

SO WHERE'S THE SOUND?

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A better relationship between directors and sound designers could prevent or solve some common problems and promote the creative use of sound as a design element in the theatre. Such a creative environment is a complex stew of attitudes, egos, and backgrounds, but it is one that needs to be considered if sound designers are to ever gain equal respect as artists on the design team. In addition, directors could gain a better understanding of how sound fits into the "big picture" and of how they can tap into the power of this important design element.

I became intrigued with this subject after designing the sound for several productions I directed; I was fascinated with the enormous changes that sound choices can have on the overall concept of a production. In that process, I noticed substantial differences in artistic freedom between working as a sound designer for a director, working as a director with a sound designer, and working as sound designer and director.

For me, the separation of those roles was especially critical, and yet is a subject not often talked about, one with more questions than answers. As both director and sound designer, I enjoyed nearly complete artistic freedom to implement sound ideas, but I had to fight both time restraints and the urge to get "too wild." As a director working with a sound designer, I was open to input, happy with the technical support, but protective of my view of the show. As a sound designer for another director, I was frustrated by not knowing, first, what was expected of me, and second, how to approach selling an idea that could affect the director's concept of the show.

To more fully understand the dynamics of these various roles, I solicited information over the years from other directors and sound designers and took an interest in the variety of ways sound was approached by different theatres. I hoped to find a way to resolve my own conflicts with the director/sound designer relationship.

I started by noting how different theatres are using sound and if they have a sound position on staff. At least one theatre I surveyed had a sound staff that included a designer, technician, two operators (who are often interns), and a composer (who is hired per production); the majority of theatres, however, had no sound staff. Of those, some had a person responsible for sound, such as the head designer, technical director, or stage manager. Many hired out whatever positions were necessary on a per-show basis, while others assigned the responsibility in a less-structured, workload-related manner. For example, a three-prop show might mean that the props person take care of the sound, whereas a show with a smaller cast of a scenically uncomplicated show might move the responsibility to the stage manager.

This method of organizing sound according to whomever is free at a particular time provides work opportunities for those interested in sound (which is exactly how I became involved), but many times it is considered too late in the production and the job falls on a person who is reluctant or inexperienced. Bringing sound belatedly into the picture creates many unhealthy situations and fosters negative attitudes about sound as a whole. Technicians who spend all night editing and setting levels only to have five more cues and two more speaker locations added the next day will literally run from doing sound again, many times with good reason. This approach undercuts sound's respectability, and leaves many sound designers/technicians feeling like second-class citizens.

It is important to understand that the scope of a sound designer's considerations may include the entire auditory quality of a production, leading to such close collaborations with a set designer as to choice of materials used so that the set will "sound" right -- not only for acoustics and microphone pickup, but for specific moments, like footsteps on iron stairs or a crisp floor sound -- and, even more frequently, collaboration for designing in speaker locations of for lighting cues that correspond with the sound. With this in mind, giving the job to someone who is inexperienced or hiring even an experienced sound designer at the last minute communicates the relative unimportance place on sound. Invariably, such an attitude will show through in the production.

What happens when a director stands up at the first dress rehearsal and says, "The sound is all wrong"? What if it had been the set? Would you, as a director, ask a set designer to replace or repaint the entire set on first dress? Of course not, because set considerations are dealt with on a continuous basis in the production meetings. But, at first dress, are new sound ideas still asked for? Yes, Directors should keep in mind that sound cues can't always be changed in 15 minutes during a rehearsal break. For example, changing a speaker location sounds simple enough, but it may mean resetting all volume levels, re-editing those cues onto a different tape, relabeling the tape, and so on. Too many directors don't know or understand this process. If the director is not putting sound on the production schedule, the technical director or stage manager should assume enough responsibility to question the director as to what requirements are needed for sound and to schedule time for listening sessions into the production calendar.

With these kinds of strains on the director/sound designer relationship, I wanted to find out what other directors expected of their sound designers. Asking directors what qualities make a good sound designer may be a bit like asking them what's their favorite flavor of ice cream: everyone pulls from his or her own experience and tastes. But as I began compiling differing attitudes and opinions, I hoped to clarify the focus by defining the term "sound designer." That quickly became problematic, since it is clear that radically different definitions exist.

The directors' comments centered around patience, trust, and sensitivity, and were often marked by a specific negative experience that brought these more desirable qualities to mind. When different theatres, artistic directors, or technical directors have one set of expectations and sound designers (or whatever titles are used) have another, the potential exists for misunderstandings, or worse, for unnecessary confrontations. Communication problems begin with a lack of mutual understanding between the director and the sound staff, regardless of position titles.

I pursued this idea by looking into the different ways sound work is credited in specific productions' programs. Each theatre -- and

sometimes a single production -- uses a variety of titles: designer, technician, engineer, operator, or composer; however, most commonly there is no listing at all. (Other theatres and productions mention "sound," "audio," "sound reinforcement," "acoustician," or "music by.")

For subsequent discussion, I propose the following "givens":

1. Every situation is different in sound production work (for example, different director, script, facility, stage manager, etc.).
2. Directors are ultimately responsible for all design.
3. All design team members are artists.

With this in mind, the following are definitions reflecting the initial expectations associated with a few specific sound design titles:

Designer -- implies more creative input in choosing music or effects, speaker location, volume and equalization levels, timing of cues (when they are called, length of fade, etc.), and in organizing the placement of cues on the tape(s) to facilitate or simplify the running.

Technician -- implies implementation duties, such as recording, mixing, and editing cues; wiring speakers and microphones; and maintaining sound and communications system equipment.

Operator -- implies actually running the mixing board and other equipment; being responsible for pre-performance checks of the systems and cuing up taped cues; but may include a host of other responsibilities as well.

Engineer -- implies a more technical orientation toward electronics, including assembling the components and rental equipment and assuring their compatibility.

Recording engineer -- implies specialization in the recording process, microphone placement, and acoustic environment, as well as in mixing (adding delay/echo. loops, split tracking, etc.) and recording levels -- a virtual opposite of the engineer.

In actual practice, the role played by the person(s) going theatre sound requires a combination of these responsibilities. Those entering the sound field generally begin by volunteering as an operator or technician and the building their working relationships to a point of trust. This idea of trust is especially important in regard to the director's ability to accept artistic input from the sound designer. Some directors want a sound technician, and some want a sound designer. Being patient enough to play both roles and sensitive enough to know how far to go with creative input are two important qualities for a sound designer to possess.

Another skill is knowing which cues to spend time on to perfect. Time is always at a premium, so budgeting time so that essentials are done first (the quality-versus-time challenge) is a valuable asset for a sound designer. Often when one person is doing sound, no matter what his or her title, that person must combine and shift responsibilities with each show, usually with varying degrees of success. In order to make these shifts and meet the differing expectations of directors, sound designers must be versatile -- as well as reliable, resourceful, and fast. This constantly changing environment makes a strong case for clarifying the realistic expectations and limitations of the artistic and sound staffs. Aggressive attempts to do so by sound designer, stage managers, and directors are essential in establishing the role sound will have in the production, and will enhance the buildup of trust between the director and sound designer.

The gap between expectation and reality affects working relationships more than mere titles. I have had major design input and responsibility while working under the lowly title of "operator," while with the lofty title of "sound designer," I have strictly run the board. My interest continued because these differing titles do have certain implications, whether or not they have any connection with the work actually done. Since each individual may have different expectations for each title, the important step is for directors to be clear from the very beginning about what they need -- a designer or a technician -- and to be able to communicate that need!

At this point, a question is appropriate: why is this director/sound designer relationship different from that with any other designer on the production team? In most ways, the relationship should NOT be different from that with other designers, and the comments here may apply to those other designers, too. A big difference may well be in that lack of well-established expectations -- expectations that do come with the titles of set, lighting, or costume designer, giving them a more solid foundation at the outset. However, other influences are also involved, such as the relatively new importance and popularity given to sound and music in our technological society, and the intimate connection between sound and dramatic action.

Many directors today still look at sound as "effects" rather than as "sound design." Actually, since theatre's very beginnings 2500 years ago, sound has been more integral than mere "effects." Sound and music are around us every day, and it is precisely that familiarity with them that gives sound its power and respectability as a design element. We all know a song or a quality of wind blowing through the trees that will spark a specific, vivid memory. This quick recognition by an audience will also lead them to a certain place, mood, or time. It may be simple, it may be cliché, but it still works. Either use the cliché or revise it to make it appropriate and believable, but **DO NOT IGNORE IT!** The choice not to use sound should be as conscious as the choice of color or the selection of a piece of furniture. I think the choice not to use sound can be as valid as using it, but what I am lobbying for is for it to be an artistic choice based on a knowledge of all the possibilities, rather than an avoidance of problems or a fear of its powers.

Lack of money or equipment is not an excuse for avoiding or ignoring sound as a design element. My reasoning for not placing too much emphasis on equipment is two-fold: first, it is an easy and often-used rationalization for limitations or problems with a design. When equipment is the legitimate problem, perhaps a different approach or choice can be made to make the problem less noticeable. Second, many new or refurbished theatre spaces make large investments in sound equipment, only to have no one around who knows how to use it, even in a rudimentary way; or else these theatres have an inappropriate or illogical installation configuration which actually discourages use

of any but the simplest functions. While updated equipment can be a blessing and is often related directly to the quality of the sound, it is not an automatic answer to problems. A good sound designer is able to get the most out of available equipment (or knows when it is the problem and what to buy) and can structure the design to fit the equipment's limitations. This places the emphasis back on the director's knowing the possibilities and on the designer's using the equipment to its full capabilities while still being sensitive to the creative needs of the production.

The possibilities and involvement of the sound designer on the design team to seem to be expanding. But even just getting sound on the production calendar is a step in the right direction, since many directors concede that sound is still one of the last areas they consider. Directors' expectations of sound will grow and change once they see the other design elements in place, and that's good. It should be allowed -- but much of it can be planned for.

Educating directors on the uses of sound is particularly vital, because how sound is used in productions seems to be dependent on a director's experience rather than on indications or styles implied by scripts. While many scripts certainly have more complex requirements and others lend themselves to a freer use of sound elements, the importance placed on sound seems to hinge on a director's familiarity with its potential. Interestingly, many professional directors have, at earlier points in their careers, done their own sound for productions they were directing. Therefore, a lack of experience in sound for directors does not extend across the board in the professional community, but it does exist through the bulk of theatre done today. Read about some of the great directors and you will find a good body of information relating to sound's strong link with dramatic action. So, with expanding technology that has sound possibilities at an all-time high, why isn't sound design taught? It isn't offered at most educational institutions and only skimmed over in directing classes.

At the same time, a general consensus exists that, while missed or incorrect lighting cues are not desirable, incorrect sound cues are usually a worse distraction for the entire audience. The sound design gets put off and shoved aside until the last minute, but when the show goes up and the sound is wrong, suddenly and miraculously sound is of major importance! Costumes can rip, sets can wobble, lights can bump up, and props can be out of place, but what everyone talks about at intermission is feedback, crackles and pops, the fanfare that played during the love scene, or the phone that rang after it was answered. In an instant, the willing suspension of disbelief is destroyed. Everyone knows this -- but sound still is not given the priority it deserves.

For the director/sound designer relationship to blossom, sound needs to be considered earlier in the process. It is a sensitive line of communication that relates directly to the director's vision of the show, and both sides must attempt a better understanding of the other's expectations. Education can help implement these procedural changes and challenge us to make new sound choices that still tie into the dramatic action. Theatre has every right to enjoy the technology available, but it needs, as always, to foster the human interface between those responsible for that technical -- and magical -- environment that will lead to the willing suspension of disbelief.

Directors hold onto much of the creative license with sound and music with good reason: such insertions into a play are themselves dramatic actions, and can produce the same effect as actions in the dialogue of the play. In fact, sound is the most interactive design element, interacting with the dramatic action, with the actors, and with all the other design elements. Its importance cannot be overlooked. But, as one director said, you only get what you ask for. For this reason, the collaboration between directors and sound designers must be sensitive, and directors must know the potential of sound as an art. Recording a few cues during tech week and plugging them into the show is not designing. When it is given the respect of the other design elements, sound will perform its equal part.