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Shhhhhh--The Kids Are Putting On an Old-Time Radio Show

Theater * The Saturday workshops let children-- as well as their parents and grandparents--produce audio plays.

By BRENDA REES, Special to The Times

Saturday mornings, Los Angeles kids can leave behind their everyday personas, and for two hours be magically transformed into cowboys, English sleuths, crusaders, hard-boiled detectives, subterranean creatures or evil blob aliens.

But these kids aren't assuming new identities via the Internet or performing in films or on stage. They are discovering theatrical ambitions the old-fashioned way--using spoken words and sound effects to create a new version of an old genre: dramatic radio plays.

Sponsored by the Museum of Television & Radio, "Re-Creating Radio" is an ongoing series of Saturday-morning workshops that introduce and reinvent the art of radio production for new generations of kids who didn't grow up listening to the adventures of the Lone Ranger or the antics of Little Orphan Annie.

"Re-Creating Radio" started more than four years ago and came from similar workshops held at New York's Museum of Television & Radio. Participants--not only kids, but also parents and grandparents--are offered hands-on experience putting together a real radio production.

"We structure the workshops like an actual radio production," says Tony Palermo, director of the sessions. He also wrote the scripts (based on vintage radio shows) and composed the music for the seven rotating stories. "We audition kids with a cold reading and then cast the show. Later, there's a sound-effect training, a cue rehearsal and then a 'live' broadcast. This is pretty much how radio programs were originally done."

While today's kids might never have sat down to listen to a radio play, they do come to the workshops already familiar with the idea of radio shows, which has surprised many involved in the program. Palermo credits animated programs and books on tape with keeping kids in touch with voice acting.

"Kids have no trouble with the concept of playing make-believe with voices," says Carla Fantozzi, deputy director for the museum. "You can be whatever you want to be--it doesn't matter what you look like, but you have to use your voice to communicate character and emotion."

After casting and before rehearsal, Palermo shows the participants a short video clip of how performers years ago put on a radio program. A startling array of voices comes out of only four performers' mouths, and the sound-effects men are shown smoothly maneuvering around Rube Goldberg-type noise machines, later crinkling paper and banging on huge sheets of metal.

The video gets kids enthusiastic and ready for the studio.

New Scripts Have More Roles for Kids

Palermo says his scripts only differ in one way from originals--they have more characters

and action, which means more kid involvement. The scripts--which range from science fiction and horror to soap opera and superhero adventures--all contain some slang dialogue that reflects the period.

For example, the script for "Rick Lowell, Private Eye" contains a glossary of phrases such as "high roller" (frequent gambler who uses large sums of money), "built like an icebox" (description of a large man), "blackjack" (a short, leather-covered club used by criminals) and "keyhole peeper" (a private detective).

Some of the sound-effects equipment--such as doorbells, buzzers and old telephone dials--has been donated by NBC in New York and locally by Cliff Thorsness, a sound-effects creator for CBS radio from 1938 to 1962.

Palermo says that Thorsness has visited the museum's workshops and has offered sound-effects advice as well as stories about the glory days of radio. "We have to realize that these sound-effect fellows really were artists," Palermo says. "Sound effects are not just an instrument or machine, it was how people manipulated them to create a certain unique noise."

Once in the studio, voice performers are instructed on how to speak into microphones while the sound-effects team practices footsteps, fight scenes and train engine noises. The cue rehearsal brings everyone together. Palermo gives last-minute instructions. Then it's show time.

Music up. Scripts are in position. Palermo points to the announcer and the play is underway. The show takes about 20 minutes to perform. When the recording is done, the company members hear a playback of their work. A week later, each participant receives a cassette copy of the show in the mail.

Gregg Heacock has been bringing his son Graham to workshops for the past two years. As an English teacher at Dorsey High School in Los Angeles, Heacock is impressed that kids attending the workshops are picking up valuable reading techniques.

"They are really learning how to read on three levels," he explains. "They learn how to decode the words, visualize what is being written and then understand the subtext or the motivation. It's a wonderful learning experience."

* "Re-Creating Radio" workshops are held Saturday mornings, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., at the Museum of Television & Radio, 465 N. Beverly Drive, Beverly Hills. Workshops are for children ages 9 to 14. Cost of the workshop is \$5 a person or \$125 for groups up to 20. Reservations are required. The radio studio is also available for private parties. For more information and reservations, call (310) 786-1014. Upcoming workshops include: Saturday: "Radio Ranger"; June 10: "Rick Lowell, Private Eye (Part 3)"; June 17: "Grim Scary Tales."

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