



Ross Brown

Sound Effect: The Theatre We Hear (2020)

How have mythologies, pop culture, art and commerce shaped the audible world as a form of theatre? How can theoretical, technological and aesthetic questions of contemporary sound design for the theatre shed light on a 250-year Western cultural history of hearing?

In this oral introduction, Ross Brown leads us into his *Sound Effect: The Theatre We Hear* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), in which he retheorises the sonic turn in theatre practice and theory in popular and populist key, subtracting the sceptre of the sonic from the domain of the purely avant-garde to focus on sound as 'effect' and not only 'affect'.

Ross Brown is Dean of School and Professor of Sound at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. He made work in late 1980s and early '90s that is now seen as representing a 'sonic turn' in UK theatre practice. In 2010 he published the field-defining edited collection *Sound A Reader in Theatre Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

[00:00:15] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

The book's title is *Sound Effect: The Theatre We Hear*. Very deliberately with no definite article, so it's not 'THE Sound Effect', it's *Sound Effect: The Theatre We Hear*. And the 'we' in that formulation is important and it's described in the preface – I talk about why I use that first person plural pronoun, which is often a pronoun that's avoided in academic writing, but I have some deliberate reasons for using the pronoun 'we'.

[00:00:57] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

Okay, well there's a banal answer to that question, which is I needed a REF output. So I had to do it as part of my job. But I think it also pulled together a lot of trains of thought and trains of broader discourse, actually, that had come about through previous work that I'd written or undertaken in terms of convening discourses around theatre sound, which I think is the second part of your question here – how does it relate to my earlier work?

In the preface of the book I recap the relatively short but quite quickly expanding field of discourse around theatre sound and aurality, and I explain why really in the early 1990s, which is when I first started teaching sound at Central, there were really no extant sort of frameworks for a discourse around the auditory experience of theatre, the auditory materiality of theatre, other than sort of technical how-to-do-it books aimed at technicians who were training at drama school. And I think the reasons for that are quite interesting, and they're to do with, I think – partly to do with when Drama as an academic study first appeared in the middle of the 20th century, out of English literature departments in universities during the time in theatre's history when things like effects and what I've come to think of as the dramaturgy of theatricality itself – it's actually not an expression I use in the book but one I've been using more recently – had kind of been negated by that sort of period of literary modernism where theatricality and effect were kind of shunned in favour of this sort of pure unmitigated unmediated connection between audience and the word and the literary play. And any sort of theatrical trappings in the production process were tended to be minimalised or downplayed. And this was partly I think in reaction to that sort of modernist mid-20th century avant-garde reaction to what were regarded as the excesses of 19th-century theatre and early 20th-century melodrama – you know, the sort of vulgarity and gaudiness of effects-based melodrama and spectacular and populist theatre. So drama as a subject area appeared during this moment of hegemony of literary minimalism and modernism. As a result of that, there weren't really any sort of founding principles or discourses within Theatre Studies or Drama that dealt with what sound and – indeed scenography more broadly – was and contributed to the transactions of theatre and drama: between artists and



audience, and within that whole sort of construct of what theatre is as a cultural event. It just really – there wasn't much there.

I started to address this necessity when I started teaching sound in the early 1990s, having been a composer and sound designer working in the 1980s during that moment when so-called 'designer theatre' at the time was fashionable, when in broader culture there was this sort of return of Romanticism – people talked of 'New Romantics' and it tended to describe this moment of gender-fluid fashion. But I think there's a broader moment where the arts were returning to figuration, Romanticism, the music video as well was being held up as this sort of new contemporary artform when MTV burst on the scene. And sound and music and a lot of those things that have been associated with melodrama and spectacular and populist theatricality in the 19th century and earlier 20th century started to become of interest again. And there was a clear link to me between that 'theatrical turn', as I call it in the book, and what has been described as a 'sonic turn' in the humanities generally, but in theatre practices more specifically. So that interested me. As a teacher I had to construct a reading list and all those kinds of things to teach the subject of theatre sound within a degree framework. I couldn't just perpetuate the technical how-to-do-it books of the traditional drama school diplomas, so I had to reach out into areas of – other areas of social science and musicology, and even sort of like hippie, New Age discourses around a lot of those Romantic and quite problematically Western ideas of mystic, Eastern, ambient sound and holistic experience. I'd just reach out and bring bits of that into constructing this theoretical framework for theatre sound – and also to formulate a dramaturgy of theatre sound. So I started doing all that. A lot of that was in my first book [Brown 2010], which was a kind of reader but with quite a sort of hefty monologue, monography through-line from me and a number of different articles around it at the time, and a number of conferences that also sort of kicked off, I think, this broader discourse. You got people like Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner [2011] starting to also write about these themes through having been involved in some of the conferences and things that I'd started to instigate during that period. So I wanted to return to a lot of that, I think probably in light of the fact that this has now become a much bigger discourse than the very lonely furrow I was ploughing in the '90s, I was the only full-time theatre academic in theatre sound for a very long time – becoming a much bigger thing.

I wanted to return to that: I wanted to do a monograph as opposed to something that drew on other readings, and I also wanted to tell a story. I didn't want it to be a book that was too purely academic in its tone, like an extended PhD thesis. I wanted it to tell a story, for reasons that actually related to the theme of the book. So I wanted to pull together a lot of the research I'd been doing into things like the Picturesque Movement in the late 18th century and 19th century, which I think was a far more pertinent expression of Romanticism. I think Romanticism had been talked about a lot in theories of scenography in the 19th century, like Appia's theory of theatre and the art of production and taking musical analogies for theatre, and musical analogies for aesthetics. And I wanted to look at the more populist and quite frankly unfashionable dimensions of the history of the senses and sensory knowledge, if you like, sensory epistemology.

[00:09:33] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

I really wanted to take as a starting point some of the unfashionable aspects of theatre sound and theatre generally that had kind of been shunned by those 20th century discourses that liked to focus on the avant-garde, liked to focus on a history of theatre that kind of fitted with a history of modernism in the other arts – in the fine arts or music or architecture, and had sort of eschewed a lot of the populist history of theatre as a popular artform, that until cinema and radio came along – which I deal with in the book in the second half – theatre was the closest that there was really to a mass medium, a mass live medium that people went to in large numbers. So I wanted to really engage with that history.



[00:10:43] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

I wanted to contribute to the field of knowledge, a counter argument to theories of the 'sonic turn' which you know, there have been a number of people – both within Theatre Studies and Drama and Performance discourses, but also more broadly within the Social Sciences, the Humanities – who've looked at this sonic turn as a different way, considering aurality and resonance as different ways of approaching knowledge and understanding to that very ocular-centric, logic-based Cartesian history. And there'd been a lot of quite convenient overlooking of the fact that hearing, sound, resonance has featured in the history of modern thinking: from Boethius and classical theories of music and being – ontology, through the Renaissance and actually through the Enlightenment as well. There's a rather convenient correlation that's often made between the hegemony of reason and logic and the hegemony of vision and seeing, and the written word and the diagram and the visualised schematic and understanding that – I think even through the history of Cartesian sort of logic and reason – has actually been countered by certain underpinnings actually of resonance. For example, the idea of the liberal arts, the construct of the quadrivium and the trivium places music – and by music in that liberal arts hierarchy of knowledge, music is up there with maths and other ways of understanding metaphysics as well as physics. It's up there at a higher level than logic and rhetoric. So it's a fundamental part of the structure of knowledge in Western thought that a musical and aural way of understanding being and the universe, is a higher, more profound way of understanding than trivial logic. And that's actually part of the fundamental structure of the liberal arts curriculum that came together under Charlemagne in the Middle Ages, in the Dark Ages, as they're unfashionably referred to now. So I wanted to counter that way of thinking, that sound had been absent from that. I also wanted to redress that balance that tended to concentrate on the avant-garde, and I think particularly, if you look at some of the theories of postdramatic theatre, I think there's over-emphasis on the correlation between the ways in which material theatricality – so the use of effects, and I unapologetically put the word 'effects' back on the table and counter this insistence that we talk about 'affect' and not 'effect' all the time. So putting back onto the table the idea that there is a dramaturgy of theatricality itself: that theatricality is part of the meaning of what's happening. And I think that if you look at recent theories to do with the postdramatic, they came as much out of things like that MTV video art moment in the '80s as they did from the avant-garde cabarets, and Dada, and surrealist noise poetry and things in the earlier part of the century. So provocatively perhaps I also wanted to talk about 'effect' and not 'affect', I wanted to talk about popular theatre, popular radio and popular cinema, as well as avant-garde theatre. I wanted to quite provocatively make that the basis of what I was doing what I was contributing back to the field, just to try and rebalance the discourse.

[00:15:50] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?

It's a fairly sort of traditional structure, I suppose, in that I start with a recap of the field. So that's in the preface – and I'm in that a little bit. So just to try and get over that academic convention of not talking too much about oneself, because I think there was a correlation between this discourse, certainly in the UK, and what we were doing at Central and through the London Theatre Seminar and TaPRA in the early days, those discourses that we were starting. So I recap the field, and then I kind of set out the basis of a theory in the first half of the book. So the first half of the book deals with theory and then the second half of the book goes back and takes a historical narrative, which looks at Victorian or 19th century popular entertainment, melodrama, looks at the Picturesque Movement and entertainments that were associated with the Picturesque and the Gothic. So there's a pleasure garden near me, an old ruin of one called Beulah Spa, which was a designed experience here in Crystal Palace that I used as a motif, partly because I was writing this book actually on an audio recorder quite often while I was walking the dog around here and in the ruins of Crystal Palace Park where again – this whole thing came out of that 19th century curated Picturesque experience that had roots in the theatre of the 18th century. So the second half of the book takes that historical narrative through from Garrick and, to a certain extent, Diderot and that pictorial shift where theatre became to do with presented tableaux within a pictorial frame and a lot of the cultural activities that are



associated with that new pictorialism, that I think took theatre as its model actually. I think – the Picturesque Movement, which is really about sketching and painting the landscape or taking deliberately curated, aesthetic walks in the countryside and finding views of the countryside that were framed and that encapsulated a theatricalised view of the world: taking the world, the environment as scenery. And I use a poem, a late 18th century poem as a motif where the word ‘scenery’ as applied to the natural environment is first used, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* etymology of the word ‘scenery’. So I take that, and then I lead that through a history of melodrama to a point where that starts to then become tangled up with psychoanalysis and symbolism and the picturesque of delusions and ghosts and, you know, the unstable mind, which then leaches into this gothic horror, the horror movie, and then in through radio and hence back to the starting point, which is the present day and the immersive theatres of the present day. Involving headphones and those kinds of things. So I take that arc, but the first part of the book constructs a theory that recaps some of the things that I’d written about previously.

The key chapter is one that’s called ‘The god sound’ that takes a lot of the metaphors of what sound is, both metaphorically, but also just as an assumption that there is a thing called sound. And again one of the sort of provocative starting points for me is the assertion that there is no such thing as sound: sound is entirely a theoretical construct; what there are, are sounds, actual event objects. But the idea that there is a field that is stretched between these effects – these effects of kinetic incidents – that there is a thing called sound, is actually a narrative construct, a story that we tell ourselves, for all sorts of reasons that I go into: that there is a compulsion to deny the multiplicity of experience and to construct a holistic singular totality to it, and I think that’s really key.

So the first half of the book deals with that, it deals with what I call the ‘audimus’, the ‘we hear’, which is, if you like, a social contract between hearers that establishes – and it’s culturally-specific, I think, it’s to do with our time and communities, and it’s to do with our sense of us and our sense of other beyond the boundaries of that ‘us’. So the ways in which we hear and the ways in which that ‘audimus’, that first person plural construct actually renders things audible and renders things inaudible. I deal with that. I deal with a lot of the more problematic narratives around sound’s mysticism and holistic-ness, McLuhan and Ong, and I also deal with some of the precepts of sound studies like the ‘audiovisual litany’ from Jonathan Sterne [2004] that encapsulates a lot of this.

I then get into the notion of sonic space itself. And I think this a key theme of the book too, which I wanted to contribute back to this discourse, which is that our understanding of this, I would argue, sort of non-existent but – well it exists – but this narrative construct of sound is predicated obviously on sonic practices like sound design or acting or performing or playing musical instruments, but it’s also predicated on the meta-narratives around sound. So it’s predicated on a lot of these things like the various notions of a ‘god sound’, of this singularised construct, but also on the technologies. It is predicated a lot on advertising, the marketing of sound kit, public perceptions of ‘hi fi’, public perceptions of what sound is. A lot of people will still think: ‘Oh, sound. Well, that’s to do with knobs and wires and speakers’, and rather than deny that I wanted to try and admit that into the equation. So when you go to the theatre or some other kind of performance event, and you are minded to think about the sound as something to critique or something to engage with or you see a credit that says ‘Sound by...’ in the programme the thing that you’re thinking of when you’re critiquing or responding to the ‘sound’ will be the practices, will be the way in which the auditorium’s constructed, but also all those little metanarratives about the kit, about what constitutes quality, what constitutes good and bad, a lot of which have been fed through advertising, through this capitalist machine. And they’re also inscribed with a lot of ‘we’ and ‘them’ and ‘us’ and ‘other’, and they’re quite sexist – I think there’s a real gendered underpinning there to understanding what sound is, because a lot of the marketing of audio products since the ‘30s – funnily enough, the late 18th-century ideas of the picturesque of sound were not that. Actually, a lot of the Picturesque Movement was led by women. But certainly I think when the latter-day picturesque of sound, when it became about hi fi equipment and became about the records that were made to showcase hi fi equipment, were very overtly marketed at men and excluded women. And I think that a lot of those histories are still present actually in the ways in which – I hear this a lot, even at Central. When people talk about sound they’ll talk about it as something that’s technical and people will say: ‘I don’t understand sound because it’s technical.’ And



there's a gendered underpinning to that – they'll look at the men in the room, and it's like: 'Well, I don't understand sound, because it's got all these wires and all of that history attached to it which wasn't my history.' I really wanted to get that into the discourse as well, really wanted to get opening that up and get people talking about that.

[00:25:35] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

Enjoyable, in the sense that you can see I'm getting excited about it now [*laughing*] – they're ideas that excite me. Difficult, because I sort of pitched this idea and then just trying to find a coherent way of leading the reader through such a huge load of ideas – I wanted to get everything in it, from my own childhood encounters with sound because that's the only way I can really start to explain what I mean about some of these god narratives which I encountered, through Saturday morning pictures and watching American cartoons and silent films that have been dubbed or European TV melodramas that have been dubbed and the voices didn't match the mouths moving and how that made me feel weird. And then, you know, things like pirate radio and the Beatles. I had to take a personal narrative through that. Then I also wanted to get into the theory, and I wanted to bring in Serres and Rancière and Lefebvre and some of these theorists that could situate this personal narrative – and then I wanted to go into this history. And I only had 85,000 words!

And the way I write isn't particularly structured: I don't map the book out all in advance and then just fill the gaps in, which I know is the way that some people are taught to write – I do tend to just start writing and then go through a million drafts. So I had a sabbatical that lasted from the end of the autumn term – it started over Christmas through to the end of the Easter holiday, so like a traditional Central sabbatical of a term plus the two holidays at either end of it. And I kind of went nuts! It was quite stressful. Everyone said: 'Oh, I hope you enjoyed your sabbatical', but I really went down a rabbit hole – multiple rabbit holes – just trying to make sense of all this stuff.

And as I said, I use this methodology of my phone and this recording app to write ideas down, then transcribing them and trying to weave them together. I had amassed quite a lot of research, downloaded PDFs, and books that I was referring to. So I didn't do a lot of new library research – I was working with a whole lot of stuff that I'd amassed over the last five or six years, but that was quite intensive. Yeah, so it was... [*Laughing*] It wasn't easy! But then again, I don't think it ever is. And I don't think it's supposed to be easy, really, to give birth to a book like this.

[00:28:54] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

I think the key chapter... You know, if somebody said to me: 'Which chapter would you want somebody to just pull out of that book and put into a reader on its own?', I would probably say – although this might just be me dipping back into the book this morning – the chapter on 'the god sound'. Because I think that kind of explains what I mean by there being no such thing as sound and how sound is a narrative construct. The rest of the book in various ways just spins that out in lots of examples of the narrative construct, this sort of diegetic nature of sound and actually the diegetic way in which sound is used in theatre, both in melodrama and in more modern post-dramatic or designed scenography based theatre.

So I would say probably the neatest chapter, the chapter where I think I tie a lot of theories and my own ideas together, quite succinctly, is probably that – 'The god sound'. Which starts with a sort of platonic dialogue, a fictional seminar – so it starts in dialogue form, with a conversation, which actually had its roots in a real seminar that I ran. I did this MA Aurality unit at Central every year, where I will often have a seminar on 'What is sound?' And it kind of started with that, but I've fictionalised it and kind of spun it out a bit. So yeah, I'd say 'The god sound'.

[00:30:40 to 00:37:27] 'Writing Sound Effect' (2020) an audio experiment composed from voice memos and piano music by Ross Brown



Clips Summary

'Writing Sound Effect' (2020) an audio experiment composed from voice memos and piano music by Ross Brown

Works Cited

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Audio available at www.auralia.space/library3-rossbrown/.

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