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"Lux Misrepresents Hollywood?" or, "Why Radio Movie Adaptations Aren't Such A Good Idea."

by Elizabeth McLeod

It's one of the benchmark programs of the entire Old Time Radio era -- the very essence of Big Time Radio Drama. The biggest stars, the biggest stories, broadcasting to tens of millions of listeners every Monday night, for nearly twenty years. And the passing of the decades has done nothing to dull its aura -- even today, forty-five years after its final broadcast, "Lux Radio Theatre" is still one of the best-remembered, most recognized, most collected of OTR programs.

So why am I not impressed?

I've listened to many dozens of Lux shows over my twenty years of OTR collecting and research -- virtually all of the surviving programs from the 1936-44 Cecil B. DeMille era, and a healthy sampling of those from the William Keighley and Irving Cummings shows of the late forties and early fifties. The shows are highly polished and well-produced, presenting appealing stars in an attractive setting. I've never heard a really *bad* "Lux Radio Theatre."

But -- and this is the key -- I don't think I've ever heard a really *great* one, either.

Part of the problem is the shallow slickness of its productions. "Lux" was never a show on radio's creative cutting edge -- it depended on star power for its appeal rather than technical wizardry. Its early episodes, beginning with the New York run of 1934-35 and continuing into the early months of the Hollywood run were actually a bit *behind* the creative curve, comparing most unfavorably with the far-reaching dramatic productions of NBC's "Radio

Guild" or the "Columbia Workshop." As the show matured, it settled into a middle-ground complacency, neither retrograde nor progressive. Other shows could explore the creative boundaries of the medium -- Lux didn't need to, not with Hollywood's biggest names coming to the microphone each week. And with thousands being paid out to the Gables and the Stanwycks and other such stars, there wasn't much left in the budget for great writing or innovative sound

effects. Despite its pretentious format and prestigious casts, Lux's dramas never approached the made-for-the-microphone snap of many of the most humble Mutual sustainers.



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And this points up the greatest weakness of "Lux" -- and its many imitators in the Hollywood Movie Adaptation genre. They were trying to be something they weren't -- trying to make radio into movies. Trying to make movies into radio. And these shows all overlooked an important point: Radio **isn't** the movies. And a good movie isn't necessarily a good radio drama.



Lux Radio Theater Director, C.B. Demille (right), discusses show details with Don Ameche and a lovely but unidentified young lady. Can anyone tell us who she is?

Films usually suffered in their Lux adaptations. The forty-five minute scripts required the stories to focus almost exclusively on plot points -- losing much of the subtleties of characterization that could be found in the full-length films. The "Lux" adaptation of "Casablanca" is a good example -- stripping the story down to its most basic points leaves it as little more than a common potboiler. Casting adds to the weakness of this particular show: so much of the charisma of the character of Rick is tied in with Bogart's on-screen interpretation of the role that Alan Ladd's wooden "Lux" performance is painful to hear. And Hedy Lamaar, needless to say, is no Ingrid Bergman.

Similarly, for a fan of "The Philadelphia Story," none but Grant and Hepburn will do in the lead roles. "Lux's" 1943 adaptation with Robert Taylor and Loretta Young simply doesn't make the cut. And when casting changes are combined with substantial alterations in the script itself, the offense is even greater. Lux's 1944 adaptation of "Wake Up And Live," a delightful Fox musical from 1937 which had starred Jack Haley, Alice Faye, Ben Bernie and Walter Winchell, is in no way representative of the original film - rewriting the story to fit an annoyingly callow Frank Sinatra and replacing the exquisite 1937 musical score with an assortment of forgettable bobby-soxer pop tunes.

But all that said, there **are** some "Lux" shows that are very enjoyable. Usually these are the lighter stories -- comedy films tended to condense much better than heavy dramas. The 1936 version of "The Thin Man" brings Myrna Loy and William Powell to

the microphone with little lost in the translation, and the 1939 adaptation of my all-time favorite movie, "It Happened One Night" manages to retain much of that film's goofy charm. And, very rarely, "Lux" would actually **improve** on the original. This is certainly the case with the 1947 adaptation of "The Jazz Singer." The original film, despite its place in legend as the harbinger of the talkie era, is a maudlin piece of trash, rescued from its own wretchedness only by Al Jolson's larger-than-life musical numbers. But the radio version draws more from the original stage play than from the film, and is much easier to take. It's also one of Jolson's finest radio performances.

Perhaps "Lux's" greatest weakness, from a modern-day listener's perspective, is this: we today are **much more familiar** with the original films than their original audiences. We see them over and over again on TV or on videos -- whereas the audiences of the thirties and forties usually saw them only once. To these audiences, a Lux adaptation was probably a welcome remembrance of a pleasant night at the movies, but to a hard-core movie fan today these same adaptations can often come across as second-rate imitations.

In a way, it's unfair to judge "Lux" by this standard -- after all, no one expects a "Classic Comic" to be judged by the same standard as a great novel. But, by the very nature of its format, the series invites comparison with the films on which it was based: and in these comparisons, it will almost always come up short. A twelve-inch speaker isn't the same as a forty-foot screen -- and what works for one usually doesn't work for the other.

Movies are movies -- and radio is radio. Movies are Stupendous, Colossal, and Larger Than Life. Radio is as intimate as your living room.

And when you try to mix them -- neither can possibly live up to its full potential.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, researcher, and freelance writer specializing in radio of the 1930s. She is a regular contributor to "Nostalgia Digest" magazine and the Internet OldRadio Mailing List, maintains a website, Broadcasting History Resources, and is presently researching a book on Depression-era broadcasting. Elizabeth is always looking for 1930s radio recordings in all formats -- uncoated aluminum or lacquer-coated discs, vinyl or shellac pressings, or low-generation tape copies. You can contact her at lizmcl@midcoast.com