

David Collison's *The Sound of Theatre*

By: Tom Clark

(*The Sound of Theatre*, by David Collinson. Published by PLASA..
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Just a few pages into David Collison's *The Sound of the Theatre* it became clear that I'd found a kindred spirit—one who has been through variations on every kind of triumph and tribulation a sound designer can experience, and lived to tell the tale. It was a comforting realization—repeated at regular intervals throughout this beguiling and informative book: The fights with producers over removing seats for the mixing console so the operator could mix the show from a location that was *actually inside* the auditorium; the initially cantankerous stars who became willing and fiercely loyal accomplices once they realized that the audience could *actually hear* them; the recordings of classic mechanical sound effects that never quite captured the essence of the original; and the panic-inducing equipment or personnel train wrecks that were somehow hidden from the audience (and producer) through sheer force of will.

He notes in the introduction that although the theatre is both a visual and auditory experience, the vast majority of written information and advice about the technical side is obsessed with the visual, and often ignores sound altogether. In a tone half plaintive and three-quarters exasperated, he finds it "bizarre" that so little attention and respect is paid to sound—and sets about remedying the situation with a combination of meticulous historical reporting and reminiscences from a long career that started with 78rpm panatropes and continued through the advent of digital samplers. (He points out that the invaluable random-access capability of these two technologies was missing from all of the interim tape-based technologies.)

Collison's first book, *Stage Sound*, along with Burris-Meyer and Cole's *Scenery for the Theatre* and Richard Pilbrow's *Stage Lighting* have, for many years usefully weighed down the backpacks of virtually every North American technical theatre undergrad. It dealt with the introductory nuts and bolts of the behavior of sound, available equipment, and tips and techniques related to its use. The new work looks at how the manipulation of sound impacts the audience experience, and includes an extensive chronology, ranging from Pythagoras' experiments with acoustics 2,500 years ago up to the slightly shadowy, but enticing, hints of more natural-sounding digital sound reinforcement consoles in the 21st century.

Pilbrow makes frequent appearances in the current work, and is clearly the author's beloved friend and mentor. He appears to be at least partially responsible for my favorite story from the book—which deals with a West End producer's attempt to reduce the weekly operating costs of a struggling musical by deleting the sound system. The musical director disliked seeing microphones in the pit and believed the orchestra and performers would sound better without amplification, so the system was shut down as a test during a matinee performance. The resulting lack of clarity from the pit and intelligibility from the stage quickly convinced all

involved that the savings would have to come from a different department. Part One of the book provides much useful historical information concerning the makeup and use of mechanical and musical sound effects.

One particularly interesting section describes the meanings of sound-related terms found in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Who knew that Flourish, Sennet, Charge, Skirmish, Retreat, and Parley (among others) each had a specific instrumentation and musical personality? The number and variety of thunder effects alone is astonishing and the number of people required to execute a complex storm sequence—with wind, rain, thunder, and sinking ships—would make a modern producer apoplectic at the thought of the payroll. Collison gives a primer on the acoustics of the ancient Greek amphitheatres and stresses the importance of good architectural acoustics throughout, but leaves detailed discussion on the subject to others.

Though presented as a straightforward timeline, Part Two focuses on the development of electrical and electronic sound, and reads at times like an adventure novel about rival inventors trapped in an endless cycle of one-upmanship—a story that has a modern ring to it. In

the everything-old-is-new-again department, he lists several instances of concurrently designed technologies that each attempted to establish new format standards for recorded media, such as Thomas Edison's introduction of an 80rpm record to compete with Victor's new 78rpm discs—HD-DVD vs. Blu-Ray anyone? I was surprised to learn of Bing Crosby's contributions to the development of reel-to-reel tape recording technology and his early embrace of the microphone as an artistic tool.

Part Three: Amplified Sound in the Theatre sketches the beginnings of electro-acoustic technology for film, then quickly moves to Broadway and the West End. The remainder of the book provides an intimately detailed report on the people and companies devoted to theatre sound effects and reinforcement equipment and practices from 1935 to the present. There are hair-raising war stories aplenty, quite a few of which feature the author in a leading role. This section is absolutely required study for anyone determined to learn from the experiences of their predecessors, and is related in an engaging, anecdotal style that makes for very quick reading.

The book has an abundance of high-quality drawings, photographs, and graphic reproductions of sound-making devices and the people that operate them, and includes quite detailed descriptions concerning their manufacture and use. It helps put names, faces, and dates on many firsts in the theatre sound business, such as first use of wireless microphones, first title page credit for a sound designer (captured in London by the author), first use of electronic delay in a theatre sound reinforcement system, and the first use of a microphone on an actor's head (rather earlier than you might imagine).

The book ends with a discussion of "over-amplification," surely the worst offense a modern sound-reinforcement designer can be accused of. Somewhat surprisingly, all of the sound designers queried by Collison on the subject blamed the trend on the director. 🎧

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