

Roy Winsor

A Transitional, Multidimensional and Unheralded Media Figure

by Jim Cox

Few people outside the broadcasting industry are familiar with the name of Roy Winsor. With the exception of those who were active from the 1930s-1970s, not many inside it recall him either. While his name isn't well known—he didn't appear, for instance, before the microphones and cameras—Winsor nevertheless wielded a powerful presence, influencing dual mediums. In radio's heyday, he took an active leadership role. As the fortunes of broadcasting shifted to television, he was personally responsible for some of video's original fare. In both expressions, he imbued those mediums with a flair for creativity that found receptive audiences. So pervasive was his impact in TV that more than one historiographer dubbed him "the Father of the Television Serial." No other male emerged to occupy that unique designation at the middle of the 20th century.

Winsor hailed from Chicago, the cradle of broadcast drama, a metropolis that significantly shaped what Americans heard on the ether during radio's halcyon days. Born April 13, 1912, he graduated from Harvard magna cum laude before inaugurating a career in radio production in his native habitat. At 26 Winsor directed the comic serial *Vic and Sade*. During the 1940s he not only directed but also scripted episodes of the juvenile thriller *Sky King*. In the same decade, employed by the Dancer-Fitzgerald-

Sample advertising agency, a successor to Blackett-Sample-Hummert, he concurrently supervised eight celebrated daytime serials underwritten by Procter & Gamble Company. Some of those were *The Goldbergs*, *Houseboat Hannah*, *Kitty Keene Incorporated*, *Lone Journey* and *Ma Perkins*. He directed the latter series at the same time. His labors for the ad firm were, in fact, almost exclusively tied to P&G. In that capacity, he frequently found himself in some uncommon and rather difficult circumstances.

One of those occasions surrounded the death of Ma Perkins' only son, John, who succumbed on a European battlefield during World War II and was buried in an unmarked German grave. The Perkins youth was the only major soap opera figure to become a fatality during the global conflict. Because Ma was universally loved by legions of followers, it seemed unfathomable that such a misfortune could transpire in her life. John's death precipitated a storm of protests, an outcome unanticipated by the show's producers. Many of the faithful were so incensed that they threatened to boycott the network and P&G's sponsoring Oxydol detergent. Angry telephone callers and authors of letters and telegrams admonished that mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts didn't need reminders their loved ones faced the potential of impending death every day.

Winsor courageously responded to those out-of-control fans. Approaching the task calmly but resolutely, he explained that – if the drama was to be rational – it couldn't ignore the potential for human casualty. He insisted that Ma Perkins experienced the same concerns thousands of other American women were similarly confronting in their own lives. Ma's inner strength, he assured, could augment and mollify anyone facing parallel tragedy. At the same time, the executive producer emphatically vowed that John Perkins wouldn't return to the storyline as many fans had

demanded. Possibly to placate those enraged outcries, however, not long afterwards a young man about John's age named Joseph arrived in Rushville Center. Looking enough like John to be his twin, Joseph rented John's old room in the Perkins domicile and took John's former job driving a milk wagon. While not all of the critics were pacified, it appeared that the show was extending an olive branch in an effort to deal with its unexpected crisis.

The point worth noting is Winsor's willingness to be in touch with what audiences *wanted*—and to deliver it insofar as possible. Such reasoning was to be pivotal to the success of future projects. He revealed that he appreciated what was essential to the people who were paying the bills. The episode undoubtedly broadened his perception of audiences of serialized melodrama. He would demonstrate that he had mastered that lesson as time evolved.

In 1950 Winsor was hired by the Milton H. Biow Company, a New York advertising agency responsible for a great deal of entertainment that Americans were hearing on their radios. For instance, an entrepreneurial Biow had created the \$64 question of *Take It or Leave It* fame in the 1940s, a catchphrase that caught on almost everywhere. When Biow divested half its interest in the feature in 1955, purchaser Louis G. Cowan brought *The \$64,000 Question* and *The \$64,000 Challenge* to CBS-TV, eventually leading to the quiz show scandal debacle of the late 1950s. Thankfully, Biow and staff weren't implicated. Years earlier Biow had engaged a \$15-a-week bellhop at the Hotel New Yorker and turned him into a multimillion-dollar marketing icon yelling "Calllllll for Philip Morrrr-raiss!" on multiple series for the Philip Morris Company, another marketing coup.

After joining Biow, meanwhile, Winsor became the firm's executive producer of commercials on TV series like *I Love Lucy*, a Philip Morris program, and *My Little Margie*. When Biow dissolved his business at mid decade and retired, Roy Winsor Productions was formed and from 1955-69 it carried forward where Biow left off, producing commercials and TV series like *Have Gun, Will Travel* (1957-63).

Winsor was a hands-on executive in all the projects he controlled. Since he was there at the inception of television, he had even greater opportunity to influence the visual medium than he had in audio. The fact that he contributed innovative ideas and demonstrated a flare for journalistic creativity netted a positive effect on the narratives for which he was responsible. His first was *Hawkins Falls*, an NBC-TV feature co-created with Doug Johnson which arrived as an hour-long Saturday night serial on June 17, 1950. It moved to Thursday nights as a half-hour entry and finally into a weekday quarter-hour slot on April 2, 1951. In that era, NBC had few successes with its daytime dramas, most arriving and departing within a few months. *Hawkins Falls* proved an exception; it was the first sturdy soap opera on the Peacock chain, persisting to July 1, 1955.

Winsor wasn't resting on his laurels, however. He was soon busy with other projects. The next one set the standard for everything that was to follow in televised washboard weepers for a decade. On September 3, 1951 his penultimate creation, *Search for Tomorrow*, arrived on CBS-TV. That drama, lasting more than 35 years, was the first of a trio of CBS daytime tales collectively certifying Winsor as "the Father of the Television Serial." Others were *Love of Life*, which began September 24, 1951 and aired to 1980; and *The Secret Storm*, from February 1, 1954 to 1974.

“Search for Tomorrow was an immediate ratings hit despite production values only marginally more sophisticated than those on radio,” a critic attested. “The reason was simple: Winsor was the first serial creator to recognize that both the audience and the medium had changed profoundly.... [Soap audiences] ... craved a fictional world that reflected their own struggles and concerns.... Borrowing elements familiar to radio audiences – the single heroine and simple theme – he [Winsor] created a naturalistic style of domestic drama that was as resonant with fifties audiences as the depression-era romantic fantasies had been earlier.”

Winsor summoned the dominant heroine archetype from radio’s tradition to build the first viable TV soap around a single female character, Joanne Barron. Perhaps recalling the creative’s connection with the earlier “mother of the airwaves,” a scholar saw Barron as “a kind of young Ma Perkins, the sort of woman who cared about her neighbors’ problems, who could offer help to others, and who could face her own personal troubles with dignity.” Winsor insisted on a bare stage technique and emphasized camera close-ups to connect his characters to the viewers. He must have been doing *something* right. Within four months, five million households were tuning in to *Search for Tomorrow*. Nine years hence the fans had swelled to 50 million. He once classified the show as “box office from day one.”

A reviewer dubbed Winsor’s next effort, *Love of Life*, as his “second ideal-woman soap opera.” The heroine-protagonist was the good sister, morally and ethically pure; she was offset by her opposite, the one incorrigibly evil. The conflict between those siblings was the heart of the storyline during its first few years and offered a compelling inquiry into human behavior.

Another observer, affirming Winsor's subsequent incarnation, declared: "No daytime drama demonstrated Roy Winsor's belief that good soap opera was simply a matter of delineating a solid theme and adhering to it than ... *The Secret Storm*.... Winsor devised the story of a family, the Amesese, who were so devastated by tragedy that each of its members retreated into his or her own secret world of despair..... Its psychological theme of inner conflict and hidden desire was as resonant with audiences as the domestic, romantic, and moral themes of Winsor's earlier soaps."

When Winsor departed those series, he didn't turn in his broadcast badge. On the contrary, he continued to infuse both television and radio drama with his genius.

For eight months in 1957-58 Winsor produced *Hotel Cosmopolitan*, a quarter-hour anthology that ran weekdays on CBS-TV, although it was never as successful as his open-ended dramas with continuing storylines. He stumbled and fell again in 1963 when his debuting serial, *Ben Jerrod*, failed after only three months on NBC-TV. For four years Winsor was a freelance consultant for a myriad of CBS and P&G projects. After *The Secret Storm* left the air in 1974, he accepted the head writing duties for NBC-TV's *Somerset* daytime serial. For a couple of years he taught serial writing at The New School for Social Research.

During the same epoch Winsor authored detective novels as a sideline venture. His first, *The Corpse That Walked*, won the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Award in 1974. A couple of added novels were released in 1976: *Three Motives for Murder* and *Always Lock Your Bedroom*. In the meantime Winsor also contributed scripts for an ambitious new broadcast drama project, *The CBS Radio Mystery Theater*, an anthology that aired seven nights weekly at its start (1974-82). A few typical titles of the 52 scripts he penned between 1975 and 1982 are gripping: *The Root of All Evil*, *The Corpse Wrote*

Shorthand, The Horror of Dead Lake, The Man Who Preyed on Widows, Wishes Can Be Fatal, Two Motives for Murder, Voice from the Grave and The Empty Coffin. In 1981 Winsor returned to serialdom writing *Another Life* which was produced by the Christian Broadcasting Network. He lived another half-dozen years beyond that, to May 31, 1987 when he succumbed at 75 at Pelham Manor, New York.

While his name isn't well known, Winsor's pervasive effect on dual broadcast mediums set the tone for much of what milady was hearing and watching in the decades adjacent to the 20th century's midpoint. There is documented evidence that he directly impacted no fewer than 11 radio series and eight on television. Possibly only Irna Phillips, the celebrated drama mama, equaled Winsor's typically unheralded contributions to those broadcast manifestations.

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