

## **So You Want to be a Radio Star?**

### **The Max Reinhardt Workshop for Stage, Screen and Radio**

Ryan Ellett

Some radio stars - notably “first generation” stars such as Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Burns & Allen - cut their teeth and learned their craft during grueling years on the vaudeville circuits. Their school was that of the proverbial hard knocks, honing their skills in front of audiences night after night. However, for those not so lucky to ease into radio with such prior training there was always the old-fashioned way to learn a trade: school.

For those unable to jump into radio (or theater or film in the example we’ll look at here) as effortlessly as the legends mentioned above, it was time to get down to the dirty and tedious work of practice, drill, and training. One place would-be Jolson’s could go to build the repertoire of skills necessary to survive in showbiz was the Max Reinhardt Workshop for Stage, Screen and Radio in Hollywood.

By 1938 when the Workshop was founded, Max Reinhardt had cemented his place in theater history and was just five years from the end of his life. Reinhardt (christened Max Goldmann by his parents) was born in 1873 near Vienna. By the age of seventeen he was acting under the name of Reinhardt and would continue to work on the stage until his death in 1943, fifty-three years later. His accomplishments, which include “search[ing] for a functional playhouse,” “his methods of repertory” and “ways of preparing and rehearsing a play,” are notable in the world of theater but of little interest to the old time radio community.

Radio fans will be most interested in Reinhardt’s Workshop, a mere postscript to an illustrious career. Reinhardt founded his Workshop in 1938, the year Germany occupied Austria and confiscated his property. It’s unclear how long Reinhardt ran the business, but he passed away in 1943 so it couldn’t have been more than five years, two or three years seems reasonable.

Luckily some documents remain from that effort thanks to a former student of the Workshop, Adah Clarke. Adah Clarke has left little information behind. A Google search turns up no performance credits for her in any medium. However, the University of Kansas Department of Theater and Film has a scholarship named after her and their archive has the papers that inspired this article.

Clarke’s notes and documents date from 1939, the second year of the Workshop. Likely they date from the fall of 1939 based on the dates of scripts found therein. The collection does not include anything that gives a clear overview of the entire Workshop curriculum. We can infer that it consisted of specific training in television production, radio production, and motion picture technique. Interestingly, the surviving papers don’t indicate specific training in stage craft, Reinhardt’s specialty. There are notes concerning props, lighting, and scenery, as well as some play scripts so surely straight stage preparation was included in the classes.

The Workshop gives contemporary old time radio fans a glimpse into the voice skills necessary to compete for aural gigs. The radio production class included instruction by men who had illustrious radio careers: Mel Williamson (*Family Theater*), Barry Kroeger (*They Live Forever*, *Joyce Jordan*), Norman Fields (*NBC Theater*, *Shadow of Fu Man Chu*), and Hans Conried (spelled Konrad in Clarke’s notes, but likely she means

Conried based on the working relationship he had with Welles at the time) (*My Friend Irma*, many others). This crew could certainly teach an aspiring thespian a lesson or two.

Williamson was the regular instructor for the course and the other three showed up just to work with students on specific skills. Fields and Kroeger focused on dialects and Conried fine-tuned their foreign accents. Students had to perform three dialects and two character parts to the instructors' satisfaction before being allowed to tryout for any network programs.

In addition to voice practice, students of the Workshop also had to memorize nine pages of industry terms, approximately 350 in all. The knowledge had to be automatic and to ensure that, they practiced "with one student in the control room and one at the microphone" to simulate real-life scenarios. Further, there was a page of 27 gestures the students had to recognize such as "increase volume," "is the program running according to the planned time schedule?", and "start at the beginning of the musical number."

The groups' radio play practice appears to be primarily straight material. Scripts include a student-written play about the French Revolution entitled "Madam Guillotine" and a Ben-Hur adaptation. Also used was a short back-and forth dialog between two actors practicing their lines labeled KHJ audition script. No comedy here.

To underscore the importance of voice training to the radio art, practice materials included mini-scripts for no less than thirteen dialects: Spanish, juvenile, southern, Irish, Yiddish, cockney, negro, character (about 75), heavy man (a racketeer), Chinese, French, Italian, and Swedish. Remember, Clarke said competence in only three was the minimum requirement. Also thrown into the notes was the following:

From the depth of the dreamy decline of the dawn through a notable  
nimbus of nebulous noonshine,  
Pallid and pink as the palm of the flagflower that flickers with fear of the  
flies as they float,  
Are the looks of our lovers that lustrously lean from a marvel of mystic,  
miraculous moonshine . . .

And so it went for another fourteen lines. Surely this was to build diction fluency.

Another crucial component of any acting training - especially radio - is perfecting one's standard English pronunciation. Thus, Reinhardt's Workshop included a course on speech taught by a Miss Darkin. This one course had a 91-page syllabus filled with lists of words representing each of 28 possible vowel sounds and approximately 16 consonant sounds. Additionally, it contained multiple pages of drills for the student to master appropriate vocalization of each sound. Extensive use was made of the Aiken Resonator Scale for this instruction and drill.

Clarke notes that special attention was given to course participants "who had a heavy Southern accent and drawl," "the nasal twang of Missouri," and "the Brooklyn accent." Similarly, foreign students (which included one from Australia and Holland in late 1939) were given extra attention in mastering common standard English vocabulary. Correct speech was never perfected; continued work was required of both new and advanced students.

Workshop participants topped off their hard work with the opportunity to watch Orson Welles and his *Campbell Playhouse Theater* cast in person as they rehearsed their programs. This allowed them to see "[professional actors'] problems, their temperaments,

and the methods used to bring about a fine radio performance.” Scripts in Adah Clarke’s papers indicate students viewed rehearsals for the following programs:

The Campbell Playhouse

“Lost Horizon”

Broadcast on December 3, 1939

Guest: Sigrid Gurie

The Campbell Playhouse

“There’s Always A Woman”

Broadcast on December 17, 1939

Guest: Marie Wilson

The Campbell Playhouse

“A Christmas Carol”

Broadcast on December 24, 1939

Guest: Lionel Barrymore

It seems reasonable to assume they also watched rehearsals of December 10’s production of “Vanessa.” In addition to having the chance to see the great Welles at work and the noted guest stars, Clarke and company got to see the talents of Everett Sloane, Edgar Barrier, Mary Taylor, Georgia Backus and Frank Readick (misspelled Reddick in the script for “There’s Always a Woman”).

This work paid off for the Workshop participants as they later got to take part in a broadcast of *Calling All Cars* and other smaller productions. Such experience allowed them to acquire Social Security cards and AFRA (American Federation of Radio Artists) membership, “which [was] impossible unless you [had] a definite assignment on a sponsored network show.” Max Reinhardt’s relationship with CBS is unclear but all Workshop work was done for CBS because Reinhardt leased all equipment and building space from the network. Whether the students made careers for themselves beyond these fleeting aural productions is unknown. I could find no records for Adah Clarke (later Adah Clarke Hagan) and she names none of the other up-and-comers.

Beyond the radio work outlined above, Reinhardt’s workshop included training for stage, television, and film (led by William Dieterle and open only to advanced students). Additional training was provided for props, lighting, and stage production. Clarke’s papers included one drawing for a production costume so this may be another area touched on during the classes.

Clarke’s “final exam” was a pantomime exercise of Thornton Wilder’s “Happy Journey.” Upon successful completion of this task Reinhardt gave her the green light to be placed with an agent for professional stage and motion picture productions. While it seems that her career may not have amounted to much, she became the first of the Workshop cadre to appear on television, performing in the same play before “experimental cameras” on station KHJ at some later point.

The Workshop for Stage, Screen and Radio likely was not a highlight of Max Reinhardt’s storied career. Probably it kept him involved in the entertainment industry and kept cash in the bank account. But for young would-be professional actors it offered

an opportunity for top-tier attention and training with individuals who were and would become staples of the Golden Age of radio. Even if Adah Clarke never acted again after this period, the experiences and memories of the Workshop surely stayed with her for the rest of her life.

Max Reinhardt Workshop Collection, Department of Special Collections, MS 10q,  
Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries.  
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