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**ARCH OBOLER:
WAY AHEAD OF SHAKESPEARE
(Part One)**

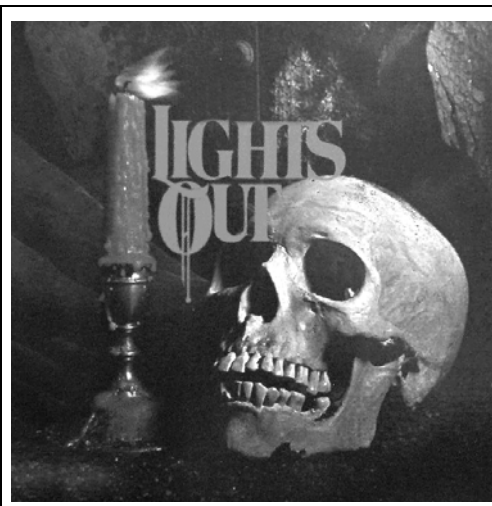
by Martin Grams, Jr.

Fans of old-time radio best remember Arch Oboler as the man who wrote and directed the silo-of-blood programs called *Lights Out*. Late at night, so children couldn't hear them, they gushed from Chicago's WMAQ and were beyond doubt the most goose-fleshing chiller-dillers in air history. But during World War II when the horrors of war kept many children from sleeping at night, Arch Oboler used the same medium that made him known among the radio community to write, produce and direct many short-run series of propaganda for the war cause.

By September of 1939, Arch Oboler had accomplished an amazing feat. He had written some two hundred radio plays in the last five years. (He wrote his first radio play in 1934). He cast many of them and directed some of his scripts while standing on a table so the actors could see him. Unique about Arch Oboler were his many unmistakable marks of genius. His inspiration was the music of the masters and during many recorded interviews, Oboler admitted that he listened to classical music while he wrote his scripts. But amid the correct mufti of staid Radio City,

according to an issue of *Time Magazine*, "he sported Hollywood-style polo shirts, violent jackets and unpressed bags" of personal belongings. One of those bags included a pet horned toad until it died after overdoing a diet of worms.

Oboler's first major assignment for radio was writing a bundle of estimable playlets he turned out in 1934-35 for the *Grand Hotel* program. This got him a job at NBC writing for Rudy Vallee's variety hour, as well as occasional offers to write scripts for *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*, starring Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. (Oboler was the scriptwriter to the famous "Adam and Eve" skit that led – in part – to actress Mae West being banned from radio). Then came *Lights Out*.



From 1933 to 1936, Wyllis Cooper wrote and directed the Chicago-based, late-night radio program *Lights Out*. Each broadcast opened with a deep, dark, dank voice instructing listeners to put their lights out and settle back in their chairs, whereupon gore would commence to flow, bones to snap, screams and groans to rowel the air. *Lights Out* was a sound-effects man's paradise and is probably the only radio program ever broadcast that has

received so much attention to the detail of sound effects. On one occasion the audible illusion of a victim's hand being smashed on an anvil had to be achieved. Everything was tried from slapping a pork chop with a cleaver to pounding wet paper with
(Continued on page 3)

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2009 Convention Schedules

At this time we have not been made aware of any upcoming OTR Conventions

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RETURN WITH US NOW...

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a hammer. At last came triumph: a lemon was laid on an anvil and struck with a small sledge. (This particular sound effect, often described as “the melon and mallet,” was spoofed very humorously during the opening scenes of George Lucas’s 1994 movie, *Radioland Murders*).



Wyllis Cooper

It was during 1936 that Hollywood called upon Wyllis Cooper to visit the Sunshine State and write movie scripts. Cooper welcomed the opportunity to write scripts for the movie studios. He wrote the story for the 1939 matinee serial *The Phantom Creeps* and the 1938-mystery movie *Mr. Moto Takes A Chance*. Cooper also wrote the screenplay for *Thank You, Mr. Moto* in 1937 and supplied additional dialogue for the 1937 movie *Think Fast, Mr. Moto*. But it was Universal’s 1939 production of *Son of Frankenstein* that did him in. Apparently Cooper did not like his experience at Universal when he discovered that he had to keep rushing across the studio lot to perform numerous frantic rewrites while the movie was being filmed at the same time. Talk about a rush job! Cooper later incorporated his experience in the semi-autobiographical episode of *Quiet, Please* entitled “Rain on New Year’s Eve” from December 29, 1947. (For anyone curious about the proper spelling of Wyllis Cooper’s first name, it was originally Willis. Sometime during early 1940 he changed his name from Willis to Wyllis to please his wife’s numerological inclinations).

Back in Chicago, NBC spared no expense at finding a replacement for Cooper so half a dozen script writers began writing half-hour dramas between 1936 and 1938 until Arch Oboler collected a batch of eerie-minded fan clubs and curdled more next-door neighbors than any program NBC had to offer. His first script for the series, “Burial Service,”

was considered so grisly that NBC received many letters of protest from listeners who were upset after they listened to the drama. The story involved the burial of a little girl and her after-life thoughts as her casket was being lowered six feet below the surface. Certainly not for the timid.

After two years with *Lights Out* (which incidentally was never called *Lights Out Everybody* as some reference guides continue to title the series), Arch Oboler left the series in other hands, feeling that not even he could top the high in horror he had by then achieved. NBC billed Arch Oboler their “Number One Wonder Boy” because of the large amount of scripts he was able to compose in such a short time so on March 25, 1939, NBC premiered the first of what would become eighty broadcasts of *Arch Oboler’s Plays*. Broadcast from New York, this dramatic anthology featured supporting actors Raymond Edward Johnson, Ray Collins, Martin Gabel and Frank Lovejoy in weekly character studies of human fallacies.

For the broadcast of June 3, 1939, Raymond Edward Johnson played the starring role in “Steel,” a ten-minute drama originally performed on Rudy Vallee’s *Royal Gelatin Hour*.

According to an interview with Raymond Edward Johnson, the highlight of his radio career was the time he was asked by Arch Oboler to play a Hungarian steelworker. Oboler had initially written the script for Paul Muni but ended up selling the script with Johnson instead. “This was in Chicago,” recalled Johnson, “and I made my first trip to New York to do the monologue and the response was sensational. It was the first time in the history of programming that they applauded over the station break and into the second half of the program. I received twenty-five telegrams from people I didn’t know, long distance calls – and the fan mail broke all records for the program.”

“Steel Worker” was broadcast on Rudy Vallee’s *The Royal Gelatin Hour* on June 16, 1938. One year later, Arch Oboler pulled out three of his ten-minute scripts from previous variety programs and featured them as one, half-hour broadcast of *Arch Oboler’s Plays* on June 3, 1939. Raymond Edward Johnson reprised his role for the same script, now abbreviated to the title “Steel.”

Sixtyish Alla Nazimova, Stanislavsky-trained Ibsenite and cinema siren, had been won to radio. Having heard Oboler’s experimental radio plays; she contacted Arch Oboler and requested him to write a radio play for her. Pleased that Nazimova shared a

conviction that he himself had held for years, Oboler turned out an opus called "The Ivory Tower," in which, for the union minimum of twenty-one dollars, Nazimova made her first appearance on the air. The broadcast of July 8, 1939 was the highest rated broadcast of the series to date and NBC admitted that the radio audience was growing with each passing week.

Seven weeks later, on August 26, Nazimova returned to *Arch Oboler's Plays* for a second drama. For this occasion, Oboler had constructed "This Lonely Heart," a doloroso radio fluoroscopy of the troubled soul of Tschaikowsky's ever-loving patroness, Mme von Meck. As one reporter reviewed: "Grey-bobbed Nazimova took to the microphone like a troupier reclaimed for a Billy Rose floor show, emoted copiously in black slacks in an audience-less studio, wasted wordily away at the finish like a traditional Camille. Mightily pleased with the play, the playwright and a medium, which let her hold most of the stage for a full hour without a single program or sun wrapper crackling, Alla Nazimova let out a secret. 'Always,' she confessed, 'I have hated audiences. Always!'"



Arch Oboler and Tommy Cook

Knowing full well how *Arch Oboler's Plays* specialized in "emotional conflict," and at the request of the writer/producer/director, NBC paid special attention by giving a full hour for the first time, and using the NBC symphony orchestra for the first time in a dramatic show. This was history in the making.

Oboler's friendship with Alla Nazimova went beyond radio productions. Shortly after her two appearances on *Arch Oboler's Plays*, Oboler signed on as a writer-director for the cinema by Frank Lloyd Productions. His virgin effort as a movie

scriptwriter was "When the Door Opened," an adaptation of Ethel Vance's 1939 best-selling novel.

Oboler had to co-write the script with Marguerite Roberts at the insistence of producer/director Mervyn LeRoy, so Oboler could grasp a feel of how to write for the silver screen. (Yes, there is a difference between a radio script and a film script.)

The script was later retitled *Escape* and released in November of 1940 and told the tale of a young man arriving in Hitler's Germany, frantically seeking information about her German mother and finds her pending execution at a concentration camp. At Oboler's insistence, the producer hired Alla Nazimova (who appeared in seventeen movies between 1916 and 1925) to play the role of the struggling mother, billed during the movie's credits not as Alla Nazimova, but simply as "Nazimova." This would become her first screen role since 1925. The film won critical reviews proving Arch Oboler could be a success in both mediums – radio and the silver screen.

In Hollywood 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 whenever 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 was named "Aeire," a stream that according to the blueprints would run through the Oboler living room. It was on 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 – especially 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 curtailed for the serious "actor" spread through Hollywood. The roles were

true human-interest stories, complex rational thoughts, and in demand by actors both of starring vehicles and supporting.



Lights Out studio - Chicago

For 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 of a dictator to 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 thousands of feet under 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 Ronald Colman was guest in an adaptation of “The Most Dangerous Game.” Madame Nazimova reprised her role for “The Ivory Tower” on March 23, 1940. Most amusing 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 – who can do nothing but endure his tomb-like existence and 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. 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,” the true accounts as reported by Ernie Pyle. Actors Lloyd Bridges, Edmund Gwenn, Franchot Tone, Paul Muni, Eddie 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 person or persons unknown who (knowing or unknowingly) cut out the proper *Arch Oboler’s Plays* opening 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” were 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 pre-empted to the week ahead after the announcement of F.D.R.'s death – of which many radio programs were pre-empted on April 12.

Although Arch Oboler is best associated with the radio series *Lights Out*, his true contribution to the war effort during the early forties and his professional relationship with Bette Davis will be the subject of part two in the next issue.

From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany



Well, here we are in December with the last issue of RWUN for 2009 in hand. This has been a different kind of year for most of us including your editor. We have all had many ups and downs this year. We have lost many of our OTR friends, both performers and fellow aficionados.

It is my sad task to let you know that we have lost a fellow RHAC member and prolific contributor to this newsletter and others. Dr. Charles Beckett passed away last month leaving us all a little poorer for the loss of his deliciously insightful and wonderfully provocative articles. "Chuck" was one of our most loyal contributors. He will be missed.

Good Listening to all...

Christmas Gifts for OTR Characters

Have you ever wondered what your favorite OTR character would want to receive for Christmas? Here are some ideas for Christmas presents to delight the hearts of some of our OTR friends:

- For:*
- Mollie McGee** - A neat, well-organized hall closet
 - Luigi Bascombe** - A surprise visit from Mama
 - Effie Perrine** - A dinner date with Sam
 - Stella Dallas** - An invitation for Christmas dinner at daughter Laurel's home
 - Connie Brooks** - A date with Phillip Boynton without MacDougall the frog.
 - Jimmy & Judy Barton** - The Silver Star!
 - Lorenzo Jones** - A patentable idea
 - Clark Kent** - A portable phone booth
 - Larry Noble** - A hit play
 - Margo Lane** - An engagement ring from Lamont
 - Dagwood Bumstead** - Book of 1001 sandwich ingredients
 - Betty Cooper** - A date with a handsome new boy
 - Lum & Abner** - Some customers for the store
 - Nero Wolfe** - A newly-discovered unclassified orchid
 - Leila Ransom** - An engagement ring!
 - Joe Friday** - Book of 10,000 facts
 - Kingfish Stevens** - A successful business venture
 - Lt. Walt Levinson** - A year's supply of antacids

Commercial Boners Amuse Listeners (Part I)

By Danny Godwin

If you were to watch a broadcast of a radio program from the studio, you would notice (for the most part) the precision of the sound effects, the lines the stars were saying, and the announcer narrating the commercials for the sponsor. While these programs were usually accurate to the second, you also have to remember that the majority of radio programs during the golden age were presented live--- and since humans were known for making mistakes, the precision was marred with numerous boners and bloopers. To the sponsor's chagrin, many of the on the air screw-ups were by announcers doing the commercials for their product. This series of articles will take a look at some of those flubs that sponsors would rather have us forget.



Arthur Godfrey

The first boner we'll cover concerns a personal favorite of mine. It took place on the September 21, 1939 broadcast of *SUNDIAL*, an early morning program of recorded music and chitchat on station **WJSV** in Washington, D.C. The host of the program was a young man named Arthur Godfrey. He was in the middle of presenting a commercial for the motion picture *The Women*, when he let out a vicious sneeze for all the radio listeners to hear. In true Godfrey manner, he excused himself, let out a chuckle, and said, "**I always wonder what I'd do if I ever had to sneeze on the air..... now I know.**" Godfrey would continue and finish the commercial as if nothing had happened.

Another common human function was the cough. There were 2 boners that featured coughing--- one boner would be the perfect lead-in to the commercial, and the other couldn't have happened at a worse time.

At the end of a newscast, **NBC** journalist Frank Blair's final task was to say his name and sign off. To his credit, he did say his name--- but when he finished, Blair started to cough uncontrollably. Fortunately, his coughing led in to the transcribed commercial for ***Super Anahist Cough Syrup***. Let us hope Blair took some of the newscast's sponsor.

The second coughing boner took place during the late 1950's. During this time, there were rumblings concerning cigarette smoking and health. The last thing any cigarette sponsor needed was a coughing announcer. Unfortunately, the announcer for ***GANGBUSTERS*** did just that! Interesting enough, he didn't start coughing until he mentioned the program was sponsored by ***Kool Cigarettes***.

A very unflattering boner took place during World War II. The commercial was to persuade the housewives to save and turn in used fat. If you're not familiar how or why this was important (and it was **VERY** important), let me explain.

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on that terrible day in 1941, it was a wake up call for the American people. Military equipment and bombs were needed desperately and quickly! With the help of radio and the ***War Advertising Council***, the listeners were asked to turn in various items for the war effort. One of these items was used fat from roasting meat. Once the meat was finished roasting, the housewife poured the meat's fat into a can. Once the can was full, she turned in to the local butcher. From there, the butcher turned in the fat to the government for the making of glycerin, which was used for the production of explosives.

In a nutshell, it was extremely important for the housewives to turn in as much used fat as possible. A commercial of this magnitude didn't need a boner that could antagonize the patriotic housewives. Unfortunately, there was one! The announcer was supposed to say, "**Ladies, take in your cans of fat to your local butcher.**" With a slight twist of the words at the wrong place, the announcer said, "**Ladies, take your fat cans in to your local butcher.**" Fortunately for the free world, the housewives ignored the announcer's comment about their physical features and continued to turn in used fat.

If the radio listeners believed what they heard on a broadcast of the **GILLETTE CAVALCADE OF SPORTS**, the United States was under the rule of the **Gillette Safety Razor Company**.

The program began with the ring announcer introducing the 2 boxers who were to participate on the upcoming bout. After they were introduced, the ring announcer asked the people who attended the bout to stand up for the playing of the National Anthem. The people in attendance heard Francis Scott Key's classic song. The radio listeners also expected to hear Mr. Key's creation. What they actually heard was the anthem of a new regime--- which sounded just like **Gillette's "Look Sharp! Feel Sharp! Be Sharp!"** Jingle.

Since the **Gillette** invasion of the United States never appeared in any history book, it had to have been a boo-boo by the person who pressed the button to play the **Gillette** jingle at the most inopportune time.

Another advertising boner took place on **Columbia's PROFESSOR QUIZ**. This was an unusual situation because the commercials weren't involved. The problem was it was the first show for the program's new sponsor, **Teel Liquid Dentifrice**--- and to "Professor Quiz" (Craig Earl), old habits were hard to break.

On the program, Professor Quiz stated the first contestant would receive a jar of the program's sponsor, **Noxzema Skin Cream**--- which was the **OLD** sponsor. The very moment **Noxzema Skin Cream** was mentioned; announcer Robert Trout corrected Professor Quiz by saying "**Teel!**" What made this boner really interesting, Professor Quiz kept insisting each contestant received a jar of **Noxzema**, only to have a desperate Trout yell out "**TEEL!**" as loud as he could.

When the broadcast came to a merciful end, an exhausted and shaken Trout said this unusual good night to Professor Quiz, "**Good night, Professor..... GOOD NIGHT INDEED!**"

Our final boner for this article was aired over a local radio station. It concerned a flustered announcer reading a commercial for **General Electric** and a woman named Annie. Previous to this boner, Annie was doing her absolute best to distract the announcer--- she would also distract him on this commercial in a big way. While reading the commercial (or trying to), Annie sat on the announcer's lap and gave him a loud kiss for all the radio listeners to hear. The announcer was so flustered, he couldn't continue reading the

commercial. To make matters worse, Annie told him to go on and read it.

If the announcers think they can slip a boner by the listeners without them noticing, they also believed the Brooklyn Bridge was one heck of a good buy. On the contrary, the listeners were very astute at what they heard. If any listener caught an announcer botching up a commercial, it was a good chance that flub will be printed in the "Bulls & Boners" section of **Radio Guide** magazine. We will take a look at some of those boners the listeners caught in Part II of this series next month.



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

As is customary with our library operations, you'll notice that we have no additional catalog entries for December. This gives us a chance to catch up on administrative issues in order to keep our libraries running smoothly.

However, there is a seasonal show currently in our library that I'd like to call to your attention. It's a "Dragnet" episode that to me is one of the most emotional and thought provoking programs that they ever performed. It's called "A Gun for Christmas". It's well worth listening to.

Finally, for the RHAC officers and the RWUN staff, I want to wish you all the very merriest of Christmases and the happiest and healthiest of New Years.



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