



Left to right: Darron L. West, Neil Patel, James Schuette, and Mimi Jordan Sherin

The
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Most artists give their souls to a project. Anne Bogart's SITI Company design team—Neil Patel (sets), Mimi Jordan Sherin (lights), James Schuette (costumes), and Darron L. West (sound)—even go so far as to give their soles. "Anne and Neil were onstage during a tech in Louisville," recalls West, "and Neil kept saying, 'The color of the floor is wrong.' And Anne called to me and said, 'Darron, throw me your shoe.' So I took off my shoe at the tech table and threw it onto the stage. And Neil said, 'Oh right, that's the color. Can I take that shoe?' And I ended up running around for part of the day with only one shoe. It's just that kind of glorious, creative bakery that's always going on. I love walking into the room with those folks."

Founded nine years ago, SITI is an ensemble-based theatre company that began life as an agreement between Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki to establish a new venture in the US that would emphasize international cultural exchange and collaboration. The company most often creates new works from the ground up (*Cabin Pressure*, *BOB*, *Culture of Desire*, the current *War of the Worlds*—see page 42—and *ROOM*), but

will occasionally bring a new spin to the classics (*Miss Julie*, *The Adding Machine*, *Private Lives*). Because many of these works remain in repertoire for several years, traveling to different theatres across the world, each production is constantly evolving in look, tone, and content. Based in New York (with a summer home in Saratoga Springs), SITI is comprised of 10 actors, a production manager, stage manager, general manager, and the four aforementioned designers. Patel, Sherin, Schuette, and West have worked together as part of the SITI Company (and occasionally on other projects) for over five years now.

For Bogart, her design team's talent goes beyond their artistic ability. "All four of them share a talent that is vital in the creative process—they know how to listen," she notes. "To listen to what we're doing, and then to act on that listening. All of them are very strong articulate artists, but that comes not just from their own vision, but from listening to what is happening."

Another reason for the team's creative synergy, Bogart notes, is its ability to gracefully meld man and machine. "We're all interested in the very high tech and very low tech simultaneously," she explains, "meaning that the most important thing on the stage is the actor's body and the animal energy that comes off the stage. For example, we pretty much never have video, film, or moving scenery done by machine. But we do use the most advanced digital sound or lighting. So the emphasis is on theatre made by people with technology, but supported by both the

human body and the human imagination."

All the designers are quick to point out that it is Bogart who is the catalyst for all SITI projects. "Anne likes to say that she comes to us with a virus, and then it sweeps through the rest of the company to make the play," says West.

"It starts with the director, naturally," adds Sherin. "Anne is an amazing collaborator—even though I kind of hate to use that word—but she is an amazing, giving director. And she lets you do what you do. Then she turns around, says I like it, I hate it, you know, whatever. But it is very free to work under her."

Entertainment Design may be honoring these four designers for their sustained excellence in collaboration, but to be fair, it is a collaboration that includes the entire SITI group. "Part of the reason [the collaboration has been successful] is the consistency that we've had, working with the same director and same group of performers for a long time, so there is now a shorthand of understanding," explains Patel.

West agrees. "There is an aesthetic shorthand between all of us so that we find ourselves communicating more about what the play says and what the play should be than a lot of discussion about whether I can hang my speakers inside Mimi's lighting rig. A lot of that stuff is taken for granted. Sometimes Mimi and I will go through an entire tech and never really have to say anything to one another."

"We don't talk to each other very much," confirms Sherin. "That's a sign that a team is working, in my opinion."

David Johnson

Anne Bogart's
design team
perfects a
collaborative
shorthand

Darron West LISTEN UP

He's a sound designer who earns admiration the old-fashioned way: he collaborates

By Steven Drukman

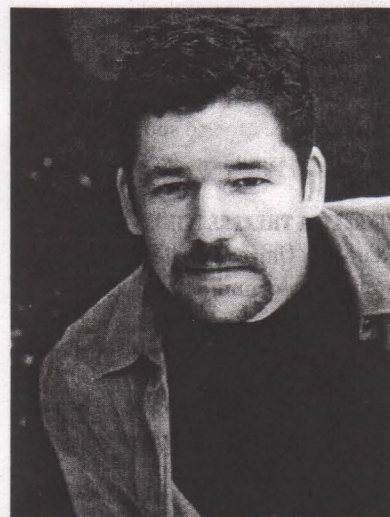
Don't tell Darron West that sound designers are the Rodney Dangerfields of the theatre; he has spent his entire career making sure he gets respect. "I don't even bother listening to those complaints anymore, that we're the 'second cousins,'" says the energetic and ultra-affable 34-year-old between gulps of frozen frappuccino. "Maybe it's true in the field overall, but my experience has been glorious. Since my first professional job I have refused to be second fiddle." Suddenly, like a musical fermata, the garrulous West pauses and reflects as the decidedly surplus caffeine kicks in: "You know? Maybe my deal is...unique."

Indeed it is. In a world where audiences tend to ooh and aah for hyper-realistic sets (running water!), where critics will at least spill *some* ink about lights and costumes and where freelance directors might settle for whatever aural augmentation a theatre provides, West's stature is *sui generis*. This has much to do with his approach to the work: While some sound designers are happy to do their major tweaking in 11th-hour technical run-throughs, West collaborates from the get-go.

"I see myself as the extra cast member," he says. "I love actors, and I love the exploration they get to do, and I want to be part of that from the beginning. Many directors have to get used to the way I work. But I can't imagine not being in the room trying out

stuff right there, as part of the process of the whole production."

A minister's son ("I even mixed the church services") who played in garage rock-and-roll bands ("really crappy REO Speedwagon covers"), the Kentucky-bred West originally wanted to work in animation. But the advent of Dolby multi-tracking in *Star Wars* and, especially, MTV were life-altering events, simultaneously determining his career choice and attention span. "That kind of velocity and density of sound is something that stayed with me," he claims. "I knew that I was a really bad musician with really good ears." West says he was confident of his



West: "I see myself as the extra cast member."

singular skill, however: "the ability to concentrate on making a specific 'aural picture.'" With ticket stubs from both rock and classical concerts

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littering his pockets, he spent his high school years vaulting between venues—Van Halen to Wagner and back again—grappling with and exploring his “physical reaction to sound waves” at that impressionable age.

FINALLY, A THEATRE MINOR AT WESTERN Kentucky University allowed him to be a one-man sound-design department, making “soundtracks for college plays like you would for a Hollywood movie.” After graduation, West’s career immediately took off. A professor landed him a job at Massachusetts’s Williamstown Theatre Festival in 1989 and he at

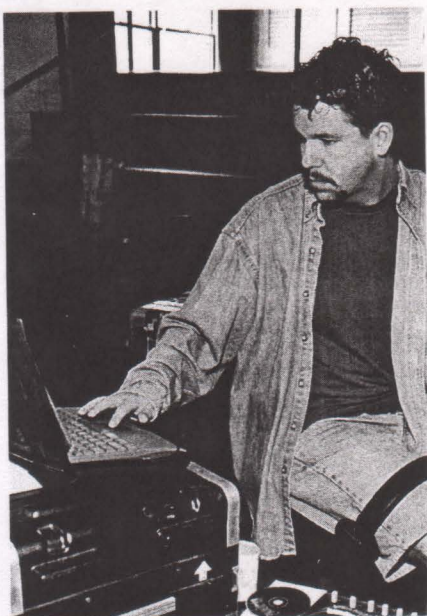


From ear to eternity: from left, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon, Stephen Webber and James Bond in SIT1's *Cabin Pressure*, with sound design by Darron West.

once became the resident sound designer—in charge of five mainstage productions, four second-stage productions and a bi-weekly cabaret. Even with his freshly found place at the table, this tyro refused to take scraps. “Well, it bugged me that, even after all that work, I had to fight to get my name on the cover of the program,” he recalls. “But sound design was just not *considered*—and that’s only 10 years ago! And I thought I was as vital to the work as anyone else.”

Subsequent gigs included Off-Broadway work and a resident position at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, then West-ian destiny brought him back to Kentucky and Actors Theatre of Louisville. His fate was really sealed, however, when he met Anne Bogart during ATL’s 1992–93 season. He remembers attending a rehearsal of *Picnic*: “For the very first time I saw a director who understood music and its

“While some sound designers are happy to do their major tweaking in 11th-hour technical run-throughs, West collaborates from the get-go.”



Not just the "sound guy": West at work.

power. Anne wasn't afraid of letting a piece of music take the weight of a scene and provide the subtext." According to West, Bogart was not merely directing a play but "creating a multi-layered theatrical poem" where each element—the actor's body, the text and (most important to West) the sound—all had an equivalent valence in the overall production.

West joined Bogart's SITI (Saratoga International Theatre Institute) company and never looked back. As Bogart says of her collaborator: "Darron is the best dramaturg I have ever encountered. When he is sitting to the left of me in rehearsals, he is looking out for the play and what the play is trying to tell us at every moment. I trust him." West is grateful for the trust, acknowledging that he is "lucky in that I don't have to work with directors who won't let me work *my* way. But that's the way I would want a designer to work with me if I was an actor! Frankly, I think it's unfair to go play around in my studio and then slap 70 cues on an actor at first tech who then says, 'I have to do my monologue over that?' I would rather be there every day saying, 'Do you hear this part of the play as more minor key?'"

This SITI-centered method clearly hasn't kept West underemployed elsewhere. He has worked at virtually every major Off-Broadway company (his Broadway debut was the Tarantino-

"The billboards on taxicabs and commercial stuff—that's not for me."

Tomei driven *Wait Until Dark*) and many regional theatres. In 1996, New York Theatre Workshop asked him to design a new musical called *Rent*. West recalls: "I had no interest in doing a musical. I saw myself as, you know, the downtown black-turtleneck guy who didn't do them anymore. But when I met [composer] Jonathan Larson, we got along like gangbusters because we were both rock heads. It was great for a while, but when the dollar signs started floating around it, that's when I said 'bye bye.' The billboards on taxicabs and commercial stuff—that's not for me."

profiles



An aural picture: from left, Barney O'Hanlon, Jeffrey Fracé, Akiko Aizawa, J. Ed Araiza, Shaun Fagan and Susie Hightower in SITI's *The Radio Play*, with sound design by Darron West.

He was recently tapped by Neel Keller, a director friend from his Williamstown days, to design last summer's *The cosmonaut's last message to the woman he once loved in the former Soviet Union* at California's La Jolla Rep. "At first, you can't believe

that he's making sounds and trying out music cues while an actor is rehearsing a monologue," Keller confesses about that first-time collaboration. "By reflex you want to say, 'Cut that out!' But then you realize that it is appropriate and, even more, very use-

ful, resulting in a soundscape that is integral to the production and not something layered on top. Ultimately, I learn from Darron about sound in the same way I learn from a great actor about acting: they both make bold choices in rehearsal that stretch your understanding of their particular art."

WHILE WEST MAY STRETCH OTHER artists' understanding of sound, he is also trying to expand his own job description. He is slated to direct Chuck Mee's *Big Love* with the Rude Mechanicals company of Austin, Tex., in the fall of 2001, and he and fellow SITI member Barney O'Hanlon are collaborating on a dance/music spectacle based loosely on the myth of Persephone. Says O'Hanlon about West's work with SITI: "Darron's not just the 'sound guy.' He's a dramaturg, a fellow actor, a director and choreographer, all of which he does behind his sampler and DAT players, with one earphone attached to one ear listening to different pieces of music and the other earphone off so he can hear what's going on in the rehearsal room."

West is beginning to be noticed outside the rehearsal room, too. He won a 1997 Princess Grace award for his work with SITI and a 1998 Obie for his soundscape in *BOB*, a choreographed and designed-to-the-teeth paean to Robert Wilson. This was a true SITI-style collaboration: While *BOB* used a pastiche of Wilson's words (compiled by Jocelyn Clarke) as text, featured SITI actor Will Bond as Wilson and was directed by Anne Bogart, it was, in essence, an abstract tonal performance that refused to privilege any theatrical element—lights, text or, of course, sound—above any other. For West, to win a special Obie for *BOB* was particularly gratifying.

"It's always about collaboration," he says. "Everybody is working towards that beast out there that is the play—completely with ego and completely egoless at the same time. It's like following the Ouija board, all together. And then the beast makes itself known." **AT**



Lend us your Ears

LIVING FOR

Their craft,
say **six prominent sound designers**,
is theatrical storytelling, too

MODERATED BY
LENORA INEZ BROWN

Sculpting sound: John Gromada
performs his soundscape for Duke University's
production of *The Illusion*.

THEATRICAL SOUND DESIGN ONCE CONSISTED OF SYNCHRONIZING telephone rings and doorbells with the action onstage, or chopping a cabbage in half to simulate a beheading in Richard III's court, or manipulating metal sheets offstage for a thunderous effect in *King Lear*. If no such effect was required, no sound appeared in the show. It has taken decades to convince theatrical producers, directors and artists of the importance of reconsidering sound onstage—not to mention of properly compensating, crediting and incorporating the sculptors of aural space.

With their recent admission into the designers' union, United Scenic Artists, the status of sound designers in the American theatre has officially risen. More important, contemporary playwrights are beginning to conceive plays with soundscapes in mind. Consider the stage directions at the climax of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*: "A sound, like a plummeting meteor...far above the earth, hurtling at an incredible velocity towards the bedroom...a terrifying CRASH as something immense strikes earth." The title character in Elizabeth Egloff's *The Swan* is heralded by equally evocative, if more enigmatic, noises: "Night. A fan rattles...a truck approaches from the distance...suddenly there is a bump as something hits the window. A shock reverberates through the house. The big wooden door slams shut." How does the sound reverberate? How large is the object that goes bump in the night? How realistic is the world in which those sounds are heard?

Recently, six leading sound designers (many of whom also compose music for the stage)—Mark J. Bennett, David C. Budries, Martin Desjardins, John Gromada, Janet L. Kalas and Darron L. West—set down their earphones, turned off their computers and discussed their approaches to sound design, and remembered (without sadness) the days of razor blades and reel-to-reel tape.

—L.I.B

LENORA INEZ BROWN: What inspired you to get into sound design?

DAVID C. BUDRIES: For me it was an accident. I came from a music background: concert-sound reinforcement and jazz. But I got tired of trooping stuff around. I got a call from the Hartford Stage Company, needing assistance with a play—this funny little show called *Is There Life After High School?* I had always loved theatre, but never dreamed I'd do it professionally. I thought the Hartford opportunity was a one-shot deal—it turned into a 19-year relationship. And the offshoot was starting the graduate program at Yale University.

MARTIN DESJARDINS: Well, my path is sort of the inverse. I was a theatre person who was introduced to sound and music. I was a scenic and lighting designer in college, and somebody said, "Hey, you should try doing sound!" Finding that, through the medium of music and sound, I could be a part of the storytelling process was liberating and very exciting. The funny thing was, I kept doing sound design thinking I would eventually find this big mass of sound designers from whom I could learn, just as there are masses of lighting and set designers. To this day I have yet to find that large mass.

DARRON L. WEST: We are that large mass. [Laughter.] I went to college to be a sound person for animation, film, television and radio. A theatre professor came up to me and said, "Hey, why don't you try being a sound designer?" I did one show and thought, "Wait a minute, I can actually do this for a living?" I've never gone back to TV and radio.

JANET L. KALAS: I had a theatre degree from the University of Colorado at Boul-

der and had studied the sciences before going into theatre. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I went to the Denver Center and talked to the sound designers—Bruce Odland and Tom Clark. They really piqued an interest in me. One of Bruce's shows moved down to Center Stage in Baltimore, and he asked me to come down and run sound. Then Center Stage asked me to design the next show. I've had a 19-year relationship with Center Stage.

MARK J. BENNETT: I began as a pianist and a composer. A college drama teacher, who had seen me in a few misguided acting moments, said, "You might want to write some music"—that's how I began working in theatre. It really wasn't until I assisted under David Budries, who had codified so much of what I'd been doing piecemeal, that I realized, "Wow, there can really be an order to this."

JOHN GROMADA: Doing sound design is a way for composers to make a living. As a composer in college, I saw sound design as a way to combine interest in music and theatre. I was always interested in electronic music and, as a way of getting my music into theatre, I learned about audio engineering and sound design. For sound designers, there isn't a heritage to inherit. There's a huge gap that started at the beginning of the 20th century when naturalism and realism insisted we strip away artifice. That artifice never really resurfaced until, to some degree, technology and aesthetic tastes allowed it to. We're the people who are making that happen, I think.

BROWN: What are some of the elements of sound design?

BENNETT: The heritage of *Musique Concrète* and [Karlheinz] Stockhausen found some gray zone with all of us, in terms of thinking of real sound as a compositional tool.

DESJARDINS: One of the most theatrical things about music is when you start manipulating timbre. Part of being theatrical, in the broadest sense of the word, is a playful self-awareness. And, in a way, when you start manipulating timbre, you heighten an awareness of something *behind* the structure of the music—the nature of the instrument that is giving you that structure.

KALAS: The thing that fascinated me most about sound was spatiality and movement—looking at a space in three dimensions rather than two. I love making a space sound beautiful, and I also love the movement of sound through space. That's one thing that I could really experiment with in theatre and no place else.

BROWN: How does one achieve movement of sound in theatre?

KALAS: A lot of it is speaker placement. But one of our goals is also trying to make the sound transparent, so the audience can't necessarily identify exactly where it's coming from. There's a lot of experimentation with speaker placement, with building the sound disk [in the computer] in terms of panning and movement and then manipulating it with your technician through the space [for an effect similar to surround sound]. It's a challenge and often it takes putting it down on paper before it can actually be tried.

BUDRIES: Spatialization adds another level. I think we're respected for the work we do because we take a compositional approach regardless of what we're composing with, whether it be traditional instrumentation, found sounds or imagined sounds. In theatre, you break down conventions and you have to imagine things from a number of perspectives. You have to think about what "real" is, what "real" feels like, what abstractions you can play with, based on those known realities. You have to expand and explore and challenge both yourself and the audience.

The sense of movement has to do with imagination—what I call aural imagination. You imagine sound in three-dimensional space (I know this is going to sound a little hokey) and even consider it in four dimensions. We're always thinking about development across time, which is very different from much visual design.

BENNETT: That actually links us with the actors and the text in a way that's not true of other design elements.

BUDRIES: Let me make a quick analogy to a photograph. A photograph is a snapshot of something that happened at some moment in time. Sound doesn't exist in that realm at all. Sound has to take place over time; it starts, has a middle and an end. You have to experience sound over time. That's the idea Janet was talking about in terms of movement—we are creating something that's moving from point A to point B.

WEST: Theatre is all about space and time. The best work on designs comes about when you're defining space and time.

DESJARDINS: What this means is that we deal with things like rhythm and the arc of the story—we have the ability to manipulate how the audience experiences that arc, and we're acutely aware of that. Everything we do drives or drags the rhythm and the tempo. That is one thing that makes us unique among design disciplines.

WEST: When I'm designing a play, I'm constantly dealing with subtext and internal scor-



Mark J. Bennett's Broadway designs include *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (with Tom Clark), *The Lion in Winter* and *A View from the Bridge*. He has also composed/designed for Off- and Off-Off Broadway and regional theatres. From 1989–1995 he served as resident composer and sound designer for the Ridiculous Theatrical Company and wrote scores for two original musicals, *Linda* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a Quasi-Musical. The recipient of Obie and Bessie awards, he has worked with choreographer Yoshiko Chuma and has maintained a 15-year collaboration with poet and translator Paul Schmidt. Bennett is currently collaborating with Robert Wilson for the Museum of the Diapsora in Tel Aviv.



David C. Budries is a sound designer, music producer and engineer. He has designed for numerous theatres, including the Hartford Stage Company, Yale Repertory Theatre, Lincoln Center Theater, McCarter Theatre, South Coast Repertory, Playwrights Horizons, Philadelphia Drama Guild, the National and Noel Gay Theatres in London and Moscow's Pushkin Theatre. Budries developed the first MFA program with a concentration in sound design for the Yale School of Drama, where he is currently chair of theatrical sound design. He also developed and currently chairs a music production and technology degree program at the Hartt School.



Martin Desjardins is the resident sound designer for the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. He performed the same role for seven seasons at Actors Theatre of Louisville, as well as serving one year on the sound design faculty at the Yale School of Drama. Desjardins has designed and composed for many regional and international theatres. Recent original scores include *Rett Etter Midnatt (R.E.M.)*, a dance piece performed by members of the Norwegian National Ballet. His Off-Broadway credits include *Below the Belt* with Judd Hirsch and Robert Sean Leonard.

ing of the characters, as well as external scoring of situations. I'm approaching scenes with the same mental tools actors do.

BROWN: Let's talk about crafting a sound plot. Why does it take a sound designer eight weeks to do that, while designers from other disciplines might craft their plots during tech rehearsals?

BUDRIES: Consider the amount of time it takes to research—that can take a month of exploration, using the Internet or talking to ethnomusicologists, for example. It may mean gathering six hours of pig sounds and editing them down to a specific vocabulary, or going to the seashore and deciding that there are thousands of kinds of pieces of sea vocabulary. And once you've gathered appropriate elements, you have to manipulate a sound into something useable. That takes a tremendous amount of time. I'm envious, quite frankly, of lighting designers, who can put a plot together and craft most of their work during the tech process.

KALAS: That's absolutely true for me as well. I did a show called *Ten Unknowns* at Lincoln Center. It was supposed to be in Mexico in the springtime, and I underscored most of it with the appropriate birds and insects for morning, afternoon and evening. I thought the beauty of my sound design was that it indicated change over time, and it took a lot of research to find what might sound right.

The initial process for me begins with the first discussions with the other designers. If I can see a set designer's photograph, it can give me a sense of whether the play is warm or cold, for instance. It can set me in a place so that I can start imagining what the sound would be. If I look at a photograph of an open field, I can sit in that field in my mind and think of moving grass, of crickets, of a dog off

in the distance, of a storm coming in from a distance. If the storm comes in, the crickets go away, the wind starts moving the grass more, and so on.

GROMADA: One thing that's important is to save time for experimentation in the studio, which I rarely ever have time to do anymore—and I'm sad about that. I find that many of the ideas and abstract sounds that I've used over the years, I developed when I was in my early twenties at one a.m., stoned, playing with an analog synthesizer. I don't have time to do that as much anymore.

WEST: I'm probably in a different situation because I'm a member of a company. I have the advantage of long-term research and long-term work that starts with the text and with collaboration. Ninety-nine percent of the time I'm actually in the room for the entire rehearsal process. I'm building the play as we're creating it. I do design the show in my head in seven or eight different ways, first, and walk into the rehearsal hall with basic ideas. But those ideas are defined once I see the actors in space.

DESJARDINS: Many of us have done sound designs in a week or two weeks when we worked in summer stock. But at some point we all decided we weren't satisfied with what that allowed us to do on behalf of the production. We've each found our own methodology, but in the end have found a methodology that begets a much more intimate relationship with the creative process.

BENNETT: One of the most satisfying processes for me was *Antony and Cleopatra* at Berkeley Rep. Three or four months before the production began, the designers and director got together for a solid week, read through the play and talked every day. Something about the team being together for that long a period

of time, that far in advance, made that process feel more integrated than anything else I've ever done.

DESJARDINS: I have learned the value of being able to approach something, back off of it and come back to it with a different perspective.

GROMADA: Given the new technologies available to us, it is easier for us to work quickly, even in tech. At most techs I do now, I have Pro Tools, which is an editing system that many of us use, at a tech table along with a sampler. That allows me to be creative in the tech process and very quickly come up with new ideas and integrate them.

BROWN: What is the difference between building a sound from a digital source, and building a sound from a live source, and bringing actors into the sound booth and building some kind of distorted sounds?

DESJARDINS: The technology that I have become attracted to over the years has less to do with creating original sounds out of the technology. I have more fun creating original sounds out of old pieces of metal that I bow with a cello bow or something. You get more interesting stuff out of it. The technology that attracts me is the technology that allows me to do the sorts of things that John was just referring to, which is to access the material more quickly and leave it in a more flexible format, so it can be revised, for a longer period of time.

Say, for instance, that you wanted to play something backwards. Ten years ago, you would record it onto a tape and once it was recorded, you'd turn the tape over, rewind it, and play it backwards. Now, you just simply tell the computer to play it backwards or the sampler to play it backwards.

KALAS: Technical issues aside, it all comes down to tailoring the sound to the production. Sometimes that takes going to the seashore and recording, specifically, what you want. Or you can go to a sound-effects library that you've collected or purchased, and pull from that.

DESJARDINS: That's a really good point, Janet. People often assume that I walk into a sound office where there are five million sound-effects CDs and exactly what I need is there. Many times it's not.

WEST: When I first got my first sampler—and I'd been working on reel-to-reels for such a long time—I thought, "Oh, my God, I have more time to work." But the tools are the tools. I don't care whether you have an 808 drum machine and an Otari 5050—it just means that you have more

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John Gromada has composed or designed sound for theatres in New York and across the country. His Broadway credits include an original score and sound design for Proof and Long Day's Journey into Night. He received a 1997 Drama Desk award for sound design for Caryl Churchill's The Skriker and a 1991 Obie for Machinal. An associate artist with the Hartford Stage Company, Gromada has composed scores for Michael Wilson's adaptation of A Christmas Carol and Tennessee Williams's Camino Real. For Camino, he composed several songs for Betty Buckley, who recorded them on her latest album, Heart to Heart.



Janet L. Kalas has designed sound at numerous theatres across the country, including Lincoln Center (Ten Unknowns and Old Money), Center Stage (with whom she's maintained a 19-year relationship), Dallas Theater Center, Hartford Stage, La Jolla Playhouse, Yale Repertory Theatre, Arizona Theatre Company and Shakespeare and Company. Her Off-Broadway designs have been heard at Playwrights Horizons (Lobby Hero), the Drama Department, Atlantic Theater Company, The Public Theater and Manhattan Theatre Club. She has received award nominations from AUDELCO, Drama Desk and the Dallas Theatre League. She worked with Peter Sellars on Peony Pavilion.



Darron L. West designs sound for and is a member of Anne Bogart's SITI Company. He has designed on Broadway (Wait Until Dark), Off Broadway and at regional theatres, including New York Theatre Workshop, Mark Taper Forum, ART, La Jolla Playhouse and Trinity Rep. A former resident sound designer at Actors Theatre of Louisville and the Williamstown Theatre Festival, he has worked internationally in London, Prague, Paris, Tbilisi, Amsterdam, Berlin and Dublin. The recipient of three Drama Desk nominations, a 1997 Princess Grace award, a 1998 Obie (for SITI's Bob) and Entertainment Design's 2000 EDDY award, he is currently a TCG artist-in-residence at Minneapolis's Children's Theatre Company. Most recently he made his directing debut (Big Love) with Austin's Rude Mechanicals.

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time to be able to create.

KALAS: It's true. Computer editing changed my life—I have more time. But I still find that I spend hours and hours exploring the editing that I can do and adding more layers. So I still spend a lot of time—it's just behind a computer rather than behind a razor blade.

WEST: I think it's safe to say that every one of us has done tape editing. I still find it completely fascinating to give master classes at universities and find that a lot of students have never cut tape! I wonder why we haven't taught new designers where our forefathers came from?

BUDRIES: I think that's an issue of time. Most of us haven't had an opportunity to, you know, drive a covered wagon either. There *are* certain things that historically you want to make people aware of, but frankly, I have no interest in going back.

KALAS: Me neither.

BROWN: What has it been like learning how to deal with particular directors? DESJARDINS: There was a time when "dealing with directors" was often the right term. At that time, there was an ongoing process of learning how to communicate about sound. However, sound and music, and the language with which they are discussed, have come a long way. Designers are mastering the creative approaches needed to discuss their work, and directorial expectations are responding by growing increasingly more sophisticated. As a result, the rapport with a given director is improving. While the process may vary from director to director, there's almost always a way to make that connection happen.

KALAS: But it also begins with the playwright. I find that more sound is being written into plays than ever before.

GROMADA: The playwrights need us desperately, because they're writing these cinematic plays that don't work without us. We're the only people who can actually solve the problem of the 40-scene play with 20 locations.

BROWN: Can you talk about how sound design helps to bridge transitions in these new kinds of plays?

GROMADA: Well, it's an economical issue because it's much cheaper for a producer to hire us to render a scene aurally than it would be to do it with scenic elements. Often these new productions have 30 or 40 scenes set in many locations, and many playwrights these days don't seem to give much thought to costume changes and scenery movement. And we're there with our Band-Aids piecing it all together so that the play can actually propel forward. This is how I make a living—slapping Band-Aids on transitions.

DESJARDINS: I would say those plays have a momentum to them. For instance, I did a production early on in my time at ATL [Actors Theatre of Louisville], which was one of these sort of 30-scene race horses. To keep that momentum going takes somebody driving it in addition to, and beyond, the actors, not only to create transitions but to connect

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ideas so that an audience knows that scene seven has something to do with scenes 12 and 17 but nothing to do with scenes 14 and 13.

GROMADA: I also find that playwrights don't know how to write a 20-minute scene anymore. They seem to want to write scenes that range from 45 seconds to 2 minutes.

BUDRIES: Yes. The sense of movement can be extraordinary, especially if you're talking about a scene that's moving from Vienna to an Amazonian jungle. Try to do that quickly with scenery.

BROWN: What's your process in creating a design?

KALAS: For me it begins with going through the script and getting the images from it—and also noting the practicalities like a telephone ring or a toilet flush or whatever. And then the next step is talking to the director. For me, there's nothing better than talking to the director, because the director's already been thinking about the play for some time. And just hearing somebody talk about a play with passion can bring to me so many images. That's very important.

BUDRIES: To give a specific example of my process: When I was doing *Richard III*, director Mark Lamos asked whether Richard III was a despicable, ruthless individual or a normal person acting out in a virtually ruthless time. That got me trying to illustrate that environment from the psychological standpoint of Richard III's pain and the difficulty of the era. Then he threw a second thing at me. We were working with Richard Thomas as Richard III on this, and Richard and Mark and I sat together. And Richard said, "This play to me sounds like Primus" [a contemporary music group]. And so I started thinking, how does that fit? And then we started going in that direction, with dark ele-

"The playwrights need us desperately, because they're writing these cinematic plays that don't work without us. We're the only people who can actually solve the problem of the 40-scene play with 20 locations."

ments of contemporary music, and then the entire score came out of these very dark elements—a lot of bent metal, recordings of very violent sounds to create a dark environment. And we were able to assemble a very visceral piece by spending weeks developing a very dark palette—a small number of melodic elements combined with a lot of very percus-

sive ideas—and exploring its possibilities for simple transitions or underscores or ghosts or all of those things. But that's just one kind of process.

WEST: My own particular process is to read the play. I make it a rule that I'll read the play once a day for the first two weeks right before I walk into rehearsals. I very rarely make any notes while I'm reading through the play. I just try to soak it all in and do a lot of research. I'm a complete research freak. I very rarely have conversations about what my design is going to be. I've got palettes in my head, but I've never been one to sit down with a director before I go into rehearsal and say, "Okay, this is what I'm thinking in this scene." For me it's all about discovering it as we're making it. I love the element of surprise. I'm very reluctant to do too much preparation. I do a lot of research and then, when I walk into the rehearsal hall, I throw all the research right out the window. Creating is a visceral experience for me. I love this dialogue that we're having now, because we don't get a time to really hang out with one another very much.

Part of our jobs is making the unspeakable heard.

BUDRIES: As artists, what we're really looking for in the theatre is appropriate, respectful opportunities to do what we do. One of our biggest problems is that, although the directors have caught

up, the producers are still behind, and frankly, we haven't made it easy for them. It is not cheap to do a good sound design. Trying to educate the producers has been one of the key things that we're all doing in our own quiet little way. One of the key things I'm trying to get at is that we are artists and we can be compensated reasonably. We don't have to feel like we're in the business of subsidizing theatres.

BENNETT: David, how does one approach producers who are looking to invest a certain amount of money in their sound department but don't want to go the wrong way? All the other design areas are more codified; our needs are almost as individual as we are.

BUDRIES: There's the sound delivery system—the loudspeakers, amplifiers and so on—which is going to be fairly consistent for most of us. What changes dramatically is how we deliver ideas, whether we're working with live musicians, whether we're working with microphones and actors, with samplers or CD players or MD players. And there's no way that a producer can be fully set up to accommodate all our particular wishes. They have to make an investment not only in the delivery system, but also in support staff and personnel so we can execute our designs in a timely fashion.

DESJARDINS: I think it's fair to say on everyone's behalf that the text, the story, the event is the lynchpin for us. That isn't always the case. There are designers who are locked into the primacy of their music, placing that ahead of the event as a whole. Others can be too heavily invested in the technology supporting the design. In both cases you risk sacrificing the play to a personal priority. In the end it's a matter of respecting that which is truly at the center of the action. What each of us is trying to do, in our own way and above all other considerations, is to take our various approaches and use them to tell a story.

WEST: Because we're storytellers, basically. Everyone who works in the theatre is a storyteller. **AT**

Sound was attributed to God by primitive people; it was considered sacred and was reserved for the priests, whom it served by enriching their rites with mystery.

▲
LUIGI RUSSOLI, THE ART OF NOISE
MILAN, MARCH 11, 1913

SONIC BOOM

AMERICAN THEATRE GETS WIRED

BY JOHN ISTEEL

The irony's rich. A generation of theatre artists creating cacophonous "noises off"—the whirl of helicopters circling, the earthquaking entrance of angels, the ripple of history wrenching open—has quietly tweaked the craft of sound design into an art form. And no one has sounded so much as a fanfare, flourish or alarum.

The most visible venue for the recognition of American theatrical accomplishment—the Tony awards—despite repeated requests, refuses to add a category for sound design. Nevertheless, in the past 20-odd years since *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* introduced rock music to Broadway, sound has become a fourth design discipline, elbowing its way down the aisle to join the familiar trio of sets, costumes and lights.

Sound effects, of course, have embellished theatre productions for centuries, as has live musical accompaniment. Shakespeare's storms, for example, were created by stagehands manipulating devices similar to the wind machines, thunder sheets and split-pea-filled rain-makers common in theatres until after World War I. And, until the invention of recorded sound, effects were primarily the responsibility of the property department. Then, in 1890, a few years after electricity first fully illuminated Victorian theatres, an English farce used a backstage phonograph to effect a baby's cry on cue. Nevertheless, for the next 50 years, theatre artists' abilities to manipulate and distribute light far exceeded their capabilities to do so with sound. While a sign appeared outside a Broadway house in 1921 crediting "lights by Abe Feder," it wasn't until 1971 that Abe Jacob identified himself as the first "sound designer" on Broadway, for his contribution to *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Sound's bastard position among the disciplines isn't because of lack of artistic vision. Imagine Jean Cocteau's frustration in Paris in 1917 trying to stage his "surreal ballet" *Parade*, which featured Picasso's scenic design and Erik Satie's music. Cocteau's text, obviously inspired by Russoli's Futurist experiments, assigned each character a "sonic costume" of key sounds—whistles, drums, clappers and so on—and called for a "noisescape" of machines—airplanes, typewriters, sirens—to accompany Satie's compositions. Unfortunately, Cocteau didn't even have a reel-to-reel tape machine, the single major technical innovation in sound reproduction to have come along since the unwieldy backstage phonograph.

Now, at the end of the 20th century, the Machine Age finally has been reconfigured and rewired, and it's time theatregoers and practitioners said hello to the Digital Era. Hartford Stage Company's resident designer David Budries insists that sound design has only become an art form because of the digitization of sound. A knowledgeable designer sitting at a digital audio work station may create, compose and manipulate a huge assortment of aural elements—samples of pop songs, multilayered synthesized effects, echoes of actors'

ILLUSTRATION BY LYDIA



From backstage phonograph to the Digital Age: Left, a study by Picasso for *Parade*, the 1917 ballet in which Cocteau assigned a "sonic costume" to each character; right, a scene from Tom O'Horgan's eclectic 1971 mounting of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the first Broadway show to credit sound design (by Abe Jacobs) alongside sets (Robin Wagner) and costumes (Randy Barcelo); above, Richard E.T. White's 1986 production of Edward Bond's *The Sea* at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, with Laurence Ballard, foreground, and sound design by James LeBrecht.



voices—as easily as a playwright manipulates dialogue on a word processor. More important, a single cue (which could contain Satie's music and trigger "sonic costumes" for any character Cocteau wanted) can be played back precisely the

same way at each performance. Digital sound, many designers assert, has affected their discipline as profoundly as the invention of electricity enhanced the art of the lighting designer.

In autumn 1993, two events

crowed the dawn of this new era. For one thing, sound designers were admitted for the first time into the design program at the Yale School of Drama instead of into its technical crafts division. Although a simple administrative change, the move sym-

bolizes the way sound increasingly is approached—not as a technical science, but as its own design element.

Budries heads Yale's graduate program and believes the increased use of sound reflects a growing appreciation for more expressionistic texts. "When I first came to Yale 10 years ago, there was no sense that sound was important," he recalls, "especially with the drama school's emphasis on naturalistic playwriting." Center Stage of Baltimore's artistic director Irene Lewis concurs: "As the theatre movement has moved away from naturalism—thank God!—you wind up with much more abstract settings, and sound paints the stage very effectively."

Although experimental playwrights and directors—Robert Wilson, Anne Bogart, Richard Foreman, JoAnne Akalaitis and others—have always demanded a full-range of sound and noise, such work now appears more frequently at resident and Off-Broadway theatres, and budding designers must be masters of the aesthetics of sound as well as the physics. For Budries, "the tools are easy to teach," but what a superior sound

designer requires is "a thirst for exploration and a need to use the imagination."

The same September that Budries's students began classes at Yale, Abe Jacob, the godfather of Broadway sound design, had a big breakthrough in New York. As the first and only president of Local 922, chartered in 1986 as the sound design chapter of IATSE, the stagehands' union, Jacob negotiated the first standard labor contract for Broadway and Broadway-tour sound designers. Although its minimum design fee of \$2,500 pales in comparison to Broadway fees for lighting designers (which can range from \$4,500 to nearly \$15,000 for large-scale, multi-set musicals), Jacob felt the compromise worth the League's belated acknowledgment that sound indeed was a legitimate fourth design discipline. Now, Jacob feels future negotiations will yield more rewards: "The contract's something to build on."

Of course, because of the nature of Broadway and its emphasis on musicals, the 40-odd designers in Local 922 concentrate on "reinforcement" (Jacob prefers the euphemism "enhancement"). Their skill at boosting the volume of God-given vocals has changed the terms of the debate in the last two decades from whether amplified sound has *any* place in the theatre to *what* role it should occupy. Sophisticated sound systems allow producers to charge more for the "nose-bleed seats"—musical theatre audiences in the back balcony may not *see* the action but they will *hear* it as if they were sitting fifth row center. Now more and more money goes to elaborate systems, conceived by audio wizards like Jonathan Deems, the Las Vegas-based designer whose computerized program for Jack O'Brien's Broadway production of *Damn Yankees* marks one of the first times a show's complexity of sound cues has been controlled by computer.

This frenzy of invention and spending makes the three rental shops servicing Broadway very upbeat. ProMix, for one, is doing booming business. A pilgrimage to the company's Westchester warehouse last spring revealed a marvel

awaiting lift-off: the mixing board for Tommy Tune's short-lived *The Best Little Whorehouse Goes Public*. ProMix employee Simon Nathan explained its significance: "It's an automated console that has a limited amount of computer built in, so the engineer can program the complete play cue-to-cue. A single 'next cue' will not only turn channels on, turn channels off and reassign channels, but even reassign different subgroups to different channels on a cue-to-cue basis—and at the same time trigger effects or a DAT (digital audio tape player), and simultaneously activate motorized faders that will send that cue to different parts of the theatre." Now you know how the helicopter lands in *Miss Saigon*.

The speed of change makes even insiders' heads spin. ProMix co-

Nevertheless, outside the commercial arena, most sound designers remained unaffected by the events of last year. Invariably autodidacts without graduate instruction, most resident theatre and experimental sound designers stumbled into a college or a resident theatre and wired their musical training to the speakers, decks and synthesizers laying around. Each must continually reinvent his or her own "program" as new technologies become available.

And while some resident theatre directors take sound design aesthetics seriously, the designers contacted for this article bemoan those who remain ignorant of sound's changing role in the Digital Era. Like some mysterious club or guild, designers thrive on the Zen-koan-like conundrums they encounter.

"Sound can function as an additional actor onstage. The question is whether to let it play as muscicularly and forcefully as the other design elements."

DIRECTOR MARCUS STERN

founder Bob Rendon recalls, "We used six wireless mikes on *Dream Girls* and thought that was a lot." Last spring, *Showboat*'s producers requested a price quote for 44 mikes. DigiCarts, computerized hard drives that stack sound cues and play them at a press of a button, have rendered tape decks obsolete. Designer John Gromada says he expects reel-to-reels to disappear at most major theatres within five years.

Only recently has theatre sound begun to mirror society's reality. For digital sound not only emanates from your favorite CD, but from speakers built into theme park roller coasters, museum installations, supermarket aisles, church choir lofts, cineplexes and airport lounges. The result is that Americans' rich digital sound diet has spoiled theatre audiences. Commercial producers, therefore, must protect their multimillion-dollar investments by competing in these sonic sweepstakes.

Sound's mystical qualities, in fact, may account for its presence in humanity's most profound questions: "Does a tree falling in the middle of the woods make a sound if no one's there to hear it?" Or the familiar Zen koan designed to provoke enlightenment: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Such questions are fundamental to the aesthetics of sound design; both are different ways of asking the same oxymoronic question Simon and Garfunkel addressed: What are "the sounds of silence?" The reason for its profundity, as the late maestro of found-sound John Cage obviously believed, is that "silence" doesn't exist or, at least, is a relative term. In fact, Cage proved, by making concert audiences listen to "it," that silence is filled with an infinity of possible noise. And so, the irony in the theatre is that sound designers are the conscience and keepers of silence. They understand that without silence

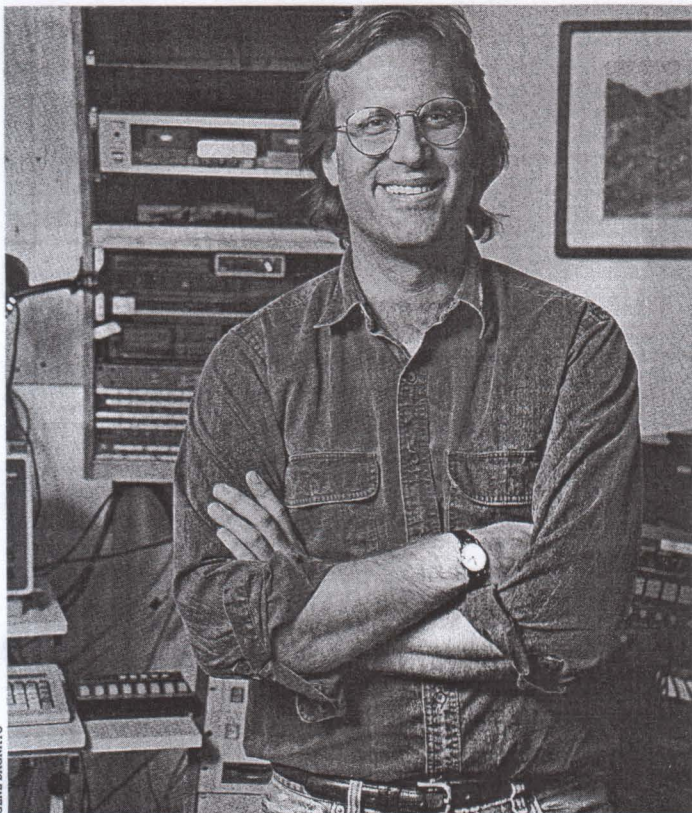
their work is unintelligible.

Darron West's 90-something sound cues for Anne Bogart's production of *The Medium* at the Saratoga International Theater Institute and New York Theatre Workshop—including samples of TV's *The Dating Game* ditty, the theme song from *The Valley of the Dolls*, and assorted statics, hisses and roars—fill most of the show's running time. "Maybe there's five minutes we've logged through without any cues," West explains. "With so many cues, the silences are a *big deal*—you have to plot where they are going to be."

Without the budgets of their colleagues on Broadway, these designers depend on their ability to manipulate limited resources to create "sonic environments" that embellish their productions with effects and underscoring that is simultaneously ethereal and expressive, abstract and concrete, all the while offering audiences answers to impossible questions.

What do you hear when you go to Heaven? *Angels in America* sound designer Scott Lehrer thought he had the answer in the feverish last days before *Perestroika* opened on Broadway. He concocted a complicated sequence that layered bits of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* with samples of power plant rumbles dropped to half speed; at the same time, the Council of Principalities angels listened to a 1940s radio sputter static while a voiceover discussed the Chernobyl disaster. Consisting of more than 60 cues in seven or eight minutes, this sequence was the "most fun" Lehrer had on the project—but it was cut out, along with about \$50,000 worth of scenery, the last day before the production was "frozen" for critics. Such experiences have soured Lehrer on commercial sound design, where he often finds too little tech time for sound or any appreciation for the importance of sound aesthetics.

Lehrer bucked the trend toward intensive "enhancement" several years ago with his work on Broadway on Gerald Gutierrez's production of *The Most Happy Fella* and Graciela Daniele's *Once Upon This Island*. In both cases, he eschewed body mikes and relied on area mikes. No



GENE MAGNATO

SCOTT LEHRER

Sound designer/multimedia engineer

Home Base: New York

Most Challenging Cue: "A helicopter landing amid a typhoon while a character talks over a walkie-talkie" in Jonathan Reynolds's *Geniuses*, directed by Gerald Gutierrez at the New York Shakespeare Festival.

Upcoming Project: *Hapgood* by Tom Stoppard, directed by Jack O'Brien at Lincoln Center Theater in New York.

matter how good the technology, Lehrer feels wireless mikes distance audiences from the experience—fine for spectacles but not for intimate musicals. Lehrer especially resents the techno-machismo posturing of some designers: "One guy called me up and said, 'Oh, man, I just did a show with 28 wirelesses.' It's like who has the most toys. I'm not interested in that."

A composition and piano major at Sarah Lawrence College, Lehrer at 20 found himself technical director for New York City's 1976 Bicentennial Celebration. "I was in over my head," he laughingly admits. But that stint introduced him to many experimental dance and theatre companies who performed in the streets. "The most interesting work for me is with a director who finds an auditory subtext for the show

separate from the narrative," Lehrer enthuses, particularly recalling his work with Robert Wilson on the New York University production of *HamletMachine* that went on to tour Europe. Last winter, he designed sonic environments for each room of a Robert Wilson furniture installation in a SoHo gallery, and he is currently at work with the director on a similar project for the Guggenheim Museum.

Wilson, an admitted Cage disciple (he dedicated *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* to him), arguably has used sound in more radical ways than any other director in the world. Lehrer considers Hans Peter Kuhn, Wilson's most frequent sound design collaborator, "a genius." Since *Death Destruction and Detroit*, Kuhn has created Wilson's "audio environments" by all sorts of innovative recording

and editing techniques. For example, a typical Kuhn design channels actors' voices to speakers placed all over the auditorium, dissociating the speaker from his or her speech, exactly the effect that Broadway sound technology tries to eliminate.

The main problems facing sound designers? Lehrer cites the insurmountable—America's disrespect for the arts—and the negotiable—producers' expectation that sound designers pay for their studio time. "No one expects set designers to build sets in their own shop at their own expense," he points out.

What's the sound of light shimmering in a swimming pool?

James LeBrecht has the answer on tape for the film director David Hartwell, whose movie *Love Is a Gun* stars Aidan Quinn. The lighter-than-air jangle takes place in the hero's fantastical mind's-eye as he contemplates suicide. After 15 years working for West Coast theatres, LeBrecht, like Lehrer, has moved into film for the obvious reasons: he makes in a week on a film what he would in five or six in the theatre. Moreover, he now sees adventurous filmmakers like David Lynch (LeBrecht built effects for *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*) posing the same intriguing sound questions he faced designing for directors Des McAnuff, Sharon Ott, Irene Lewis, Athol Fugard and Adrian Hall, among others.

LeBrecht won numerous awards for his work in Los Angeles, San Diego and especially the San Francisco Bay Area, where for 10 years he was resident sound designer at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. His best experience as a sound designer may have been collaborating on Edward Bond's *The Sea* with director Richard E.T. White and Todd Barton, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's resident composer. "The music came relatively early," recalls LeBrecht. "There was a lot of underscoring and Larry Ballard, the lead actor, really got to react to the subtleties—little bells ringing and stuff like that." This gave LeBrecht time to mix sound effects into the music.

By technical rehearsals, all he had to do was adjust volume and speaker placement.

Often, such organization and planning eludes directors. LeBrecht remembers John Hirsch's highly acclaimed Old Globe production of *Coriolanus* in the late 1980s. Sensing something missing from the composer's accompaniment, Hirsch asked LeBrecht to augment the music. LeBrecht collected different metal objects—square tubing, ammo boxes—and suspended them in a recording/production room. "John wound up coming in and banging stuff around with a threaded pipe until his hands were bloody," LeBrecht remembers. "We ended up incorporating a lot of those sounds into the score."

Unfortunately, directors aren't always so committed to getting the right sound. According to LeBrecht, directors are "uncomfortable with sound—you can't pick it up and look at it like a rendering; it's something you have to imag-



JAMES LEBRECHT

Sound designer/film sound editor

Home Base: Bay Area

Most Challenging Cue: "The sound of shimmering light reflected off of a swimming pool at night," for the film *Love is a Gun* directed by David Hartwell.

Upcoming Project: *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner, directed by Mark Wing-Davey at California's American Conservatory Theater.

ine." This situation compelled LeBrecht to co-author the first book, *Sound Design for the Theater* (with Deena Kaye), that treated sound design as an aesthetic discipline.

What's the sound of history ripped open?

For Liz Diamond's production of *The America Play* by Suzan-Lori Parks, both at Yale Repertory Theatre and the New York Shakespeare Festival, John Gromada created a fearsome, ear-shattering noise that sounded as if a cellar vault door was opening after having been sealed for centuries. The lyricism of Parks's script gave Gromada lots to work with: "The whole show is about echoes—of the past, of people," he recounts, climbing up the ladder to his console perched in a bird-nest-like loft in the Anspacher space at the Public. Gromada, one of New York's busiest designers, shows off his latest toy—a monitor that graphically displays a calliope sound. "On this computer I can write volume information, fades, and change them. They've already taken it for granted that I can change a sound cue in 30 seconds." Until this show, Gromada, like most of his colleagues, would go to his studio, rework the cue and return next rehearsal, praying it suited the director's needs.

With every show he designs, Gromada takes a technical step closer to the future. His design for JoAnne Akalaitis's Lincoln Center Theater production of *In the Summer House* in 1993 was the first he had ever done without a reel-to-reel tape deck. Instead, every cue was stored on a DigiCart. Gromada really gets excited about a computerized digital sound studio he first encountered last fall designing Irene Lewis's Center Stage production of *The Triumph of Love*, for which he composed a score for vibes, baritone sax, violin and harp. When he discovered there was a glitch every few seconds on the harp track, the Session 8 allowed him to call up the track on a monitor and actually redraw the wave. "You can get inside sounds," he marvels.

Only 30 years old, Gromada won one of the few Obies ever awarded for sound design for his nightmare noisecape accompanying Michael Greif's 1991 staging of Sophie

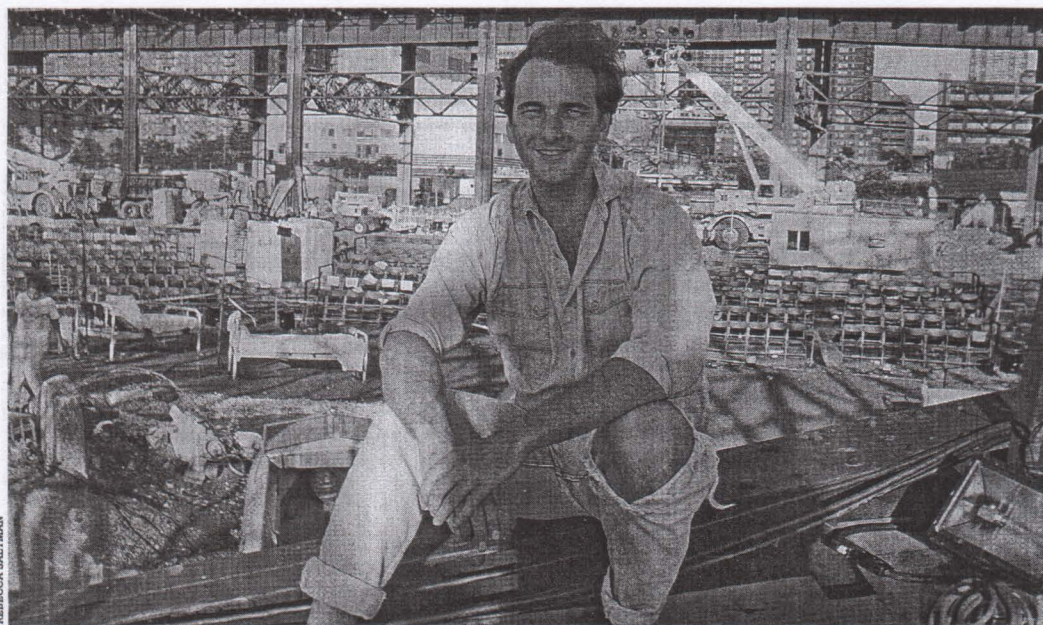
Treadwell's 1928 drama *Machinal* at the New York Shakespeare Festival. It confirmed his vibrant and dramatic sense of sound's theatrical presence. Often he suggests actors create their own effects onstage. For Michael Wilson's recent production of *Beauty and the Beast* at PlayMakers Rep in North Carolina, actors manipulated objects, chimes and whirling tubes. And Lewis enthusiastically recalls their first collaboration (*Servant of Two Masters*), for which Gromada brought a musician onstage who played every kind of kazoo and drum. Lewis described him as "a one-man contraption, stage left." And for Fritz Ertl's production of *The Return of Pinocchio* at Berkshire Theatre Festival, Gromada not only

take advantage of his composing ability. Others seem insensitive to or confused by the sound designer's role, and Gromada and his colleagues still sometimes feel as if they've been hired simply to wire mikes and hook up speakers.

More collaborative-minded directors may elicit wondrous aural soundscapes. Gromada won a DramaLogue award for his work on Tina Landau's production of José Rivera's *Marisol* at LaJolla Playhouse, and his work on Landau's two Hudson River pier-side spectacles for En Garde Arts in New York—1993's *Orestes* and this past summer's *Stonewall: Night Variations*—are exemplars of the way sound designers aurally complement the visual landscape for audiences.

Kaye. Working with Phil Lee, whose Manhattan sound studio she and a handful of more experimental theatre sound designers rely on, she found a silver bowl, poured water in it and close-miked it. "Phil reverbed my hand splashing in this metal bowl," Kaye remembers with satisfaction, and the resulting cue "was the essence of wet." That show symbolized Kaye's signature sound design—a blend of environmental noise over classical music.

Kaye epitomizes the designer as sound librarian. "You could call her a musical dramaturg," reasons Cleveland Play House's Roger Danforth, who credits Kaye with introducing him to sound's possibilities when he directed *Lady Windemere's Fan*. "She brought in



JOHN GROMADA

Composer/sound designer

Home Base: New York

Most Challenging Cue: "Conveying the destruction of the planet" in José Rivera's *Marisol*, directed by Tina Landau at California's La Jolla Playhouse.

Upcoming Project: *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, directed by Michael Wilson at PlayMakers Repertory Company in North Carolina.

composed a concertina score but learned to play well enough to perform on stage every night.

Unlike Lehrer or LeBrecht, Gromada considers himself more a composer than a sound designer, a distinction that maddeningly blurs disciplines, contributing to the confusion about his and other designers' roles. Some directors don't

What's the sound of "wet"?

Deena Kaye recalls working with director Ron Daley on a *Macbeth* production set in 1100 that was "very Viking" and in which the director wanted all sorts of strange sounds, including that of a "two-ton machine turning in hell." But the sound of "wet—not rain or a river—just wet" was most challenging for

a wide variety of period music and completely energized the rehearsal process," he recalls. Now, Danforth brings sound into the rehearsal process as early as possible, something that most designers agree is crucial to the creation of a cohesive and collaborative score.

After a hiatus devoted to rearing her first child, Kaye designed sound



DEENA KAYE

Sound designer/vocal coach

Home Base: New York

Most Challenging Cue: "The sound of an eagle's wings taking off in flight" for Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall*, directed by Roger Danforth at the Triangle Theatre in New York.

Upcoming Project: Producing a demo album of *Masquerade*, a new musical based on Anouilh's *Thieves Carnival* (score by Andrew Cooke, book by Claude Furon).

last season for the New York-based Acting Company's touring production of *Twelfth Night*. Trained as a concert pianist from an early age, Kaye was forced to take up vocal coaching and acting after an injury. She eventually ended up at the Academy Theatre in Atlanta, where, with producing artistic director Frank Wittow's encouragement, she designed scores and arranged sound accompaniment "because no one told me you couldn't."

Her skills as a vocal coach and reference librarian's knowledge of period music make Kaye a particularly valuable collaborator on classics. For *The Spanish Tragedy* she not only placed pickup mikes on the swords to enhance the sounds of battle, but researched different war-drum patterns which

she incorporated into the fights.

As a "pioneer" who remembers designing for Happenings in the 1960s, Kaye downplays the role of technology: "An eight-dollar remote speaker switcher from Radio Shack allows you to move sound diagonally so you can make helicopters run around the theatre. We were doing that long before *Miss Saigon*."

What's the sound of a raven with ping-pong balls under its wings?

Like Kaye, Nathan Wang trained as a classical pianist. After attending the Eastman School of Music, he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Oxford University. There, Wang discovered an old analog synthesizer in a practice room; his proficiency garnered him an offer to compose effects for a BBC radio

series. Every month he'd get a list of cues needed for radio adaptations of children's stories, all of which he created on the synthesizer.

Solving the audio puzzle for the raven's flight gave him a sense of satisfaction Wang never forgot, even after returning to Los Angeles and working for a year as a speech writer for ex-governor of California, Edmund Pat Brown. Sound effects at a production of *The Comedy of Errors* at the Globe Theatre in West Hollywood then reminded him of the work he did for the BBC, and he sent his resume out. Eventually the composer designed scores for many Southern California institutions, including South Coast Repertory and the Mark Taper Forum.

Yet Wang's resume remains eclectic. While working on a number of different musical projects, he earns a living partly by composing songs for Hong Kong top-40 pop stars and scoring music and effects for animated cartoons such as Fox Network's Saturday morning *Eek the Cat*. At one time, he had the opportunity to conduct a 40-piece orchestra every week as he recorded his compositions underscoring episodes of the TV series *China Beach*.

Wang's big theatrical opportunity came working with director Ron Link, whose sensitivity to sound the composer particularly admires. During one of the titular characters' monologues in John Godber's *Bouncers*, a cue had to be extremely ethereal. It was a flashback to when he was a child on a swing. Wang remembers, "I composed something like the sound of a wet finger on a crystal wine glass on my DX-7 Yamaha synthesizer, which was pretty hot and heavy item in mid-1980s." Then Wang added sound in increments so that by the middle of the emotionally charged monologue, he had a chorus of champagne glasses singing. Apparently, Link loved the four-minute cue. But even so, Wang recalls the frustrations during tech: "Ron had me adjust the volume of one cue for about 20 minutes. I was in the booth muttering, 'This is ridiculous.' But once I sat in the theatre during previews, I realized what he was after." Working with Link was one way that Wang learned there's more to good

sound design than the standard "establish and fade."

As a Chinese-American, Wang draws on both Eastern and Western musical traditions. Recently, he's completed his second musical with Dom Magwili, *The Cathayan Pirate*, which will be produced, as was their first collaboration, at East West Players in Los Angeles. Simultaneously, he's composed a musical adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Wang believes directors avoid sound for a peculiar reason—they feel it's cheating. "They see it as a crutch, and using it admits that something on stage isn't working." On the other side of the spectrum are directors who rely on too much music or sound to tell the audience what to feel, which begs the question of whether cinematic underscoring will become common in the theatre. Even though he's scored television and film, Wang likes to keep the art forms separate. "I'm not advocating movie music in the theatre," he declares.

What's the sound of 1969?

That's an easy one for Darron West: loud and louder. When the 28-year-old self-proclaimed "sound design baby" returned to Actors Theatre of Louisville to work on Tina Landau's performance collage *1969*, he walked into rehearsals with his own sampler and in no time created cues that had taken the stage manager hours every night to splice together on a reel-to-reel. The opening six-minute sound sequence of *1969* defines the mood and dynamics of what's to come. It starts with a Dick Cavett interview softly playing from an onstage TV—"We have a guest here tonight, Miss Janis Joplin." A young, nerdy-looking student timidly approaches a 1969 high school yearbook center stage, picks it up and opens it. Then the rest of the characters enter.

In rehearsals, West immediately "heard" the possibilities. With Landau and the cast's support, West quickly whipped up a small roar that began as Howie tried to open the yearbook. As the actor and director played around, the moment soon expanded into the character's slow-motion wrestling match with high school

history. West gets excited: "The book opening was supposed to represent the spitting out of all of that horror of being a smart gay senior in 1969. It propels the play; it's the setup. You start with something really, really small—the interview through a TV speaker, then you see him pick up the book—the roar grows louder until it blows open, and you've got three seconds of this Janis Joplin drum riff, then it goes right down to this really cool sample from *Time of the Season*." West grins intently, "It should be like a roller coaster—buckle-in and just go."

West has been resident designer for the Williamstown Theatre Festival and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival as well as Actors Theatre of Louisville, but after designing sound for Anne Bogart's Louisville production of *Picnic*, he lost his appetite for what he calls "standard *Crimes-of-the-Heart* naturalism." So for the past year he's followed Bogart from Kentucky to Japan to

Saratoga, N.Y. to Circle Repertory Company in New York City, and back to Japan this summer for *Big Dreams, Small Lives*, the companion piece to *The Medium*. In between, he's worked with Landau (on *Floyd Collins* at Philadelphia's American Music Theater Festival, as well as 1969), Marcus Stern and Robert Woodruff. He savors these experiences because of the way the directors use him in rehearsals, actively encouraging his collaboration on each show, stirring up sonic environments in which actors can explore. Yet, unlike his musically trained colleagues, West insists, "I don't consider myself a composer—I'm a sound manipulator."

West's youth is his asset and the dynamics of sound his joystick: "I like to listen to the Smashing Pumpkins or a band like Jason and the Scorchers, who one minute are playing mandolins, singing a folk song, and all of a sudden they're revving up their Les Pauls and doing this huge country-punk number." Also, he respects the aural barrage offered by film sound-scores, feeling audiences raised on film expect a sonic jolt. Asked about the future, West looks bewildered—he's booked through January 1995. West does become animated when Wang's work on cartoons is mentioned: "I did that in college! I just loved that. There is no actor in the world who has better timing than Bugs Bunny."

What is the sound of the end of this article?

The final irony is that audio technology now has surpassed most designers' capabilities. Over the past decade, changes have occurred at such a heady rate that designers concoct new sound systems for each show but never fully explore each system before moving on. The Moog synthesizer generation trained in the 1970s approaches middle-age, and now sound opportunities are increasingly found outside theatres. Budries wired a Mystic Seaport historical exhibition; Lehrer designed Ellis Island's sound system. Last spring, LeBrecht cut a conversation short so he could do effects editing at Skywalker Ranch. And Kaye wished she had had a crack at the



DARRON L. WEST
Sound designer

Home Base: New York

Most Challenging Cue: "It's always the opening cue of the show, because it defines the aural approach of the show and sets up the conventions of what the cues will do."

Upcoming Project: *Small Lives, Big Dreams* for the Saratoga International Theater Institute in Saratoga, N.Y., conceived and directed by Anne Bogart, created with the SITI company.

"dreadful" sound used by Olympics figure skaters. Computer video games and interactive programs demand sound effects that may lure more designers from stage work.

Will American theatre artists hear the sound of the future? While musically trained directors like Des McAnuff (who with *Tommy*'s sound designer Steve Kennedy reintroduced Broadway to rock-and-roll), and Mark Lamos (whose insistence on creative sound helped give David Budries a career), have always encouraged sound designers, many directors still define theatre using its Greek roots as "the seeing place." Most were never trained in the aesthetics of sound design because the subject didn't exist.

Luckily, theatre poses some of the most creative challenges—if directors offer them. Marcus Stern, who teaches directing at New York University, begins each semester's class by bringing in a one-page scene and a bunch of CDs. "The first day we direct as a class, swapping tapes not only to get a sense of how a sound change can radically alter the entire event on stage, but to show how user-friendly working with sound can be. It doesn't have to be an intimidating lesson on 'how to create a sound design.'"

Stern works regularly with Yale classmate John Huntington, and

their collaboration on Mac Wellman's *Hyacinth Macaw* at Primary Stages in New York epitomized sophisticated sound design. They understand the power of sound: "Sound can function as an additional actor onstage," Stern believes. He has students ask themselves, "How much do you want that presence there, because sound is an aural set?" The question is whether to let sound play as muscularly and forcefully as the other design elements." Stern, who has also worked with both West and Wang, insists on bringing sound into rehearsals, not only so he can hear the possibilities, but so the actors can work with them.

Syracuse Stage artistic director Tazewell Thompson agrees that sound "is the most mysterious design element," but he wishes fellow directors, actors and producers would heed Caliban's observation in *The Tempest*: "This isle is full of noises/Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not." As Thompson interprets Shakespeare's character's advice, "I mean, even he, a monster, understood the moods of sound." **AT**

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NATHAN WANG
Composer/sound designer

Home Base: Los Angeles
Most Challenging Cue: "The sound of pigeons flying with ping-pong balls tied under their wings" for the British Broadcasting Company.

Upcoming Project: Composing the score for an original musical, *Cathayan Pirate* (lyrics by Dom Magwili), for Los Angeles's East West Players.