

A Growing Grass-Roots Renaissance for Radio

By LORI E. PIKE

Puritan-era adolescents shriek accusations of witchcraft. Ruby the futuristic detective sniffs out clues. Grandfatherly John Avery Whittaker teaches his young employee a few things about friendship. The Lone Ranger gallops off into the sunset.

Scenarios from books? Television series?

No. It's part of the renaissance of radio drama and comedy, old and new, available for the hearing in Southern California and beyond.

"I think there's a resurgence of interest in radio drama," said Robert Sims, news and program director for KNX-AM (1070), which has broadcast an hour of golden drama oldies each day, seven days a week, since 1983.

"It's a remarkable hour. Sometimes I'm just shocked at the audience it gets," Sims said. "From 9 to 10 p.m., KNX-AM does remarkably well. We are usually the No. 1 or No. 2 station in Southern California in that hour."

No Los Angeles broadcaster—including Sims—foresees radio drama re-emerging as the dominant force that it was in the "golden days" of the 1940s. Advertisers put their money in TV drama these days, not radio.

"In the old days, there was a tremendous need for radio programming... but [now] there's no national sponsorship," said Sims. "The money isn't there to make from the shows as it was 40 years ago."

Still, the grass-roots interest in radio's dramatic possibilities is taking many forms.

Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works, for example, is one professional repertory group dedicated to presenting plays and novels via radio through a company boasting



MARSHA TRAEGER / Los Angeles Times

Radio drama and comedy are enjoying new life on AM and FM bands. Actors assembling for '87 L.A. Classic Theatre Works/KCRW-FM production of "Babbitt," include Ed Asner, Georgia Brown, center; from left, rear, Bud Cort, Holly Palance, Helen Hunt, Ted Danson, Nan Martin, Hector Elizondo, Richard Masur, Marian Mercer and Harry Hamlin; from left, seated, Robert Foxworth, JoBeth Williams, Fionnula Flanagan, Michael York and Ally Sheedy. The multipart program is now being rebroadcast.

some of the best-known acting names in the country. Ed Asner, JoBeth Williams, Michael York and Harry Hamlin are among the three dozen professionals who make up the troupe.

At the other extreme is Tom Lopez, a one-man radio drama factory in Upstate New York. He stretches the barriers of sound and imagination with stories that are aired on stations across the nation and as far away as Australia.

There's even a weekly radio program for children. Produced in Pomona by the Focus on the Family organization, "Adventures in Odyssey" is a half-hour, Christian-oriented alternative to Saturday-morning TV.

In the old days, CBS produced many of the all-time radio classics. But, more recently, CBS affiliate KNX-AM had been getting additional mileage out of the old "CBS Mystery Theatre," originally de-

veloped by Himan Brown. The nightly mysteries aired regularly on the all-news station from 1974 to 1983.

"We had developed such a nice audience for those programs that I scouted around to see if I could find something that would please those listeners," said KNX's Sims. Five years ago, he set up a roster of 14 half-hour old shows a week.

"What I'm trying to do is present the programming in the same way

it was presented originally," he said. "In the old days, you would tune in on certain nights for certain programs."

At least one other local commercial station has taken note of KNX's success. KMPC-AM (710) jumped on the golden oldies bandwagon last September, airing the now-syndicated "CBS Mystery Theatre" reruns.

Station program director Chuck

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Irish and film and radio actor (and husband of Webber) Sean McClory.

KUSC was impressed enough with the "Treasure Island" tape to air the 90-minute broadcast in September but was unprepared for the outpouring of listener support that followed.

"Obviously, our primary vehicle is classical music, so we were curious as to what people would have to say," said KUSC spokeswoman Susan Taylor. "We conducted a listener's survey following the broadcast, and it was bedlam. The phone banks just lit up, and we heard from people all over Southern California who very much desired more."

That lively response has earned the Radio Theatre group six slots of air time for 1989. KUSC has been airing the monologues of Garrison Keillor on weekend reruns of his "A Prairie Home Companion" for several years and more recently has been broadcasting the syndicated Saturday-night variety show "Good Evening" from Minnesota Public Radio, which usually contains some Keillor-esque storytelling. But the public station's commitment to six new bona-fide dramas from the radio acting troupe is unprecedented.

"They're a very impressive group," Taylor said. "What they have that we don't hear in other radio productions is the strength to proceed simply on the basis of what they can do with their voices."

"Take the voice of many extraordinary [non-radio] actors, and you're still not going to find that ability to vocalize emotion. Having to dump every bit of a character into a voice . . . it's a whole new world for most actors, except those who did it day in and day out."

"In some ways, they're kind of an angry group of artists because they've been neglected. They're sort of a national treasure. The waste of their talents is kind of tragic," Taylor said.

"I don't think we're angry," Peggy Webber said. "I think most of us feel quite fulfilled that we were able to do as many radio shows as we did. But what disturbs me and a lot of my friends is that in England, Ireland and other countries, radio drama is still very much a part of the culture. Why has it gone by the wayside in the U.S.?"

"We do want to pass our techniques and art on to young people,

so they can continue the tradition," she said. "We feel we have something to offer. We really learned how to perfect radio drama over the years, because we worked with the best."

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The story of another Los Angeles radio acting troupe—"30 Minutes to Curtain"—is one of hard work and perseverance. It literally sweated its way onto the airwaves.

"We started off in a little studio that was so hot, we couldn't use it until 6 at night, and then we'd have to record until 3 a.m. to finish," said "Curtain's" executive producer, Frank Finn.

Thus began the career of a group that has provided KCSN-FM (88.5) at California State University, Northridge, with half an hour of radio drama every other week since 1983.

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Drama

Southcott's market research seems to back up his enthusiasm over the show's potential.

"We've discovered that a broader age range than you might expect has a phenomenal interest in drama on the radio—both the old drama that still stands up today, and the new," he said.

Tantalized by radio drama's listener appeal, KMPC is moving a step further toward attempting to recapture a bit of that old-time radio excitement by going into production of new scripts. Beginning in early 1989, the station will experiment with a once-monthly hour of drama to be broadcast live in front of a studio audience.

"Oddly enough, there is a group of very creative young people out there, from just post-college to their mid-30s," Southcott said. "They're people who write for other media, but they started playing around with radio drama and got very excited by it."

Some old-time radio actors are eager to show that their skills have only improved with age. Earlier this year, for example, the California Artists Radio Theatre presented classical music station KUSC-FM (91.5) with an audition tape of the group's adaptation of the classic "Treasure Island."

California Artists Radio Theatre, a group of about 100 actors, grew out of the friendships formed between actress Peggy Webber and other veterans of radio drama. Webber, a radio actress since her 11th birthday, was a fixture on many network shows in such roles as Ma Friday on "Dragnet."

The "Treasure Island" program was directed by Webber and "Mercury Theatre" and film director Richard Wilson. Cast members included Jeanette Nolan, Dan O'Her-

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The troupe doesn't get paid and only a few of the group's 25 members have had any previous experience in radio . . . or in acting, for that matter.

"Amateurs," sniffed some broadcast professionals interviewed for this article.

But this scrappy little group of radio enthusiasts doesn't care. It just loves the constant challenge of producing radio drama. "Thirty Minutes to Curtain" survived a stretch when there was no studio available in which to record. Production was moved to members' apartments, where every toilet flush meant re-cuing the last scene.

Even so, members aren't always sure anyone is listening to their original productions, such as "Tragedy Over New York," a docudrama about the day a B-25 aircraft crashed into the Empire State Building in 1945. KCSN is a public radio station, after all, and rarely gets audience data readings from ratings services such as Arbitron and Birch.

As a result, the acting company sometimes offers prizes such as restaurant gift certificates "to make sure someone is out there listening," Finn said.

KCRW-FM (89.9) manager Ruth Hirschman is radio drama's best friend in L.A. and quite possibly the nation.

"We broadcast more radio drama than any other station in the country," she boasts. "We're not talking the Golden Age [though the station does run a weekly hour of vintage programs]. We're talking about contemporary drama productions from the BBC—whatever is available nationally here, as well as our own."

KCRW's "own" includes the unpredictable Joe Frank, imported by



BERNIE BOSTON

You can't build an audience if you present drama once in a while.

—Ruth Hirschman
KCRW-FM

Hirschman from Washington in 1986 to offer weekly programs that tend to traverse dark, obsessive ground. He's dialed phone sex lines on the air while being bathed by a French woman, and offered a monologue about his desire to dismember the elevator operator who takes him to his psychoanalyst's office.

KCRW also has a production partnership with the critically acclaimed Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works. The National Public Radio affiliate's voracious appetite for drama keeps Hirschman busy continuously scouting for top-quality programming.

"There isn't much available, so we use everything we can get," she said. "We couldn't do this without the British Broadcasting Corp. [Radio drama] is expensive, it's difficult to produce, and you have to be really committed to do it. So there aren't many people producing quality radio drama in this country. In the BBC, they have a whole department set up to do just that."

The governments of other nations regularly subsidize the production of radio drama, according to Hirschman, but not the United States.

"Australia has very good radio

drama," she said. "I here are many countries that understand the tremendous power [of radio drama] and put a lot of money into it. But we have not got a system in this country where public broadcasting is supported in the main by government dollars. So those stations that want to go after [drama] have to roll up their sleeves, put it on the schedule and try to raise money for it."

Hirschman sees an ever-expanding potential audience for radio drama.

"I think increasingly, I've gotten a younger audience," she said. "People associate radio drama with the Golden Age, and it's true they produced wonderful drama. How-

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DUSTIN HOFFMAN

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ever, the material that's being produced now pulls in a younger audience. Joe Frank is a good example of that." (See article on Page 4.)

Those stations that do carry drama tend to be far too timid, Hirschman insists.

"You have to have an air time commitment to broadcast it," she said. "You can't build an audience if you present it only once in a while. You have to present it day in and day out. You can hear radio drama every day on KCRW."

Today, from from noon to 5 p.m., and from 6:30 to 8 p.m., KCRW will air "Theatre of the Imagination," a collection of Orson Welles' "Mercury Theatre" dramas plus a documentary on that early radio era. (See article on Page 12.)

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The 38-member L.A. Classic Theatre Works includes major film and TV names. John Lithgow, Amy Irving, Richard Dreyfuss, Marsha Mason. . . .

How did these busy actors get involved in radio drama?

Originally, company co-director Susan Loewenberg explained, the group was formed as a stage company of actors "classically trained in the theater" but also well-known because of their film and TV

involvement. But, during the Classic Theatre Works' formative script-assessing days, Dreyfuss suggested that the company investigate radio drama possibilities.

"Radio seemed to have marvelous advantages," Loewenberg said. "It was relative to a full-scale theater production, seemed to be simpler to do, was certainly less expensive and would reach a very large audience—much larger than a theater audience. It would also permit us to really explore a lot more material very intensely using voice as the main instrument."

Hirschman quickly pledged KCRW air time and some financial support. The group's premiere performance was a revival of the 1920s Moss Hart spoof of Hollywood, "Once in a Lifetime," which aired live over radio in July, 1987. It was the group's first and, so far, only production aired live before a studio audience.

Subsequent productions, all aired over KCRW, have been a 14½-hour dramatization of Sinclair Lewis' novel "Babbitt" (now being re-aired) and the plays "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?" Arthur Miller's "The Crucible" and "Oh Dad Poor Dad Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad."

The future for the Theatre Works is tied to radio. Though the group hopes to take to the stage for some legitimate theater work in the coming months, its flirtation with public radio appears to be

permanent.

"Ruth is hoping to build a special studio for us at KCRW," Loewenberg said. "That would be a terrific boon to all of us if we could have a studio dedicated to radio drama."

KCRW will broadcast the company's latest production, "The Beauty Part," Sunday at 6 p.m. and again the following day at noon. The 1962 satire by S. J. Perelman features Judge Reinhold in the starring role of Lance Weatherwax, a millionaire garbage-disposal manufacturer on a quest for truth and beauty. Harry Hamlin, Amy Irving and Fionnula Flanagan also

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are in the cast.

The next big project is "McTeague," a turn-of-the-century novel by Frank Norris about a greedy San Francisco dentist that was turned into a legendary lost film classic by Eric Von Stroheim in the 1920s appropriately entitled "Greed."

Loewenberg said the company would like to present about five more plays, to complete "a kind of survey that represents 20th-Century drama." After that, the group wants to interpret French and German literature and maybe even work with Joe Frank on a dramatization of a Russian novel.

zation of a Russian novel.

"Ideally, we'd like to create a whole library of books and plays with an American voice," Loewenberg said.

□

While KCRW, KNX and KMPC all aim toward an adult audience, children are largely ignored. Focus on the Family, a Pomona-based Christian organization, is trying to change that.

"Adventures in Odyssey" is a bid to woo kids from "what's generally junk" on weekend television, according to program producer Steve

Harris. The program airs on Christian stations throughout the country, but, locally, it is heard over KFSG-FM (96.3) and KPRZ-AM (1210). Harris and a staff of five write and produce the program using local acting talent.

"There's nobody that we know of in the country doing children's radio drama on the level we're doing it," he said. "There's over 100 man-hours in every 30-minute episode. We take the job very seriously."

Odyssey is the name of the mythical town where stories ap

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Los Angeles Times

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propriate for a pre-teen audience unfurl each week. A kindly retired gent named John Avery Whittaker resides over Whit's End—a cozy little place that's part ice cream parlor, part museum and part inventor's workshop.

The shows try to convey "traditional values as they relate to young people, like honesty, friendship and responsibility," Harris said.

Some programs have religious themes and some don't, but there is a conscious effort not to preach.

"There's a bit of humor here and there—we like to have fun with it," said Harris. "We've done some great stories from the past. Our Fourth of July program was about a young kid who's a Revolutionary War nut. He gets bopped on the head and runs around in 1776 with Nathan Hale, helping to bring freedom to the country."

The listener-supported show is currently aired on 624 stations in the United States and on 10 more in Canada. As for listener appeal, Harris said, Focus on the Family "hears from 800 to 1,500 kids a

week who call our toll-free number in response to the broadcast."

Radio, Harris suggested, is a powerful way to stretch a child's imagination.

"I think radio is far more visual than television," he said. "In radio you can travel anywhere, do anything, see anything, and all it takes is the sound effects to prompt you. We put Spielberg to shame every week with what kids can do with their imagination."

□

Tom Lopez is also taking a giant step back to the future in mining the possibilities of radio theater.

"Originally, I thought I was going to write for the theater, but I decided no one would ever produce what I wrote, so I wrote a radio play and produced it for KPFA in Berkeley," said the the New York-based writer-producer.

His second radio production was sponsored by rock group Jefferson Airplane in 1972.

"The Fourth Tower of Inverness," dubbed "a classic mystical adventure," introduced hero Jack Flanders, who lives on today in that original series as well as a number of sequels. Lopez had found his niche. He created ZBS Foundation, a nonprofit organiza-

tion funded though NPR, grants and the mail-order sales of series cassettes.

In the esoteric world of radio drama, Lopez's programs are mentioned frequently and favorably by broadcasters. His series about a futuristic detective named Ruby, "The Adventures of a Galactic Gumshoe," has been aired on 500 stations, including KCRW and Armed Forces Radio.

The wily, sexy Ruby scours the planet Summa Nulla ("the high point of nothing") on a quest to find out who is manipulating the media. Along the way, she encounters intriguing creatures such as the Tookah, who sports four tentacles, three eyes, a blue mustache and red fez. Meanwhile, the Android Sisters entertain the locals with satirical "speak-songs" at the Digital Circus.

"My shows seem to give a lot to people because the productions are so complex," said Lopez. "Also, some of them have a sort of spiritual nourishment to them, in a way. Sometimes they deal with strange Eastern religions or sometimes I throw in different ideas—Sufi sayings or Zen things—that may seem throw-away but are

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Kevin Thomas, Los Angeles

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actually quite profound."

The often surrealistic and mystical bent of his programs frequently leaves his older listeners cold.

"But a lot of kids like it," he said. "We have about 12 high school stations that play [the programs]. They're also big on college stations. Maybe 150 of the 500 that aired 'Ruby' were NPR stations. The rest were college," Lopez said.

His latest project promises to be a bit more conventional. "Saratoga Springs," named after a town near Lopez's home and recording studio in upstate New York, will begin airing in 3-minute and half-hour chunks in March, 1989. He's found that offering both ultra-short and longer program formats pays off in greater air play. "There were some stations that actually ran 'Ruby'

five times a day," he said.

Lopez, a former writer of commercials, also likes the challenge of telling a meaty piece of a story in three to four minutes. "You can really concentrate on getting in and punching one thought and then getting out of there. It's a way of getting up to speed and talking to people via radio, which is not the way it used to communicate 10 years ago," Lopez said.

"Los Angeles is our biggest audience by far, primarily because of KCRW. So I see our audience, particularly for the series I'm working on, as being stuck on the freeway, going either to or from work," he added.

Lopez believes that there will always be a hunger for quality radio drama. "I think we like to hear stories in whatever forms they come—in television, books or radio. There's a certain nourishment we get from stories that goes

back to myths and primitive times, though maybe it's gotten terribly diluted through the electronic media," he said.

But, if radio drama producers expect to find air time for their programs, Lopez said, they must be ready to know their audience and to adapt to its needs.

"The people who want to do radio drama really have to think who their listener is, and how they listen to radio, and then adjust to it. You can't just do one-hour dramas and expect stations to play it, because they won't—they don't have space for it anymore," he said.

"To expect anyone to listen, you have to be worthy of the listener," Lopez continued.

"You can say, 'Listening habits have been ruined by commercial radio or television,' which happens to be true, by the way. But after a while you quit complaining and learn how to communicate."

SHIRLEY
MacLAINE

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—Kevin Thomas, LOS ANGELES TIMES

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"With its chilling message, 'The Chocolate War' is a fascinating film done with style, with care and with excellence. It's first-rate."

—Sheila Benson, Los Angeles Times



"Filmmaker Keith Gordon is a