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A Radio Host Tries His Voice on Television

By DAVID CARR

Few approaches to telling stories would seem less suited to modern television than that of the radio show “This American Life”: Tales unfold at a pace set by the normal speaking voice, the driving ethos is one of empathy, and when the epiphanies come, they seem to arrive of their own accord. It isn’t exactly “Flavor of Love.”

As a popular feature on public radio, “This American Life” and its host, Ira Glass, have used this simple method to engage the listener with normal people who just happen to be abnormally interesting.

Mr. Glass is a radio wonk who got his start as a 19-year-old intern at National Public Radio. He has since worked as an audiotape editor, a newscast writer and an education reporter. He became known for having a light, fanciful touch with common folks, and in 1995 he was asked if he had any ideas for a local show in Chicago. What eventually came to be “This American Life” gradually gained steam, winning most of the significant radio awards along the way. It brought a kind of radio majesty to the prosaic, the significant and the weird: kids frolicking at summer camp, love in wartime between a soldier and a prisoner, or a woman who goes to a Bible class really to hear its message and is unnerved by the violence underlying many of its stories.

Each radio show has a theme and unfolds in a series of acts, with guidance from Mr. Glass, whose nasal voice could belong to a cerebral grad student if it weren’t for the compelling stories it appears alongside.

Whether the show can be made visible without losing its charms is a question that will be answered tomorrow night at 10:30 Eastern and Pacific times (9:30, Central time), when a television version of the broadcast begins on Showtime. Sitting in the series’s office in Chelsea, Mr. Glass said plenty of people had their doubts, he chief among them. “We went into the pilot not convinced that it could work at all,” he said. “In fact, we asked for assurances from Showtime and got it in our contract with them that if we thought it didn’t work, that at the end of the pilot, even though they would have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars, then we could ask them to kill it.”

There had been false starts with broadcast networks, underwhelming attempts, and Mr. Glass said there was always the fear that the ineffable magic of the radio show might be rubbed out by a hail of production notes from television executives. And there was a new vocabulary, this one visual, to master.

“There were a couple of points in making this pilot that I was surprised by the expressiveness of television and what the images could add,” Mr. Glass said. “We are not snobs about TV. We all watch TV, we talk

about TV, but we had all worked all our lives in radio, and I have never had the experience in radio of thinking, 'Oh, if I only had a camera, I could get this across.' "

He said they were, in the end, "looking for interesting pictures to talk over." The series, directed by Christopher Wilcha, with photography by Adam Beckman, succeeds by coming up with a template that is receptive to all manner of images. The closest analogue is probably an Errol Morris movie, in which the images don't always relate directly to what is being said, but add narrative and texture of their own. In one of the Showtime episodes, a story about a 14-year-old boy who decides he will never, ever fall in love uses slow-motion photography of the girls he goes to school with to capture their allure while he remains oblivious.

"I think the process was initially frustrating for the people who had worked in radio," Mr. Wilcha said. "They did not want to bend what was working on radio to the needs of the medium, so I had to shoot it and cut it so that they could see it didn't work. 'This American Life' always has a moment of realization, and once we all figured out a way to translate that to TV, we all got excited." (The radio version of the show will continue to run.)

The America of the title is a big tapestry, taking its viewers from a pig farm with olfactory charms that lay the camera crew low, to the Lower East Side, where a smarmy art hipster punks a nascent rock band by manufacturing a fan base. Mr. Glass was greeted as a conquering rock star in various American cities during a recent live tour, and Showtime is hoping that the rabid, embedded fan base of "This American Life" — as well as the tsunami of media coverage generated by reporters who love to write about someone who actually tells real, live stories — will give it visibility in a cluttered television universe.

"This is sort of the heart of what we do in terms of trying to get attention with quality shows," Robert Greenblatt, president of entertainment at Showtime, said. "This is a show that was created by a visionary using a deceptively simple process. As I have told the people that work here, this is Ira's show, and he needs to do it. If he wants help or advice from us, he can have it, but it is his show."

In the first episode a rancher makes the unfortunate decision to have the family's pet bull, Chance, cloned. (Like many "This American Life" tales, it's a long story.) Second Chance — think Cujo with bad genes and very long, pointy horns — eventually gores Ralph, his owner, and badly. Ralph makes a nice little speech from his hospital bed about getting back on the bull, so to speak, Mr. Glass said, "but then there is this moment afterwards when there is this look of complete vulnerability and utter weariness that crosses his face."

"That look gives you so much more information about the character than we could ever get across in the radio piece," Mr. Glass said.

The series has no dominant visual aesthetic: "We knew what we did not want it to look like," he said, sitting in a corner office just off a common area that contained both an old wooden radio and a massive flat-screen television. "We knew that we didn't want it to look like reality television or a documentary."

Instead the television show is a mosh-up of visual styles, with short animation, found video, highly formal interior shots and expansive exteriors. What connects the shows — both the television and radio versions — is an uncommon empathy for subject. Viewers often find themselves rooting for whoever is featured going through the traditional arc of setup, epiphany and denouement.

Each episode opens with Mr. Glass inhabiting television conventions, sitting at a desk in a suit with coffee mug and pencils at the ready. But the desk is a movable feast, plopped in front of a booming subdivision for a show on growth spurts and in front of ominous nuclear power-plant cooling towers for an show on unintended consequences.

The six episodes, most containing two or three acts, never find themselves in service to television conventions. There is the Virginia politician who deploys what he calls "radical honesty" in a doomed election, a hot dog stand in Chicago that serves up racial invective, and the faithful in the desert who look for God's face in a Polaroid.

"We want to do people on a human scale without a lot of shouting," Mr. Glass said. "The subjects don't need to be exemplars of some national trend. They can just be people with interesting stories."

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