

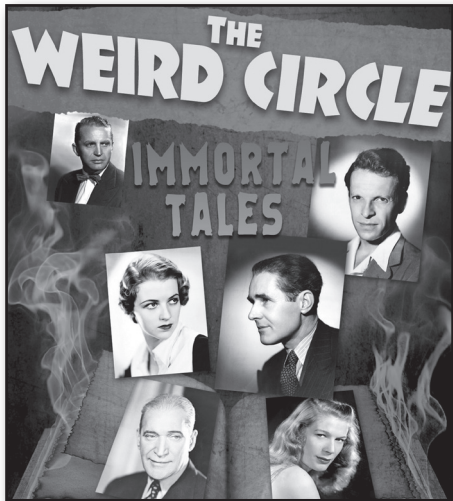
THE WEIRD CIRCLE

Immortal Tales

Program Guide by Karl Schadow

In 1943, when authoress Peggy Mayer was asked about the debut of her latest endeavor, she responded: “I am a great admirer of the methods movie director Alfred Hitchcock used to build and sustain suspense . . . In my radio scripts I strive to attain some of the startling modern effects.” While the exact nature of these methods and effects were not divulged, the undertaking proved to be a most profitable enterprise for both Miss Mayer and NBC. Indeed, it was the National Broadcasting Company that produced and distributed what would become one of radio’s classic anthology series: *The Weird Circle*.

The addition of this transcribed show to the collection of offerings by NBC Radio-Recording Division (NBCRRD) was announced with the usual fanfare (*Variety*, May 19, 1943). The program’s audition for the



trade press, along with the entertainment and advertising industries, occurred in New York City on June 10, 1943. This trial recording was an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” It also served as the first of twenty-six episodes, thirty minutes in length, which would all be adaptations of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century literary classics of mystery, fantasy and horror. In 1943, nearly a decade af-

ter the NBCRRD was created as the network's Electrical Transcription Service, it was a major player in the recorded program business -- competing successfully with other such firms, including C. P. MacGregor, World Broadcasting System, and Frederick Ziv. (It should be noted that *The Weird Circle* is often incorrectly attributed to this latter firm.)

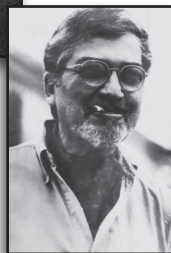
The initial achievement of *The Weird Circle* was due in large part to the NBCRRD production team. In addition to Peggy Mayer, contributors for the program's first cycle included script supervisor Steve Carlin, producer Oscar Turner, and Morris Hamilton, who co-directed these stanzas with authoress Mayer. Sound patterns were performed by Tilden Brown and Manny Segal. The former earned his way into Sound Effects from Guest Relations in NBC's New York facilities, while the latter transferred to The Big Apple from the network's Chicago studios in the late 1930s. In The Windy City, Segal had been involved with numerous daytime serials and the classic sitcom *Fibber McGee & Molly*. In addition to *The Weird Circle*, the Segal/Brown duo collaborated on many of the NBCRRD packages, including *A House in the Country*. All of these individuals worked under network vice-president C. Lloyd Egner. Much to the gratification of NBC, this first round of *The Weird Circle* was such a success that an additional four blocks of thirteen episodes each were created during the eighteen months that followed the series' 1943 premiere. Thus, by the early months of 1945, the program would be comprised of seventy-eight installments. Most of the episodes recorded in 1944 and 1945 were produced and directed by Herbert H. Wood.

The initial twenty-six scripts of *The Weird Circle* were crafted by Peggy Mayer; nine of which have been selected for this CD set. Her first three years in radio were a whirlwind affair. A native of St. Louis, she studied in both France and at Southern California's Pasadena Playhouse. She sojourned to Chicago in 1940 to begin her radio career as an actress. However, her focus soon turned to writing, and she contributed stories to such programs as *Wings of Destiny*. She departed The Windy City for The Big Apple, and worked as a secretary to radio director Carlo DeAngelo. In 1942, hard work in New York, coupled with previous writing experience, allowed her to become the medium's youngest scripter of a daytime serial (*The Story of Bess Johnson*). Prior to joining NBC in

1943, she also wrote for Dave Elman's popular series *Hobby Lobby*, and served as the radio director for the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. The number of scripts (if any) that she penned between episodes # 27 and # 78 is currently unknown. However, at least four additional scribes have now been identified as having contributed to these chapters of *The Weird Circle*. According to various Radio Writers Guild Credit Bulletins, both Jack Barefield and Calvert Egerton transformed at least thirteen individual stories for *The Weird Circle* canon. At the time of their involvement with the program, they were members of the NBCRRD continuity staff.



Peggy Mayer



Alfred Bester

Prior to his work at NBC, Barefield was a writer for both the New York City Municipal station (WNYC) and Radio Events, one of the medium's largest script syndicating firms. In addition to *The Weird Circle*, he also wrote for *Stand By For Adventure* and *One Nation Indivisible*. Prior to joining the continuity staff, Egerton was a member of the NBC Sound Effects Department. Another NBCRRD staffer and scribe for *The Weird Circle* was John A. Richards, who also supplied scripts for *Stand By For Adventure* and *Playhouse of Favorites*. A fifth wordsmith for *The Weird Circle* was Alfred Bester, who submitted his entries as a free-lance writer. Following a career in both comics and radio, Bester would become an icon in the science fiction genre.

Those five script writers noted above must certainly have been challenged by the task of transforming the works of such luminaries as Wilkie Collins, Amelia Edwards, Fitz-James O'Brien, and Emily Brontë. A hallmark of *The Weird Circle* was its diverse nature, with yarns culled from the efforts of forty-three different authors. In this collection, you will be thrilled by old favorites from Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens, as well as translations from French storytellers Honoré de Balzac, Émile Gaboriau and Prosper de Mérimée. The objective of the program's production staff was to include not only those authors who would be most familiar to the radio audience, but to introduce tales by some



Elizabeth Gaskell

lesser-known wordsmiths, such as Charles Reade and Elizabeth Gaskell. When adapting this wide range of narratives for the constrained parameters of radio, the script authors did take liberties when re-working each installment, as might be expected. Note that in some stories, narrators or new characters were introduced in order to provide a clearer comprehension and flow of the plot. It is interesting to consider that another anthology series on the air at that time, Mutual's *Murder Clinic*, utilized more recent fiction (e.g. Craig Rice's John J. Malone) from the first four decades of the Twentieth-century.

Each broadcast of *The Weird Circle* opened with the sounds of crashing waves and tolling bells, followed by the authoritative voice of announcer Ted Jewett, who introduced the title of each week's adventure. Jewett also doubles in character roles in several stories. (Though there is a basic opening to each episode, note the slight variations in the selected features of the current release.) Ted Jewett had entered radio as an announcer at NBC's New York studios in 1930, before moving to CBS in 1934. In addition to his announcer/narrator duties on numerous programs, he was a regular cast member of both *The March of Time* and *The Cavalcade of America*. Thespians heard on *The Weird Circle* were identified through press releases and via voice recognition (names are cited in the Episode Guide). In this CD set, you will find many of New York's elite voice actors, including Alfred Shirley, Elspeth Eric and Walter Vaughn (father of television actor Robert Vaughn). Syndicated series often lacked on-air



Robert H. Harris

credits, and new information about participants continues to be discovered. For example, you will notice the name of Robert H. Harris in the credits for "The Queer Client" (CD 7B). He was known primarily for work in films (*How to Make a Monster*, *The Invisible Boy*) and television (*The Goldbergs*, *Perry Mason*). However, during the 1940s, this native of New York City performed in front of radio microphones on both coasts. Prior to his participation in *The Weird Circle*, he portrayed leading roles on *The Whistler*.

In 1943, an up-and-coming youngster expertly enacted 'nasty boys' on *The Weird Circle*. His name was Skippy Homeier, and he had previously been cast in such radio programs as *This is Our Enemy* and *The Cavalcade of America*. For his performance as a Nazi youth in the Broadway play *Tomorrow, The World!*, Homeier earned a special award from the Drama League of New York. When it came to the all-important animal imitations for *The Weird Circle*, Donald Bain was enlisted to perform these tasks.



Skippy Homeier is seen here (back left) with sound man Manny Segal (front) and other cast members from "Mateo Falcone."

The distinct lack of music throughout the series was the result of the recording ban mandated for transcribed programs by the American Federation of Musicians in 1942. Though the injunction was lifted in 1944, in order to have a uniform series of episodes, music was not incorporated into the installments of *The Weird Circle* that were produced once the restriction was no longer in effect. In lieu of bridge and incidental music, the sounds of waves, wind, and bells were utilized. You will note, however, that the mouth organ is played by the character Fortunado in "Mateo Falcone" (CD 2B), which was one of the initial twenty-six episodes.

While originally produced without commercials, there are some recordings of *The Weird Circle* that include advertising copy. These air checks were made of broadcasts that were sponsored by the Imperial Tobacco Company of Canada, Ltd. (promoting their Ogden's brand). For those episodes, the program aired under the title *The Ogden's Playhouse*. The voice of the commercial announcer would be familiar to fans of *Broadway Is My Beat*. It's Larry Thor – and one may wonder what brand of cigarette Detective Danny Clover was smoking while investigating those gruesome Manhattan murders. As reported in the 1946 edition of *Markets of America*, the Canadian tobacco firm had achieved success with its radio advertising campaigns, utilizing such programs as *The Weird Circle* and *Stand By For Adventure*. Indeed, the company was

going to invest a greater portion of its budget with the soon-to-be released NBCRRD musical series *The Art Van Damme Quintet*. In the United States (and its territories), the assortment of *The Weird Circle* patrons (via respective outlets) varied from the Carolina Power & Light Company (WWNC, Asheville, North Carolina) and Henager School of Business (KALL, Salt Lake City, Utah) to the Coca-Cola Company (KGU, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii). As reported in the trade (*Sponsor*, July 14, 1952 and *U. S. Radio*, March 1961), *The Weird Circle* continued to be a profitable entity for its successor distributor, RCA (the parent company of NBC).

Episode Guide:

(Note: episodes were assigned individual program numbers in a continuous sequence regardless of the year or block in which they were recorded.)

CD 1A: “The Knightsbridge Mystery” - 1943 (Program # 8)

This Charles Reade story from 1882 features Alfred Shirley, Roland Winters, and Cameron Andrews.

CD 1B: “William Wilson” - 1943 (Program # 10)

Edgar Allan Poe’s 1839 thriller is brought to life by Joseph Julian, Elaine Kent, Robert Donnelly, Kay Loring, and Bill Smith.



Alfred Shirley

CD 2A: “A Passion in the Desert” - 1943 (Program # 11)

Alfred Shirley narrates Honoré de Balzac’s 1830 tale, which also includes performances by Roc Rogers, Lon Clark, and Ed Latimer.

CD 2B: “Mateo Falcone” - 1943 (Program # 12)

Often cited as the original French short story, Prosper de Mérimée’s 1829 yarn features Edwin Jerome, Skippy Homeier, Milton Herman, Joseph De Santis, and Gladys Thornton in lead roles.

CD 3A: “The Great Plague” - 1943 (Program # 15)

Burford Hampden, Ralph Bell, Jeanne Elkins, and Edgar Stelhi enact this satire based on Thomas Hood’s 1834 story “A Tale of the Great Plague.”

CD 3B: “The Lingering Expectation of an Heir” - 1943 (Program # 16)

Ian MacAllaster, Gladys Thornton, and Alfred Shirley headline the cast for this adaptation of Dr. Samuel Johnson’s 1752 yarn The Lingering Expectation of an Heir.

CD 4A: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” - 1943 (Program # 19)

Walter Vaughn heads the cast of this 1841 Poe masterpiece, which also includes performances by Lawson Zerbe and Alan Devitt.

CD 4B: “The Tell-Tale Heart” - 1943 (Program # 23)

The thespians in Poe’s 1843 thriller include Ian MacAllaster, Walter Vaughn, and Julian Noa.

CD 5A: “The Niche of Doom” - 1943 (Program # 24)

Honoré de Balzac’s 1831 spine-chiller is performed by Lesley Woods, John Gibson, and Michael Fitzmaurice.

CD 5B: “The Feast of Redgauntlet” - 1943 (Program # 27)

Burford Hampden, Arnold Moss, John Moore, and Walter Kinsella headline the cast of this adaptation of Sir Walter Scott’s 1824 historical novel.

CD 6A: “The Murder of the Little Pig” - 1943 (Program # 28)

In this loose adaptation of Emile Gaboriau’s 1876 tale “The Little Old Man of Bati-
gnolles,” James Van Dyk enacts the lead role with support from Alan Devitt, Tony Barrett, and Stacy Harris.



Lesley Woods



Burford Hampden

CD 6B: “The Strange Judgement” - 1944 (Program # 30)

Roc Rogers, Elspeth Eric, Tony Barrett, and Skippy Homeier star in Honoré de Balzac’s 1834 seaside tragedy.

**CD 7A: “The Old Nurse’s Story” - 1944
(Program # 38)**

The cast of Elizabeth Gaskell’s unearthly narrative, published in 1852, includes Betty Furness, Joan Banks, Walter Vaughn, and Emily Kipp.



Betty Furness

CD 7B: “The Queer Client” - 1944 (Program # 46)

Robert H. Harris stars alongside Burford Hampden, Kay Loring, Edwin Jerome, and Arthur Maitland in this episode adapted from “The Old Man’s Tale About The Queer Client,” a chapter of Charles Dickens’ 1836 novel *The Pickwick Papers*.

CD 8A: “The Executioner” - 1944 (Program # 51)

This 1829 tale of terror by Honoré de Balzac is performed by Karl Swenson, Julian Noa, Eleanor Audley, Ted de Corisa, Michael Fitzmaurice, and Lesley Woods.

CD 8B: “Tapestry Horse” - 1944 (Program # 61)

This supernatural thriller was adapted from *Metzengerstein*, Edgar Allan Poe’s first published story (1832). Heard in this broadcast are Alan Devitt, Ian Martin and Inge Adams.

Acknowledgements: The author thanks Martin Grams, Jr. and Rick Lai for the invaluable assistance.



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