Radio Theatre
for the Classroom

by Meredith Ludwig

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There is a moment of great concentration after the words “Quiet on the set” have been spoken. For me, there is nothing like the intensity and the humor we all shared as our creations, our plays, come into the ether.
**SOME KIND OF MAGIC**

I was living in Los Angeles and a friend of mine, Patrick Tovatt, started to produce a series of original radio plays at KPFK FM. I had auditioned for a part, but when the cast list was posted the words “sound effects” were next to my name. My first assignment was to produce the sound of pigeons taking flight for a play by Barry Corbin. I was at a loss as to what to do for bird wings but someone suggested flapping the legs of our blue jeans. That’s what we did, and the pigeons flew. Some kind of magic happens when sounds, words and the mind mingle to create an image.

Radio theatre’s golden years ended with television. For the first time, the audience could see the story and were no longer required to work the imagination. Generations of children have grown up with a medium that supplies everything. By introducing radio theatre into the classroom, auditory as well as imagining skills are sharpened.

This manual will provide you with enough information to lead your class in producing one of the scripts from this book and continuing on to create original short works on cassette. Through the excitement this workshop generates, students participate in a creative process which takes them from the inception of a story idea to an actual product, while being exposed to scripting, multiple drafts, vocalization and sound design.

By using *Radio Theatre for the Classroom*, you and your students will share an audio adventure that will be remembered for years to come.
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ACTIVITIES

1. Discuss the early days of radio and play a classic like *Sorry Wrong Number* or one of *The Shadow* series that are readily available.
2. Suggest when they watch television at home that they close their eyes and listen. Have them describe what that experience is like.
3. Ask if any of the students can imitate effects like sirens, cars, airplanes, lawnmowers, dogs and baby cries. Tape on a cassette recorder and play back.
4. Build a scene around the student sounds. Record the improvisation and play back.
5. If students are journaling, have them write down the happiest sound they know and the saddest sound. Explain why those sounds bring up those emotions.
6. Have them list the first sound they hear in the morning and the last sound at night. Discuss how sounds give us information.
7. Write about the sound they would miss most if they lost their hearing.
8. Create a thunderstorm in the classroom. Make the thunder balloon. (See page 2). Choose a student to operate the thunder. Holding the balloon by the knot with thumb and first finger, spread the other fingers for a good grip and shake. Have the other students imitate the wind by blowing lightly through rounded mouths, snapping fingers for the light rain drops and slapping hands on legs for a hard rain fall. The teacher will have to direct the piece starting with the wind, then a bit of thunder, some light rain, more thunder, harder rain and on until you have a full storm. Have the storm move off, by returning to the gentle rain, and distant thunder, ending with just a few snaps for drops. Record the storm. Before playback, have the students close their eyes and imagine they're standing in front of an open window. Play the tape.
9. Discuss a story line using the thunderstorm. Add actors to the storm and other sounds like birds chirping before and after the rain, dogs barking, a siren in the distance.
10. Look around the classroom and locate as many sound effects as you can such as the door, textbooks, jacket zippers, chalk on the chalkboard.
A WORD ABOUT RECORDING EQUIPMENT

Don't let the lack of good equipment discourage you. I started this workshop years ago using a boom box that had external built-in microphones. Of course if you have nice equipment, all the better. I have found the Realistic PZM Microphone (Cat. No. 33-1090B) mounted on a mic stand makes for excellent workshop recordings. A plug adapter may be necessary depending on the type of recorder you are using. The PZM sells for around fifty dollars and is available at Radio Shack.

THINKING IN SOUND

Think of a radio play as a soundscape. We are painting a picture with sound and word. As with color, it is the mixing and the intensity that determines the outcome. Without visuals available, the imagination is very forgiving. BBs in a balloon become thunder and snapping fingers, raindrops. You will no doubt discover some "virtuosos" among your ranks. Many students have mastered the sounds of dogs, sirens, lawn mowers, crickets, airplanes and baby cries. Don't overlook the talent pool.

SOUND EFFECTS TO MAKE OR FIND

Thunder balloon: Twelve-inch helium-quality balloon with fifteen to twenty BBs inside, inflate. Used for thunder, explosions, and blast-offs. Try a swirling motion for hovering spacecraft or a skating rink.

Cornstarch box: Shake the box for the sound of footsteps.

Cellophane and bubble wrap: Wrapper off the cassette you record on. Slow handling is a crackling fire, fast is breakfast cooking, smell that bacon!

Gravel box: A heavy duty, low-cut cardboard box, or kitty litter tray with a two-inch layer of kitty litter or gravel. Take two fingers or two shoes and walk in the gravel for outdoor footsteps.

Newspaper trees: Take three sheets of newspaper, cut one-inch strips from bottom to center, roll up and tape handle. Also known as a pom-pom. Crunch with hands to make footsteps through leaves and grass, wind blowing through trees. As the crispness wears off, the sound gets better.
Coconut shells: Put a hole through one of the “eyes” and drain the coconut. Saw in two (cut across, not end to end). A difficult task, you’ll need a vice grip or a friendly meat cutter at the grocery store. Pick out the coconut meat and enjoy. Used for horses hooves, alien footsteps, the whack of a baseball bat ...

Key chimes: Gather about twenty old keys (hardware stores will give you rejects or charge maybe a penny each) and string them with fishing line to a stick. Be sure you hang them so they touch each other when you move it. Lovely sound for dreams and a musical accent.

Water bottle: Any liter pop or water bottle, a third full. Sounds like lapping waters up against a boat or the shore, footsteps through a puddle, splashing in a tub. Many together can make the ocean waves.

Jar lids: Baby food jar lids have a safety button that pops. The frogs are chirping now or it could be a light switch.

Quaker shaker: Round Quaker Oats box with a couple handfuls of dried garbanzo beans inside. Make the sound of a train chugging down the track. Start slow, shaking the beans back and forth, then pick up speed and away you go.

Humming bees: A great insect sound for a small investment. Rubber band vibrations causes the buzzing. Big hit. Order from Anyone Can Whistle, 1-800-435-8863. $1.50

Tone tube: Plastic tube you swing over your head. Popular awhile back. Plastic wiring conduit will make the same lovely whirring noise of tornadoes and approaching aliens. About three feet long, 1½” diameter.

Animal noise boxes: Turn them upside down, then right side up and they make a delightful sound. Birds and cows are particularly good. Sometimes nature stores carry them. $3.50

Train whistle: Available at most truck stops and souvenir shops. $4.00
Music

Music is usually the last thing students attend to when producing a script but it is a very important tool and its use should be encouraged. Replay a segment of one of the classic shows such as The Shadow and ask the students to listen for the music. Have them also listen for music in the television shows they watch. Ask them why they think it’s in every show and then share with them these reasons.

1. Music is used as an introduction, to let the audience know that something is about to happen.
2. Music can set the mood of the piece preparing the listeners for the type of story they are about to hear.
3. Music can be used to show that time has passed or a change in location has occurred. We call that a transition. A change has taken place. The imagination is very forgiving and it will make great leaps if you give it a little music.
4. Music makes a nice ending, like a bow on a package.

Encourage any of your students who play instruments to bring them and find ways to work their talents into the scripts.

Four Plays

for classroom use

1. The Best Show of All
2. The Pretzel Woman
3. Reading with Alex
4. Moving the Circle
5. Rain

Director’s notes included
THE BEST SHOW OF ALL

(Music: Keyboard)

ANNOUNCER: The Best Show of All, performed by

__________’s _______ period class.

(Sound: Coffee cup hitting saucer)

JENNY: Grampa, me and Billy want to watch TV. Our
favorite show’s on.

GRAMPA: Not tonight. I don’t want to hear any of that
racket.

BILLY: But Grampa, Mom always lets us watch TV.

GRAMPA: I’m not your mother. Find something else to do.

JENNY: We don’t know what else to do.

GRAMPA: When I was your age we didn’t even have
television.

BILLY: How boring.

GRAMPA: Far from it. We had radio.

JENNY: We have radio. It’s no big deal.

GRAMPA: Well, it used to be. When that was all people had,
it was a real big deal.

BILLY: How come?

GRAMPA: Because, there were stories on the radio, like
Superman and ...

JENNY: Superman’s on TV.

GRAMPA: But he started out on radio. Here, listen.

(Sound: Cellophane wrapper)

BILLY: That’s a candy wrapper.

GRAMPA: Close your eyes. Now listen.

(Sound: Cellophane)

JENNY: It sounds like fire.

GRAMPA: Come upstairs. I’ve got a few things stored away.

(Music: Keyboard)

(Sound: Open trunk)

BILLY: Wow. This is some neat-looking junk.

JENNY: Are these coconut shells?
DIRECTOR'S NOTES ON THE PRETZEL WOMAN

CAST LIST

ANNOUNCER: Announces title and author.
NURSE: Setting is a nursing home and she works there.
LUCY: Young girl visiting her great aunt for the first time.
BEN: Her brother.
AUNT NADINE: (Pronounced Nay-Deen) An elderly woman,
in her eighties. This is a good chance for one of your students
to try a character voice.

SOUND EFFECTS

Birds: Audubon Bird Call. Some students can do birds very
well.
Spoon and cup: Sounds of other residents having breakfast.
Soft talking: Residents discussing things like the food,
weather, false teeth ...
Chains: A piece of chain jingled around and then dropped into
an empty paint bucket.
Applause: Students clapping.
Singing: Lead several of the better singers in a musical scale.
Mules: Coconut shells clicked together.
Seals, doves, dogs: Students can make an “arf, arf” sound
for seals, “cooing” sound for the doves, and they all know how
to bark.
Elephants: Have some class members stomp their feet.
Radio: Portable radio or boom box.
Thunder: (See page 2.)

The Pretzel Woman was written as an example of how to take
a subject out of history and present it in a theatrical form. It
does have some difficult words, but with a little rehearsal it’s
not too hard. I like this script because most of the students
know nothing about this period in theatre, so they learn
something while they have fun.
THE PRETZEL WOMAN

(Music: Keyboard or other instrument — a tune from the twenties or anything with that feel)

ANNOUNCER: The Pretzel Woman, a play by Meredith Ludwig.

(Sound: Birds, Spoon and cup, soft talking from the class)

NURSE: Your Aunt Nadine had a rough day yesterday, but she’s much calmer today. I know she’ll be glad to see you both. She’s right over here.

LUCY: How’s her memory?

NURSE: It comes and goes. Sometimes it’s very clear and she remembers the most amazing things.

BEN: Is she eating enough?

NURSE: She’s thin, but fairly healthy. Miss Nadine, someone’s here to see you.

AUNT NADINE: Tell them I’ve gone to the Palace Theatre and won’t be back till after my performance.

NURSE: But they’ve come a long way.

NADINE: So, they can wait a little longer.

LUCY: Aunt Nadine, I’m Mary’s daughter, Lucy. This is my brother, Ben.

NADINE: Well, I’ll be a-tripping through the tulips. You’ve come to see my show at the Palace?

BEN: What palace?

NADINE: Well, I’ve got a few minutes before I go on. Sit down. Sit, sit, sit! The Palace opened its doors for the first time in New York City on March 24th, 1913. It was strictly a vaudeville theatre.

BEN: What’s vaudeville?

NADINE: Oh, my poor boy. What has the world done to you? Harry Houdini’s on stage right now. If we listen closely we can hear him escaping from his chains.

(Sound: Chains in bucket, applause)

BEN: (Whispers.) I don’t hear anything.
DIRECTOR’S NOTES ON READING WITH ALEX

CAST LIST

ANNOUNCER: Announces title and author’s name.
MOM: Mom.
SARAH: Temperamental, bored child.
ALEX: Her little brother.
ELLiot: Character from a children’s book.

SOUND EFFECTS

Car Horn: Sometimes found on keyboards. You could use a knock at the door instead, something to let the mom know her friend has arrived. If you do that, add a line like, “Just a minute.”
Door: Use the classroom or closet door, whatever sounds best.
Rattle: BBs in a plastic egg works if you don’t have a real one.
Book: Book.
Slide whistle: This group of sounds takes us into and out of the land of Poopelliot. It can be any combination of things you have, just so we feel like she is falling through space and time.
Splat: Try several things, maybe a book bag dropped flat on the floor.
Birds: Since Poopelliot is a fantasy, you can let the students get a little wild with the birds and other background sounds.
Jar lids: Frog and bug sounds
Cow: Come up with an unusual sound here, too.
Key chimes: (See page 3.)
Thunder: (See page 2.)
Yerbles: (See description in play.)
Water bottle: (See page 3.)
Wind Wand: Not listed under sound effects but available from Anyone Can Whistle. Makes a whirring sound. Can get a similar effect by tying a plastic ruler to a piece of string, like an Australian bull roar. This can be dangerous because you have to get it going really fast to make the sound.
Humming bees: (See page 3.) Students can make a buzzing sound if these things aren’t available.
Tone tube: This group of effects is the same as when you entered Poopelliot.
*Reading With Alex* was written based on the theme of boredom, the idea being to take a problem that some people have and find a way to comment on it within a play. This is also a take-off on a Dr. Seuss story, so the words rhyme: Elliot, Schmelliot, Poopelliot, yerbles, schmerbles and berbles. Have the class practice these silly words together till they can all say them.
READING WITH ALEX

(Music: Chimes)

ANNOUNCER: Reading With Alex, a play by Meredith Edwig.

(Sound: Car horn)

MOM: (Calling) Sarah! Laurie’s here. Come watch your brother.

SARAH: (Calling back but moving closer to mic) Do I have to? It’s so boring.

MOM: Boredom is in your brain, not in the experience. Here’s the phone number and here’s Alex.

ALEX: Goooooo.

SARAH: Thanks, Mom. You sure can ruin a day.


(Sound: Door opens and closes.)

ALEX: Goo goo, Sa sa.

SARAH: Learn to talk, you little rug rat.

(Sound: Rattle)

ALEX: Weed bookie, Sa sa.

SARAH: Ok, bring it over here.

ALEX: Weed bookie.

SARAH: “Elliot Schmelliot goes to lopeilliot?”

ALEX: E-wee-it!!

SARAH: “Elliot Schmelliot was a strange little one. He liked to eat dirt cakes he baked in the sun. This is stupid. Pick another one.

(Sound: Close book)

ALEX: (Crying) E-wee-it! E-wee-it!

SARAH: Ok, ok. Just don’t cry. “Elliot Schmelliot was a strange little one. He liked to eat dirt cakes —

(Sound: Slide whistle, flex-a-tone, tone tube — or any strange sounds you can come up with.)

SARAH: Wow! What’s going on? Alex, grab my hand. Alex! Aleeexx.
DIRECTOR’S NOTES ON MOVING THE CIRCLE

CAST LIST

ANNOUNCER: Announces title and author.
LAUREN: A very unhappy hiker.
JOE: Another hiker who is trying to have a good time.
JANIE: Lauren’s only friend.
SALLY: Another hiker who’s had it with Lauren’s attitude.

SOUND EFFECTS

Birds: Bird call or students.
Bugs: Sometimes you can get a rattle to sound like locust.
Humming bees (page 3)
Footsteps: (See gravel box, page 2.)
Packs: Book bags
Tape: Packing tape folded back on itself and used on a nylon jacket, as if you were picking off lint.
Thunder: (See page 2.)
Wolf: Have several students make those hair-raising howls.
Rain: Try using the finger snapping and leg slapping for a believable effect.
Zipper: Use one off a jacket or a book bag.
Spatula and skillet: The real thing works great.

MUSIC: Any little tune will do. Ask if anyone plays flute or clarinet.

Moving the Circle is a play dealing with tolerance and conflict resolution. The Indians I refer to are the Nootka people, who live on the Northwest coast of Alaska. This play is a little longer than the others, which makes it a nice choice for a live presentation. I wrote it for a Parent/Teacher Organization meeting. Afterwards the students explained the effects they had used and answered questions from the audience.
MOVING THE CIRCLE

(Music: Keyboard)

ANNOUNCER: Moving the Circle, a play by Meredith

(Sound: Birds, bugs, footsteps [newspaper trees])

LAUREN: (Out of breath) I wish someone would have told me

that trail was straight up the side of the mountain.

JOE: You didn’t ask.

LAUREN: Well, I never would have come if I had known how

hard a hike it was going to be.

JANIE: Lauren, can’t you just stop complaining for one

minute and show how beautiful it is from up here?

LAUREN: If I look down I’ll get sick and then you’ll be real

sorry I came.

SALLY: (Under her breath) I already am.

JANIE: Look, there’s a red-tailed hawk.

LAUREN: Who cares. I’ve got a stop. I can’t go another step

with this pack.

SALLY: OK. Let’s take a break.

(Sound: Footsteps stop, pack being removed)

LAUREN: I’m not carrying this thing another step. It

weighs more than anybody else.

JOE: Lauren, we made sure everyone was carrying the same

amount.

LAUREN: My back hurts, my feet are swollen, my ankles

itch. What are those things on my socks?

JANIE: Ticks.

LAUREN: What?

JOE, JANIE, SALLY: Ticks.

LAUREN: Get ’em off! Get ’em off.

JOE: Here, use this. It’s tick tape.

LAUREN: That’s just old packing tape.

JANIE: It works.

(Sound: Tape on jacket)
DIRECTOR’S NOTES ON RAIN

CAST LIST

ANNOUNCER: Can be male or female. Announces title and author of play.
ABBY: A young girl not afraid to be different from the crowd.
BEN: A friend.
CARL: Another friend.
DEENA: A girl with an attitude.
ERICA: Another friend ready to try something new.

SOUND EFFECTS

Bell chorus: Use any combination of chimes or bells. This is just a suggestion. If someone in the class plays flute or clarinet, that would be nice.
Thunder: BBs in balloon (see page 2.)
Rain: If you have enough people, use the finger snapping and thigh slapping. If not, have several students, at least three, rub plastic bags back and forth between their palms.
Keyboard: Car horn, and church bells. Substitute other sounds here if need be.
Footsteps: Use a water bottle, sloshing it with a back and forth motion to sound like someone walking through a puddle. Have the effects person rehearse with the actors. If they start the sloshing away from the mic and then move closer, it will give the impression of footsteps approaching.
Dogs: Several students can make a great dog chorus.
Train: The Quaker Shaker and the train whistle (see page 3).
Birds: Audubon Bird Call.
Bees: The humming bees (page 3) or several students buzzing.
Cow: Optional, adds a nice funny sound on the end.

Rain is a simple play with lots of repetition. As each character is added, they ask the same question and the answers should build with that annoyance. The script addresses peer pressure and being one’s self in the midst of the storm.
RAIN

(Music: Bell chorus)

ANNOUNCER: Rain, a play by Meredith Ludwig.
(Sound: Thunder, rain, Car horn or bicycle horn, dogs bark)

ABBY: I’m not it funny how when it rains everybody runs for
cover? Me, I like to stand in the rain and get all wet.
(Sound: Footsteps)

BEN: Hey, what are you doing?

ABBY: Standing in the rain.

BEN: You’re gonna get wet.

ABBY: I know.

BEN: Here, come and under my umbrella.

ABBY: No, thanks.

(Sound: Siren, dog howl with siren, thunder, footsteps)

CARL: Hey, what’s she doing?

BEN: Standing in the rain.

ABBY: I’m standing in the rain.

CARL: She’s gonna get wet.

BEN: She knows.

ABBY: I know.

BEN: She wants to.

ABBY: I want to.

(Sound: Footsteps)

DEENA: Hey you, it’s raining.

BEN & CARL: She knows.

ABBY: I know.

DEENA: She’s gonna get wet.

BEN & CARL: She is wet.

ABBY: I am wet.

DEENA: Don’t you think that’s stupid?

BEN & CARL: Yeah. We do.

(Sound: Church bells ring three times, train, train whistle,
thunder, footsteps)

ERICA: Hey, what’s going on?
PLAYBACK

After all the scripts are recorded, it's time to turn off the lights, get comfortable and listen. I like to play all the pieces back to back, like a radio show. I encourage students to close their eyes while listening, but I must admit it's also fun to see the reactions to the work.

If some of the pieces are particularly good, you may want to have them played over the intercom system and share them with the rest of the school. I've also had schools make copies of the pieces and make them available to students through the library check-out system.

The scripts can also be performed live in front of an audience. Just make sure you have enough mics available for both actors and sound effects people. Music stands are helpful. Audience members love to watch how the sounds are generated so be sure the effects table is visible. Costumes are not necessary but can add to the fun. Insist on mic checks immediately before the performance. There's nothing much worse than watching a radio show you can't hear.

You may find a local station interested in playing some of the pieces. Pick the strongest plays in terms of plot and production. Approach them with an interview idea, and you just might find yourself on the air.

NOTE: The numerals running vertically down the left margin of each page of dialog are for the convenience of the director. With these, he/she may easily direct attention to a specific passage.