<u>Writing the Audio Drama</u>

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<u>Legacy of the Audio Drama</u>

With the release of the *Danger Zone One* audio drama, it felt like a perfect time to delve into an often overlooked aspect of writing. In the 1930s and 1940s, during the 'Golden Age of Radio,' the audio drama garnered the popularity equivalent to today's television programming. Radio shows like *The Lone Ranger*, *Superman*, *Suspense*, *Inner Sanctum*, and *The Shadow* were produced weekly, broadcasted live to homes across the country. By the 1950s, with the advent of television, interest in the audio drama began to wane. However, by the late '60s and well into the '70s, the audio drama experienced something of a resurgence, with new shows being produced, broadcast, and released on vinyl. Even in the 1980s the format thrived with younger audiences, as audio dramas based on Saturday morning cartoons, such as *Transformers*, *Masters of the Universe*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, and *Batman*, were released on audio cassettes and records, often paired with a comic book. Perhaps, one of the most notable "blockbuster" audio drama events was the original *Star Wars* trilogy, which aired as a twenty-six part series on National Public Radio in 1981, and became their most listened to broadcast with over 750,000 listeners per episode.

Since the 1990s and beyond, the audio drama's mainstream popularity has again declined, at least in the United States. However, in Japan, the format has gained quite a following, with official audio dramas being produced based on video games like *Metal Gear Solid*, *Resident Evil*, and *Steins;Gate*, while countless anime titles have received their own similar tie-ins, such as *Sailor Moon*, *Gundam*, and *Code Geass*. Typically these Japanese audio dramas cover subplots or side-stories that were missing from their respective games or anime counterparts, filling in details not heard anywhere else.

However, despite the seemingly 'archaic' nature of audio dramas, independent creators may also find the format useful. It's far cheaper to produce an audio drama than live-action or animation and, in most cases, less expensive than doing a comic (especially if an artist needs to be commissioned). Aside from a finished script, an audio drama requires decent actors and a capable sound mixer.

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Isn't writing an audio drama similar to writing a screenplay? Yes and no. Unlike a screenplay,

which is visual in nature, a writer must always be aware of the auditory requirements that come with audio dramas.

Take, for example, the following scene:

Steven arrives home late at night and enters his home, to find his ex-wife, Jean, sitting on the sofa. She taunts her surprised ex before shooting him with a gun she's been concealing.

Okay, if we were to write that scene in a screenplay, it would be fairly straightforward. We know that, as viewers, we'd see Steven enters his house, he'd encounter his ex-wife—we'd witness the look of surprise on his face—followed by the moment she takes out her gun. In an audio drama, none of this is possible, since the audience can't *watch* the action unfold. And one of the foremost challenges in an audio drama is relaying the scene to a listener without coming off as corny. We certainly don't want Steven to arrive home, spouting off some awful dialogue like, "Ah, that was a hard day's work—well, I'm glad to be home! Uh, Jean, why are you—hey, is that a gun?"

Instead, there are other ways to set the scene and the location. For instance, how do we know it's night time? An easy solution—we hear crickets in the background. But what about Steven, how would the listener understand that he's arriving home? This can be achieved by including sound effect cues in your script. In this case, maybe we hear a car slowly pull up on a gravel road, the engine dies and someone gets out, closing the vehicle's door behind them. We hear footsteps, followed by the jangling of keys, and then the sound of a door opening.

Next we can allow dialogue to set the scene, without coming off as cheesy. As Steven enters his home, the scene can unfold like this:

STEVEN

(surprised)

Jean?

JEAN

(Deadly calm, a sardonic tone in her voice)

Well, well. Home late tonight, Stevie.

STEVEN

What are you doing here? I already sent the

divorce papers to your lawyer last—

JEAN

Don't worry, I won't need them anymore…

SOUND EFFECT: The hammer of a gun being cocked back.

STEVEN

Jean?! What are you—

SOUND EFFECT: Gunshot. Steven crying out as his body drops to the floor.

JEAN

I figured out a way to *expedite* the process.

And there you have a scene that can be played out without any need for visuals. We get that Steven was shot, and that Jean did it. But to get a further idea of how to properly format an audio drama script, I've also included the full *Danger Zone One* audio drama script. Look it over and see how sound effects, music cues, and dialogue are used to effectively create a cohesive story.

Plot and Action

Just like any other form of dramatic writing, an audio drama must be about *something*, complete with a beginning, middle, and end. As a general rule, because of the nonvisual nature of the format, it's best to avoid heavy action. So, leaving out car chases, slug fests, and detailed shootouts is usually preferred. In a visual medium, where you can see the hero clinging to a window thirty stories up, it works…but in when audio is what you're relying on, it doesn't play so well. This is one of the reasons why there are so many mystery, suspense, comedy, and science fiction audio dramas, due to their ease of translating into a nonvisual format. That said, one of the benefits of the medium is that there are virtually no boundaries, aside from one's imagination. Your story can take place in Atlantis, on Mars, or in some post-apocalyptic wasteland. Maybe you want your story to take place in ancient Egypt, or London in the 19th Century—there are no restraints, whether budgetary or imaginative, which is something very few other creative mediums offer.

Characterization

Establishing characterization in audio dramas can be a tricky business. Let's say your script calls

for a suave British male of the James Bond variety. If this were a television or film production, a fitting actor who looked the part would be cast. They'd then "sell" the performance based on their appearance and style of delivery. Yet, in an audio drama, that doesn't entirely hold—instead, you have to rely on an actor's voice and their line delivery alone to make the scene work. It's often said that a good actor can read the dictionary and make it interesting, but it's important that the dialogue for your audio drama is polished. It's crucial to make dialogue sound authentic in *any* dramatic writing, but the importance of this increases substantially when the audience's only point of reference is the spoken word. Also, try to make sure no two characters sound alike. In the real world, people have different speech patterns. Create characters with different accents, some who speak in slang, and others who pronounce every word with an air of eloquence, and so on… Speech patterns are like fingerprints, and no two are the same. A brain surgeon won't speak like a street gang member, nor will an army drill sergeant sound like a librarian. It's amazing what specific vocal patterns, inflections, phrases, and choice of words can tells us about the speaker, thereby aiding characterization in an audio drama. Always choose your dialogue wisely for each character.

Structure and Acts

Just like how a screenwriter watches movies to hone their craft, or an author reads numerous books, a writer of audio dramas must learn the formatting of their medium. Track down and listen to some classic radio programs. Unfortunately, most of the aforementioned Japanese ones have never been translated into English (outside of some fan-dubs). However, there are tons of older radio dramas that are now in the public domain and are available to listen to for free on YouTube. These recordings can offer an idea of the types of shows that have been done in the past, how their effects were accomplished and the process by which the story was developed. The *Star Wars* audio dramas are also highly recommended.

A typical audio drama episode runs around 24 minutes and contains the standard three act format. Usually, the first act and set up of the story is 5 minutes long, the second act approximately 10 minutes and the last act rounding at anywhere from 7 to 9 minutes. In the case of an hour-long audio drama, the show can be broken down into four acts at around 10 to 15 minutes each.

Unlike a stage production, a writer won't want to linger in any one scene too long. Listening to two characters talk in an office for 10 minutes might not engage your listeners all that much. Keep the pace moving, make all of the dialogue matter, and don't stick to the same location for too long. For example, if your script centers on the last will and testament of a dying man, go to his home and spend some time with the soon-to-be-deceased; then drift over to his office to listen in on his attorney, and

then to the downstairs den with those who stand to inherit a substantial sum from his passing.

It's also difficult to have any scenes centering on a single character. In live-action, you can have a lone detective silently inspect a crime scene while we watch him dust for fingerprints on a murder weapon. In an audio drama, that same scene just wouldn't work. Maybe if the detective had a partner to bounce dialogue back with, or a reporter asking questions, the scene could be reworked to suit the needs of a nonvisual production. The only other alternative is a voice-over, with the character narrating the events.

Key Aspects of the Audio Drama

Similar to a novel or screenplay, each act of an audio drama should end with a hook, which keeps the listener interested in the story. Always conclude these acts with a dramatic high point, the moment where the threat is issued, the music reaching a crescendo, and where the prospect of death, destruction, or general conflict has reached its peak.

Unlike film or television writing, an audio drama writer needs to keep in mind the need for transitions, to segue from one scene to the next. This can be done by scripting musical cues into the actual script. Alternatively, sound effects can be a big help. An example of this would be having two characters discuss taking a plane to England, followed by the sound of an aircraft, which gradually fades down and under the dialogue that follows.

Speaking of sound effects, few elements are more important to an audio drama's script than proper use of effects, oftentimes abbreviated as SFX. This can include sirens, gunshots, doors, footsteps, etc. Always choose your effects carefully, and take caution not to overload your script with them.

And, finally, let's not forget *vocal* effects. If a person's voice needs to be altered for whatever reason in the story, there should be a written note of it made in the script. Let's say your character is shouting in a cave, then it's a good idea to mention that reverb should be added to the voice. In another instance, a character may be on the phone, which would call for the use of a filter to give it an authentic vocal effect, making it sound like the voice is coming from a receiver. Make no mistake, little details like these can go a long way in furthering the professional quality of one's audio drama.