

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Ross Brown – interview transcript

Interviewer: Emma Johnston

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Sound-designer. Samuel Beckett; development of sound design as a profession; musicals; National Theatre sound-design; role of sound-designer; salaries; sound in plays; symbolists; technical requirements of sound-design.

EJ: First of all, I want to ask you what your general perception of sound design is; what sound design lends to a theatre production, like, relating to straight sound design rather than musical theatre?

RB: OK. That's a huge question. I think sound design has always been there, you know, going right back to the very earliest forms of theatre, but was just regarded as part of the – you know - *mise en scène*: it was part of what everybody was involved in, putting the production on. Did you know they created sound effects - where sound effects were needed - by them using their voices, or using some sort of kinetic means, thunder sheets or just props and objects? It was only really, I think, with the advent of new technologies, recording technologies and playback technologies, and as a bi-product of modernism and possibly the cinema, that the notion of designing sound for performance - for plays - really became a discrete entity... it became something that was separate from just the general business of putting on the play. I think recently - by recently I think I probably mean since the mid-sixties, very sort of slow beginnings of sound design, certainly through the seventies - through the work of people like John Leonard at the RSC and in America there was a variety of practitioners like Charlie Richmond who used to work with Francis Coppola, and the Act Theatre in San Francisco, theatre started to experiment with using sound in a more... as a sort of parallel narrative, or part of the stenography, part of the environment. It was a very gradual thing and it wasn't really until I think the eighties and the advent of digital technology, you know, basically the ability to use micro-chip-based computer processing in the playback of sound that it actually became feasible to really start pushing the envelope of sound design, to start really incorporating it and realising its full potential. That happened I guess around '84 if one were to mark the actual year. In this country it tended, I think... the National Theatre sound department was at the vanguard of that, starting to use digital sound and computers, and at that point it became possible to start bringing sound into the rehearsal room. You could have a little mini-studio in the rehearsal room, you could react to ideas that were coming out of the rehearsal process instantly, just by sampling sounds over the microphone, or through the CD player, and then putting them on a keyboard. You instantly had the ability to manipulate that, and directors started to become aware that they could use sound in various ways, some of which were quite familiar already from film use - and the filmic use of sound is quite common amongst directors talking to sound designers - so it was possible, for example, to take a

naturalistic sound, a naturalistic recording of you know... of someone's voice, or an animal, or a musical element or a machine or whatever, and then either pitch it up or down, or loop it or stretch it, so you could sort of start to abstract sound from its environment, remove it from its original location and create something that maybe adds again another dimension to what's happening on stage. So, I mean, this was very much what happened as a result of the digital revolution; sound suddenly became very sort of abstract, and sort-of music concretish in a way. Lots of use of looped and pitched down mechanical noises and animal noises, sort of reminiscent of David Lynchfield, that sort of thing. But of course the use of sound effects was always there as well, and was a very important part of sound design. It's not just about the musicality of sound, and creating sound-scapes and abstract sound sculpture, environments, you know. The art of refining the use of sound effects has always been an important part of sound design, and actually I think that was what originally was developed more by writers than anything, because people like Chekhov really started sort of very purposefully writing in sound effects, writing for sound, you know, the famous wire snapping sounds, and not the wire but with the breaking of the wire sound in *The Cherry Orchard* and then through symbolists, people like Maeterlinck through to people like Pinter. I mean Pinter I think was ironically - because he simply personally hates sound, you know, the use of sound effects, the use of musical sound in theatre - but in a way he sort of wrote the rhythms and the voices and silences and pauses that he started bringing in. Just started, I think generally all these writers started to raise - and Beckett as well - started to raise the consciousness, not just of what was being said and what was being done on the stage, but in a sort of phenomenological way, the way that the audience experienced that; the rhythms and the musicality of the speech was something that was abstract and parallel to what was actually being said, and similarly the sounds of the actions, the percussive sounds, the actors interacting with the set, and the acoustic properties of the set. All these things started I think because of what had happened, because of what those writers had done, and what had also happened to modern music and modern art, which throughout the sort of period of modernism had been quite preoccupied with noise and sound.

EJ: Think about things, the play by Samuel Beckett, so it's basically just about sound design and a few props on the stage...

RB: That's right.

EJ: It seems as if sound design is becoming more important than...

RB: I think it has been, yes exactly. I mean Beckett wrote with sound, I mean you know he wrote *Two Acts Without Words* which were, you know... and if you've ever done or seen those - we actually do them here at Central as a first year project with design students, because you very quickly become aware that, you know, he's described a number of sort of visual scenes and actions, but when you actually stand those up on stage and perform them you also realize that he's designed a sound-scape, you know... So the whole consciousness of sound sort of grew through the 20th century, I think, and nowadays, I think, it's fairly standard. I mean, there's been quite a lot written about it recently, there was I thought a very good article last year in the *Village Voice* in New York, which sort of summed up where we're at now, and also there's quite a few things happened over the last couple of years which are quite key. The National Theatre - who

as I say were at the vanguard of this in the eighties - and people like Paul Ardittie and Scott Myers and Mick Jones who were working in the sound department and sort of playing with samples, and directors like Peter Hall got very interested in using samples in rehearsal room, playing the thunderstorm in Lear. If you remember in Lear with Antony Hopkins - it must've been about '84, I think - it was the first time the sound operator actually was playing the thunderstorm: they actually had thunder claps across a musical keyboard and there was an interaction going on between the actors and the sound operator who was responding, and you know, there was this rhythmic interaction going on there. Now they have just recently - going back to what I was saying - the National Theatre made a policy decision that every show has a credited sound designer, which sounds like a sort of trivial matter but to sound designers that's quite a big deal because it's sort of been a labour of love really. You know, there's not really an established professional role until very recently of sound designers. I mean, there's only been an established developed role of lighting designers since just after the Second World War I think! But up until relatively recently it wasn't a foregone conclusion that you would have a sound designer on the creative team in theatre, but now it's starting to happen that one would expect, you know, almost always to see a sound designer credited; certainly at the National they do it by policy now, every show has a credited sound designer and sound design is starting to get poster credits. These are little things that sound designers have sort of been fighting for to legitimise their craft. They still don't get paid as much as set designers and lighting designers, but that will come. It's all been kind of director driven.

EJ: Do you think it's the case then that directors are starting to trust sound designers more to work on their own and create their own sound-scape, whereas before directors had more control over it?

RB: I think that it's, I mean, market forces apply in theatre whether we like it or not, you know there's no sort of... I think there was a brief period in the eighties, particularly when I used to work for Peter Allbright in the eighties when he just left the National, when there was quite a lot of money sloshing about, but that was partly due to who he was, and the eighties, which were quite affluent, but there's never a lot of spare cash sort of sloshing about for gratuitous sort of experimentation, so I think the very fact that there are professional sound designers now - and there are, there's perhaps probably 20 or 30 working in London who can say they are professionals and they make their living from it. I think that came about through directors demanding it, and I have personally been involved in battles between directors and producers where directors have been saying 'No, we must have this person, we must pay that fee, we must pay to hire that equipment, because it's an important part of what we do' and the producers saying 'Oh, but I've never had to pay for this before on one of my shows'. % % %

EJ: So is it getting better, do you think, the budget limitations?

RB: It is... well it sort of goes up and down according to the economy basically - the theatre economy - and it's still early days, but yes, I think producers - the money people - now understand that this is something that they do have to pay for, they do have to budget in. I was thinking about this just recently, I mean, a lot of people ascribe, you know, the explosion of sound design that happened through the eighties and nineties just to the fact that the technical possibilities were opened up by digital technology. I

don't think it is just that, I think it's also the fact that there is so much sonic context now, because of the filmic use of sound, because of the way that sound has sort of invaded our daily lives in so many different ways, just in terms of the way we are bombarded by sound by the media and you know, the sound-scape at large has just become louder, and more diverse and richer. There's also the whole history of the use of sound that I was referring to, through the modernist writers and modernist artists, so that now actually, directors are aware that there's potentially amusing sound but they need help. In the old days, yes, they would have just been a director who would get the stage manager or a technician to go and find a list of sound effects from the BBC sound effects library, or would get them to go and make those sound effects with a wind machine and a thunder sheet.

EJ: You can get sound effects off the internet though, can't you, if you use online databases and...?

RB: You can get them, yeah, and with these medias machines you just have to get one of those, and go out and get your own, you know, just record your own, which is what most people do.

EJ: Do you think it's mainly to do with this new Technologies Act freeing up time, saving time, giving more time to the...

RB: That's a part of it, yeah. I mean, certainly there was always a frustration when John Leonard, who was probably one of the earliest - I'm not talking about musicals here but, one of the earliest - sound designers working in theatre and plays in this country for the RSC in the seventies. He was obviously able to work in the analogue domain, and he was quite innovative with synthesisers, lots of Revox tape - you know, reel to reel tape machines and big tape loops and that sort of thing - but it was quite slow. If you wanted to edit sound, you had to literally get a razor blade and cut the tape and stick it back together with a piece of tape, and you had to go away to a studio and record stuff.

EJ: You can do more things on site.

RB: You can do things much quicker now, there's a much quicker turnaround...

EJ: Yeah, you don't have to go back to the studio.

RB: And a lot of British theatre-making is predicated on the fact that it's done very quickly. We have a three or four week rehearsal period and then we're on, whereas in other countries, there's a lot bigger... you know, there's a much bigger lead-in.

EJ: You've got to keep changing things as well, haven't you, and adjusting things right up until technical rehearsals and...?

RB: That's right. Exactly! And now you can do that much, much more quickly in the back of the rehearsal room, you know, round the back of the stalls with your laptop and your sampler, so yes that has done a lot, but also, I think, directors just don't feel... they don't have the knowledge, they don't necessarily have the dramaturgical... I think a lot of what sound designers do is dramaturgy. It's about giving the director advice on the sonic context. It's about saying 'Well, yes, we could go for the cricket sound effect back there, but that's a little bit clichéd, what about if we did this?' or 'Yes, what you're suggesting there is quite interesting, but it might be a little bit reminiscent of... I don't know... such and such a composer, or such and such a film-maker', and this has happened not just with sound actually, I think it's happened across the board with theatre that there's far more sensitive expertise now: it used to be the director or the actor manager or whoever who basically made a lot of decisions - well most of the decisions if not all of the decisions unilaterally. You know, they would just point to the lights they wanted to bring up, and the technician would bring them up, and would say to the sound effects person 'I want that sound there, and that sound there' and they'd do it. Now the potential is so much greater, and there's also so much more reference and so much more context, sort of cultural context going on, that they need all these different sort of experts advising them, all these different dramaturges. I don't know if you're familiar with dramaturgy? Dramaturgy, in European theatre, is basically a literary adviser to the director, somebody who advises them on the literary context of the play that the director is staging. Well, I think dramaturgy is not just about literary advice any more, it's about all manner of cultural advice, and that includes sounds. I think a large part of what I do as a sound designer isn't actually making the sound, it's talking to the director, giving them advice, finding concept, you know, finding what we're going to do with the sound that is going to work with the rest of the piece: it's going to work with the set, it's going to work with the central concept that's driving the piece. So it's not just... I think the need for theatre sound didn't just come from - or rather the explosion or proliferation of theatre sound didn't just come from - the fact that it became technically easier, it also I think, to probably a larger extent, came from the fact that directors wanted to do more with sound and they needed expert help to help them do that.

EJ: So, do you think it was the same with other departments as well, such as lighting and costume, they've had more of a say as well?

RB: Yeah I do. I think that those things that happened earlier, because they weren't so predicated on digital technology. I think it's interesting actually, because sound came along - sound design as we know it today was almost from its instigation a post-modern thing, you know, it started happening in around '84 I think, when all the sort of post-modern you know sort of heterogenics of referencing of various cultures, and quotation of things was already very much part of the common parlance of theatre making. Whereas set design, lighting, costume and those things had been around you know, sort of... Now I think those disciplines and those practitioners are also undergoing revolutions, but it's not, you know... modern sound design came in and was a post-modern thing from the start, modern sound design.

EJ: Do you think maybe sound design was seen as more of a technical field, maybe sound designers were seen more as technicians and operators than actual artists?

RB: Well I think there's still, yes that's exactly it. I think you've put your finger on quite an important thing there. The people that did pre-date, I mean, the key practitioners in this country, people like Paul Arditti, who started at the National and then was freelance for a while, then was head of sound at the Royal Court and he's just gone freelance again. We had a big sound seminar the year before last at the National Theatre, June 2002, and we had sound designers from all over the world, coming from Japan, Israel, the Czech Republic, quite a few from America and Canada and most of the big names of British sound design were all there and it was interesting, they were all of a certain age: they were all relatively young actually. Most of them started in the eighties, and you could quite clearly see that there was a vanguard there, there was a... these were like the first generation of a new entity. They weren't technicians, most of them weren't technicians.

EJ: Do you think maybe they have been technicians to start with till they...?

RB: Yeah and that's what infuriates most sound designers: they're still regarded as being primarily technicians. Of course, there is a technical aspect to what they do, as there is if you're a set designer, you know: you have to technically know how to work in scale and you know the properties of the materials and that sort of thing. It's exactly the same with sound, you've got to know how to use your tools, but it's not primarily a technical thing anymore. Of course, the directors and other practitioners who pre-dated the advent of sound design, you know, who were working in the fifties, sixties and seventies, were used to the sound person probably being a deputy electrician or a member of the stage management team who basically knew how to edit tape, or knew a little bit about how to rig speakers and that sort of thing, and of course when musicals started to become amplified, reinforced, around the late sixties, early seventies, a lot of the people that were brought in to do that came from rock and roll, from the music industry, and they were technicians, they were sound engineers. A lot of sound design took a while to really find its feet because there was a lot of frustration with this. Directors were bringing in people basically to put the sound systems into theatres so that they could do *Godspell* or *Jesus Christ Superstar* or whatever - the rock musical that they were doing at the time - and discovered these people knew a lot about how to put systems together but didn't know anything about theatre, and everything was always too loud. There were a lot of sound technicians and engineers during that period [who] did a lot of harm, I think, to the cause of sound 'cos they just didn't understand theatre, they were technicians and they still are. I mean, there are obviously still people who are, I would say, 'production sound people', rather than 'sound designers'. I mean you know you can, companies like Autograph for example. Autograph of course is... who are the biggest musical sound company in the world, and based in London. They have teams of professional production sound technicians, and their job is to put systems in and maintain systems in the West End or Broadway or... % % %

EJ: So would they mainly work on musical theatre because it's more technical?

RB: Mainly. I mean, some straight plays have big sound components which have probably been designed by designer and also need production sound support as well. There's a company in London that's run by John Leonard, (who I was talking about earlier - started at the RSC), called Aura, and they have a number of sound designers and they also play a production... in fact one of their directors, a guy called John Owen,

is a production sound technician; and so they've got a number of shows running in London at any given time, you know, on Shaftesbury Avenue, Hampstead or wherever. Some of them run for ages, a lot of them are operated by stage managers, and things go wrong so they need a technician who can go round and just fix the system, but there are... I mean, it does infuriate me and other sound designers when sound design is referred to as one of the technical departments of theatre. But I think that is changing... I think increasingly... I mean, again, it's director driven. You know, sound designers are being seen as a seat at the creative table, a seat in the creative team.

EJ: Do you think with things like this Aura sound company that sound design is being seen maybe as a more attractive profession to go into if there's companies that can send people out and employ them, and maybe it's more stable because it has largely been self-employed in the past?

RB: It's largely self-employed still.

EJ: Is it still?

RB: And even people like Aura would use self-employed subcontractors to be operators. I mean this partnership... basically, there's a few designers who got together and pooled their resources and pooled their equipment. It's still - as is the majority of theatre actually, actors, designers you know - there are a few... in the receiving houses you get salaries and house technicians and salaried house... I don't know, managers of various descriptions, and in the few remaining repertory theatres you might have some salaried designers and wardrobe people, but apart from that the vast majority of the British theatre industry is self-employed, and it's the same with sound. Career-wise, it used to be... I mean, sound operators, funnily enough, used to be pretty well paid because it was a bit like being a musician, you had to have the skills to do the job. You couldn't just get in anybody off the street and say: 'Operate the sound for this show'. So in order to get those people with those skills, you used to get paid quite well; and certainly when I was opping in the eighties, particularly on tour, the sound operators often were one of the better paid people in the company. Sound designers - who tend to get a fee, as I said before - I don't think they're yet necessarily consistently on a par with the lighting design or the set design in terms of their fee. Only, just recently sound designers have started to get themselves agents, and there's a few agents that will take sound designers and I think probably they get better fees, and, as is the case with most professional theatre design work, the way that you can make the big money is to get a percentage royalty of a show that happens to overrun, so, you know, if... I can't remember who designed the sound for Inspector Calls but Steven Wallbeck did the music. If Steven Wallbeck got a percentage point of Inspector Calls - I don't know whether he did or he didn't, because it was our own T transfer - he's certainly quids in. I know that Paul Groothuis is a musical sound designer, who came out of the National Theatre sound department, you know, you can afford to do a lot of the shows you want to do if you just get a couple of big musicals under your belt so a lot of sound designers even though, I mean obviously there are some sound designers who specialise in doing musicals and that's what they love doing, they're very hard work and they're far more engineering jobs than they are sound design jobs, though of course there are creative art decisions to be made about the sound of the thing. But a lot of sound designers will try and get a few musicals under the belt just because they're the ones that are likely to be

the bankers you know, you get a percentage point on something like Les Mis and that's it, you're set up for life!

EJ: But there's already, like, a set score for Les Mis isn't there... is the sound designer more about balancing sound between, say, orchestra and singers?

RB: Yeah, well, musical sound design was initially that. I mean, initially in musicals - American musical theatres - there wasn't any sound design, it was, you know... the singers had big semi-operatic voices...

EJ: They did, yeah.

RB: And they just blasted it out over the orchestra and it was all done acoustically and a lot of people say that that's the way it should be done, but as I said before, with the advent of electric orchestration in the sixties, basically rock operas and rock music started coming in and also voices changed. Voices stopped being so operatic and became more like the sort of pop singing voices, you just needed to lift people, and it started with float mikes, which is basically just a microphone settled on the front of the stage, and then of course the big change for musical sound design was the advent of the radio mic, and as soon as you were able to wear, first of all it was like the hand-held radio mics and now these tiny little Lavelier mics that they put on the forehead or on the side of the ear which can be completely invisible from the front row. You've got flesh coloured ones which are sort of taped on and go through the wig and you can hardly see them.

EJ: Do sound designers get involved in all that side of things like that?

RB: Yeah they do for musicals. No, that's a very important part of it because you have to work with wigs and costume, you have to work with the actor as well, to find [out] where they're going to wear the mike, you have to make quite a lot of decisions based on your hearing really, and I think the most important thing for a musical sound designer is to have good ears. You know, you have to listen to the actor's voice and make all sorts of decisions about e-q-ing the voice - which is adjusting the tone of the voice - placement of the radio mike, just recently they've got into wearing these in-ear monitors. They look like little hearing aids and have to be moulded specifically for the actor, so you have to have casts of the ears taken so that you can wear these. All this really does increase the quality of what you're listening to, although some people would say that it reduces the live-ness because actually a lot of these incredibly well reinforced musicals, are just starting to sound like CD recordings.

EJ: People want cinema quality, don't they, when they go and see musicals and...?

RB: Yeah they do, and some people say 'Well that's... yeah but it's just a bit like going to see a film or listen to a CD, it doesn't feel live any more, you know'. Yeah, you mentioned cinema sound quality, I mean, that's another thing, another recent development in sound design.

EJ: Do you think it's mainly what happens in film filters down into theatre sound design?

RB: Well, I think there's some of that... I think there's probably not as much of that as people think. I think surround-sound is a very interesting case in point because I think that obviously happened first in cinema, I mean that just started, again in I think, semi-Apocalypse Now - which is, what, 1981 or something - was a surround sound film from the start. I think it probably pre-dated that, I'm not entirely sure, and it's always... ever since then I think, a lot of people, directors and sound designers have wondered, have asked 'Can't we do, you know, wouldn't it be good if we could do this in theatre'... 'If we can have sound moving round the auditorium'... I think it's been quite an interesting history that, the whole history of surround-sound in theatre because I don't... it's always been problematic, in a way that cinema surround-sound hasn't been, and I think it's something about the live-ness of the experience and the essential difference between theatre and cinema. In live theatre, you're... there's something about the fact that there are live actors there on the stage and they're in the same room as you and they're over there, and as soon as you start hearing a sound coming from a different direction, coming from behind you, somehow it intrudes into that. I don't know. That sort of phenomenological bubble that makes theatre distinct from cinema. It's... I'm not saying it can't work, it can work and I've seen some very good use of surround-sound in theatre but it doesn't lend itself to live theatre I don't think. But that's certainly an example of where the cinema has created a sort of fad that theatre sort of feels obliged to pick up on, but in other ways I'm not so sure, I mean I think actually it's probably the other way around. People... there was use of... I mean, Henry Irving in the late nineteenth century used to use continuous underscoring on an epic scale for his plays at the Lyceum. You know, he'd do Romeo and Juliet or whatever and have a full orchestra playing continuously under the stage in what we would regard as a very filmic way, and actually it was cinema that took that from theatre in the first place and developed it, and finessed it, and made it you know sort of a pretty separate art; meanwhile theatre stopped doing it. Theatre became very minimal during this sort of modernist phase and when, in more post-modern times, directors started to want to bring music, underscoring into theatre again, everyone said 'Oh well, that's just, you're aping cinema'. Well actually no, actually it came from theatre in the first place, and similarly you know, the sort of very dense use of sound was quite common in Victoria melodrama, there was a lot of use of sound effects, so no, I don't think it's fair to say that modern theatre sound design is just sort of imitating cinema sound... some of that though.

EJ: So do you think in general then that sound design is becoming seen as more of a respective profession and it's...?

RB: Yeah, I mean, we train people here. We've got a degree course in theatre sound design here which is 10 years old and was the first, and I think that there... I'm not sure if there are others that are single honours dedicated theatre sound courses, but certainly it's cropping up in theatre curricula in various places, and I even know of somebody that's doing a PhD in theatre sound in this country. As I said, we had this symposium conference thing at the National Theatre a couple of years ago and we had theatre sound designers from all over the world and I was quite amazed actually how many there were, with very similar tales to tell throughout the world. I mean, we all met up again this summer at the Prague Quadrennial Theatre Design Exhibition in Prague where

they had an exhibit of theatre sound designers which I thought was again quite significant, that this big theatre design exhibition had a special feature just of theatre sound. So I think it has sort of become... it is becoming accepted, but as I say market forces apply and, you know, there will only be as many professional working theatre sound designers as the industry can afford, and also, this is probably me talking personally, I think it's a sort of young person's game in a way, because the majority of it is pretty hard work. I mean it's touring, it's not necessarily a career yet that has a career structure to it, an established career progression to it in a way that I think other theatre areas perhaps do, I don't know but yes I think it is. In America it's unionised. In this country there is a specific union for theatre sound designers but in America, where theatre is far more unionised anyway, there is a particular union that they belong to and there are set pay rates for all different sorts of theatre sound work, and certainly I think it's much easier now in this country to get paid and get the budgets that you would need to do your shows than it was 10 or 20 years ago, you know.

EJ: Okay well I think I'll end it there.

RB: Okay.

EJ: Thank you very much for your time.

RB: You're welcome.

EJ: Thanks.