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Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.

(Shakespeare, The Tempest, Act 3, Scene 2)
This chapter and Chapter 2 look at how sound design is defined by its practitioners and by the specialist literature and discourse that surround a comparatively new term in the glossary of theatre practice.

Many professional theatre sound designers will have stories to tell of how directors and producers have either misunderstood, or simply not understood at all, what sound design is. A common source of this perplexity has been the association of the term ‘design’ with the visual. The production of sound effects (formerly known as noises off) was understood to involve artistry of a kind, but in terms of the organizational structures of theatre practice it belonged in technical (props, stage-management or electrics) not design departments. Moreover, a design was something static, something fixed in time; time-based designs had other names: plays, compositions and so on. Sound design challenged category and terminology. Sound effects fitted into and around the text – so if there was design there it surely was done by the author and the director. Whereas the concept of sound system design was acceptable, there was considerable cultural resistance to allowing the word design to be used in relation to what we might call the sonic ‘content’ or ‘programme’ of theatre. And yet, by the turn of the millennium, theatre sound design had become an established term in theatre programme credits and drama curricula. However, its uneasy beginnings are not far behind, and still resonate in this current wiki definition:

Currently it can be said that there are two variants of Theatrical Sound Design. Both are equally important, but very different, though their functions usually overlap. Often a single Sound Designer will fill both these roles, and although on a large budget production they may work together, for the most part there is only one Sound Designer for a given production. Where such distinctions are made, the first variant is “Technical Sound Design” (which has also been termed Theatre Sound System Design by the United States Institute for Theatre Technology’s (USITT) Sound Design Commission), which is prevalent on Broadway, and the second “Conceptual Sound Design” (which has also been termed Theatre Sound Score Design by the USITT), which is prevalent at Regional Repertory Theatres. Both variants were created during the 1960s. These terms are really examples only, and not generally used in practice since most Sound Designers simply call
themselves Sound Designers, no matter which role they are filling primarily
(‘Sound design’, Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. 2 Mar 2007, 17:12 UTC.
Sound_design&oldid=112107638)

While some sound technicians fought hard, in the 1970s and 1980s, to be credited as designers – on a par with set, costume and lighting designers in terms of billing and pay – others did not want to go where that term seemed to lead. They were happy to be the technical facilitators in the traditional creative hierarchy where the ‘creatives’ were not specialist in production, but realized their vision through explanation to, and discussion with, technical specialists who would argue that they found their creativity in fulfilling a brief or in engineering elegant technical solutions. This might seem like a kind of design, but in theatre terminology, the term ‘design’ brought with it conceptual responsibility. A technician could disown an artistic failure and still be satisfied that they had done their job well.

Digital technology played a part in the establishment of sound design. The near-instant fingertip access to sounds afforded by samplers in the rehearsal room seduced influential directors, such as Peter Hall in his latter years at the National Theatre and in his commercial ventures thereafter. In order to play with these toys, directors needed people who could programme them, who also understood theatre (which people from the music industry where this technology originated, tended not to). So it was, therefore, at the insistence of ‘big name’ directors that producers granted the term ‘sound designer’ to those who were ambitious for it, and before long it became firmly established. Producers took some convincing. Here was a new ‘creative’ fee, and here were new hire costs. Many a showdown between director, sound-designer and producer centred on the rationale for an operator fee, an auditorium mixing position or the hire-charge of an unfamiliar-sounding digital sampler or processing unit.

Sound, unlike lighting, was not generally considered to be a base-level technical requirement of theatre other than in musicals. Producers were initially (in the 1980s) resistant to incorporating any sound that a stage manager was incapable of operating from the wings. Even worse, from the producers’ point of view, sound designers, backed up by their patron directors, started insisting on four or five weeks additional hire budget so that they could have a sound system to play with in the rehearsal room!

Gradually producers were persuaded by the insistence of the directors who wanted to ‘go further’ with sound, that sound was something worth paying a little more for. Sound design for non-musical theatre gradually became a (barely) viable profession for a handful of people by the late 1980s and even today I would estimate that there are no more than 30 sound designers in the UK making their living solely from theatre sound design.

Things have changed. The West End and Broadway now have awards for theatre sound design. Paul Arditti, who has won several of them, does not
have to battle so much these days to have his name on the poster. The cross-influence of cinema, home entertainment and other theatrical forms, for example the hi-tech spectacular of Cirque du Soleil, has raised audiences expectations of whizz-bang, swirlingly immersive surround sound. Theatre sound design has become a bona fide specialist area of training and degree-level study.

Outside of the commercial mainstream, and even within it, hierarchies and models of theatre production are also changing. Sound designers are forming their own companies and becoming the instigators of theatre. They are branching out into audiovisual design; finding new ways of collaborating and making theatre; diversifying their creativity by making sonic art, teaching, writing and making creative use of the Internet.

THE SOMEWHAT RELUCTANT DISCOURSE OF THEATRE SOUND

In 2002, assisted by my former graduate student Gregg Fisher, I convened a conference on behalf of the Central School of Speech and Drama, at the National Theatre in London to discuss the art and dramaturgy of theatre sound. To our knowledge, this was the first conference for professional practitioners and theatre sound educators that focused exclusively on creative processes and discouraged the alphanumeric technical jargon into which sound practitioners so easily slip when in each other’s company. We were amazed and delighted by the positive reaction this proposal received. Practitioners travelled from around the world for an opportunity to discuss their creativity with others who, like themselves, felt insecure about discussing processes which they normally undertook as the sole member of the sound department. Many were fed up with being characterized as techies or ‘noise boys’, and wanted to engage more with the kinds of discourse enjoyed by scenographers and theatre architects through international organizations like the International Organization of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians (OISTAT). ‘When set designers get together they don’t just discuss the latest power-drill or paintbrush on the market: why is it that sound designers are obsessed with their kit? We complain about not being taken seriously as artists, and yet we conform to the technician stereotype. We don’t do ourselves any favours’, it was said.

And yet, despite the overall feeling that sound designers really ought to talk together more, there was also a sense that theatre sound seemed to lack the critical vocabularies or theoretical frameworks that other artists seem to have. Short-hand vocabularies would develop with particular collaborators, but discussion of sound generally was awkward.

I expect this will change as graduates of sound design degree programmes, which began to appear in America and the UK in the mid 1990s, enter the arena, although even now the literature of theatre sound design is remarkably limited for such a key area of theatre practice, and to
this point comprised almost entirely of ‘how-to-do it’ books. The English language canon is so limited that it can be listed here in what I believe to be its entirety:

Frank Napier (1936) Noises Off (London: Muller): Aimed at the amateur market: Napier is exceptional in that he does allow himself to theorize as well as giving ‘recipes’ for practical noises off. Describing himself as a noise-maker, his career at the Old Vic straddled the advent of modernity.

Michael Green (1958) Stage Noises and Effects (London: Jenkins): Aimed at the amateur market, recipes for practical noises-off but without the opinion and analysis of Napier.


David Collison (1976) Stage Sound (London: Cassell): Introduction by Sir Peter Hall. Collison is thought to be the first sound engineer to be credited as sound designer (in 1959). Includes a brief, well-illustrated history of practical noises-off. The second edition (1982) extends the technological scope, from the dropping of styli onto gramophone records through to electronically automated mixers, showing how rapidly technology had revolutionized hundreds of years of sound practice.

Carol Waaser (1976) The Theatre Student: Sound and Music for the Theatre (New York: Richard Rosen Press): From the same period as Collison but aimed at the theatre student who knows very little about sound rather than the specialist.


John Bracewell (1993) Sound Design in the Theatre, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall): The definitive American college theatre sound design text by Dr Bracewell (a student of Burris-Meyer), probably the most comprehensive book on theatre sound, including chapters such as Psychological Basics of Auditory Aesthetics and Creativity.

With the exceptions of Napier, Bracewell, and Kaye and Lebrecht, there is very little space in these books given to what we might call the dramaturgy of sound. Each of them, understandably given the dates of publication and their intended readerships, assumes that the sound practitioner primarily provides a service to a director in relation to staging a literary text – there is no mention in any of these books of collaborative, devising practices or of ‘alternative’ forms of theatre. I expect that those books will eventually appear. I should, at this point, mention, as an addendum to this list, various websites and internet forums that have grown up around theatre sound. The most prolific and important of these is the Theatre Sound Mailing List, a forum which claims to be for those who ‘do audio for musical theatre or plays, concerts, worship services, etc’. The list’s archives are a tremendous resource, created by the list members and can be accessed at http://www.brooklyn.com/theatre-sound/archive.

CONCLUSION

Theatre sound design is now an established profession of the theatre, but those studying theatre sound design should not be guided solely by professional practice. In the introduction to this volume, I talk about theatrical immersion in the everyday, and immersivity is a trope which permeates new thinking in relation to subjects as diverse as cultural studies, anthropology, archaeology and law. Theatre academics too, are starting to think about theatre as an ecology in ways that I would suggest are aural. Theatre sound designers do not have to be interested in these things in order to do their job, but they should at least be aware that there are other theatres of sound. At the very least they should recognize the fact that, as people who spend most of their working lives listening and hearing in a theatrical environment, that there are probably people out there who would be interested in what they have to say.

The remainder of this Part reproduces extracts from some of the texts mentioned above in order to describe the orthodox pedagogy of theatre sound.
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