



March 8, 2009

What happens to radio co-hosts?

By MAUREEN
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Radio fans can name their favorite duos in the time it takes to change stations.

Clayburn had Finch, Curtis had Lisa, Hannity had Colmes and I had Maire Martello. Listeners called us "The Radio Birds." Martello's contributions included reading her adaptations of the alien-filled news of the world, to which she'd interject local characters: bail bond mogul Phil Konvitz, a dead nun from her unhappier school days, or a deserving politician.

We "Birds" parted over an equitable distribution of labor dispute. I felt I was doing all the heavy lifting — she didn't. But you just can't keep radio buddies apart.

Big Jay Sorensen and Anita Bonita still are joined at the hip even though no longer together on WJRZ-FM (100.1). Sorensen still describes their pairing as "lightning in a bottle."

Lately, the bond between us has taken on unexpected dimensions. Martello, who always insisted on having time for her writing, completed a play called "The Lodger," based on a novel about Jack the Ripper. She needed someone to read the stage directions.

"Sure," I said.

"I just couldn't bear to hear that man I had the last time," she said. "He droned on so, Scene 14, Scene 16, Scene 17 . . ." his voice getting lower each time — just ghastly!"

Seventeen scenes? I thought.

The theater was nearly 120 minutes by train, a small favor for a co-host. But thankfully, Maire's husband, John, drove us in. I was wedged in the backseat between Maire and a Shakespearean actor, who turned out to be George Innes, a Brit who acted in "Upstairs, Downstairs" and many other TV series and plays.

We emerged at The Players Club in Gramercy Park, where the reading was going off that night. I was led into the bar for breakfast. I'd scarcely taken a bite when Maire introduced me to the director, an extremely high-energy man with intense good looks and a strong Italian accent.

Antony Marcellis declared that he would need to work alone with me for at least the next four hours. I went along, out of duty. Antony had made numerous directorial script changes and needed to rework the stage directions accordingly. We worked closely.

On a break, I passed Martello in the hallway of the club, where John Wilkes Booth's brother Edwin had lived and worked. She was pasty white. It's all going to hell, or words to that effect. The actor playing the Ripper had gotten news from some Caribbean island that his favorite short-order cook had taken ill and he had to leave the play at once.

"His cook?" I asked.

There was more: serious disputes over character motivation, nuances to defend, dark subtexts, and who would do the shouting newsboys' voices. It would be me. Martello would help.

"La Dolce" moment

Another actor appeared to play the Ripper. There was a meeting of the cast and playwright. Martello looked near tears. The Italian director seemed to be stifling a scream or at the very least a Mastroianni-like outburst, like in "La Dolce Vita." Martello's voice was alienly soft. She wasn't using her "news of the world" persona. She seemed so alone there on the audience side facing all the others on the stage.

I resisted the urge to go and wrap an arm around her. At last she held together, neither combative nor apologetic, an artist toiling at her craft.

Blessedly, we got under way as scheduled. With the exception of a cast member taking a call on his cell phone, all went well. As with all of Martello's endeavors, the end product gave the lie to all of her darkest fears. By midnight, we were all gathered downstairs toasting each other's work and, of course, the playwright — my co-host!

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