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Return With Us to the Thrilling Days Of Yesteryear—Via the Internet

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Fred Greenhalgh's Audio Dramas Hark Back To Radio's Golden Era; It Sounds Like Snow

By Barry Newman

SOUTH PORTLAND, Maine—The script called for snow, and it was snowing.

"I wanted light and fluffy," said the director, Fred Greenhalgh. He was talking about the cozily muffled acoustics, not the pretty view. "This is perfect," he said. "Roll 'em!"

Windshield wipers slapping, a car wooshed to a stop at an old schoolhouse in this coastal city, now home to a theater company. Letting the car door slam as he got out, Bill Dufris, playing a cop in Brattleboro, Vt., said, "I'll do my best," and crunched up the wooden steps to a make-believe crime scene.

Overhead, a sea gull screamed. "I could hear that," Mr. Greenhalgh interrupted. "This is supposed to be Vermont." Thinking that inland Brattleboro shouldn't have sea gulls, he called for another take. Mr. Dufris got back in the car, drove around, slammed the door, and delivered his line again: "I'll do my best." Somewhere in the harbor, a foghorn blew.

"Cut!" said Mr. Greenhalgh. His sound man turned off his digital recorder. "The joys of recording on location," Mr. Greenhalgh said. "OK, one more time."

A 26-year-old with blond bangs and a goatee, the director was busy dramatizing a detective story. Not for the screen. For the iPod. The book it was based on—"Open Season" by Archer Mayor—begins with an image: "The snow lay before our headlights like a

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freshly placed sheet..." But Mr. Greenhalgh had no camera. His job was to translate the book into sound.

Radio drama, ranging from "Captain Midnight" to the high art of Orson Welles, thrived for 40 years in America. It was all but gone by the 1960s, killed off by television. Yet now that TV must contend with the Internet, the Internet has given radio drama a whisper of new life. But it can't be called "radio drama" anymore, since hardly any of it gets on the radio. Mr. Greenhalgh settles for "audio drama," but the catchiest name for it is "mind movie."

Sue Zizza, a sound-effects artist who teaches at New York University, figures there are about 300 "true, quality audio dramatists" active in the U.S. She helps put on a one-week "audio theater" summer workshop that has lately been attracting 100 trainees. In 2006, one was Fred Greenhalgh.

"What amazes me is that audio drama just won't go away," Ms. Zizza says. "It's so primal in us. No matter how much we ignore it, there are still people out there like Fred."

He grew up on the Maine coast writing short stories. At the University of Southern Maine, unpublished, he rewrote one of them as a radio script, replacing sights with sounds, as in: "Storm increases with violent intensity until it unleashes a mighty burst of lightning."

Mighty bursts were produced in radio's golden age by shaking tin sheets in a studio. Now, mighty bursts are downloadable. But Mr. Greenhalgh can't afford studio rent and prefers not to buy (or steal) anyone else's thunder. He harvests lightning by walking out into a storm with a recorder and a microphone.

"Sonically, it's more interesting," he says. Add some editing software, and that's his kit. Cost: $1,000. In the three years since Mr. Greenhalgh started making audio dramas, the Mad Horse Theater Company's actors, all pros, have performed without pay—in bars, on beaches, in lighthouses—just for the voice experience. And the food. On this day, it was lasagna.

"I thought we'd be behind glass, and there'd be a machine with buttons," Martin Cohn said as he joined a few actors in a bare hallway to record crime-scene mumbling. Mr. Cohn, a Vermont public-relations man, had come with Mr. Mayor, who has written 20 well-reviewed mysteries, not one of which has been made into a movie.

They decided to try the audio-drama route and hired Mr. Greenhalgh to produce a pilot. The script, the theater, the actors, the sound man and the lasagna are setting Mr. Cohn and Mr. Mayor back $1,500. "It's the first time anybody's talked money," Mr. Greenhalgh confided earlier.

Now, Mr. Greenhalgh was asking everybody to mumble, and they did. "In a crime scene, there's more laughter," Mr. Mayor said when it stopped. Mr. Greenhalgh ordered another take.

The cost of this production is more than most programmers will pay, but it's still peanuts. The British Broadcasting Corp. spends $15 million a year on 750 hours of radio plays. One of them, "A British Subject," made it to a New York stage last year. "It's extravagant radio," says Alison Hindell, who runs the operation, "but it's very, very cheap drama." On American radio, talk is a lot cheaper.

Getty Images

In the '30s, radio drama had stars like Orson Welles, second from right.

A few of radio drama's old hands still fight for outlets. Yuri Rasovsky still produces his "Hollywood Theater of the Ear"for satellite radio. L.A. Theatre Works, a not-for-profit outfit, records classic stage plays with sound effects and distributes them to public radio. But its head, Susan Loewenberg, won't touch plays written for radio. "The best time to listen to radio drama is 1937," she says.

Old-time radio and its fans aren't her idea of the next big thing. Public radio's energy goes mainly into nonfiction now, not original fiction. On commercial radio, drama's last toehold is in the miniskits of commercials. Meanwhile, audio books have piled into the void and grown into a $400 million business.

Now comes podcasting. It has allowed a small number of audio auteurs—from a group called Bay Area Radio Drama to the Cape Cod Radio Mystery Theater—to build up a substantial cache of mind movies in easily uploadable episodes. The product, as Ms. Loewenberg sees it, often combines "21st-century technology and eighth-grade content." Fred Greenhalgh has higher-grade ambitions.

On his FinalRune Productions Web site, he podcasts his own episodes, plus 156 more, culled from around the U.S. "Our work is more like what you'll read in a literary rag," he writes on the site, which gets 1,500 downloads a week. He sees it becoming an "audio-drama warehouse."

If that is ever to happen, he'll need a smash hit first, one that crosses over into the iPod mainstream. His backers from Vermont want an Archer Mayor mystery series to be the big one—made on location, in Maine, with Mr. Greenhalgh's no-budget ring of authenticity.

"This is the body," the director was saying as he lay a coat onto the snow in the theater's backyard. Mr. Mayor's book set the scene at night in "a dazzling white circle of flood lamps." Mr. Greenhalgh intended to mention that later, in narration.

"OK, crouch over the body," he told his actors. Mr. Dufris (the detective) and Chris Price (a forensics man) crouched. "Crunch the snow," said Mr. Greenhalgh. They crunched.

Script in hand, Mr. Dufris began his line: "Were there any footprints...?" A dog barked and a door slammed. Somebody in the next house yelled, "Now you come here!" None of that belonged in the play. Mr. Dufris started over. But then an airplane passed. And another. The scripts were getting wet.

Mr. Greenhalgh said, "Let's just do it."

"Were there any footprints before this all happened?" asked Mr. Dufris. Mr. Price said, "Nope," and crunched out of microphone range with his exit line: "Hit the lights when you're through, OK?"

"You got it," said Mr. Dufris.

Mr. Greenhalgh said, "That's a wrap."