

R.E. Jeffrey – pioneer of science fiction in British Broadcasting and the BBC's first Director of Drama Productions

By Professor Tim Crook.

Introduction

R. E. Jeffrey is a largely forgotten figure in the history of British Broadcasting. He was the BBC's first Director of Dramatic Productions between 1924 and 1929. The BBC's Written Archives have no personal record file on him. Some academics researching and writing about early BBC radio drama have criticised his failings and somewhat diminished his contribution to the new art of sound drama.

He was condemned by his successor in the role of Director of Drama Productions in 1929, Val Gielgud as "...far more 'of the theatre,' far less 'of the world'" (Gielgud 1957: 26).

The audio drama scholar Alan Beck in his 2000 study of early BBC radio drama *Invisible Play* agreed saying Jeffrey's writings about the theory and practice of sound drama lacked intelligence and detail (Beck 2000: 7.4.3) and that his championing of a special 'Drama Studio' for production in an internal paper was as 'verbose and meandering as his *Radio Times* articles' (ibid 7.4.4). Beck concluded 'it is surprising that Jeffrey was retained till the end of 1928.'

Dr Christina L Pepler in her 1988 PhD thesis 'Discovering the art of wireless: a critical history of radio drama at the BBC, 1922 – 1928' said of Jeffrey:

'When R.E. Jeffrey was made first head of Productions, the appointment was as chancy as many in those days; and though his efforts to stimulate a sense of radio drama's separate aesthetic identity were not spectacularly successful, he was left in charge for a number of years. Noteworthy output of the period in study was written not demonstrably because of anything Jeffrey did' (Pepler 1988:4).

Pepler's overall analysis of Jeffrey's work at the BBC is detailed, critical, and forensic.

In 1927, Jeffrey had to represent the BBC when it was determined to reject on the grounds of political controversy a major play called *Machines* that it had commissioned.

The play's author, Reginald Berkeley, was a leading writer of the time.

Pepler concluded: 'Jeffrey as an individual and the BBC corporately handled the affair with political naiveté, defensiveness bordering on paranoia, and a muddled if not totally failed sense of priorities' (ibid 197).

Roger Wood in his 2008 PhD thesis 'Radio Drama at the Crossroads: The history and contemporary context of radio drama at the BBC' said 'Jeffrey was an advocate of experiment yet could not wholly accept the divergence of radio drama from stage drama' (Wood 2008: 57-80).

Wood identifies two further reasons for his eventual departure from the BBC: 'The *Machines* affair must certainly have weakened Jeffrey's position, but what ended his tenure, and thwarted any ambitions his deputy [Howard] Rose might have had for the succession, was the *Twelve Great Plays* season of 1928/9 [...] it was over-ambitious, premature and far too long. The plays chosen were extreme, ranging from a difficult Shakespeare to a very minor Strindberg via a fifth century Sanskrit drama' (ibid 61).

Beck (2000: 7.4), Pepler (1988: 166-172) and Wood (2008: 57-58) all criticised Jeffrey for advancing a project at the BBC in 1927 for the creation of a special drama studio in a building outside Savoy Hill where the radio play could be developed in a physical space shared with live audiences. Jeffrey was also criticised internally and quite harshly for seemingly reversing radio drama's progress from the theatrical drama medium.

I would argue respectfully that they may have misconstrued the extent of Jeffrey's pioneering thinking about how sound drama performance, production, along with its intrinsic qualities linking listening, consciousness and imagination can be developed aesthetically in its relationship with listeners.

In the early 1990s I explored these ideas successfully with Richard Shannon, my fellow director in Independent Radio Drama Productions and On Air Theatre Company.

We experimented by producing new work by writers in physical stage theatre space as well as the traditional radio drama studio. We also produced across studio, outside location audio verité and stage theatre.

In 1994 this culminated in a two-hour live production in one of the stage spaces of the National Theatre in London. Four different plays were performed and produced to a live audience of several hundred people.

The plays switched between traditional physical theatre set, audio studio performance in front of microphones, and sound produced sequences from the theatre's speakers as a form of radio theatre in the dark.

We realised from the audience's enthusiasm and response, combined with the excitement and inspiration recognised by the writers, performers and sound designers involved, that Jeffrey had been advancing new ideas which had potential and credibility. Jeffrey's 1927 project was not in the least retrogressive.

New research reveals that for all his faults Jeffrey was an unacknowledged pioneer of science fiction drama on the radio, commissioning the writing and production of three seminal productions in 1928, including at least one and perhaps two written by himself under *noms de plume*.

Jeffrey wrote *Speed* under the name Charles Croker, broadcast 2nd April 1928, and described as 'A Tragi-Comic Fantasy of Gods and Mortals' and conjured 'specially for radio transmission' (*Radio Times* 18, no. 235: 12). The play was scheduled in the *Radio Times* with the modernist ritual of fast racing car, aeroplane, and speedboat illustration.

Jeffrey self-consciously implored the audience to be in their listening chairs and plaintively hoped: 'If the author has been successful, this fantasy of the gods on high Olympus and the speed-mad, self-destructive mortals below will tell its own story in its own way' (ibid).

It is apparent that Jeffrey commissioned the script *The Greater Power* written by Francis J. Mott. This was broadcast 18th September 1928, and was about 'a mad inventor of a death-ray such as science has only dreamed of, who from the island where he lives surrounded with strange apparatus and tended by a hunchback henchman threatens destruction to the civilised world' (*Radio Times* 20, no. 259: 26).

The third play in this 1928 science fiction trilogy was titled *X*, by George Crayton, broadcast 29th October 1928, where 'X' is the name given to an unknown radio station broadcasting the same programme every night until the one occasion when it was interrupted by a desperate cry for help. The underlying theme of the play is 'that unknown quality—that dangerous, incalculable 'X'—that lurks in the machinery made by men' (*Radio Times* 21, no. 265: 18).

This is a significant pioneering canon of full-length science fiction modernist original writing specially for the radio drama medium hitherto unnoticed by radio scholars. The scripts of *Speed* and *X* have survived.

While the identity of a separate and proven living writer Francis J. Mott has been established, this cannot be said of 'George Crayton.' He has no clear identity or independent record in the BBC Written Archives or any clear existence in the UK's relevant records of births, deaths, marriages and censuses. There is every possibility that R.E. Jeffrey was also writing under the pseudonym of George Crayton.

While Jeffrey has been criticised for failing to realise the potential of radio drama, and resisting the pressure of institutional containment and censorship of political drama by the playwright Reginald Berkeley during the 1920s (Beck 2000, Gielgud 1957, Pepler 1988, and Wood 2008), there is evidence that his work at the BBC merits a more nuanced appreciation.

I have found evidence that it may well be the case that Jeffrey was very much Reginald Berkeley's champion and had done his best to negotiate between the desire of a high-profile author's demand for freedom of expression and the state and broadcaster's purpose in avoiding political controversy.

I think Jeffrey used science fiction as an artistic and modernist metaphor to provide a vehicle for criticism of some of the key politico-economic issues of the time and this was a survivable mechanism of airing political controversy through contemporary drama.

I also think it is time Ronald Ernest Jeffrey, because they were his full names, receives more of the cultural and historical recognition that is due to him. He was the leading founder and early developer of BBC sound drama and he conceptualised the aesthetic philosophy which began to define sound drama as a unique dimension of the dramatic arts.

His writing, directing and producing achievements both before he became director of drama productions in 1924 and until he was deposed from his position around five years later are outstanding and enormously influential.

That is not to say the criticisms of Jeffrey's work at the BBC by Gielgud, Briggs, Pepler, Beck, and Wood are not relevant and indeed creatively and culturally legitimate.

The first three 'science fiction' plays on BBC Radio in 1928

I would argue that Jeffrey's play *Speed* written under the name Charles Croker merits consideration for the science fiction genre because of the transference of action and power in the 'Tragi-Comic Fantasy of Gods and Mortals' (*Radio Times* 18, no. 235: 12). It was a fiction extending beyond myth into a 'fantasy of the gods on high Olympus and the speed-mad, self-destructive mortals below' (ibid).

The God Cronus is given the speech:

'Blow, Zeus, And with thy great breath scatter mists which now obscure the planetary constellations from our gaze. Let us find sport among those stars and Planets of the interstellar space (Jeffrey/Croker 1928: 4).

It was also a highly political play because of its 'socialistic' critique of the damage of speed and machine age of capitalism to the dignity of human beings:

Ethel: Father, surely humanity comes before production?

Father: We fail humanity if we don't produce.

Ethel: Father, can't you see that this craze for speed is killing humanity?

Father: Nonsense, my child. Factories like these are for their good' (ibid 12).

The play features the shrieks and carnage of workers being killed in an oppressive and exploitative factory where plant is run too fast and recklessly for profit.

Jeffrey even managed to dramatise a Titanic style ship struck by iceberg disaster scenario into the play, which was something of a big taboo in radio at that time.

The writing in *The Greater Power* by Francis J. Mott was compared by the *Radio Times* to Jules Verne.

This was broadcast by the BBC on 18th September 1928, and featured a plot: '...that might have come from the brain of a modern Jules Verne. Incident piles on incident until, when the uncanny science of Gall has reduced to impotence the guns of a great fleet, the play ends with a climax that is the greatest surprise of all' (*Radio Times* 20, no. 259: 26).

The script has not survived.

The third play in this 1928 science fiction trilogy was *X*, by George Crayton and broadcast on 29th October 1928.

The *Radio Times* explained the underlying theme of the play:

“‘X’ was the name given by three wireless enthusiasts in England to an unknown station that seemed to broadcast the same programme every night- until the one occasion when it was interrupted by a desperate cry for help.

Behind the enigma of the mystery station lies a tale of machinery run riot; of men imprisoned in a fortress of steel; of a city ruled by semi-human machines, crushing the men who made them in their metallic grip. No stranger, more thrilling story was ever written by Jules Verne or H. G. Wells. And underlying it all is the hint of that unknown quantity- that dangerous, incalculable ‘X’- that lurks in the machinery made by man’ (*Radio Times* 21, no. 265: 18).

The promotion of this play has hubris, chutzpah and an ambition to be compared with the science fiction of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells and because of its radiophonic context an advance on what they had achieved. H. G. Wells’s work had not been produced by the BBC up until this time.

No credit was offered in the *Radio Times* billing in respect of the producer/director. I am presuming in the absence of any exculpatory evidence that Jeffrey was producing his own script.

It was sophisticated for its time and, like R.E. Jeffrey’s *Speed*, self-contained long form radio drama. It has a prophetic Science Fictional style and narrative frame.

In the plot, a high power destroys itself by developing machines for its own benefit, then machines control the human power. The theme is that the ingenuity of scientific progress destroys itself.

The deployment of thought transference and power was not necessarily robotic. There was the creative construction of an all-encompassing force, exploitative and predatory, and could be interpreted as a capitalist consuming metaphor of humanity eating and destroying itself.

There is an unseen power perhaps more realisable for the invisible and unseen medium of radio which exists only inside the minds of the listeners:

‘Morton: No, they didn’t make mechanised men – Robots, or whatever you like to call them. That’s alright for newspaper stunts and novels, but they didn’t bother to make their machines look like men. They didn’t do their engineering to show off, but for strictly utilitarian reasons. They simply wanted to make their work lighter and, if possible, to eliminate it altogether. They did that. You will hardly believe me when I tell you that everything here is done by machines’ (Crayton/Jeffrey 1928: 22).

I strongly suspect R.E. Jeffrey wrote and directed this play. It has circumstantial evidence of his style and similarities with *Speed*.

Jeffrey damaged by a political play called *Machines* censored in 1927

R.E. Jeffrey has been criticised for failing to realise the potential of radio drama and resisting the pressure of institutional containment and censorship of political drama by the playwright Reginald Berkeley in 1927.

Evidence has emerged that it may well be the case that Jeffrey was very much Reginald Berkeley's champion and he had done his best to negotiate between the desire of a high-profile author's demand for freedom of expression and the state and broadcaster's purpose and need to avoid political controversy.

The control was by the government edict not to broadcast politically controversial content.

Beck and Pepler argue on the basis of the correspondence between Berkeley and Jeffrey about *Machines* that the latter was almost pusillanimous and weak in standing up for the writer (Beck 2000: 8.4, and Pepler 1988: 197-231).

Is it possible they had not appreciated that Jeffrey had been made 'the fall guy' and was between the rock of professional respect and friendship for the writer and the hard place of BBC institutional politics?

After Jeffrey left the BBC and when Berkeley's landmark radio drama achievement *The White Château* was about to be reproduced and broadcast on national BBC radio in 1933, a *Daily Mail* article presented a completely different perspective of R.E. Jeffrey's defence of radio drama content and his ability to counter political censorship.

Collie Knox's radio preview column in the newspaper published on 9th October 1933 discussed R.E. Jeffrey's connection with Berkeley's *The White Château*:

'The production to-night at 8.45 p.m. on the Regional of Reginald Berkeley's play, "The White Château," one of the most successful serious plays ever broadcast, has brought me some interesting information from Mr. R.E. Jeffrey, who was director of productions at the B.B.C. from 1924 to 1929. For, though no mention at all has been made of it, it was he who commissioned this drama as well as some others in this present festival. He tells me that "The White Château" was banned by the B.B.C. Control Board the very day before its production. As the play was ready and waiting, Mr. Jeffrey appealed to the higher powers, and one of them descended from Olympus and adorned a rehearsal. Observing that the drama was not being put over, as he had feared, not having heard it, as a melodrama but as a sincere representation of war conditions, he graciously passed it. Its success was, of course, immediate' (Knox 1933).

If we accept the premise of this article, most likely based on a briefing from Jeffrey himself, there was clearly an attempt by him four years after his bitter leaving of the BBC, to counter assassination of his character and professional reputation.

It raises a serious question for historians. To what extent has Jeffrey suffered from being rendered invisible in terms of his contribution to British Radio Drama as a result of malice?

Jeffrey's successor as Director of Drama Productions, Val Gielgud, in his 1957 history of BBC Radio Drama, wrongly claimed that his close friend Howard Rose had directed *The White Château*; not R.E. Jeffrey (Gielgud 1957: 22).

The facts would have been easy to check. Gielgud had at least one researcher working for him and the archive of past issues of the *Radio Times* were to hand. Mistake or lie?

The character assassination of R.E. Jeffrey

The official history of the BBC Radio Drama Department in the BBC Written Archives stated: 'It was decided by the end of the year (1928) that Mr. Jeffrey was not the right man as head of the Productions Department' (BBC WAC Part 3: 6). This is blunt, patronising and rather chilling.

Val Gielgud wrote in 1957- rather ungraciously- given that was the year of R.E. Jeffrey's death:

'R.E. Jeffrey was in every way a less obviously impressive personality. To this day my principal recollection of his physical appearance is confined to spats, a pipe, and very smoothly brushed hair. His reputation at Savoy Hill was none the less considerable. I remember the slightly awed disbelief of two of my colleagues when I confessed one day in the *Radio Times* office that the initials R.E.J. scrawled with obvious vigour beneath an inter-office memorandum of some pungency meant nothing to me. Fated as I was to succeed Jeffrey at the beginning of 1929, our mutual relations could hardly be other than a trifle bleak, though I like to think that they were always correct. Of the causes of his ultimate resignation I know nothing' (Gielgud 1957: 25).

The language here is superior, pompous and nasty. Note the highlighting of his focus on R.E. Jeffrey's physical appearance which is implicitly pejorative and unnecessary. Gielgud's claim to have no knowledge of the causes of Jeffrey's resignation was disingenuous to say the least.

And the reference to Jeffrey's pungent memo may well have been a complaint about the letters, which Gielgud himself had faked, being published in the *Radio Times* excoriating the BBC for its drama programmes.

After R.E. Jeffrey had been effectively deposed and Gielgud appointed in his place, on 1st March 1929, the BBC's *Radio Times* published a special issue celebrating the radio drama genre of programming and achievements up until then.

Already Jeffrey was not only history, but invisible history. He is not mentioned or credited anywhere in the issue despite having been responsible for commissioning and producing most, if not all, the BBC's significant radio drama achievements until then.

Val Gielgud had never written or produced on his own any radio play before his appointment to Jeffrey's job in January 1929. There is the evidence, already referred to and which is embarrassing and scandalous, that he previously undermined Jeffrey by abusing his role as editor of the letters column in the *Radio Times* and fabricating public complaints about BBC radio plays produced under Jeffrey's direction.

This is the destructive and ruthless pursuit of utterly selfish ambition by somebody with Machiavellian tactics in order to destroy the reputation of a key figure and pioneer in the history of sound drama. There is ample evidence he was a willing witness and participant as Jeffrey was then unceremoniously defenestrated and cashiered in public.

This does not, of course, detract from the very great achievements of Gielgud in his long and distinguished career at the BBC. And there may well have been aspects to Jeffrey's character, conduct and performance at the BBC which militated against his continuing career as head of drama productions.

But there does need to be a more sober and accurate assessment of how Gielgud landed his job in the first place.

Gielgud is more than happy to admit to the appalling behaviour of fabricating the letters many decades later. He also admits to inveigling himself into the interest and consideration of the BBC's Director-General Sir John Reith when casting and directing Reith in the BBC's amateur dramatic society during 1928.

The 1st March edition of *Radio Times* in 1929 celebrated Radio Drama's achievements with a spectacular Art Deco style front page illustration by Eric Fraser.

The Radio Drama Number of The *Radio Times* published 1st March 1929

The graphic and text highlighted and paid tribute to *The Kaleidoscope*— a modernist experimental sound feature auteured by Lancelot De Giberne Sieveking D.S.C., *The White Château* – the first anti-war play on radio written by Reginald Berkeley M.C. for Armistice Night 1925 and the first British radio play ever published in book form, the dramatisation by Cecil Lewis of Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*, and *Carnival* by the novelist Compton Mackenzie who performed the narration of his own book, and had plenty to say about 'The Future of the Broadcast Play.'

There was merely a one-word reference to *Speed* which was BBC Radio's first and original foray into science fiction on the radio, but the authorship by its first Director of Drama Productions, R.E. Jeffrey under a pseudonym, is not acknowledged anywhere in the issue.

Surely these are pinnacles of success to celebrate and should be credited to R.E. Jeffrey's leadership and are not Gielgud's to take credit for?

All of this was going on while R.E. Jeffrey had been demoted, humiliated and shunted off into some experimental features unit.

Jeffrey's messy and bitter leaving of the BBC is admirably researched and analysed in Pepler's eighth chapter 'The End of an Era' (Pepler 1988: 267-273).

While Gielgud always pleaded ignorance and implied innocence about the reasons for Jeffrey's defenestration, Pepler spotted an admission from Gielgud on page 30 of his 1957 history of British Radio Drama.

Gielgud had been told of his appointment as Jeffrey's successor as early as the autumn of 1928 'when Jeffrey still had some months ahead of him in office as head of Productions' (ibid 267).

The shameful treatment meted out to Jeffrey became public in June 1929 when he released his first resignation letter to the Director-General Sir John Reith which he had withdrawn, and then his second and final one.

All was revealed in the 10th June 1929 edition of the *Aberdeen Press & Journal*— the daily newspaper for the town where Jeffrey had triumphed and built his reputation as the director of the BBC station there:

'B.B.C. RESIGNATION.

"Personal Humiliation" of Mr R.E. Jeffrey.

It is officially stated that the letter to Sir John Reith conveying Mr R.E. Jeffrey's resignation from the B.B.C., which has been published in some newspapers, was dated November 15, 1928, but was withdrawn five days later at the special request of Mr Jeffrey.

Although the resignation had been accepted it was arranged to give Mr Jeffrey another chance. Mr Jeffrey, who was formerly station director at Aberdeen had been for some time in charge of the section of the programme branch concerned with dramatic work. He was not director of programmes. He resigned to join British International Pictures on March 22, 1929. His final letter, addressed to Sir John Reith, dated March 22, read as follows:-

Dear Sir John- I have sent my official letter of resignation to Admiral Carpendale. During the prior six years I have had cause to thank you on many occasions for the consideration you have shown me. Under your personal leadership I have been stimulated to great enthusiasm over my work, and it was this stimulus which contributed in large measure to any success I may be said to have attained in the past. It is with regret that I am compelled to sever myself from this leadership. Yours very sincerely, (Signed) R.E. Jeffrey.

Mr Jeffrey's first letter of resignation referred to in the above statement was as follows: –

Dear Sir John,- The supporting of my position of programme director and the carrying out of the necessary work and development of my department have of late become increasingly difficult.

The unconsidered or ill-advised action taken with respect to the contract, coupled with the personal humiliation attending upon it, shows that my continuation under the existing circumstances would be unprogressive and unprofitable. I therefore tender my resignation, together with my regrets that such a course has been rendered inevitable' (Aberdeen Press & Journal 10 June 1929).

The personal humiliation R.E. Jeffrey was talking about was his removal from the role of Director of Drama programmes and productions and his replacement by Val Gielgud.

Mr Jeffrey was entitled to ask who on earth was Val Gielgud and what were his qualifications for the job? His experience, reputation and track-record were dwarfed by those of Mr Jeffrey.

Gielgud had little status from his own sphere of activity having only been the editorial assistant to Eric Maschwitz – the editor of the *Radio Times*. He did not have even one radio drama production and broadcast credit anywhere. In fact, he had no credits at all for any radio programmes.

He knew nothing of the Dramatic department. Several members regarded him with a mixture of suspicion and dislike. What was most likely unknown to Mr Jeffrey is that Gielgud had assumed fake identities in the correspondence columns of the *Radio Times* which he was responsible for editing. He did this to indulge in the criticism of the Drama Department's policy and methods (Gielgud 1947: 70-72).

In Chapter 3 of his own history of BBC Radio Drama he confessed to writing: 'Under a pseudonym – a number of letters to the *Radio Times* dealing, I fear rather critically, with certain aspects of the work of R.E. Jeffrey's department' (Gielgud 1957:35).

R.E. Jeffrey's resignation was reported in a number of national and regional newspapers including the *Reading Standard* on Saturday 30th March 1929:

'Mr. R.E. Jeffrey, one of the best known officials at Savoy Hill, has also resigned from the staff of the B.B.C. to take charge of the Sound Production Department of British International Pictures, Ltd. Mr. Jeffrey has much to do in connection with the B.B.C.'s dramatic organisation. He has devoted himself for the past six years to the selection and production of plays for broadcasting, and has concentrated on sound effects as the best means of conveying to the listener the atmosphere of the play. He originated the system of blending stage effects and the voices of the actors, so that the spoken work and the background can be heard simultaneously. Mr Jeffrey commenced his wireless career when he opened the Aberdeen station, later coming to London to undertake the work which has brought him so prominently to the notice of listeners as one of the most successful members of the staff at Savoy Hill' (*Reading Standard* 1929).

On Wednesday 19th June 1929, the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* disclosed more of the background to Jeffrey leaving the BBC. The paper was analysing high profile departures:

'Many of the earlier secessions were entirely due to the offers of higher pay in other spheres- notably the "talkies"- but more recent resignations have been because of a general dissatisfaction that exists owing to the limitations that have been imposed upon the more responsible officials. The first important resignation was that of Mr. R.E. Jeffrey, who was the first dramatic producer, and was later given the position of director of dramatic research, a position which appeared to have been manufactured for him when the present dramatic producer, Mr. Val Gielgud, was appointed. Evidently Mr. Jeffrey was of the same opinion, for he came to the conclusion that under the arrangements that came into being he could not carry on and do justice to his task.'

Just how invaluable a leader of programme making the BBC was losing had been made apparent in this *Daily Mail* profile of Jeffrey published on 23rd March 1929. The newspaper paid tribute to him in ways the BBC was unable to:

'THE PRODUCER OF PLAYS. Introduction of New Technique.

Many people must have wondered what type of man is required for the task of supervising all the many varied dramatic productions for the B.B.C. For the last five years one man has had this post- Mr R.E. Jeffrey – whose official title is Productions Director, and now that he is leaving so as to help a British film company to produce good "talkies" the veil of secrecy which always shrouds workers at Savoy Hill can be lifted.

Mr. Jeffrey is known as the "master" wireless producer, and yet it was almost by chance that he found himself in the wireless world. After a period on the stage Mr. Jeffrey some years ago was stranded with a touring company in Aberdeen. He immediately started to look for a job, and became a teacher of elocution in Scotland, and for 15 years was engaged at Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities. His speech, by constantly teaching pupils, became so clear and distinct that when a wireless station was being opened at Aberdeen his services were at once accepted. His was the first Sunday Children's Hour, which brought to the then unknown producer hundreds of letters from all over England.

It was soon evident that he would be secured at headquarters, and within nine months he was in charge of the productions at 2LO. In those days plays by wireless were rare and the technique was crude. Mr. Jeffrey at once began to remedy defects, and the present high standard at the B.B.C. is largely due to his efforts. He has broadcast hundreds of times, but none of the public knew that Raymond Trafford, whose clear voice could easily be picked out, was Mr. Jeffrey. He is the only man to have acted the part of Shylock before the microphone, the Portia being Miss Phyllis Neilson-Terry.

Some idea of his popularity can be gained from the fact that when he left Aberdeen a presentation was made to him publicly, and much of this was contributed in sixpences enclosed in letters from many of the poor citizens of the town' (*Daily Mail* 1929).

The UK's leading national liberal newspaper, *The Daily News*, reported on 10th June 1929 with information clearly provided by Jeffrey himself:

'MR. R.E. JEFFREY. WHY HE RESIGNED FROM THE B.B.C.

Mr. R. E. Jeffrey, who resigned last March from the British Broadcasting Corporation, where he was associated with the production of variety, musical-comedy and dramatic productions, explained the circumstances of his resignation to the "Daily News" yesterday.

Mr. Jeffrey, who is now working on the production of sound and talk-films in a British studio, first resigned from the B.B.C. in November 1928. This, he told the "Daily News," followed a series of "aggravating and humiliating interferences" with his work.

The B.B.C., stated that this resignation was withdrawn at Mr. Jeffrey's request, and that..." it was arranged to give Mr. Jeffrey another chance."

"I think in fairness to me," Mr. Jeffrey said, "the B.B.C. ought to have disclosed the circumstances of my withdrawal. The suggestion that I was 'given another chance' is absurd. I was told after I had sent my resignation last November that it was 'impertinent' and that if I wished to remedy things I should see Mr. Roger Eckersley, who was my chief. I did nothing for three days, then Sir John Reith sent for me and we had a frank talk to the end that I should reconsider my decision. I did not want to withdraw my resignation, but finally I agreed. The approach was not mine.

"A man whose salary was increased from £500 to £1,500 during his stay with the B.B.C. does not need to ask for 'another chance'" (*Daily News* 1929).

A new evaluation of R.E. Jeffrey- background and achievements before, during and after the BBC

There are four articles R.E. Jeffrey wrote and had published in the *Radio Times* which demonstrate how he was defining radio drama according to its own terms as an art form.

These were 'Wireless Drama' (6th June 1924), 'The Need for a Radio Drama' (17th July 1925), 'Seeing with the Mind's Eye' (5th November 1926) and 'Technique or Dramatist?' (28th September 1928.)

R.E. Jeffrey's first Radio Times article about radio drama came with the authority of having been the Station Director at BBC Radio's Aberdeen station. It is clear from the writing that he had a unique professional and artistic grasp of sound drama as a new form of dramatically performative story-telling:

'The amazing advantage of listening without sight to words which are arranged to build emotion-compelling situations is that every person places the emotion in a setting fitted to or known by him. Thus, the emotion becomes a power inter-acting with a personal experience. Here the artificiality is entirely done away with, and if the ability of the speakers is of a high order, the emotion of the situation is universally accepted- it becomes a personal picture adapted to the mentality of the individual and assumes a reality which can be far greater than any effect at present provided on an ordinary stage' (Jeffrey 1924).

Jeffrey articulated a critical truth about audio drama; that it is a medium of storytelling communication based on feeling.

In June 1924, Jeffrey's article was combined with the promotion by the BBC of a competition for radio dramatists: 'Can You Write a Play? ... £50 for the Winner (ibid)'

In 1925, he was advancing ideas for 'The Need for a Radio Drama' by explaining the creation of a playwriting technique which will produce the best possible type of drama for broadcasting.

This would be done by 'Imaginary Scenery' where director/producers 'have to deal with hearing versus sight' (Jeffrey 1925). He talked about having 'to present situations and emotions which will penetrate deeply into the human consciousness' (ibid.)

He said that new players were wanted with 'richly imaginative minds and voices- flexible, responsive to interpreting through transition' (ibid). He talked of new scripts whose literary quality 'must be equal to their dramatic strength' (ibid).

In 'Seeing with the Mind's Eye' in November 1926, he said makers and producers of radio plays are now thinking in forms, not words. He discussed the idea that true drama is emotion, and emotion stimulates its own picture, not through the eye, but 'through the sub-conscious- the mind's eye' (Jeffrey 1926b).

Jeffrey recognised and advocated sound drama as 'psychological drama' (ibid).

In the last article, he wrote on the theory and practice of radio drama 'Technique or Dramatist?' In September 1928 he consolidated his thoughts on reaching the consciousness of the listener.

He said: 'It may well be that this is not a matter of new technique at all, but rather the willing pen in the hand of the inspired writer, and the willingness to appreciate in the consciousness of the listener' (Jeffrey *Radio Times* 1928).

By this time R.E. Jeffrey had led and fostered the development of the long form in sound drama.

He had encouraged and supported writing and publication of the first book about writing sound drama published anywhere in the world, *Radio Drama and How to Write It* by Gordon Lea in 1926. He said: 'Radio Drama has a great future' and offered the compelling maxim: 'He who listens may learn' (Lea 1926: 11-12).

He had commissioned and produced the first original radio play to be published in book form- *The White Château* by Reginald Berkeley which became the first originally written radio play inspiring a multi-media dynamic of radio play, book form, theatre and then later television.

Jeffrey had led the development of multi-studio technology using mixers- described in those days as 'control panels.'

He had also convened the first radio drama company of actors at 2LO- 'London Radio Repertory Players.'

He had fundamentally inspired and encouraged the development of sound design so that radio plays became audiogenic and radiophonic, meaning that they generated an impact and relationship with the listener as audience in terms of the sound created and dramatized story telling in a sound form unique to the radio medium.

He was very much a dramatic experimenter. Professor Asa Briggs in the first volume of his history of BBC Broadcasting said Jeffrey had caused much consternation at the BBC's then headquarters in Savoy Hill by bringing in a gun and firing it to evaluate a comparison between real sound and synthesised or performed sound effect:

'When the first Dramatic Director, R.E. Jeffrey, was appointed, he wished to signal his début by introducing greater realism into radio sounds. He began with the sound of a gun, and to the dismay of the staff spent his first few hours firing a shotgun over the banisters into the well of the staircase. He did not succeed: the noise sounded like flat champagne' (Briggs 1961: 183).

R.E. Jeffrey had also advanced the popularity and interest in radio drama as a new dramatic form through interactive competitions. This is so well evidenced in the feature article in the *Radio Times* 'What Happened in the third act?' published in April 1926 (Jeffrey 1926).

Jeffrey had been responsible for originating the first interactive radio dramas with competitions inviting listeners to guess and to actually write how performed plays will end.

Cash prizes had been provided. He wrote: 'And so ends a very successful contest which has evidently pleased and entertained a large body of listeners. We hope to be able to announce another before long' (ibid).

Jeffrey conceived and commissioned a twelve part 'Great Play' series which straddled 1928 and 1929 with full length (sometimes more than 2 hours) productions of significant theatrical literature.

It was hugely ambitious, international in scope for the time and included Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *King Henry VIII*. This was combined with the publication of educational and discursive booklets for each play.

Although criticised at the time, this project merits reconsideration. It should have been seen as radio drama's attempt to look outwards in terms of transnational cultures, demonstrate that sound drama production can be as major in length and scale as classical theatre and serve as what would be later described by Martin Esslin as a 'National Theatre of the Air' (Esslin 1965).

R.E. Jeffrey was a key founding influence of variety and light entertainment in radio programming. He recruited the director James Lester and together they conceived 'Radio Radiance' which was the inauguration of regularly scheduled variety radio entertainment.

The Radio Times on 3rd July 1925 announced the first edition of 'Radio Radiance' described as 'A Revue in Ten to Twelve Beams. Played by a Company of West End Artists, including: Arthur Chesney, Eveline Drew, Eddie Morris, Violet Parry, James Whigham, Bertha Russell and Dancing Chorus' (Radio Radiance 1925).

In the 45 minute sequence there were also items such as 'Book by Jack Hellier' and 'Popular Musical Numbers.' The co-direction was by James Lester and R.E. Jeffrey.

'Radio Radiance' ran for more than 80 editions through 1925 to early 1926. The *Radio Times* reported on 22nd January 1926: 'The introduction of review into the broadcast programmes was an experiment which proved one of the most successful ever devised by those who organise our dramatic productions. From the very first performance listeners were enthusiastic in their appreciations. "Radio Radiance" became a valuable part of the lighter side of the programmes. From time to time various improvements were made: each "edition" of the review had some new feature and always it was kept up-to-date and topical' (Radio Radiance 1926).

James Lester tried to exploit the success of 'Radio Radiance' by creating a theatrical version with the same name to take on tour and advertising its BBC branding.

On 21st October 1926, the *Stage* reported that the BBC had to take him to court with the broadcaster's lawyer reading an affidavit from Jeffrey 'stating that they had instituted as part of their broadcast programmes an entertainment of the revue type to which they had given the title of the "B.B.C. Radio Radiance" which was invented by him' which he had co-directed and produced (*Stage* 1926).

Lester claimed he originated the name, but settled the action by promising to pay for an advertisement declaring the BBC was not responsible and connected with his theatrical revue.

Lord Asa Briggs offered a generally positive evaluation of Jeffrey's contribution to BBC dramatic programmes in those early years in the first volume of *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: The Birth of Broadcasting 1896-1927* when it was first published in 1961- a mere 4 years after Val Gielgud's history of British radio drama:

'He believed also that the best radio plays had genuine advantages over stage productions: they would grip the listener more and appeal more profoundly to his "mentality, imagination and emotion". Jeffrey wrote several articles in the *Radio Times* on this subject, took great interest in a competition to find the best radio play, and won the good will of many famous actors and actresses who appeared in early BBC performances. He was less successful, in a short period of collaboration with the actor Donald Calthrop, who worked as a part-time BBC producer for a brief spell between October 1925 and January 1926.

One hundred and forty-one “plays” were broadcast between August 1924 and September 1925. Of these 55 per cent were said to be comedy, 35 per cent popular drama, and 10 per cent plays of a “classical or high-class nature.” Some of the plays would be called “features” today- “One Hundred Years of Railways” or “Pictures from the Past”, for instance- but there were several straight plays which introduced Lady Forbes Robertson, Mrs Kendall, Lady Tree, Henry Ainley, Gladys Cooper, Sybil Thorndike, Lewis Casson, Arthur Wontner, Cathleen Nesbitt and others to the “unseen audience”. About 900 would-be actors and actresses had been given microphone auditions during this period. Jeffrey’s closest collaborator was Howard Rose, with whom he produced many plays which were “the embryos of practically all the later and well-known offspring of the Drama Department” (Briggs 1961:256-58).

The latter quote from Gielgud’s 1957 radio drama history and the next sentence in Briggs’ volume is another manifestation of the mischief of Gielgud’s malice against Jeffrey. It seems he was determined to steal and transfer to other people any credit that Jeffrey deserved. Briggs repeats the ‘mistake’ of Gielgud in claiming Howard Rose directed and produced Reginald Berkeley’s seminal anti-war 1925 Armistice play *The White Château*. Briggs and his researchers did not fact-check, to use a now fashionable phrase.

R.E. Jeffrey was responsible for commissioning, directing, producing and protecting *The White Château* from censorship. His directing and producing credit is in black and white in *The Radio Times* (*The White Château* Issue 111 p. 300) and the publication of the play’s script in book form (Berkeley 1925: 7).

Jeffrey was responsible for casting, rehearsing and directing the successful company of actors who included contemporary stars such as Cathleen Nesbitt, Donald Calthrop, Henry Oscar and Milton Rosmer. He commissioned the original musical score from Norman O’Neill which Berkeley publicly commended as ‘beautiful’ (ibid vi). He was also responsible for planning and producing the evocative and impactful sound design.

Briggs continued in 1961 with analysis which is contradictory because he takes on the Gielgud perspective even though he managed to squeeze through the sentence ‘There was to be unprecedented progress in radio drama in 1927 and 1928...’ The ‘buts’ are all Gielgud’s.

More research by Lord Briggs and his researchers would have discovered that it was R.E. Jeffrey who auditioned Mabel Constanduros at BBC Savoy Hill in 1925 and realised she was a creative radio tour de force performer.

Jeffrey commissioned her *Mrs Buggins* comedy sketches where Mabel wrote and performed all the parts of the Buggins family- the first British radio sitcom and proto-family soap opera. He also recognised her versatile ability to perform straight roles in experimental plays such as *Squirrel’s Cage* by Tyrone Guthrie.

In my opinion, the truth is that all the embryos for future success in British radio drama were in eggs laid by R.E. Jeffrey.

These are the achievements of a creative genius and pioneer *par excellence*. He recruited, nurtured and encouraged the cadre of innovative producers at the time including Mary Hope-Allen, Lance Sieveking, Cecil Lewis, Howard Rose and Peter Creswell.

Gielgud and his followers have done him a grave injustice.

The hinterland of R.E. Jeffrey

Ronald Ernest Jeffrey had been born in Uxbridge, Middlesex on 29th July 1886.

His father James was Scottish and working as a Nursery man in market gardening. James and Ronald's mother Maggie had been born in the 1840s and brought up their family in Copenhagen Cottage, Cowley Road, Hillingdon, Uxbridge.

At the time of the 1891 Census Ronald had two older brothers, Andrew and James, and an older sister Mabel who had been born in Edinburgh, Scotland. Another older sister Violet had been born in Denham, Buckinghamshire.

Older brother Andrew, then fifteen years old, was working as a clerk.

Ronald Ernest Jeffrey joined the RAF during the First World War and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in administration on 20th June 1918, working in equipment supplies on the Home Front.

He was posted to his ground duties at a stores depot after training on 25th November 1918, a fortnight after the armistice ending the war. He had enlisted when living at 44 Burton Road in Brixton, south London.

Ronald had been put on a waiting list of people accepted for commissions in the Royal Air Force and there is a letter from him in his War Office file asking for an authority indicating he would be granted a commission in due course which 'he could present to recruiting officers approaching him' (Jeffrey National Archives).

Young men in civilian clothes were subject to considerable public harassment from intense recruitment campaigns which even involved women putting white feathers into the top pockets of men at large and not in uniform.

This prompted the special award of the Silver Badge to men invalided out of service which they could wear on their civilian clothes.

In January 1918, a Major Cameron of the Royal Flying Corps recruiting office in Glasgow, Scotland (The RFC would merge with the RNAS [Royal Naval Air Service] to form the RAF later in the year) had minuted that Ronald Jeffrey was a well-educated and responsible person who would make a good junior officer.

In his temporary war commission form he described his father as 'a business organiser', under the heading 'schools and colleges where educated' he said he had had 'private tutors

owing to health' and explained that he was currently employed as an 'author, actor (organised recently large war charity efforts)' and was also a 'Lecturer at Glasgow University' (ibid).

There is a reference in the *Stage* on 4th January 1917 that he had been elected to the Council of the Actors' Association which was supporting the families of members who had lost relatives killed in the Great War: 'A vote of condolence was passed with Miss Rosamund Mayne Young on the death of her father, and with Mr. Harry Lauder on the death of his son, killed in action and with Mr. Henry Dana on the death of his son' (*Stage* 1917).

He gave his Scottish residential address as Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow where his wife and next of kin, Janey Jeffrey, was living. He had references from a Lieutenant Colonel in a Scottish Regiment and a Professor at Glasgow University.

It seems his service as a ground equipment officer was short because by December 1918 he was admitted to hospital. It is possible he was being treated for Spanish Flu given the deadly pandemic at the time.

By February 1919 he was declared fit for ground duties and on 15th July 1919 his service file said he was transferred to the 'u/list' (ibid).

It seems he quickly resumed his career in professional drama. By Thursday 16th December 1920, *The Stage* was reporting that 'Mr R.E. Jeffrey brings the run of "The Dragon" to a finish at the Aldwych on Saturday night. The theatre will reopen on Tuesday next with "The Private Secretary" to be played twice daily until further notice' (*Stage* 1920).

In the autumn of 1923 R.E. Jeffrey came to the notice of the BBC's then managing director John Reith with his dramatisation and production of *Rob Roy* which was an experiment in live radio drama being relayed between BBC radio stations.

At that time, the BBC did not have the technology to distribute nationally with one radio transmitter reaching all parts of the country.

The Radio Times reported:

"Rob Roy." One of the most interesting radio events of the week will be the broadcast version of "Rob Roy," which is to be transmitted from Glasgow to three other stations- Newcastle, Cardiff, and London- when this romance of old Scotland, adapted for broadcasting by Mr. R.E. Jeffrey, will be unfolded in a way never dreamed of by its originator, Sir Walter Scott, even in his most imaginative moments!

Every player has been chosen specially to suit the requirements of broadcasting. The chorus numbers will be sung by a large choir of members of the Glasgow Lyric Club, while the band of the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers will support the station orchestra.

To listen to the story of the doughty Highland chief, to hear the old choruses and minstrel lays sung with true Scottish fervour, and to listen to the bagpipes played as only Scotsmen

can play them- this will be an unprecedented pleasure for thousands south of the Border' (*Rob Roy* 1923).

Jeffrey's ambitious *Rob Roy* extravaganza had first been broadcast from the Glasgow station 5SC on 31st August 1923. It was impressive because it was long, using a script written for radio adapted from a novel which was one of the more political stories from the pen of Sir Walter Scott, involved a large cast, a live military band and large choir.

The *Glasgow Herald* said at the time:

'A special feature of to-night's wireless programme from the Glasgow station will be the broadcasting of "Rob Roy," the production of which has been undertaken by Mr R.E. Jeffrey. It will be the largest so far attempted in any broadcasting studio in this country, and will therefore be in the nature of an experiment. There are, it will be appreciated, many difficulties to be overcome, but the rehearsals have been satisfactory. In selecting the cast an endeavour has been made to select artists having voices appropriate to the various parts. The incidental military music will be provided by the band of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, and the choral items will be rendered by members of the Glasgow Lyric Club. The performance is to be repeated in a few weeks' time, when the Glasgow studio will be connected by land lines to London and the other broadcasting stations, so that it will be possible to transmit the performance simultaneously from all stations' (*Glasgow Herald* 1923).

R.E. Jeffrey was appointed as the first director of the BBC's radio station in Aberdeen. On 27th June 1924 the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* reported on the generous celebrations and gifts given to Jeffrey on his departure to join the BBC's 2LO operation in London as Director of Productions:

'Mr R.E. Jeffrey, who has been station director at Aberdeen of the British Broadcasting Company since its inception last year, and who is leaving 2BD has been presented with farewell gifts in recognition of his services. A pleasant ceremony marked his away-going. Mr W.D. Simpson, assistant station director, on behalf of the staff and orchestra, handed over a clock made in the form of a microphone, together with a framed and inscribed photograph of the staff. Mrs Jeffrey was presented with a handbag and Miss Dodo Jeffrey received an umbrella.

Mr Simpson, in handing over the gifts, said they would greatly miss Mr Jeffrey, for the staff had found him an ideal station director to work with. He had given due consideration, thought, and sympathy to his staff. The listeners of 2BD would also regret Mr Jeffrey's departure.

Mr Jeffrey, replying, said he had but carried out to the best of his ability and with loyalty his duties to the B.B.C. He would always appreciate the gifts, and look back upon Aberdeen as having been a real home' (*Aberdeen Press & Journal* 1923).

Career after the BBC

R.E. Jeffrey left the field of radio drama in 1929 and entered the exciting new world of sound cinema.

He joined British International Pictures on 22nd March 1929 as director of films.

Two years later in 1931 he joined Universal Pictures in the UK as their 'Universal Talking News announcer' and was sometimes referred to in the media as the 'Golden voice of the silver screen.'

The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* said in their edition for 14th March 1931 that as the BBC's Aberdeen announcer 'he earned national fame for the beauty of his voice' (*Aberdeen Press & Journal* 1931).

This was a period of two to three decades when news reel cinemas were part of the picture house culture and social architecture of towns and cities.

Newsreels were the main form of visual cinematic journalism in English speaking countries such as the USA, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand between the silent era until the 1960s when television news journalism replaced the form.

The first official British news cinema only showing newsreels was the 'Daily Bioscope' that opened in London on 23rd May 1909. The only surviving cinema building, designed in Art Deco style, which had been a 'News Theatre' is The Tyneside Cinema in Newcastle Upon Tyne. It was called the 'Bijou News-Reel Cinema' and opened on 1st February 1937.

It is not widely known that the early BBC Television service first launched in 1936 and interrupted by the Second World War years broadcast British Movietone and Gaumont newsreels for several years until 1948.

On 4th October 1932 the *Daily Mail's* film critic Seton Margrave was reporting that 1,000 cinemas in the country were now showing news reels with a growing demand. He wrote:

'The popularity of the news reel as a feature of cinema programmes is now so great that in London, in addition to the News Theatre in Shaftesbury-avenue, there is the Piccadilly News Theatre, which presents a programme made up from the Paramount, Pathé, and Universal news reels, while the Gaumont news reel is specially featured at the Tatler' (Margrave 1932).

Margrave name-checked R.E. Jeffrey and added: 'The Universal Talking News, with its expert commentator, Mr. R.E. Jeffrey, happily comments on the settlement of the Lancashire cotton dispute, while a picturesque item in the Pathé Sound Gazette is a record of a ploughing match in Sussex. As a whole these news reels are most admirably presented' (ibid).

In 1930 Jeffrey was an actor playing the role of 'The Foreman of the Jury' in the British talkie thriller *Murder!* and he has directing credits for 24 short films made between 1929 and 1933. These include titles such as *The Skin Game* (1931), *Choral Cameos* (1930) and *A Feast*

of Harmony (1930). In the 12 minute film *Chelsea Nights* made in 1929 'An artist laments the absence of his sweetheart, who returns.'

On the 25th July 1929, while Val Gielgud was trying to work out how to be a radio drama director, Jeffrey was being reported in the *Stage* taking a leading role in the fast-developing British film industry:

'British International have now got a third sound-studio in action at Elstree, and "shorts" are being made in it at the rate of one a week. The first is a musical comedy, "Turkish Delight," which is being directed by R.E. Jeffrey, late of the B.B.C. The stage is 100 by 75 ft., 30 ft. high. A fourth stage of the same size was opened on Tuesday. The specially constructed studio and theatre for synchronising and adding effects will be opened on July 29th' (*Stage* 1929).

As the 1930s developed it seems Jeffrey concentrated on his career as a cinema newsreel announcer and extended this dimension of a journalism career into foreign correspondent and roving reporter.

On the 19th February 1938 the *Illustrated London News* carried an article and photograph revealing that he had covered the Spanish Civil War with a dramatic photograph of 'War-like "fireworks": propaganda by rocket from Franco's lines in Spain.' The magazine explained:

'Propaganda has played a great part in the Spanish Civil War and a number of new devices have been produced to disseminate it. We illustrate here the use of the propaganda rocket. The photographs form part of the film taken in General Franco's territory by Universal Talking News and recently brought to England. Mr. R.E. Jeffrey, the camera-man, stated in a Press interview that he was allowed to photograph everything except guns, 'planes and aerodromes. "Both sides,' he said, "have invented a new technique in propaganda. A rocket with a range of a mile and a half scatters 1000 pamphlets at a time, and Franco uses a German van with sound equipment, six loud-speakers, and cables three-quarters of a mile long"' (*Illustrated London News* 1938).

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, the National Register census taken at the end of September recorded that he was employed as 'a newspaper reporter.' He was residing with his wife Janey at Caravan Farm, Friday Street in Dorking, Surrey.

Ronald Ernest Jeffrey passed away at the age of 70 on 14th February 1957 at St Mary's Hospital, Hampton in Middlesex. He had been living at 41 The Avenue in Sunbury-on-Thames.

He left probate in the form of effects valued at £8,892, four old shillings and six old pence. The Bank of England's inflation calculator gives this a value at the time of writing (28th September 2024) of £181,013.41.

It does not seem that any publication saw fit to commission and publish his obituary. Six years later Val Gielgud retired from the BBC and the *Times* reported his '34 years of radio drama.'

It may well be the case that Gielgud had a conscience and some regret over his treatment of his predecessor. He had been prepared to confess his undermining machinations with fabricated letters of criticism and professional abuse directed at Jeffrey in the letters column of *The Radio Times* when he was editing the section.

And it seems that he forced himself to say something positive about R.E. Jeffrey.

The Times article largely eulogised Gielgud's contribution and long career at the BBC, nearly seven times the length Jeffrey had been able to manage:

"It was very exciting when I began" he said recently, "but by 1929 various people- notably Cecil Lewis, Howard Rose and R.E. Jeffrey- had done the pioneering work" (*Times* 1963).

It was nice of Mr Gielgud to remember Jeffrey albeit at the very end of his list of notable pioneering predecessors.

Gielgud had given Jeffrey a little more credit for his pioneering achievement in the experimental play *Speed* when writing his 1947 biographical memoir *Years of the Locust*:

'I fear that my personal reaction to the former's original radio play *Speed* was critical rather than enthusiastic. It seemed to me to be pretentious in conception, turgid in writing. Nevertheless, at the bottom of that swirling maelstrom of words and sounds there glimmered the jewels of "What Might Come to be Done." For all its faults *Speed* was a milestone' (Gielgud 1947: 72).

Summarising Ronald Ernest Jeffrey's Legacy

I begin with what he achieved in respect of science fiction in radio broadcasting.

Jeffrey found a way to use science fiction as an artistic and modernist metaphor to provide a vehicle for criticism of some of the key politico-economic issues of the time.

This was a survivable mechanism of airing political controversy through contemporary drama.

It was a dimension of dramatic irony that could have developed as an artistic conduit for making sound drama much more socially and politically relevant without the forces of institutional containment suppressing it.

He also discovered that Science Fiction had the power to excite and inspire intense and portentous realms of story-telling in the dystopian and utopian genres. He seeded and contributed to what would later become the imaginative scope and range of Science Fiction on the radio: Mercury Theatre on the Air's *War of the Worlds* (1938), *Journey Into Space* (1950s), *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1978), *Star Wars* (1970s/80s), and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* first dramatised by NBC USA in 1949.

Jeffrey inaugurated the BBC's Drama Department as its first head and his range of achievements in what was actually less than four years between July 1924 and December 1928 are breath-taking. It was R.E. Jeffrey who put radio drama on the map of dramatic art-forms during the 1920s. He inspired, commissioned and produced every kind of 'first' imaginable.

Val Gielgud took over a creative organisation rather like a new soccer manager brought in after his predecessor had been dismissed.

Notwithstanding the external and internal criticism of Jeffrey's leadership of drama at the BBC, he had succeeded much more than he had failed.

He had assembled an impressive team of producers and a production culture with new and developing technology in the form of the early sound mixer which they called 'The Control Panel.'

He had innovated in every area of sound drama in the production of original writing for the sound medium, variety, dramatisation of novels and radio adaptations of stage plays.

He had been brave and ambitious. He had experimented. He had also recognised, recruited, nurtured and encouraged new talent.

These were the foundations from which BBC Radio Drama would be capable of many future decades of growth, success and further development. It became the world's biggest and most influential public broadcaster of audio plays and this remains the case to this day.

Gielgud was appallingly ungenerous and disrespectful to the tremendously creative and pioneering person who had first led radio drama at the BBC between 1924 and 1929.

11,160 words.

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Biography

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