

THE PANIC

The Date

Sunday, October 30, 1938

The Place

Studio One on the 20th floor
of the CBS Broadcasting Building in New York City

The Characters

ORSON – 23; director, co-producer, actor

HOWARD – 36; writer

JOHN – 36; co-producer

PAUL – 32; associate producer, asst. director, actor

ANNE – 24; assistant to Howard

AGNES – 37; actress

VIRGINIA – 22; actress, married to Orson

ALICE – 33; actress

MARY – 28; actress

TAYLOR – 35; CBS executive producer

BENNY – 27; orchestra conductor, piano soloist

ORA – 38; female chief of sound effects department

JIM – 30; sound effects technician

JOHNNY – 26; sound engineer

DAN – 24; actor

BILL – 22; actor

FRANK – 41; actor

CARL – 25; actor

RAY – 48; actor

KENNY – 28; actor

The Setting

We find ourselves in Studio One of the CBS Broadcasting Building on Madison Avenue. It's the 20th floor, but that's of little consequence as there are no exterior windows. Sound-absorbing tiles line the beige walls.

The large center area of the stage is where the primary recording takes place: voice, piano and sound effects. A studio grand piano sits in one corner, facing the center of the room, a microphone angled toward its strings.

Another corner is occupied by period-appropriate sound effects equipment and tools. This includes a huge assortment of odds and ends on tables and the floor, such as suspended sheet metal; trays of gravel, dirt and concrete; various kitchen household items including coffee cups, bottles, jars, plungers, washboards and cellophane; a car door on its frame; a toilet; and boxes of other items as yet unrevealed that may find a purpose. Three record turntables form a line on a table that also holds a dozen or so sound effects LPs. Hanging, standing and tabletop microphones are at the ready.

Along the back wall is a soundproofed door and window to the adjoining music studio; the window reveals the orchestra conductor at his podium, but little else.

Four steps on one side wall lead to the control booth with its soundproofed swinging door and glass windows running its entire length. The downstage side of the control booth has lost its fourth wall, allowing us to see and hear the activity within. At the far end is the sound engineer's station; closer to us is the observation area inhabited by producers, writers and other staff.

Against the wall opposite the control booth, a platform (about a foot high and four feet square) rises up from the floor, home to a script stand, floor microphone, and a fixed box used for vocal distortion. From this perch the show's director has an unobstructed view of all areas of the studio, including the conductor's window and the control room.

In the center of the room, a few tables, many chairs, and two additional floor mics clutter an already cluttered room. All microphones have a large metal flag at their top with 'CBS' in bold, sans serif letters.

One wall holds four clocks, labeled 'New York,' 'Chicago,' 'Denver' and 'Los Angeles.' Another very large clock with a red second hand has been set to the same time as the smaller 'New York' clock.

One more door, larger than the rest but equally soundproofed, leads to the world outside the studio. Over the door, a large black rectangle lights up to display 'STAND BY' or 'ON THE AIR.' It is currently dark.

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The views and opinions expressed in this play THE PANIC are solely those of the playwright and do not reflect the views of Howard Koch or anyone associated with the source material.

THE PANIC

The stage is black.

The houselights snap off, thrusting the audience into total darkness. We begin to hear, faintly at first, radio broadcasts from 1937-38: entertainment programs such as Jack Benny, Burns & Allen and Bing Crosby; fireside chats delivered by Roosevelt; Herbert Morrison's famous reporting of the Hindenburg crash; Chamberlain defending the Munich Pact; a half-dozen or so "We interrupt this program ..." and "We interrupt this broadcast ...;" Edward R. Murrow reporting the fitting of gas masks for children in London; and passionate stadium speeches by Hitler.

The broadcasts grow in urgency and volume, overlapping and drowning out the other until they crescendo to a deafening pitch.

The stage lights pop on and a controlled chaos of onstage bodies and voices immediately replaces the radio broadcasts in both loudness and intensity.

What's most immediately overwhelming in the onstage cacophony of sound are the tuning squeaks and squawks of the 22-piece orchestra emanating from the music studio, its door open to the larger recording studio. Though the smaller studio is bustling with human activity, we see only the resulting shadows.

In the large studio, ORA is at the sound effects station, headphones on, listening intently. JIM is seated at the base of the toilet, a microphone stand directed toward the bowl, fiddling with a large pickle jar in the basin. FRANK is at one of the record players, also donning headphones, a script in one hand and repeatedly cuing up cuts on an LP with the other.

DAN, BILL and RAY are seated at a table, running a scene, shouting to be heard.

Seated at a separate table is CARL, who is writing in script changes given to him by HOWARD. ANNE stands to the side, verifying — and sometimes correcting — HOWARD'S changes.

KENNY is alone, reading aloud from the script, a cigarette holder protruding proudly from his mouth.

JOHNNY is on the floor at the base of a microphone stand near the center of the studio, checking an audio cable connection while attempting glances up the skirt of ALICE, who stands — bored and unawares — at the mic.

AGNES sits alone in a chair, quickly thumbing through a copy of Theater World magazine while maintaining an impatient surveillance of the studio door. She smokes.

JOHN is in a heated conversation on the studio wall phone beside the director's station. He speaks with a cultured British accent.

In the control booth, TAYLOR and PAUL are also in disagreement; TAYLOR makes this clear with his pencil, crossing out words in the script.

The large clock in the studio reads “7:34” as the stage lights snap on. The action unfolds in real time.

NOTE: All lines are shouted and overlap, and there should be a constant and pervasive dissonance of voices in addition to the scripted dialogue.

JOHN (furious, into the studio phone): You've got five minutes, Sergeant, before you get a call from Bill Paley!

TAYLOR (to PAUL): What do want from me, Paul?! These CBS attorneys, they won't take no for an answer!

ALICE (into the mic): Testing! ... 1,2,3! ...

ORA: Lower, Jim! Drop it in the bowl!

DAN (*reading*): “One hundred and forty yards to the right, sir!”

HOWARD: We’re changing that to *six* state troopers! It’s six, right?!

RAY (*reading*): “Shift range, thirty-one meters!”

PAUL: Your argument isn’t with *me*, Taylor! It’s *Howard*! And *worse*!

BILL (*reading*): “Thirty-one meters!”

CARL: Not thirty-seven?

JOHN (*into the phone*): Look, I’m just telling you what’ll happen!

ANNE (*to HOWARD*): Yep, *six*! Better to start small, you said!

BENNY enters hurriedly through the studio door, sheet music in hand.

AGNES tries to vocally snag him.

AGNES: Benny! BENNY?! Have you *seen* him?!

BENNY (*exiting into the music studio*): No! And don’t you *dare* tell him where I *am*!

ALICE: Testing! ... 1,2,3! ... Testing!

JOHN: Time is running *out*, Sergeant!

TAYLOR and PAUL are exiting the control room to speak with HOWARD.

TAYLOR: HOWARD!

ORA: LOWER!

RAY: FIRE! (*RAY, DAN, BILL make explosion sounds*)

PAUL (*as he passes*): Keep your legs together, Alice!

PAUL'S comment confuses ALICE, until she looks down at JOHNNY'S sheepish expression. Her knees slam tight.

DAN (*reading*): "A hit, sir! We got the tripod of one of them!"

TAYLOR: Howard, I just met with the boys in legal! We need to talk!

JOHN: In that case, Sergeant, the next voice you hear will be that of Mr. Paley! (*hangs up the phone*)

PAUL: Sorry, Howard, I tried to hold him back! (*to ANNE*) Hey there, Anne!

JOHN (*to the open music studio door*): BENNY!

ANNE: Hey there yourself, Paul!

ALICE (*to JOHNNY*): We about done here, buster?!

ORA: That's it, Jim! You got it!

BENNY appears at the open music studio door.

BENNY: What do you need, John?! I'm busy!

JOHNNY: Sure, doll! That'll do it!

JOHN: Close the door, will you?! We can't hear ourselves THINK!

BENNY closes the music studio door, signaling his annoyance.

The result is remarkable. The ambient sound in the large studio is reduced significantly.

JOHN (*to all in the studio*): And everyone ... please work swiftly, but quietly. If you can.

They do. The constant buzz of voices continues, but without the tuning of the musical instruments they can speak without screaming.

ALICE, released from her sound check duties, goes to speak with AGNES.

DAN, BILL and RAY continue running lines in hushed tones at a table.

ORA and JIM review a script for additional sound effects cues.

PAUL: John, you need to see this.

JOHN starts over to where PAUL, TAYLOR, HOWARD and ANNE are gathered, but first stops to speak with ORA.

JOHN: Ora, I don't believe we can spring Ray from the *hoosegow* by airtime. I did my best. Can you and Jim handle it alone?

ORA: Mostly. But I'll need a set or two of clompers for the militia and maybe a spare kisser for the boat whistles.

JOHN: We'll get you somebody. *(to PAUL)* I couldn't convince the authorities to release Ray. I'm shocked ... usually all it takes is just a few syllables of the Queen's English.

PAUL: I'll ask one of the girls to fill in. Taylor, here, wants to make some changes.

TAYLOR: It's not me, John. Damn legal. I fought as hard as I dared.

HOWARD: I bet.

JOHN: How bad is it?

TAYLOR: We kept it under a few dozen.

HOWARD: A few *dozen*?!

TAYLOR: Just place names, mostly. I think we can all agree no one wants a lawsuit.

PAUL *(after a long silence)*: Those are crickets you're hearing. Give us the list.

TAYLOR (*reviewing the list*): Change the Biltmore Hotel to the Park Plaza, the—

ANNE (*writing down the changes*): —The Park Plaza? Where’s that?

JOHN: Precisely.

TAYLOR: The New Jersey National Guard to the State Militia, Langley Field to Langham Field, St. Patrick’s Cathedral to “*the cathedral*,” Prince—

HOWARD: —Aww, for chrissake, Taylor! “The *cathedral*”?! Who’s gonna believe there’s a church in Manhattan called “The Cathedral”?

TAYLOR: The thinking is that people will infer it’s St. Patrick’s.

HOWARD: Yeah? Well tell those idiots upstairs to *infer* that they can kiss my *ass*!

JOHN (*to TAYLOR, patiently*): What else?

TAYLOR: Small things, really. Except ... (*turning*) Kenny, you should hear this.

HOWARD: Oh no!

KENNY (*approaching*): What’s up?

TAYLOR: They were emphatic ... we can’t impersonate the President.

KENNY: *What?!*

HOWARD: Goddamnit, John!

PAUL: Taylor, now wait. Kenny’s got his FDR down cold.

TAYLOR: Look, fellas, you can argue all you want but—

PAUL: —Show him, Kenny.

KENNY does a confident and spot-on FDR, the cigarette holder clamped in his mouth, angled toward the ceiling.

KENNY: “Citizens of the nation: I shall not try to conceal the gravity of the situation that confronts the country.”

An outbreak of applause by the cast and crew.

TAYLOR: That’ll make a neat party trick, Kenny, but it won’t be on CBS radio.

A chorus of boos, catcalls and Bronx “raspberries.”

JOHN: Taylor, the president’s speech has critical exposition. We mustn’t cut it.

TAYLOR: Nobody’s asking you to. They’ve approved using ... *(referring to his list)* ... “the Secretary of the Interior.”

ANNE: Who’s that?

JOHN: Precisely.

TAYLOR *(handing the list to HOWARD)*: Here’s the full list. Make sure every correction gets in the final script.

TAYLOR walks away to return to the control booth, followed by PAUL.

HOWARD *(pleading)*: John ...

JOHN *(taking the list from HOWARD to review)*: I know. And he won’t like it.

HOWARD: You’ll talk to him?

JOHN: Absolutely. Get started on the rest of these. You’ve got about ... twenty minutes.

JOHN hands the list back to HOWARD, who quickly goes to ANNE.

They will confer, then visit with each cast member — starting with CARL — to provide the script changes during the following.

JOHN walks over to AGNES and ALICE.

JOHN: Excuse me ... have either of you ladies seen Mary?

AGNES: She's downstairs fetching you boys some hot java. That's what we do now, we're waitresses and sound-check monkeys, since getting axed from yet another script.

HOWARD: Agnes, not now. Please.

ALICE: Not even one female character in tonight's show.

JOHN: We were running long. We've only been able to keep in the roles of the reporters, the scientists, the military and the government officials. You know how it works.

AGNES: I'm learning. Nothing for principal actresses last week, before that Sherlock Holmes, Hell on Ice, Treasure Island—

JOHN: I'm somewhat familiar with our past episodes.

AGNES: Julius Caesar?!

JOHN: Your argument is with Mr. Shakespeare, not with—

AGNES: —I know that *you* decide the season!

JOHN: Precisely.

AGNES AND ALICE: Precisely.

JOHN: Yes. And you're not helping your cause.

AGNES: I'll go around you.

JOHN: You have every right, Agnes. Good luck.

We now hear JOHNNY'S voice, projected from the booth.

JOHNNY: Twenty minutes to air. Twenty minutes.

JOHN (*to AGNES and ALICE*): I am required elsewhere. Excuse me.

JOHN starts for the booth.

KENNY has joined DAN, BILL and RAY at a table, getting script changes from ANNE. HOWARD is with FRANK, providing the same.

CARL, who has been reviewing his revised script, stops JOHN.

CARL: John! You have a second?

JOHN: Make it quick.

CARL: I was going over Howard's edits and I noticed something on page four. It's the bulletin from the Intercontinental Radio News. Replacing "Trans-Radio," which it was previously. *(reading)* "Toronto, Canada: Professor Morse of McGill University reports observing a total of three explosions on the planet Mars, between the hours of 7:45 P.M. and 9:20 P.M., Eastern Standard Time." You see the problem?

JOHN: No.

CARL: The show starts at eight. At this point in the script we're about — what? — five, maybe six minutes in? The 7:45 reference is fine, but the 9:20, that's still more than an hour away.

JOHN: Sorry, I'm not following. *(noting the clock)* Please, get to the point.

CARL: I'm describing an event that has yet to take place.

JOHN: It's not a real bulletin, Carl. It's a radio play.

CARL: But the idea is to report events as they're happening.

JOHN: Yes. In 1939.

CARL: What?

JOHN: Thirty-nine. Not thirty-eight. It's in the introduction.

CARL: It is? How did I miss that?

JOHN: It all takes place next year. Same date, but next year. No one listening to the broadcast is going to believe you're doing real-time reporting. Was that—

ORA and JIM have placed a bow saw against the suspended sheet metal. They now begin drawing the saw quickly against the metal, creating an ear-piercing, cringe-inducing noise.

All heads in the studio spin in the direction of the scraping metal, but then immediately swivel toward an eruption from outside the studio door.

ORSON (*extremely loud*): JEE-SUS CHRIST!

A second later ORSON enters. Actually, ORSON doesn't enter but rather explodes through the door, sitting atop a coffee trolley being pushed by MARY.

ORSON has a script held aloft in one hand and a fedora in the other. MARY struggles a bit with the trolley but recognizes it's in her best interest to cooperate.

Bringing up the rear of this truncated parade is VIRGINIA, burdened down by ORSON'S overcoat and briefcase in addition to her own overcoat, purse and a large hatbox.

Immediately upon entering, ORSON jumps down from the trolley, nearly toppling the coffee urn that shared the top shelf.

JOHN: *Orson!* I called the thea—

ORSON: —Just *who* is responsible for that goddamn awful noise?! (*an abrupt shift in tone*) Kenny, tip the ambulance driver, be a good boy?

KENNY, after an eye roll to DAN, BILL and RAY, hurries out the studio door.

FRANK rushes to assist VIRGINIA with the coats, briefcase and hatbox. MARY pushes the trolley to an open space along one wall.

ORSON stands in the middle of the studio, awaiting an answer to his noise question.