

# Cover Story:

## SPEAKING OF RADIO



Chuck Schaden's Conversation with

AGNES MOOREHEAD

*Agnes Moorehead was called "the first lady of radio drama" and over a twenty year career on the air she appeared on a great many programs. She was Margo Lane on *The Shadow*, the *Dragon Lady* on *Terry and the Pirates*, Lionel Barrymore's housekeeper on *The Mayor of the Town*, and starred in the Suspense classic "Sorry Wrong Number."*

*Agnes Moorehead died on April 31, 1974 at the age of 68. A few years before her death, in 1971, we had a rare opportunity to visit with her and chat about her career.*

I was one of the founders of the Mercury group — Joe Cotten, Orson Welles and I founded the Mercury Theatre.

*How long was the Mercury Theatre on Broadway?*

Well, we started in 1934-35 and 'round about 1937-38, Orson left Broadway and came out to the coast and "Citizen Kane," of course, was done in 1938.

*You were in the film "Citizen Kane" and so was Joseph Cotten for that matter. But just before you went to Hollywood, you were on the "Mercury Theatre On The Air." Were you — inevitably I must ask — were you involved in the "War of the Worlds" broadcast?*

Yes, in the background. We were all screaming — the women. You see, he used all of the people that he had — a nucleus of Mercury Players — he always used them. We were sort of a stock company and we'd play leads or we'd play anything that he wanted us to play. You had to be rather versatile to be in

with the group that Orson used. And, you had to be rather versatile to be in a radio show that I did for eight years — "The March of Time."

*You played Eleanor Roosevelt on that series.*

I was the only one that was allowed to.

*What is the story behind that? How did they select you?*

Well, before I had permission, she negated all of the people who were impersonating her because they were lampooning her. She had a strange kind of voice quality and they would — you know — lampoon her voice. And she got rather tired of it and said no one was supposed to do this. But, she was in the news so much that the people who were at the head of "March of Time" wrote to her and asked her if it would be possible to use her on the "March of Time." She said, "Well, I'll have to interview the young lady who is going to do me and I also want a record of how she sounds."

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AGNES MOOREHEAD

And so I made a record and I was interviewed by Mrs. Roosevelt and she approved of me and she said, "This is the woman. She's the only woman that I will allow to impersonate me."

*How many times did you impersonate her?*

Oh, many times. Constantly. She was in the news a great deal at that time.

*And this was broadcast from New York?*

Yes, in the thirties.

*You must have been really busy, because at the same time you were playing on "The Shadow" with Orson Welles.*

I played probably — I averaged, I would say, five shows a day. And many times it was seven or eight.

*Soap operas?*

Everything.

*Adventure programs?*

Everything. From the beginning of the day to the end, because, at that time you must remember, there was a repeat of shows. You'd go on one time for the east coast and then another time for the west coast.

*When you went to Hollywood with Orson Welles and Joseph Cotten for "Citizen Kane," you appeared in a number of Orson Welles productions.*

I was with him for seventeen years.

*It must have been an interesting partnership.*

Terribly exciting, and a great privilege to be with him.

*How did you manage to keep up a very active radio career in Hollywood, while at the same time getting involved in so many —*

Well, I was the only one allowed to do this. I went under contract with Metro Goldwyn Mayer and they didn't want any of their people to go on radio. They wanted to have control of anything that one would do outside — recordings or radio. But, I was on radio when I went under contract and I said, "Well, I don't —." They said that actors didn't have the knowledge or the taste or the judgment to be on the right kinds of shows. And I said, "Ohhh? Well —" and then I named all the shows that I was on and said, "I don't quite agree with you." I guess my argument was so strong that they said, "All right, we'll allow you to go to do radio right along with your contract." So that was the reason that I did so much radio.

*How did you manage to fit it all in?*

Well, it depended. It sometimes was Saturday, sometimes Sunday, sometimes late at night.

*Your broadcasts, you mean.*

My broadcasting, yes. And, of course, you must remember that after you finished a picture, you sometimes had lay-



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offs of weeks that you didn't do a picture, there wasn't a picture available. You were still under contract, you know, but you were free to do pretty much what you wanted to do.

*Has there ever been a time in your career that you have been out of work, not of your own choosing?*

Oh, yes, plenty, plenty. I starved when I was first in the theatre. That was very difficult, very difficult. And, I remember out in Hollywood, as far as that's concerned, I believe there was one time that I didn't work for eleven months.

*Can you recall your first radio role?*

Yes. It was over KMOX and KSD in St. Louis, Missouri and I was called "The Girl Baritone."

*"The Girl Baritone"?*

Yes! That was before you! But that was the first radio and that was at the time when they had those crystal sets.

*Did you ever do any radio work in Chicago?*

Yes, but not anything that I had to stay here to do, a particular series. I was just guesting. I played a great many radio shows that I can't remember. As a matter of fact, when I would do radio, you know, and do so many shows per day, I couldn't tell you what I played in the morning.

*The role, of course, that you and so many of your fans all over the world remember is Margo Lane on "The Shadow."*

Yes. Well, I was the first one. That was when Orson was in "The Shadow" and they wanted a girl to come in and play his girlfriend or his good girl Friday or something of that sort, and they asked him who he wanted and he said, "Agnes Moorehead."

*How long did you play on "The Shadow"?*

Oh, I can't remember how long. It was quite a while. As long as Orson played it, yes. And I think it was longer, too, because (after he left) they brought someone else in.

*What about "Sorry, Wrong Number"? How did they decide that Agnes Moorehead was the right person to play an invalid?*

I don't think they decided at all. The script was written for me. By Lucille Fletcher. And it was presented to me and I started to read it. And it was so nerve-racking that I thought, "No one will listen to this." Because it just unnerves you as you go along with the story. Bill Spear was the director and he asked me what I thought of it and I said, "Well, it's a howling story. It'd be kind of fun to do because, you know, it's a *tour-de-force*." So, we went on the air with it. And the first time we went on the air, they got so excited at the very end that they didn't do the right ending. The men were so excited that it kind of frustrated the actors and the sound. There were a great many people who had been listening in and they called in and said, "What is the end of it? Tell us the end of it!" So, in about five weeks, I would say, I repeated it. Then, it was almost a command performance. I did it eighteen times on the air.

*You made a recording . . .*

Then I made a recording of it for Decca and then I did it on my one-woman show. I did about seventeen minutes of it on my one-woman show and I did that for quite a while.

*I want to thank you for doing it. It was terrific and everyone who has ever heard it thinks it was magnificent and great.*

They use it, you see, as a sort of study for craft. The craft in that type of



**SORRY WRONG NUMBER** was Agnes Moorehead's tour de force on radio's outstanding theatre of thrills, *Suspense*.

writing and the craft of the acting, which is kind of interesting, in colleges and universities.

*And then they made a movie out of it, too.*

Yes, but I didn't do that.

*Barbara Stanwyck.*

Yes. But it wasn't like the (radio) show. It wasn't, because it wasn't a *tour de force*. You see, the whole thing is all the woman and you should never break it for all those other things. 'Cause

when you break it, then you break the suspense and the whole thing is to keep it on the woman, and she hears all these voices coming in. But (the movie) wasn't made that way at all.

*It was a great suspenseful story and, of course, it was on the radio series "Suspense."*

I played on "Suspense" many, many times. There were some marvelous shows in there.

*You were Homer Brown's mother on*

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*"The Aldrich Family" and —*

— I was the aunt, Aunt Harriet, too, for a while.

*You worked with Jackie Kelk a couple of times, didn't you?*

One of the first things that I ever did, one of the first series that I ever did after "Mystery House" (which was the first series I ever did) was a thing called "The Gumps." I played Min Gump and the boy, Chester, was played by Jackie Kelk.

*As radio was changing to television in the late 1940s, you were on just about every anthology series that was on in those early days, but you were a regular only in the "Bewitched" series.*

("Bewitched" was) the only (television) series I have done. I've done guest shots in various series, but (other than "Bewitched") I've never done a series that I had a definite character to do all through.

*Was it easy for you to make the transition from radio to TV?*

I never thought anything about it. There's lots of times that you can't make the adjustment from the stage to pictures or from pictures to the stage. The only thing that I feel is the difference is the fact of the medium being either small or large. But as far as emotional values are concerned, there's no difference at all. Playing isn't any different and so I never even thought about it.

*Would you say that "Sorry, Wrong Number" was your most exciting radio performance?*

No, no. I've done loads of exciting radio performances. That just happens to be a memorable one. I have done many of them. Many of the ones on "Cavalcade of America," many of the ones on "March of Time." So many were exciting. Every night as far as "March of Time" was concerned, was exciting.

*That was a good challenge for you?*

.. A wonderful one. I had to do all kinds of characters and the fact that you were impersonating a great many people in the news and had to be accurate about them was kind of an exciting thing to do.

*You've made many films. Can you recall which was the most challenging film for you?*

They're all challenging. I don't know of a role that isn't challenging. I've never done anything — it doesn't make any difference what it is — on stage, screen, radio, television, anything — it doesn't make any difference. I think they are all challenging, everyone of them. If it isn't a challenge, why do it?

*You spent about twenty years working in what is now called the "Golden Age of Radio." We'll always be grateful to you for providing so many memorable performances on the air.*

I'm glad they asked me to be on radio. I'm very grateful to radio.

Chuck Schaden's



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