



principles of writing radio drama

by Tim Crook



Here are some horrible truths:

Most radio drama is very badly written. Radio drama is an endangered species. It has never taken a hold of mainstream programming on commercial radio in the UK. It used to be the mainstream in the States and Australia but lost out to TV in the middle to late fifties.

It is under threat within public radio services including the BBC because of the pressure of monetarist ideology and the fact that authors and radio drama directors have been too complacent. IRDP is a significant oasis and continues to support the principle of the original

play.

Ground rules

The Beginning

The beginning is everything. If this part of it does not work you are 'up shit creek without a paddle'. Your listeners will desert you. You have failed. You do not exist as a dramatist. Boo!

The Moment of Arrival

This is how you drop your listeners into the story. Don't give them a warm bed with comfortable pillows and a hot water bottle. The background and sub-text of previous histories is better explored through revelation in dramatic action. So parachute your listener into a top dramatic moment. Not the climax. That would be premature. Find the MOMENT to join the story. Avoid the slow snail's explicatory route. Kick 'em into a high energy trip and whoosh them through the rapids.

Structure

Set up...struggle...resolution. You can reverse this if the set-up is more dramatic and explosive than the resolution. Regard your play as a series of phases

The Plot

This is the story with lots of twists and turns. The more the merrier. Most listeners like good exciting plots. Without a good plot you're eating a souffle that has gone flat. You need plot, more plot and more plot. Run at least two story lines. Two sub plots would be interesting. Keep the plots linked logically within the same play. The best system is a major and a minor storyline linked to one another. Get them to come together at the end.

Surprise

People are hungry for entertainment. If they wanted boredom they would be filling out their tax returns instead of listening to your radio play. Make people afraid, but also excited.

Character

Your main character must have the sympathy of the audience. Your audience has to identify with your main character. If this does not happen you have created a failure. Boo!

Conflict

Drama = conflict = audience. There has to be an emotional, financial, human, moral, physical struggle so your listeners can laugh or cry. Yes, you want your listeners to laugh or cry or laugh and cry. If you don't, give up.

Polarities or Extremes

The art of story telling is exploring the extreme limits of our psychological or physical existence. To pitch one polarity against another.

The Climax

I apologize for the sexual metaphor. But there is something in this. The better sex has foreplay, development, sustained excitement, surprise and affection, nay love followed by an explosion of ecstasy. Good radio drama is not all that different. If you don't use it, you lose it.

Dialogue

This is how we engage dramatically with the world. Characters inform, argue, amuse, outrage, argue through the ebb and flow of dialogue. When we do we talk and that is how great radio plays are made.....by talking in dramatic dialogue.

Atmosphere / Ambience

This sets the emotional spirit of the play. It determines whether your listeners believe in the

world that you have created. Worlds are not created by dramatic dialogue alone. There is attitude and atmosphere. This is determined by detail and relevant detail. It could be in a sound effect. It could be in the writing. It could be in the music. It could be in everything. But the result is that the fifth dimension of radio writing - the imagination of the listener - is stimulated to become a picture palace of the mind.

Emotion

Got to be there. You have to generate an emotional response from the audience....preferably to the main character....also not so strongly in relation to the other characters. Emotion = love, hate, admiration. Never mind about the type of emotion.....concentrate on whether it is there or not. Emotional connection between the writing and the listener = good radio drama.

Balance Character and Plot

You have to have both. You cannot trade. One can predominate over the other. Where they are balanced equally....it can only work if characterisation relates to plot development. If your main plot is character intensive, make sure that your minor plot is plot intensive.

Purpose

Crook's golden rule is that every word, every line, every scene must serve a dramatic purpose in terms of characterisation and plot development. Drop anything that does not have a dramatic purpose.

Tension and Humour

To stop the listener dropping off or switching off, maintain the tension always and throw in the humour. Tension, humour, tension, humour, tension humour...like the foxtrot..Make the emotional rhythm of the play dance on the listener's heart and mind. Charm and alarm, charm and alarm. But they've got to be linked. Your character uses humour to react to the tension in the scene or play. Keep one character who uses humour to deal with difficult situations. Make sure the humour is verbal. Slapstick belongs to a different type of play or entertainment. Make sure you do not have characters taking it in turns to be funny. This is not stand up comedy or sitcom. Make sure that the character who uses humour has a consistent sense of humour.

Get your listener inside the world of your play. How?

- a. Sympathy or empathy with the main character.
- b. A bloody good set up.
- c. A big, nasty antagonist or villain.
- d. Great Plot...Great Story....twists and turns.
- e. Crisis at the beginning is dramatic and a great start.
- f. Emotional intensity. Hit some high points.
- g. Escalating conflict so the structure climbs with tension and humour.
- h. Strike the colours with detail so there's an atmosphere, mood...ambience.
- I. Modulate charm with alarm...humour with tension...tension with humour...funny policeman nasty policeman.
- j. Surprise, surprise...that's what you do to the listener, through the plot.

The principle of developing scenes

1. Introduction.
2. Character one...goal and objective.
3. Character two...goal and objective.
4. Purpose of scene in overall plot.
5. One of the characters achieves a goal.
6. Link to the next scene by introducing or pointing to location of next scene or presence of character in next scene.

Question marks in the mind of the listener. Always keep one, better two or three

The Principle of Character

1. Believable and recognisable.
2. Purpose within the plot.
3. Characters have to have function. Character has to be consistent with function.
4. Characters have to be intentional.
5. Start with a stereotype to ensure rapid recognition, then twist the stereotype. Challenge the homily that there is nothing new under the sun by making it new under the moon.
6. Give each character a dominant physical or behavioural characteristic. Make the dominant characteristic purposeful. Make it extreme.
7. Your main character must be active.
8. Active character / urgent plot. The character's energy has to fight the urgency of the plot and the urgency of the plot makes the character more energetic.

The principle of Hero / Heroine

1. Listeners look up to main characters, want to admire them because we all want heroes and heroines in our lives. Life's eternal fantasy that transcendent people and transcendent moments conquer adversity.
2. If you are very clever you can transfer the hero from the obvious to the humble and make great the inferior or character who has greater potential for human dignity.
3. Charisma. Characters need intensity and conviction. They may not be perfect but they are attractive. You cannot identify with people who are unlike ourselves...too perfect, no beliefs...take themselves too seriously...lack a sense of humour..
4. Give your characters private moments when they drop their guards and allow us into their minds and hearts. Make the listener privileged. Use this moment for revelation.
5. The main character has to change and has to be changed by the plot.
6. You must have a main character and secondary characters. Your main character changes. Your secondary characters are probably more singular in their characteristics. Your secondary characters are already committed. Your main character is still weighing up the options.
7. You must have characters who are extreme in relation to each other...characters that are different make drama.

Where are we now?

Well, we should be here....

- a. The main character is in the middle of the story.
- b. You've used dominant characteristics.
- c. The listener likes the main character.
- d. The listener cares what happens to the main character.
- e. The listener hates the antagonist.
- f. The main character is developing.

Principles of Dialogue

- a. Dialogue must be a response to a situation, plot or action.
- b. Dialogue must be a response to each character in the scene.
- c. Dialogue must be comic relief.
- d. Dialogue must connect to the next scene.
- e. Avoid reflective, passive and neutral. Go for active, and direct and emotional.
- f. Dialogue must be believable by being specific...by being specific to the character's background and emotional state.
- g. If dialogue is reacting to action or situation then it must be dramatic and poised on polarities. The goals of the characters in each scene should be different.
- h. Dialogue should be continuous. Tip...characters often take a tag by repeating the last word spoken by the first character.
- i. Dialogue must relate to function.
- j. You can mix direct with indirect between two characters because they have different goals.
- k. Humorous dialogue is not a character telling a joke but a line or lines responding to the

dramatic situation.

1. Heightened dialogue vs naturalistic dialogue. Heightened language is the language of the theatre...high octane communication...poetic, philosophical...charged. The expression of the playwright...It serves not only the development of the plot and character, but it also presents the view of the writer. Works well in radio. But there is now a tendency for more naturalism. Radio producers like to go out on location and explore realism. In these situations you must stick to natural dialogue.

Principles peculiar to Radio

1. The inner existence.
2. The tension and conflict between the interior and exterior.
3. More psychological.
4. Easier to explore the real and the surreal and to delineate the line between the two.
5. Have to work in the fifth dimension...the energy of the listener's imaginative participation.
6. The interior existence offers exploration of personal thoughts, fantasies, emotions and conflicts.
7. All levels of external conflict can be explored.
8. The precipitating event through plot has to threaten the inner life of the main character. This is the kick-off in radio drama.
9. The end or resolution in radio drama is more deeply rooted in the emotional equilibrium and insight of the main character. Changes are internal as well as external.
10. Time transposition and translocation are faster and more rapid and more complicated. Flashbacks...flash forwards... different ages.
11. Radio requires less rather than more characters. Characterisation needs to be strong and fascinating.
12. Maintain the focus of the main character and plot.
13. Economy of words underlines subtextual surprise and engagement with the listener's imagination.
14. Wit is vital because language is so important...cleverness with words...energy with words. Humor with words...Wit is advanced by surprising the listener...being aggressive with the listener. Being fast, short and clever with the listener.
15. Irony is pathos and bathos. It's conflict between the inner life and outer action.