

Theatre for the Car

L.A. Theatre Works produces plays that are not only provocative and entertaining, they're particularly geared to listeners.

To this observer, who has been producing, writing about, and listening to audio drama for 35 years, L.A. Theatre Works (LATW) is one of the most important audio theater companies in America today. While the majority of its productions come from stage sources—meaning plays written to be performed onstage rather than on radio—LATW carefully designs its productions for listeners. The ensemble of TV, film, and stage veterans mounts regular omnibus seasons of primarily American plays, which are heard on public radio stations (such as WGBH Boston; KPCC Southern California, and KUOW Seattle), and on XM satellite radio in a series called “The Play’s the Thing.”

“We don’t do ‘radio plays,’ per se,” says Executive Producer Susan Albert Loewenberg, the honcho and driving force of the nonprofit production company. “We’re fundamentally about enriching the community by using technology to give the widest possible access to thoughtful and thought-provoking drama.”

“The Play’s the Thing” is accessible for streaming on the Internet, and the plays are published as digital downloads and on CD. LATW has more than 360 titles in its audio theater collection—everything from contemporary works such as *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill to classics from Noel Coward, Oscar Wilde, and Eugene O’Neill. The ambition of LATW’s repertoire, the high quality of its productions, and its educational and outreach efforts are unequaled in this country.

Recording sessions take place before live audiences at West Coast venues such as the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles or on tour around the country. Actors perform stationary at mikes. Sound effects and music are employed sparingly where needed, but no attempt is made to disguise the auditorium ambience. Just the opposite. The live audience is part of the show, especially for comedies, in which laughter from the “house” becomes a significant aural element. But even in straight dramas, the synergy between actor and audience, though often silent, is palpable.



The British-born actor-producer-director Rosalind Ayres, who frequently performs with the ensemble, explains that LATW's method of recording "gives a two-fold experience. The performance in the theater by the actors—working with their scripts in front of microphones—allows the audience, collectively, to see and hear the play. They are able to watch leading actors at work, often performing plays that would be far too expensive to produce commercially. The resulting recording is then broadcast or published for a wider audience that can enjoy the drama in a slightly different way, 'seeing' their own 'mind movie' as they listen."

This "auditorium style," which depends almost exclusively on text and actor for impact, harkens back to and builds upon a long tradition of programs such as "Lux Radio Theater" and "Theater Guild of the Air." It's as valid a contribution to audio drama as what may be called *studio-based* productions, which are performed or recorded under closeted studio conditions with voices,

sound, and music carefully textured to evoke impressions of place, time, and action. (Incidentally, over the years, LATW has also produced 25 studio-based plays cooperatively with the BBC.)

"L.A. Theatre Works is one of the very few continuing standard-bearers of the great tradition of radio drama in the United States," says Ayres, who has created numerous plays for BBC. "In an age dominated by images on screens, it remains vitally important that the art of listening is preserved—an audience encouraged to create pictures in their own imagination. Essential, too, that great drama, both from the past and newly minted, should be available to everyone."

The distinguished actor-director-producer Hector Elizondo, a founding member of the ensemble, calls LATW a "caretaker of dramatic literature." Back in its early days, he reflects, "Who knew that it would become so important?" He attributes its longevity and successes to its strong sense of mission, its core group of first-class acting and directing talent (including such recognizable names as



Adam Arkin, Annette Bening, Ed Asner, Jamie Lee Curtis, Charles Durning, Fionnula Flanagan, John Goodman, and Helen Hunt), and the determined and tireless helmsmanship of Susan Loewenberg. “It amazes me how she believes in it and sticks by it!”

“I began acting professionally when I was 14 and am hopelessly in love with the literature of the theater,” says Loewenberg. In 1974, she and fellow theater artists started a volunteer effort in local jails. “We called ourselves Artists in Prison,” she says, “because the focus of our work was a series of improvisation and theater games workshops with incarcerated men and women.”

They began doing radio after a casual remark by Richard Dreyfuss, one of the 34 members of the original group. In 1982, Dreyfuss had performed in a radio play for the first time and mentioned that he wanted to do it again. “I had produced live theater for years,” says Loewenberg, “but I was ready to learn something new. So, when this opportunity with LATW presented itself, it just seemed the right road to take.”

Paradoxically, LATW is at the height of its powers at a time when radio seems allergic to drama. A joke among station program directors goes, “The best time slot for radio drama is 1945.” Loewenberg acknowledges that even public radio stations “are inherently reluctant to carry radio drama or a two-hour show, and we are both of those things! Nonetheless, our stations are reporting high listener loyalty.”

Meanwhile, she vigorously pursues new technologies such as streaming audio and podcasting in addition to CDs. She holds that while it’s more difficult to market plays than music or audiobooks, once people try listening to plays, “they are usually hooked.”

Ayres asserts, “At a time when funding for the arts is increasingly at the bottom of the list (on both sides of the Atlantic), it is a major achievement for Susan and LATW that they are still able to provide opportunities for writers, actors, directors, and—most importantly—audiences. Long may they continue to entertain the listening audiences of America and beyond!”

Take Note—

Look for these new LATW productions. And check out L.A. Theatre Works’ Web site at www.latw.org for new productions, listening schedules, and the Audio Theatre Collection catalog.

FROZEN

This tense three-handed British drama concerns the aftermath of a child’s molestation and murder in which the grieving mother eventually confronts the killer. Inner lives are explored here, mostly through monologue. The script has many flaws as formal play writing but excels in its psychological observation. Jeffrey Donovan’s understated performance as the perpetrator sends shivers up and down the spine. Rosalind Ayres blew me away with her depth and sincerity. She is every mother who ever lost a child.

SIXTEEN WOUNDED

A Palestinian militant hiding out in Amsterdam goes to work for a kindly secular Jew, falls in love, and begins to rethink his principles, only to be forced between a moral Scylla and Charybdis that will cost him the ultimate sacrifice no matter which course he chooses to take. Omar Metwally and Judd Hirsch received kudos for the Broadway premiere. Metwally repeats his outstanding performance here with the more than able Martin Rayner in the Hirsch role. If you are looking for fresh insight on the Middle East situation, you won’t find it here. If, on the other hand, you appreciate theater that reaches near-tragic dimensions, this is for you.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

This vintage comedy by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur (*The Front Page*) is brought riotously to life. Desperate and bankrupt, producer Oscar Jaffe (Jeff Perry) seeks to persuade his former lover, Broadway star Lily Garland (Nancy Bell), to headline his next show. Perry, one of the founders of Chicago’s celebrated Steppenwolf Theater, rarely gets to show his comic chops in the bland roles he plays on TV. Jaffe is an over-the-top character, and it is delightful to hear Perry pull out all the stops for a change.

PHOTOS: Page 25, clockwise from top left: Amy Brenneman in Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*; Anne Heche, Jeremy Sisto, and Teri Garr in George Bernard Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*; Tonya Pinkins in *Fired Again*; Ed Begley, Jr., and Fred Willard in David Mamet’s *Romance*. **This page, from left to right:** Kevin Kilner, Armin Shimerman, and Jeffrey Donovan in Reginald Rose’s *Twelve Angry Men*.