

## **Selected extracts from Prof Tim Crook's centenary timeline**

(For the full timeline, with archive photographs, please see <https://canvas-story.bbcrewind.co.uk/radiodrama/>)

### **1922**

**First original radio drama Christmas Eve December 24 1922.** Written specially for the BBC by Phyllis M. Twigg under the pen-name Moira Meighn. *The True Story of Father Christmas as told by The Fairy Dustman* was performed live for half an hour with BBC London 2LO. Station director Arthur Burrows playing Father Christmas and flying a plane with thousands of presents, lighting up the imagination of children to meet 'with Santa Claus always in the Hall of Hearts.'

### **1923**

**First season of full length radio adaptations and studio productions of William Shakespeare.** May to June 1923. Devised and directed by Cathleen Nesbitt. She adapted, cast and directed *Twelfth Night* followed by *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. **Followed by the first studio drama of a modern stage play November 23rd 1923. *Five Birds in a Cage* by suffragette playwright Gertrude Jennings.** Five people from different class backgrounds confront and face danger and death when their London underground lift breaks down and they are plunged into darkness.

### **1924**

**First original radio drama written for the adult audience 15<sup>th</sup> January 1924. *Comedy of Danger* by Richard Hughes.** Three people visiting a coal mine in Wales are trapped after an explosion and in the pitch black darkness face death from drowning. Produced around the world and the first radio play broadcast in Japan

### **1925**

**First original full length radio play commissioned for radio and published in book form.** Armistice night November 11 1925. ***The White Chateau* by Reginald Berkeley.** First anti war play about the Great War broadcast by the BBC, later developed and adapted for successful West End stage run and produced for BBC

television in 1938.

**First broadcast sitcom. 1925.** *Mrs Buggins and Family* by Mabel Constanduros who initially performed all the voices in the family. First sketch broadcast 9.47 p.m. 29<sup>th</sup> August 1925 'Mrs Buggins chooses a Hat'. Continued until 1955.

**1926**

**First book on the art and craft of writing radio drama in the world in 1926.** *The Way To Write Radio Drama* by Gordon Lea. He talked of radio plays coming out of 'a canvas of silence like jewels against a background of black velvet, soul speaking to soul, a mental pageantry of colour and delight', where writers could create plays 'in the heart of a buttercup if they so wanted'.

**1928**

**First Radio Science Fiction commissioned by R E Jeffrey, first Head of BBC Drama Productions (1924-29).** Jeffrey wrote *Speed* under the name Charles Croker, most probably X, under the name George Crayton, and commissioned *The Greater Power* by Francis J. Mott.

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**1935**

**The earliest surviving BBC sound archive of a full radio play** is the dramatization of *The Purple Pileus* by H.G. Wells, adapted and directed by Laurence Gilliam for broadcast 6<sup>th</sup> August 1935.

**1936**

**Mary Hope Allen's 'Louisa Wants a Bicycle or The Fight for Woman's Freedom A Rapid Retrospect.'** Tuesday 8th September 1936- an innovative 45 minute drama montaging the characters 'Mary Wollstonecraft , Florence Nightingale, Anna Jameson, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell , Elizabeth Garrett , Millicent Fawcett and others.

**1940**

**First dramatic representation of the rise of Adolf Hitler, Nazism and the persecution of the Jews. 1939-40.** *Shadow of the Swastika* – a nine part series by Igor Vinogradoff and A.L. Lloyd and also published in book form, directed by

Laurence Gilliam.

**1941**

**First regular family soap opera style series. *Front Line Family* for the North American Service** became so popular with service people and families overseas it evolved during WW2 into *The Robinson Family* on the BBC's Light Programme channel from 30<sup>th</sup> July 1945.

**1943**

**Saturday Night Theatre on the BBC Home Service from 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1943 which quickly became established as the most listened to drama programme in BBC history** with regular audiences of between 10 and 20 million- much more than figures achieved by BBC Television in later years. Conceived and executively produced by the then BBC Head of Radio Drama Val Gielgud, brother of the actor Sir John Gielgud.

**Barbara Burnham's adaptation and direction of 'Children in Uniform' by the gay German-Hungarian playwright and novelist Christa Winsloe, 9<sup>th</sup> October 1943.** Explored lesbian love in conflict with Prussian drill and blind obedience in Weimar Republic Germany. Winsloe would be murdered in France along with her gay lover and companion seven months later after being falsely accused of spying.

**1944**

**First broadcast of the ballad opera by the African-American Harlem Renaissance poet and playwright, Langston Hughes. *The Man Who Went To War*** was arranged and directed by D. G. Bridson and broadcast on the BBC Home Service Monday 6<sup>th</sup> March after the 9 o'clock news to an audience of seven and a half million listeners including performances by Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters and Canada Lee. This was the first play by a Black writer and all-Black cast produced for the BBC.

**1946**

***The Dark Tower* by Louis MacNeice 21<sup>st</sup> January 1946. Regarded as one of the most significant and qualitative verse plays in radio drama history.** A parable play on the ancient theme of the Quest, suggested by Robert Browning's poem Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.

**1947**

**The world's longest running stage play, Agathe Christie's *The Mousetrap*, still being performed to sell-out audiences at London's St Martin's Theatre owes its origin to its first incarnation as a BBC Radio playwritten by Agatha as a birthday present for Queen Mary, the consort of King George V. It was broadcast on 30th May 1947 under the title *Three Blind Mice*. The West End theatre run now stands at over 29,000 stage performances.**

**1951**

**The first episode of the full series of *The Archers* broadcast nationally on the Light Programme from New Year's Day 1951 written by Geoffrey Webb and Edward J. Mason- the same writers for *Dick Barton Special Agent* - which it replaced. It is now the world's longest-running drama in any broadcast format. By March 2023 it had clocked up nearly 20,000 episodes.**

**1953**

**First Science Fiction regular series *Journey Into Space* by Charles Chilton beginning Monday 21st September 1953, at 7.30 p.m. on the Light Programme. Ran until 18th June 1958 and became a cult classic in the history of science fiction radio.**

**1954**

***Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas was specially written for radio and first broadcast Monday 25<sup>th</sup> January 1954 on the Third Programme. The one hour and 20 minute production, with Richard Burton's rich voice providing the narration, was produced by Douglas Cleverdon with children's songs and the singing game recorded by the children of Laugharne School. Won Prix Italia in that year.**

**1957**

**Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall* was the poet and playwright's first radio drama broadcast on the Third Programme 13th January 1957. He had been encouraged to write for radio by the BBC Radio Department's script editor Barbara Bray and the producer Donald McWhinnie who travelled to Paris to meet the author of the famous innovative stage play *Waiting for Godot*.**

**1959**

**Harold Pinter's writing career and reputation was established, encouraged and**

nurtured by a series of influential radio drama commissions under the script editing influence of Barbara Bray between 1959 and 1961. *A Slight Ache* was his first for the Third programme on 29th July 1959 and produced by Donald McWhinnie.

**1962**

**Caryl Churchill's first radio play *The Ants* broadcast 27th November 1962 on the Third Programme.** 'Tim, a small boy is playing with his friends the ants.' Caryl Churchill would go on to write a canon of influential radio plays and become one of Britain's leading playwrights with plays premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London's Sloane Square.

***The Long, Long Trail*- a musical feature dramatization with 'Soldiers' Songs of the First World War' devised and produced by Charles Chilton would be the inspiration and basis of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Royal Stratford East musical *Oh What a Lovely War!* which would be later made into an equally successful film.**

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**One of the most successful films of the 1960s *Alfie* (1966) originated first as a BBC Radio Drama production for the Third Programme 7<sup>th</sup> January 1962 with the title *Alfie Elkins and His Little Life* by Northern playwright Bill Naughton.**

**1964**

**Joe Orton 1964 and his first professional drama production *The Ruffian on the Stair* was 'discovered' by John Tydeman in the BBC Radio Drama Department.** Orton gave Tydeman his stage script *Entertaining Mr Sloane* to read. Tydeman introduced him to the agent Peggy Ramsey and it was immediately taken up and produced at the Arts Theatre in London.

***The National Theatre of the Air*- influential BBC Lunch-time lecture by Martin Esslin, Head of BBC Radio Drama in the Concert Hall at Broadcasting House 8<sup>th</sup> January 1964.** Esslin put into words a manifesto for the public service broadcasting values of BBC Radio drama. He explained that whereas the country's National stage theatre produced between eight to twelve new plays each year, BBC Radio originates between four and five hundred.

**1965**

**BBC Radio Drama wins Prix Italia** for Stereophony in a new production of *The Foundling* by Peter Gurney first broadcast 24<sup>th</sup> January 1959 on the Third Programme and produced by Raymond Raikes. This was a verse play and Raymond Raikes received special recognition for directing a new production using the technical and creative positioning of the stereo sound field. When broadcast in 1967, the *Radio Times* credited the sound engineers and even the VHF transmitters.

**1972**

**BBC Radio Brighton and BBC Radio Three broadcast *Oluwale*- the first UK mainstream media dramatization of the racist bullying and persecution of Nigerian migrant David Oluwale in Leeds who died in 1969 after being assaulted by police officers.** The script by *Cathy Come Home* dramatist Jeremy Sandford tells the story of David Oluwale's life in Britain and the first conviction of any police officers in Britain for a racist assault leading to the death of a black man.

**1973**

***Cries from Casement as His Bones are Brought to Dublin*, by David Rudkin first broadcast 4<sup>th</sup> February 1973 on BBC Radio 3, about the life, times, and execution of Sir Roger Casement containing a 'potent brew of explicit language, gay sex scenes and Irish nationalism.'** Director John Tydeman said it was 'One of the best radio scripts ever written.' The *Radio Times* said the play would raise the questions: Is there a parallel between his history and Ireland's? Is there a lesson to be learned from it?'

**1978**

***Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams.** First broadcast 8th March 1978 on BBC Radio 4- 'In which the earth is unexpectedly destroyed and the great hitch-hike begins. An epic adventure in time and space including some helpful advice on how to see the Universe for less than 30 Altairian dollars a day.' It would lead to a television series, best selling series of books and attract a new generation of younger listeners to BBC sound drama.

**The beginning of the Giles Cooper Best Radio Play awards for BBC radio playwrights that would include publication of the scripts annually in volumes published Methuen and running until 1991.** The awards commemorated the writer Giles Cooper who was regarded as one of the most innovative and original writers of radio plays in the post Second World War period.

**1980**

**First broadcast of *The Company of Wolves* by Angela Carter for BBC Radio 3, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1980 and directed by Glyn Dearman,** regarded as one of the most influential and innovative radio plays to re-imagine fairy tales and in the words of Angela Carter herself explore 'the atavistic lure, the atavistic power, of voices in the dark, and the writer who gives the words to those voices retains some of the authority of the most antique tellers of tales.'

**1982**

**First episode of Sue Townsend's *The Diary of Nigel Mole Aged 13¾* first broadcast 5<sup>th</sup> January 1982 in BBC R4 Thirty Minute Theatre.** This would immediately lead to a book contract with the Nigel name being changed to that of his friend Adrian, the release of an instant best-selling book, and launch Sue Townsend on a successful writing career.

**1984**

**First radio drama commission for Caryl Phillips, *The Wasted Years*, which would win a Giles Cooper Award for that year.** This was a seminal play exploring the experiences of the Windrush generation of migrants and their children and first broadcast 12th March 1984, on BBC Radio 4 starring Carmen Munroe Rudolph Walker and Tony Armatrading. The *Radio Times* said: 'A bright 16-year-old, about to leave school, is going through a bad patch. His schoolwork has deteriorated, his conduct is becoming rebellious or that's what Mr Teale thinks ... But Solly is the only black face in the class and that makes all the difference.' This inaugurated a distinguished career of BBC Radio Drama plays accompanying the development of his global status as one of the most significant novelists of his time.

**1987**

**Anthony Minghella's first original radio play *Hang Up* broadcast 19<sup>th</sup> November 1987 on BBC Radio Three would win Prix Italia.** His next radio play, *Cigarettes*

*and Chocolate*, for BBC R4 first broadcast 6<sup>th</sup> November 1988 received a Giles Cooper award. The BBC commissioned and recognised a playwright and screenwriter who would achieve world-wide award-winning success for the films *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1990), *The English Patient* (1996), and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999).

## **1988**

**BBC Young Radio Playwrights' Festival introducing Benjamin Zephaniah as a radio playwright with his verse play *Hurricane Dub* first broadcast on BBC R4 17th October 1988.** The Festival was produced by director Jeremy Mortimer and symbolises the role BBC Radio Drama has played in commissioning and recognising outstanding Black and Asian British dramatists who are now mainstream writers in multiple fields of dramatic expression. These would include Bonnie Greer, Winsome Pinnock, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Roy Williams, Lenny Henry, Benjamin Zephaniah, Tanika Gupta, and Ayeesha Menon.

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## **1991**

**Tom Stoppard's *In the Native State* commissioned by BBC Radio and first broadcast 21st April 1991 on BBC Radio 3 won a Giles Cooper award and was later transferred to the theatre under the title *Indian Ink*.** His radio plays were considered of such cultural and literary importance, the British Library produced a special five disc CD collection in 2012 including the first BBC productions of the Prix Italia winning *Albert's Bridge* (13<sup>th</sup> July 1967), *Artist Descending A Staircase* (14<sup>th</sup> November 1972), *The Dog It Was That Died* (9<sup>th</sup> December 1982), and *In The Native State*. BBC Radio Drama gave him his debut in professional writing with the 15 minute play on the Light Programme called *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot* broadcast on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1964.

## **1994**

**Caroline Raphael becomes first woman Head of BBC Radio Drama from 1994 to 1997, and was then appointed the first BBC R4 Commissioner for Drama programmes.** She would be followed by Kate Rowland as 7th Head BBC Radio



Drama 1997 to 2001, Gordon House as 8<sup>th</sup> Head 2001 to 2005 and Alison Hindell as 9<sup>th</sup> Head BBC Radio Drama 2005 to 2018, with the role being renamed 'Head of Audio Drama.' Alison is now commissioning editor for BBC R4 Drama and Fiction.

### **1995**

**The novel *Bomber* by Len Deighton is dramatized by Joe Dunlop and the drama documentary production in Dolby Prologic Surround Sound is broadcast Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> February on BBC Radio 4 in real time throughout the day as if it covered the timespan of an actual bombing raid on Germany during World War Two.** This production continues BBC Radio's rich tradition of blending documentary reminiscences from the men and women who were involved on both sides with intense creative dramatization of the historical events they were part of.

### **1997**

***Spoonface Steinberg* by Lee Hall first broadcast 27th January 1997 on BBC Radio 4 and directed by Kate Rowland who described the impact of the play as her 'Orson Welles War of the Worlds moment.'** The poignant monologue of a 7 year-old autistic girl dying of cancer met overwhelming public acclaim, led to a BBC film production and stage play, and was part of a quartet of radio plays- *I Luv You Jimmy Spud*, *The Love Letters of Ragie Patel*, and *The Sorrows of Sandra Saint*. Hall's writing career would develop with great success for his screenplay of the film *Billy Elliot* (2000) and the book and lyrics for its adaptation as a stage musical of the same name.

### **1998**

**David Pownall's *Epiphanous Use of the Microphone* is one of the most elegant and sophisticated radio plays about the making of radio plays- first broadcast 15<sup>th</sup> May 1998 on BBC R4.** It was commissioned to celebrate 75 years of BBC radio drama with a dramatic exploration of the BBC's first production of a full-length Shakespeare play- *Twelfth Night*. Pownall juxtaposes the tensions and challenges at the BBC's Savoy Hill HQ in 1923 between Managing Director John Reith and the adapter and director Cathleen Nesbitt with the menaces and jeopardy facing William Shakespeare himself during the play's first production in 1602 during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

**2007**

**BBC Radio Three The Wire. *The Incomplete Recorded Works of a Dead Body* by Ed Hime and directed by Jessica Dromgoole. Innovative in developing ‘fictional found sound storytelling’ and recognised with the award of the Prix Italia prize for radio fiction. First broadcast 31st March 2007 and described in the *Radio Times* as a ‘..blackly comic fictional documentary combines a collage of deliberate recordings, from police surveillance tapes to an unfinished installation piece on pigeons, as it follows Babak Beyrouiti, famous Iranian sound recordist and agoraphobic, as he braves London in his quest for lost love.’**

**Q&A by Ayesha Menon, from the novel by Vikas Swarup. First broadcast BBC R4 30<sup>th</sup> July 2007 and produced with location performance and production by John Dryden. This is the story of a street kid who goes on an Indian TV game show. Derived from the novel behind the Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*.**

**Between 1998 and 2010, the development of the BBC’s Writersroom, originated by the Head of Radio Drama Kate Rowland, into a multiplatform resource, workshop and public service culture of encouraging, supporting and developing new writers in all media. The launch of the Writersroom online portal is symbolic of radio drama nurturing of new writing evolving into audio-dramatic story telling in the digital age and storytelling through podcasts.**

**2011**

**The dramatization by Mike Walker of Vasily Grossman’s novel *Life and Fate* first broadcast 18th September 2011 BBC Radio 4, and directed by Alison Hindell represents a radical and significant development in audio drama’s ability to bring recognition and advance the importance of previously neglected literature. *Life and Fate* starred Kenneth Branagh, Greta Scacchi, Harriet Walter and Nigel Anthony and charted the fate of both a nation and a family in the turmoil of war set against the ferocious Battle of Stalingrad in 1942. Its comparison of Stalinism with Nazism was considered by Soviet authorities to be so dangerous that the**

manuscript itself was arrested. The production triggered so much interest in Grossman's work, it led to BBC Radio's production of Grossman's prequel to *Life and Fate*, newly published in its first ever English translation by Richard and Elizabeth Chandler and the development of the series *Grossman's War*.

***Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* drama-documentary directed by Susan Roberts, and poetry by Simon Armitage, first broadcast 11<sup>th</sup> March 2011.**

Continuing the powerful tradition of creative verse drama combined with documentary interview. This was a sound elegy to the young gap-year student who was attacked in Stubbeylee Park, Bacup, Lancashire and who later died on August 24<sup>th</sup> 2007.

Sophie tells her own story through a series of poignant poems written by the award-winning poet Simon Armitage alongside her mother, Sylvia Lancaster remembering her daughter's shortened life.

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**2012**

***The Interrogation* by Roy Williams, first broadcast on BBC Radio 13<sup>th</sup> February 2012.** The origination of a new, innovative and socially conscious detective series. It has been produced over eight series to 2021 and established a unique reputation for using the radio drama medium to tell hard hitting and realistic stories of modern crime. The radio critic of the *Spectator* said Roy Williams '...writes about the stuff you'd rather not know, prefer not to think about, pretend to ignore. But it lives on with you in the mind. It won't let you go. By his words, the sharp, brittle, spot-on dialogue, he forces you to recognise the limitations of your experience, your understanding.'

**2014**

***Home Front* and *Tommies- Great War* radio drama series made to coincide and commemorate 100 years since Great Britain was engaged in a total global war on the Western and other overseas Fronts and the Home Front between 1914 and 1918.** It can be argued that *Home Front* is one of the most ambitious historical drama projects in the history of British radio. The first episode was broadcast 4<sup>th</sup> August 2014 on BBC Radio 4. Each episode was set in Great War Britain exactly one hundred years before its original broadcast on BBC Radio. In the first episode, 'as Britain waits for Germany's response to their ultimatum, in Folkestone, Kitty Wilson has a deadline of her own.' It was described in 2014 as 'a ground-breaking

new Radio Four radio drama - its biggest ever at around 600 episodes - ...playing a central role in the BBC's comprehensive offering to mark the centenaries of World War One.' ***Tommies* was a drama series with immersive sound design created by Jonathan Ruffle and meticulously based on unit war diaries and eye-witness accounts.** Like *Home Front* each episode traced one real day at war, this time the military Front Line, exactly 100 years before the day of broadcast- the first episode went out on BBC Radio 4 7<sup>th</sup> October 2014.

## **2016**

**The creation of *Life Lines* written by Al Smith and directed by Sally Avens is representative of qualitative original writing and production for broadcast radio and online sound podcasting.** From the production of the first series in 2016 it offered the ideal content and flexible length of storytelling to meet the development and launch of BBC Sounds in 2018. *Life Lines* is set in an ambulance control room where the paramedic controller Carrie faces a series of heart stopping emergencies at work. The first series of *Life Lines* won Best Series at the Audio Drama Awards, Best Drama at the Radio Awards and Best Fictional Storytelling at The Audio Radio Industry Awards in 2017. In 2022 *Life Lines* would win a further Audio Drama Award for Best Original Series or Serial.

## **2017**

**The major dramatisation of the novel *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie broadcast over one day. Another example of ambition and grand scale of production by BBC Radio Drama.** On 15<sup>th</sup> August 2017 most of the BBC Radio 4 schedule is taken over by a seven part dramatization of Salman Rushdie's dazzling novel of love, history and magic. This takes place on the day of the 70th anniversary of the Partition of India. The listener embarks on a story beginning with the birth of Saleem Sinai on the stroke of midnight on 15th August 1947, at the exact moment that India and Pakistan become separate, independent nations. The novel was dramatised by Ayesha Menon. Both Ayesha and the production would be recognised with the BBC's Outstanding Contribution to Audio Drama award in 2018.

## **2021**

***The Jungle Book* written and directed by Ayesha Menon who takes Rudyard**

**Kipling's family classic and gives it a darker twist, re-imagining it in the concrete jungle of present-day India.** Described by the *Radio Times* as 'a gangland coming-of-age fable.' First broadcast in episodes on BBC R4 from 6<sup>th</sup> March 2021. The production marks the successful contribution of the independent sector to BBC Radio Drama and the ingenuity and technical skill of the Goldhawk production team to produce the entire series remotely using digital global networks of sound connections during the COVID pandemic and lockdown.

## **2022**

The significance of original audio drama writing and production in nation regions such as Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is recognised with the Richard Imison award given to *The Lemonade Lads* by FaebianAveries and produced by James Robinson at BBC Cymru Wales for BBC Radio 4, and BBC Scotland producing for BBC Radio 4 and BBC Sounds podcasting *The System* by Ben Lewis- described as 'a propulsive thriller.' Richard Imison was a legendary literary/script editor in BBC Radio Drama through the 1970s and 80s and represents the huge contribution made by the BBC's support for new writing in the sound drama medium. This inspired the creation and development of the BBC's Writersroom from 1998.

## **2023**

The BBC marks the *Centenary of Audio / Radio Drama* with dedicated programming at several points in the year and the Contains Strong Language festival, in conjunction with the Leeds Playhouse, holds a three-day symposium and celebration of the genre. This includes a live recording of the first radio dramatisation of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller...*, adapted by and starring the actor Toby Jones.

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