JaySmouse

English

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An Investigation into the Production of Audio Dramas

Thesis: The creation of an audio drama is different from other mediums ranging from the writing of the script to the recording and directing of the actors, to the post production.

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What would a movie be like without the visuals? That is what an audio drama is; a story told without visuals. Audio dramas are like movies for the ears in which the stories are told exclusively by the dialogue of the characters, sound effects, and in some instances narrators. Audio dramas were first popularized shortly after the commercialization of radios in the early twentieth century in the form of radio dramas. Popularity did not last for radio dramas, though, as "The time of radio as the primary source of entertainment was, however, short-lived — the attention of the public turned to television" (Ek). With modern technology, however, audio dramas have come back in the twenty-first century. Now, many online podcasts produce audio entertainment consistently. This has allowed for audio drama to be more publicly known, but it still does not receive the recognition it deserves. In addition to podcast audio dramas, radio dramas exist to this day. In the UK, the BBC still produces audio dramas, some of which air daily in episodic series (Baume). The creation of an audio drama is different from other mediums ranging from the writing of the script to the recording and directing of the actors, to the post production.

According to Nathan Hoobler, the Focus on the Family created audio drama "Adventures in Odyssey" has a very collaborative writing process. When a writer in their staff has an idea for an episode, they pitch the idea to the whole team during a writer's conference. Before pitching an idea to the team, a writer usually writes a few paragraphs detailing what he or she plans to do in the episode. If the others like the idea, an outline is written. Once the first draft of the script has been completed, the original writer gets notes back from the team. Another draft is written, and notes are this time received from a few select members of the team who have now been assigned to help work on the episode. Occasionally, a third draft is written before the final "polish", as the writers like to call it. If there is a scene where the sound design might be particularly difficult, the sound designers are involved in the writing process to talk about the difficult aspects of post production and

how that might affect the writing. Usually, the whole process of writing an "Adventures in Odyssey" script takes a few months to complete, but in some extreme cases it can take only a few weeks (Hoobler).

When writing an audio drama, the main aspects of good storytelling still apply across mediums. Kevin McCreary, creator of the Ceiling Fan podcast, says that "audio drama is the hardest thing to write for [... for the reason that] you don't have visual cues, and you don't have narration—or you shouldn't" (McCreary). Narration will often take the listener out of the story, so avoiding having a storyteller whenever possible is a good idea. Writing a good audio drama can be a challenge, because without narration or visuals everything must be described through the use of sound effects and dialogue. As Austin Peachy said, "There are challenges for each medium, but the challenges can also be the best aspects of that medium. [...] But that's probably the biggest challenge: making sure that things sound natural and you're still helping the audience see what's happening in their mind" (Peachy). Dialogue must sound natural, but this is difficult because the dialogue must also describe everything about the scene, characters, and overarching story that the sound effects cannot. Characters cannot plainly state all points of exposition, as that would sound extremely unnatural and would become boring to the listener. One can write a superb audio drama if one follows a few tips. First of all, and most importantly, the writer must start with a good story. To write a good story, good characters are a necessity. About his character from The Ceiling Fan podcast, McCreary said, "to me, I think Ethan Daniels is all of my insecurities accentuated. So I'm like, 'I hope I don't act this way but I know I do' so I'm just gonna just, like, make him an extreme of that" (McCreary), continuing to say that he enjoys using Ethan Daniels to explore the things that he would have liked to have done when he was Ethan's age; when writing characters Kevin McCreary believes that one should draw from what and who they know, including one's self (McCreary). McCreary's co-host, Josh Taylor follows the previous quote

up with a warning not to mould a character specifically after a person known personally, especially if the character is doing some not-so-great things because the person might find out that you based the character on them (McCreary). Whatever the medium, a tale can only be told well if the story is a good one.

Although the foundation for a good audio drama, similar to a movie or book, is a good story, the description of the scene and the portrayal of the environment differs in an audio drama. Differences between audio dramas and books often involve how the scene is described and how the environment is portrayed to the audience as "What can be described in a book by text or in a film by visuals, must intelligently be incorporated in the dialogue" (Ek). For example, a writer might want to portray a man walking across a field in the distance, from the perspective of two children looking out a window. This obviously could not be portrayed by visuals if the story is being told in an auditory medium, and sound effects wouldn't work either as the man is at a considerable distance. Scenes like this must be described by the dialogue; the writer might have one character mention and give a brief description of the man and the other ask where the man is. Then the first character would say, "On the other side of that cornfield," and the audience would understand what was happening in the scene. Therefore, audio drama scripts differ from other writing because of different incorporations of exposition, but remain similar to all mediums in which storytelling occurs through the key aspects of storytelling.

Once the writers have written and edited the script, the audio drama must be recorded; throughout the recording, the work of talented individuals is needed; perhaps most notably, the actors contribute immensely. Top-quality, bigger budget audio dramas gather all the actors together in the same studio at the same time for the recording. In productions with smaller budgets, the actors will record their lines over a web-conferencing program such as Skype or Zoom, or even record separately at different times. If the actors do not record together in the

same studio, they will record in their own studios and send their audio files to the editor. For the best results, the actors all gather together in the same studio at the same time so that they can bounce creative energy off of each other. Actors should know the story, the character, and what the director wants. Austin Peachy says that understanding the character's mindset while acting acutely helps the actor (Peachy). When acting for an audio or radio drama, actors must convey all emotions with their voices. Talented voice actors can create a more powerful listening experience than a watching experience in a story in a visual medium with the help of an experienced director.

However, no matter where the actors record or how talented they are, they still need at least some direction. Good directors will know the material, in the case of audio drama the script, very well so that they know what each scene and line needs to accomplish for the story. In order for industry professionals to consider someone a satisfactory director, a prospective director needs to have mastered their communication skills and should listen to the actors. Usually, directors will write notes on their copy of the script as the actors go through their lines and then talk to them about the notes they took after each take (Arnold). Directing is an important part of the process of recording an audio drama but the recording of the actors and other sounds have equal importance.

Actors' vocals are the main part of the audio drama that needs to be recorded, and the second most important part would be sounds that are closely connected with the person who produces the sounds; those sounds, that are not part of the dialogue, are called foley. When recording custom foley (examples of which include clothes rustling, footsteps, a character taking a drink of water, or any sound that is closely connected to the character who produces the sound), the sound designers—or foley artists—will sometimes have their own foley room, or a recording studio set up specifically for the recording of foley. Rooms like this contain a myriad of props that the foley artists can use to create a diversity of sounds. Some rooms

contain different kinds of floors to record footsteps, tubs to fill with water for water sounds, and doors for the wide range of door sounds. If a scene requires highly customized sound effects, a proficient foley artist will physically act out the sounds, typically while listening to the actors' dialogue on headphones. Better-known parts of producing an audio drama include the recording of the actors and sound effects as well as the directing of the actors, but one of the less publicized aspects of creating an audio drama that goes on behind the scenes is the post production process of editing.

Editing is the main aspect of post production for an audio drama. Speaking about post production done on an audio drama, Todd Busteed of GAP Digital asks, "What are we capable of doing with our ears?" (Sutter). Human ears can detect the minutest of details, but the edit must start with the broadest changes. First comes the rough edit, in which all the actor's voice tracks are lined up and the best takes are chosen (Baume). When finding the best takes, sometimes the editor will even take part of a line from one take and mash it with the rest of the line from another take (Guenot). Then, the tracks are put into the DAW (Digital Audio Workstation; often Pro Tools) and the takes are aligned. When aligning the takes, the editor must make sure to keep the correct pacing for the sake of the story. Sometimes, after the addition of certain sound effects, the voice tracks are moved around a little as well. Usually, the addition of foley, sound effects, and the creation of an ambiance are done after the alignment of the voice tracks. Once all the sound effects, music, and foley have been added, the final "fine" edit can be done. In this edit, the sound designers will make sure everything is level, that is, at the same volume, and all the tracks have been EQed, or equalized (McClean). For radio dramas, the sound designers also need to make sure that the final product fits in the broadcast length so that it can be aired on the radio.

Sound effects are either recorded specifically for the instance in the audio drama or are retrieved from a sound effects library. Sound effects, foley, and ambiance are necessary to

audio dramas as they work only in the auditory medium. Dave Arnold, executive producer for "Adventures in Odyssey" describes post production as "the process of adding sound effects to the recorded dialogue [...] it's basically adding sound to bring the scene alive" (Arnold). Professionals call sounds from sound effects libraries "canned" sounds (Peachy). It is usually harder to find historical sound effects in the sound effects libraries, so sound designers will record their own effects, combine several canned sound effects, or combine their own effects with canned sound effects found in various sound effects libraries. However, "If it's on a library, nine times out of ten we'll use that" (Arnold). Sound designers also need to make sure that the sounds all sound uniform; they cannot have one sound that sounds like it is from the 1960s and one from the 2020s if they are both meant to be set in the same decade (Peachy). Often a sound designer will take sounds of things that resemble the effect that the sound designer wants the listener to hear. When it comes down to it, choosing canned sound effects or custom sound effects depends on the tools, skill, library, and script that one possesses (Arnold).

When custom sounds are needed, the sound designers need some creativity. For example, Todd Busteed shared that when creating the arrow sound effects for *The Legends of Robin Hood* audio drama, real wooden bows and arrows did not quite sound good enough; adding some creaking wood sound effects helped to solidify the mental image of an arrow flying by (Sutter). Corn starch is also often used for snow sound effects and foley, but sometimes the real thing is needed. Back when sound effects libraries had yet to be built up, Dave Arnold came across a situation where he needed skiing and snow sound effects. Skiing sound effects could not be found in any of his sound effects libraries, so he had to record his own. Unfortunately, he was situated in warm California. To get the skiing sounds, Dave used a cheese grater and some ice to grate his own snow. When he had enough grated ice, he brought it into the foley studio and covered the floor with it. He borrowed some skis and

recorded all the skiing sounds needed for the episode. One step in the process of creating an audio drama, custom sound effects, are only created if the sound designers cannot find the sound that they need, or if the scene requires highly customized sounds.

Audio drama's creation process starts with the creation of a script, continues to the recording and directing of the actors, and finishes with choosing sound effects and performing post production. Though there are a few major differences between writing for audio and writing for video or for a book, the common denominator between all storytelling mediums is simply a good story. Writing for audio drama comes with its differences and challenges, allowing the writer no narration and requiring the writer to incorporate all necessary information in the dialogue and through the use of sound effects. Excellent direction helps the actors convey what the writer of the script wanted to come through. Recording is the next step of the process of creating an audio drama, and often custom foley needs to be recorded as well as the actors' dialogue. Post production comes in second, after writing, for the longest part of the production of an audio drama. It is broken into three main sections; first, the best takes of the dialogue are lined up for proper pacing; next, effects are applied on the voice tracks and all other sounds, such as sound effects, foley, and music, are added; lastly, the fine edit takes care to make sure that any mistakes from previous processes are fixed, and the radio drama is shortened to fit the broadcast length. Audio drama can be an extremely powerful medium that can be used to tell stories in a much better way than any other current medium can. When combined and done well by passionate creators, using the listener's imagination along with the writer's imagination to mesh together the perfect platform from which to tell a story, all of these processes lead to the production of a superb audio drama that can bring enjoyment to the public.

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