SOUND DESIGN
The scenography of engagement and distraction

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The theater soundscape and the end of noise/Performance Research 10/4 2005

Theatre sound design as the technê of the moment

When mainstream theatre critics make grand proclamations about sound it seems significant, because the conventional wisdom is that sound design should not be noticed. Noticeable design, the maxim goes, must be distracting design. So when Michael Billington mentions the theatre soundscape in connection to “the return of Tragedy” in theatre (Guardian: 22 December 2004), or Susannah Clapp proclaims “there are not enough sounds on the stage” (Observer: 15 March 1998) or that “in a few years, our concentration on looking rather than listening will seem Neanderthal” (Observer: 26 December 2004) the ears prick up.

If sound design is being noticed approvingly, maybe the distraction is benign, or maybe distraction is somehow no longer a theatrical cardinal sin. I would like to suggest that theatre sound design of the kind that Billington and Clapp are referring to indeed functions as a kind of dramaturgical noise, providing a dialectical distraction from the programmatic text of the performance. This distraction, and the way in which it engages the audience in a moment of negotiation between self, place and what I will term the programme (the object of audience’s expectant gaze) produces an effect on the meaning of that moment of audience.

I suggest that theatre is more fully understood if one considers audience practices as well as the dramaturgical practices of intentional production. Theatre is more than merely a performance of ideas presented according to certain conventions, it is an air-filled room where people can model and play with the processes, relationships and feelings that are the conditions that produce ideas. These conditions manifest as theatrical situations – one might say that the technê of theatre is not just a process of the realisation of a text, but the material
“standing up” of circumstantial cultural conditions as a meta-text, which can be read in the manner of the mise-en-scène – in its design and material choices, gestures and ways of moving, accents, voice and so on. Within, but also without, the mise-en-scène, theatre sound design shows things about aural culture, about the ways in which we relate to the world around us through the skin/air interface of hearing (which engages not merely auditory apparatus of the ears and brain, but the whole body, in the world around it). The manner in which hearing and sounding are practised in the theatre is also a performance: while making performance on stages out of words, actions, designs and conceits, the techné of our scenographic practice also performs us.

One can flick through theatre history and see that the conjuring tricks and massive gesture of Victorian spectacular, the finely detailed living-room interior, the framed starkly empty space, the caricatured kitchen or bedsit, or the graffiti and ruin of the urban exterior are more than apt or symbolic dramatic settings. In their level of finish, in the materiality of the way they are framed in time and space and in the craft that they represent, they perform cultural conditions that also speak to their dramatic significance within the programme.

Each of these examples is characteristic of a moment in cultural history and I suggest the technologically crafted theatre soundscape will be remembered as the emblematic scenography of turn-of-the-millennium theatre. I believe that this is because the designed theatre soundscape has become more than an effect to assist the legibility of text lifted off the page. As the field of communications that we inhabit becomes ever more complex and immersive, and as modes of communicating become less singularly linear (like two tin cans connected by a taut string) and more complex (like a game of cat’s cradle), theatre sound design has become an apt process of techné through which we might better understand omnidirectionally encountered time/space as it is experienced in the live, fleshbound moment.

The maxim is true that to notice the sound design is to be distracted, but at this cultural moment, perhaps, it is appropriate to subject audiences to distracting circumstances. Since sound is a phenomenon of surrounding atmosphere, one might think of noise as a meteorological condition. As the ether within which the communications of daily life are transacted becomes more opaque, as the weather of noise and competing sign-systems becomes more energised, we cope with and derive meaning from distraction and obfuscation.

In evolutionary terms, hearing might be characterised as the sense of distraction. The psychoacoustic brain has evolved a multi-tasking capacity to listen attentively to a stream of words, while apparently “zoning-out” the ambient noise of circumstance. Other surrounding conversations and sounds amalgamate and recede into a distant background atmosphere (again, like weather). But in fact, this is an effect only of the conscious perception. Even when one is rapt in conversation the brain continues to hear all, in detail, at a subconscious level. This is known as the psychoacoustic “cocktail party effect.”

There are Darwinian reasons for it. When standing in a busy street or a dangerous jungle, one cannot afford to be too lost in conversation, too exclusively devoted in one’s attention to one programme, so the psychoacoustic brain has developed the capacity to listen and engage in verbal communication in noisy environments while remaining receptively (if not perceptively) alert to sudden, significant or out of place sounds. This is one of the reasons mobile phones, sweet rustling or talking in the theatre are so particularly...
annoying: these sounds break convention and are therefore significant, and are almost impossible to zone out.

Hearing constitutes a continuous cultural dialectic between focused perception and omnidirectional awareness, or between signal and noise, and the fully determined meaning of a signal, especially in a socially (air-present as opposed to virtual) live situation, ought properly to take into account the circumstantial noise which has been negotiated in order to hear it. This circumstantial noise might be the noisy energy of the auditorium materiality of the performance, or of the street outside, or it might be of a smaller, more personal scale (one’s own bodily sound-field; the tension one experiences constraining one’s bodily noises; one’s breathing and swallowing, or even remembered or imagined phonomenetic sounds in one’s head or onomatopoeic, anamnetic sensations such as itching).²

So if one takes a more subject-centred and less object-orientated view of theatre, circumstantial and even random noise is meaningful. Theatre audience, as a process, seems better understood not as a simple binary attentiveness to a programmatic figure set against a ground of background noise or circumstance of assumed insignificance, but as the negotiation between conventional expectation of where meaning is to be found in any given moment of audience, and a constantly dynamic matrix of circumstantial distraction. If sound design is to be considered a branch of scenography, then this complex matrix of distraction is the skena upon which its designs are drawn, the arena into which its shapes are thrown.

A brief history of sound effect

“Yes, but what exactly is theatre sound design?” an eminent theatre historian asked me — embarrassed not to know. “A crafting of the aural experience of the theatre audience” was my well-rehearsed reply. It is a question I get asked less frequently these days, but one that continues to speak to a lack of discourse around an area that is now a fixture of theatre practice.

The auditory experience of theatre can be influenced by design in two ways. The first is the aural attention focused on the organisation of noises within mise-en-scène according to the dramaturgy. This organisation might be made in a semiologically functional way (the doorbell or the birdsong that denotes “outside in the country”) or in a more melodramatic way: sound (maybe music) that underscores or offers ironic counterpoint to the emotional vectors of the performance. The second is the organisation of the audience’s hearing: the subtle modification of the auditorium acoustic or ambient presence using artificial reverberation, the subliminal use of ambient effects or subtle electroacoustic reinforcement of certain elements of the performance, all of which subtly changes the audience’s psychoacoustic disposition towards the mise-en-scène.

Then there is the interplay between these two areas of sound design, and the area of uncertainty at the intersection between dramaturgically organised noise and the theatrically organised hearing. By this, I mean the sound effect that might not be, or the noise that might (particularly in the “surround” sound field). This seems to be the area that contemporary surround-sound design wants to exploit in order to speak almost directly to the part of the brain that remembers the aura of place and time, rather than verbal allusions. Here is Billington:
It’s the sounds one remembers most. The clink of a spoon on a wine glass. The laughter of a child. The gush of running water. All these reverberate through Festen, the Dogme film famously made into a play and running at the Lyric Shaftesbury in London. And, at the year’s end, I find Paul Arditti’s remarkable soundscape still echoes in my brain and unlocks memories of an event that signifies a major shift in the development of modern theatre: the rebirth of tragedy.

(Guardian: 22 December 2004)

This mainstream critical engagement with the notion of “soundscape” seems to reflect an advance in critical engagement with theatre sound design. Sound has, until recently, been scarcely mentioned in critical reviews, other than vaguely, in relation to its atmospheric effect (as though it were some kind of scent). But then, theatre sound design, per se, has a short history. David Collison was the first to be credited as sound designer, at the Lyric Hammersmith as long ago as 1959 (although in the 1970s and 80s the term applied more to technical system design than to what is now sometimes known as “soundscape composition”, “conceptual sound design” or “sound scoring”).

Prior to the invention of these terms, stage noises and audience hearing were organised by writing, composition, acting, architecture and the skilled craft of providing noises off (fairly standard conventional repertoires of mainly elemental sounds that relate thematically, to classical dramatic theses). While the term is a twentieth-century one, it would be a mistake to think that theatre sound was not designed before, in terms of both the dramaturgical organisation of noise and the theatrical arrangement of hearing. One might point to the Vitruvian ideology of Renaissance auditorium design, the soniferous allusions and musical codifications of Elizabethan dramaturgy, the co-authorship of drama by playwright and musical director during the era of melodrama, the vast orchestrated sonic mise-en-scène of the Meininger Players. In the twentieth century, one might identify as a form of sound design the foregrounding of silence and the scripting of dramatic moment with sparse, haunting, quiet and often dreamlike sound effects by authors such as Maeterlinck, Chekhov and Ibsen, whose musicality as poets lay as much in pauses and stage direction as it did in the words themselves.

The first use of recorded sound in theatre seems to have been the sound of a baby crying in Arthur Law’s The Judge in 1890. The phonograph seems to have made little impact at first, but by 1927, the year of Metropolis and the Jazz Singer, electroacoustic sonic effect had become part of the cultural radio-age zeitgeist. In Paris, Rusollo applied his intonarumari – the machines of his Futurist Art of Noise – to theatre and silent film, and in Hollywood the term sound effect was coined as part of the hype for the late silent-era blockbuster Wings, which had no recorded dialogue but used the primitive Kineographone to synchronise the noises of battles to the screen images and a live orchestral score.

In this theatre era of sound effects, sounds became acousmatic (disembodied, separated from original source) and re-embodied in a loudspeaker. The theatre soundscape became intermedial – a dialectic between the “live” acoustic world of the air-filled theatre and the electroacoustic, acousmatic acoustic world that brought an exotic frisson of the radio age to the theatrical congregation of fleshly presence. Theatre sound practitioners now worked
increasingly with knobs, wires and loudspeakers, less with their bodies and soniferous materials: theatre sound went from craft to technical art.

In America, theatre sound pioneer Harold Burris-Meyer, author of the first textbook of the electroacoustic era, embraced the modern technology but was cautious about this transition. He understood that in taking the production of sound effects away from the performing company and propmakers, and in giving it to audio technicians, much accumulated stage sense, dramaturgical understanding, and most of all perhaps, musicality handed down through apprenticeship, would need to be articulated for the first time so that it could be learned anew. He also understood that the modernist fetishisation of the “realistic” in sound reproduction might be of limited applicability in theatre:

Sound effects are important to the production in that they create, reinforce, or counterpoint the atmosphere or mood; reveal character; or contribute to the advancement of the plot. In a sense they fulfil the function of music as illustrated by the fact that musical figures can often be substituted for effects and serve as background music. In conformity with the principle that music is a way of handling sound, effects treated according to the principles of music composition can achieve emotional response as does music. Sound effects need not be faithful reproductions of the subject concerned.

(Burris-Meyer and Mallory 1959: 20)

Burris-Meyer adheres to a traditional approach, wherein sound design is a component of an overall programmatic design upon which the audience trains a detached gaze (both visual and aural). However, in the following quotations we get a sense of how sound went on to make a further transition from component to “total programme” of engagement between audience and theatre:

We are beyond the era of sound effects. Sound is no longer an effect, an extra, a garni, supplied from time to time to mask a scene change or ease a transition. We are beyond an era of door buzzers and thunderclaps. Or rather, door buzzers and thunderclaps are no longer isolated effects, but part of a total program of sound that speaks to theatre as ontology . . . Sound is the holistic process and the program that binds our multifarious experience of the world. Sound is our own inner continuity track. It is also our primary outward gesture to the world, our first and best chance to communicate with others, to become part of a larger rhythm.

(Sellars in Kaye and Lebrecht 1994: vii)

Then, ten years later, Susannah Clapp, in her overview of the theatrical year for the Observer on 26 December 2004:

There have always been sounds in the theatre, but they’ve been thought of as effects: isolated illustrations of events – thunder-rolls or the swoosh of breaking waves at the beginning of The Tempest, an occasional outburst of birdsong to signal
spring. The idea that there might be continuous thought and purpose behind this, rather than a boy in the wings with a whistle and a couple of coconut shells, has been slow to take hold. For most theatre audiences and critics, “design” has meant a visual plan.

Sound effects now seem to link not just to a particular moment or function in relation to the mise-en-scène, but to each other and to a continual plenum of sound. This coincides to an extent with the concept of the soundscape (remember Billington using the word in the earlier quotation) which R. Murray Shafer, who coined the term, defines as:

The sonic environment. Technically, any portion of the sonic environment regarded as a field for study. The term may refer to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an environment.

(Schafer 1994: 274)

Rick Thomas, in his application for the discipline of Theatre Sound Design to be recognised by OISTAT’s Scenography Commission in Bregenz, 2000, likens the use of a composed or designed soundscape in theatre to a musical setting, which he proposes has an ontological link to dramatic form itself (drawing on Appia and Schopenhauer):

Theatre springs from the inner life that music provides, and theatre associates that inner life with an intellectual discourse that brings profound enlightenment to humanity’s most fundamental questions. The moment we accept the primal role that music in its broadest sense plays in instigating the drama, we open ourselves to the approach that music in its more audible manifestation must play in the drama.

(Thomas 2001)

In making the case for the soundscape as music in this way, Thomas is clearly advocating, in Appia’s tradition, a unity and cohesion of design purpose and concept that harmonises in a quasi-musical way with original authorial intent. This, in my view, implies, somewhat romantically, that the designer must “tune in” or “get on the same wavelength” as the writer as well as attending, dramaturgically, to the meaning of their words; it is also soundscape being used in a melodramatic way (I mean this in the strict sense of the word, and without any pejorative intent or stylistic implications: literally melodrama as hybrid music/drama).

I am not sure how, consistently, to achieve or assess design that relies on a kind of emotive empathy, or shared muse (although I am sure there are times when it does happen). More to the point, perhaps, I am not sure that audiences sit back and appreciatively gaze at (or listen to) theatre as a holistic artwork from a critically detached position. I suspect that theatre, as Sellars suggests, is ontologically a place of engagement; of subjectivity; of the individual negotiation of meaning within a noisy field.
Theatres of audience engagement

I return then, to the concept of the matrix of distraction; of the contemporary theatre soundscape as an environment that immerses its audience in uncertainties, conventional annoyances and in a dialectic between staged melodrama over there and personal circumstances over here. As I have said, I see this process of technê, of thinking through creative practice, as a manifestation of changing culture. I also see the surround soundscape as a synecdoche for new, formal theatres of immersivity or engagement, based maybe on game worlds or intermedial aleatory strategies, which I regard as aural theatre forms.

Designing sound, making theatre, making any art perhaps, begins in the synthesis of one’s perceptual experience of the world with one’s original ideas (which might perhaps be considered noisy thoughts although I’ll concede the phrase is less glamorous). Some call this process inspiration: an aerobic trope implying some kind of spiritual possession. I prefer to think of it as a more circular exchange with surrounding atmosphere: in auditory terms, a process of listening/hearing $\rightarrow$ thinking $\rightarrow$ sounding. As Bruce R. Smith notes when formulating his concept of the “O factor” in The Acoustic World of Early Modern England (1999), performers and audiences alike engage with their environment in a circular way (both phenomenologically, and culturally). The cultured body, the cultured mind and the potential of the audient to be sounder all have an effect on what is heard, and what is heard, and the ways in which it is heard, has an effect on what is sounded. Audience, when understood according to aurally “historical” (or culturally nuanced) phenomenology, is a productive practice, an engagement in art as a process rather than the detached observation of it as an object or detached environment. R. Murray Schafer defined the soundscape as an environment, and Einstein once defined the environment as “everything that isn’t me.” With sound and with theatre, as it becomes more aural, one is never sure where the line falls.

NOTES

1 The air is important, not simply because it keeps performers and audience alive, but because it is the immersive, tactile medium of both audible and inaudible sound as well as smell and heat. Air is the medium of theatrical presence, of shared phenomenological experience (see Ihde 1976, passim).

2Augoyard and Torgue (2005, p. 85) describe a phenomenon they call anamnèsis: the physical recollection – literally the re-membering – of sound through the body. This might be triggered empathetically by sensual perception or through imagined or remembered sound. One might remember music in one’s head (phonomnesis) and also experience its effect in the body (anamnèsis). Anamnesis is produced either by sound or by memory; indeed, one might view it as a form of memory or imagination experienced in the aural body.

3 Much of its meaning lost to modern audiences – see Lindley 2006.

4 See Mayer 1980.

5 Organisation Internationale des Scénographes, Techniciens et Architectes de Théâtre.
REFERENCES


