

ARCH OBOLER: WAY AHEAD OF SHAKESPEARE (Part One)
 by Martin Grams, Jr.

Martin Grams, Jr. is the author and co-author of numerous books including: The Sound of Detection: Ellery Queen's Adventures in Radio (2002) (reviewed in the Aug. 2003 RWUN), Inner Sanctum Mysteries: Behind the Creaking Door (2003), and the highly-acclaimed The Alfred Hitchcock Presents Companion (2001). Martin's latest book, The I Love A Mystery Companion is due for release on October 15.

Fans of old-time radio best remember Arch Oboler as the man who wrote and directed the silo-of-blood program 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. About Arch Oboler were 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 it on 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*.

(Continued on Page 3)

RADIO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION OF COLORADO

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LIBRARIES

Reference Material:	Bill McCracken	7101 W. Yale Ave. #503	Denver, CO 80227	(303) 986-9863
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Convention Schedules

The Friends of Old-time Radio 28th Annual Convention Oct 23 - 26, 2003 at the Holiday Inn-North, Newark NJ. Our web site will keep you up to date. For information contact Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887 email: JayHick@aol.com, web site: <http://www.lofcom.com/nostalgia/fotr>

SPERDVAC Annual Convention Nov. 7 - 9, 2003 at Hacienda Hotel, Los Angeles, Ca. For additional information visit the SPERDVAC web site at www.sperdvac.org or write the club at : P.O. Box 7177, Van Nuys Ca. 91409

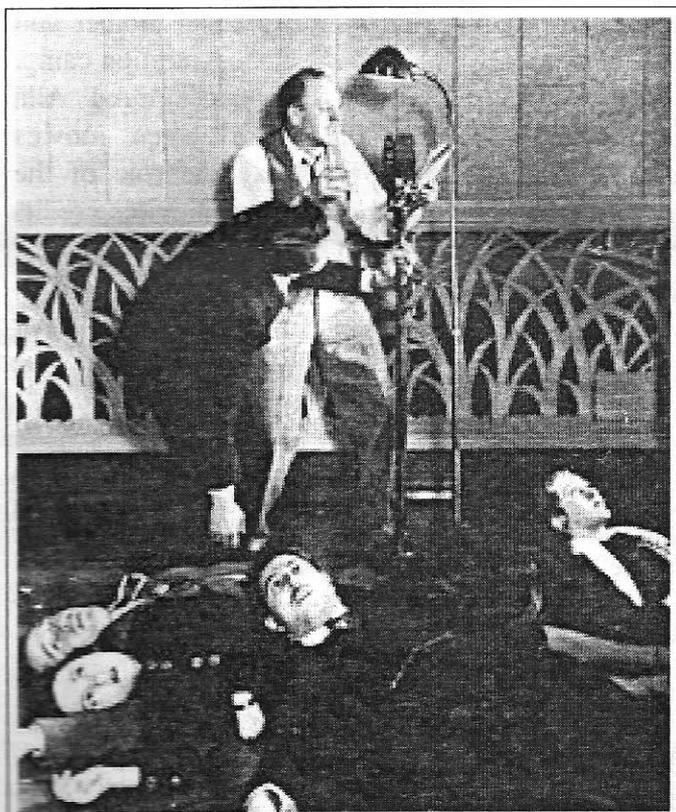
**** See Page 6 For Complete Details ****

18th Annual OTR and Nostalgia Convention, April 16 - 17, 2004; Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence KY 41042 (859) 282-0333 haradio@hotmail.com

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RETURN WITH US NOW...

From 1933 to 1936, Wyllis Cooper wrote and directed the Chicago-based, late-night radio program *Lights Out*. Each broadcast's opening featured 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, and 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 its' 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 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



The *Lights Out!* cast in the mid-1930's. Sidney Ellstrom --- who died a thousand violent deaths during the run of this show -- is at the microphone, about to be done in by an-about-to-expire cast member.

movie, *Radioland Murders*.)

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. *

Back in Chicago, NBC spared no expense in finding a replacement for Cooper. Half a dozen script writers began writing half-hour dramas between 1936 to 1938 until Arch Oboler's collected a batch of eerie-minded fan clubs and curdled more next-door neighbors than any other 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. It was certainly not for the timid-hearted.

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 highs 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 a short time. 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 fluoroscoping 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 trouper 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!'"

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.

(To be continued...)

* 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.

THE SHADOW'S "SHADOW"

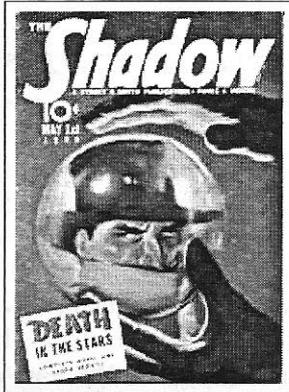
By Bill Kiddle

Was it possible for someone to "shadow" The Shadow? At first blush this situation seems impossible. Evil-doers often stalked *Lamont Cranston* (a.k.a. The Shadow), but could not successfully track a person who "could cloud men's minds so they could not see him." However, events that occurred behind the scenes on Mutual radio during the fall and winter of 1940-1941 may have been an attempt of this network to have Peter Quill, a new crime drama, walk in a "shadow relationship" with the ever-popular Shadow, then in its seventh season.

The first indicator of such a relationship might

be the time slots that they shared on Sunday afternoons. The Peter Quill series, written and produced by Blair Wallister, was heard in Chicago over WGN on Sunday afternoon in the 3:00 to 3:30 time slot, slightly before The Shadow, who was firmly fixed in place at 4:30 to 5:00 CST. Listeners to the Mutual network could hear both great programs each Sunday for 25 weeks, between 10/06/40 and 3/30/41. The interesting relationship ended when Peter Quill left the air in the early spring of 1941.

The second possible link can be seen in the two characters with pseudo-scientific backgrounds. The persona of Peter Quill was well established in the



first episode, "*The Thing That Couldn't Happen*." Quill was pictured as a strange scientific wizard who pitted his genius against "the Red Circle", a mythical sabotage ring directed against America's peacetime defenses. Lamont Cranston used hypnotic powers, learned in studies conducted in the Orient, while Peter Quill is more of an inventor. In the first episode Quill develops a "stethometer", a device used in detecting and detonating the hidden "infernal machines of destruction" planted by a member of the "Red Circle."

The third possible similarity can be found in the unusual events in similar locales. On Sunday (October 6, 1940) Lamont and Margo Lane, played by Bill Johnstone and Marjorie Anderson, went on a vacation to the Old West and encountered more than they bargained for in "*Ghost Town*" when the quest for gold leads to murder. On 12/15/40, Peter Quill, in a tale titled "*Frozen Terror*" visits a small town in which the temperature inexplicably drops to 80 degrees below zero, disrupting communications and finally cutting the limited area off from the world. Quill and his friends Gail and Captain Dom bring a mad scientist and his mysterious freezing device under control.

The types of mysterious adversaries faced by the

two crime fighters was a fourth area of commonality. On many occasions The Shadow tangled with ghostly appearances. In "*The Ghost of Captain Bayloe*" (2/05/39) and the "*Ghost of Caleb Mackenzie*" (1/26/41) Lamont and Margo met some threatening mariners. On Navy Day (10/27/40) in a yarn titled "*The Phantom of the Navy*", Peter Quill meets a friendly ghost in the person of John Paul Jones as they help save the crew of an American submarine from the delayed detonation of a bomb planted by evil enemy agents.

The one program that best ties Peter Quill to the classic mystery genre so well depicted for so many years by the Shadow, was "*Picture of a Cat*" (2/02/41). A noted artist, a painter of animals, is mysteriously killed. His body bears marks indicating that he was mauled by a giant cat. Quill is called into the case when an injured girl swears that a man who turned himself into a cat attacked her. Quill and his friends are trapped by the evil Mago Makasthal, who reveals that he has the power to transform himself into a cat that kills. Shadow fans will long remember "*The Cat That Kills*" (12/31/39); the "*Leopard Strikes*" (1/05/41) and "*Cat and the Killer*" as three fine dramas in which powerful feline adversaries had to be bested.

The Shadow and Peter Quill differed markedly in their relationship to world politics. In those unsettled years before America's entry into World War II, the Shadow remained largely an apolitical figure. Lamont and Margo faced mainly domestic crime perpetrated by evil doers who were advancing their own twisted personal agendas. Only in "*Sabotage*" (1/16/38) and in "*Sabotage in the Air*" (3/05/39) did foreign agents take center stage in the drama. On the other hand, Peter Quill's main thrust was the defense of America from foreign agents, spies, and other traitors.

We probably will never know if Peter Quill was designed to "shadow" the Shadow broadcasts. We do see that both programs did tap into a public interest in stories that focused upon the deep recesses of the unknown. As a result, there is a classic "good news" / "bad news" refrain for fans of old time radio. The good news is that at least 200 episodes of the Shadow have survived the ravages of time and neglect. However, the small band of Peter Quill fans are still waiting in vain for the first transcription disc to be recovered from a dusty archive to bring back to the airwaves the voice of the master scientist turned crime fighter.

*From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany*



It's October again, the scariest month of the year. When you are busily preparing all the goodies for the little ghosts and goblins who inevitably come knocking on your door around the 31st, consider the wonderfully terrifying times we had as children snuggled up under the covers listening to Lights Out and other chillers.

One of the most prolific people involved in creating these classics of the horror genre was Arch Oboler. Martin Grams Jr. has written a masterful piece about Mr. Oboler starting in this issue and continuing next month.

Also in this issue is a great article by Bill Kiddle about Peter Quill. Bill calls Peter Quill "the Shadow's shadow" and makes a very good case for his point of view. Do any of you happen to have any Peter Quill shows in your collections? If so, would you be willing to share a copy? I, for one, would love to listen to some examples of what sounds like a very interesting show.

Finally, I would like to recommend a short piece for your Halloween listening. It is Arch Oboler's "The Dark" and involves one of the classic great sound effects of all time, that of a human being turned inside out. This particular short show still scares me after many years of listening to it.

Have a great Halloween, everyone, and good listening...



New in the Tape Library

by Dick and Maletha King

This month's additions to the CD library continue with the "Fibber McGee & Molly" shows that were aired through the summer of 1941. These shows are from the time when Gildersleeve was a regular visitor to the home on Wistful Vista

We then offer a continuation of the "Richard Diamond, Private Detective" series, with fourteen shows not already in the other libraries.

Finally, we're adding shows from the very popular "Lux Radio Theatre" program on five CD'S with lots more to be offered in the future.

SPERDVAC's 2003 Old Time Radio Convention

Will be held Friday, Saturday and Sunday, November 7, 8, and 9 at the Hacienda Hotel, 525 N. Sepulveda Blvd. El Segundo, CA 90245, near LAX. There is a special rate for hotel rooms for convention attendees of \$59 plus tax per room per night. For hotel reservations call 1-800-421-5900 and mention SPERDVAC Old Time Radio Convention. There is a free shuttle to and from LAX for our out-of-town visitors.

The cost is \$135 for members pre-registered (\$160 for pre-registered non-members) for all three days. There will be prices for individual events for those who do not wish to attend the entire convention. A registration form is on the website at www.sperdvac.org If you don't have access to the internet you can write to convention chair Bobb Lynes, P.O. Box 628, South Pasadena, CA 91031 or call SPERDVAC toll-free at (877) 251-5771.

SPERDVAC will have a program booklet this year. Dealers and clubs are encouraged to submit ads. Advertising rates for our printed program will be \$100 for full page 8½ by 11 (camera ready), \$50 half page, and \$25 quarter page. Contact Bobb Lynes, P.O. Box 628, South Pasadena, CA 91031, iairotr@hotmail.com

There will be a dealers room again this year. Dealers tables are only \$40 per eight-foot table. If you'd like a table, contact Glenn Mueller, 18716 East Aguiro Street, Rowland Heights, CA 91748, Durangokid@worldnet.att.net. Make checks/money orders payable to SPERDVAC.

There is free admission to the dealers room beginning at 1 pm on Friday afternoon. On Saturday the dealers room will be open from 9 am to dinner time.

The latest information on activities and guests will be posted on SPERDVAC's website at www.sperdvac.org On Friday the panels will begin at 1 pm. Friday evening after the banquet there will be two recreations: one by 30 Minutes to Curtain, directed by Barbara Watkins, and one directed by Herb Ellis. Titles to be announced.

On Saturday there will be panels in the morning and afternoon. At 1 pm there will be a performance of radio drama by New Frequency. Later in the afternoon Walden Hughes will MC a panel of singers. Other panels will be announced when confirmed.

Saturday evening there will again be two recreations, one directed by Gregg Oppenheimer of "The Maltese Falcon" as presented on ACADEMY AWARD. Hal Stone will direct the other.

Sunday brunch will be from 9 am to 11:30 am. Plans to be announced.

Go to SPERDVAC's website at www.sperdvac.org for the latest information on activities and guests.