

Radio

Idle Thoughts

In company with a good many others, I imagine, I took care not to miss *Radio 5 with Eric Idle* the Saturday before last. I wonder if as many and as eager tuned in for the second programme, while for the third this afternoon the first keen incentive is somehow missing.

This is one occasion when I would very much have preferred not to be disappointed. When Mr Idle put out his first three programmes last year, they immediately reached a level of comic invention such as radio had not seen for years and then rarely or never in that vein. Disguised as yet another record show, the discs were there presumably only because Radio 1 cannot visualize broadcasting without them. For once they were incidental to the intervening chat and this was what created the lunatic world of *Radio 5*—a series of one-man turns each purporting to be an item in the daily schedule. They made their mark because they sounded like the genuine article, but with something gone terribly amiss—broadcasting's talent for fatuity was pursued to some wild but logical extreme, or the listener would find his fantasies of life the other side of the microphone suddenly spelled out. The shape of the new series is the same, but that electric spark of life has gone out of it. I am not the only disappointed listener. Barry Took, who should know a comic radio occasion when he hears one, spoke later in the week of the same reaction, adding that he thought Mr Idle would do better without the records, but with an audience—a suggestion which in my view touches at the heart of *Radio 5*.

One role of the present day studio audience is surely to create an illusion: the Halls, where the funny man faced his "house" across the lights, are still seen as a legitimate means of making people laugh and radio has traditionally traded on that, fostering the idea that the listener is sharing something with a real and living audience. In fact what he actually hears is often very hard indeed to reconcile with anything that could conceivably happen on a stage or in front of it—who ever knew a stalks and circle laugh in that distinctive on/off manner of the studio? But the listener goes along with that—though make-believe, it creates a scene he knows and he's glad of it.

Attempts to do without the studio audience have commonly come unstuck and it was one of the distinctions of *Radio 5* as it first appeared that it seemed to have got over this: it took radio as it most often is—one man talking to a tape recorder through a mike; one tape recorder playing it all back again to a million or more people in their homes, while the man who did the speaking is in bed asleep or dead or on the other side of the world. In that context Mr Idle managed to be funny and it was a remarkable achievement. Now however he seems to be struggling: a

sense of effort has replaced spontaneity, the material sounds as if it had been dredged up—last week only "What's on this Weekend?" had the original demented élan. Perhaps it will recover—I very much hope so; but perhaps this is one of those occasions when radio should quickly decide not to push a really splendid bit of luck. The one thing I know of you can do with luck is wait for it to come round again; pushing drives it straight into the ground.

Barry Took's views on *Radio 5* were heard on *Kaleidoscope* which I am reminded has been going for a year. How does it look now? Making a success of an arts programme on its own is an uphill task; this one has had the added burden of including a spot of popular science. It has not been a happy mixture and this has finally been recognized—science on *Radio 4* is to be taken from *Kaleidoscope* and re-instated in a new programme under Brian J. Ford. On Mr Ford's record to date this is as good a chance as popular radio science has ever had. It will leave *Kaleidoscope* with a little more time to devote to books and the arts and this it certainly needs; but perhaps what it needs as much is to stop for breath and remind itself that as its task of coverage is impossible anyway, it doesn't actually make matters better by cramming things in. Along with hell for leather pace, but on the credit side, I have been favourably impressed with the general level of comment and with the use of illustration which is to the point and informative. For a programme whose brief is not only to interest those already culturally in the know, but to attract those who aren't—equivalent to walking a tightrope in skates—*Kaleidoscope* comes out rather well.

Fay Weldon's play, *House-breaker*, did two things extremely well—it epitomized the nature, or an aspect of it, of those terrifying people we have met who never refuse a challenge to their charity and ability to cope. Rose Arnot, as we discover in a dozen different ways, is actually without any significant awareness of the existence of the people around her, husband, daughter, lodgers, anyone. She meets her come-uppance however in the junkie, ex-boyfriend of her daughter and suffering from it, who follows the girl home and is simply abandoned by her (she has her mother's nature, but unveiled). Needless to say, Rose copes and at the expense of everybody else, but there is no percentage, she awakens absolutely no response; Gavin lies there silent and inert and poor Rose gradually collapses into his emptiness. As she does so he revives; he has passed his misery on and speaks for the first time only at the very end of the play. Yet throughout and by his silence he has dominated it. This was the second excellence: to portray so tellingly a character whose sole utterance is the final speech.

David Wade