

USING SOUND EFFECTS FOR THE THEATRE

An article written for Teaching Drama magazine by Miles Russell

The use of sound effects can completely transform a production. They're useful for getting information across to an audience in a fast and simple way and you can achieve great effect for minimum cost. Here's some tips on how and where to use them.



IMPRACTICALITY

The most obvious use of sound effects is to recreate sounds you can't achieve live due to impracticality, safety issues or budgetary reasons. This could be anything from not wanting to use real gunshots to being unable to fly a real airplane through your theatre space!

ESTABLISH LOCATION

Use sound effects to establish where you are. Audiences are very good at picking up clues so everything from a jungle, to a football match, to a busy café can be created just by using sound. Consider how simple it is to use a recording of waves and seagulls to suggest a beach ambience. Just stick on a simple CD track and the audience will accept they're at the seaside with no need to cover the stage in sand! (One tip is to use sound to set the scene but then fade it out once it is established so it doesn't get in the way of dialogue.)

ESTABLISH TIME

You can use sound to establish the time of day. Morning birdsong sets a very different scene to evening crickets, especially when combined with appropriate lighting. A quick recording of an owl hoot also implies night. However, you do need to make sure your sound effect is not too corny. Starting a morning scene with a cock crow often gets a laugh!

USING MUSIC

Music can also establish place and time. Organ music places you in church. Hear a didgeridoo and you're pretty sure you're somewhere 'down under'. Slade's 'Merry Xmas Everybody' makes it Christmas. Music is also very good for placing a scene in a specific historical period. Hearing Elizabethan court music sets a very different scene to a piece of Glenn Miller wartime jazz. Using music as the audience arrives (in the preshow) can be very effective to set the mood. Music often works well because we associate certain pieces of music with certain events, such as Mendelssohn's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', now known forever as 'the Wedding March'. This also happens a lot with music that has been used in adverts. To people of a certain age Carmina Burana will always be advertising Old Spice!

However, this raises another point. You need to make sure your target audience will understand your musical references. Your own reaction to a tune on Radio 3 might be very different to someone in year nine.

PRACTICAL EXERCISE 1

Music and sound can heighten emotions and our perception of a scene can be completely changed by the accompanying sound.

Sit a student (or a pair) on chairs in front of the rest of the group. Their job is just to sit and be neutral and try not to respond to the sounds they hear. Then play different pieces of sound or music and get the audience to gage how they feel about the actors.

Here are a few examples of music and sounds to use:

The Jean de Florette Theme (the Stella Artois advert)

The Look of Love - Dusty Springfield (always gets a laugh!)

The Ugly duckling - Danny Kaye

Flies buzzing

Clock ticking (this can create great tension if it starts quietly, builds over 30 seconds, then stops dead. Everyone holds their breath. Point out that the actors have done nothing, but the sound has created the tension)

A baby crying (this is also very powerful as the actor, not responding to the cry, raises questions about their character)

DIEGETIC & NON-DIEGETIC SOUND

These terms, often used in media and film, are also useful in theatre. Diegetic sound comes from within the play (such as a television in an actual scene), as opposed to non-diegetic sound which is outside the hearing of the characters (such as scene change music or a narrator's commentary). Try adjusting the tone of diegetic music or sounds (using the EQ on a mixing desk) so your sounds are more accurate, for instance making a radio sound tinny, or muffling the "blasting dance music from next door" heard through the wall.

A nice trick is to use music for a scene change (non-diegetic) but then make the same track come from within the scene on a radio (diegetic). As the scene starts you will probably need to adjust volume, EQ and placement (see below). Quentin Tarantino uses this effect all the time in his films.

SPEAKER PLACEMENT

Most theatres have stereo speakers which gives the option of having the sound come from either left or right of the stage (by using panning or routing on a mixing desk). Use this to your advantage so the offstage gunshot happens from the correct side of the stage, or the motorbike passes the right way. Depending on how much equipment you have, you can also have 'spot' effects so the sound comes from more specific places on stage, (very useful for diegetic sounds). Having the effect of a radio or telephone coming from the correct place on stage can add to the realism of a piece (and machine guns coming from behind the audience can really make them jump!)

"I NEED A CAR SOUND"

Often I'll get requests for sound effects that are not specific enough.
There are many questions you need to ask to make the sound fit for purpose.

For example, in this instance:

- What period is the car from and the play set?
- What sort of car is it? (At the very least we need to know if it is a posh or poor car.)
- What sort of sound do you need? The engine? The breaks? The doors? The horn?
 - Is the car arriving? departing? Running?
 - How long do you need the sound effect to run for?
 - If running, is it constant or speeding up or slowing down?
 - Are we hearing the sound from inside the car or outside?
- Even, what attitude does the driver have? Friendly? Impatient? Angry?

All of these are the sorts of questions you'll need to ask to get the correct sound. Remember, the purpose of a sound effect is to enhance your production and help the audience understand what's going on, so the more specific you are, the more the sound achieves your aim. Having said this, it does not mean you need be a slave to accuracy. Sometimes you will find a 'wrong' sound effect that just sounds better, (though you risk the chance of someone informing you after the show that your play was set in winter and the bird sound you used was inaccurate as that bird only visits in spring, etc!)

PRACTICAL EXERCISE 2

Find a piece of text with the potential for adding sound effects. Get your students to discuss how they would use sound, encouraging them to be precise about what sounds they would need.

They need to think about what the sound is (being as specific as possible), the volume and length of sound, the placement, and also start and end cue points.

Radio dramas can be very good material for this exercise.

WHERE TO GET SOUNDS?



PRE RECORDED SFX

CD's of sound effects are available (and often obtainable in your local library) and there are some fantastic websites where you can download sounds too. When playing any pre-recorded sound you need to make sure you're not infringing any copyright laws. Some CD's, usually more expensive, grant you the rights to use them however you want, but most require you to obtain the rights to use them. Information about who to contact about rights is usually on the CD. You can find out more about copyright from the Centre for Education & Finance Management, www.cefm.co.uk, who administer and advise on public performance licences for schools. Their schools' helpline is 01494 473014. Key advice from them is never to assume you have the rights and also check far enough in advance.

SELF CREATED SFX



If you have access to recording equipment, try recording your own sound effects (or get your Music Technology department to help). This has the added advantage of avoiding any copyright issues. You can also create sounds using mechanical means. This could be as simple as slapping two sticks together to make a whip crack or wobbling large sheets of wood or metal to produce thunder effects.

VOCAL SOUNDS

Why not create your own live sounds vocally? This can be a very creative and inclusive way to involve a large group of students, and is the ultimate in simplicity as you need no equipment (and this fits very nicely into the study of Brecht).

PRACTICAL EXERCISE 3

Try using students to create a vocal soundscape to accompany a scene, getting them to come up with suitable noises.

Scenes with weather can be a good starting point as it is relatively easy to orally recreate the sound of wind and rain. Maybe try the opening scene of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as an exercise, creating the sound of the ship in the storm.

CONCLUSION

There is a wealth of material out there and using it wisely can really lift a production, adding to the audience experience, supporting the actors and helping their onstage energy. It can also be a lot of fun getting it right. Enjoy!

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