

Radio Theatre: Theatrical Genre or Hybrid Species?

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Abstract: Radio theatre emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, during a time in which classical theatre was undergoing a series of changes, people were experimenting with it, and new trends appeared – such as symbolism, expressionism, and avant-gardism. The theatre play was adopted and adapted by the audio media, with the goal of educating and providing entertainment, in the sense of spending time in a pleasant way. Taking into consideration that radio theatre combines elements from several different arts and means of expression – which it adapts according to the specificities of the audio medium – can one conclude that it is a theatrical genre, or is it rather a hybrid species, somewhere between theatre in its purest form and a narrative exercise of sound? The arguments which support the idea that radio theatre is a theatrical genre are related to the common points between radio theatre and classical theatre: both start from a text, preserve the dramatic structure, directors and actors take part in their creation, and both offer the audience an aesthetic theatrical experience. However, in radio, the stage dimension and physical presence of actors are missing. Moreover, audio media cannot exist in the absence of technology. In accordance with the arguments presented in the following comparative analysis, the answer is affirmative.

Keywords: radio drama; actors and radio; theatre practitioners; radio professionals; cultural memory; regional media; radio dramaturgy

Radio theatre appeared almost simultaneously with the radio itself, as a form of expression, borrowed and adapted by this medium to fulfill two of its objectives: to educate and to produce entertainment.

Theatre on the microphone, as it was originally called, appeared into the world – as well as in Romania – in 1922; thus, at the start of the 20th century. The moment left its mark on the history of theatre through a phase of experimentation and diversification; more exactly through the emergence of new trends, such as symbolism, expressionism and the avant-gardism. Thus, new forms of artistic expression emerged, influenced by technology – including radio theatre. It is the period when Bertold Brecht (1898-1956) introduced new techniques, different from

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those used in traditional radio – such as “the distancing effect”, which required the viewer to follow the action objectively, without being influenced by the characters’ development, which represented “a pivotal point in our author’s perception of theatre, as well as a matter of worldwide acclaim, with important consequences in modern schools of film and theatre directing”. Antonin Artaud (1898–1948) advocated for the supremacy of directing over that of the text, and came up with the “Theatre of Cruelty Manifesto”, where he evoked emotional brutality as a means of unsettling the spectator – the only way, in Artaud’s perception, to make the public understand reality, to leave a mark, and, perhaps, change them. Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) revolutionized the art of acting by creating a “system”, which can be found in “An Actor’s Work on Himself”, a book which remains, to this day, a valuable guidebook for theatre performers. Another theatre innovator of that period is Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940), who introduced new methods of staging¹.

In this context, audio media emerged as a necessity for communication between people. The forms of expression specific to theatre were immediately borrowed; theatre people – actors, directors and theoreticians – found, in turn, a new space for expressing themselves, which offered a much larger audience – in the order of millions – for their art, than that of a theatre hall, as well as timelessness, in terms of their art. Radio theatre has brought together perhaps the highest number of theatre people from all types of radio programs. The miracle of turning scripts into creations – more exactly, the fact that, only with the help of voice and sound alone, they can challenge and excite the audience – attracted them, providing them with the opportunity of trying new types of artistic expression.

However, a dilemma arises: to what extent does radio theatre belong to theatre as an artistic genre? In the following paragraphs, I propose a brief comparative analysis, which could lead us towards an answer.

The relation with the dramatic text

Radio theatre emerged during a time when, in classical theatre, directors were seeking, through avant-garde staging methods, a kind of detachment from the usual understanding of texts, a break from routine, the removal of any barrier between the stage and the audience. New means of expression were embraced, so as to contribute to the refining of the performing arts. The first common element between theatre plays performed on stage and those performed on the radio was the text – comprised of conflict, characters, and dialogue. Victor Craciun wrote that “in radio theatre, as in

¹ Ion Zamfirescu, *Istoria universal a teatrului*, Vol. IV, Aius Publishing, Craiova, 2003

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classical theatre, the question that arises is that of the primacy of the text”². There are, however, certain differences; thus, the text for radio dramas acquires a different form from that of a traditional theatre script. Producer of cultural programs, Gabriela Campeanu, of Radio Romania Iasi, compared the script of radio dramas to that of a film: stage directions and actors’ instructions are much more detailed than those for the classical theatre, and the plotline is much more alert. In addition, for the audio version, lines are added in order to explain actions the listener cannot see³. Moreover, fragments that complicate the script and are irrelevant in the absence of visual elements are eliminated. Theatre expert and radio professional Constantin Paiu divided radio scripts into several categories: “dramatic reading, radio adaptation of a dramatic text, dramatization, radio script and recording of a theatre performance”⁴. Such solutions can be found in classical theatre as well. Some directors resort to adaptations, dramatizations of literary texts, in order to stage them. In other cases, they modify the texts through reduction.

Quickly enough, authors began to write specifically for radio theatre, the texts respecting certain rules from the very beginning. Prof. Dr. Constantin Paiu explained the relation between the artistic director and the text, along with the main characteristic of the radio script: “In short, the difference between a dramatic theatre director and a radio theatre one lies in the fact that the former, when preparing his director's notebook, sees the upcoming show; the latter, hears it. The text chosen for the upcoming radio performance (and this is the radio editor's main job) must include (it may seem paradoxical!) less commentary, and more involvement in the plot. Or, this involvement - made exclusively through speech - is the constant concern of the radio director”⁵. It is not always the radio editor who selects the texts; the directors can come up with their own proposals.

In time, the radio script has transformed and diversified greatly, adapting different literary genres for the audio media. If we access the *eTeatru.ro* page⁶, we

² Victor Crăciun, *Scena undelor*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1980, p. 45

³ Radio Iași, Gabriela Câmpeanu: *...actorii au intuit cel mai bine care va fi relația lor cu radioul*, <https://www.radioiasi.ro/life/gabriela-campeanu-om-de-radio-actorii-au-intuit-cel-mai-bine-care-va-fi-relatia-lor-cu-radioul-interviu/> [Accesat la 26 martie 2026]

⁴ Constantin Paiu, *File din istoria radioului ieșean. Perspective teatrale* (interviu), *Dacia literară*, Nr. 1 (172)/2024

⁵ *Ibidem*

⁶ Paltforma de teatru radiofonic a Societății Române de Radiodifuziune

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find that theatre productions are organized by category: classic Romanian stories (dramatized), love stories, dramas, comedies, short shows and series. All these productions are digitalized from Radio Romania's archive. Listeners can enjoy old and new shows, valuable renditions of classical or modern texts. This platform also provides long plays, which can no longer be broadcasted on-air, due to changes in listening habits. However, one can opt to listen to them on this platform, which is organized similarly to those that host movies. When it comes to radio programs, the maximum time allocated to a theatre play is one hour. If the listener is simultaneously engaged in another activity that ends at a certain point in time - before the end of the play - they will keep listening, to find out how the story ends. However, if there are still a few dozen minutes left, they will give up on the play.

The radio script - just like the classical one - has transformed over time, taking into account the trends, the audience, and the rigorous of censorship, imposed by authoritarian regimes. The text remains, in both cases, the starting point in any such artistic endeavour.

The radio theatre director and the construction of the universe of sound

A radio theatre production, just like the classical theatre performance, is the result of the artistic director's vision, and the text is interpreted by the actors. The director is the one who, sometimes, chooses the text, decides and creates the form they give the script, and comes up with the cast. They work with the actors, starting from the readings, explaining their take on the text. These are also a director's duties when it comes to classical theatre. As for radio theatre, the director carries out the staging in the absence of visual elements. Simultaneously, they are the set designers of the sound universe they create, unlike the shows performed on stage, to which a set designer with a distinct role from a director's contributes. In the case of radio theatre, the images built with the help of the decor, lighting design, video mapping, costumes, movement, choreography disappear, and the "picture" is created in the listener's mind, described only with the help of sounds. If theatre means convention, then in the case of radio productions, the complicity of the audience is even more important. Listeners must get involved in the act of creation, thus becoming creators themselves. With the help of their imagination, they perfect, in their mind, what theatre and radio people build with the help of their voices, noises, vibrations, music. The sound "landscape" takes shape in the inner universe of each listener. The public's willingness to contribute to this act of creation is essential. Listening to a radio play is similar to

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reading a novel, and the satisfaction is commensurate. Radio theatre director Mihai Zirra compared what happens in the mind of a radio theatre listener to an “imaginary screen on which they watch everything in an attentive and engaged way”⁷.

At first, right after the appearance of radio theatre - when it used to be broadcasted live - the noises were made during the performance. Starting with the 1950s⁸, when it became possible to record the plays on tape, some of those background sounds began to be introduced later, during the technical process. In the first case, this role belonged to the studio director: the sound of footsteps, of a sip taken from a glass, the sound of a slammed door, the rustling of grass. Mihai Zirra, from the National Radio Theatre within the Romanian Broadcasting Society, described the technical director as “the extension of the artistic director’s arm”⁹. For all of this, there are suitable sets in studios intended for such types of radio production - for this method is still used to this day, although less frequently. However, there are sounds that are difficult to reproduce in the studio. For example: birdsong, car horns or car engines. They are recorded outdoors, saved into databases - in the so-called “noise libraries” - and added, as mentioned, during the technical work process. Gabriela Campeanu - who, as a radio producer, worked for a long time on the production of radio drama for Radio Romania Iasi - said, in an interview, that sound illustration was her favourite part of the process¹⁰. Together with illustrator Ioan Teodoru, who had a comprehensive sound archive, they found the most suitable ones in order to create the desired atmosphere.

To date, the radio has made a huge leap in terms of sound design. Artistic director Mihnea Chelaru, from the National Radio Theatre within the Romanian Broadcasting Society, prefers recordings “on site”, in the environment where the action takes place. The actors and the broadcast crew move their equipment to the

⁷ Mihai Zirra, *Am ales Teatrul Radiofonic...*, Editura Casa Radio, București, 2009, p. 29

⁸ Stelian Lambru, *Magnetofonul la Radio România*, <https://www.rri.ro/panoramice/enciclopedia-rri/magnetofonul-la-radio-romania-id868372.html>, Radio România Internațional, 09.03.2025, [Accesat la 21 martie 2026]

⁹ Mihai Zirra, *op. cit.*, p. 27

¹⁰ Radio Iași, Gabriela Câmpeanu: *...actorii au intuit cel mai bine care va fi relația lor cu radioul*, <https://www.radioiasi.ro/life/gabriela-campeanu-om-de-radio-actorii-au-intuit-cel-mai-bine-care-va-fi-relatia-lor-cu-radioul-interviu/> [Accesat la 26 martie 2026]

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chosen location, and the scene is recorded there. The sound ambience is realistic, and the listeners' imagination is stimulated so as to compose the appropriate setting.

Digitization has also contributed, through the emergence of digital libraries, which store a significant number of sounds. Processing and adding them is infinitely simpler, due to new technologies. Tape - much more expensive and difficult to edit - has disappeared. Today, the production of a radio play is much faster, the number of rehearsals is reduced, and technology solves problems that were very difficult to overcome in the past. Computers and sophisticated software are very efficient, and the results are extraordinary. Judging by the number of hits on platforms which host such productions - including *eTeatru.ro* - they are sought after and loved by the public.

As argued, the work of the theatre director on the microphone is very similar to that of the classical theatre director. Moreover, radio theatre directors do not benefit from a separate specialization - they come from the ranks of theatre directors, and are fascinated by the audio medium and the creativity they can show on the radio, as creators of sound scenography.

The role of the actor in radio theatre versus classical theatre

Owing to the radio, actors acquired the immortality of their artistic act, which is otherwise subjected to ephemerality. Their voices and performances were recorded - on tape at first, then in digital form - to the future generations' enjoyment. On the other hand, radio offered them a different, sound exclusive space for artistic expression, for which special skills are needed, as well as a different type of portrayal of their role than on a stage.

If in the case of classical theatre, the actor conveys the character's feelings with the help of the expressivity of their movements, but also of their voice, speech, in radio theatre, the body is not visible. The voice is the only instrument that the performers have at their disposal in order to build characters and convey messages, ideas, emotions. Thus, the nuances in their voice and the emphasis on certain sentences become fundamental. Timbre, enunciation and knowing how to speak into a microphone are indispensable qualities for the radio theatre actor. Details which can be presented on stage through a series of decorative elements, costumes or movement, on the radio, they depend on the finesse of the speech. When it comes to radio dramas, it is very important whether the character has a low or high voice, if it is hoarse or has a pleasant timbre, whether they stutter or burr, if they speak fast or slow. These are details that help shape the character in the listener's imagination. On stage, the surroundings are well-defined, they present the environment where the character evolves, and this aspect helps with the performance, whereas in radio dramas, the setting is imagined by the listener, who is stimulated solely by what they hear,

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including the acting. For example, if fear, in a terrifying place, is convincingly portrayed with the help of voice alone, the public visualizes the appropriate landscape without the need for sets, lighting design, or video-mapping.

The radio audience is larger than that of a theatre. “It is a kind of theatre meant for the masses, which reaches the most remote corners of the country, that crosses its borders and that can suddenly be a show of artistic quality for millions of spectators”, wrote Mihai Zirra. However, these millions of spectators cannot enjoy the emotion which the actors convey live, on stage. A radio theatre actor’s performance is all the more spectacular. They must impart the same feelings tens, hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away, with the help of technology, indispensable to the radio. On the other hand, the radio listener has access to a button that can “save” them from an unsatisfactory interpretation, from unpleasant voices; in short, from an unsuccessful play. They change the channel or turn off the radio, and the eventual torture is over. Unlike them, the spectator of a theatre play is forced to remain seated at least until the intermission, even if they are dissatisfied with the performance.

There are actors who are suitable for radio theatre and actors who cannot find their place in front of a microphone. The audience's attention is focused solely on what they hear; it is not distracted by images. Thus, the ear catches even the smallest speech defects or phrasing errors. Just like preparing for the stage, the actors train their voices for the microphone, as Alexandrina Halic explained: “First of all, I learned how precious this ‘instrument’ called voice is. [...] I learned to tune it, to modulate it, to manage it. In the absence of other supporting elements on which traditional theatre is based - such as costumes, set, physical presence of the actor - the voice remains the only means through which you can convey the emotion and the truth of the character played in radio theatre. The ‘school of Radio’ also taught me that it is not only the timbre of the voice that matters or its quality, but especially the delivery of the lines”¹¹. On the radio, the actor must not only demonstrate mastery in terms of speaking techniques, but also greater sincerity, because the feelings of the characters they play are broadcasted through radio frequencies, without the listener being able to see their facial expressions and body movements. Actress Cornelia Gheorghiu spoke about this aspect in an interview for the book authored by Calin Ciobotari - *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

¹¹ Ion Moldovan, *Alexandrina Halic – Lumea magică a teatrului radiofonic*, Editura Ecou Transilvan, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, p. 40

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effort in your voice, replacing the facial expressions that the listener needs to imagine”¹².

In the absence of the visual elements found in classical theatre, in audio media, the word has a special meaning. Choosing the right words - in the case of radio theatre - is the responsibility of the scriptwriter, the radio editor, the artistic director, the one who adapts the text. Highlighting the word, filling it with meaning depends on the actors. “Listening to my colleagues, listening to the actors reading into the microphone or performing their roles in front of a microphone, I realized how much art there is in the speculation of a word and how it can be skilfully handled, so as to acquire the desired meaning”¹³, wrote director Mihai Zirra. He also explained that the talent of speaking in front of a microphone is innate, and the microphone does not forgive; it highlights any speech or phrasing defect. The timbre must be pleasant, “and if God gave you such a gift, it would be a shame not to put it to the service of something that deserves to be cherished; and that something can be the treasure kept in the Radio Sound Archive”¹⁴, said actress Alexandrina Halic, who is very attached to radio theatre, and the shows she took part in as a child and throughout her career.

The director also has a responsibility to clarify aspects related to pronunciation, phrasing, during rehearsals, but also during recordings, if necessary. As previously stated, working with actors, script readings are similar to those in classical theatre. The difference is that, in the case of the radio, the time allocated to them is shorter. The director-actor relationship and the purpose are the same as in traditional theatre - as stated by radio professional Constantin Paiu: “...choosing the cast, based primarily on the timbre of their voice, the clarity of their speech, the likeliness of bringing to the fore-front the personality of their role - these are the main concerns of the director who works with the actor. The ultimate goal of the director's work (just like in stage performances, for that matter) is to highlight the implicit moral of the story, proposed by the author”¹⁵. The listener must understand the message of the play, grasp the meaning of the ideas expressed in it, be moved by what the characters are going through and, for a certain amount of time, detach themselves from reality, and - just by listening to a play - enter another, imaginary world. For this,

¹² Călin Ciobotari, *Cornelia Gheorghiu, între Ciocârlia și Sarah Bernhardt*, Editura Junimea, Iași, 2010, p. 14

¹³ Mihai Zirra, *op. cit.*, p. 27

¹⁴ Ion Moldovan, *op. cit.*, p. 53

¹⁵ Constantin Paiu, *File din istoria radioului ieșean. Perspective teatrale* (interviu), *Dacia literară*, Nr. 1 (172)/2024

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a lot of artistic mastery is needed, as well as a good understanding and interpretation of words by both directors and actors. The radio is considered a place for training for actors, who learn how to use their voice and how to read correctly. This opinion was also expressed by director Ion Vova: “...we are a school that considers the word to be primordial, and the best school for reinstructing an actor is here, at the National Radio Theatre”¹⁶.

Gabriela Campeanu believes that “the actors were the ones who predicted the best what their relation with the radio would be like. [...] I think it was a great joy for them, because it was their only chance to leave something behind. The show is performed once, twice, three times, ten times; we have stories that we saw once before, it sometimes leaves a mark; when it is an extraordinary show, it leaves a mark in our heart, on our mind, but the fact that you can record an entire show, to broadcast it - even like this, with only the voice of the actors - is wonderful, because this way, performances that are unforgettable to the audience have been preserved in our archives”¹⁷. These statements are supported by the thousands of recordings from the sound libraries of the National Radio Theatre and Radio Iasi, where entire generations of actors participated with passion and joy.

Conclusions

Classical theatre and radio theatre have similar missions: to educate and to provide entertainment. Education through theatre is accomplished in a pleasant way, it feeds the need to have and maintain a relationship with literature, with art. In this respect, theatre - whether on stage or on the radio - is a delightful and efficient instrument. It proposes ideas, provokes reasoning and creates emotions. Similarly to classical theatre, radio theatre starts from a text, preserves the dramatic structure, involves the participation of a director and actors, and creates an aesthetic theatrical experience. These are the arguments in favour of including radio theatre in the performing arts.

There are also aspects that could contradict this conclusion. In radio theatre, the stage dimension, physical presence of the actors is missing, and what appears is

¹⁶ Octavian Iordăchescu, *Ion Vova cel... cumplit!*, Edutura Casa Radio, București, 2007, p. 142

¹⁷ Radio Iași, Gabriela Câmpeanu: *...actorii au intuit cel mai bine care va fi relația lor cu radioul*, <https://www.radioiasi.ro/life/gabriela-campeanu-om-de-radio-actorii-au-intuit-cel-mai-bine-care-va-fi-relatia-lor-cu-radioul-interviu/>, [Accesat la 26 martie 2026]

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the dependence on technology. Of course, technology has recently started taking up an important place in the evolution of a performance in classical theatre too. On the other hand, radio cannot exist without technology.

In recent years, audio dramas have had separate categories in theatre festivals. Every year, the Romanian Theatre Union gives out an award for the Best Radio Theatre Performance. These are different ways of acknowledging that this is a complex theatrical genre, and not just a hybrid form at the intersection of theatre and a narrative exercise of sound.

In conclusion, can radio theatre be considered a type of theatre? In my opinion, the answer is affirmative, in accordance with the arguments presented in this comparative analysis.

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