

"The Medium" in Four Mediums

GIAN-CARLO MENOTTI

RECENTLY my opera "The Medium," presented on Broadway last season, was broadcast over two radio networks. It was recorded by Columbia and is released in its entirety this month. It is now about to be filmed. All these transformations have given me pause for thought, and strengthened my belief that it is important, in presenting a dramatic work on radio or records, to be scrupulous in preserving the original quality of the work, with as little change as possible.

We should be horrified if a Cezanne landscape were to be blown up and made to serve as a backdrop in a theatre. We would be equally distressed if Titian's opulent courtesans were thinned down in order to make them into more palatable, modern glamor girls. Fortunately, this is improbable, for in the world of painting there is still some respect left for the original conception of the artist. There is little respect for this conception left, however, in the world of music, and even less in the theatrical world, where it is almost impossible to find an original drama (especially among the classics) that has not been tampered with.

Let us take as an example the case of Strindberg's "Dance of Death," recently produced on Broadway and "adapted" for contemporary audiences. Disfigured beyond recognition by the new authors, this awkward but magnificent play was thoroughly roasted by every critic in town. Strindberg was blamed for an out-of-date drama and the actors and "adaptors" responsible for the butchery were looked upon with compassionate eyes for having to work with such poor material. Adaptation in this case, as in Gorki's "Lower Depths" and in countless other instances, meant nothing else but a leveling of material into what Broadway considers a success formula. This does not take into account (if we still consider the drama as a work of art) that the work of an artist may be moving because



Gian-Carlo Menotti: "I would be distressed if 'The Medium' were to be filmed or rewritten by anyone else."

of its very imperfections and excesses, as well as because of its conventional virtues; that very often even in these imperfections and excesses are revealed his unique scheme and vision, and that in editing these passages one is apt to destroy his personality and meaning. Who would want Proust shortened or Henry James *Reader-Digest-ed*?

But whichever way we turn in the modern theatre we see some kind of assassination. Novels are made into plays, plays are made into movies, movies are made into radio scripts. Ten years later the whole thing is revived as a musical comedy. On Broadway we even see plays adapted into new plays, as in the case of Molière's "Bourgeois Gentilhomme" rewritten for Bobby Clark.

It is time that we realized that the choice of medium in the creation of a work of art is itself inseparable from the texture and conception of the work. The popular belief that a real artist has first of all an idea and then ponders whether to make it into a novel, a movie, or a radio script is

just plain silly. For this reason, I ask that we respect the original medium which the artist has chosen.

Of course, we must not only blame Broadway producers for distortions of originals. If the idea of making "Crime and Punishment" into a play is quite monstrous, it is equally startling to hear that even a great writer like André Gide has succumbed to the fashion of adaptations and made of Kafka's "The Trial" (whose fascination is actually based upon its revolutionary use of the novel) a play which could never hope to approximate the strength of the original form. By that I do not mean that the dramatic versions of "Crime and Punishment" and "The Trial" are bad plays, but they are simply uncalled for, and useless works of art.

Then we come to the question: should works originally conceived for the stage ever be recorded or broadcast or filmed? Certainly I would not be so niggardly as to deny the exciting possibilities of such a transference properly conceived. I believe that it is possible to adapt a play or opera into another medium as long as it is done with the help and approval of the author. Some of us may find it shocking to see a delightful comedy like "Liliom" made into a musical show. But after all, Mr. Molnar liked the idea and assisted in putting it into its new form. Similarly, I believe that a great play can be made into a good film, as in the case of Shakespeare's "Henry V," where the presentation was done with such love and respect for the original that its greatness was not diminished by the pictorial approach. In this latter case, the "desecration" is equivalent to playing the harpsichord sonatas of Scarlatti on a piano, to which only the most severe purist would object.

I WAS confronted by this artistic dilemma in "The Medium," as it progressed from the stage to the air to record studio and, so on, to films. In the case of the broadcast and the re-



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ording, my attitude has been an adamant one, and I believe it has also interpreted the desire of the public at large. I insisted that the works be done without cuts as originally written; and that they be presented as they stood without adaptation to the new form. Usually, in recording practice, this approach is happily maintained. Except for a rare case in symphonic music in which tempi are slightly hurried in order to make proper breaks and fit the music to the required number of sides, the recording companies have usually tried to adhere strictly to the original composition. In the present Columbia album, both "The Medium" and "The Telephone" are presented in their entirety except for a few measures that I have myself eliminated for this version.

(This is, I might add, the first time that a contemporary opera has been completely recorded and I hope it won't be the last.) I feel that the recording is an accurate documentation of the musical material of my opera and I am glad that the dramatic action is left safely to the imagination of the listener. In "The Medium," for example, it was very fortunate that no attempt was made to convey the presence of the deaf mute (who is however one of the principal characters in the drama) with devices uncalled for in the original score.

In the case of broadcasts, although the problem should be approximately the same as that of recording, the above approach is difficult to obtain. Program directors of radio com-

panies cannot accept the fact that the public might very well prefer to hear a work in its original form; they feel that they must dramatize it with the same old clichés which are used in broadcasts of radio shows. Is a play or an opera any less a work of art than a symphony? Would we put Beethoven or even the lengthy Bruckner or Mahler in capsule forms? Until such time as serious artists are commissioned by radio as well as film companies to write works particularly for these mediums, they should maintain a purely documentary approach to any foreign material. It is fortunate that there has been no tampering with the opera on the Metropolitan opera broadcasts. Had there been, who knows what radio "sound effects" they might have added to an opera like "Die Walküre"? There is no earthly excuse for the mangled version of "Faust" as I heard it given a few weeks ago by the Chicago Theatre of the Air. Nor do I understand why the Theatre Guild permits such a complex three-act play as "The Doll's House" to be condensed into a one-hour script which in my opinion brings it down to the level of soap opera. (The British Broadcasting Company, by the way, was able to broadcast the whole of Shaw's "Man and Superman.") If they have only one hour of time, why not commission playwrights to write one-act plays fitted to this time schedule or why not present only one act at a time of a great play? In a musical broadcast, it often happens that a conductor may present one movement of a symphony.

Although this is not an ideal condition, no musician would dare condense a symphony into a short program by taking bits out of each movement. I maintain that the same respect should be shown to a play or an opera.

Fortunately in the case of the broadcasts of "The Medium," I have no such complaints. I was blessed with a discerning and sensitive director, Jim Fassett of the Columbia Broadcasting System, who disregarded all suggestions for "improving" the script and who stuck scrupulously to the original. With my entire approval we added a few spoken phrases and musical sounds to make the presence of Toby, the deaf mute, felt. Curiously, even these slight additions met with some criticism from a part of the public, who remembered the original stage presentation and resented any interpolations.

For the adaptation of "The Medium" and any other opera into motion pictures, the problem is even more difficult. Because of the dominating presence of the orchestra in an opera, its stage technique must surmount it constantly and emphasize the dramatic element; while on the screen, which is dangerously close to the audience, with emotional elements such as the orchestra completely in the background, the dramatic element has to be humanized and made more intimate; otherwise the balance will be destroyed and the end-product heavy handed and meaningless.

SHOULD "The Medium" then be filmed? Yes, I still think it can be done if it is largely rewritten in terms of the new form; but I believe that the only person who should be asked to so adapt it is the author. My only interest in becoming a film director is that I feel I can best make this adaptation. I would be distressed if it were to be filmed or rewritten by anyone else. We have some sad examples of filming operas. Putting the "Barber" into the movies was a hopeless undertaking and a definite disservice to Rossini, who never intended his libretto for such detailed scrutiny. This was bad enough; but it was even worse when Billy Rose or Orson Welles tried to help Bizet and Shakespeare to meet modern audiences. I feel that there should be a Dramatists Guild to protect dead authors, as well as those who are still living.

As for my own work, as long as I am alive I find it exciting and challenging to adapt it to all modern mediums—radio, films, records. Once I am dead, however, if no one likes the versions I have left behind me, I hope that my work will be left to sleep in the protective care of some kind-hearted public librarian.

"You Got to Get Out of the Way..."

EUGENE H. SAERCHINGER

VIRTUALLY every owner of a radio set anywhere in the United States or Canada can, and probably does, listen to transcribed music programs prefabricated in New York by one of the five major transcription houses of America. Four hundred and twenty-five stations subscribe to this company's disc library, and over three-quarters of them use the accompanying "continuity" scripts which arrange the music into twenty-one hours of regular weekly programs. Other services have similar scope.

"Continuity" is the word given to radio phrases like, "But first we invite you . . .," "Madame Hoheimer will now sing . . .," and other miscellaneous lines which pass through the ear unabsorbed. Like the literature found on soup cans, continuity is so taken for granted that most people regard it as a natural phenomenon. But after a year and a half of such work, I can testify that continuity is not natural. It is painstakingly created by hard-working, occasionally well-paid individuals dignified with the title "writer."

The continuity man's primary task is to make his words so unobtrusive that, in the well-known radio phrase, they will "get out of the way for the music." The pinnacle of success is reached only when his words slide so easily off the announcer's tongue and so smoothly through the listener's ear that no one is aware of their existence.

Complete self-effacement in composition is no easy goal, and to achieve it continuity often receives more detailed editing than a constitutional amendment. For instance, a writer creates a typical introduction:

And now, lovely Linda Carrol steps into the picture with a beautiful song. In romantic rhythm as bright as a brand-new dime, Linda sings "My Love Song."

The assistant script manager doesn't like the first two words. "And now" is found in every other introduction, he complains, and changes the words to "next" (which is used on every alternate occasion). The adjective

"lovely" should be reserved for "lovely Louise McDunna," so Linda Carrol must be described as "romantic." He doesn't like the cliché "steps into the picture" and replaces it with one he does—"takes the spotlight." Brand-new is proclaimed redundant, so he takes out "brand." Finally, he changes "bright as a new dime." He has no political objection to the Roosevelt dime, understand, but listeners may be wondering if you do mean it politically, when they should be listening to the music. "Dime" is changed to "penny." "You got to get out of the way for the music," he says.

The script manager himself sees the edited version and objects to "song" appearing twice. He changes one "song" to "melody." For rhythm, he replaces the "brand" in "brand-new." "Romantic" is now used twice, so "romantic Linda Carrol" becomes lovely again, and to hell with Louise McDunna. The revised version reads:

Next—lovely Linda Carrol takes the spotlight with a beautiful melody. In romantic rhythm as bright as a brand-new penny, Linda sings "My Love Song."

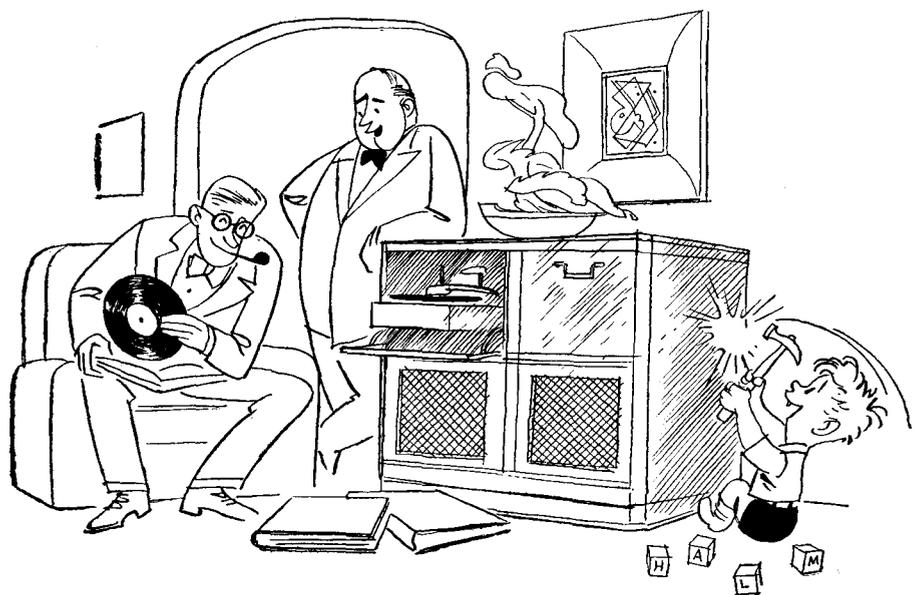
Of the original thirty-word introduction, ten words have now been

changed, two of them twice. To the hopelessly ignorant, the two versions might seem indistinguishable. But the experienced script manager knows how important it is to be sure the words step aside for the notes.

The continuity writers' hunt for unused adjectives is as devoted as the pearl diver's search for infected oysters. All writers know Roget's Thesaurus. Embittered cynics in the trade know other lexicons called "Adjective Finders." My colleagues and I at NBC constructed our own adjective finders, cross-referenced according to program-subject and meaning. Actually this is less impressive than it sounds, as we had need for only four meanings. For instance, six of the fifty-five scripts we wrote were hymn programs. For these shows we needed adjectives suggesting that the hymn was pretty good, and therefore a favorite; that the hymn was old, and therefore pretty good; that it was a stirring hymn, and therefore a favorite; and that it was a soothing hymn, and therefore pretty good. Under the first, or general praise, category, "inviting" and "beauteous" were popular. Under the "old" category, we used such words as "timeless," "everlasting," and "immortal." Under the heading of "stirring" hymns, we classified "inspirational," "radiant," and "glorifying." But the final, "soothing" category was my favorite, for here almost any degree of lugubrious unction was permissible. That's where we put "enrapturing," "blissful," and "care-drowning." Everyone in the office celebrated with bacchic delirium when someone added "soul-searing."

The word "familiar" is most widely used. The philosophy of radio is to give the audience what it likes best.

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"Listen to that strong primitive beat."