ON THE AIR

By James A. Gustafson

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STORY OF THE PLAY

The year is 1937. The Depression grips the nation and times are hard. So hard that WISH Radio in Cincinnati is flat broke. The curtain rises about an hour and a half before the station is scheduled to sign off for the last time. Dwindling advertisers, unpaid bills and relentless creditors have forced the intrepid WISH cast and crew into their most difficult broadcast. As if the financial crisis weren’t enough, dozens of unexpected pratfalls conspire to sabotage their swan song broadcast.

A madcap ensemble cast, an inebriated writer, reunions of lost loves, singing commercials, zany sound effects, a mad mouse, and mystery combine for lots of laughs and a great night of theater. Naturally, there’s happy ending...that’s why the station’s call letters are WISH.

SETTING

The set has five discrete areas. Each is defined by special lighting which draws the audience into the on-stage action. The areas are: the studio; the control room; Howie’s office; the lobby; Margie’s living room.

STAGE DIRECTIONS

The action in all areas is continuous, however, once the lights go off in an area, everything there is done in pantomime. When both the lobby and the studio are lit, the actors in the studio are only heard when the “soundproof” door opens. When the door closes, the pantomime begins. This requires carefully choreographed timing so the actors in the studio have their outbursts and silences synchronized with the door movement.
CAST OF CHARACTERS
(15 m, 9 w, doubling possible)

HOWIE NELSON: Station manager, early to mid-thirties. Hard working but a great guy to work for. He’s the station’s referee and the entire crew likes and admires him because he treats everyone with respect.

ANNIE FLANDERS: Radio actress who plays Lola. Annie is in her early to mid-thirties. She’s a tough but classy “dame.” She’s kind of a 1930s liberated woman but not strident. Annie’s been around but isn’t a loose woman. She’s always in control and lives life on her own terms. She and Howie have been seeing each other so there’s a romantic spark. The others aren’t aware of their relationship.

TREVOR GILES: Radio actor playing Catfish King. Years ago, Trevor was the toast of the London stage. However, as he aged, he refused to accept older roles. With his career crumbling, he reluctantly took a job at WISH Radio. He still assumes he’ll return to the London theater district to star again.

LOUISE: Station secretary and would-be writer, in her mid-twenties. Howie’s Girl Friday. She quietly and efficiently runs things around the station. She’s the shoulder for everyone to cry on. In her own life, all she wants to do is be a radio drama writer instead of just writing public service announcements and commercials.

STAN: Newscaster/Director. Stan’s age could be anywhere from 30 to mid-40. He’s a former newspaper man...a real pro who’s weathering the Depression at WISH. Once the economy picks up, he’ll likely go back to a newspaper as a tough beat reporter.

WINNIE: Radio actress. An older woman in her fifties or sixties. A sweet little old lady, she can deliver dozens of voices and accents. She enjoys being on the radio because she likes fooling the audience with all her sexy voices.
PLATINUM PIPES TUCKER (ARCHIE MONROE): Radio actor/Vaudeville star. As Platinum Pipes, he’s an addle-pated, elderly gentleman known as “The Man of a Hundred Voices.” He’s afflicted with multiple personalities…and every one is left of center. Frequently, for no apparent reason, Tucker harmlessly slips into various characters on his sojourns from reality. In his mixed-up mind he has hundreds of friends that reside in his head. Interestingly, his real identity is more fascinating than any of his imaginary personas.

CARLYLE: Announcer - jack-of-all-trades. Carlyle is a former bank president who lost everything in the Crash. Now a consummate professional, he puts all his energy into being a good radio man. While not particularly outgoing or personable, his work ethic has impressed the others and he’s earned their respect.

CANDI RHAPER: Radio actress. In her early twenties, she’s the baby of the station. She loves being a part of radio. Bubbly and enthusiastic, she hasn’t yet formulated any ambitions, so her career is right where she wants it to be.

TOM: Commonwealth Edison employee, in his early twenties. While he’s not the brightest bulb on the marquee, he’s a nice, hardworking young man. Tom’s happy to have a job and not really thinking about setting the world on fire.

EUGENE: Mysterious visitor who is timid and easily intimidated. If he were more assertive, we wouldn’t have a play.

VIRGINIA: Organist. A sweet, loyal traditional wife of a 1930s marriage, she’s got a secret that could explain a few mysteries.

CHARLIE: Sound effects man. Charlie is an odd duck. For the most part, he lives in a world of his own and does his job without interacting with the others.

TERRY: Radio actor in his twenties. He is overjoyed to get the opportunity to take over doing sound effects.

JANE: Newscaster - radio actress. In her mid-twenties. She’s a serious broadcast journalist but, because the station’s budget is so limited, she has to double as a radio actress and commercial singer.
LANCE: Radio writer, about 35. For a while he was Hollywood's shiny new penny and the hottest screen writer in Tinsel Town. Unfortunately, he became too involved with Johnny Walker and Jack Daniels. When the movies turned their backs on him, he began writing for radio at WISH.

LAMBERNE: Lance's girlfriend. She's a gum-chewing floozy with a heart of gold. She had her shot at silver screen stardom as an ingenue, but never got as far as a speaking part. She fell in love with Lance and followed him to Cincinnati.

ORSON COBB: Representative from the National Broadleaf Association.

MARGIE: Invites Teddy to her house to listen to the radio.

TEDDY: Margie's boyfriend.

MOM and DAD: Margie's parents.

WATERWORKS MAN: Comes to turn off the water.

WATERWORKS ASSISTANT: His assistant.

SPECIAL SOUND REQUIREMENTS
The sound from the studio goes to the house sound system and to small speakers in "radios" in Howie's office and Margie's living room. This makes it possible for the audience to occasionally become part of the broadcast's home audience.

MUSICAL REQUIREMENTS
While the early radio stations had an organ and a piano in the studio, this show can get by with an inexpensive electronic keyboard in an organ-facade. If an organist isn't available, the musical stingers can be a single chord created using one key on most of the keyboards. If an organist is available, the program can be enriched with ad-libbed organ support as desired.

SINGING COMMERICALS
The actors cast as Jane, Candi and Annie should be able to sing in the close harmony that was common in the '30s (and wildly popular in the '40s with the likes of the Andrews' Sisters). The singing commercials can be a capella if an organist isn't available. Two of the songs, "America the Beautiful" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," are public domain. The other songs are simply rhyming patterns and the singer can add any tune.
(AT RISE: LIGHTS up on the right thrust stage. MARGIE is sitting on her living room couch. SFX - Knock on door. Margie jumps up and runs to door.)

MARGIE: (Flirtatiously.) Hi, Teddy.
TEDDY: Hi, Margie. (SHE enthusiastically hugs and kisses HIM. He reacts in surprise and embarrassment.) Margie! What’s gotten into you? Your parents ... I ... MARGIE: Mom and Daddy aren't here. They're out until ten. We're alone.
TEDDY: Are you sure?
MARGIE: Yes! They’re at a Democratic party meeting for President Roosevelt. They love FDR so they'll stay 'til the end.
TEDDY: That’s swell. So, it's OK if I come in?
MARGIE: Of course, Teddy. I thought we could ... kind of, you know, listen to the radio tonight and, well, you know ...
TEDDY: Yeah. "Catfish King, New Orleans Gumshoe" is on later and a new episode starts tonight.
MARGIE: So don’t just stand there. Come on in.

(THEY go in and sit on the couch. Teddy is closest to the lamp and radio. Margie excitedly sits next to him as he nervously fidgets.)

TEDDY: Well, Margie ...
MARGIE: Yes, Teddy ...
TEDDY: Shouldn’t we ... ah ... turn on the radio?
MARGIE: Oh, yeah the radio. (SHE leans over TEDDY and turns on the radio.)

STAN: (Voice on the radio.) The news from Europe continues to be disturbing as Adolph Hitler and his Nazi troops marched through the streets of Vienna, the Austrian capital. (STAN continues under MARGIE and TEDDY.) The German Chancellor led the bloodless invasion after the Austrian government capitulated to Germany’s ancestral territorial claim to the Teutonic nation. British Prime Minister Chamberlain has called for a meeting with the Reichstag to deliver a demand to keep Germany’s expansionism in check.
MARGIE: It’s the news. Isn’t “Catfish” on WISH?
TEDDY: It’s too soon. “Catfish” isn’t on until 8:00.
MARGIE: Well, we have a few minutes to wait.
STAN: (Continues under MARGIE and TEDDY.) The President met with Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, to declare the official U.S. position is to leave European problems to the European nations.
TEDDY: What do you want to do?
MARGIE: I have an idea. (SHE leans over TEDDY and turns off the light.)
TEDDY: Margie, we shouldn’t do this ... I’m afraid your parents will come home.
MARGIE: Teddy, it’s like President Roosevelt says, “The only thing to fear is fear itself!”
TEDDY: Margie ... Mar ... MMMMMMM ... 

(Cross fade LIGHTS to radio studio on stage. STAN is on stage reading the news at the center mic.)

STAN: In domestic news, the New Deal Administration announced up to 25,000 jobs will be created with the WPA’s Tennessee Valley Authority plan for rural electrification.

(LIGHTS in the office area rise. HOWIE NELSON, listening to his radio, hears STAN starting his wrap up. Howie stands, turns off the radio and goes to the studio door. Stan is at one mic. CARLYLE stands behind him reading a newspaper. CANDI is standing by at another microphone. JANE is sitting at the sound effects table editing her copy. Howie cracks open the door. When door opens, Stan’s voice is heard.)

STAN: This has been a news update from WISH radio in Cincinnati, the Buckeye State’s beacon for broadcasting. For in-depth coverage, tune in at ten for our complete worldwide report. I’m Stanley Delong, bidding the Queen City ... good news and good night.

(CANDI stands by mic on SR and sings a cappella.)

CANDI: W-I-S-H ... Raaa-Deeee-Ohhhh ... Cincinnati.
STAN: Now a word from our sponsors.
End of Freeview

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