

50th Anniversary of 'Suspense'

Radio's Outstanding Theatre of Thrills

BY JOHN DUNNING

Suspense, "radio's outstanding theatre of thrills," was first heard on CBS June 17, 1942, starring Charlie Ruggles in "The Burning Court," by John Dickson Carr.

It was on the air for the next twenty years, under many talented directors. Each brought his own mark to *Suspense*, making it one of the most diverse, unusually broad-based shows of the air.

A breakdown:

June 17, 1942: *Suspense* premieres as a 30-minute summer thrill show, Wednesday nights, CBS, sustaining. Charles Vanda, producer, then William Spier.

October 27, 1942: Becomes a part of the regular CBS fall lineup, Tuesday nights. Spier is producer-director; scripting is by John Dickson Carr.

August 21, 1943: To Saturdays.

September 2, 1943: To Tuesdays.

October 12, 1943: To Tuesdays.

December 2, 1943: To Thursdays. First show for Roma Wines. This basic format lasts for almost three years. The last Roma show is November 20, 1947.

November 28, 1947: To Fridays, sustaining.

January 3, 1948: *Suspense* goes into a 60-minute Saturday-night sustaining format. Robert Montgomery is host. William Spier continues as producer-director until February 21, 1948, when he is replaced by Anton M. Leader. The hour-long format lasts until May 22, 1948, when *Suspense* goes off for the summer.

July 8, 1948: *Suspense* returns to its old Thursday-night time slot, sponsored by Autolite and directed by Anton M. Leader. Leader leaves June 30, 1949, and Norman Macdonnell becomes director. (Spier is producer during the Macdonnell era). On August 31, 1950, Elliott Lewis becomes producer-director.

August 27, 1951: To Mondays, Autolite sponsor, Elliott Lewis, producer.

June 7, 1954: Last Autolite show. Moves to Tuesdays June 15, with Norman Macdonnell as director. Sustained.

September 30, 1954: To Thursday. Anthony Ellis, director. Sustained.

February 22, 1955: To Tuesday.

July 11, 1956: To Wednesday.

September 25, 1956: To Tuesday.

November 4, 1956: To Sunday, with William N. Robson as director-host. Finishes its long run **September 30, 1962**, as a Sunday show. Bruno Zirato, Jr. takes over as director in 1959, leaving midway through the final year. Fred Hendrickson directs for the remainder of 1962.

In the early years of William Spier's reign, some unwritten rules were established that served as rough guidelines through the entire twenty-year run. *Suspense* dealt in life-or-death situations. That element was usually established within the first few minutes. Then, through characterization and audio coloring, little touches were added to heighten the sensation of impending doom. That was what suspense was all about: The slow tightening of the knot.



PREPARING the first hour-long *Suspense* show in 1948 are, from left, Robert Montgomery, narrator and star; producer William Spier; music director Lud Gluskin.

The thrill of the nighttime; the hushed voice and the prowling step. The crime that is almost committed. The finger of suspicion, pointing perhaps at the wrong man. The stir of nerves at the ticking of the clock. The rescue that might be too late, or the murderer who might get away. . . . Mystery and intrigue and dangerous adventure. . . .

Another of Spier's rules was that the murderer rarely got away. He also believed in staying close to home, with realistic themes and common-man heroes. No science fiction or ghost stories for him. *Suspense* featured tales of people in trouble. Human emotions were stretched to the breaking point, and the solutions were withheld until the last possible moment.

But Spier was also one of radio's most flexible directors, and he occasionally broke his own rules with great effect.

The two-part Orson Welles show, "Donovan's Brain" was to become a classic of science fiction.

Spier's "House In Cypress Canyon" was the story of a young couple who encountered a werewolf in their newly rented canyon home; today it ranks as one of radio's ultimate horror shows.

"August Heat" propelled Ronald Colman into a date with fate and a madman with a knife — a chilling sequence foretold in an inscription on a tombstone.

"The Dunwich Horror" retold H.P. Lovecraft's tale of an ancient race returned. The popularity of the dark side led Spier to try one or two such dramas a year. But, for the most part, he stayed with the tried and true everyday situations that had suddenly gotten out of hand and become extraordinary. Situations like Ernest Bowers' auto accident, sending him into a coma resembling death. This little piece of fiction became the show "Dead Ernest," and a race with time against an embalmer's knife.

By far the most famous of all *Suspense* plays was an exaggeration of everyday life. There was nothing supernatural about "Sorry, Wrong Number," except the



ORSON WELLES starred in the two-part "Donovan's Brain" on *Suspense*.

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intensity of Agnes Moorehead's performance. She played the invalid Mrs. Elbert Stevenson with such terrified emotion that it left her collapsed across the table at its conclusion. It horrified the nation when it was first heard May 25, 1943, and each of the seven additional times it was aired. And yes, Miss Moorehead admitted, it even scared her.

It concerned Mrs. Stevenson's troubles with the telephone. Connected to a private number by mistake, she hears two killers plotting the murder of a bed-ridden woman. Her efforts to get help by phone are frustrated. Operators pass the buck; the cops seem unconcerned, and Mrs. Stevenson's mounting hysteria only adds to the problem. Too late she realizes that the murder being planned is *her* murder. A scream, a thud, and the phone drops to the floor. Mrs. Elbert Stevenson's final agony is lost in the wail of the 11 p.m. train passing just outside her window.

Even in "Sorry, Wrong Number," Spier broke a rule. The killers got away, adding the final wedge of horror to an already terrifying show.

"Sorry" became nationally known as radio's ultimate murder show. So intricate was the correlation between Miss Moorehead's lines and soundman Bernie Surrey's effects that a great bond of respect developed between them. Just before air time, they would clasp hands for good luck, and Miss Moorehead would organize the same battered, pencil-notated script she had used for the first broadcast. During one performance, she drank ten cups of water, yanked off her jewelry and shoes, and pulled out her blouse and collapsed on the table when it was over. The intensity of her performance led to her title "the first lady of *Suspense*."

Under Spier, *Suspense* was known as an "actor's theatre," and he built a reputation as "the Hitchcock of the air." There were usually only a few hours of rehearsal before shows: Spier liked to see the stars



ANTON M. LEADER, *Suspense* producer-director.

tense as they stepped before the microphone.

People like Cary Grant, Fredric March, Charles Laughton, Humphrey Bogart, Lucille Ball, Olivia De Havilland, Gregory Peck, Peter Lorre, Henry Fonda, and Orson Welles headed the casts. Many top film stars asked to return for encore performances.

Spier wasn't afraid to let people be creative, and it didn't matter whether they were highly paid film stars or staff musicians and sound men. Bernie Surrey, *Suspense* sound effects artist during those days, was given a wide berth in creating the background for the exotic plays. He researched "Donovan's Brain" for almost three weeks before coming up with his impression of what a severed brain, kept alive in a tank and still experiencing powerful human emotions, would sound like. Surrey was also allowed to improvise on the spot if a suggested effect wasn't working or if something needed additional emphasis.

Spier worked closely with musicians Bernard Herrmann, Lucien Moraweck, and Lud Gluskin, earning the latter's expressed admiration as a director who understood music, sometimes better than the musicians.

Early in the show, a general format was established and stuck throughout. *Suspense* opened to the ringing of soft churchbells intermingled with stinging music. By the fall of its first year, Joseph Kearns, a grim-voiced fellow known as "the man in black," was abroad as the narrator. That stuck through the Roma Wine years, with Truman Bradley (another of radio's most distinguished voices) doing the commercials.

The man in black had disappeared by the time the show went to 60 minutes in 1948. Robert Montgomery, then the host, also acted occasionally in the dramas. During this time Anton M. Leader, a refugee from the syndicated *Murder at Midnight*, came on as director. The man in black never did return, though Kearns continued doing a variety of character parts.

Harlow Wilcox became announcer with the shift to Autolite, and big-name guest stars continued to appear. Burt Lancaster made his first radio appearance in a *Suspense* show called "The Big Shot." Fibber McGee and Molly appeared out of character in "Back Seat Driver," a tight little tale about a ride with a killer. And James Stewart gave a powerful performance as a paralyzed war veteran whose sighting of a former Japanese torturer drove him back to health — and murder.

Suspense always had top directors. Norman Macdonnell, who followed Leader, was one of the best in the business, handling *Gunsmoke* and *Escape* as well.

But perhaps the most distinctive *Suspense* work was done by Elliott Lewis. Under his hand, the program turned its emphasis to true material, to ultramodern themes and even to classics. Jack Benny, Red Skelton, and other comics were cast in serious roles. And Lewis, in what must have been a gummy decision, dramatized



ELLIOTT LEWIS, producer-director of *Suspense*.

Othello on *Suspense* in two installments, using Shakespeare's original dialogue, casting himself in the title role, wife Cathy as Desdemona, and Richard Widmark as Iago (though none had ever played Shakespeare), and replacing the usual musical bridges with themes from Verdi operas.

Even in its old age, the show was good. William N. Robson, who took the helm in 1956, opened with a neat mixture of drama and rough-cut philosophy. He became known as "the master of mystery and adventure." The series kept the bells and a variation of the same music to the end.

In its late years, the opening signature was breathed into the microphone in a menacing "And nowwww . . . another tale well calculated . . ." ■

(ED. NOTE — This *Suspense* article originally appeared in *Tune In Yesterday, The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio, 1925-1976* and is reprinted here by permission of the author, John Dunning, who is presently working on an enlarged and revised edition of the book, to be published by Oxford University Press, hopefully by 1994.)