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Howard Blue. *Words at War: World War II Era Radio Drama and the Postwar Broadcasting Industry Blacklist.* Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002. 440 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8108-4413-1.

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The recent death of Arthur Miller (1915-2005) has been treated as a blow to world theater, and rightly so. But it also severed another of the few remaining links with an age of radio drama unlike any other. The beauty of Howard Blue's volume on this subject is that it seeks to bring this era back to life in rich detail and with an in-depth understanding of the often contradictory trends unfolding at that time. *Words at War* works on a number of levels–as biography, institutional analysis and social history–leading to a layered and intriguing work.

A number of research fields could benefit from Blue's rich description. He reminds us that the "golden age" of Hollywood was also the golden age of radio drama, an era in which the likes of actor Raymond Massey could command a $3,000 fee for half an hour's work (p. 315). For students of mass communication, there is a demonstration of what can happen when the usual economic imperatives behind commercial radio are temporarily modified or even suspended. For students of propaganda there is a useful summary of the themes and issues that government agencies saw as essential to winning the war on the home front. And for those considering the combination of creative and activist work by left-leaning cultural practitioners in the inter-war period, most famously summarized in Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961), Blue provides an interesting overview of where many such writers were headed after the "red decade," and where a younger generation was starting out.

For some time, Aaron's investigation was reputed to be a more-or-less definitive account. However, it is clear today that his liberal and humane approach is not a generational portrait, but more of a sectional one, primarily concerned with New York bohemians and literary critics. Recent works have conducted parallel tasks: Alan Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time* (2002) covers those writers with a more durable relationship to the Communist Party, while Helen Langa's *Radical Art* (2004) deals with "printmaking and the left in 1930s New York." More than forty years after Aaron's book was published, scholars are still piecing together the generational biographies that can serve as the basis for subsequent investigations, unless one is to rely on theory and textual analysis alone. With *Words at War*, Howard Blue has authored a text that establishes the foundations from which further study can proceed, in the form of a collective biography for radio dramatists and their casts.

The volume opens with two short chapters offering biographical sketches devoted to the writers and actors who staffed wartime radio drama. Some, such as Orson Welles and Arthur Miller, need little in the way of an introduction except for the way their radio work is often forgotten against the backdrop of their successes in other forms of cultural production. Others, such as Millard Lampell and Joseph Julian, are seldom remembered today. Yet it is clear from some of their pre-war broadcast output that they shared misgivings about developments in Europe. Chapter 4 is given over to the shared strategy of "expressing antifascism through allegory," when fictitious references to barbarism in unspecified European countries jostled for airtime with H. V. Kaltenborn's gripping reports of the 1939 Czechoslovakia crisis. Even these relatively mild criticisms proved contentious twice over: first among U.S. isolationists and admirers of fascist leadership, who threatened commercial sponsors of anti-Nazi shows with boycotts (pp. 77-78); and later as evidence of the "premature anti-fascism" hunted by the

post-war anticommunists.

Whereas the earliest anti-fascist broadcasts came from the conscience of such figures as Welles and Archibald MacLeish, whose poem "The Fall of the City" was the first radio play written in verse, over time this became a question of policy. A government initiative, the noncommercial show "The Free Company" was aired on CBS with a view to countering nativist sentiment and Axis propaganda, to the annoyance of the Hearst press. As war clouds gathered, Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) to supply accurate war-related information to journalists and to direct a public relations offensive of sorts. The two years prior to Pearl Harbor represented a period of delicate negotiation, as the transition from New Deal counter-crisis measures to war-readiness was accelerated, alongside a careful battle of ideas, attempting to win over skeptical sections of the public who recalled "Great War" propaganda campaigns with disdain (p. 78).

With this basic framework in place, Blue shifts the discussion to the institutional life driving the ideological innovation in radio drama. Directed by MacLeish, the OFF proved unable to simply peddle a government line for a variety of reasons. It existed as a division of the Office of Emergency Management, dividing its time between radio–under William B. Lewis–and an unsuccessful print division (p. 118). Critics such as the *Chicago Tribune* called it the Office of Fuss and Feathers; more precisely, it suffered from a defensiveness in the face of public suspicion and from the suspicion itself. But when things came together, 20 million people tuned in to such shows as "This Is War" or Norman Corwin's "We Hold These Truths," which set out to define common values on the eve of war.

After eight months the OFF was absorbed into the Office of War Information (OWI). Once again, much of the agency's work was ad hoc in nature, with additional controversies over anti-communism to negotiate. Although there was proportionately less on offer in terms of directly produced radio drama, there was an increased consultancy role for the organization. This led to the transformation of the CBS soap "Main Street USA" into the pro-war "Green Valley, USA." Other critical successes included "Passport for Adams," in which a liberal journalist and a more prejudiced photographer discuss the ethics of the war as part of their professional assignments. (In addition, the OWIâs work was supplemented by that of half a dozen private agencies, each of which toed the official line to varying degrees; these receive a cursory treatment in Chapter 7.) Despite these innovations, the OWI retreated from radio production after 1943 and dedicated its efforts to coordinating the work of other propaganda agencies, until its closure at the end of the war.

From here there is a shift in both Blue's treatment of his subject matter and the overall tone of the book. Each new chapter commences with a relevant, sourced quotation concerning the topic at hand and what appears to be a fragment of the opening of a radio script. In a propagandist tradition which, in the United States at least, started with the "Living Newspapers" of the Federal Theater Project, audience members are addressed directly and didactically, as if with a loudspeaker off-set: "Your name is Ernie. It is September 1942. When you first heard about Hitler . . ." and so forth (p. 203). Only when we get to a speech directed at "Irina," who will apparently be answering a questionnaire in New York's Brighton Beach district in the 1990s, does it become clear that Blue is spoofing the vocal style he has immersed himself in so thoroughly as part of his research. This rhetorical device sets the stage for a series of chapters each dedicated to a different theme, evaluating wartime radio's treatment of particular aspects of the war effort. The propagandist intent of such broadcasts is made clear, as each one–despite its entertainment industry format–had a specific purpose in mind for micromanaging an aspect of civilian morale or war-readiness, right down to encouraging the donation of household pets or recycling of unwanted typewriters. Little wonder writer Allan Sloane complained about the frequency with which he was asked to provide scripts with a blood drive theme (p. 129).

Numerous questions of representation follow in rapid succession, concerning the U.S. Armed Forces, the enemy, British and Soviet allies, and issues of racism, anti-Semitism, and the position of women within the war effort and society. Blue reveals in rich texture how these key social questions were mediated through radio drama. Thus, Corwin's "This Is War" series of 1942 continued the tradition of showing "America as a multiethnic patchwork that despite its diversity was nevertheless united" (p. 183). In turn, this emphasis was extended to radio's treatment of armed forces life. When wartime radio drama worked with the grain of the broader assimilationist ethic of the New Deal coalition, it built on existing sensibilities to deliver effective propaganda.

Other aspects of the war effort proved more difficult to manage. In the six decades since the war, it has become clear that U.S. attacks on Nazi racial policies sat uneasily with formal Jim Crow segregation in the South,

providing logical contradictions for critics to exploit. On the one hand, Blue avoids simply drawing the reader's attention to this and complaining of hypocrisy. Instead, he shows a chain of compromises in which committed writers saw their scripts modified to take into account the backward-looking sensibilities of advertisers, southern Congressmen, lobbying listeners, and hostile newspaper editors. Station managers and government censors worked hard to ensure that the professed desire to win the war was not supplemented with radical–or even social-democratic and justice-oriented–visions of postwar life.

The author's descriptions of station office politics, horse-trading, and frustrated aspirations are convincing, yet his tendency to criticize these arrangements from the standpoint of the present day is distracting. It is clear that Blue accepts the necessity of the U.S.'s entry into the Second World War, but this makes his quibbles over its conduct on the airwaves somewhat hollow. Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, in the style of Karl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) and his established theoretical system for warfare before them, were fighting a total war. In Clausewitz's "Trinitarian" model, the armed forces, government and domestic population were equally significant players. If the object of the exercise is to build mass hatred of an enemy prior to annihilating him, then it seems that wartime radio drama was headed in the right direction. Much of what Blue, like most people, finds objectionable today–racial stereotypes of the Japanese, insufficient differentiation between Nazis and Germans, segregation in the armed forces–were deemed necessary to winning a total war. Objecting to particular offensive details seems like nit-picking when much of the book praises the commitment of radio writers and actors to total warfare. Only from the perspective of breaking the war into its components–an inter-imperialist war, an anti-colonial conflict, the Russo-German territorial battle, and so forth–does a selective approach to the propaganda war makes sense. (A tiny minority of New Deal-era writers consistently opposed the war, mainly pacifists and Trotskyists, but they were seldom allowed to broadcast their views, and never as government-sanctioned radio drama.)

To writers such as Blue it often appears that an aspect of "total war" carried on after 1945. Although the nuclear age and "mutually assured destruction" made Clausewitz appear redundant, a battle for hearts and minds took place along anti-communist lines throughout the postwar period. In a single, penultimate chapter, *Words at War* sketches in the details of the broadcasting industry blacklist, relying more on assertion than evidence and often ran as a racket by paid "security clearance experts." Several of Blue's heroes of the early 1940s cave in, naming names under duress or following a change of heart. Others, such as the actors Canada Lee and John Garfield (Julius Garfinkle), meet their demise from heart attacks amid the pressures of this period. While the chapter itself draws on sufficient interviews and archival materials to make an old controversy fresh again, a single chapter does not do it justice (and there is a case for a book-length study of the radio blacklist in equivalent depth and detail). One cannot help but wince to see how the social democratic certainties of wartime propaganda were treated as evidence of un-American activities later on.

Although not the subject of a specific chapter, three related issues inform the book as a whole. The first is the issue of quality: As drama, was it any good? Blue notes the often rushed conditions under which plays were scripted and produced, the sheer volume of work writers were expected to deliver, and the instrumental and often pedantic demands arriving daily from Washington and its appointees. Abstracting from this flurry of distractions, the author compares the voluminous output of both Norman Corwin and Arch Oboler, noting that early critical reviews of the latter indicated that his reputation was unlikely to last despite delivering at least 850 popular radio dramas (pp. 337-338). In contrast, appraisals of Corwin were more positive, although his career went off-track temporarily through a mixture of "graylisting" (pp. 358-359) and disillusion with the commercialization of radio (p. 382). This would all suggest that applying conventional appraisals of dramatic work is not the most productive activity in the face of material that was primarily propagandistic in its goals.

Secondly, the thorny question of reception is handled with panache. What did audiences make of these performances? Thankfully, Blue avoids the assumptions found in many propaganda studies, based on second guessing what an audience thinks and how it responds. He is alert to the way music, sound effects, and the status of radio itself would all combine and contribute to the understandings that listeners would arrive at and the uses they would make of radio. Where the archives are available, he makes it quite clear that audiences were divided between an active minority who sought to criticize the broadcasts and a majority who responded enthusiastically, welcoming either the "gripping" nature of the dramas or predicting big things for their impact on civilian morale. Wisely, Blue notes that the wide range of surviving correspondence is the work of active listeners, albeit

ones living in a society with a greater degree of social engagement than today. He makes no claims that the archives studied are representative of the opinions and conduct of the 1940s radio audience as a whole.

Finally, was it worth it? Did wartime radio matter? According to Blue, who echoes some of his interviewees from the period, it made little direct difference to the outcome of the war. That said, its uneven impact in terms of recruitment, accessible explanations of war aims, and the civilian imagination is almost tangible in this marvelous book. Blue reminds us that the Second World War was as much a battle of ideas as of troops and weapons.

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