

Turn Off Your Lights... ...Turn On Your Mind

A peek at the life of radio playwright Arch Oboler

BY ERIK J. MARTIN

Lights...Out...Everybody!

Listeners of the thirties and forties are not likely to forget the sinister, whispering command that introduced radio's greatest horror show. Nor are its new generations of fans who dare to play tapes or records of the classic series in the dark. Think some of the show has lost its fright after 50 years? Try it yourself sometime. Just as wine improves with age, "Lights Out," much like a good Universal horror film from the 30s, can still tingle a spine with the best of them.

During its time, the program was so blood curdling that it had to be tucked away in an after-midnight time slot to safeguard the peaceful slumber of children. "Lights Out," featuring popular creepsters of the era like Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi and Peter Lorre, thrilled audiences with its pioneering use of sound effects: one heard decapitations at their goriest, bodies being turned inside out, a woman being drowned in concrete, a decapitated head thumping slowly down the stairs, a revenge-bent dentist ready to drill holes into his victim's body, and perhaps the grisliest sound of them all, the eating of human flesh.

Even more importantly, fans remember the scripts themselves—terrifying tales of

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bodies rising from their graves, movie monsters coming off the screen to terrorize your town, and pulsating, protoplasmic organs growing in gargantuan size—most wrought as monstrous cause-and-effect morality myths and fables of supernatural fate meant to scare the evil out of all of us. And the person responsible for giving people more nightmares than anyone else was a peculiarly named playwright: Arch Oboler.

Oboler was a dwarfish, energetic man with dark hair, thick, horn-rimmed glasses who, it was said, preferred wearing casual polo shirts, unpressed pants and a fedora hat in the stuffy, business-suit-only world of radio. Though he looked about as intimidating as an English sheepdog, behind the power of his pen, Oboler terrorized a nation every week on the super-heterodyne with his horrifying yarns, and went on to revolutionize the medium in the process.

Oboler was born in post-turn of the century Chicago to parents Leo and Clara Oboler, and grew up with aspirations of becoming a naturalist. In his bedroom he kept a variety of animals, from turtles and salamanders to snakes and scorpions, always fascinated by the animal kingdom. He sold his first story, about a zoo, at the tender age of ten. Later, while attending the University of Chicago, he submitted a science fiction manuscript to NBC called "Futuristics" as a joke to see if the net-



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work would actually buy it. To his surprise, NBC gave him \$75, and used it as a salute program during the Radio City Music Hall opening ceremonies in 1934.

Oboler soon found steady work with NBC and quickly became one of the most prolific penmen of the airwaves, landing writing jobs for "The First Nighter Program," and "Grand Hotel." Before he knew it, he was scripting sketches for the biggest names in Hollywood: Don Ameche, Henry Fonda, Joan Crawford, Walter Huston and Edward G. Robinson, all who were thrilled to appear behind the "Grand Hotel" mike with an Oboler script, even for union scale (\$21).

Faithful to his Windy City roots, Oboler worked in Chicago, buzzing about the NBC-based Merchandise Mart on a daily basis. In the same building worked another

curious radio author, Wyllis Cooper, who was making waves with his fifteen-minute overnight sensation, "Lights Out." Cooper founded the program, and along with writer Ferrin N. Fraser spearheaded the writing and production for two years until 1936, when he departed the series after an illness. This opened the door for Oboler to produce his own show. With innovative sound effects and memorable tales, he brought "Lights Out" to an all time high, continuing the tradition of Cooper the visionary, who happened to be Oboler's favorite writer.

Oboler's very first "Lights Out" play, "Burial Services," almost got him blacklisted from radio for good. It depicted a woman buried alive while her griev-

ing relative watched. Audiences, to say the least, were shocked. Other highlights of the series include "The Chicken Heart," "The Dark," and "Cat Wife," starring Boris Karloff as a frustrated man whose cruel wife turns into a human sized feline.

"Lights Out" fan clubs popped up across the country, and ratings skyrocketed. Everyone seemed to be loving the "Lights Out" craze—everyone, that is, except Arch Oboler. The writer was simply all horrified-out after two years on the show. He wanted to expand his horizons and earn notoriety for other creative facets besides his morbid storytelling.

He had already begun to delve into side work with writing stints for "The Rudy Vallee Hour." His play, "Rich Kid," excited Vallee enough to repeat it several times on his show and prompted a long

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friendship between the two that led to more performances of Oboler plays on the Vallee program. With his previous imaginative work for NBC, Oboler had so impressed the network that in 1938 he was invited to christen a new program, "Arch Oboler's Plays." "Lights Out," meanwhile, died.

But the new series made Oboler a household name, bringing weekly radio drama to the collective ear of the country in all shapes and genres: fantasy, satire, mystery and tragedy. It was his work on this program that earned Oboler the reputation of having perfected the art of monologue and stream-of-consciousness storytelling for radio. He was rewarded later in 1938 when his play "Alter Ego," starring Bette Davis, was chosen as the best original air drama of the year. Oboler's all-time favorite story even made it to broadcast, a one-hour dramatization of "None But the Lonely Heart," starring the famous Russian actress of the time, Alla Nazimova. It was also during this time that Oboler found a star to cast in the lead of his life: Eleanor Helfand, a sweetheart from his college Alma Mater. For their honeymoon, they toured all of the haunted houses in New England.

1940 was truly Oboler's year. By this time, he had already authored more than 400 plays, and later in the year became the first radio dramatist to publish a body of scripts, "Fourteen Radio Plays" (several other published script compilations followed over the years). Though "Arch Oboler's Plays" had begun to flicker in popularity after only two years, Oboler jumped ship to Oxydol's "Everyman's Theatre," broadcast on Friday nights. That same year, he even landed a three-and-a-half year contract as author-director in Hollywood, and penned the screenplay for the film "Escape," adapted from Ethel Vance's best selling anti-Nazi novel.

By 1942, however, audiences of "Everyman's Theatre" simply weren't tuning in. It seemed that the time was ripe for the resurgence of radio horror. And with the United States now involved in World War II, Oboler, now financially strapped, seized the moment. "Lights Out" was reborn, this time on CBS for a full 30 minutes on Tuesday nights.

Murder and gore was rampant again on the airwaves, but with the Fascists and Nazis creating a very tangible fear, Oboler began to concentrate more on horror verite, or realistic terror: stories, for example, about sadistic Nazi generals struck by grisly fate and physically and psychologically wounded soldiers struggling to stay alive.

He perpetuated these subtle, patriotic themes in a new side venture, "To the President," a fictional series in which a citizen would address a wartime issue to the U.S. Commander in Chief. By 1945, Oboler's work had earned him another of radio's top accolades, the Peabody Award for radio drama.

"Lights Out" didn't last much longer, however, and as the golden age of radio began to fade, Oboler found himself back in Hollywood. His film "Five," depicting life in a postnuclear future, was released in 1951.

In 1952, he directed, wrote and produced the screen hit "Bwana Devil," the world's first 3-D movie (yes, before 1953's "House of Wax") utilizing a new polarized process called Natural Vision, which garnered him the inaugural award of the Academy of Stereoscopic Arts and Sciences for his realistic techniques employed in the film.

In the 1960s, Oboler Productions brought its proprietor much producing, directing, and writing work, including "Night of the Auk" (a science fiction play he wrote for Broadway), the teleplay "Af-

rican Adventure,” “The Bubble” (another 3-D film released in 1966 that failed at the box office), “House on Fire” (a 1969 thriller novel), and the motion picture “Domo Arigato” in 1973.

Oboler had unique eccentricities that only add to his rich legend. Many remember him prowling around New York City in old clothes, always in search of new plot material. Stories would sometimes come from sleeping dreams, or by listening to the classical masterworks of great composers. It was rumored that Oboler kept a horned toad in his studio as a sort of mascot that

eventually died of overindulgence. Those who collaborated with him recall Oboler standing on a table in the radio studio—not in the control room where directors usually reside—wearing big, bulky earphones and pointing, always, pointing.

In an interview with Chuck Schaden several years back, Oboler said he “challenged the listener to remember the (television) play that moved him a week ago.” In radio, however, Oboler has “had listeners remind me of plays that they heard 40 years ago. (One man) told me a story that I wrote that I had completely forgotten. It was done that long ago and it stayed there in his neuron, so to speak, because he gave of himself when he listened to that. In radio...you give of yourself, you’re part of



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communication.”

In 1987, Arch Oboler died at the age of 77 due to heart failure following a stroke. Millions revere him as the real voice of radio drama—the man who stirred the embers of patriotism with programs like “To the President” during World War II; the playwright who brought of lump to our throats with heartwarming morality plays like “The Ugliest Man in the World;” and the architect of anxiety who literally got away with murder on the infamous “Lights Out” series. ■

NOTE: An Arch Oboler *Lights Out* drama, “Murder Castle” will be broadcast on *Those Were The Days* May 18. See listing on page 23 for details.