, Elwin Stowley, Hank Gutstop, Fred and Ruthie Stembottom, Dottie Brainfeeble, Mr. Gumpx (the ever-present but never-seen garbageman), Ike Kneesuffer, Police Chief Cullerson, Bluetooth Johnson, Rotten Davis, Clyman Smurch, and Irma Flo Kessy, people we only heard about, but if Vic or Sade or Rush or Uncle Fletcher said they were real and important, we believed them. The family loved beef punkles and beef punkle

icecream, so we did too, even though we hadn't the faintest notion what beef punkles were. Vic's lodge, the Sacred Stars of the Milky Way, became a part of our lives just as did Sade's beloved Yamelton's Department Store. Every family then, and most families now, had an Uncle Fletcher, garrulous and absent-minded and lovable, capable of telling long, convoluted, pointless stories about people no one else knew or cared to know. Uncle Fletcher's favorite lines would sound vaguely familiar to anyone with an Uncle Fletcher, for example, "Ike Stufflebottom went into the brass bed business, moved to St. Charles, later died." There must be students who would not like "Vic and Sade," just as there must have been people in the 1930's and 1940's who didn't like them, but then there have been insensitive clods throughout history.

Finally, teachers might play tapes of old-time radio just for the fun of it. True, given the serious conditions today and the back-to-the-basics people, some people would consider fun impossible to justify in education (as students frequently believe that school and fun are mutually exclusive terms), but at its best education should be tiring, never tiresome. And for those moments when we might like to read a short story simply for enjoyment, presumably to reward us or the kids, or for the many moments when we might like to read something they'd enjoy <u>and</u> learn from, we might consider using an old radio show. "Vic and Sade" stands up well, but then so do the many mystery or horror shows on radio. Horror and terror and suspense shows, especially, were joys on radio because the monsters and villains and situations we create in our imaginations were infinitely superior to the biggest

budgeted television superspecialextraextravaganza. Suspense presented an incredible number of great shows as did The Shadow or Escape. Some of the greatest horror and terror shows were on sustaining programs (never sponsored) and all too little known. Shows like Quiet Please, Black Mass, The Mysterious Traveler, Theatre 10:30, Beyond Midnight, and Murder at Midnight work beautifully in class. I defy anyone to listen to "Behind the Locked Door" or The Mysterious Traveler or "The Thing on the Fourble Board" from Quiet Please without getting the creeps even though the shows are more than twenty years old. (McCoy's Recordings have five great tapes on "Tops in Horror" with these shows -- details about this and other matters in the appendix.)

In concluding his article, "Paul Rhymer, Madcap Marquis of Vic and Sade" in the April 11, 1976, Los Angeles Times, Don Weldon wrote,

> At this point in history, when mass tensions are building up to an intolerable level, there's a strange nostalgia in the air for reminders of the '30's, a decade when nonsense was an antidote for the doldrums and sanity was preserved with mock insanity. That's almost a lost art, victim to the life-is-real-is-earnest syndrome.

There's merit in Weldon's argument, for most of us would like to find sanity in an insane world and make sense out of chaos, and the time of radio (not necessarily radio itself) seems like an island to flee to. That's one rationale for the continued popularity of old-time radio shows. But there's more to it than that. There was and is an integrity about some old radio shows that's evident to listeners, and the integrity demands preservation and attention. That integrity can be found in few radio shows -- integrity

is rare in anything -- but it is present in Bob and Ray and Vic and Sade and I Love a Mystery and One Man's Family and Fred Allen and Dimension X and Quiet Please and the radio version of Gunsmoke. If preserving and discussing and thinking about humanity's rare moments of art and integrity -- whether they are in print or on film or on tape -- is the province of education, then radio deserves a place in the classroom.

Appendix A: A Note on Available Old-Time Radio Shows

Some shows are available in cassettes or on records. Most companies produce reel-to-reel tape recordings. The more expensive is the custom-made tape where requests are filled for this half-hour show plus that 15-minute show plus another hour show. Obviously, these are more expensive. MAR-BREN (address below) charges $7.00 for an hour of tape, $12.75 for two hours, and $18.50 for three hours. A number of distributors now produce ready-made reels, usually four to six hours of tapes for purchase with included programs listed in catalogues. These reels take advantage of the fact that early radio was monaural, so programs can be recorded on both right and left channels (they must be played on a stereo tape recorder). Playing these tapes at 3 3/4 speed gives twice the mileage out of 1200' or 1800' of tape. Ready-made tapes allow no freedom to select shows in a precise order, but they are economical, and frequently listeners will find five out of eight shows they wanted and the other three turn out to be serendipitous and sometimes better than the ones originally requested. Two of the largest suppliers of ready-made tapes are RADIO RERUNS and MCCOY'S RECORDING (addresses below).

Appendix B: Addresses of 10 Suppliers of Old-Time Radio Shows

1 RADIO RERUNS, P.O. Box 724, Redmond, Washington 98052
2 MCCOY'S RECORDING, INC., P. O. Box 1069, Richland, Washington 99352
3 MAR-BREN SOUND LTD., P. O. Box 4099 Rochester, NY 14625
4 REMEMBER RADIO, INC., Drawer "C", Euless, Texas 76039
5 MARK 56 PRODUCTIONS, P. O. Box 1, Anaheim, CA 92805
6 OLD TIME RADIO, INC., 618 Commonwealth Building, Allentown, PA 18101
7 THE RADIO VAULT, Box 9032, Wyoming, Michigan 49509

8. OLD-TYME RADIO CO., INC., P. O. Box 81, Hazlet, New Jersey 07730
9. RADIOLA, Box H, Croton-on-Hudson, NY 10520
10. THE RADIO STORE, P. O. Box 203-B, Oradell, New Jersey 07649

Appendix C: A Brief Bibliography of Materials on Radio

Teacher/Student Aimed Material:
1. G. Howard Poteet, Radio! Dayton, OH: Pflaum, 1975. Brief coverage of history, drama, comedy, soap operas, quiz shows, music, sports, and news of radio. Only 125 pages yet beautifully done. Many illustrations.

History of radio:
1. Erik Barnouw, A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968.
2. Erik Barnouw, The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-1953, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968.
3. Erik Barnouw, The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States from 1953, NY: Oxford University Press, 1970.
4. Jim Harmon, The Great Radio Heroes, NY: Doubleday, 1967. On I Love a Mystery, The Shadow, Jack Armstrong, etc.
5. Joseph Julian, This Was Radio: A Personal Memoir, NY: Viking, 1975.
6. Howard Koch, The Panic Broadcast, NY: Avon, 1970. About the October 31, 1938, Mercury Theatre production of H. G. Wells' The War of the Worlds and the national panic it caused. Almost unbelievable but true.
7. Ron Lackman, Remember Radio, NY: Putnam, 1970.
8. Lawrence Lichty and Malachi C. Topping (eds.) American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television, NY: Hastings House, 1975. A massive 723 page compilation of valuable documents.
9. Curtis Mitchell. Cavalcade of Broadcasting, Chicago: Follett, 1970.
10. Irving Settel, A Pictorial History of Radio, NY: Grosset, 1967.
11. Sam J. Slate and Joe Cook, It Sounds Impossible, NY: Macmillan, 1963.

Encyclopedias of Radio Programs:
1. Frank Buxton and Bill Owen, The Big Broadcast, 1920-1950, NY: Viking, 1972.
2. John Dunning, Tune in Yesterday: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio, 1925-1976, Englewood Cliffs, NY: Prentice-Hall, 1976. 671 pages of radio shows in the best source book yet.

Radio Scripts:
1. G. Howard Poteet (ed.) Published Radio, Television and Film Scripts: A Bibliography, Troy NY: Whitsun Publishing Co., 1975.

Radio News:
1. Edward Bliss, In Search of Light: The Broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow 1938-1961, NY: Knopf, 1967.

2. Fred Friendly, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control..., NY: Random House, 1967.
3. Eric Sevareid, This Is Eric Sevareid, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

Radio Soap Operas:
1. Madeleine Edmondson and David Rounds, The Soaps: Daytime Serials of Radio and TV, NY: Stein and Day, 1973
2. Mary Jane Higby, Tune in Tomorrow, NY: Ace, 1968. The popular soap opera, When a Girl Marries, was her best starring role, but she acted in other serials like The Right to Happiness, Our Gal Sunday and Stella Dallas.
3. Raymond William Stedman, The Serials: Suspense and Drama by Installment Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971. A number of chapters on radio serials.

Radio Humor:
1. Goodman Ace. Ladies and Gentlemen -- Easy Aces, NY: Doubleday, 1970. Eight Easy Aces scripts.
2. Fred Allen, Treadmill to Oblivion, Boston: Little, Brown, 1954.
3. Fred Allen, Much Ado about Me, Boston: Little, Brown, 1956.
4. Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding, Write If You Get Work: The Best of Bob and Ray, NY: Random House, 1975. Radio and TV scripts about Wally Ballou, Mary McGoon, the Charley Chipmunk Club, Biff Burns and other assorted Bob and Ray fictions and funnies.
5. Jim Harmon, The Great Radio Comedians, NY: Doubleday, 1970.
6. Mary Frances Rhymer (ed.), The Small House Halfway Up in the Next Block, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1972. A great "Forward" by Ray Bradbury plus 30 wonderful Vic and Sade shows by that genius of humor, Paul Rhymer.
7. Mary Frances Rhymer (ed.), Vic and Sade: the Best Radio Plays of Paul Rhymer, NY: Seabury Press, 1976. Thirty more Vic and Sade scripts with a sympathetic "Forward" by Jean Shepherd.