

BBC RADIO NEW SEASON

# Radio Times



## Drama in space

H. G. Wells's 'The First Men in the Moon' and the science-fiction serial, 'Earthsearch', are on Radio 4UK this week, and our back feature reports on Radio Drama's theatre of the air

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With certain of the writers it was simply a question of bringing work which was acclaimed by a tiny coterie to the attention of an audience one-thousand-fold larger. But with others it actually meant the difference between writing and not writing.

Harold Pinter was one such: 'My first experience of the professional theatre was an absolute catastrophe. It was my second play, *The Birthday Party*, and the critics hammered it. I was completely disheartened. I was broke and ready to turn back to acting. If I had ever written again it would not have been for some time and might well have been novels; I certainly would not have written for the theatre again.'

Then out of the blue came a call to meet Donald McWhinnie at the BBC. He commissioned radio plays. What pleased the young playwright was the gesture of faith involved rather than any genuine excitement for the medium. But over the years in which he wrote exclusively for radio while the theatre continued to ignore him, he developed such an enthusiasm that he describes writing his latest radio play *Family Voices*, (premiered on Radio 3 this week) as 'like coming home'.

Pinter believes that radio possesses a purity about it: 'It



The 'Earthsearch' production team, with some of the programme's gadgetry. Left to right: Glyn Dearman, producer; Tim Sturgeon, studio manager; James Follett, writer; Lloyd Silverthorne, senior studio manager; Richard Beadsmore, studio manager, and Louise Spencer, production secretary



The crew of the Starship Challenger. 'Earthsearch' actors (top left, clockwise): Darv (Haydn Wood), Commander Telson (Sean Arnold), Sharna (Amanda Murray) and Astra (Kathryn Hurlbutt)

reduces drama to its elemental parts and enforces the sort of restraint, simplicity and economy I strive for anyway. Radio saved my life when I thought my career was over. It is doing the same for other writers still. Without question, people like Mason, Tydeman, Bradley and Imison carry on the tradition with the utmost distinction and vitality.'

The efficacy of the net which trawls for fresh talent is very largely due to its width. Pinter was helped by a London-based producer, but many other promising writers are spotted by the BBC regions. Producers are based in Bristol, Birmingham, Cardiff, Belfast, Edinburgh and Manchester, where Alfred Bradley works closely with three other drama producers. 'If you're on the ground,' says Bradley, 'you get to see work in the local theatres which a London-based team could never reach. You develop much closer contacts with the writers and build up a trust and a knowledge. Our job is not to produce something regional, but

to find the best of what is "national" in our area.'

It is a task which is more complicated for producers like Robert Cooper in Northern Ireland: 'We're dealing not just with a region but with a different country. So the problems are multiplied: we cover a larger area, a different culture and, in the case of a producer based in Belfast, some very different preoccupations.'

In Wales, Enyd Williams has the difficulty of revitalising a department which had been dormant for several years: 'At the moment I'm concentrating on doing plays by Welsh writers simply to redress the balance, but eventually I hope our output will be more general.'

In Scotland, Stewart Conn has what he sees as the best of both worlds: 'We're able to do work both for the network and also on plays for Radio Scotland which are of particular Scottish interest. Listeners here can hear both.'

In the regions an important part of many actors' wages can be regular radio work →