The Importance Of Sound Essay, Research Paper

The Importance of Sound

Theater is an extremely involved and complex production. It encompasses play writing, directing, acting, costume, makeup, scenery, lighting properties, theater architecture, machinery, special effects, management, audiences, and criticism (Brockett-b xi). What this statement fails to include is the element of sound design as a major theatrical consideration. The aspect of sound in the past and present entails so many technical aspects, that it must not be over-looked in any production. This is reinforced by analyzing the need for music and sound, how these where used in the past, and finally what to consider for modern sound design.

Music and sound is essential for enhancing any production. Its presence serves two crucial functions. First, it establishes mood. All people have certain reactions to sounds, especially music. For example, upbeat rythmatic tempos have the ability to release adrenaline in a persons body. Slower tempos can tend to depress people. In theater, the use of sound and music is geared towards the extremes. The sound designer=s purpose is to create a moody atmosphere. For example, most moods created relate comedy to gaiety and tragedy to somberness (Brockett 402). Heavy beating of drums and deep horns bring a sense of hostility and aggression which are typical feelings of war that can be suggested in a tragedy.

The second function sound serves is exposition. Exposition refers to realistic sound effects. Things such as gunshots, breaking glass, doorbells, and telephones are most commonly used in theater. The most important task of exposition is to alert the audience to off-stage occurrences or to prepare them for up-coming events on stage. Also, these sounds are presented to give the audience a knee-jerking reaction.

These two things are the most important objectives to be considered for any sound designer; however, there are other benefits to incorporated sound. First, it has the potential to relay a great deal of information to the audience related to time and place (Wilson 107). The understanding of the local and period of the play is needed information. There are several genres of music which indicate time period and regional areas of the world. The mandolin is typical of the Renaissance which thrived throughout Europe. Bagpipes are exclusively associated with Scottish tradition. Effective use of sound makes it undoubtedly clear as to the time and place.

A second benefit of sound is textual reference (Walne 39). This involves the sounds referred to or reacted to by characters. It could actually be a type of trademark sound that alerts the audience to focus on a certain character. Also, textual reference could associate a certain feeling intended by the playwright with the audience. The Jaws theme is a very effective textual reference that establishes an upcoming threat or terror.

The third important benefit of sound is its ability to provide cues for the actors to respond to (Walne 39). This is because a sound that is part of the play provides a non-visible cue. Typical cues involve telephone rings, doorbells, and door knocks. They usually denote a shift of attention within a scene or even an introduction of a character or scenario.

As far as music is concerned, this aspect can open up an entirely new world to any production (Walne 41). This is especially true when it involves a live band or orchestra. Most people prefer live music to that which is recorded and can only add an extra degree of appreciation by the audience. Many theaters include orchestral pits for this reason; the pit provides the needed space for the musicians and the presence of live music which will attract more audiences. Further, music leaves ample room for the sound designer to be very artistic. A lot of music exists and the composition of an excellent musical score can be very diverse and difficult to achieve. However, when it is done right, it is an element that is never missed or unappreciated by the audience.

Basically, it has been established that there are two types of sound concerning a play; music and sound effects. Throughout history, even the first plays used these two things in order to enhance the production. The Greeks are credited to be the first to develop theater. Music was an integral part of Greek Drama as it accompanied recitative passages. It was used to capture the exclusive attention of the audience which was essential to understanding the prose that was spoken.

Most accompaniment for Greek drama was done with a single flute. The trumpet and forms of percussion where also used. Usually there was only one musician and there is little known as to his means. It is known, however, that the Greeks associated certain music to ethical qualities, emotions, and ideas, thus, it could be discerned that the musician had to be very diverse and talented (Brockett-b 26).

The Romans used music even more extensively than the Greeks. In some plays of Plautus, up to two-thirds of his lines were accompanied by music. Music was presented so conventionally that the audience could predict what types of characters would appear just simply by listening to the textual reference of the music.

The musicians presence was an essential part of Roman Drama. The musician was actually part of the play as he would walk amongst the chorus, constantly moving and playing his flute or other instruments. Roman musicians where highly valued in the production; their importance was only preceded by the lead actor (Brockett-b 69).

Some other major eras that incorporated music were the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Often, music often preceded the start of the play. This was probably a means to entertain the audiences before the opening scene. Music was usually performed by choir boys dressed as angels in a heavenly set. Most medieval plays were religiously oriented and this setup was most often used to announce proclamations by a deity or dialogue that was religious in nature. Instrumental music was most often played by professional musicians where some productions hired up to 156 musicians at one time (Brockett-b 96). Not only did they provide musical accompaniment but they also entertained the audiences between and after scenes. For practical purposes, sound in the form of music actually covered up unwanted sounds such as shifting sets and dropped props during intermissions (Brockett-b 126).

English theater of the late sixteenth century, towards the tail end of the Renaissance, valued the musical aspect of the production almost as equally as they valued the production itself. Complete songs were inserted into many plays which were probably the beginnings of the musical. Musicians also provided entertainment after the play providing music for the audience to dance to. Community youth also delivered concerts before the play, sometimes lasting up to one hour long (Brockett-b 161).

For modern theater, the purposes of sound are identical to those purposes of Greek, Roman, and Medieval drama. Yet, as the other elements of theater have evolved technically, so has sound. The use of modern technology can not only enhance the quality of sound in a particular setting, but it can also ease the responsibilities of the sound designer. The need for a sound designer is an absolute must in any production as a specialist is required with the knowledge of the numerous technical details which go into a modern sound accompaniment.

First, the designer has to choose a sound system for the theater. If funds are limited to a particular production, then the implementation of a sound system can provide an inexpensive alternative to live music. A designer has several things to consider when implementing this system.

The ease at which the equipment can be used can prove to be very beneficial to the sound designer (Walne 56). Since the field is so highly technical, the easier the system is to use, then the easier it is for the operator to follow cues and to deal with problems that may arise during a performance. An entire system can be operated by a few simple controls and the lesser the controls, the better. Also, if a system is more automated, then the less manpower is needed. This can ultimately save money and the time of head designers and directors.

The system=s resistance to failure is very important to consider in the implementation of any design (Walne 56). The designer must be able to know the difference between equipment designed for domestic use and that designed for industrial use. Equipment used for broadcast purposes are suitable to theater because their proven reliability during extended use and subjection to extreme environmental conditions. Excessive temperature is the number one cause of failure in sound equipment. Since the designer doesn=t always have total control on the location of the equipment, doing the research on finding the right components for the given physical environment (which is different for every theater) is extremely important.

The durability and exchangeability of the media is a very important consideration that the designer must take into account (Walne 57). There are all types of medium available, the newest technology involving the compact disc. Just as the consumer knows, the compact disc provides better sound quality but less manipulation of sound. The opposite is true for magnetic tape. Manipulation is easier while sound quality is sacrificed. The needs of the production must be analyzed and equipment chosen to suit those needs.

An intense knowledge of the equipment available to the designer is important (Walne 48). Several types of media equipment to record sound exists. The older systems such as reel to reel and NAB cartridges are still effective because they allow direct physical manipulation of the media. The systems are also relatively inexpensive. Their disadvantage, of course, deals with the extra space these machines require and the extra noise they produce. Digital Cartridges are more automated as they are controlled by computer software. Digital audio tape is another type of media where digital sound information is stored on magnetic tape. While this type of media and equipment is very durable, they are slow to initiate, thus the disadvantage is obvious. The most modern media available is the CD and mini disc where information is stored digitally and then read by a laser. This media provides excellent quality but unfortunately is still very expensive. Another method of storing sound is through computer hard disks and Midi technology. This allows the easiest manipulation, cuing, and automation of sound. Just like anything else, computers can do it all and will probably replace all sound systems in theater in time.

The playback equipment is very important because it provides the actual sound heard by the audience. Sound mixers and speakers are part of the playback devices as they provide control over several aspects of the sound and the output of that sound. Things such as tone, bass, and volume are the most basic controls a mixer can provide. Again, having the right mixer for a production depends upon the purposes of that production. Having the correct speaker setup is a science in itself. The size, shape, and reflective qualities of the theater hall all effect the setup of speakers (Hood 42). These are all technical aspects left to the decisions of the design.

One of the most difficult tasks of accomplishing the objectives of sound design is using available resources and making decisions on what sounds or music to use and what not to use. The designer has to decide if the sounds will be originated live, recorded off-stage and then played back, or borrowed from a previous source and then played back (Walne 61). The designer has to incorporate his own artistic talent with that of the director in addition to meeting the objectives of the production itself. In addition, the designer must be knowledgeable as far as the technical aspects are concerned. Edmund Hood=s APractical Handbook of Stage Lighting and Sound@ details every technical facet of sound; approximately 150 pages of diagrams and text are devoted to the general science itself and is by no means a complete guide (Hood 33).

In knowing this, and how sound is essential to theater in the past and present, it becomes very obvious that it is an aspect which cannot be overlooked. Every production should put this aspect atop its priority list because after all, it is what the audience sees and hears that gives them their notion of theater. The visual design is extremely important, but if the sound design and setup is horrible, then that visual spectacle is lost completely.

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