

We offer you. . . Escape!
By Stewart Wright
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Radio has often been called "The Theatre of the Mind." Few series from the Golden Age of Radio rivaled Escape in the ability to combine acting, scripts, music, direction, and sound effects to transport the audience anywhere in the world, or, in some cases, out of this world, and place them in the middle of impossible situations. What other anthology series could have listeners cornered by a deadly Bushmaster snake on a cruise ship in Tropical waters on one show, "A Shipment of Mute Fate" and the next week, in "Action" have them hanging by their fingertips on the sheer face of an ice cliff in the Alps?

Them Schedule Changes

Escape was the wandering vagabond of CBS series during its seven-year, 228 episode run. The series aired on every day of the week and in a total of ten different time slots. It is little wonder that, with all these scheduling changes, that Escape had trouble attracting sponsors, developing strong ratings, and a loyal audience. During its entire run, the series only had a single significant period of sponsorship, four months in 1950 by the Richfield Oil Corporation.

Sunday was the most common day of airing with 103 Escape episodes being broadcast on that day; Saturday and Wednesday were the next most common broadcast days with 27 episodes each. Escape generally aired relatively late in the evening with 183 episodes starting at 9:00 PM or later. (All times used in this article are Eastern Time Zone.)

Quite frequently, runs of Escape were short. Several times the series was a Summer replacement. There were long gaps, ranging from a few months to one of over a year between the various portions of the series' run. Only once did Escape remain on the air for an entire year in the same time slot: Sundays at 9:30 PM Eastern Time from 10/12/1952 to 10/04/1953.

The Opening and . . . The Voice

Escape hooked the audience from its unique opening, which had gradually evolved over time into an anonymous Voice (which became known as The Voice of Escape) that was soothing, but at the same time somehow menacing and dangerous that asked some seemingly innocuous questions:

"Tired of the everyday routine?

Ever dream of a life of romantic adventure?

Want to get away from it all?"

Followed by the announcer dramatically stating:

"We offer you. . . Escape!Escape!. . . designed to free you from the four walls of Today for a half hour of High Adventure."

The Voice then returned to pull the listener into that night's episode such as in the 1953 production of "Wild Jack Rhett":

"You are standing in a moonlit street of a Western cow town. . . alone and friendless. While moving slowly down on You. . . their horses crowding every exit, is a band of killers. . . each one of whom has been paid to shoot You dead."

When combined with the music, it made for an opening which was most memorable.

While The Voice of Escape was performed by many actors, it was most frequently and memorably done by two actors: William Conrad and Paul Frees. Their voices seem to add just the right qualities of menace, danger, and adventure.

The Stories

Escape featured a superb mix of adaptations of novels and short stories and original scripts. The adaptations were done by some of radio's finest writers. Later, some of these adaptors and other writers would pen original stories for the series.

The initial run of the series, 07/07/1947 - 08/18/1947, featured adaptations of classic and contemporary fiction that set the standard for quality scripts that would be a hallmark of Escape. Four of the episodes were Les Crutchfield adaptations of classic stories by: Rudyard Kipling – "The Man Who Would Be King", Joseph Conrad – "Typhoon", Robert Louis Stevenson – "Sire de Maletroit's Door", and Arthur Conan Doyle – "The Ring of Thoth".

The other three episodes were adaptations of more recent fiction: "Operation Fleur De Lys" by Stewart Alsop & Thomas Bradon (adapted by William N. Robson), "The Diamond As Big As The Ritz" by F. Scott Fitzgerald (adapted by Les Crutchfield), and "The Fourth Man" by John Russell (adapted by Irving Ravetch.)

Through the end of 1949 the stories aired on Escape were almost exclusively adaptations of classic and contemporary fiction. Adaptations would remain a staple during the series' entire run. Three radio classic adaptations had their first airings on the series: "Leiningen Versus the Ants", "A Shipment of Mute Fate", and "Three Skeleton Key" would terrify and captivate audiences and would be reprised on Escape and other series. Adaptations of many genres of literature were aired on Escape.

Here are just a few examples:

SCIENCE FICTION – "The Time Machine", "Mars Is Heaven" and "The Outer Limit";
HORROR – "The Fall of the House of Usher", "Ancient Sorceries", and "Snake Doctor";
WESTERN – "Command" and "Wild Jack Rhett";
ESPIONAGE – "The Great Impersonation" and "Confidential Agent";
CRIME – "When the Man Comes, Follow Him" and "Crossing Paris".

Starting in 1950, original radio plays began to air on Escape and they too would run a wide range of genres. Some of these original plays were "The Man from Tomorrow" by Irving Reis, "Sundown" by Joel Murcott, "The Sure Thing" by John and Gwen Bagni, "North of Polaris" by Charles Smith, "Train from Oebisfelde" by Ross Murray, "Violent Night" by Les Crutchfield, "Pressure" by Richard Chandlee, and "The Island" by Millard Kaufman. Several of these original radio plays would be reproduced on other series.

Script Re-Use

During its network run, 28 scripts were reused on Escape. Each reuse was a new production and not simply a repeat broadcast of earlier aired episodes. These new productions usually had some rewritten dialog and included new cast and crew members. These initial script uses and subsequent reuses accounted for a total of 64 episodes.

One script, "A Shipment of Mute Fate", was used four times on the series with a different actor playing the lead role in each production: Jack Webb (10/15/1947), Harry Bartell (3/28/1948), John Lund (3/13/1949), and David Ellis (7/7/1950.)

Six scripts were used three times: "The Country of the Blind", "Evening Primrose", "The Fourth Man", "Leiningen Versus the Ants", "Three Skeleton Key", and "The Diamond As Big As The Ritz". The productions of the latter script was unusual in that the lead role of John Unger was played by brothers: Jack Edwards on 7/21/1947 and Sam Edwards on 8/29/1948 and 3/27/1949.

The quality of the scripts used on Escape was confirmed by the later reuse of many of them on other series. Twenty-nine Escape scripts were subsequently produced on Suspense. The following are a few examples. Classic Escape scripts "A Shipment of Mute Fate", "Three Skeleton Key", "Country of the Blind", and "Leiningen Versus The Ants" were later used on that series. Director William N. Robson adapted an Ambrose Bierce short story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", for Escape in 1947 and later reused the adaptation three times while he served as the director of Suspense.

Actor John Dehner penned two scripts: "The Man With The Steel Teeth" and "Lily and the Colonel", that were initially produced on Escape by director Antony Ellis and later reused by Ellis when he directed Suspense. Script alterations were made in the series openings and closings, and dialog, cast and crew changes were made.

The Herb Purdum script "Macao" was first produced on Escape on 07/18/1951 and approximately a year later was produced on Romance as "The Red Angel". For the Romance production, Purdum made significant changes to the final act.

Antony Ellis also reused some Escape scripts on the various series he directed. When he was the director of Suspense, he reused some scripts from the time period when he wrote for and directed Escape: "The Game", "A Study In Wax", and "Classified Secret". Ellis also wrote "The Cave" which was used on at least three series: first Escape, then Suspense, and finally Romance.

When "The Cave" was produced on the latter two series, Ellis was also the series director.

Missing Episodes: Real and Imagined

All but a handful of Escape episodes are in circulation. Those episodes that are not in circulation are "The Run of the Yellow Mail", "The Primitive", "The Blue Wall", "The Big Sponge", "Transport to Terror", "Pagosa", "Nightmare In The Sun", "Dangerous Man", "The Blue Hotel", and "One-Eighth Apache".

There were several stories that were announced on Escape as upcoming episodes, but were never broadcast. Most of these shows had proceeded in the production process as far as a draft script, however there is no indication that any of these shows were ever cast, rehearsed, or recorded. These shows are: "The Haunted Man", "The Canterville Ghost", "Grand Canyon Suite", and "Mute Witness".

And now. . . , we offer you . . . new information about an episode that never was part of Escape. Often reputed to be a lost Escape episode, "Your Grandfather's Necktie", is commonly listed in Escape logs as a special broadcast that either aired on 08/26/1950 or 08/31/1950. Research in 2008 by the article author has determined that "Your Grandfather's Necktie" was not an Escape episode, but was actually an episode of the series Stars Over

Hollywood which aired on August 26, 1950 and starred Alan Young. This information was verified by consulting the original Escape scripts, director Norman Macdonnell's personal papers, and period Radio Programs Listing Sections from the New York Times and several other newspapers.

The Players

While Escape did not frequently feature big-name stars, the series did possess an outstanding "company" of regular performers. Its "company" included many of the finest West Coast vocal talent such as Parley Baer, Joan Banks, Michael Ann Barrett, Tony Barrett, Edgar Barrier, Harry Bartell, Jeanne Bates, Herb Butterfield, Lillian Buyeff, William Conrad, Hans Conried, Jeff Corey, Ted de Corsia, Don Diamond, Lawrence Dobkin, Paul Dubov, Sam Edwards, Georgia Ellis, Paul Frees, Will Geer, Virginia Gregg, Wilms Herbert, Ramsey Hill, Vivi Janiss, Bill Johnstone, Joseph Kearns, Berry Kroeger, Lou Krugman, Jack Kruschen, Peter Leeds, Frank Lovejoy, Charles Lung, Jeanette Nolan, Jay Novello, Vic Perrin, Barney Phillips, Luis Van Rooten, Jack Webb, Peggy Webber, Ben Wright, and Barton Yarborough.

Over the years I have been fortunate to hear many actors talk about the Golden Age of Radio and their favorite series. Several of those actors mentioned Escape as one of the series on which they most enjoyed performing.

Perhaps Harry Bartell best summed up how actors felt about the series. In a 1998 interview Harry shared his feelings with me about Escape, "The scripts were wonderful, many of them were based on Classics that stood the test of time. They offered me, as an actor, parts that I never would have gotten on any other program. They were exciting, fun to do and very rewarding from a performance standpoint."

Directors

For most of its run, Escape was directed by three of Hollywood's finest: William N. Robson, Norman Macdonnell, and Antony Ellis. Robson was a veteran director with over ten years experience. For Macdonnell, a recently returned World War II veteran, Escape was his chance to move from acting to directing. Ellis, an experienced actor and writer/adaptor, got his first extensive experience in direction on Escape.

Robson was one of the most honored directors during Radio's Golden Age. He was Escape's initial director through late March, 1948. In October, 1949, Robson returned to direct Escape through mid-August of 1950. His other directorial credits include Calling All Cars, The Columbia Workshop, The Man Behind The Gun, Doorway To Life, Suspense, Romance, and The CBS Radio Workshop.

Norman Macdonnell got his first directing experience on Escape. Early in Escape's run, he was the assistant director to producer/director William Robson. In the beginning of 1948, Robson was so busy with other CBS series that he turned over the direction of Escape's broadcasts for the West Coast audience to Macdonnell. By late March, 1948, Macdonnell became the director and producer of the series and continued in those positions until late August of 1949. Macdonnell returned to resume directing Escape for 16 episodes in 1950, 12 episodes in 1951, 16 episodes in 1952, 7 episodes in 1953, and 14 episodes in 1954.

Macdonnell became one of the busiest CBS radio directors during the last 15 years of the Golden Age of Radio. His credits include The Adventures of Philip Marlowe, Fort Laramie, Gunsmoke, Have Gun - Will Travel, Honest Harold, Rogers of the Gazette, Romance, and Suspense.

Antony Ellis had started in Hollywood as an actor and writer/adaptor. Counted in his extensive writing/adapting experience are 27 episodes of Escape; including 14 episodes while he also directed the series.

Ellis got his directing start on the series Pursuit. He directed most of the Escape episodes from December, 1952 through mid-October, 1953 and later also directed Romance, Suspense, The CBS Radio Workshop, and Frontier Gentleman.

1954: The End Of The Line

During 1954, its last year on the air, 24 episodes of Escape were broadcast. Again, there were changes in broadcast nights and time slots. Still the script, music, sound effects and acting quality was there and several memorable episodes were produced and aired.

The first twelve of episodes were aired on Thursday nights; six from mid-March to mid-April at 10 PM, a single episode in May, and the remaining five episodes on consecutive Thursday nights at 9:30 PM from June 3rd through July 1st. Norman Macdonnell was again the director. Included in this group of shows were three written by actors who regularly performed on Escape: "Affair at Mandrake" by Ben Wright, "Benscelina and the Fisherman" by John Dehner, and "Blood Waters" by Tony Barrett.

On July 10, 1954, Escape made its final move to Saturdays to the 8:00 PM slot. Again it was a Summer replacement series. The final run started with a fine adaptation of the Daphne du Maurier story, "The Birds". After the first two episodes, Norman Macdonnell turned over the directorial reins to the team of David Friedkin and Morton Fine. (The duo also wrote two of the final twelve episodes: "Night of the Guns" and "Carnival In Vienna".) An early September episode, "The Boiling Sea", placed the listener in a most improbable spot: on a ship in the

Philippines that was being surrounded by a rapidly rising undersea volcano. The magic of Escape was still potent.

As the reading of the credits for the final episode, "The Heart of Kali", on September 25th was completed and announcer George Walsh said "Next week," the audience was not treated to the usual music bridge used to precede the teaser for the next week's episode of Escape. Instead, the theme of the series that Escape had filled in for those last twelve weeks rose in volume and became recognizable. It was the theme from Gunsmoke. Walsh turned the microphone over to Gunsmoke star and frequent Escape Voice and performer William Conrad who told the audience, "Today, marks the last of the current series of Escape programs. . . ." Conrad then told the audience that Gunsmoke would replace Escape.

With this announcement, one of the finest anthology series in Radio history ended. However, since so many Escape episodes have survived, we and future generations still can be transported to exotic locales for

". . . a half-hour of High Adventure . . ."

and be placed in situations

"from which there is . . . no Escape!"

Postscript: One Fan's Experience

On June 30, 2001, I was fortunate to attend a Radio Enthusiasts of Puget Sound (REPS) recreation of "Three Skeleton Key." The audience included a large number of youngsters who had just attended an Adventures in Odyssey re-creation. Most of these pre-teenagers and their parents had never heard of Escape, let alone the classic tale about "The Rats." Here is the review I wrote for REPS Newsletter, the Air Check:

"Take a classic story and superlative acting. Add great sound effects and music. Mix with skillful direction and engineering. Magic happens! The power of "The Theater of the Mind" was never more evident than during the Showcase IX re-creation of the radio classic 'Three Skeleton Key.' In a REPS survey taken last year, this particular Escape episode was listed as one of 'Top Radio Treasures of All Time.'

This year, Showcase attendees not only had the opportunity to see and hear this classic tale, about the occupants of a lighthouse being attacked by hoards of ravenous rats, but to see it performed by two of the three actors who appeared in the original Escape airing on November 15, 1949.

Harry Bartell and Elliott Reid brought down the house with tour de force performances of their original roles, Auguste and Jean respectively. Herb Ellis masterfully played the head lighthouse keeper, Louis, and also doubled as the announcer. REPS member Christopher Conrad, son of actor William Conrad, who originated the role of Louis, adeptly performed the Voice of Escape. The drama was heightened by the compelling music played by Randy McMillan and fantastic sound effects created by Ray Erlenborn, Cheryl Jacobs, and Bruce Pair. Deftly orchestrating this fine performance was director Frank Buxton. An incredible job by all!

The audience responded with a prolonged and well-deserved standing ovation. Somehow, the performers had transported them back in time over 50 years into a broadcast studio during the Golden Age of Radio. Radio drama doesn't get any better than this!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stewart Wright is an vintage radio researcher and historian in Colorado. He has written extensively on many Old-Time Radio and Contemporary Radio series. He has also researched and compiled several series broadcast logs that can be found at:

<http://www.old-time.com/otrlogs2/index.html>
