

Radio Theatre – From the Rigour of Construction, To the Emotion of a “Performance of Sound”

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Abstract: Radio theatre – from its classic form to the newer ones it tackles – is a complex construction, through which the listener is invited into a universe consisting of words and sounds. It is up to the listener to perfect the “performance” in their mind, where the images are created. The script writers, the artistic, sound and studio directors, the producer, and the actors take part in a creative workshop in which rigour, imagination and ingenuity are needed. A pleasant and expressive voice, correct pronunciation and phrasing, solid technical knowledge, the ability to concentrate, good coordination combine with talent in order to create productions that aim to captivate the public, to challenge them emotionally. Creating worlds out of words and sounds, in the absence of images, represents a bold but nonetheless beautiful task, throughout its entire process: from working on understanding the meaning and pronunciation of words, to superimposing effects and music. The result is spectacular if the listener is pulled into the story, transformed into their own creator of the visual dimension, a receiver of the emotions that are transmitted.

Keywords: radio theatre, rigor, emotion, sound, performance

Radio theatre has been part of the radio roster since the beginning of this type of media. Alongside poetry reading and entertainment programmes, radio theatre for both adults, as well as children, educates the public, but it also brings joy to them. This is how one of the objectives of any public radio station is met. These productions – which are part of the cultural sphere – abide to the rules of a performance which takes place in conventional, as well as non-conventional spaces. There is a script, an artistic director, a stage manager, a sound designer – who is in charge of the sound scenography – and, of course, the actors. Radio theatre is syncretic, refined through a number of different artistic means, just as writer George Astalos very eloquently explained: “Messenger of the globality of creation, radio theatre includes in its sound corpus the *heavy artillery* of the major arts – poetry, prose and music – while, at the same time, using the entire *arsenal* of the rhetorical forms of

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communication”¹. Unlike performances that take place on a stage, in the case of radio dramas the direct interaction with the audience is missing, as well as the exchange of emotions that takes place instantly between performers and spectators who are together in the same place. However, the audience is part of the performing arts’ equation, receiving and interpreting the message, experiencing different emotions. On the radio, emotions are captured by the microphone, stored (in the past, on tapes, and today, on audio files) and then delivered to the public. The audience is much larger than that of a theatre hall, the radio taking advantage of the benefit of having a much wider number of listeners. “It is a form of theatre that is meant for mass audiences, that reaches the farthest corners of the country, that crosses its borders and that can suddenly be a show of artistic stature for millions of spectators”², according to director Mihai Zirra. This is what makes radio theatre a correspondent to the concept of “mass culture”. Another advantage of radio productions is that they are immortal. They are archived and, in addition to their artistic value, they also have the value of a document of sound.

The “radio performance” just like the one on stage, has transformed over time, along with the evolution of technology and the changes in listening habits, “from the classic theatre on the microphone and radio theatre, to audio dramas, podcasts, live sound shows”³, explained producer Oana Cristea Grigorescu, from the National Radio Theatre, part of the Romanian Broadcasting Society. Experimental and documentary theatre are types of theatre explored in radio productions, and they can be found in the roster on online platforms as well, alongside old and valuable recordings. Katja Simunic, producer, author and director at the Croatian Public Radio, HRT, explained in an article published in *Scena Magazine* that the “Radio Theatre Department is made up of various sections with distinct specificities and different artistic interpretations⁴: *Radio theatre, Radio play, Radio scene, Radio novel, Radio workshop, Documentary radio drama, Soundwalks, An*

¹ Georgeta Răboj, Dan Oprina, Monica Patriciu, Magda Duțu, Domnica Țundrea-Gheorghiu, Vasile Manta, *Teatrul Național Radiofonic*, Casa Radio Publishing, Bucharest, 1998, p. 16;

² Mihai Zirra, *Am ales Teatrul Radiofonic...*, Casa Radio Publishing, Bucharest, 2009, p. 27;

³ *Scena Magazine*, No. 66 (4)/2024, Oana Cristea Grigorescu, *Play/Rec. Dosar audio drama*, p. 4;

⁴ *Idem*, Katja Simunic, *Cuvinte și sunete în mișcare*, p. 10;

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artist's portrait in theatre, Short forms, Radio theatre for children and young adults"⁵. Important works of universal and Croatian literature from the 19th century as well as the first half of the 20th century are performed on *Radio theatre*, while "contemporary Croatian works are made into series with at least five episodes, with a half hour duration"⁶, to be broadcasted as part of the *Radio novel* section. The *Radio play* promotes young authors, who are at the start of their careers. Experimental theatre is hosted by the *Radio workshop*. The variety of genres it covers, established and current, as well as the generous time space allotted to cultural programmes make the Croatian radio an example of good practice. Furthermore, the division into sections also makes it easier to create a varied offer for different types of public, even within the theatre programmes.

Current scripts, wherever they are produced, are much shorter, because they are in alignment with the time today's listeners dedicate to listening. Oftentimes, they are on the move, either in the car, on the street, or at work, and they listen to the radio online, on modern devices. Their attention can be kept for shorter periods of time, in-between other activities they are carrying out. That is why a radio production can only be between five and fifty minutes long. Writer George Astalos observed and explained this phenomenon: "The technical revolution of the 19th century and the successive booms of technological evolution of the last sixty years have modified the personal motherboard of our young homo tehnologicus (the term belongs to us), adjusting their sensitivity to a shorter attention span, an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of humankind"⁷. George Astalos calls this transformation "a mutation recorded in the emotional field of our contemporary"⁸. The means and time of reception and perception are different from ten, thirty, sixty years ago. This dramatic genre has had to adapt both its modes of communication, as well as its duration. Regardless of the length of

⁵ *Ibidem*;

⁶ Georgeta Răboj, Dan Oprina, Monica Patriciu, Magda Duțu, Domnica Țundrea-Gheorghiu, Vasile Manta, *Teatrul Național Radiofonic*, Casa Radio Publishing, Bucharest, 1998, p. 16;

⁷ Georgeta Răboj, Dan Oprina, Monica Patriciu, Magda Duțu, Domnica Țundrea-Gheorghiu, Vasile Manta, *op. cit.*, Casa Radio Publishing, Bucharest, 1998, p. 17;

⁸ *Ibidem*;

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the script, the radio show maintains its objectives: it creates emotions and it brings up certain subjects for debate, whether the issues are classic or modern ones. The short-story “To battle”⁹, written by Răzvan Ursuleanu, directed by Mihnea Chelaru, and produced by the National Radio Theatre, of the Romanian Broadcasting Society, is approximately six minutes long. It presents the perspective of several children on the war in Ukraine. The play is imagined as a sequence of monologues that sometimes overlap – a technique previously unthinkable in radio theatre. The sound effects enhance the drama of the text. The impact on the listeners is devastating. The conception required a lot of imagination from the team, as well as effort, from a technical point of view. The overlapping of voices and sound scenography are put together carefully, so that it does not turn into disturbing noise, and the script can be understood and provoke emotion.

What has not changed in terms of radio theatre, no matter what forms it has taken, is its essence: the word. Director Mihai Zirra emphasized this aspect by observing “how much art there is in the speculation of the word and how it can be handled skilfully, in order to obtain its intended meaning”¹⁰. Director and sound designer Stefan Weber said in an interview with Oana Cristea Grigorescu, for *Scena Magazine*, that to him, “the word, not the sound, makes the music. (...) Thus, if I read a text for the first time, I listen to what the story is telling me in the form of sound”¹¹. The word takes on extraordinary significance in radio performances, because in the absence of movement, sets, costumes, and lights, it is the main tool for describing characters, places, as well as for delivering emotions. When it comes to radio scripts, words must be weighed carefully; their meanings are exploited to the maximum by the director and the performers. That is why table-reads are very rigorous. Before getting to the rehearsals in front of the microphone, actors must find out the right meanings of their lines. It is a laboratory where the meaning of words is researched. The microphone highlights pleasant voices and successful interpretations, and on the other hand it enhances flaws, exaggerations and

⁹ <https://www.eteatru.ro/#art-index/radio-noir-povestiri-politiste>. [Accessed on January 12, 2025];

¹⁰ Mihai Zirra, *op. cit.*, p. 38;

¹¹ Interview of director and sound designer Stefan Wever, for Oana Cristea Grigorescu, *Scena.ro*, No. 66 (4)/2024, p. 7;

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pronunciation mistakes. “The microphone sometimes unmasks details that are difficult to notice on stage”¹², said director Mihai Zirra. The expressiveness of the timbre and diction, even if inborne, must be cultivated through hard work. The exercise consists of repeatedly recording the texts, identifying mistakes and repeating the process until the desired result is achieved. It is a work that the actor carries out on their own. The process is difficult, because it is awkward to listen to and recognize your own voice. That is why the exercise continues until one becomes familiar with their own voice. Director Mihai Zirra – who was also an announcer at the public radio for a period of time – talked about his experience with this process: “After two or three recordings, I got used to it and started studying the qualities and flaws of my diction and phrasing. It was not difficult to correct, but it was serious work with myself, trying to find *my* best distance away from the microphone, so as to favour my qualities and avoid my defects”¹³.

Just as important for the success of a radio performance is sincerity, said actress Cornelia Gheorghiu, in an interview with Calin Ciobotari for the book *Cornelia Gheorghiu, între Ciocârlia și Sarah Bernhardt (Cornelia Gheorghiu, between Skylark and Sarah Bernhardt)*: “In radio theatre, you need much more sincerity than on a stage. There, in front of the microphone, you have to do it in such a way that you put double the effort in your voice, replacing the facial expressions that the listener needs to imagine. You have no idea how important whispering is on the radio. You can convey countless moods with a single whisper”¹⁴. Only after this individual training does the director intervene and create the show according to their own vision. Radio has established itself as a school for educating pronunciation and phrasing, and the use of the voice. Cornelia Gheorghiu confesses that this is, in fact, “from an acting perspective, the work of the radio”¹⁵. In fact, her collaboration with this media began in childhood and continued later on, as an actress of the

¹² Mihai Zirra, *op. cit.*, p. 39;

¹³ *Idem*, p. 38;

¹⁴ Călin Ciobotari, *Cornelia Gheorghiu, între Ciocârlia și Sarah Bernhardt (Cornelia Gheorghiu, between Skylark and Sarah Bernhardt)*, Junimea Publishing, Iasi, 2010, p. 14;

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 13;

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“Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre, where she took part in theatre productions at Radio Iasi, in programmes dedicated to poetry; she was also an announcer at the same station. Other important actors and directors also recommend that young people have such an experience. Actress Alexandrina Halic quoted Clody Bertola who said that radio theatre “is an exam for any real actor”¹⁶. There are other qualities for which some actors are particularly appreciated by radio people: the ability to concentrate and to get into character very quickly, endurance in the face of a fast and tiring work pace – given the multitude of retakes. Performers must show patience and understanding, and maintain the right state of mind to continue recording.

The radio drama producer attends all rehearsals and recordings, carefully monitoring the script, so that it is followed to the letter; they also oversee that the pronunciation is correct, and the words are spoken clearly. It is painstaking, but necessary work, in order for the audience to easily understand the text and receive the message the author, director, and performers intended to send. The radio allows the listener to carry out other activities while listening. They can be on the street, in the car or in another means of transportation. If they do not understand what the actors are saying or the performance is not convincing, they will certainly change the radio channel, as Mihai Zirra observed: “In a theatre hall, once you've entered and taken your seat, no matter how unconvincing the actors are, you're forced to stay at least until the first intermission. In front of the radio, when you're served a poor performance, you press a button to shut it off, and regain your good mood”¹⁷. This laborious activity of the team is focused on the word, from searching for and understanding its meaning, to its pronunciation; this kind of work is fundamental for creating the universe of sound into which listeners are invited.

Radio productions are shows of fantasy that result in intellectual and emotional satisfaction that only reading a book can awaken. The success of such a production consists in drawing the listener into a game of imagination, turning them into an accomplice. They are introduced, by use of words, music

¹⁶ Ion Moldovan, “Alexandrina Halic. Lumea magică a teatrului radiofonic”, Ecou Transilvan Publishing, Cluj-Napoca, 2023, p. 70;

¹⁷ Mihai Zirra, *op.cit.*, p. 38;

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and sounds, into a world that mentally transforms into images, which they can “touch” and “smell”. The listener must be prepared for such an experience, as well as willing to make an effort to decipher the universe of sound. The listener becomes, to some extent, co-author of the project, and their involvement is decisive. Ileana Berlogea explained the similarity between “the pages of a book and radio theatre. In the first case, we only have graphic signs, words laid out on paper, but our imagination gives them a voice and a shape. We see heroes walking, searching, suffering or rejoicing. And how many times have we watched films based on famous novels and exclaimed: *‘It’s not like the book: the novel was much better, more complex. The heroes were much more interesting!’* Haven't we often done the same thing when we listened to a play and then saw it on stage? But it was better on the radio! Why was it better? Because it gave us the freedom to see the heroes with our mind's eye, to dress them in period pieces or contemporary clothes, to give them the colour of their eyes and hair”¹⁸. This is the reason why, in her opinion, radio theatre would win in an imaginary competition against theatre on a stage. The listener of radio productions can be kept on the same wavelength only if they are captivated by the story and the way it is told. Any fake or unjustified sound, any inconsistency in the sound design snatches the listener away from the made-up atmosphere, disrupting the “show”. The studios at the National Radio Theatre (of the Romanian Broadcasting Society) are equipped with everything needed to produce noises: gravel, stones, marble, metal, sand. The wind breeze or the rustling of grass are imitated with the help of recording tape, which nowadays only has this use. If the actor (who is holding the text in their hands) has to sip from a cup, drink water, or write, the studio director sits next to them, at the microphone, and does the respective action. For it to be believable, coordination, concentration, and very good communication are crucial. Mihai Zirra called this team member “the artistic director's elongated hand in the studio”¹⁹.

¹⁸ Georgeta Răboj, Dan Oprina, Monica Patriciu, Magda Duțu, Domnica Țundrea-Gheorghiu, Vasile Manta, *op. cit.*, Casa Radio Publishing, Bucharest, 1998, p. 21;

¹⁹ Mihai Zirra, *op.cit.*, p. 29;

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The sound director has a particularly important role; they must show talent, solid technical knowledge, imagination, but also rigour. Together with the artistic director, they establish what the appropriate volume of a shout or a whisper is, for it to convey the desired feeling. They know what distance the actor must keep from the microphone. During the recordings, their attention and hearing are used at maximum capacity. No noise that is not part of the sound universe of the play can escape their attention, no shrillness of the voice, no erroneous pronunciation or phrasing. From this perspective, the artistic director, the radio producer and the sound director have common attributions. This guarantees that the production will be flawless, the listening experience will not be disturbed by any mistakes, and the atmosphere of the play will not be broken. After the recordings are finished, the sound director selects the best interpretations from the various retakes, overlays the music and effects and, together with the artistic director, they “tell” the story, they build the “performance”. This is another important part of a sound director’s job. When plays used to be recorded on tape, the process was laborious; the sound illustrator would work for hours or even days, using two huge tape recorders at the same time, in order to synchronize the music and effects with the script read by the actors. One tiny slip of attention could erase the effort of an entire day’s work. Today, this process is digitalized, but not any simpler. Modern technology allows for very good sound and formidable effects; it also means you can store a larger number of takes. Recordings are done on several tracks and thus it is much easier to keep, and to find the best versions. Noises are found in “libraries” with millions of sounds. The sound director listens to the recordings several times, in parts, until the best versions are identified. They use programs to facilitate the overlaying of tracks only if they are very well mastered. This process is meticulous. Searching for the most suitable effects, adding them at the right moment – it requires attention and a very good ear, so that, in the end, the sound design is the appropriate one.

As demonstrated, preparing a radio production needs very good organisation, which is handled by the team consisting of an artistic director, producer, studio editor, and sound director. Once rehearsals and – afterwards – the recordings begin, the actors join this team. In this article, I have briefly presented each person's duties and the methodical work they carry out within such a project. Furthermore, I did not exclude the audience from this process, because they must be willing to step into the world made up of words, sounds,

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and feelings. When it comes to radio theatre, the listener imagines different worlds and receives emotions created with passion and rigor, in the intimate space of the radio, by theatre and radio people.

Radio is a type of media which offers privacy and freedom; it is not intrusive and does not overwhelm. It accompanies the listener in any activity they may be doing, just like a loyal friend. Radio theatre maintains these characteristics. Regardless of the way in which it is presented, the “radio performance” offers descriptions in the form of words and sounds, leaving the joy of transforming them into images and creating a personal view of them up to the listener. In this space, the word has kept its power, its expressiveness and the rationale to shape minds and emotions. Radio theatre is accessed and listened to on the National Radio Theatre platform, eTeatru.ro (the Internet allows monitoring of traffic); on the other hand, it is oftentimes pirated, bringing thousands of views to those who have such illegal and immoral initiatives. One can conclude that there is, indeed, an audience for radio theatre, one that seeks to escape from a world subject to excesses and dominated by visual images. The alternative is a consistent message, and raw emotions, transmitted through words and sounds. “Modesty proves productive. It brings to light the deep and ‘*shocking*’ truths of a text, proposing to the listener – and oftentimes succeeding in obtaining – genuine *emotional shock*. We live in a civilization of the Image, in which theatre on the microphone grants the ‘*audience*’ its title of nobility”²⁰, wrote director Sorana Coroama-Stanca.

The production of a radio theatre play requires hard work, rigour, concentration, and of course, talent and creativity. The effort remains known solely to those in the team consisting of theatre and radio people. The listener enters a universe they take part in creating, enjoying the emotions they experience during its audition. Radio theatre exerts a form of fascination on its audience, which ensures its future in a digitalized, fast-paced world, but a

²⁰ Georgeta Răboj, Dan Oprina, Monica Patriciu, Magda Duțu, Domnica Țundrea-Gheorghiu, Vasile Manta, *op. cit.*, Casa Radio Publishing, Bucharest, 1998, p. 34.

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world to which this type of theatre has proven that it knows how to adapt to, while still preserving its decency and charm.

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