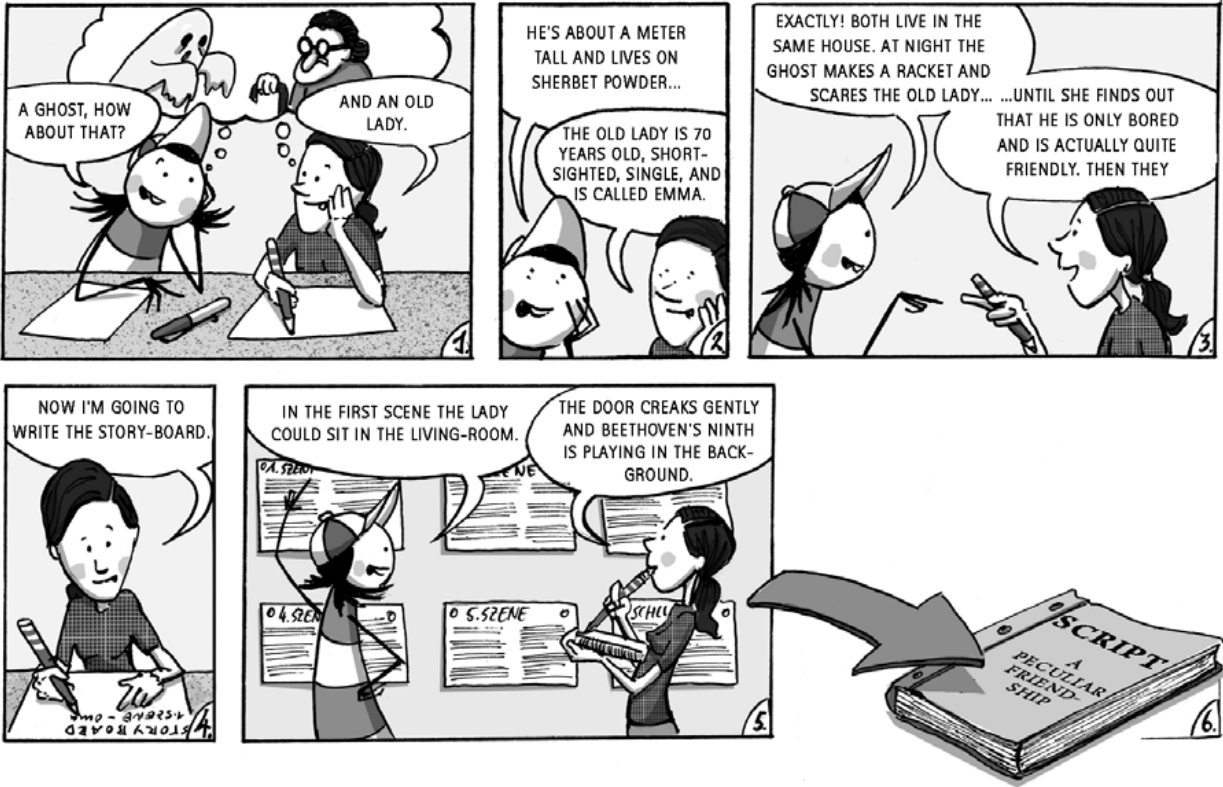


THE RADIO PLAY

PART 1: HOW DO I FIND A STORY?



PART 2: IN THE STUDIO: HOW DO I PRODUCE VOICES, BACKGROUND NOISES AND MUSIC?



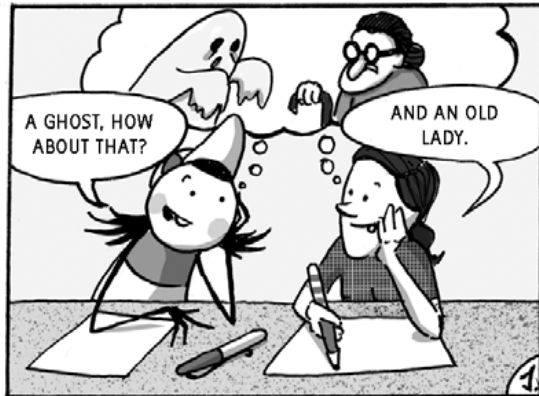
From the Idea to the Final Radio Drama

Developing and Staging the Scenes of a Radio Play: Steps

by Ulrike Werner

Taking a short sequence of dramatic scenes as an example it can be seen how short radio plays (about 5 minutes long) can be created and produced. In this case the radio play is a "drama." That is to say that it has a plot that is driven by means of dialogues between characters.

1. Inventing the story



Each radio play story consists of:

- the basic plot
- the acting characters
- scenes in acoustic spaces
- the sequence of scenes
- tones, noises and music

Developing the Material

For each story you need some "material" to start from. This material is the background or the subject from which the story is developed

Possible Material

- stories that have been passed down (fairytales, sagas or legends)
- historic events (for instance: the change of a village because a factory was built, Christophe Columbus "discovering" America, the first time that women got the chance to go to school)
- social or politic grievances (for example: deportation of migrants from Germany, privatisation of drinking water, biotechnology in agriculture)
- everyday -life together (family conflicts, love and misunderstandings in a multi-storey building with multicultural tenants)

Collecting Material

When you have settled on a topic you start collecting material. How you proceed is very similar to journalistic research.

You collect observations, questions, impressions, episodes. In doing so, possible material sources are: stories, newspaper articles, letters, television reports, court reports, one's own or other people's experiences. Or you think of something yourself – fantasy knows know boundaries!

Looking through/ Sorting the Collected Material

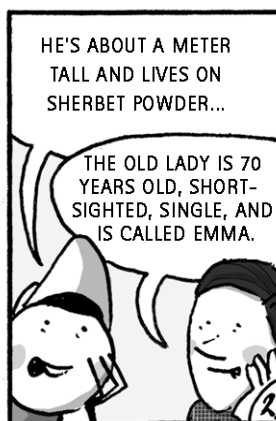
When you have collected enough material and ideas and have written it down and you have everything in front of you, you look through it once more. You now part again from many of the ideas and observations and consider:

- Which character can I imagine particularly well?
- What would make my topic particularly vivid?
- What is particularly fascinating, funny, sad or intriguing?
- Which conflicts/oppositions are there to develop scenes from?
- What is the most important thing for depicting the conflict?

The Characters

Before you begin to elaborate the scenes and write them down, you should develop the characters. You make them so vivid that you can clearly see them, hear them and imagine why they act which way. You even know their life stories.

When you have two main characters it can be worthwhile to have contrary, easily distinguishable characters that impersonate two sides of a conflict. This makes it easier to develop the plot. It helps the listeners to tell the characters apart acoustically.



However, contrary characters do not mean that one character is only good the other only bad. This seems cliché - ridden and boring. But, „contrary” means that the characters act differently because of different interests, life circumstances or motivations.

Giving Names

First of all, you give a character a name. Only when they have a name you can really see them.

Making up a Life Story

Even if the characters only appear in a short scene later on, it helps to create their life story. Where were they born? What kind of family are they from? What was their childhood like? What are their favourite things to do? What do they do? What are their present circumstances? Are they in love, engaged, married? Happily or unhappily? What do they wish for? What makes them sad? Were there key moments? Possibly their behaviour already results from this in the scene to be written.

Peculiarities of a Character, Actions, Special Way of Speaking

Which characteristics do the roles have?

Do they have any quirks or spleens?

What is particularly conspicuous? Are there peculiarities in their appearances?

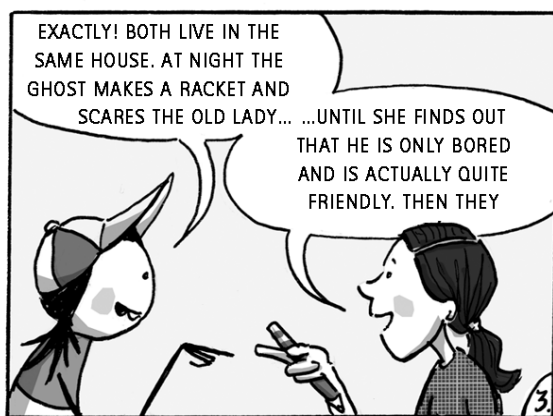
How do the characters speak? With a noticeable accent? Or in a special jargon?

Are there particularities?

Planning a Character's Motivations and Actions in the Story

As a last step in planning the characters you try out how they could react in the story that you are planning. Because you are familiar with them now you can easily imagine their actions and explain them through their characteristics and their personal life story. The character's actions receive their motivation.

The Central Storyline



Each story is based on a central storyline that can be summarised in one or two sentences. This is easiest if the central storyline consists of a problem or conflict that is represented by two contrasting main characters.

Example: Cinderella

Cinderella has to do dirty work in the kitchen although her father is rich. This is due to Cinderella's step-mother who wants all the riches of the house for her own daughters. Although the step-mother puts many obstacles in her way Cinderella wins the prince's heart.

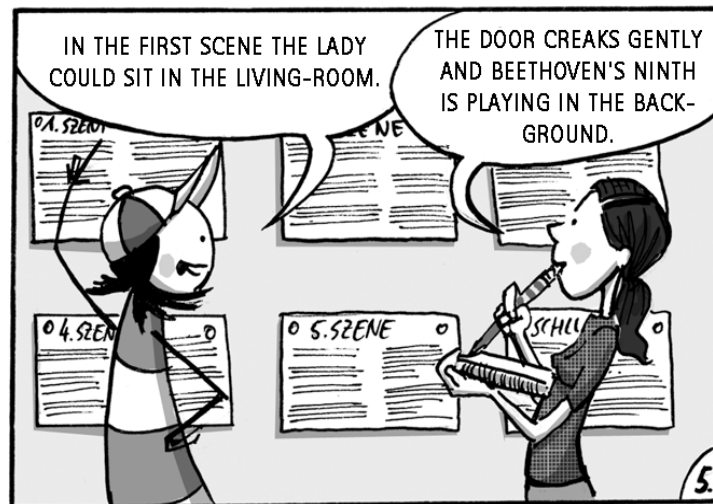
The Story's Structure

A story consists of one or more scenes/episodes that are arranged in a suspenseful order by the "thread". In other words, the underlying central storyline, the conflict is resolved in the scenes. These scenes are told one after the other in a distinct order. This order is also called storyline.

Questions that help locate the storyline: How does the conflict develop, What happens meanwhile, what do characters feel? How is the conflict solved?

An easy and “classic” pattern for the structure of a dramatic story since the Greek antiquity is:

1. Exposition: Introduction to the conflict (scene 1)
2. Main part: conflict is told and is slowly moving towards a climax (scene 2,3,...)
3. solution/denouement: because of the climax a new situation develops, the ending (last scene)



Scenes/Situations

The characters speak and act in a certain situation, at a certain place and at a certain time. This is called “scene”. A scene always takes place at present. Actions in one scene always have consequences that are decisive in the following scenes.

A narrator can be used to “cut back on” scenes by giving summaries.

Questions that Help Develop Scenes and Situations

What is happening? What do the characters experience in regards to the conflict? How do they deal with it? Where are they? Who is there, too? What happens next?
What can you hear in this scene?

Acoustics

When developing scenes you can hear in your head: How do the characters speak? Which noises are there? Is there music that creates a special atmosphere? In which room does the scene takes place? (“kitchen”, “ballroom”, “garden”, “village street” etc.)

Determining the storyline / the order

When the scenes are definite the order of situations is determined. How do the scenes follow each other from the beginning to the climax? Is there a thread to follow?

For a short sequence of scenes (two to three minutes in length) three to four scenes are enough! (exposition, main part, conclusion)

Acoustic Narrative Levels

When planning a scene you put yourself in the listener's position. They only come to know what can be heard.

The most important levels to convey information are:

- the character's dialogues
- the noises, tones /music
- (in some cases narrator)

Character's Dialogues

The characters act with their speech in the situation. They react audibly to each other. Thereby, the situation changes. The listeners learn what is happening through what the character's say. With the dialogue they additionally give the listeners all necessary information that they need to be able to follow the plot. They can also ponder, question and observe and thereby make the situation comprehensible. Sometimes they also read aloud a letter or note so that the listeners know why this or that is now important.

The character's texts should be as short as possible and if possible free of fillers ("just kind of","so", "sort of"). This is also imperative in the individual sentences. This way the dialogues are played best during recording later on.



Narrator

Sometimes it is advisable to create a narrator to summarise scenes or give additional information.

Sound Effects

The narrative level of noises and tones is already developed when the dialogues are.

Which Background Noises are Central, that is, Tell a Part of the Story?

This can be individual noises, like a knocking on the door or the creaking of a tree. But often you can hear a whole array of sounds that is composed to accompany a scene. These compositions are atmospheric background noises as for example: the twitter of birds and the soft ripple of water at a creek, the voices and noises inside a train station; pop music, dishes, voices and steps at a pizza place.

Be Careful to Avoid Planning Too Many Sound Effects!

Too many individual sounds make production more complicated. There is also the danger of overcrowding the story with noise. This means that only the most important sounds should be planned. Easy to produce and very effective are background noises that are atmospheric and that accompany a whole scene.

Deciding on Acoustic Spaces

It helps the listener if acoustic spaces are determined for each scene. By adding atmospheric background noises to the scenes you can make space audible. That is also manageable for production later on.

Example

"in the restaurant", "in the living room", "on the street"

You can also take note if the space is closed or open, if it is in- or outside. That is important for the speech recordings. If you want to represent a small confined space you can create this effect by putting sliding walls, boxes etc. around the speaker.

Producing Noises and Sounds yourself



How do you find sound effects?

There are CDs with noises and tones and you can download sound effects for free online at www.hoerspielbox.de.

But most of the time these pre-produced sounds do not sound as good as noises you have recorded yourself.

You can record interesting noises with the recorder and a stereo microphone inside and outside. You can record "authentic" noises like "the clatter of dishes in a restaurant", "inserting a coin into a machine", or "church bells". You can also record atmospheric background noises: for example "shopping at a supermarket", "the roaring of the sea", "inside an escalator in a multi-storey building".

Many sounds can be reproduced using props indoors or outside. For example to create the ripple of water, you do not need a river or the sea: You can place a bowl of water in front of the microphone and produce noises using your hand or a spoon. Just try it out and listen!

Music



Music directly affects our emotions. Therefore, it is stronger than words and texts. So that the effect that you aim for is achieved you need to listen carefully. Music should be used very sensibly in the appropriate “dosages”. Sometimes texts are a lot stronger when they can be heard without music. However, music can also accent, increase or thwart the effect of texts.

Music can structure a radio play, there can be a main theme, shorter sequences can be played between scenes. Music can create dramatic effects, atmospheres but also characterise roles.

It is nice to have music that is your own work. If someone plays an instrument you can use this. Even a few notes on a xylophone can be more appealing than music from a tape or CD.

2. Production of a Radio Play in the Studio

When the script is finished you can go off to the studio (computer room) with script, props, instruments and recorded sounds. There everything is fed into the computer and then worked on further. For this technical aspect you need some initial training and practice.

Recording

The recording of speech and sounds needs to be practised before recording. This also helps the actors to find their way into their parts. For warm-up you can do breathing and relaxing exercises. You can speak best while standing. If you move you should be careful not to change the distance to the microphone. The technician adjusts the micro during practice because everyone has a different voice! If one scene just will not work it can help to just keep going and then play it again at the end.

To stay on top of things you note in the script how often a scene has been done and which version was best.

In improvised radio plays you can record scene after scene then stop the recording and try and see how it will go on.

Editing and Mixing

For radio play projects you should arrange for sufficient tracks so that you can easily mix and overlay.:

- at least two for speech
- at least two for sound effects (individual noises and atmospheric background sounds)
- at least one for music