

RadioDoc Review

Volume 7 • Issue 1 • 2022

2022-01-03

Radio Drama Takeover 1: Hedda Gabler

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Abstract

British radio drama since the creation of the BBC in 1922 has often been in the form of adapted stage plays. This has led to disagreements about whether the non-visual representation of dramas written for the theatre produces satisfactory results. This article explores this question using Ibsen's realist drama, *Hedda Gabler*. It is argued that the audio version is successful and enables the listener to 'overhear' whispered conversations and share Hedda's domestic claustrophobia.

Keywords

Adaptation, theatre, Ibsen, Hedda Gabler, BBC, Donald McWhinnie

Recommended Citation

Chignell, H., (2022) "Radio Drama Takeover 1: Hedda Gabler", *RadioDoc Review* 7(1).

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Throughout the long history of British radio drama, many of the most successful productions have been adaptations from the stage; this tradition started with scenes from Shakespeare's plays in 1923 to repeated adaptations of the theatrical canon on the post-war BBC, in what was called 'the national theatre of the air', which has continued into more recent adaptations of both classic and contemporary theatre. BBC producers, most notably Val Gielgud, the Head of Drama from 1928 until 1963, argued that some dramatists wrote in such a way that their plays adapted particularly well for radio. If a stage play's strength was largely linguistic rather than visual, as in Shakespeare, then their work would succeed on radio (or so it was argued). Some of the plays by the great Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, have this 'radiogenic' quality and the popularity of Ibsen's work for adaptation has recently been made more evident using the BBC's Programme Index (previously the Genome), which shows all radio programmes on a searchable database. We can just key in Ibsen's name to see how frequently his plays were broadcast. The first Ibsen play for radio was *Emperor and Galilean* broadcast in July 1924, and it was followed by regular broadcasts of *Peer Gynt*, *The Master Builder*, *The Wild Duck* and other Ibsen dramas. In the last 20 years, the Programme Index has revealed productions of a remarkable number of Ibsen's plays: *The Master Builder*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, *Rosmersholm*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Wild Duck* and *The Pretenders*. Val Gielgud's claim that Ibsen's plays were "outstandingly adaptable to the radio medium" (Gielgud, 1965, p. 62) has clearly become the consensus at the BBC.

It is worth considering here how the predominantly visual medium of the theatre can possibly work on the non-visual medium of radio. After all, when people go to the theatre, they say they go to 'see a play', so surely to see nothing is a poor substitute. This was in fact the view of one of the most important British radio drama producers, Donald McWhinnie, famous for his productions of plays written specifically for radio by Samuel Beckett, Giles Cooper and Harold Pinter. McWhinnie was an advocate of the play written for radio and saw most adaptations from the stage as poor alternatives to the real thing. In order to understand how a radio adaptation of something written for the stage can succeed on radio, we can look at the example of Ibsen's realist masterpiece, *Hedda Gabler*. This has become one of the most popular of Ibsen's plays; his biographer, Michael Meyer, claims that it is his 'most universally admired play' (Meyer, 1967 p.673). On the London stage there were four different productions during the 1970s and a further four in the 1980s. More recent productions in London featured Sheridan Smith as Hedda in 2012 and Ruth Wilson in the same role in 2016.

The play is about the young wife, Hedda, trapped in a loveless marriage to George Tesman, a dull academic. The couple have recently returned from their honeymoon and are visited in their new house by a variety of different characters including the devious and dangerous Judge Brack and by a former lover of Hedda's, the wild and brilliant Eilert Lövborg. Tesman sees Lövborg as an academic rival and feels threatened by his latest book. Meanwhile,

Hedda is jealous of an old school friend, Thea, who has left her husband to pursue Lövborg. The play ends with the death of Lövborg, encouraged by Hedda herself and her own suicide.

The great popularity of the play and the regularity of new productions and adaptations is mainly due to the character of Hedda Gabler herself. This is a great tragic role and no wonder that leading actors are keen to perform it. Hedda lives in horror of the banal every day and feels “besmirched by the petty, lower-class environment in which she finds herself” (Mori, 2006, p. 316). Her husband is a wonderfully dull and pedantic character who lives for libraries and archives and the status of university professor, and every time Hedda sees him she is reminded of her own ordinary and empty life. In contrast to this everyday experience, she dreams of beauty and heroism. As Toril Mori explains, while she despises domestic femininity, she “identifies with heroic masculinity” and “behaves like a man” (p. 317). It is easy to see how Ibsen’s representation of the entrapped, 19th century bourgeois wife, scornfully rejecting a domestic feminine role, resonates with contemporary feminism. As a very early modernist and realist, Ibsen described the fate of the Norwegian woman in terms that resonate today; her character and her sense of entrapment are fully expressed in the words that she speaks and the tone of her voice (at times irritated, angry, ironic, conspiratorial and so on), all of which is communicated with particular dramatic effect on radio.

Another reason why *Hedda Gabler* is an important example of radio drama is the simple, practical matter of accessibility. Can we actually listen to it? In the UK, radio drama students and researchers are greatly restricted by poor access to old dramas. This is true of all of Ibsen’s plays produced by the BBC. However, in a surprising recent move, with almost no supporting publicity, BBC Studios produced a CD box set of ‘nine full-cast BBC radio dramatisations’ of some of Ibsen’s most popular plays. This included *Hedda Gabler*, broadcast on 18 October 1998, translated and adapted by Helen Cooper and produced by Eoin O’Callaghan. The play starred the celebrated English actor, Harriet Walter, as well as another star, Corin Redgrave, as Judge Brack. Originally this was a stage production and a reviewer praised Walter’s performance as a ‘frightening portrait of a woman torn between convention and despair’ (*The Independent*, 10 August 1996). Two years later, the play was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 with the same cast, and this is the recording that is now available commercially.

The central question for anyone engaged in the study of adapted radio drama is whether the non-visual, radio version of the play succeeds both artistically and as a way of representing Ibsen’s vision. Is the suffocating domestic interior of Hedda’s everyday existence successfully communicated by sound alone? In fact, could it be argued that given the heavy reliance on voice and the use of language (of words often whispered secretly), that *Hedda Gabler* is better on radio and is a more intense representation of Hedda’s world than on the stage? There are various reasons why the play seems to work so well on radio. The play is set entirely in the main reception room in the Tesmans’ house. This is not a play with changes of scene that might confuse the listener or other visual spectacle. The dialogue is also particularly well suited to radio. Ibsen is widely acknowledged as the great ‘realist’ playwright and the play consists of short exchanges between the characters of only a sentence or two. There are no long speeches typical of less realist drama and what we hear has the quality of overheard conversation. At one point in the play, Judge Brack and Tesman are talking about, among other

things, the party for the men that evening at Brack's house. Hedda, meanwhile, is having a hushed conversation with Lövborg while showing him some photographs of her recent holiday:

Hedda: Would you like to see some photographs Mr Lövborg? Tesman and I stayed in the Tyrol on our way home.

Sound of Tesman and Brank chuckling

Hedda: These mountains are part of the Ortler group. You see, Tesman has written the name underneath 'The Ortler group ... near Meran'. *Ironic emphasis*

Lövborg: *breathlessly, sotto voce Hedda* Gabler! Hedda Gabler!

Hedda: *sotto voce* That used to be my name before (*long pause*) we knew each other.

(BBC Radio 3, 18 October 1998).

The hushed breathlessness of this conversation against the background of the men's chuckling is particularly effective on radio; we have a real sense of overhearing secrets not available to other characters on the stage.

Another part of the success of the play is the modern adaptation of Ibsen's original script. Helen Cooper's adaptation contains interesting variations from the original Gosse and Archer translation of 1891. So, in Act One, Brack tells Lövborg "you are booked for my bachelor's party this evening". Cooper's script reads:

Judge Brack: ...but I've already booked you for my soiree.

Hedda: his all male (*emphasis*) soiree.

Hedda's contempt for the all-male party is made much more obvious in the later version. Throughout the radio play, the script sounds much more contemporary than the original translation. In the more recent translation, Hedda describes her husband as 'an obsessive' rather than as a 'specialist' in the original translation. In the earlier translation, the relationship between Hedda, Teasman and Brack is referred to as a 'triangular relationship' but in Cooper's adaptation this becomes a far more suggestive 'menage a trois'.

Dramas that are written specifically for radio or podcast owe part of their success to the fact that the writer acknowledges the invisibility of the medium for which they are writing. But, as I hope this article has explained, plays that are written for the stage can also be surprisingly successful when adapted for radio. Even one of the great plays of early realism, written before the invention of radio, can be extremely effective without staging and in fact can be more powerful as drama without the paraphernalia of staging.

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