

# “Sorry, Wrong Number” (“Suspense”) (May 25, 1943)

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Essay by Christopher H. Sterling (guest post)\*



*Agnes Moorehead, in performance*

In a modern era of digital cellphones, the impact of this period program is sometimes difficult to understand. But when it was originally broadcast in the midst of World War II, in an analog era of operator-assisted telephone calls and shared “party” lines, radio listeners could readily identify with the situations they heard.

***The Program Series:*** “Suspense” was a half-hour crime drama series that aired on the CBS radio network from 1940 to 1962 (for the first half of 1948, episodes lasted for 60 minutes). That multi-year run made it one of network radio’s longer lasting dramatic series with nearly 950 episodes produced. From 1949 to 1954, an hour-long anthology version ran on the CBS television network, produced live from New York, and included some story lines adapted from the radio series. The series was later revived with new stories on SiriusXM satellite radio in 2012.

At its height, the radio series featured a cross-section of Hollywood actor and actress greats (it was aired from Los Angeles from 1943 through into the 1950s) who were attracted by the quality of the scripts and show’s production values. For years, the host was simply “The Man in Black” who would almost whisper the opening line “. . . And now, another tale well-calculated to keep you in . . . *Suspense.*”

***The Episode:*** Initially broadcast live twice on May 25, 1943 (once for East Coast listeners—with a minor flub in one line—and then repeated for the West Coast) and rebroadcast other eight times (on August 21, 1943; February 24, 1944; September 6, 1945; November 18, 1948; September 15, 1952; October 20, 1957; and February 14, 1960), “Sorry, Wrong Number” is a gripping *tour de force* built around the lead character’s increasingly frantic phone calls to prevent a murder—which turns out to be her own.

The entire episode is heard from Mrs. Elbert Stevenson's point of view and concerns her slowly growing realization of what is about to happen. The reality of her situation for listeners depends initially on her growing impatience with a series of seemingly feckless and faceless telephone operators. (AT&T, then the phone company for most listeners, complained about this characterization of its operators, though to no avail.) As Mrs. Stevenson overhears other characters due to various crossed wires, her frustration soon turns to absolute horror. In the end, she is murdered and--rare for this series--the murderer escapes unpunished.

Written by Lucille Fletcher and directed by William Spier, "Sorry, Wrong Number" is a stunning presentation.

***The Actress:*** Agnes Moorehead (December 6, 1900-April 30, 1974) plays the invalid woman who--as she slowly realizes--is the target of a murder plot. Moorehead utilized the same copy of the script for each broadcast. For several hours before each live broadcast, she worked herself up into being agitated Mrs. Stevenson. Though most famous for this episode, Moorehead was actually cast in more "Suspense" episodes than any other actor.

(Barbara Stanwyck starred in a movie version in 1948 which earned her an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress and she appeared in a one-hour "Lux Radio Theater" version that aired that same year.)

***Importance:*** This episode demonstrates many of radio drama's listening appeals--its reliance on sound effects (here, for example, of telephone dialing, switching and ringing), using music to build suspense, and utilizing the factor of time to heighten listener anticipation. Another obvious factor is the characters' voices--in this case the tremulous panic of an old woman as played by a 43 year-old actress. And, of course, the listener's own imagination and the mind pictures created with audio "prompts" from the radio receiver. Many critics dubbed this episode as one of the most effective radio programs ever aired.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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