

# Their Mix of Music, Noises Becomes Art —If Nobody Notices

By MIKE WYMA

Reid Woodbury didn't know what to think. As a relative newcomer to the field of sound design for live theater, he welcomes critical notice. So he was pleased that his work on "Sand Mountain," currently at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, has attracted it.

The critic from Drama-Logue magazine termed Woodbury's sound effects so good, they become "another character" in the two one-act plays. A Los Angeles Times critic had similar praise.

"That's nice to read, but I don't think this is the best show I've done," protested Woodbury, 28. "It really, was pretty simple."

Jon Gottlieb owns an elaborate studio in North Hollywood. Perhaps the most successful sound designer in Los Angeles, he said he often encounters the same phenomenon.

"Mail is a good example," Gottlieb said of the play, which is leaving the Pasadena Playhouse next month, possibly for Broadway. "It has incredibly complex sound needs—11 cordless mikes, a full band that needs reinforcement, tapes cues, everything. The show got great reviews, but the sound didn't get mentioned. That means I did my job, because people will notice what's wrong before they'll notice what's right."

Part technician, part musicologist, part trickster, a sound designer is responsible for everything a theater audience hears, apart from the actors' spoken lines. This includes taped music, which the designer often selects, and sound effects that come from tape players in the sound booth or from doorbells and the like on stage.

He also is responsible for live sound by musicians or singers that needs to be "reinforced," or amplified and mixed. The designer plans the sound in conference

with the director, creates the necessary tapes and then leaves the running of the tapes during performances to a sound operator.

"It's gotten to the point where people expect sound in the theater to be as good as the sound from their TV or stereo," said Gottlieb, 30. "When they're paying \$20 or \$40 for a ticket, what they hear should be better in quality than what they get in their living room."

But at the same time, sound designers say, their budget is the first to be trimmed by cost-conscious production companies.

"It's the first place they'll cut a corner," Gottlieb said.

"In L.A. theater, especially Equity waiver, there

isn't the emphasis on sound design that there is on the acting and direction of the piece," said Jeff Seymour, artistic director of the 50-seat Gnu Theatre in North Hollywood. "Unfortunately, the sound is left at the very end."

Laura Zucker, producing director of the 93-seat Back Alley, said that sound design has been overlooked partly because of economic reasons—theaters often struggle financially—and partly because of the origins of most local playhouses.

"Theater in Los Angeles really started as actors' theater," she said. "Actors got together and said, 'Let's do a play.' Now that theater's maturing, a lot of people

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are realizing it's not just actors on stage, that a whole series of special designers are needed."

"At a lot of live theater in the Valley, a guy will come in a door from outside and there will be complete silence," said Jeffrey Markle, sound designer for "Jitters" at the Gnu. "It helps so much if the guy opens the door and you hear a horn honk or a car go by."

Like Woodbury of "Sand Mountain," Markle, 31, does not make a living from sound design. Both have day jobs. Woodbury, a music major in college, is an audio editor at a company that produces commercials and other promotional materials. Markle is an electrician and part-time actor.

A production's sound design, including minor equipment and the designer's fee, can cost as little as \$300 or as much as \$5,000. Markle said he keeps costs as low as possible, borrowing records from friends and libraries instead of buying them. One recent morning found him inside a Builders Emporium, recording the rings of doorbells to avoid buying the wrong one.

He said his proudest achievements probably go unnoticed.

"If the sound design is really good, it should be subliminal. The audience shouldn't notice. For 'Jitters' I took an album of Irish ballads and edited a 15-second opening piece that contains parts of several songs. Twenty years ago someone would put on a record and hope it didn't skip. Now you really create a mood."

Gottlieb was delighted when, in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" at the L.A. Theatre Center, some of his tapes passed for live music.

"The show is based around a 1920s recording session and we had a four-piece group—a trumpet, bass, piano and slide trombone," he remembered. "I had the piano music coming from right behind the piano, the trumpet from right behind the trumpet and so on. Even

the reviewers thought the music was coming from the instruments."

Audiences sometimes are fooled in other ways. Woodbury's work in "Sand Mountain" includes a storm. While the rain and thunder are the real thing, taken from a sound effects record, the wind is recorded from Woodbury's Mini-Moog synthesizer.

"Recording it got kind of boring, sitting there for half an hour, twisting dials to make the wind change levels," he said.

The sound of chicken frying, used in another play, was easier.

"The level had to be the same all the way through, so I just set the synthesizer and went away," he said.

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Woodbury had tried first to record the sizzling that water and grease make when dropped into a pan. He said the effort created a large mess and very little usable tape.

Gottlieb, recipient of two Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle awards, 13 Drama-Logue awards and several other prizes, called sound design "50% creativity and 50% equipment know-how."

"It gets more complicated on the technical end than other design elements, like lighting and staging," he said.

One of the Drama Critics Circle awards he received was for "Nana-watti," at the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

"It's the story of Russian tank lost in Afghanistan," Gottlieb said. "The tank is terrorizing this rural area, even though the tank is never seen. We had to get a menacing

sound every time the tank came around, but make it different every time. I layered animal sounds and cries in with the sound of a tank and machinery. It worked."

Gottlieb, an acting major in college who switched to sound design after graduation, said he could earn more money editing audio for television and films, but would have less control over the product.

"Anyone who stays in theater is in it for the creativity," he said. "The creative end—reading a play, then sitting down with the director and talking about the play's sound needs, then putting it all together—that's what I enjoy."

Gottlieb, who has sizable collections of sound effects and music on records and compact discs, predicted that technological advances will continue to make for improved

sound design for plays.

Other sound designers agree. There are, however, ancient tricks of the trade that will endure, especially in smaller theaters.

At one point in "Sand Mountain," for example, an actor knocks on an imaginary door and the audience hears rapping that coincides with each strike of the actor's knuckles on the non-existent wood.

"That's pretty tricky," a theater-goer said to Woodbury. "How do you time it so that the tape and the actor match so exactly?"

"We don't," he said, "because there is no tape. The actor just uses his foot to kick the step when he's knocking."

As Shakespeare said, things are seldom what they seem.



*Reid Woodbury, who won praise for his design of what audiences hear in "Sand Mountain," on the set of the play at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys*