

## **See You at Midnight: A Crash Course in Radio Theatre**

**By Dianne Ballon**

*An earlier version of this article was published in the newsletter of the Association of Independents in Radio.*

I have been teaching a crash course in radio theatre as a guest instructor at the University of Maine at Augusta for over ten years. I work with students in the audio recording class. In three classes, students are asked to write a script, create sound effects, and record the drama. We start at 6:00pm, the class ends at 10:00pm, and I never get home before midnight. Most students stay, and we are able to record all of the dialogue that first night. Then later, interested students will take on the mix as an independent study. I bring excerpts from the student works for all to hear at the National Audio Theatre Workshop.

I start each class with an audio presentation that encompasses the elements of radio theatre. Because good audio production is an integral part of the process, I talk about recording and mixing techniques. For example, I describe the recording process and play sound effect artist Tony Brewer demonstrating the sound of thunder at the National Audio Theatre Workshop. The effect is done by filling a balloon with BB's, blowing it up, and giving the balloon a strong shake.

The sound of thunder is much louder than the sound of his voice describing the effect, so I record in two takes, setting each level. Then I splice the two recordings together. Tony describes the effect, and then we hear the thunder. The thunder is so real it knocks our socks off every time we hear it.

I like to demonstrate how difficult it is to record in the field. So I play my unedited recording of the wind howling through a partially open window with two unwanted sounds: a car driving through and chickadees that land in a tree next to the window. Although any bird watcher would expect chickadees in the winter, others would associate the sound with summer. Here I am trying to record a cold, wintry sound, with

singing chickadees. Welcome to our noisy world. Be prepared to roll more tape so you'll have more material, to choose from.

### **Getting Our Hands Dirty with Sound**

Whenever we need the sound of water, i.e., large tubs of water, we call on the maintenance crew. Once we dumped dry sticks and leaves on a tarp in the studio, set up a stereo pair of mikes and rehearsed till we were "walking through the woods." The best sound was the breaking of dry sticks under foot, but with every added take, we were running out of sticks!

We run microphones and cables down the hall and out the door to record cars in the parking lot. We communicate by cell phone. I'm in the control room talking to a student in his car who is getting ready to perform the "car door slamming." "After you hang up," I say, "Do a five-four- countdown, and then slam the door. All quiet for 5 seconds, and then call me back."

I keep a journal about each class: what works and what doesn't, noting the humorous moments and the unusual avenues we take to create sound effects. I remind students that the microphone does not always "hear" the same way we do. And, because of this, we often have to come up with other objects to create the sound we are after.

Like finding that old typewriter:

*We pull out the old electric typewriter from the tech room to get the teletype sounds for the newscaster. The machine sticks and we are delighted by the stuttering.*

Creating the sound of a church bell:

*We needed the sound of a church bell ringing. We tried hitting the keys of an electric piano but that sounded too "electric." Then we walked around the studio hitting every object in sight with different implements to find a bell tone.*

*I'm not sure which student thought to test out one of the old metal desks that happened to be in one of the tech rooms. He slid out the metal partition in the drawer, used the eraser end of a pencil, and struck the partition. Close, but not quite. Then he hung the metal partition on a mike stand and struck it. We now had our bell.*

Breathing inside a Spacesuit:

*Nate performed the "Breathing inside a Spacesuit" sounds which were so good I want to dub off a recording. But the students thought he sounded like he was snoring, so we did a Take 2 which was much less raspy.*

Needing the sound of soap bubbles:

*This was another sound I worried about pulling off. At first I envisioned sending someone out for straws and all blowing into the same bowl—but not very hygienic. Cancel that. Then when I was mentioning it to Jared, he happened to be drinking from a straw and started blowing into it. Sounded great. So, we took a break and sent Joni down to get some soft drinks and straws.*

*I set up the students in a circle around an omni-directional microphone. What we needed was 3 solid minutes of blowing bubbles. I told the students that they had to start one after the other, so that when each person takes a breath, they don't all take a breath at the same time and stop all the sounds. Worked out beautifully. My only regret was that we didn't take a photo. All heads, paper cups and straws leaning toward the mike.*

The sound of clothes rustling, achieved more specifically:

*Peter, a small skinny guy, was asked to do the "clothes rustling" sound. We needed the sound of the character in the script "taking his costume off."*

*First I had Peter use April's gray wool coat, but we couldn't get any recognizable sound. Then, he used a leather jacket but the zippers and snaps sounded too harsh. Then I said, "Skip the zippers and the snaps and just take off the jacket. When you finish taking it off, lift it over your head as if you are pulling it over your head. Then step out of it with your legs."*

*The motions were choreographed as he imagined climbing out of the costume. He was very focused and not embarrassed at all. Even between takes, when I asked him to add this or that, he was wonderful.*

Thus, are the efforts of creating sound effects. And finally, perhaps one of my favorite stories, was the time we needed a "slap on the back":

*Two students volunteer: Miles who is short and Seth who is 6 feet tall. Miles reaches up to slap Seth on the back. I'm in the big room. Miles & Seth are in the isolation booth. I ask the student engineers in the control room if they are ready. Not quite. "Okay," I say, "let's rehearse, to hear how it sounds." Slap, slap, slap.*

*Too much high end, so I ask Seth to put on a jacket. Only now it sounds too dull, so we experiment with the force of the slap. We decide to record with the jacket on, and then with the jacket off. Miles is grinning from ear to ear, but Seth looks through the glass as if to say, you've got to be kidding me.*

*At this point the student engineers are ready, but remember, they are new at the mixing board. This means a sound check could take up to 15 minutes. Slap, slap, slap.*

*When we finally finish, we applaud and give Seth the night off.*