

GCSE DRAMA

Sound design

8261

Teaching guide: sound design

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Sound design

Introduction

Sound designers create what the audience hears during a performance, from the sounds demanded by the script to soundscapes, underscoring, and atmospheric sound. This can include pre-recorded sounds, as well as sounds that are performed or created live during a performance. Sound can be used to create the world of a performance - this is the sound designer's role.

Activity 1: Diegetic and non-diegetic sounds

Diegetic sound is sound that the characters on stage can hear. For example, if a telephone rings on stage and a character answers it, then the sound is diegetic: the character on stage has heard the telephone. Non-diegetic sound is any sound that a character cannot hear, but instead creates the mood or atmosphere for the performance. For example, if a piece of music is played to accompany a scene (called **underscoring**), but cannot be heard by the characters, then it is non-diegetic.

Find a short clip of a performance or consider a live performance that you have seen. Try to identify examples of the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds used. Are there any sounds where it is difficult to decide whether they are diegetic or non-diegetic? Why?

Way in

Sound design can incorporate music, soundscapes and sound effects. Think about the ways that sound could be used in a production you are working on. Could music cover the beginning or end of a scene, or a scene change? Could a soundscape create a location for the action? Could a sound effect be associated with a certain character or action? As a group, make a list of as many possibilities as you can, then try a couple out in practice.

Activity 2: Sound and atmosphere

One of the functions of sound can be to create a mood or atmosphere in a performance. Choose a specific atmosphere for a scene in your devised piece or chosen set text and list all the different sounds that you might use to create that on stage. Discuss how you might collect and record these sounds.

'Essentially, the theatre sound designer is responsible for everything the audience hears. Exactly what that entails can vary considerably, depending on the type of show, the performers in the show and the performance venue. In practice there is no single job description that encompasses everything that the sound designer does, as they will adapt what they do to the demands of a specific production.' Gareth Fry, Sound Designer"

©Association of Sound Designers/ Gareth Fry

Discussion ideas

- Is there a moment in the play you are studying where sound could be used to create an atmosphere? What sorts of sounds might you use to do this?
- Compare three different pieces of music to underscore the same scene or sequence: how does the music alter your response to the performance?
- Sound designer Gareth Fry says that 'being creative is simply coming up with ideas and finding solutions to problems'. What problems does a play you are studying or a piece you are devising present to a sound designer? What different solutions would you suggest?
- Sound can be used to support a transition in a performance, for example to tell the audience that a mood or location has changed. How might you use a sound effect to mark a transition in the production you are working on?

Activity 3: Learning to listen and collecting sounds

‘Listening is an art form that takes many years to refine’ – Andrew Diey

©Andrew Diey

For sound designer Andrew Diey, the first step in working with sound is learning to listen. Try keeping a sound diary – what sounds do you hear at different times of the day? – or writing down all the sounds you can hear as you do a certain activity or walk a certain journey. The more you listen, the

more you will hear. Begin collecting those sounds by recording them: most mobile phones have a recording device that is sufficient for testing things out. Play the sounds back: do they sound the same in different circumstances? How do other people interpret the sounds you’ve recorded?

Activity 4: Making a soundscape

Start with an image of a character or a landscape. List words that describe the image. Consider how the image would sound if it were a stage set or a character. Try recording those sounds. This doesn’t have to be literal: liquid soap and a little bit of water rubbed between your hands can sound like a squelching, murky swamp for example. If you have access to editing software, try mixing your sounds. If not, play the sounds over one another using multiple devices (for example, a number of mobile phones or CD players) to experiment with creating a soundscape.

You can also create these sorts of soundscapes for a play you are studying. For example, what sort of sounds would you use to create the atmosphere of the jail in *The Crucible*? How would these be different to the sounds of the forest in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*?

Professional Example: *The Oresteia* (1999)

Gareth Fry’s work on *The Oresteia* (National Theatre, 1999) used a range of sounds in order to create a specific experience for the audience. His work carefully balanced sound and silence so that sound can contribute to a significant moment for those watching. He says:

‘We started off with a recording of a heating system to create a low rumble that played from before the audience entered. The effect was that the audience ignored the rumble, in the way that we filter out constant background sound. We were then able to bring in abstract sounds – pitched down bowed violin and the like – to subtly underscore the emotional, dramaturgical shifts in the play. We were also able to very slowly increase the level of the boiler rumble over the course of the play, until at the very end of the show, when a gun is fired, we simultaneously muted the rumble creating an immense silence.’ (©Gareth Fry 2015).

Design Tip

Fry’s ‘low rumble’ is an example of underscoring: using music or sound during a scene to add mood or atmosphere. Think about how underscoring could be used in your chosen set text, for example, how could underscoring help to create the atmosphere of the dystopian society needed in *Noughts and Crosses*?

You could also consider how sound is used in productions of *Blood Brothers*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *The 39 Steps*: how is underscoring combined with music and sound effects to establish locations or support transitions in these productions?

Find out more...

- **A step by step guide to sound design by Andrew Diey**
bbc.co.uk/newtalent/drama/advice_diey.shtml
- **Association of Sound Designers:**
associationofsounddesigners.com/whatis
- **Gareth Fry’s Q&As for students of sound design:**
garethfry.co.uk/qas-for-students/