

## “On the radio the pictures are better”

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Dan Rebellato Interviewed by Michał Lachman<sup>1</sup>

**Michał Lachman:** There is a tendency to think about British post-war drama exclusively in terms of realism. Did you want to redefine this tradition in *Cavalry*?

**Dan Rebellato:** Yes. The basic idea for the play was a story of someone interviewing four men who at some point turn out to be the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. And I thought it would be interesting to do it in a magic realism genre where you have the biblical story but at the same time you try to treat it very realistically. So the language in *Cavalry* is hyper-realistic; for example, consider the way she speaks in the first half of the recording; she is stumbling over words, she is finishing sentences half way and starting another thought. All that is scripted and the actress, Francis Gray, played it wonderfully well. So the formal point of departure was a juxtaposition of realism of a journalist and ins-and-outs of that profession with the extremity of an apocalyptic story.

**ML:** When listening to your play, it came to me that you can hardly find plays in the history of contemporary British drama that refer to the future or the end of the world. The theme rather features in science-fiction or dystopian literature but not necessarily in modern drama. More often it can be found in medieval drama, like morality plays. Was medieval drama an important context in composing the play?

**DR:** There are some examples, actually; Caryl Churchill has written some dystopian plays like *Far Away*; Simon Stephens, David Eldridge, and Robert Holman co-wrote an end-of-the-world play called *A Thousand Stars Explode in the Sky*. There are others. I think they are responding to climate change, globalization and more, and I am interested in the way they do so through apocalyptic imagery. In my case, though, the play is deeply anchored in the present. I wonder at what point you guessed that the four jockeys are the Four

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<sup>1</sup> The following interview was conducted as a part of the 2012 edition of Back 2 Festival “BETWEEN.POMIĘDZY” (Sopot) after the audience listened to one of Dan Rebellato’s radio plays, *Cavalry* (2008).

Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Some people guess it very early on and some do not until one of the characters admits that. In that way, the play is completely in the present and it also should seem quite banal; the first five minutes listeners keep asking themselves what kind of an incompetent journalist it is, making a real mess interviewing some jockeys, which, for starters, sounds like the worst idea possible for a play. That is also the reason why we have the initial poor quality of the recording; I wanted people to go and check if the radio is broken.

In addition, I am not at all religious and had no commitment to tell a real tale of the end of the world. So in a way it is an alternative take on the present rather than a projection of the future.

**ML:** Right, and, unlike listeners who sooner or later guess the identity of the characters, the journalist is the last to believe that the four horsemen are the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Was it your intention to depict modern man as an individual who is unable to comprehend or tolerate irrationality, metaphysics or the supernatural?

**DR:** The journalist is very much me, in the sense that she denies the possibility of the horsemen being the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. If I were in that bizarre situation I would also be quite reluctant to believe someone saying that they are the Four Horsemen. The play

is therefore a mechanism to test the limits of our rationality.

What is more, I was interested in the whole context of the fundamentalist Christian millenarianism and the apocalyptic view in some of the extreme American Christian groups for which all the conditions for the Last Judgement are in place and the Rapture is coming soon and we will be left in chaos. So the play is recognition of the imperfection in the world and a totally fictional attempt to find a solution for it.

**ML:** So is the play a critique of beliefs such as millenarianism?

**DR:** Not really, at least not expressly. The play obviously does write on the iconography and associations of the Four Horsemen, although I did not strictly follow the Book of Revelation in the respect of presenting those characters. The reason why they are scary is that they are four relatively young and very cocky men in a male environment with a single woman. There is a mixture of physical threat, occasional sexual threat or simply the way they behave; they are uncooperative, rarely answer the questions, constantly teasing and ridiculing her.

**ML:** What I also found interesting in the play was the process of recruitment of these horsemen—they are selected from the ancient armies of Genghis Khan or Alexander the Great. You seem to suggest that the apocalypse, like the Four Horsemen

of the Apocalypse, is completely man-made. How did that idea come around?

**DR:** The actual reason for that idea is quite trivial. I had problems to get the play commissioned and when we first put forward the proposal for the play, it got rejected on the basis that there was not enough story. Apparently, the apocalypse was not enough a story for the BBC afternoon play.

Actually, writing plays for the BBC works in that way that you say you are going to do certain things and then you do not have to do them. So I promised to insert an epic story of each horseman. And although I did not do that I sort of thought it might be interesting to slightly colour characters as individuals with their doubts and fears because that makes them more appealing.

**ML:** That is right and at the same time you seem to suggest that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse used to be humans shaped by a destructive mechanism we ourselves produced. They are not of God's but of humanity's making, and each marvellous and great civilization has been founded upon destructive powers. Still it is good to know it was just a trick to fool the BBC.

It is also interesting to see how you depict the journalist herself and what role she is given in the apocalyptic vision. The journalist records a programme about jockeys. So in *Cavalry* we have a radio record-

ing within a radio recording with all the technicalities, her incompetence and final sticking to the microphone with a view to recording the story among the chaos of the apocalypse. (It must have been very reassuring for BBC journalists: the idea that they are presented as lasting until the very end, as they are the last resort to which people would turn.)

**DR:** There is a sort of a classic BBC radio drama and it is very similar to a nineteenth-century novel in that microphone is the omniscient, non-existent figure and you just hear voices in a similar way as a narrator's voice in, say, George Eliot's novel. So I was interested in disrupting that convention of the microphone as a point of view that gives you a different sense of involvement in a story.

Before *Cavalry*, I did an adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*. We did a different sort of experiment there. What I found boring about radio drama is that you often have a narrator who speaks into a microphone. It is called "close mike" and it means that you have a narrator figure who introduces the story and conveys the idea of "a voice in your head." Then you have regular scenes with actors further from the microphone. I have always thought it boring and cheap and obvious. *Dead Souls* is interesting in that it was written in 1842 when the idea of the omniscient narrator had not really settled down

yet. And the narrator of the novel is quite odd because sometimes he narrates way too much, telling you what the horses are thinking or what the furniture is thinking; and sometimes way too little as when a woman pulls a certain face and the narrator says he has no idea of what that might mean (although as a narrator he is also the creator of the entirety of the story!). My favourite point of *Dead Souls* is where the narrator is narrating quietly so as not to wake up the people he is narrating about.

Doing the adaptation we had the narrator at the “close mike” but the joke was that everybody could hear him. So when he is making very unflattering descriptions about people, they get offended. By means of that we tried to explore the mechanics of the radio drama conventions.

**ML:** Indeed, *Cavalry*, I think, is very “spatial” in the sense of us hearing the voices within various distances from the microphone. In a way you really feel the space. At one point you have the journalist very close to the microphone and when the horsemen appear for the first time, we hear them at some distance. The play is therefore very three-dimensional.

Can you tell us how plays get commissioned?

**DR:** There are various slots at BBC afternoon play shows; there is an afternoon play slot, a Saturday play

slot, a classic serial, a woman’s hour drama. They have commissioning rounds at various times of the year. The round for the afternoon play takes place twice a year.

**ML:** What about the production?

**DR:** You also have to have your own producer. Mine is Polly Thomas and I have done about ten radio plays with her. First, I send her a couple of pages of ideas for a play and then we have a conversation or a series of conversations. Polly always directs the plays and we are a very good team; we have the same taste, I think, the same ideas about radio and narrative. I am there at the recording and when I feel some things are missed or there is an opportunity we could go for I have a chance to make it then.

The great thing about drama in Britain is that it is done very quickly. *Cavalry* was recorded in a day and a half so that is half an hour of making broadcast material in a day. In addition, you can get very good actors because it is enough to make some phone calls and make an arrangement for the following week or so. So, for example, I have worked with Michael Palin who played the narrator in *Dead Souls*. I could write stage plays my whole life and could never get Palin to be my actor.

**ML:** Has it ever happened that you had to make any changes in the script?

**DR:** Yeah, sure. When you have a day and a half to record, everything in the script must be like it is going to be recorded. The process is: I produce a first draft and send it to the producer. She gives me notes and suggestions for rewritings. There is no possibility of extending the play, so if the play is too long, I need to cut because otherwise it will be cut in the edit.

At the beginning of the first day of recording, you always do the read-through to judge whether the running time is OK. Usually I have a good judging of the right length of the script. But, surprisingly, *Cavalry* was six minutes under, too short, and that was really tricky. On that Monday evening I went back to my hotel room and wrote those six minutes; that is the bit where one of the horsemen takes the journalist to see the horses. It is quite funny because I wrote it very quickly and people often tell me that it is their favourite bit.

**Audience 1:** Could you describe the writing process when writing for radio compared to writing for stage, and whether the visualizing work is the same or different in those two respects? And if it is different, in what way?

**DR:** There are two interesting and contradictory stories about radio drama; both are also probably untrue. The first refers to the first radio drama ever broadcast which was in 1924. The BBC had thought

about making radio drama but radio as a medium has the disadvantage of no images. So the first radio play broadcast on the BBC was set down a coalmine during a blackout because they wanted to motivate there being nothing to look at. So the story conveys the idea of radio drama being confusingly blind.

The second story is set in 1950s. Loads of people bought televisions in Britain, partly for the Coronation. There was a woman who decided to give up her television on the basis that in her view “on the radio the pictures are better.” That story captures the completely opposite view; that the radio is intensely visual.

In my opinion, the writing process of a radio drama must be located somewhere in between those two contradictory ideas. The interesting effect you can get in radio is when you have someone saying why they are doing this or that so you have to engage your visual imagination. Most of the time, you have a fuzzy sense of what people in a radio play are like.

The toughest thing in a radio play is a conversation of, say, six people because you somehow have to differentiate between them so that the listener knows who is talking. And when one character is quiet for a long while it is confusing for the listener to know who they are. So you have to pay a lot of attention to this somewhat indeterminate mental visual picture. But it is not about being fantastically

descriptive so that the listeners can create incredibly three dimensional high-definition images.

**Audience 2:** What are you currently working on?

**DR:** In terms of radio plays, I am doing a trilogy of plays, broadcast in the same slot. The idea is a story of Britain's relationship with the Middle East and, more specifically, of a British woman getting kidnapped by one of the factions in a country like Syria during an Arab Spring.

The first play is first-world, focused on the woman's husband being woken up at night by someone saying that they have lost contact with his wife. Trying to find out who those kidnapers are, he discovers his wife's secret life.

The second play is second-world and focused on UN hostage negotiators roleplaying with each other quite incompetently, and trying to prepare possible scenarios when they get her back from the kidnapers.

The final part will be the woman and her kidnapper in the form of a duologue. The three plays will be real-time, which seems to be quite a challenge to do. Also, I want to convey the idea of a claustrophobic and small space in the trilogy, intense in focus like *Cavalry* with the difference that *Cavalry* starts tiny and finally gets really massive; the trilogy in turn would keep claustrophobic and small.

**Audience 1:** Did you get any response from listeners with reference to *Cavalry*?

**DR:** The play went down quite well. It was nominated for the Sony Award for the best radio play. It did not win but was in the top five.

There used to be a BBC radio drama message board where people could post their comments on the BBC website zone about the plays they watched or listened to. *Cavalry* got generally positive posts. There was, however, one person who did not like it but, still, said it was nice to hear a radio play where nobody is baking a cake. (BBC radio plays are often cosily domestic and it would not be untypical for the central action to revolve around a stressed housewife making a cake.)

**Audience 3:** Is there any research about who listens to BBC radio plays? What is the audience?

**DR:** I do not really know that level of detail but I do know that the afternoon plays, like *Cavalry*, usually get an average audience of one million people, which is massive, of course. The most popular BBC radio play, *The Archers*, gets an audience of about two or three million. The afternoon play slot begins right after that radio series with about two million people and in the course of it the audience is reported to fall by half.

**ML:** Is it not discouraging?

**DR:** Not really; it is rather motivating. I am aware I am writing for someone who can easily hit the off button. My experience is that the afternoon radio slot starts at 2.15 when people have just had a bit of lunch and they're cleaning up in the kitchen with the radio on. But once they finish the cleaning-up, they go. My aim is to write a play that would stop people from leaving and instead make them carry on listening.

The nice thing about writing radio plays is to get an email from people saying that they sat in their car outside their house because they wanted to hear the end of the play before they went in. So I had a strong sense of the necessity to intrigue the listeners and keep them listening. That is why story is so important for a radio play. It very well organizes the experience and you can insert lots of things in the story.

I also consciously wrote *Cavalry* for another listening and inserted several jokes that work best on the second listening; for example, Pestilence has got a rash he cannot get rid of or Famine enters saying he is starving. These jokes are there for people who might want to hear the play again.

**ML:** I downloaded the play from the Internet. Was it an intentional leak from the BBC website or was that stealing on my part?

**DR:** No. I have got all my plays available on my website. You have not done anything wrong; I might have, although the BBC board have not asked me to remove them. The BBC is tied up in a bureaucratic web that makes it difficult for them to make the plays available for people. And it has the extraordinary resource of thousands of thousands of plays that people might like to listen to.

**ML:** Sharing intellectual capital is not the end of the world, right? Thank you very much.

Transcript: Bartosz Lutostański  
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