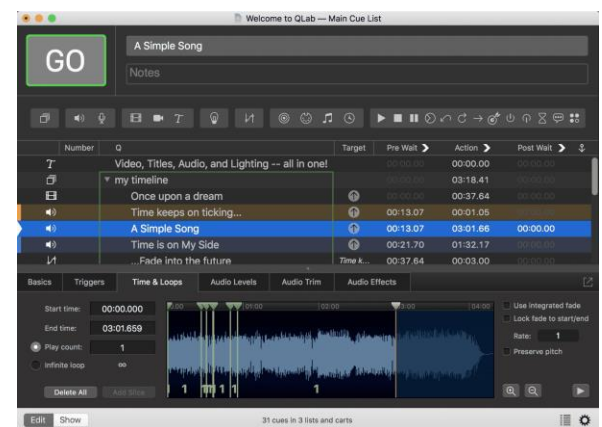# Theatre People: Sound Designer

Sound designers are responsible for the sonic world of a play. According to the Associated Designers of Canada, sound designers are responsible for sound effects, speaker placement, and mic-ing actors if it is needed. However, sound design often also ends up including elements of music (composing, recording, working with musicians, making beats on a laptop etc.) and music direction (writing or learning songs for a show and teaching actors to sing and/or play them). Every job is different!

There are many ways to get into sound design, and just as many ways to specialize your skills. Some sound designers go to audio engineering school, some were or are also musicians (classical, pop, folk, etc, literally any genre), some were theatre kids who worked on a show that needed some sound and just figured it out. Sound designers are hired by a theatre on a contract basis for a particular show, and many do other sound-related jobs between productions such as composing or sound designing for film, working on video games, making music for dance, or playing in bands.

It's important to talk to directors and producers early on about what they are expecting from you as a sound designer, so you can make sure that your skills are a good match for the job. Something very fun about sound design is that often jobs will require just a little bit of knowledge you don't necessarily have, and can be a great opportunity to expand your skills! No matter your background, and no matter the gig, sound designers get to use sound to help shape an audience's experience of a show.

Tasks and activities in a typical day

- Reading and analysing the script, noting where a playwright has made specific sound suggestions, and imagining what sorts of sounds will fit the themes and world of the play.
- Meeting and talking with directors about their vision for the play. *Hamlet* set in a disco club means the sound design will be really different than if we are setting it in medieval Denmark!
- Making or finding music for a show. This could be as simple as making a playlist of songs from iTunes and sound effects from YouTube that fit the mood of a play and then playing parts of them during scenes, or creating all of the sounds and music yourself! Depending on the theatre and the show, sound designers must also be aware of when copyrights apply to sound they want to use and make sure that the theatre knows to get permission.
- Working with technical directors and crew members to decide where to hang speakers and what kinds of microphones to use.
- Communicating with actors. Because in most plays actors are speaking lines, moving around, interacting with props, and therefore creating sound, there's a surprising amount of overlap between the craft of acting and sound design! We are collaborators in creating the sound of the play. Actors should know about the sound designer's inspirations and ideas early on, and ideally should have the chance to practice with early drafts of sounds during rehearsals.

QLab is an example of software that lets a designer edit sounds and make a cue list for playback.

- Communicating with stage management. Stage managers are responsible for running the show once there is an audience. They must know exactly when each sound cue is played, and how (For example, will sounds be on a Spotify playlist, or programmed using specialized theatre software?).

Theatre People: Sound Designer

5 skills that a sound designer uses:

- Creativity: you will have a unique perspective on the story that is being told. A lot of theatre is about creative problem solving, and your particular experiences and knowledge might end up holding the key!
- Listening: to the balance and quality of different sounds in the theatre, and to your collaborators.
- Reading: understanding the themes, story, and arc of a play is crucial to good sound design.
- Communication: truly the biggest part of the job. Your sound design will always be improved by talking with other designers, directors, actors, and other members of the creative team about artistic visions.
- And of course, creating, effecting, and mixing sounds!

In *It's A Wonderful Life*, sound designer John Gzowski used Foley techniques make sound onstage. He worked with the set to use microphones that looked period, but had modern functions. (Set and costumes: Michael Gianfrancesco; lighting Hugh Conacher)

Building Abilities

There are probably lots of things you are already doing, and things you can start to do, that will serve you as a sound designer. Some of these are:

- Spend time with theatre people. Theatre is a collaborative art form, and you're going to need people to make and talk about your work with!
- Go see live theatre as much as you can. Many theatres offer free tickets in exchange for volunteering your time as an usher, and/or have discounted tickets for young people. Get in touch through websites and social media to find out! This is also a great way to meet people and get a feel for the theatre world.
- Explore free software to start manipulating and creating sounds. You can learn technical skills needed to make, effect, and mix audio on your own by consulting tutorials on Youtube or software websites. There is a lot of free music software, from full on audio editors for computers (like Garageband, Reaper, and Audacity) to music-making apps for phones and tablets. Even the basic version of Qlab, the standard industry software for playing back audio, is free to download on a Mac.
- Make and shape sound: learn an instrument, play with others, do sound for your friend's band, sing in the shower – anything can be good practice!
- Listen: to lots of different kinds of music, to the sound in video games and movies and TikToks, to the sounds of the city, classroom, doing the dishes – sound is all around, all the time. Listening to the world is the best sound design school you could go to.

Sound designers choose types of microphones and where to place them on actors, working costumes for the right look. Tara Jackson in *The Color Purple* had a mic on her forehead, and Lauren Bowler's was on her jaw in *Matilda*. Photos: Ian Jackson, Dylan Hewlett.