



THEATER OF THE MIND

Alfred man at leading edge of radio drama's online revival

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SOUTH PORTLAND, Maine — Blockbuster movies from big Hollywood studios have seemingly unlimited funds with which to create hyperreal, entirely believable fictional worlds.

Fred Greenhalgh has whatever is left in his bank account, after paying the bills, with which to do the same thing.

Instead of film, though, his chosen medium is radio drama, the audio-only art form that was wildly popular in the days before television and now is experiencing a revival online. His low budget doesn't really bother him. With a microphone, a script and a handful of voice actors and special effects, Greenhalgh is able to transport listeners to places like a desert island off the coast of South America, a demonic sea captain's home in Down East Maine or a medieval battle between a knight and a wizard.

"No matter how much money you spend on special effects, your brain always has a bigger budget. Your imagination is always more powerful," said Greenhalgh, 26, speaking before a recording session in South Portland. "It all exists in your head. You don't have to go to the Caribbean or outer space to get the kind of sound you want. You can do it wherever you want."

For Greenhalgh, that's in the Portland area. He lives "off the grid" in rural Alfred, about a half-hour north of the city. His day job? A marketing manager for ReVision Energy, a solar power supplier in Liberty. The rest of the time, he's devoted to Final Rune, the radio drama production company he founded in 2006.

Greenhalgh was born in Ellsworth, moved to Machias with his family while he was still very young, then ended up in tiny Greenfield, outside of Old Town. As a child, he wrote stories constantly. His writing style then and today tends toward a kind of magical realism, incorporating fantastic elements or horror themes into realistic settings. Monsters and supernatural things interact with everyday people.

"I can also kind of skew toward some political, satirical stuff, like the H1N1 [flu virus] story we did for the live Halloween show last year," he said. "It's definitely my little platform to say what I'm thinking."

He graduated from Old Town High School in 2001 and attended the University of Southern Maine, majoring in media studies. In addition to writing, his talents also extend to film, Web design and audio recording. He spent two years on a student exchange at the University of New Orleans, and it was there that he began to figure out what he might want to do with his life.

“I worked on a movie while I was there. I was always the one holding the microphone,” Greenhalgh said. “Movies were too much for me. There’s too much planning, too much going on. I wanted to produce something and just do it.”

He returned to Maine and, on a lark, began work on a radio drama. “Day of the Dead,” his first radio play, tells the story of a man who goes to New Orleans and ends up getting sucked into the underworld. The show later was broadcast on Portland community radio station WMPG, and ended up being Greenhalgh’s senior thesis for college.

“It was based on the Greek myth of Orpheus,” he said. “I guess it was kind of a gag, but I knew there was something to it.”

“Day of the Dead” led to Greenhalgh starting his own radio show on WMPG, “Radio Drama Revival,” which has been going strong since January 2007, broadcasting from 1 to 1:30 p.m. every Friday. Greenhalgh features radio drama from writers and companies from all over the world — and when he has his own content, he plays that too.

“Radio drama has had a little bit of a revival, thanks to the Internet,” said Greenhalgh. “After the dawn of TV, it pretty much died out completely, but it’s found a new home online. And the accessibility of the technology to do this kind of thing has really helped, too.”

Since “Day of the Dead,” Greenhalgh has recorded 12 radio dramas through Final Rune. Some are his own original stories, such as the nautical-themed horror drama “Waiting for a Window” and the Down East Maine haunted house yarn “Dark Passenger.” Others are adaptations of other writers, such as “Tales from Williamsville,” by Portland writer John Coons, and “The Most Dangerous Game,” written by Richard Connell. Vermont author Archer Mayor recently lent his detective character Joe Gunther to the drama “Open Season.”

All his recordings are available for download by donation on his website, www.finalrune.com. He also maintains his Radio Drama Revival blog, which offers each episode of the radio show as a podcast. Those podcasts routinely reach around 10,000 downloads a month.

“It’s not uncommon for that to happen with podcasts, but we’ve been going since 2007, which is ancient for a podcast,” said Greenhalgh. “I’ve had a lot of great responses. I remember this guy, a janitor, sent me an e-mail saying, ‘I’m a single father in Oregon, and your stories have gotten me through a lot of nights at work.’ That was really cool.”

Greenhalgh has had the good fortune to meet and befriend a number of like-minded individuals. All his voice actors are volunteers from the Portland area, ranging from actors from the Portland-based Mad Horse Theatre Company to fellow radio DJs and audio engineers.

“Anyone I can talk into coming, pretty much,” he said.

Bill Dufriis, a Houlton native, met Greenhalgh while he was working on “Day of the Dead,” and found a kindred spirit in the young writer and producer. That Dufriis has his own recording studio at his home in South Portland and

had years of experience in audio, including his current job as a voice actor for books on tape, was just icing on the cake.

“I had done my own radio drama called ‘Nightmares on Congress’ and had adapted a number of others when I met Fred. We certainly hit it off,” said Dufris, who formerly worked as a voice actor for the BBC. “It’s really a lot of fun. We both enjoy it so much. And going on location is always an interesting experience.”

Greenhalgh regularly scopes out nontraditional locations in which to record, from abandoned trailers in the woods to lighthouses and docks. The sound of wind coming off the ocean or a car pulling into a parking lot can be reproduced in a studio — but why not go on location and get the actual sound?

“You can get extravagant results from minimal production value,” said Greenhalgh. “I like to think of what I do as the audio equivalent of an HBO show. It’s very entertaining, but it’s got a meaty kind of heft to the storytelling. Except with a much, much lower budget.”

To download Fred Greenhalgh’s radio dramas, visit www.finalrune.com. His newest radio drama, “The Troll of Stony Brook,” will be available for download later this month. In October, Final Rune Productions will write and produce a radio drama for Bangor radio station WKIT 100.3’s Halloween broadcast.
