Out of Sight, Out of Mind, Into Silence:

A Collection of Norman Corwin's Forgotten Radio Plays
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On October 19, 2011, I was abnormally quiet. I moved through the day with few words, unsure what I would say if someone asked, “Is something wrong? You seem sad?” Both of these things were true; but explaining why would have proven difficult. The night before, I received a phone call from a literary agency informing me that Norman Corwin had died. Corwin, a man I never met face-to-face, lived a rich life. He was 101 years old at the time of his death. Over the course of his lifetime, he received: two Peabody medals, an Oscar nomination, an Emmy and induction into the Radio Hall of Fame. In March of 2006, a film about Corwin’s life won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject. The day after his death, I appreciated the printed lists of achievements in newspapers across the country, but felt they were insufficient. In October, America lost a legendary writer, performer and human being. Though he made an indelible impression in our nation’s history, I feel his loss most profoundly when I check the mailbox. Norman Corwin was my pen-pal. His literary agents contacted me because they found our correspondence in his home. Most people do not remember, if they ever even knew, his name.

Discovering Norman Corwin

During middle and high school, my primary extracurricular activity was competitive forensics (speech and debate). My summers were spent at institutes around the country selecting and cutting literature for performance. I also formed some of my most lasting friendships at these institutes. In 2002, two of my best friends from
summer camp won the largest invitational speech tournament in the country (held annually at Harvard University). They were performing a Duo Interpretation of a script entitled *My Client Curley*, written by Norman Corwin. *My Client Curley* is a charming story about an agent who represents a trained, dancing caterpillar (named Curley, of course!) I found myself attracted to the script, perhaps because it managed to create a feeling of nostalgia while telling a timeless story. I knew that the play had been published in the 40s, but it still seemed applicable and appropriate to a modern audience. I was also impressed that both high school students and adult judges (who, at the time, seemed like ancient beings) both enjoyed the story. A few years later, competing on my college speech team, I encouraged my teammates to take a look at the script for their own performance. While attempting to locate the out-of-print text, I discovered that its author, Norman Corwin was still teaching (though in his 90s) at the University of Southern California. That day, I began correspondence with corwin@usc.edu.

**NC + Me**

My first email to Corwin (4/27/05) makes me cringe. The tone is that of a star struck fan and the last sentence asks for his own personal recommendations of his own work. Three hours later, Corwin responded graciously, offering some suggestions and mentioning that he preferred to correspond via postal mail. A month later, I sent him a handmade birthday card, featuring a dancing caterpillar. He wrote back, asking if I had managed to track down any of his work. Indeed I had. I had already begun to blindly order anything bearing Corwin’s name from used bookstores. Ordinarily, the shipping
was more costly than the text itself, and Corwin’s words would often arrive at my house with a stamp relegating them to the “DISCARD” pile. Undaunted, I wrote Corwin to tell him what I had obtained. Soon, the occasional package of “supplementary” material would arrive at my house—always a first edition, always bearing Corwin’s own personal inscription to me.

The Corwin Canon

Once, in an accompanying letter to a “supplemental” package, Corwin remarked that he was amused that My Client Curley was my introduction to his work. In his vast canon, it is a relatively insignificant play. However, it does represent the work he was doing in the early 1940s. In 1941, he accepted a position at CBS that is the stuff of radio legend. Every week, Corwin wrote, cast, directed and produced a completely different, completely original radio play. When one play ended, he immediately began work for the next week. The forty-five minute plays each stand alone, with no recurring characters or plots. As most of the material written for radio during this time was episodic/part of an ongoing series, listeners never knew what to expect from a Corwin broadcast. Traveling between humor and drama (often in the same episode) Corwin’s plays were never unified by theme, but instead by writing style that sounded much like poetry, making it especially appealing on the radio. Though originally a six-month contract, Corwin worked steadily for CBS for the next six years. Books in my own collection that represent this time period include: Thirteen by Corwin (My Client Curley is published here), Untitled and Other Radio Dramas, They Fly Through The Air With the Greatest of Ease, Dog in the Sky, More by Corwin and The Plot to Overthrow Christmas.
During World War II, Corwin's radio plays were a welcome distraction from the news bulletins filling American households. On Sunday nights, families would tune in for a respite from worry surrounding unseen battlefields. Though we are familiar with the anxiety caused by wars fought in foreign lands, technology today provides both immediate updates and welcome distractions. For those waiting to hear about their family members in the 1940s, weeks would pass with no news...and radio was the only in-home performance. Corwin's charming fictional characters and whimsical storylines entertained audiences for years. His writing also attracted the most sought after actors (Orson Welles, Jimmy Stewart, Martin Gable), many of whom would work for Corwin for free. During the war, Corwin's work became so famous that his radio plays were published in small volumes bearing the seal "Armed Services Edition" and sent to troops overseas to boost morale and encourage patriotism.¹

When Victory in Europe was imminent, the officials at CBS turned to Corwin to break the news. He was commissioned to write a 45-minute radio play, to be broadcast on the eve of victory. On May 8, 1945, 60 million Americans gathered around their radios to hear Corwin's celebratory address. *On a Note of Triumph* is (by far) Corwin's most famous work. Though Americans expected to hear a jubilant celebratory play, Corwin also raised questions about the nature of war, giving lines to characters named simply "soldier" that asked:

What have we learned from this war?

¹ My own collection includes *Selected Radio Plays of Norman Corwin (Armed Services Edition)*, 1944. A gift from Corwin, my copy is inscribed: "For Michelle Hill, who has made her own selection. With my warmest wishes, NC."
We learned out of World War II that we’d learned nothing out of World War I.

What do we do now? And when it’s all over, what then? Is it going to happen again?

Fifteen million of our civilians and six million of our fighting men are not here with us to celebrate. What they did to us in our homes and streets, in torture chambers and in prison camps, nobody will find easy to believe. There’s too much distance between the happening and the telling about it. Pain doesn’t transmit itself through talk.

I hope to God it won’t happen again. I hope they plan better this time (Corwin, 48-50).

Though Corwin’s words were a surprise to many, the play was so popular that it was rebroadcast a week after it’s original airing. It documented both a celebratory moment and a cautionary message. For Corwin, this dualism is especially significant. Though On a Note of Triumph marked the height of his career, television was just around the corner.

Deafening Silence

At one point, every American with a radio knew the name Norman Corwin. However, after the advent of television, radio became less than a mainstay in households across the country. Though Norman Corwin continued to write, his medium was no more.

I do not collect Norman Corwin’s books simply because I like them, or because I adored the man who sent me Christmas presents, though he himself was a devout Jew. I do not collect them out of a sense of nostalgia for a time when American’s gathered together to celebrate poetic performance in their living rooms. All of these are valid
reasons for collection, but I believe that the text within Corwin’s covers has tremendous value today, particularly in the classroom setting.

Although these once celebrated texts belong to a canon of excellence, many have been difficult to obtain.\(^2\) When plays stop being performed, they often go out of print and the conversation surrounding them is silenced. There is an even more immediate danger of losing the work of the era of Radio Drama because much of this work was written for immediate performance, and incredible volumes of it have not been republished or revived since. If his work falls into literary extinction, Corwin’s words will be silenced. The vast majority of Corwin’s plays are set in their own “present”—serving as cultural barometers of a specific population segment. As such, they can still be read and performed as living documents depicting forgotten private moments. History books provide the names, dates and facts; but drama provides a window into emotion, dialect and relationship. If these plays are introduced into classrooms across the country, not only can students learn about the art of radio, they can also learn about the time periods and attitudes which these plays depict...and about a man who has been called “America’s poet laureate of radio.”

I believe that one of the reasons Norman was so willing to communicate with me was that he once received fan mail in laundry sacks... but for the last fifty years of his life, he had not. In March of 2006, we watched the Academy Awards “together.” We

\(^2\) My own collection is supplemented by work that Norman Corwin sent directly to me, always inscribed. These texts are: *Selected Radio Plays of Norman Corwin* (Armed Services Edition), *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas*, *On a Note of Triumph*, *The Pocket Book of America*, *Norman Corwin’s One World Flight*. 
emailed throughout the broadcast and shared back-and-forth notes featuring only exclamation points when “his” movie won.

On October 19, no one asked me what was wrong. The death of the most famous writer in the history of radio was not breaking news. When I sent my exclamation point email, I hoped that the win would bring his name back into cultural conversation. Now, with a few years of distance, I feel that Norman Corwin’s best hope of being remembered lies within his own words. That’s reason enough to keep collecting his plays.