

# DAN LAWRENCE AND SOUND DESIGN

## WHAT IS A SOUND AND MUSIC DESIGNER'S JOB?

According to Dan Lawrence, who is also a music composer, his job as a Sound Designer is more technical. The Sound Designer has to ensure how much of the budget is available to spend on a sound system. He/she will have to decide what will play the sounds – on a computer, for example – and if there's a live band there then they need to be mic'd up, and if anyone is singing onstage then radio mics need to be provided. The Sound Designer puts the individual cues into the computer in order to cue sound effects during the show or play.

Cooperation between the Sound Designer and the Light Designer is of the utmost importance.



## DAN LAWRENCE

Dan Lawrence was raised in Aberystwyth and then he went to Manchester to study Pop Music and Recording. He stayed there for ten years working for different bands (particularly jazz and folk) and as a session musician. Dan now lives in Cardiff. In addition to composing music and designing sound for theatres and Theatre in Education, Dan continues to play with three bands – Sibrydion, Os Sambistas and Olion Byw. He's worked – and still works – for several theatre companies in Wales.

### Where does a Sound Designer start?

A Sound Designer should always start with the script – this should never be forgotten! It's a mistake to think that a Sound Designer can sit back and design the sound effects at the end of a rehearsal period without knowing anything about the play. The play should be at the forefront of his/her mind at all times. After all, the Sound Designer's decisions should always support the performance.

The Sound Designer will work as part of a group and his/her responsibility is to discover what the actors are doing in the devised piece or the script. With the members of the group, he/she should discuss what sound effects are needed for the piece and what effect the sound will have on the scene and the audience. Will the sound be played as an underscore to create an atmosphere under the dialogue? What sounds are needed to link scenes together? Is there background noise e.g. a dog barking, traffic noise etc?

In the theatre, the Sound Designer is in discussion with the Director. Dan Lawrence refers to the discussion between him and Arwel Gruffydd, the Director of 'Y Tad'. The Sound Designer needs to know what the Director's vision is of the complete work, and what exactly he/she wants to see during the performance. In the case of 'Y Tad', for example, Arwel Gruffydd didn't want a lot of underscore music under the dialogue but wanted very clear pieces when going from one scene to the next.

Sometimes, as in the case of Dan Lawrence, you will need to create your own sounds or music, and other times you can find CDs, tapes or sound files to use.

What are the main duties of sound designing?

- establishing the time of day, the season and the weather
- facilitating the changing of scenes
- placing the actions in a specific place
- providing information about the characters
- creating atmosphere.

# DAN LAWRENCE AND SOUND DESIGN

A Sound Designer should always consider the following:

## VOLUME

The volume of the sound that is provided is important to create the right effect. The sound should be audible, but at the same time it shouldn't drown out the actors' voices. It's very important to rehearse the play in full with the sound effects in order to ensure that they're perfect.

## LENGTH OF THE SOUNDS

The length of the sounds could be in seconds or a minute or longer. A Sound Designer must ensure that he/she knows exactly how long each sound effect is that is used by them.

## SCENE CHANGES

In changing from one scene to the next you could use sound/music effectively, helping the performance to flow smoothly.

## RESEARCH

It must be remembered that research is important to a Sound Designer. Research must be made into the period of the play, if it's not a fantasy piece. Libraries and the internet can be used to find examples of how life was during that period. For example, if the piece is set during the First World War, then you will need sound effects that are connected to that period. If the Sound Designer is working on a piece of fantasy, then sound is needed that will not make people think about any specific historical period.



# DAN LAWRENCE AND SOUND DESIGN

## MUSIC

As a composer himself Dan Lawrence sees the importance of music in the theatre and he says that music can be used in many different ways. In his work as a Sound Designer, Dan will compose his own music and record the whole thing in order to play it back during the performance.

Listen to what he has to say about the music in the production of 'Y Tad'.

Of course, as he suggests in his interview, music can sometimes be live on stage.

If, unlike Dan Lawrence, the Sound Designer is unable to create the music himself/herself, he/she can find CDs, tapes or sound files to use.

If music recorded by others is used, matters of copyright must be considered if it's a public performance.

## REVERB

This is an effect that can be added during recording, or added to a voice during the performance. This effect holds the sound for longer than usual, as if the sound is echoing around a big building (e.g. a cathedral).

## SOUND EFFECTS

Sound effects for any performance can either be already recorded or they can be live. There are many websites specifically for pre-recorded sound effects and they can be found on CDs too. There is a wide range of sound effects available, including background sounds like birds tweeting and specific sounds like the sound of a train arriving at a train station. There are certain effects that are better performed live, like a gun shot, a door slamming shut, and voices off-stage. A good example of an effective sound effect is the sound of thunder. For this, a thunder sheet can be used – a big hanging sheet of steel with two handles that produces sounds like thunder when it's shaken or beaten.

## SOUND EFFECTS IN THE PLAY 'Y TAD'

Listen to the clip of Dan Lawrence discussing his ideas with regard to sound effects in the play.

- Dan believes that it is important that the music assists the audience in understanding the nature of the play. He decided that a piano would be the best instrument to link the scenes. Dan Lawrence explained that he created musical motifs to tie the scenes together. As 'Y Tad' was originally a French play, he decided he'd create classical music similar in tone to French composers like Chopin or Debussy. He felt that the piano was a classical instrument that was appropriate for a middle class family who would have likely heard of the composers.
- He explained that there were always three parts to the music: a few bars at the end of the scene that would bring the emotion of that scene to an end, a musical piece in order to change the set, and then a couple of musical bars that would convey the emotion of the next scene. The music was in G minor, so it was music that was melancholy and sad, in order to create the appropriate tone for the play.
- Dan Lawrence created a sound which he called a 'zap', so there was a sudden sound and the lights would give a bright, sudden flash at the end of a scene in order to show the audience that we were moving along to the next scene. This sudden change also made us, as an audience, consider whether or not what we saw was illusion or reality; was it a scene that happened in Arwyn's mind?
- There were a few other sounds used, such as those Dan Lawrence explained as 'atmos' (atmospheric sounds): sounds of a dog barking, cars passing the window, a doorbell etc.
- Dan Lawrence also explained that he created a sound of one long note that was played every time Arwyn was confused. This was like the sound someone would hear in their ear if they had tinnitus. This helped us know when Arwyn's mind was wandering in the scenes.

# DAN LAWRENCE AND SOUND DESIGN

## ACTIVITY 1

In considering the play 'Y Tad', and what Dan Lawrence did as a Sound Designer, discuss other ideas that you, as a Sound Designer, could have added to the play in order to convey the theme of dementia to the audience. Perhaps you have different ideas to Dan Lawrence. Perhaps you saw another production that had special sound ideas that influenced you.

Discuss your ideas and make notes on the following:

- in the script of 'Y Tad' there's no reference at all to any sounds. How would you, as a Sound Designer, decide what sound effects (if any) to use?
- will there be sound to connect the scenes? What sort and why?
- will sounds be used as an underscore to the dialogue to create atmosphere? What about Ann's monologue?
- sound effects to create atmosphere – sounds outside the house etc.
- sounds to create Arwyn's confusion and the sounds you can use in those scenes where Arwyn was confused about the people?
- which other productions have you seen where the sound effects were successful? Make a list. Have any of the ideas had an influence on you? Why?



## ACTIVITY 2

### 'It appears that the whole village is crazy'.

The play 'Un Nos Ola Leuad' is set in a quarrying village – somewhere similar to Bethesda in the 1920s. The play deals with poverty and men dying in the quarries or suffering horrible injuries. There are storylines about people going insane and being forced into the asylum. The landscape and the country surrounding the drama plays an important part, and it can be said that it's a character in the play. A character called 'the Man' is introduced, and really we are reliving the story of the Boy through the eyes of the Man, who's looking back on his life. The conclusion of the drama is incredibly powerful, as the Man walks into the lake and takes his own life.

Discuss how you, as a Sound Designer, would convey those themes and the meaning of the play to the audience.

Make notes on the following:

- what sort of 'atmos' sounds are needed to create an atmosphere?
- what type of music would you suggest to connect the scenes or to be used as an underscore to the dialogue in order to convey that we're in a quarrying village in the 1920s? Is religious influence important to convey in the play?
- there are many specific opportunities for a Sound Designer in this play. What type of music or sound would you use for the following scenes?
  - the boxing scene
  - the music box scene between the Boy and Wmffra
  - the scene where Grês Elin is being refused in the Church
  - the scene where the Boy's mother goes to the asylum
  - the scene where Jini is hanged
  - the scene where the Man walks into the lake at the end of the play.
- also discuss which other live productions in the theatre have influenced your decisions and ideas with regard to the use of sound.



# DAN LAWRENCE AND SOUND DESIGN

## ACTIVITY 3

The musical 'Sweeney Todd' is described as 'a musical thriller'. As Sondheim said, 'The only way to tell a horror story ... is to keep musical texture going, because in most horror films, what really scares you ... is the music.'

The music by Sondheim would surely scare the audience, with the powerful sound of the organ and music like the 'Dies Irae' in the Requiem Mass. The challenge for the Sound Designer is to add to the songs and music that already exist. Discuss how you, as a Sound Designer, would convey those themes in order to create an appropriate atmosphere.

- Go through the script and see if it's possible to add sound cues anywhere and make a list of them.

## ACTIVITY 4

Look at another play that's on your A Level course and discuss how you, as a Sound Designer, would convey the play's theme and meaning to the audience.

Discuss your ideas and make the notes on the following:

- are there any sounds suggested in the script? Which ones? Would you keep these in your production of the play?
- what kind of music could you use to underscore the dialogue to add to the tone and atmosphere of the scene?
- is there any period-specific music that should be used?
- what other kinds of sounds could you use to create atmosphere?
- is music needed to tie scenes together and to facilitate the changing of one scene to the next?
- create motifs for the different characters in the play.
- is there a way of creating a motif to emphasise the different themes in the play? Experiment with a few ideas.
- which other live theatre productions have influenced your decisions and ideas with regard to how sound is used in, and adds to, the production?

