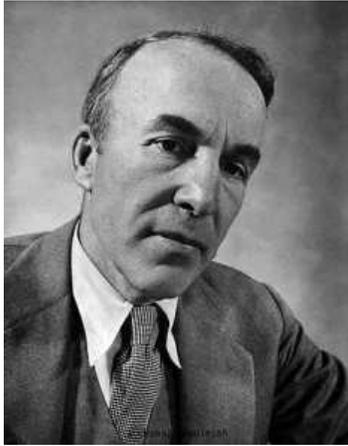


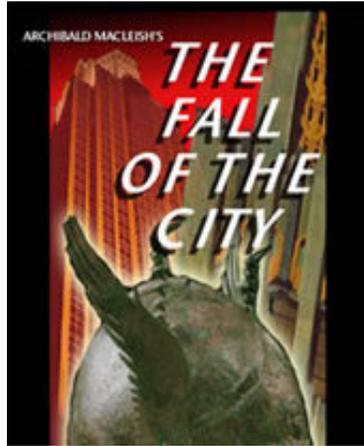
“The Fall of the City” (“Columbia Workshop”) (April 11, 1937)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Archibald MacLeish



Artwork for a more recent radio production



Burgess Meredith

Ambitious, influential, prophetic, discomfoting, and revolutionary are just some of the terms that have been used to describe the radio verse play “The Fall of the City” which first aired on April 11, 1937 as part of the CBS radio series “The Columbia Workshop.”

As the name implies, the “Workshop,” which debuted July 18, 1936, was conceived as both a showcase for new writers and as a lab for stretching the perimeters of the radio medium by taking ample, unique advantage of radio’s strengths, from sound effects to the manufacturing of aural atmospheres. In reviewing the program at the time, “Time” magazine went so far as to say of the show, “the production, not the play, was the thing.”

Under the guidance of Irving Reis, a former engineer and the program’s original guiding force, the “Workshop’s” first few productions were, arguably, too esoteric for their own good. For the show’s debut, two one-act plays were compressed into one half-hour time slot. For the program’s third show, “Cartwheel,” nine actors performed 34 different speaking parts during the 30 minute broadcast. Gradually, however, the series would find its footing and reach an unparalleled peak with its production of “The Fall of the City.”

“The Fall of the City” was the work of poet, dramatist and future Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish. By the time of his inaugural radio script, MacLeish had already received the first of his three Pulitzers (for his poetry collection, “Conquistador,” in 1933). MacLeish’s involvement with the “Workshop”—even if it were for the paltry sum of \$100 per script—helped elevate the status of creating works specifically for radio. The literary esteem in which he was held soon attracted other notable writers to the medium including William Saroyan, Dorothy Parker, and Lord Dunsany.

A verse play, with its stanzas of irregularly timed rhymes, “Fall” tells the story of a city and society on the verge of collapse. It opens as a newscast with a reporter reporting on this strange time and place, an unnamed city—any city—where “We have seen the familiar room grow unfamiliar.” As the show begins, it seems an unruly hoard of citizens—“there might be ten thousand”—have gathered in the town square, beneath an ominous group of birds circling. There, the crowd is held in wait for an oracle-like woman, supposedly “four days dead,” to once again rise and speak. When she does, her words are a harbinger of doom and the poem’s most frequent refrain:

*The city of masterless men
Will take a master.
There will be shouting then:
Blood after!*

Even after she speaks, everyone remains and seems to be waiting for something....

First, two messengers arrive (one voiced in quavering tones by a young Burgess Meredith), each with impassioned warnings against false gods and phony saviors. "Beware of the Conqueror!" they forewarn. But, still, as the poem/play progresses, the people, the citizenry, heed no warnings. They eventually fall to a demi-god of their own making by buying into their own reverse psychology and Orwellian thought: "Masterless men/Must take a master!...Men must be ruled!...Chains will be liberty!" Even in the end, after their new Master has been discredited as a charlatan--literally an empty suit of armor--the people remain oppressed, their city in ruins.

"The Fall of the City" is both metaphor and not metaphor: what is happening in this tale, in its brutality and desperation, is real to its characters; for them, there is no veil masking other, larger issues. However, "Fall" is also, without question, a parable, and a commentary, on, among other things, the 1930s and the then unfolding situation in Europe, the foreboding rise of fascism. As critic Randall Jarrell noted a few years later, "MacLeish foretold the fate of Vienna by eleven months. Prague, Warsaw, Oslo, Amsterdam, Paris—the play was repeated with tragic variations."

Along with the power of its language, its imagery and message, the broadcast of "Fall of the City" gains enormously from its talented vocal cast. Along with Meredith (then a largely New York-based actor who supposedly got his part by simply walking in and asking for it), Orson Welles solidified his reputation as radio's most austere and commanding male voice with his role as the announcer/reporter, the de facto narrator of the piece. Equally as important is the sound of the teeming crowd whose noise, cries, footfalls and chants, which rise and fall throughout the broadcast, makes them (it?) as much of a character in the work as any other. The production used innovative techniques to properly replicate their noise. Dispensing with normally used "canned" mob sound effects, Reis gathered 200 students from New York University as well as New Jersey high-school kids and area boys' clubs members into the Seventh Regiment Armory and rehearsed them into a mob-mentality frenzy, priming them for that evening's broadcast.

The broadcast itself, as heard over the national airwaves, was demanding, compelling, disturbing and exhausting all in its 30 minutes. It was also critically acclaimed. "Time" magazine said after the production, "radio is ready to come of age, for in the hands of a master a \$10 receiving set can become a living theatre, its loudspeaker a national proscenium."

Weighty in subject matter and execution, the existence of "Fall of the City," in radio history, stands in sharp contrast to a medium and its era often erroneously remembered as only consisting of innocuous comedy and vaudeville routines.

Along with having an effect on radio, "Fall of the City" also seemed to have a significant impact on two of radio's greatest auteurs—Norman Corwin and Orson Welles. Corwin, who would go on to create such aural masterpieces as "We Hold These Truths" and "On a Note of Triumph," would often speak of his admiration for MacLeish's work. Meanwhile, "Fall's" doomsday scenario and sense of hyper-realism (namely its pseudo-newscast format) greatly infused Welles' production of "War of the Worlds" which would occur one year later. The story's focus on empty icons would also figure prominently in later Welles work, most specifically "Citizen Kane."

Meanwhile, “Fall’s” theme of a decaying city and decomposing society has been replicated numerous times in sociological and science fiction works like P.D. James’ “Children of Men” and Doris Lessing’s “Memoirs of a Survivor” as well as Jose Saramago’s “Blindness” and any number of other speculative works, both film and print.

After its on-air debut, “Fall of the City” was presented nationally over the air again in 1939, again with Orson Welles. Since then, it has been printed in book form, put on the stage, presented on television and then, in a full circle moment, in 2009, put on radio again. The ’09 version, which featured a specialty score by pop duo Wendy & Lisa, aired over WNYC.

Endlessly enigmatic, “Fall of the City” is eligible for a multitude of interpretations and analytic tracts. It can be approached as literature, epic poem, biblical allegory (the resurrected woman, the ignored messengers, etc.), social commentary, radio drama, science fiction or something that isn’t “fictional” at all. It is also indicative of the 1930s, the time period of Chaplin’s “Modern Times,” Martha Graham’s innovative dance theatre (like her “Heretic”), Picasso’s radical masterpieces (like his “Guernica”) and other revolutionary works all born out of a tumultuous yet remarkable decade.

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