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**A Race Against Time
Building Community by Adapting Radio Theatre on an Epic Scale for the 21st Century**

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Radio plays, since their inception with Richard Hughes' *Comedy of Danger* in January of 1924, were written to be performed live on air in forty-minute increments, leaving time for advertisements and news updates. A hundred years later, we, as theatre artists and educators, are reinventing this approach with a different scale in mind. Through development of a new work entitled *Flying In the Face of God*, which would become a 10-½-hour radio play, we cultivated a community among our company within our unique producing situation and learned about the radio play producing process. By adapting radio theatre practices that became so necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic, we created a mode of storytelling in which artists can continually revisit and refine the work. This new model for approaching 'works in development' provides opportunities for playwrights, directors, performers, designers, and technicians. It is the hope of authors, Rosenfeld and Sikora, that recap of the process producing *Flying In the Face of God* by Cade M. Sikora will be a valuable resource for others looking to produce works in what might be otherwise un-producible circumstances.

In this approach, unique conditions are the following: the playwright is able to hear the work multiple times; performers are able to revisit some characters or play multiple different characters over time; and sound technicians and the sound designer have the task of recording

and organizing potentially hundreds of vocal tracks, sound effects cues, and pieces of music to fashion the presented piece. The finished product appeals to an audience that is increasingly familiar with podcasting and/or “binging” on storytelling. Lastly, and perhaps most excitingly, we discovered this as an opportunity to produce “un-producible” pieces of storytelling. As theatre educators and professionals in Indiana and Texas, we have the unique opportunity to explore this form of new play development with the support of our departments and the great work of our pre-professional students.

Unexpected Results: The Play and the New Play Development Initiative

It is important to note that Rosenfeld and Sikora did not intend to accomplish many of these outcomes when they set out to create an audio recording of *Flying In the Face of God*. Our objective was to produce the play for archival purposes. The catch to approaching this specific text in any form is its size. The finished radio play is in 26 episodes, spanning over 10-½-hours, and has dozens of historical characters. Simply put, the text is not practically producible by traditional means. A short explanation of how this came to be the catalyst for recording an enormous, dare we say, “titanic” radio play follows.

Flying In the Face of God, is a docu-dramatization set during the only transatlantic voyage of the R.M.S. *Titanic* in April 1912. Sikora’s primary objective was to present, in a dramatic format, many of the historical narratives, weaving them together and connecting the themes the survivors themselves identified in their experiences. It was not written to be presented, but was written to exist, hence its length. During the fall of 2021, Sikora was writing a second draft of the script with Rosenfeld serving as dramaturg. A short read-through of a section of the play with students at Texas A&M University, Commerce in February of 2022 developed into a series of six longer readings over the course of the spring semester.

The readings with a mix of student actors, designers, writers, and technicians were also a way of modeling the collaborative process of theatre. Prior to each of the readings, students were cast among those who expressed interest. In every reading, each student portrayed a single lead character and a variety of secondary and supernumerary characters. Occasionally, students were cast based on known strengths and interests. Because many plotlines in the text are told through pairs and trios of characters, a concerted effort was made to provide variety in the casting to encourage new chemistry between characters from reading to reading. In many cases, a character who was a lead in one reading would feature as a very minor character in another reading. When this occurred, there was the luxury of either casting the same performer or casting a different student, either to simply hear a different take on the character or out of necessity, if the original student performer was playing another lead character that week. This approach allowed the group to hear a wide variety of characterizations and proved instrumental in casting the full recording of the piece.

At the beginning of each reading were short dramaturgical presentations including historical character biographies, vocabulary, and nautical terms. Sikora created a slideshow of the spaces on the ship that ran throughout the reading to help the readers place themselves in the action. At the end there was time for moderated feedback and questions from the students. Thus, the participants were also able to experience a new play evolving from a second to a third draft and witness the improvements their time and energy helped to create.

As a voluntary extra-curricular experience, the student turnout and excitement about the process was delightful. In fact, they asked if they could record a reading of the entire script. By creating an archival recording, the students would have material for reels, the Department would have a record of the activity for both assessment and reference, and Sikora would have a

resource to assist him through further rewrites. Rosenfeld and Sikora spoke with the department and received support for the endeavor. In the process, Rosenfeld used the recording as an opportunity to create a student organization called The New Play Development Initiative which hosts a number of student activities and continues as producer of recording updates to *Flying In the Face of God*.

Audio of the play with a cast of 13 students was recorded over three days in September 2022. Mixed in the Fall semester of 2022, and in January 2023, the original workshop recording was released for students and their families to hear. Re-writes and additional casting took place in Spring and Fall 2023 and Spring 2024. In Summer of 2024, a redux-ed recording of *Flying In the Face of God* was released featuring 13 new voices in addition to the original cast.

Unanticipated Outcomes: Multi-faceted Dramaturgy

Rosenfeld first approached this play dramaturgically as a new work and quickly realized that as a piece of documentary theatre both she and the play needed her to embrace production dramaturgy as well. She not only researched the lives of the historical characters and the impact of the sinking on the world, she also studied the *Titanic* and learned both its architecture and mechanics. This was particularly useful in understanding the point of view of the crew and leadership from both historical and procedural perspectives allowing the actors to translate these experiences into the audio realm.

The size and scope of the script and the ship made it imperative to create a series of spreadsheets that tracked the locations and characters involved in each scene of the play. Then another that tracked each main character's movement on the ship which allowed their arcs to be clearly seen. This assisted Sikora in the script's development by providing the opportunity to see how each of the plotlines were represented and where any holes might exist dramaturgically.

Sikora has spent most of his life with the subject matter and often served as Rosenfeld's first resource. Through him, she was introduced to a number of *Titanic* historical organizations, books, and websites. Rosenfeld then found her way to a number of the passengers' archives both in the United States and England and reached out and corresponded with a number of authors and experts. There were days spent in newspapers' online archives worldwide.

With the number of characters, plotlines, and locations, Rosenfeld wanted a way to visualize the play without storyboarding. She divided a large piece of posterboard into various sections, used colored markers to represent each plot line, and mapped out the passengers' country of origin, religion, class, primary location on the ship, major plot points and finally which, if any, lifeboat they survived in. It became very colorful and very detailed; yet as Sikora began to finish the second draft with added characters and plot lines, Rosenfeld knew this visual would no longer be as useful. It was, however, a great tool to use to both illustrate the world of the play as well as document where the script was when the readings began.

Once the workshop readings began, the dramaturgical casebook proved invaluable not only in providing information to the student actors via slideshows but also to model the role of the new play dramaturg and how that is both similar and very different from the role of a production dramaturg. Not only were the students able to see the accumulation of research and the growth of the casebook, but they also were able to note script changes throughout the readings and into the recording. They often heard Rosenfeld and Sikora discuss not only the possibilities for dialogue changes and evolution of characters but also the continued development of the structure of the play. The next year when Rosenfeld taught a course in Dramaturgy, it allowed her to use this shared experience as an example throughout the semester.

Unrealizable but Reimagined Worlds: The Workshop Recording Process

Flexibility was at the forefront of the recording process of *Flying In the Face of God*. Casting was based largely on the original readings, with some changes to accommodate three new student performers and to avoid as many instances of performers speaking “to themselves” as different characters as possible. To ensure the quality of the recordings was consistent, it was important for Sikora to use the same equipment for each recording taken. Utilizing the seven matching Pyle PDMICR42R microphones leftover from a production of *Vintage Hitchcock: A Live Radio Play* by Joe Landry, Sikora recorded 13 performers by pairing the performers, two to a microphone. He was able to record each pair of actors to a separate audio track simultaneously by running each microphone to a separate input on our Allen & Heath Qu-32 soundboard. Performer pairs were chosen based approximately on voice type.

The university is an Adobe campus and, as such, Sikora had access to Adobe Audition, a program he knew was suitable to mix a dozen vocal performers, music, and sound effects. By pairing performers together by voice type, Sikora made this editing process easier. In voice recording, equalizing and tuning voices in post is a must. Since it was inevitable that performers would have to be on the same audio track owing to the microphone situation, Sikora reasoned that he could save time by EQing two voices together which were broadly in the same range rather than go through the time-consuming process of picking an audio file apart and separating two voices which were very different and then EQing.

The company spent three days recording. While only about 10 hours were spent doing the actual recording, Sikora accumulated 272 individual audio files and approximately 82 hours of recorded audio. This included the dialogue as written, in-the-moment rewrites, adlibs, and flubs.

After Sikora combed through the audio in the editing process, performers were brought back to record pick-ups to accommodate rewrites and to rectify bloopers.

Due to schedule conflicts with students who were active in the readings, three new actors were recruited. This made the dramaturgy even more vital as it provided relevant information for their characters without their need to read the entire script as recording time was limited. Each session began a review of any dramaturgical information relevant to the scenes being read. The recording stopped for questions and explanations as needed. Rosenfeld and Sikora consistently expressed our gratitude to these pre-professionals for being flexible in their collaboration with us on this project.

Within the context of the dramaturgical information, content disclosures were shared first with the cast as they volunteered to participate. These disclosures regard the many difficult topics addressed in the play. In addition to the tremendous loss of life at the ship's sinking, there is discussion of divorce, domestic violence, race relations, and suicide as well as the occurrence of loud noises and gunshots. Time was taken within those moments during the recording to allow the actors to process their emotions as well as their characters. We allowed as many retakes as they requested in order to honor their personal and artistic process.

The final scene of the play consists of the survivors speaking, verbatim, about their experiences aboard the lifeboats and the *Carpathia* as well as their lives afterward. Within the second page of this scene, emotions began to prevent the actors from speaking clearly and in character. When Rosenfeld looked up to see most of the room in tears, she called for a break. Although most had read through that scene previously and the new additions to the cast had been prepared for its content, this is an example of the concerns about material with a truncated, flexible rehearsal process and changing stakeholders. None of the actors experienced the entire

script all at once before and there was a desire to continue to the conclusion. The decision as made to take over the reading with Rosenfeld reading for the women and Sikora reading for the men. The recordings were then made individually with each of the actors during pick-ups.

Conversely, six weeks of rehearsals were saved by not needing to block movement or memorize lines. This allowed us to produce the show over a long weekend early in the semester and not interrupt the department's production schedule. While this is certainly not appropriate or feasible for every radio drama production, this proved to work quite well for this production.

Editing, Presentation, Feedback and Connection

It was always Sikora and Rosenfeld's intention to release this production in three installments, to match the three acts of the written play and the structure Sikora followed as he began importing sound files. Sikora planned to add ambient and very specific sound effects where Stage Directions would be unsatisfying. As he edited this together, he realized that this needed an "all or nothing" approach. What was originally intended to be an archival recording for the students became a radio play of epic proportions. Prior to completing the mix, Sikora produced an audio trailer to drum up enthusiasm and "test the waters" among the student body. The trailer premiered at a department-wide meeting and was met with wild enthusiasm and emotion. The finished recording was over 10-hours in total. This was split into three volumes as planned and uploaded to SoundCloud, from which it was shared with various theatre- and history-oriented communities online.

The feedback received after the release of the initial recording was so useful that it sparked the idea for a redux. There was confusion and difficulty following the storyline due to too few actors playing too many characters. More student performers, including those from other universities, were invited to the project. This also facilitated rewrites Sikora made to more

completely address certain of the plots present in the story. The first recording, which was originally intended to be largely archival, was released in multiple three-hour parts. This proved to be difficult for listeners to navigate, especially when listening in more than one sitting. There are now 26 segments: one for each scene, ranging from about 20-45 minutes each. Though no feedback was given in regard to the included stage directions, Sikora realized during mixing that they consumed *far* too much play time and slowed the overall pace. Although he had significantly edited them prior to recording, they were still too long. For the second recording, he edited and cut anything that was not necessary to the understanding of the action. Throughout all these changes, the dialogue of the script was able to be prioritized over everything. By doubling the cast, splitting up the audio segments, and removing many stage directions, the piece became much more accessible and successful in telling its manifold and complex story.

The dramaturgy was able to expand during this time as well. Rosenfeld began corresponding with a few descendants/friends of some of the passengers while Sikora spoke with a descendant who has authored books on the subject. He also continued research on new findings about the order in which the lifeboats left the ship. As new details were discovered, Sikora began the third draft of the script.

The Redux-ing Process

With more connections made and information available, Sikora adapted the script and then wondered, “Could we adapt the recording as easily as I adapted the script?” It was decided the time was right to experiment with reduxing the workshop recording. The major considerations were how to adapt the recording to be consistent with the adapted script, how to introduce new performers to the process and product, and how to make the published recording more user-friendly

Adapting the recording was a relatively straightforward process. With permission from the original cast to continue editing the project, Sikora knew that editing would be no more complicated than replacing old recordings of dialogue with new recordings. While there would necessarily be changes in timing to accommodate different performances of the same and new material, the overall structure would be largely unchanged. This was true for everything save the middle of Act II. Recent scholarship on the *Titanic* suggests that the lifeboats departed in a different order than was previously believed. Many of these lifeboats contained people represented in *Flying In the Face of God*, and it was important to Sikora that their stories be depicted. The original recording was mixed in Adobe Audition and it was easy to insert the new recordings into that platform. By utilizing the original Adobe Audition files and assets, Sikora was able to rearrange blocks of dialogue and stage directions within a scene to reorder events with the minimum of difficulty. This reinforced the notion that this method of recording and editing new plays suits the playwright immensely insofar as, if the playwright is knowledgeable about the technology, they can restructure their work and *hear* the way it flows without having to re-record or re-create the entire piece.

One major quality of the original recording is that almost all of the performers played as many as 10 or 15 people. While there are only a dozen or so lead characters, there are many more secondary and tertiary characters, each of whom was a distinct person in 1912 and thus a distinct character in the text of the play. While it may not be critical that an audience member be able to identify each of them by name, it is important that the audience understand that they were different people with distinct lived experiences. This was one area of the original recording Rosenfeld and Sikora specifically wanted to improve upon: to make the recording less confusing to the listener who is hearing 2 or 3 important characters voiced by the same person. With

rewrites to the text already taking place, this was an ideal time to introduce new performers. Rosenfeld and Sikora prioritized casting new performers for the roles which were being rewritten and, because the original cast members each performed as multiple people, the original cast members were still used, especially in roles which required limited rewrites. Major revisions with new cast members were recorded at Ball State University, where most of the new cast was from. In each case, they were treated like pick-up recordings: Sikora, the cast member, and an engineer recorded the new material in the sound booth with Sikora giving broad descriptions of the scene and direction. Suddenly, the cast went from 13 to 26, demonstrating the incredible flexibility of this process and also the need for multiple voices.

Usability was a major consideration in going from the original recording to the redux. In addition to the usability concerns about overly long files and segments, Sikora also felt that the pacing of the radio play lagged due to the presence of long stage directions. To remedy these concerns, Sikora and Rosenfeld agreed that the best way to serve the play, audience, and artists, would be to present each scene in the text with a separate audio file. Stage directions were truncated in favor of letting the performances speak for themselves.

Sound effects and retiming pre-recorded dialogue took the place of many stage directions. All in all, three three-and-a-half hours became 26 individual files, ranging in length from a few minutes to just over an hour. This is much easier for a potential audience to navigate *and* gives the creatives the opportunity to “title” each scene for presentation in a way that uploading the entire play at once or in large sections does not. In retrospect, Sikora and Rosenfeld recognized that these were essential steps to adapting *any* theatrical text for radio theatre.

Outcomes and Evaluation

Recording and reduxing *Flying In the Face of God* were mammoth undertakings. What originally was intended to be purely an exercise in archiving a new work evolved into an experiment in producing what appeared at first to be un-producible. The momentum built during the days of recording continued through re-writes, re-takes, editing, and the addition of sound design. An intended archive became a recorded production. Many in our cohort rediscovered radio theatre as an alternative to creating fully staged productions. This is especially beneficial in situations where the collective's time or budget are very modest.

The recording gave our pre-professional students the opportunity to do voice work for the first time and have material to use in their reels. Because of the redux, they now have all had the experience of working with other actors whom they may never meet in person and have witnessed how chemistry can still exist within the scene. It also opens the potential for collaborations with students in other departments such as Communications, Film/Media, and Music.

This model allows any play the opportunity of production whether it is a work in progress, a seemingly "unproducible" closet drama, or previously unproduced works from the archives. Particularly when working with new plays, this model provides an abundance of pedagogical opportunities for all participants. Rosenfeld looks forward to the opportunity to repeat this process with a student playwright and afford them the opportunity to experiment with re-writes and edits much more efficiently--whether that is in the moment during the recording or later during rewrites.

Notably, this also gives the production an opportunity to run longer than the typical six-to-eight performances seen at most universities. Sikora and Rosenfeld originally intended that

the recording be available for a limited run, but when interest continued, the decision was made to make it available indefinitely. In this platform, the playwright and producers are able to make continual decisions together about the availability of the piece, audience, and timespan. It can be listened to with others in an auditorium or alone in the car, at one's own pace and to pause and relisted to a single moment again and again. Audiences can pay a fee or it can be free. Safeguards can be put into effect to prevent downloading and disseminating in order to protect the work and copyright.

As with any theatrical endeavor, there are many future considerations. Perhaps the most pressing has to do with the collective familiarity with a text before it is performed. While an advantage of this model is that it does not take weeks to rehearse and perform a play, conversely, one runs the risk of not being familiar enough with a text. As noted earlier, however, this can often be remedied with dramaturgy.

A century after Richard Hughes' *Comedy of Danger* crackled across the airwaves in 1924, modern storytellers and theatremakers are still using audio-based mediums to tell their stories. By using contemporary equipment and platforms, we are able to continue the tradition of radio drama. Embracing new practices allowed us to be flexible with our storytelling and story creation in a way that was perhaps only imagined in 1924. New Play Development Initiative (NPDI) will continue adapting *Flying In the Face of God* as an experiment with this form. With the newfound knowledge from this process, NPDI plans to produce new and previously unproduced material from the archive very soon. Stay tuned.

Flying In the Face of God can currently be found on SoundCloud by clicking [here](#) or by scanning this QR Code.



Bibliography

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