

Steam Radio

Hermione and George are in their fifties, and Suzanne in her early twenties. The ages of the other characters are fairly flexible. Terry (or "Terri") could, in principle, be played as a woman's part. The cast and the radio parts they play should be as vocally distinct as possible, for example Suzanne might, herself, have a Liverpool accent.

There are several chairs, a small table, a wooden cupboard, and a metal waste-paper bin. Downstage there are three microphones on stands which the actors use when performing the radio play. At the back of the studio there is a prominent panel with separate illuminated signs for ON THE AIR and REHEARSAL.

Separated from the main studio area by a (possibly imaginary or implied) windowed (but actually glassless) partition, running upstage-downstage, is the small control room. At the upstage end of the partition is some kind of connecting door or curtain through to the studio — this could be in the partition itself, or via a short backstage route. At the downstage end is a large reel-to-reel tape deck, a rack of tapes, some kind of simple mixing desk, a telephone etc. There is a microphone, operated by a switch on the desk, through which the control room can talk to the main studio. Ideally, the control room microphone should be practical and slightly amplified. The tape-deck, on the other hand, will not actually be the source of the sound effects heard during the play. On the wall is a large clock, side-on to the audience so the hands cannot clearly be seen.

Depending the studio and control room props being used, the play may be set at any more or less any time between the 1950s and the 1990s. References to the BBC Home Service should be read as BBC Radio 4 if the setting is post-1967. Similarly, the final pip of the Greenwich time-pips was lengthened in the mid-1970s. With a more recent setting, mineral-water might be a more appropriate substitute for the lemonade that features in the play.

Initially, the stage is in darkness. We hear the sound of a loud express steam-train passing through a station blowing its whistle, followed by the stirring opening of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto. As the music fades we hear another train pulling out of the station over which there is an announcement on the station Tannoy.

TANNOY: Milton Junction — Milton Junction. The next train to arrive at platform one will be the 5.38 for Chelford.

As the train noise fades, the stage lights, including the REHEARSAL sign, slowly come up. In the control room, the tape deck is in motion. It is operated by TERRY who is wearing headphones. When the train sound has all but disappeared, RICHARD, who is holding a stop-watch and a script in a binder, signals first to TERRY who stops the tape, then signals through the window for ROSE to begin. ROSE is using the microphone farthest from the control room, MAURICE is at the centre.

ROSE: So I said to him, I think you'll find those rock buns were fresh this morning.

MAURICE: Gerraway.

ROSE: And if *he* had any ideas about getting fresh, I'd give him more than he'd bargained for!

MAURICE: Lawks a mercy, Mrs Bassett, you never did, did you?

ROSE: I did indeed, Mr Perkins. Ooh, you should have seen his face. If looks could kill...

MAURICE: Well you certainly know how to handle men, Mrs Bassett, and no mistake.

ROSE: I know not what to what you are alluding to, I'm sure, Mr Perkins. Of course, you got a *much* better class of traveller before the war. Much more refined. Real gentlemen — not unlike yourself, if you'll pardon my familiarity. And what are you doing standing there with your ears flapping, Iris? Table three needs clearing — if it's not too much trouble, of course.

SUZANNE, who has apparently been engrossed in filing her nails up to this point, ambles up to the microphone with perfect timing to deliver her line.

SUZANNE: (As IRIS) Yes, Mrs Bassett.

RICHARD signals to TERRY who presses a button on the tape deck and the spools start revolving. We hear the sounds of cups and saucers being clinked. SUZANNE ambles back upstage, still engrossed in her nails. GEORGE gives her a conspiratorial wink.

ROSE: And of course, you can't get the staff these days either.

MAURICE: I know exactly what you mean, Mrs Bassett. That new porter on the morning shift — he's just the same. The younger generation, tch.

RICHARD signals again to TERRY who fades the crockery sound then stops the tape. Towards the end of the next speech, MAURICE gradually and very smoothly turns away from his microphone — illustrating an audio fade-out effect. GEORGE performs the reverse manoeuvre, with a slight overlap, to give a fade-in effect.

MAURICE: 'Ere, I had a right one this morning. Chap with a third class ticket on the 9.15 was in the lavatory and pulled the bloomin' communication cord. Swore blind he'd meant to pull the lavatory chain. So, I told him straight, if the train was in the station, either way it was against regulations. But would he have it? In the end, I had to send for Mr Hancock — and you can imagine what Mr Hancock had to say...

GEORGE: (As ALEC) Laura! Laura! So there you are. Oh Laura, darling, I've been looking for you everywhere. Thank God I've found you at last. When you ran away like that I felt so awfully beastly. I started to imagine all sorts of ghastly things had happened to you.

HERMIONE joins GEORGE at the centre microphone.

HERMIONE: Alec. It's no good. I just had to get away from that awful flat. I just don't know how we got into all this.

GEORGE: Oh Laura, you mean so much to me.

HERMIONE: Oh Alec, you know that I love you with all my being. I've never been happier than in these past few months with all the time we've spent together. But if we look in our hearts, I think that deep down we both know that it could never be. We have our own lives and our own responsibilities. I have to think of my children, Tommy and Dorothy, and Trixie the dog, and the guinea-pigs Flopsy and Mopsy, and the goldfish. And of course there's my husband Fred. Dear, ordinary, reliable, conventional, respectable, decent, stiff upper-lipped, boring, tedious old Fred.

During the next speech, HERMIONE starts brushing fluff off GEORGE's shoulder in a proprietorial way. She finds a long hair and suspiciously hold it aloft. GEORGE is slightly thrown for moment.

GEORGE: I can hardly remember the time before you came into my life. You know, Laura, when I'm not with you the days pass so slowly, and life just seems so grey and empty and meaningless. I just don't know how much longer I can go on like this. Oh, if only I'd met you years ago — who knows how things might have turned out. But now, it's all getting so complicated. I think my wife is starting to suspect something.

HERMIONE: It was bound to happen eventually.

GEORGE: Oh, it seems so unfair, dash it all. Laura, my dear...

HERMIONE: Yes, darling?

GEORGE: There's something I have to tell you. I've been putting it off all day but it simply can't wait any longer. You see the thing is, I've been offered a new job. As a senior doctor in a new hospital in Africa.

HERMIONE: Oh Alec, I feel so stupid. I wish I understood all those complicated medical words. But we must be brave. And you know Alec, deep down I think we both know it could never have worked. Love's all very well, but what about self-respect and decency and stiff upper lips? Oh darling, what are we going to do?

GEORGE: Oh, darling we have so little time.

HERMIONE: Alec, could you light me a cigarette?

GEORGE: Of course, darling.

RICHARD and TERRY repeat their routine with the tape and we hear the amplified sound of a cigarette lighter.

GEORGE: You know I always think of you when I use this lighter that you gave me.

During SUZANNE's next speech (at the microphone nearest the control room), HERMIONE looks at SUZANNE's hair, then at the hair which she is still holding — we can see the wheels going round inside her head. SUZANNE is momentarily thrown but pretends not to notice.

SUZANNE: *(As the garrulous DULCIE)* Hello there Laura. Fancy seeing you here! Oh, I'm sorry, you're with someone. Look do you mind if put these bags down — I've shopped till I've flopped. I was browsing around the linen department in Shackleton's — they always have such lovely towels don't you think, especially that pastel pink. And their towels are so soft and fluffy. When you drape yourself in one after a hot bath and feel its silky texture gently caressing your bare buttocks and thighs... and they come up so well in the wash. The towels, that is, of course. Well Laura, you mustn't let me chatter on like this — aren't you going to introduce me to your friend? Hello, I'm Dulcie Pargeter.

HERMIONE: Dulcie, this is Dr Harley.

GEORGE: Alec. Hello.

SUZANNE: I say, would you mind most awfully getting me a cup of tea. I'm feeling a little...

RICHARD: Hold on everyone. George lovey, absolutely tremendous performance darling, but that last line of yours.

GEORGE: You mean "Alec. Hello?"

RICHARD: Yes dear boy, well it's that "hello." I'm wondering if we could do a bit more with it? Possibly convey something more of Alec's essential ambivalence to the situation in which he finds himself, his primordial but unrequited yearning for his beloved Laura, his fundamental humanity as a committed member of the medical profession, his frustration at the unexpected arrival of the interloper...

HERMIONE: *(Acidly)* The fact that he's old enough to be her father.

GEORGE glares at her.

GEORGE: Thank you Hermione, dear. By the way darling, I've been meaning to ask you — is that a new hair-do?

HERMIONE: Why, yes George. I was wondering if you'd noticed.

GEORGE: Well, I know it's half price for pensioners on Tuesdays. OK Richard, I'll see what I can do.

RICHARD: All right, everyone. Top of page six. OK Terry? *(TERRY gives a nod)* Can you give him the cue, Hermione.

HERMIONE: Dulcie, this is Dr Harley.

GEORGE: Alec. Hellooooohh.

SUZANNE smiles at GEORGE and mimes applause. He gives her a smug smile back. HERMIONE snorts.

SUZANNE: I say, would you mind most awfully getting me a cup of tea. I'm feeling a little...

There is a pause. Everyone looks expectantly at GEORGE whose line it now is. He is still making eyes at SUZANNE.

GEORGE: What? Oh, is it me. Sorry. Er, I hadn't realised you wanted us to carry on, Richard. Was that all right by the way? Primordial enough for you? (*GEORGE winks at SUZANNE*)

RICHARD: Ravishing, lovey.

HERMIONE mimes puking to MAURICE. She catches GEORGE looking at her and feigns a cough.

MAURICE: Ooh, that's a nasty cough you've got there, Hermione. I hope it's not going around. I think I felt a bit of a tickle in the bathroom this morning.

RICHARD: OK boys and girls. Terry? Right, once more, and straight on this time.

HERMIONE: Dulcie, this is Dr Harley.

GEORGE: Alec. Hellooooooooooooooooouuuuuhh.

HERMIONE raises her eyebrows.

SUZANNE: I say, would you mind most awfully getting me a cup of tea. I'm feeling a little...

Having overdone his line, GEORGE has developed a coughing fit.

HERMIONE: I think you'd be quicker making the tea yourself, dear.

MAURICE: (*Into one of the microphones*) Talking of tea, I hope we get a break before transmission. I'm gasping back here you know.

RICHARD: All right everyone, I don't think we've got time to go any further with that. Could we just have a quick canter through the flashback scene on page fifteen? OK, Hermione? All right Terry — whenever you're ready.

HERMIONE and GEORGE are standing at different microphones. TERRY starts the tape and we hear the sound of a car engine which rapidly fades at the appropriate point.

HERMIONE: We were out in the country and were feeling quite jolly. We'd had a delightful lunch in the cafeteria at the hospital where Alec works — steamed fish, boiled potatoes and cauliflower, followed by a scrummy tapioca pudding. Then Alec said he'd take the afternoon off as he hadn't much else to do that day — just an open heart operation and a couple of kidney transplants. Oh, I wish I understood all those complicated medical words. So, there we were, bowling along a country lane in Alec's car when, suddenly, we pulled over at the side of the road. Alec looked across at me with his big brown eyes and said...

GEORGE: Darling, there's something I just have to get off my chest. It's completely absurd I know but, now that it's happened, I think it's only fair to both of us to face up to it. Oh, Laura, my darling...

HERMIONE: Yes, Alec? What is it you're trying to tell me?

GEORGE: Oh, Laura — my life, my love...

HERMIONE: Yes, Alec, yes...

GEORGE: I... I... I think we've run out of petrol.

HERMIONE: Oh, Alec — I don't give two hoots about the car.

And with that, he enfolded me in his strong arms and — our lips finally met!

MAURICE, standing at GEORGE's microphone, sucks the back of his hand to produce deliberately exaggerated kissing noises. GEORGE puts on a pained expression.

Of course, I was frightfully late getting home that evening, and as I walked in the front door, Fred was there waiting for me.

GEORGE: *(As FRED)* I say, Laura, thank goodness you're here. Tommy's been refusing to go to sleep till you got home.

SUZANNE: *(As TOMMY)* Mummy, Mummy — Flopsy and Mopsy escaped from their cage and Trixie was chasing them all around the garden. Then I was chasing Trixie, and Daddy was chasing me. *(She smirks at GEORGE)* It was jolly wizard fun! Oh, I do wish you'd been here to see Daddy chasing me round the garden, Mummy.

HERMIONE: So do I, Tommy, so do I.

GEORGE: *(Leering across at SUZANNE)* Right Tommy, come along now. I want to see you tucked up in bed ready for your goodnight kiss.

MAURICE looks at GEORGE, then SUZANNE, then back to GEORGE, giving him a knowing look.

RICHARD: *(Via the control-room microphone)* OK, thank you everyone. I think we're going to have to leave it there. You're all doing marvellously well. There's less than fifteen minutes before we go on the air, so don't go too far away.

TERRY flicks a switch and the REHEARSAL light goes out.

SUZANNE: I think I'll just pop down to the canteen. Can I get anyone anything?

HERMIONE: *(To ROSE)* A decent co-star.

GEORGE: What was that, darling?

HERMIONE: A fruit and nut bar. *(Patronizingly)* Why, my dear child, how very kind of you to offer. I'm sure I don't deserve it. Some tea would be very nice, please. Darjeeling if they have it.

SUZANNE: Right. One tea.

HERMIONE: *(Trying to be difficult)* In a nice white china cup and saucer. I can't stand those awful mugs everyone uses these days. The tea just doesn't taste the same.

SUZANNE: Right. One tea, white china.

HERMIONE: Oh, and could you possibly ask them for a left-handed cup. Er, my arthritis, you know. But of course you mustn't put yourself to any trouble on my account.

SUZANNE: *(Sweetly)* I wouldn't dream of such a thing. I'll see if they've got a left-handed spoon as well, shall I? What about you, Maurice?

MAURICE: Ooh, I could murder a gin and tonic but I suppose Sir would kick up a fuss. I'll just have a milky coffee, please dear.

ROSE: Well, I'm feeling extravagant today. Could you get me some cheese-and-onion crisps and a lemonade?

SUZANNE: OK. Anyone else? *(She moves to the control-room window and makes a cup-rocking gesture)*

RICHARD: *(Via the control-room microphone)* I think we're amply provided for in here, thank you, darling. Terry has kindly brought along a large thermos-flask and a bounteous supply of fishpaste sandwiches of which I have been munificently asked to partake.

SUZANNE: Right then — one tea, one coffee, one lemonade, one cheese-and-onion.

HERMIONE: What an obliging little thing you are, dear. Isn't she, George?

GEORGE: You must let me come and help you, Suzanne.

SUZANNE: Why, thank you kind sir.

GEORGE: It'll be my pleasure. And on the way we can have a quick chat about one or two aspects of your part — a bit of fatherly guidance from an old hand. Besides, it's suddenly got very stuffy in here.

SUZANNE: Right, shan't be long.

SUZANNE and GEORGE exit. MAURICE sits down and reads a copy of The Stage. In the control room, RICHARD is making notes on his script. TERRY is rewinding the tape.

ROSE: Fatherly guidance indeed! And I know which aspects of her parts that his old hands are interested in.

HERMIONE: You don't have to tell me dear. I've been married to George for nearly fifteen years, remember. I know all about his slimy little ways. In fact, I can probably tell you exactly what he's saying to Suzanne at this very minute. *(She starts mimicking George)* It's quite clear to me that you have a very special gift, m'dear. Yours is a talent that, with the right kind of nurturing — from the right person, could take you to the top of our profession. Of course, I knew it from the very first moment I laid eyes on you...

HERMIONE/ROSE: *(Together, making the same exaggerated dramatic gesture)* A bright new star in the thespian firmament. *(They laugh)*

MAURICE: Did I miss something?

HERMIONE: No Maurice. Just an old joke, a *very* old joke. *(To ROSE)* It's nothing to laugh at really, though. Whenever George feels the sap rising and starts chasing after some femme fatale, it's always me who suffers. If he gets rejected, then he's impossible for weeks. And if he doesn't get the elbow, then he's even *more* insufferable. You know, Rose, I think he honestly believes I swallow all those pathetic stories he comes out with.

ROSE: Well, I suppose he's at that awkward age.

HERMIONE: He's been at that awkward age for the last twelve years. I sometimes think I've just about had enough.

ROSE: Come on, it's not that bad. He just likes to flirt, that's all.

HERMIONE: Perhaps. But one of these days, he may just push his luck a little bit too far. Anyway, how are things with you, Maurice? Any good auditions coming up?

MAURICE: Well, I thought this one here sounded rather up my street...

ROSE and HERMIONE gather round MAURICE to look at his paper. Over in the control room, RICHARD has been studying his stop-watch and script.

RICHARD: Terry, it still looks like we're over-running a smidgen. I think we need to save about twenty seconds somewhere. Any bright ideas?

TERRY: Well, there is that train sequence on page 19. We've been using a standard recording out of the sound library. It's a Castle class 4-6-0 loco on that uphill stretch of the Sheffield and District Railway Company's line to Barnsley before it was re-laid in 1946. So although it's roughly the right vintage traction-wise, it's completely the wrong track acoustic. Any spotter worth his salt would notice it a mile off, of course. I shouldn't be surprised if the BBC switchboard was jammed with complaints.

RICHARD: Really Terry, that's absolutely fascinating, but...

TERRY: Now I do happen to have with me a recording I made myself of a restored Midland Class 4-4-0 pulling mixed freight on a mid-week afternoon past platform four at Carnforth station.

RICHARD: That really is most interesting Terry, but could we get to the...

TERRY: Right stock, right location, and most important of all for our purposes... (*RICHARD looks hopefully at TERRY*) ... superb tonal ambience.

RICHARD: Terry, dear heart, do you think that by any remote possibility you could just give me a...

TERRY: And, of course, it'd save you seventeen and a half seconds...

RICHARD: ... just give me a chance to make a note of that. Platform four you say...

Meanwhile, MAURICE, HERMIONE and ROSE have been looking at audition notices.

MAURICE: I don't know what you mean Rose, I've always rather fancied myself in Lincoln Green.

HERMIONE: If you ask me, it's any excuse to wear tights with you, Maurice. No matter what the colour.