



# RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
COLORADO

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## Arch Oboler: Plays or Lights Out?

(Part Two) by Martin Grams, Jr.

*Martin Grams, Jr. is the author and co-author of numerous books including: The History of the Cavalcade of America (1999), Information Please (2003), Invitation to Learning (2002) and The Have Gun-Will Travel Companion (2000). His most recent book, The I Love A Mystery Companion, was published in October, 2003.*

In Hollywood, Arch Oboler was described as “all the Dead End Kids put together.” He badgered Escape’s director Mervyn Le Roy endlessly about studio technique until one afternoon when Le Roy finally told him to watch through a camera finder and he would demonstrate a storm scene. As soon as Oboler had his eye glued to the finder, Le Roy cued technicians to drench him with cinema rain.

Reticent about discussing money when he was questioned, Oboler often admitted to making twice as much as anybody should. He hired Frank Lloyd Wright to design a \$20,000 house for a 25-acre mountaintop he owned in the Santa Monica Mountains overlooking the Pacific. During the construction, one feature of the place named “Aeire,” was a stream that according to the blueprints would run through the Oboler living room.

It was in this mountaintop retreat that Oboler would later write most of his experimental work for radio. (Oboler’s Frank Lloyd Wright home was

featured in the Columbia Pictures’ release *Five* in 1951, which was filmed on location at Oboler’s residence since the movie was written, produced and directed by Arch Oboler.)

From March 25, 1939 to March 30, 1940, Arch Oboler’s Plays presented to the American radio listeners a total of fifty-four broadcasts. Shortly after the two high-rated broadcasts featuring Alla Nazimova, Oboler’s reputation for writing and directing radio dramas tailored for the serious “actor” spread through Hollywood. The roles were true human-interest stories featuring complex rational thoughts, and were in demand by both starring and supporting actors.



In the broadcast of November 18, 1939 entitled “Bathysphere,” George Zucco, (best known to film fans as the mad scientist in numerous horror pictures of the 1930s and 40s), played the lead as the dictator of a foreign nation who, during the submerging of a bathysphere, receives the fright of his life when he is informed that his faithful followers intend to leave him stranded under thousands of feet of water. For the broadcast of

November 11, 1939, the great Gale Sondergard played the starring role in “I’ll Tell My Husband.” In the following weeks Gale Page, Joan Crawford and Elsa Lanchester were featured in the original dramas. Towards the end of the series, Oboler found himself writing adaptations of other authors’ works such as the broadcast of March 16, 1940 when

**(Continued on Page 3)**

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**18th Annual OTR and Nostalgia Convention**, April 16 - 17, 2004; Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence KY 41042 (859) 282-0333 [haradio@hotmail.com](mailto:haradio@hotmail.com)

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**RETURN WITH US NOW...**

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**November, 2003**

Ronald Colman guested in an adaptation of "The Most Dangerous Game." Madame Nazimova reprised her role for "The Ivory Tower" on March 23, 1940. A most amusing sidelight was the fact that all of these actors appeared on the program for the meager pay of \$21.00 per broadcast.

Perhaps the most influential of the broadcasts was "Johnny Got His Gun", broadcast March 9, 1940 with James Cagney in the role. Based on the novel of the same name by Dalton Trumbo (written 1938, published 1939), this harrowing story deals with an American youth missing in action and hideously injured in War (his arms, legs and face have been blown away). He can do nothing but endure his tomb-like existence, recall the memories of a family that is unaware that he has survived, and relive his life before his dismemberment. The timing of the publication of was unfortunate, coming just days before the Germans invaded Poland in 1939.

For purposes of plot, the mute lump of barely living flesh has a name in the book: Joe Bonham. The "Johnny" of the title is symbolized as Everyman. Not the least of the American ironies that Trumbo was playing off of here was the old Civil War song, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," with its celebratory words about the hero's return sung against its dirge-like minor-key music.

Cagney played the radio role with depth and emotion. The radio listener obviously knew that the lump of flesh on the bed could not speak but his thoughts - Cagney's dialogue - are so true to every listener that anyone who listens to the recording today will forget that it's James Cagney speaking. It's the wounded War vet. Thankfully, a recording of this broadcast exists and any radio listeners who have not heard this one should seek out a copy not just to listen, but own and share with friends and family. If there was ever a shred of doubt that Arch Oboler couldn't write anything but horror dramas, this dismissed all doubts.

In 1945, Arch Oboler signed a contract with the Mutual Network to revive his series for twenty-six broadcasts. Although occasionally using some of the scripts dramatized on his previous series such as "Special to Hollywood" and "The Truth," for the most part Oboler wrote new dramas. Coming a close second to the famous "Johnny Got His Gun" broadcast, Oboler presented Burgess Meredith in an autobiographical drama entitled "Mr. Pyle," true accounts as reported by Ernie Pyle. Actors Lloyd Bridges, Edmund Gwenn, Franchot Tone, Paul

Muni, Eddje Cantor and Raymond Massey were among the few who played leads in these new presentations, broadcast from April 5, 1945 to October 11, 1945.

It should be noted that many of the 1945 Mutual broadcasts exist in recorded form, and during the late 1980s many of these recordings were altered by a person or persons unknown who (knowingly or unknowingly) cut out the proper Arch Oboler's Plays openings and closings, and replaced them with the familiar "gong" opening from Lights Out. These new recordings were bought, sold and traded - and even commercially released - as broadcasts of the Lights Out program. The truth of the matter was, dramas like "Rocket From Manhattan," "My Chicago" and "The Truth" was never dramatized on the late-night horror show. Confusion still exists because recent MP3 discs feature these dramas as part of the Lights Out series making innocent consumers assume what they are buying are authentic Lights Out broadcasts. The reason why major companies like Adventures in Cassettes and Radio Spirits sold these programs under the heading of Lights Out was the lack of documentation. Little was known about the Lights Out series and as a result, the errors went unnoticed.

A couple of the Mutual broadcasts suffered complications beyond Oboler's control. The broadcast of May 24, 1945 was entitled "An Exercise in Horror: A Peculiar Comedy" and featured Peter Lorre in the lead, supported by Frank Martin, Theodore Von Eltz and Winifred Wolfe. During the broadcast, the network unintentionally lost the show temporarily and was forced to air music for a time.

Martin Gabel and Raymond Edward Johnson co-starred in "Lust for Life" broadcast on April 19, 1945. This presentation was originally slated for broadcast on April 12, but was pre-empted to the week ahead after the announcement of F.D.R.'s death - because of which many radio programs were pre-empted on April 12.

As a result of the cancellation of Arch Oboler's Plays, Oboler turned to NBC and Proctor and Gamble to support a new dramatic series written, produced and directed by who else? Arch Oboler. The series was entitled Everyman's Theater. Broadcast on Friday evenings, each episode opened and closed with Richard Strauss' "Death and Transfiguration." Everyman's Theater was originally signed to be a twenty-six episode presentation but



came out to twenty-five instead. The reason was because the broadcast of November 1, 1940 was pre-empted for presidential speech. Many of the presentations were repeat performances of previous scripts. The premiere broadcast (October 4, 1940) featured Alla Nazimova reprising her role in "This Lonely Heart," which she had performed a year before on Plays. On October 18, Boris Karloff reprised his role in "Cat Wife," from a 1938 broadcast of Lights Out. Husband and wife Elsa Lanchester and Charles Laughton co-starred in "The Flying Yorkshireman" on November 15. Most important was the impressive guest list for this short-run series. Norma Shearer, Brian Donlevy, Marlene Dietrich, Lee J. Cobb and many others were guests.

Oboler was not at all astonished that such theatrical lights were anxious to deliver his lines. "I have a respect for the medium I am working in," stated Oboler in the December 2, 1940 issue of Time Magazine. Proctor and Gamble paid Oboler \$4,000 a week - a meager pay for most producers who did all the tasks including writing the scripts and direction. His contract with the sponsor gave him the last word on all problems connected with Everyman's Theater. Out of the \$4,000, Oboler paid the actors (his top was \$1,000) and musicians, sometimes spending as much as \$3,6000 to put a show across.

As it turned out, one of the costlier numbers was "This Lonely Heart," for which he hired a full symphony orchestra to weave in a bit of Tchaikovsky. Like Clifford Odets, his opposite number in the theater, Oboler could not work without music and always made it a point to listen to recordings of Beethoven, Moussorgsky, Sibelius and Debussy while composing his scripts.

The most important broadcast of the series, was perhaps the most significant for the time. On November 29, 1940, Elisabeth Bergner starred in "An American is Born." This was Bergner's radio debut. The story (based on the Peter Jefferson Paker and Fanya Foss novelette) involved a small group of people who cross the Mexican border and wait the time they could come to the country under the quota. More specifically, it was the story of Marta and Karl Kroft who willingly met many trials in order that their child would be born in the free country.

Dr. Frank Monaghan, an associate professor of history at Yale, was quoted a year later: "To many millions in Europe, America beckons forth as an earthly paradise because it is a land of freedom.

They know the bitter taste of despotism, the heavy load of misery. Mr. Oboler has taken a small group of these unhappy men and women who yearn for the liberty which is America..."

A little more than a year after this broadcast, on January 19, 1942, the DuPont-sponsored Cavalcade of America program presented "An American is Born" as part of their continuing series of weekly, half-hour dramas. Bette Davis played the role of Martha Kroft, and it was about this time that Oboler and Davis began admiring each other for their skills and talents. Davis would later star in many of Oboler's dramas sometimes without questioning what the scripts were about. When Oboler phoned Davis to say that he had a script tailored for her, Davis accepted without hesitation. "Arch Oboler wrote this play more than a year ago," quoted Davis about her Cavalcade of America broadcast, "and then just a few days ago I read an item in my newspaper about a lady named Mrs. Lloyd B. Turner, wife of an American oil man in Venezuela. A few years ago, she started on a three thousand-mile journey home to Houston, Texas - to make sure her child would be born in the United States. That to me is evidence of a great faith."

Trivia: During the Cavalcade broadcast, ear-phoned Oboler made sure that during the performance a falling tree really sounded like a falling tree. Oboler saw to it that a real tree with real twigs, branches and undergrowth were collected for this one sound effect, creating a massive pile of two and a half feet which was flattened by two sound effects men.

Months after Everyman's Theater went off the air, the United States declared war on Japan and the Cavalcade presentation of "An American is Born" had a deeper meaning than it had before. And with the advent of war, Oboler joined up with other celebrities and radio talents to present a series of morale-boosting programs for the American radio listeners who remained at the home front. Plays for Americans, To the President and Everything for the Boys became staples in network broadcasting.

Dedicated to "people of good-will everywhere," Arch Oboler's *Plays for Americans* was designed as a weekly series of thirteen war-related broadcasts from February 1, 1942 to April 26, 1942. More amusing was the fact that the "powers that be" at the National Broadcasting Company received so many favorable replies from the listening audience regarding the dramatizations that they granted

Oboler an extension of eight additional broadcasts in early April of 1942. (The final broadcast was heard on July 5, 1942, a total of 21 episodes.)

Oboler's skill as a radio playwright was so well established as to be taken for granted and his anger towards anyone related to the axis of evil was expressed in each script. In calmer days there might have been room for esthetic argument about whether an artist did his best work at white heat or cool reflection. The significance of Oboler's series, *Plays for Americans*, and of the collection published in late 1941 under the title "This Freedom" (Random House, 1941), was that they were written for this time, and that behind them is the urgency of his indignation, general and specific. Had he waited or worked more slowly, they might have acquired a certain polish; almost certainly they would have lost a deal of immediate force.

The U.S. entrance into the war had altered his approach somewhat. He was free to speak in terms the cautious networks had frowned upon before December 7, 1941. But even when he was under wraps, so to speak, Arch Oboler struck hard and bitterly and with the savage joy of an antagonist who fought with conviction. None but a dolt could have failed to see that in "And Adam Begot", a fantasy of time turned back wherein three civilized people are confronted by a Neanderthal man, he was writing a parable of appeasement. Equally obvious were the facts that he was flaying the self-centered, callous mind in "Special to Hollywood," another time-fantasy; and that Hitler and his "voices" were the real subject of "Genghis Khan," the tale of a Harlem Negro run amok with a "spirit" at his side.

Radio reviewer John K. Hutchens of the *New York Times* writes in the March 8, 1942 issue: "Of the five plays heard thus far, the basic theme in three has been the awakening of the average man in time of crisis. 'Johnny Quinn, U.S.N.' told of a 'main chance' boy who woke up - and died at Pearl Harbor. 'Paul Revereski' was the tale of a lad whose pure patriotism worked sundry changes in his elders. 'Ghost Story,' recounted by 'a guy earning his living with his hands,' brought into sharp and agonizing focus the tragedy of Europe as told by its murdered dead. Of course they are not equally good as plays - what author could be counted upon for a first-rate one-act play every week? - but all of them have power. And one of them, 'Memo to Berchtesgaden,' a story of a German agent baffled by the Yankee mind, was rich in sly humor - surprisingly so,

because humor is not Mr. Oboler's forte."

Unlike Oboler's previous radio series, *Plays for Americans* presented original dramas - no repeat performances of scripts used on other radio programs. But the Hollywood cast was impressive (again). Martha Scott, James Stewart, Thomas Mitchell, Raymond Massey, Olivia deHavilland, Jean Hersholt, Claude Rains, Conrad Veidt, Robert Taylor and Ralph Bellamy were a few of the guests. Alla Nazimova and Elizabeth Bergner also made guest appearances. Bette Davis was heard on two broadcasts, the second of which is regarded as one of the best episodes of the series, "Adolf and Mrs. Runyon" on June 21, 1942.

Another series written, produced and directed by Arch Oboler for the war cause was *To the President*, broadcast from October 18, 1942 to December 20, 1942 for a total of ten broadcasts. Oboler publicly held that since President Roosevelt termed the present conflict a "people's war," it was within the province of the common people to speak to their leader without pulling punches in informing him what they were thinking about, laughing about and even crying about. Having conducted an extensive survey of a cross-section of the lives and opinions of American people at war, Oboler offered his report *To the President* through the medium of individual members of everyday American families, calling upon them to open their hearts to their Chief Executive.

Each program dealt with one American family, presenting in dramatic form actual incidents in the lives of its members. In each case the characters had their counterpart in every city and hamlet of the land, with the main contention of the series being a refutation of the claim that the American people couldn't "take it" and that they wanted to win the war in the headlines.

Among the individuals and their families who spoke up were: Mrs. Joe Cleary, whose husband was at Wake Island when the Japanese attacked, Jerry Douglas, a youth in his last year in high school, who was faced with a world in which he believed he had no future, and Sam Adams, a farmer, who watched his family break up as its members took jobs in distant war industry plants. *To the President* was not a documentary; rather it was an entertaining presentation of the real life stories of men and women in a world at war.

On December 12, 1943 a press-release was issued: "Arch Oboler, writer and producer, is

working out the details of a new venture entitled 'Command Theatre,' which should be coming along as a commercial next month over NBC. Ronald Colman is mentioned as master of ceremonies."

Well, the press release was a little pre-mature. By the time Oboler's new venture premiered on January 18, 1944, the name of the program was changed to *Everything for the Boys*. The program's format also changed. Originally this series was to be a collaboration of Arch Oboler's writing and directing skills, along with Colman as host. A twenty-minute drama was to be acted out by a new guest each week, followed by a two-way short-wave conversation between the guests and servicemen stationed in foreign places. The drama of choice was supposed to be a selection of popular stage plays and novels made on the basis of careful surveys of service men's preferences. Oboler's task was to then adapt the novels and plays into feasible radio scripts, being allowed to submit one original of his own.

Shortly after the premiere broadcast, it was evident that *Everything for the Boys* was a disaster. Oboler lost control of the series and problems behind the microphone were kept from the eyes and ears of John Q. Public. Oboler paid for the rights to adapt "A Connecticut Yankee," "Rebecca," "Three Men on a Horse" and "Cyrano de Bergerac" for the program. Whether Oboler took the time to adapt them into feasible radio scripts is not known, but the stories were never dramatized on the show - a financial loss to Oboler. Forced to find substitutes, Oboler began using more than one of his own radio plays, previously dramatized on other programs. This went against the contract Auto-Lite (the sponsor) signed with Oboler. Some internal correspondence suggests copyright issues halted the productions of those dramas. As a last-minute solution, Oboler turned to Robert E. Sherwood and paid the playwright for the radio rights to most of Sherwood's stories such as "Lost Horizon" and "Berkeley Square."

Much good came from the *Everything for the Boys* broadcasts. Ingrid Bergman was a guest on April 25, 1944 in a dramatization of "Death Takes a Holiday" and afterwards, sang "As Time Goes By" from the 1942 movie, *Casablanca*. On June 6, 1944, Jimmy Durante guest starred with Jose Iturbi in a drama entitled "Durante Takes Over." Edna Best and Loretta Young were featured in "Blithe Spirit" on May 16, 1944.

Ronald Colman also read letters and short essays

for the troops, after every performance. On February 15, 1944, Colman read "High Flight" by John G. McGee. After the drama of March 21, 1944, Rolman read a "Letter to General Montgomery from General Nye." After the drama of March 28, 1944, Colman read a "Letter to a Soldier's Wife from India."

On June 13, 1944, Dick Haymes made a guest appearance on the show with Claudette Colbert in "Reunion in Vienna" and this marked the transition from drama to music. Both Ronald Colman and Arch Oboler left the series in a dispute with the Auto-Lite Company. The sponsor apparently wanted more music incorporated and both Oboler and Colman wanted dramatic entertainment. Both men left the series and beginning with the broadcast of June 20, 1944, *Everything for the Boys* was revamped with Dick Haymes as the weekly star. The new version featured no dramas. Instead, poems were read and songs were sung. *Everything for the Boys* would remain a weekly musical production for a year until the series was last heard on June 25, 1945.

Arch Oboler's contribution to radio also expanded into the medium of television and motion pictures. His "And Adam Begot" drama from *Arch Oboler's Plays and Lights Out* was adapted for NBC-TV's *Lights Out* program starring Kent Smith in the lead. This was the only Oboler-scripted radio play to make the transition to the television counterpart of *Lights Out*. Although a recording of this "live" telecast does exist (thankfully), it was not well preserved. The kinescope deteriorated over time, but thankfully the program still remains visible.

During the early 1950s and throughout the early 1960s, Oboler wrote, produced and directed his own low-budget movies and sold them to distributors like United Artists and Columbia Pictures. Employing radio stars such as Hans Conried and Gloria Blondell for *The Twonky* (1953) and Susan Douglas for *Five* (1951). *Five*, incidentally, was a character study of how five survivors of an Atomic Holocaust managed to live with each other during an emergency situation. The movie was filmed on location at Oboler's real-life Frank Lloyd Wright home.

Although this series of articles described the various programs Oboler wrote, produced and directed, this was not intended to cover everything about Oboler. Merely a few brief glimpse to give the readers an idea of Oboler's scope and the diversity of his radio productions in support of the war cause.



**Frank and Anne Hummert's Radio Factory  
The Programs and Personalities of  
Broadcasting's Most Prolific Producers**

By Jim Cox

*A book review by Stewart Wright*

Through their Air Features Inc. production company, Frank and Anne Hummert were a dominant force in network radio for much of the Golden Age. While this very private couple were the most prolific producers of radio series, they were reclusive and very little has been written about them. Author Jim Cox has rectified this omission with his enlightening new book, "*Frank and Anne Hummert's Radio Factory*." His book not only provides insight into their private lives, but also the professional activities of Radio's Golden Age most prolific series creator-producers.

Jim has unearthed extensive biographical information on the Hummerts. He discusses their early years, how they met, and their backgrounds in journalism and advertising. Additionally, Jim provides many intriguing vignettes that give glimpses into the Hummert's private and business lives.

In the pages of "*Frank and Anne Hummert's Radio Factory*," we learn that Hummerts were astute business people who were acutely attuned to the likes and dislikes of American radio audiences. They were responsible for least 125 radio series. Twenty-four of these series were on the air for a minimum of a decade. At least 25 Hummert series were on the network airwaves *each year* between 1934 and 1948.

While most mostly remembered as pioneers of the radio soap opera (the Hummerts did produce 61 daytime serial series), they did not neglect other popular genres. Among their many other production efforts were 37 musical or variety series, 10 mystery series, eight children's series, and nine series of other genres. There are highly informative chapters describing the Hummert's endeavors in each of the major genres.

The eccentric Hummerts were often seemingly contradictory in their dealings with their employees. They paid the lowest wages in the industry, gave little artistic credit to their writers and performers, and were quick to fire those who displeased them. However, they were loyal to those who met their standards and observed their edicts. During the

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Communist scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s, they refused to fire employees who were blacklisted.

There is also a very interesting chapter on the Hummerts' primary competitors in the production of daytime serial dramas: Ina Phillips and Elaine Carrington. There are biographical sketches of both women. The styles of the soap operas of Carrington and Phillips are compared and contrasted with those of the Hummerts

As readers have come to expect from books by Jim Cox, there are several informative appendices. They are: a chronology of the Hummerts' lives; a description of each of the 125 Hummert-created, adapted, supervised, or influenced radio series; a collection of quotations attributed to the Hummerts that express their philosophy of broadcast programming; a list of the most active radio producers of Radio's Golden Age with their most famous series; and typical broadcast schedules of Hummert series.

Fans of Old-Time Radio will enjoy Jim Cox's new volume that entertainingly fills a long-standing void in Old-Time Radio history. This book gives the reader a new insight into and understanding of two of the most influential, but enigmatic icons of Radio's Golden Age.

**Frank and Anne Hummert's Radio Factory  
The Programs and Personalities of  
Broadcasting's Most Prolific Producers**

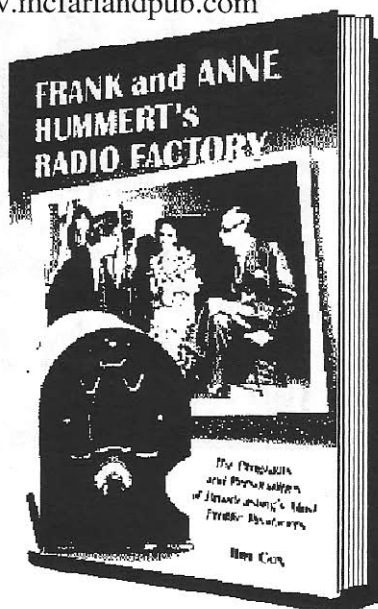
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November, 2003

*From the Desk of  
the Editor  
by Carol Tiffany*



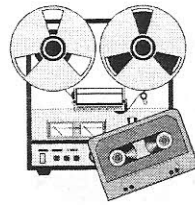
Hello again, everyone.

Once again we are entering the Holiday Season, with Thanksgiving coming soon and Christmas decorations already adorning the stores. What happened to 2003? It could be that time speeds up as one grows older, at least it seems so to your editor.

We are making a small change in your newsletter format starting with this issue. Twice each year there will be no new catalog list in RWUN. Instead, we will have an extra two pages of articles, puzzles, etc. In this issue, we have been able to complete Martin Grams' article about Arch Oboler. What would have been a three-part article is thus complete in two installments.

Due to this change, we will be looking for a few longer articles. If you have an idea for an article, we are actively soliciting contributions.

Happy Thanksgiving and good listening to all...



## **New in the Tape Library**

by Dick and Maletha King

No doubt by now you've noticed that there's no RHAC library catalog insert page for this month's issue of our newsletter. As you know, we are feverishly working to expand our library of CD offerings just as quickly as possible. The problem is that this has put a tremendous burden on Bill McCracken, the man who's responsible for most of the work required to get the job done. Bill says he enjoys the process but he needs to step back just a little in order to pay attention to all the other demanding things in his very busy life.

What this all means is that twice each year we will be substituting expanded article content for the catalog page. This month is an excellent example of how our RWUN Editor, Carol Tiffany, has filled this page with the fascinating Arch Oboler story, and not make you wait for another episode to see how it all turns out - as they gleefully did in the old time radio serials.

So, enjoy the change in format and Dick and I want to wish you all a very happy Thanksgiving.

