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I’ve been researching the history of Shakespearean performance on BBC radio – and it’s a story that goes back almost to the birth of the organisation and continues to this day. It’s also a sometimes misunderstood history: people looking back have concluded that the BBC presented Shakespeare because it was educational, it was good for the listeners. But that wasn’t the idea at all. Producers were looking for entertainment. Why they turned to Shakespeare is unclear: maybe he was seen as universally known – a safe bet. It probably helped he didn’t need paying for script and couldn’t refuse his permission, unlike George Bernard Shaw! Whatever the reason, it wasn’t to be worthy.

Within weeks of the BBC first going on air, scenes from Shakespeare’s plays were being presented. But two things really led to the Beeb broadcasting a full production. Firstly, they moved – from the highly inadequate Marconi House to the slightly less cramped Savoy Hill. But perhaps more importantly, their hand was somewhat forced by the theatres.

The BBC had quite happily been broadcasting excerpts from West End plays. But the theatres began to fear this new form of audio entertainment was stealing their audiences. Action had to be taken. The Entertainments Industry Joint Broadcasting Committee agreed a resolution: ‘That the broadcasting of plays, music, songs, or other entertainments is prejudicial to the interests of all connected with places of public entertainment, and that such steps shall be taken as might be necessary to protect such interests.’ No more excerpts.

Instead of giving up, the small but enthusiastic team decided to mount their own production. Bringing in respected Shakespearean actor, Cathleen Nesbitt, to prepare the script – and probably recruit the cast of professional actors – in May 1923, the BBC presented *Twelfth Night*, in a blaze of publicity. And radio drama was born.

It has been suggested in the past that this and successive early performances ‘probably resembled drawing-room readings, or the amateur recitals held by Shakespeare Societies’. But I don’t think so. They featured music, definitely. In the case of *Twelfth Night* it was Henry Purcell’s work performed on harpsichord. Sound effects, probably – although by later admission they were ‘rudimentary’. A specially adapted script, including narration – something that was a staple of BBC radio drama, particularly stage adaptations, for many decades. And the actors seemed to instinctively know what they needed to do to convey action on the radio. One reviewer commented that Nigel Playfair, who took the part of Andrew Aguecheek, believably sounded as if he was ‘capering’ – dancing about. And Dame May Whitty – a famous theatrical *grand dame* of the time – wrote a half-page article for a magazine praising the production, stating ‘I should like particularly to commend the Malvolio. One realised the pomposity and fatuousness of the character, and one saw that painful smile and the yellow stockings cross gartered.’

Things quickly developed. By October, the London station has also broadcast *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Macbeth*. Manchester and Glasgow had also broadcast Shakespearean productions. But the station that went on to be the most prolific – at least in these very early days – was Cardiff. From October 1923 to June 24 they presented almost twenty plays at an average rate of one a fortnight! It sparked a row in the press, with listeners arguing over whether they wanted to hear Shakespeare on their radios or not – and there was a passionate debate on both sides. It came to a head when the station director, a remarkable man called Arthur Corbett-Smith, told Cardiff Rotarians:

‘We have tried to share beautiful music and poetry with you, not as Welshmen or as Englishmen, but as members of one human family. I don’t think we are ‘highbrows.’… You must not think because we give you symphonies and Shakespeare’s plays it is because we are ‘highbrows.’

It was to become a recurring theme: what *is* Shakespeare on the radio *for*? And time and again, producers have argued it’s for entertainment – and that the majority of listeners agree with them.

Take this comment from 1930s producer, Peter Creswell, writing in the *Radio Times*: ‘a letter… came to me after I had produced *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is signed “An Unemployed Miner in the Rhondda Valley” and contains this sentence: ‘I had no idea before that Shakespeare was so exciting.’ One need not labour the point, but I had rather have had that letter than volumes of praise from all the professing ‘Shakespeare lovers’ in this world.’

While critics were complaining about the ‘butchering’ of Shakespeare’s texts – in other words the cutting down of these huge plays to a manageable two hours – head of drama, Val Gielgud believed the average listener was ‘not prepared to listen for hours at a time to Shakespeare… because any listening to the spoken word is a business demanding acute attention and concentration’.

Voice was also an issue. How dare the BBC not present something totally in RP?! The critic Grace Wyndham Goldie complained in 1935 of a production of *Macbeth*: ‘In the minor parts there were all kinds of accents which varied from the best Oxford to something perilously near Cockney.’

But producers were undeterred. They continued to give us Shakespeare, plenty of it – they’ve been 400 productions across the last century – and they’ve done their best to make it entertaining.

Since that first broadcast in 1923 they’ve been many other drama firsts… The first original play – Richard Hughes’ *Comedy of Danger* in 1924. And much innovation – stereo, quad, binaural. But it all starts with Shakespeare and the idea that whatever the BBC gives its audience, it *has* to entertain.