

GATHER 'ROUND THE RADIO
E-NEWSLETTER FOR THE METROPOLITAN
WASHINGTON OLD-TIME RADIO CLUB
THE GRTR STUDIO EDITION



THE SOUND PATTERNS ISSUE

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THE SET-UP

Hello fine listeners, and welcome once again to the mythical confines of the GRTR Studio where we broadcast information and inspiration about radio, music, nostalgia, personality, books, and beyond. Terry Gross continues to be our inspiration. Listen to her “Fresh Air” radio show, live or podcast; check your NPR listings for a station where you can tune in.

It's a beautiful day here in central Pennsylvania, and word may be getting around that I have recently moved to a retirement community on the outskirts of the storied town of Reading. It's comfortable and situated on a landscaped hillside near a creek. I have good neighbors in all three buildings, an attentive and friendly staff, and we all gather for activities and a noisy dining hall experience.

Our tinpot studio is still operational; they've given us space in the old red barn just across the road from the creek. Chuck and Joanie and I have spent precious hours setting up our vintage equipment and table space; and we fashioned a nice Mud Room in a corner that has wide slat walls and rough-hewn beams overhead. Electric is good and our broadcast reach is as good as ever. Write in, if you please, and let us know how the reception is. The dusty old courier pouch is looking a bit forlorn of late.

ON THE AIR

Joanie is watching the sweep of the wall clock; she signals network feed. We three finish up our coffee and carrot cake and head for the studio. Chuck is piping in instrumental music composed by a local musician. It is music inspired by Hawk Mountain up near Kutztown, to celebrate the migration of raptors that catch the winds of mountain and valley, drawing crowds of admirers.

Hello everyone, and welcome to the broadcast! We are in our new digs, quite near the high flowing Tulpehocken Creek. We've got some good music today as we discuss the works of British playwright Tom Stoppard and his love of radio, in particular his admiration for sound effects. In that regard we will give a nod to the SFX team that Mark and Marsha Bush put together over the years.

We will look at two radio plays of Tom Stoppard. "Artist Descending a Staircase" (1972), which was rebroadcast by the BBC in 2016, accompanied by a 7-minute interview with the playwright. And in 2013, Stoppard collaborated with Roger Waters of the expansive rock group Pink Floyd to produce the script "Darkside," where the group's music from their 1973 album "Darkside of the Moon" is integral to the doomsday plot of planet Earth in peril.

In the interview, Stoppard is enthusiastic to the point of telling this anecdote, in effect: On the day in 2016 that "Artist Descending" was scheduled to air, the studio sent a messenger to his door with a CD of the finished program. He put the CD aside, he said, because he planned to tune in later to the BBC live, preferring to listen to radio drama, "as it was intended, over the wireless."

The play is a tragicomedy of repeated images and a chronology which descends and ascends through 20th century time. Three artists are sharing a place in 1972, and the first five scenes depict them living the years back in time to 1914; in the next scenes they progress forward to 1972. By then, one of the artists is dead in the room and the remaining two artists each suspects the other of murder. The first scene begins with the sound of snoring and a man's voice: "Ah, there you are." Following that there is a chaotic fall down the staircase.

We the listeners believe it is a man because of the muffled cry we hear in the midst of the SFX of tumbling bannister sticks and tipping-over boxes. It lasts 8 seconds, and it is a motif repeated throughout the play, and it heightens our interest and our suspicion.

That startling beginning reminds us of Club member Edgar Farr Russell's 1996 radio play, "Kiss from a Little Old Lady." Edgar writes a huge and tragic fall in the opening scene. A man named Papashiel is shoved in his wheelchair down a fire escape by two very bad men. We hear their spiteful threats and the squeak of the wheelchair across the floor. The Club's SFX table gave the old man a 9-second fall with a horror of tumbling metallic pieces and a scream, ending with the slow wheel click of a rotating disk.

In the interview Stoppard continues to name the sound effects in "Artist Descending a Staircase." He is delighted with the cocoanut shells used to connote a horse. He knows that the audience will visualize the horse. He says that in a sound-only medium he much prefers not to be overly explicit, not to "cut up everything on the audience's plate." He finds the fun in sound effects and is happy to have "clever theater people" work with him.

Later in the play he tests the listener's belief by using tricks of SFX. He has two of the artists playing ping pong. The sound of the game is obvious. Artist #3 brings in a lady friend and tells her, "...that's Mr. Beacham on the right and Mr. Donner on the left." She in turn comments "...ping pong is quite the fad these days...good shot..." and so forth. Artist #3 tells her, "...they are not, of course, playing ping pong...Beacham, turn it off..." We hear the click of a tape recorder knob and the game stops. We believe they are playing, as does the woman. Artist #3 introduces her to his friends. She says, "I'm blind, but it's OK if you say, 'I see' because people always say that." The listening audience and the blind character are in the same boat: they use sound to assess their surroundings.

MUSIC BRIDGE AND COMMERCIAL

Joanie is tapping her clipboard and Chuck is piping in an orchestral piece by Pink Floyd, "Time," which begins with a windup alarm clock ringing under the crazy chimes of a grandfather clock in the foyer, an afternoon in England and it's raining.

We turn to news about our sponsor The Dayton Dragons, who are playing hard but who keep getting clipped to the tune of winning only 4 out of 10 games. But hey! They are high-profile favorites in the community. A Yoga in the Outfield day drew 125 or so women and men to exercise; they sponsored a

Dragons 5K Run, and the Dragons Kids Club is a hit. We of the MWOTRC are pleased to be involved; Club members took the field at Fifth Third Park a few years ago, to great acclaim.

TOM STOPPARD'S THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

“Darkside” was first broadcast on BBC Radio 2 on August 26, 2013.

The 53-page script was published by Faber & Faber in 2013 as an 8 x 5-inch hardback with two CDs: the radio drama, and a CD of script translations in PDF, featuring nine languages.

Two motifs are followed in the play: Spot the Dilemma; and, Do You Believe in the Juggler? There are SFX directions throughout, mainly for the blending of characters' lines and excerpts of the music of Pink Floyd: *overdub; underscore; sing / song / speak / song; bridge; distant tolling bell from album.*

The play begins in a school, with Ethics Man presenting a dilemma to the class, which is: if a train wreck is imminent, should bystanders do nothing and many people will die, or shift the train's path onto a siding where only one boy will die. At stake is: the good of society, or the rights of the individual?

The class members are fairly upset, with lots of questions. Emily asks, “What about the boy?” Ethics Man: “There is no boy; it's a Thought Experiment.” And yet The Boy appears, and he and Emily wander the Earth, encountering greed for money and power, pollution of soil and water, repression of humanitarian efforts. We find that Emily and The Boy are helped along by The Witch Finder, whose mission is to expose corruption in high places. There are soldiers coming, our heroes must flee!

SFX from Pink Floyd's “Speak to Me”: atmosphere, heartbeat, voice and laughter, helicopter, scream – repeated twice – and these lyrics, from “Brain Damage”:

And if the dam breaks open many years too soon

And if there is no room upon the hill,

And if your head explodes with dark forebodings too,

I'll see you on the dark side of the moon.

Emily appears to have won: the soldiers have stopped shooting, and she dreams of reforestation and a ban on animal poaching. Even as she sees green

shoots of grass appearing, The Politician appears and declares a photo opportunity for the development of the Greenbelt.

Emily spots The Dilemma:

(over saxophone): Kindness didn't save the world. Still working on that. But if kindness is only selfishness in disguise like The Witch Finder said, the question "What is The Good?" wouldn't be about anything except what's best for you – and what's moral about that? *(music soars then fade to underscore).*

Lyrics from "Us and Them":

Down and out,

It can't be helped but there's a lot of it about.

With, without.

And who'll deny it's what the fighting's all about.

Ethics Man comes on the scene to comfort Emily. He says, cheerfully:

Oh, we don't make progress. Footnotes to Aristotle, it has been said.

The good life. Justice and fairness.

The Boy arrives, saying to Emily that since he survived the Thought Experiment ("...after all, I've been hit by a train...") that he has one more question: "Do you believe in The Juggler?"

Emily tells him, of course, he's The Juggler, so he can juggle.

Stoppard here wants us to ponder this bit of SFX:

Do we believe in The Juggler on radio?

Lyrics from Pink Floyd's "Time":

Home, home, again. I like to be here when I can.

When I come home cold and tired

Far away across the field, the tolling of the iron bell

Calls the faithful to their knees

To hear the softly spoken magic spell.

That about wraps it up; Joanie signals that we have some time before network feed. So, I'm asking Chuck to come to the studio table here and pull over that microphone. I transcribed the introduction that he wrote and read for "Kiss from a Little Old Lady," 1996, right from my original cassette copy of the play. I'm handing the typescript to Chuck as he settles in at the table:

CHUCK:

Thanks, Mark, I'm glad there are some cassettes of our shows still around! They never go out of style. After those early efforts of scripts and recordings, I'm glad the idea really took off for the Club. And hey, thanks for letting me play all those Pink Floyd tracks!

Introduction to "Kiss from a Little Old Lady" read by Chuck Langdon:

Welcome to Out of the Past. I'm your host, Chuck Langdon. You are about to experience the excitement shared by millions of people in the 1930s and '40s during the Golden Age of Radio. On this program we're performing a radio play using the only components possible in the medium of radio. The dialogue, sound effects, music, and your imagination. Our newly written play will feature the music of legendary composer Rex Koury, known to many of you for his music on the radio and television series "Gunsmoke." Mr. Koury created and performed an original score for this production. Now let's listen to a mystery drama just as it may have sounded being broadcast during radio's Golden Age. I'll turn on the old Philco, (*SFX tube radio high-pitch squeal*) let the tubes warm up, and tune in the show. (*cue theme music and Quicksilver production intro*).

Thanks, everyone, for tuning in. Keep those cards and letters coming! Soup and sandwiches in the Mud Room? But of course!

Mark A.

Reading PA