

Exploring a Theatre of Sounds

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the element of sound design in theatre and seeks to explore how the concept of *theatre* itself might get reconfigured through contemporary experiments in sound-centric performance.

Sound & Fury is a London-based theatre group that works on 'developing the sound space of theatre and presenting the audience with new ways of experiencing performance and stories by heightening the aural sense'. (*Sound & Fury Website*) Through an analysis of their sound-centric performances like *War Music* and *Watery part of the World*, the paper addresses the question of whether theatre can exist as an aural experience and whether there can exist a *theatre of sounds*.

By analysing the work of Indian theatre director B.V. Karanth, the paper also seeks to explore the concept of a *sound-centric language* in theatre.

While sound has been an integral constituent of the experience of theatre, it has been peripheral and subordinate to the text, body and spectacle in theatre. While numerous experiments with sound have been done in theatre that have relocated it at the centre of the theatre nucleus, the question still remains of how the language of theatre can be expanded or evolved or adapted to create a unique sound-centric form of theatre.

'A voice comes to one in the dark.

Imagine.'

Samuel Beckett (1980)

It is exactly this power of the aural, its role and impact in theatre that this paper seeks to explore. This paper is an exploration into an alternative lens of viewing, signifying and articulating in and about theatre; an exploration that involves re-situating the element of sound in theatre that might also lead to a possible reconfiguration of the inter-relationship between different elements of theatre. Through this exploration into open-ended territories of speculation, I intend to throw up certain questions on the element of sound as a constituent of the language of theatre, whether a sound-centric language can be one of the languages of theatre and how theatre can be articulated and experienced through this language.

Sound in theatre/Sound as theatre

The nucleus of theatre is usually the dramatic text, the actor's body or the visual spectacle.

Sound in theatre can be voice, music or sound effects. In most cases, sound in theatre operates as an auxiliary that heightens the effect or emphasizes this nucleus of the text, body or the spectacle. In this sense it plays a subordinate and supporting role to the central event in theatre. John A. Leonard addresses this situation in his book *Theatre Sound* (2001) when he cites the experiences of sound designers and the constant friction between the potential and power of sound design and its usual subordination to text, body and spectacle that produces a lacuna in the realisation of that potential.

'Now that there is a recognized role for the sound designer in the creative team, a very real danger exists that we will try to make our presence felt. In doing so, we can create a situation in which, instead of adding to the production as a whole, we provide a distraction, making the work of the actors, writers and director far more difficult. [...] Although the type of recording

and replay equipment that we have at our disposal and the resulting techniques in effects creation and sound reinforcement have changed radically, the fundamental purpose of theatre sound has changed very little.' (Leonard 2001, p. 2)

So then, the question to be addressed is that if sound design has the potential to take on a more powerful role, how can that happen without dislocating the language of theatre? If the *fundamental purpose* of theatre sound undergoes a change, how would that alter its relationship with other elements of theatre and could an alternative theatre language be unearthed then? If sound in theatre relocates from the periphery to the centre, would it still remain within the boundary of theatre?

In order to observe sound as a central object of study, if we make a paradigm shift from looking at sound in theatre to sound as theatre in itself, what does it yield? Within theatre, sound creates and inhabits different spaces like the acoustic space (the area over which a sound signal may be heard), the dramatic space (the space-time created for the spectators) etc. Theatre takes place in a space. The theatre (the structure where plays are performed) is a space itself. The theatre space is divided into different spaces – performance space, audience space, etc. For sound to occur, to be performed, a similar abstract space is required. The space of the auditory world would in fact be equated to time. Within the auditory space, exactly where a certain sound is located is defined in terms of its *time of occurrence* within the composition. Therefore, the space that a particular sound inhabits in the auditory space is its time of occurrence within the entire timeframe of the composition. The emptiness of space is an absence of matter. In the auditory space, emptiness would be an absence of sound. The empty space can therefore be equated to silence. As empty space transforms into a 'bare stage' where the 'act of theatre' (Brook 1995) takes place¹, similarly silence reifies the stage of

sound-theatre. If silence is the space within which sound occurs, the composition, i.e. the arrangement and order of sounds forms the text. The intensity, pitch, tone, volume, and dimension of sound would give the *sound body* performativity and movement vocabulary. The encompassing sound environment would form the scenography and the elements of voice, music, noise and sound effects produce this comprehensive soundscape.

The objective of this short foray into this theatre of sound was to view and analyse sound through the elements of theatre. Now as an element of theatre, can sound design take on a central space in theatre and create a soundscape-scenography, language-less text and an aural spectacle that configures a Theatre of Sounds?

A sound-centric language

'The theater, which is in no thing, but makes use of everything – gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness – rediscovers itself at precisely the point where the mind requires a language to express its manifestations [...]. To break through language in order to touch life is to create or recreate the theatre.' (Artaud 1938)

An investigation into sound-centric performance is a search for an alternative theatrical method that re-situates and rediscovers sound within the matrix of theatre elements and expands the matrix of possibilities of recreating and re-inventing theatre.

One of the earliest arrangements that led to an alternative mode of engaging with theatre through sound was in 1881 in Paris when it became possible to listen to theatre performances over the telephone. This arrangement was called the 'theatophone'.

This was perhaps the first time a live performance was mediated (through the telephone) and theatre was experienced primarily through sound. This was also a

precursor to audio theatre which was to come in a big way with radio later.

'The most popular feature of the Paris Exposition Internationale d'Electricite of 1881 was such an arrangement, variously described as the theatophone and the electrophone. From August to November crowds queued up three evenings a week before two rooms, each containing ten pairs of headsets, in the Palais d'Industrie. In one, listeners heard live performances of the Opera transmitted through microphones arranged on either side of the prompter's box. In the other, they heard plays from the Theatre Francais through ten microphones placed at the front of the stage near the footlights. Not only were the voices of the actors, actresses, and singers heard in this manner, but also the instruments of the orchestra, the applause and laughter of the audience – and, alas! The voice of the prompter too.' (Marvin 1990, p. 209)

In this case, the theatre performance was not altered or recreated or adapted for the theatophone, however, the reception and experience of theatre for the theatophone-using audience was an alternative re-construction of the actual event.

At the other end of the spectrum, a number of contemporary theatre performances attempt to recreate the auditory space of theatre. *Sound & Fury* is a London-based theatre group that works on 'developing the sound space of theatre and presenting the audience with new ways of experiencing performance and stories by heightening the aural sense.' (Sound & Fury Website) Their productions *War Music* and *Watery part of the World* were staged in complete darkness with surround-sound effects, occasional low level lighting, live and recorded sound interaction and hi-tech sound design, aimed at creating scenes within the *mind's eye*.

This raises a fundamental question of what is theatre? Can sound-centric performance claim to be a legitimate language of theatre? How would this form of theatre be different from radio drama?

Willmar Sauter (2000) elaborates on the concept of the ‘theatrical event’ as a communicative encounter between performer and spectator².

The interaction between recorded sounds, live bodies and actual-time produced sounds gives a theatrical presence or theatrical event-ness to sound-centric performance that clearly distinguishes it from the scheme of sonic art and radio drama. This materiality of *liveness* of sound-centric performance places it distinctly in theatre as opposed to radio drama. Ironically, the term *live* was first used in the context of radio, in the BBC Yearbook for 1934. Philip Auslander (1999, p. 59) argues that the term *live* was in fact necessitated by the ambiguity of *live* and recorded elements in radio that put this distinction into a state of crisis. Apart from the other elements of theatre, a sound-centric performance of the kind cited above also makes use of both recorded and *live* sounds. However, in this case the *liveness* is not just the actual, instantaneous production of performance, but the reality of the ‘theatrical event’.

Theatre critic Madeleine North described the experience of *Sound & Fury’s War Music* in the following words:

‘In essence, War Music is simply a recitation by five actors – four men and one woman. Yet it feels nothing like a poetry reading. Suffused with sound effects – both pre-recorded and live – and performed in immediate proximity to the audience, it is theatre at its most potently intimate. Actors whisper into microphones, or boom battle cries inches from your head; water trickles almost imperceptibly behind the undulating voices and a fleet of chariots thunders overhead, the noise all-consuming and sharp as the blade which slices audibly through Lycon’s neck, leaving the head dangling by “a skein of flesh”. It is, curiously, an experience of sensory deprivation which simultaneously heightens the senses. In this respect, War Music is utterly unlike a radio play, which doesn’t demand the listener’s undivided attention or bombard its audience with aural stimuli. It is the theatrical equivalent

of listening to music through headphones instead of speakers.’ (North 2000)

The reception and experience of radio drama is similar to a story-telling session where the audience remains outside the event, while a sound-centric performance places the audience as the observer in the midst of action. Apart from the ‘bombardment with aural stimuli’, it is the liveness of the theatrical event that clearly distinguishes sound-centric theatre from radio drama.

It is significant that audio theatre reached its peak through the medium of radio. Its potent reach and effect is illustrated by the classic example of the *War of the Worlds*. This historic dramatised radio version of H.G. Wells’ novella, directed by Orson Welles, sent a wave of terror and hysteria through masses as they tuned in and believed that the Martians had indeed invaded the country³. This historic broadcast on CBS (Columbia broadcasting system) radio network was a precursor to the power, reach and impact of radio and audio theatre. It is interesting that the historic broadcast was re-created by the Saratoga International Theater Institute (SITI) Company 70 years later through a stage play. *War of the Worlds: The Radio Play*, written by Naomi Iizuka and directed by Anne Bogart, captured the improvisational character of radio theatre and looked at media manipulation of audiences. While the original radio event was a staged Halloween prank for the radio listeners, the staging of that historic radio event as a play de-mystifies the grandeur of that broadcast by going behind the scenes to dramatise how the event was actually created. It also brings forth a dialogue between the two genres of performance – the stage play and the radio drama.

In a similar play-within-a-play format, SITI Company also produced a sound-centric, adapted version of Shakespeare’s Macbeth. Interestingly, the radio play genre was again invoked in this production called *Radio Macbeth* where a group of actors gather in a

broken down theatre to rehearse for a radio production of Macbeth. Using the trope of radio drama, a sound-centric version of Macbeth was explored where controlling the sound meant controlling the world of the play. Through this cross-fertilisation of genres, the two productions inverted equations of audience reception. While the theatre audience focused on listening to the play, it enabled the radio audience to see the making of the drama. By re-interpreting the sound design as a key to revealing the essence of the play, sound was re-situated as the nucleus of theatre.

Another unique and historic production of Macbeth was by Indian theatre legend B.V. Karanth. In this production he adapted Macbeth into the idiom of *Yakshagana*. This was a National School of Drama production, in a new verse translation titled *Barnam Van* by the Hindi poet Raghuvir Sahai. The traditional dance-drama form of Karnataka (*Yakshagana*) was employed with its characteristic emphasis on song, percussion, dance and gestural interpretation.

As a director, actor and musician in theatre, Karanth re-interpreted sound in theatre by re-configuring the interrelationship between song, language, music and sounds. His musical innovations in theatre involved the composition of unique music scores with an eclectic blend of classical and traditional forms interwoven with everyday sounds and noises and using music as a primary device and as a 'prose of theatre'⁴.

By emphasizing on the rhythm of a particular language, rather than the meaning of the words in the text, he investigated the *sound* of a language and how that could be used to articulate meanings. For instance, he pointed out that

'Bengali has a three-beat rhythm . . . *ekla chalo re ekla chalo re* . . . 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Hindi has a four-beat rhythm: *Raghukula reet sada chali ayee* 1-2-3-4, 1-

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2-3-4. 1-2-3-4. Kannada has five beats: *Yen aadu ru maadu thirutamma taka tikita taka tikita* 1-2-3-4-5. Punjabi, like Hindi has four beats, but while the stress in Hindi is on the first beat, in Punjabi it is on the second: *Uhu uhoon uhu uhoon balle balle balle balle*.' (Karanth in an Interview, Dhiman 2000)

In this way he equated language with music and used language as music rather than text. Another example of this language-as-music analogy is Karanth's use of *mantra* (chants) and *gaali* (swear words). He considered both important tools in using language as music. While *mantra* expresses a certain mystery in language, *gaali* gives force to language. He used both these elements in terms of how they sound rather than what they mean and in this sense he attempted to create a *sound-centric language*.

Secondly, Karanth developed the concept of *Sound-patterns* as a kind of stage music device. Using everyday sounds to compose a stage music score, he created a soundscape to bring out the inner essence of the script and characters by directly inscribing their socio-cultural sonic palette into the music score.

'In songs and other forms of music, words are of prime importance, not so in sound-patterns where we hardly use words, poetry and formal music. Our life is full of sounds, although we do not usually notice it. The cacophony of traffic, the chirping of bids, ticking of the clock and so on. A milk man sells milk using his own sound-patterns, a newsvendor sells newspapers using his distinct sound-patterns, using blow horns or whistles. I actually got this idea from my experiences at railway stations. And these sounds have a very strong relationship with life. I decided to use these sounds to enhance the dramatic impact in plays. For example, in one of the scenes in a play, the tyranny of a villain was brought out with great impact by using the sounds of a chandelier. The effect would have diluted had we used songs or poetry.' (Ibid.)

He built upon the same concept of sound-pattern when he composed using a 25-piece orchestra of household

objects (used as instruments) during his work at Rangayan – an institute established by the Karnataka Government to promote theatre. This theatrical and musical experiment profoundly reverberates Italian futurist composer Luigi Russolo's manifesto written in 1913 where he argued for an alternative sonic palette of natural, technology-produced and man-made sounds, to produce music out of *noise* and to

'substitute for the limited variety of timbres that the orchestra possesses today, the infinite variety of timbres in noises, reproduced with appropriate mechanisms.'⁵ (Russolo 1913)

It is this significant exploration into the elements of sound, involving a re-examination of the concepts and relation between song, language, music and noise that re-situates sound within the larger universe of theatre. When this network of the elements of sounds undergoes an intrinsic mutation where language is music, words are sounds and noise is orchestrated, sound can be experienced as a language of theatre and a language in theatre.

Theatre as a sound experience

The audience reception of sound-centric performance is quite unique. For a degree of technological sophistication and the desired effect, it was important to use headphones in the case of *Sound & Fury* productions. How would that change the texture of the theatre experience? In this case, the members of the audience get isolated from each other the moment they put on the headphones. However, a different relation is established with the performance itself since the headphones take the audience onto the stage by placing them in the midst of the happenings through the sound universe. This effectively breaks the *fourth wall* and creates new acoustic, dramatic and imagined spaces within theatre.

Secondly, as in the *Sound & Fury* example, if the play is staged in complete darkness, how are scenes actually created? If we try to understand this through the phenomenology of the blind, the mind's eye as earlier mentioned, creates an audio-image, which could be considered the *spectacle* in this form of aural theatre, yet this spectacle is unique and different for each member of the audience. In this respect, the essential function of the soundscape and its differentiation from the function of the text and the spectacle is important to recognise the scope, significance and expression of sound-centric theatre.

'The soundscape attains its highest and most effective purpose when it serves a very critical and singular function. That function is clearly:

The soundscape makes us feel a certain way about the world we are experiencing. Whether we employ stylistic devices such as the illusion of realism or not, we are most certainly destined to succeed if we focus our sonic energies on manipulating the emotional state of the theatre audience. Let the meaning of the words and the visual signs communicate the intellectual ideas. They are much better at that. Begin by focusing the sound on manipulating the emotions of the audience.'⁶ (Thomas 2000)

The theatre of sounds is an emotional, intimate, powerful theatre. It is the theatre of screams, whispers, words and silence.

While its source is grounded in the organic drama within the play, as a mode of expression and manifestation it can fly into virtual worlds and imagined spaces, seeking a language beyond language. Like the voice, that resides within, in the innermost recesses of our being and becomes the agent of articulation, expression and manifestation of thoughts and emotions, sound can reveal itself as the inner being of theatre, the spirit that theatre is.

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- ¹ This is a reference to Peter Brook's widely quoted opening lines from *The Empty Space* (1995): 'I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all I need for an act of theatre to be engaged.'
- ² Willmar Sauter introduces his concept of the theatrical event and through the book he analyses the process of theatre and interaction between the performers and spectators – 'Theatre does not exist as physical reality unless it is an event including both performer and spectator. We can, of course, speak of theatre, remember it or plan it, make it part of the ongoing discourse, but as actual experience, I think it is useful to conceive of it as a theatrical event.' Sauter (2000) *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception*. University of Iowa Press, p. 6
- ³ *The War of the Worlds* was an episode of the American radio drama anthology series Mercury Theatre on the Air. It was performed as a Halloween episode of the series on October 30, 1938 and aired over the Columbia Broadcasting System radio network. Directed and narrated by Orson Welles, the episode was an adaptation of H. G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds*. The first part of the 60-minute broadcast was presented as a series of simulated news bulletins, which made many listeners believe that an actual Martian invasion was in progress.
- ⁴ Stage artist and theatre critic Lakshmi Chandrashekhar pointed out about Karanth's music in theatre – 'His plays were less famous for design as for the brilliance of their musical content, which became part of the prose of theatre.' From an interview to Parvathi Menon; 'A genius of theatre' *Frontline* 19 (20), October 12-25, 2002.
- ⁵ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises* (*L'arte dei Rumori*); This is a Futurist manifesto, written by Russolo in a letter to Futurist composer Francesco Balilla Pratella. In the manifesto he discusses the origin of man-made sounds and the future of music, composition and orchestration. http://120years.net/machines/futurist/art_of_noise.html (accessed 27/04/09)
- ⁶ The Function of the Soundscape; Richard K. Thomas, Originally presented at the 2000 OISTAT Scenography Symposium, August 21, 2000, Bregenz, Austria; <http://www.richmondsounddesign.com/docs/soundscapes-td-t.doc>