Sound, Body, and Feeling:
Sound Design and Acting in the Work of SITI Company

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ABSTRACT

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Sound, Body, and Feeling: Sound Design and Acting in the Work of SITI Company

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is a theorization of the relationship between sound design and acting in the work of New York City-based theater group SITI Company. Theater sound, both live and recorded, encompasses sound “effects,” music or sound used as “soundtrack,” actors’ voices, noises made by the movement of bodies or objects on stage, and includes the uncontrollable sonic content of the performing environment. Focusing on the body and feeling, sound’s most significant contribution to theater performance is found in its affective functioning to create social experience. Through ethnography, archival research, and critical analysis, three cases are examined: SITI Company’s Suzuki and Viewpoints training and their productions Radio Macbeth and Under Construction. I draw on recent theater sound scholarship that conceptualizes sound as dramaturgy, as well as from Deleuze, Barthes, and Peirce to consider several different approaches to understanding the affective effects of sound’s immediacy in the theater.
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INTRODUCTION

What are the functions of sounding and listening in the theater? How do we listen when immersed in the theatrical moment? Is the sound of the theater different from everyday aurality, and if so, how? What is the unique contribution of sound design to theater’s role in cultural formation? This dissertation is an attempt to examine the relationship between sound and acting in contemporary theater performance. It questions how actors work with sound and how sound affects audience members’ experiences of the theater event. The goal of this study is to explore the ways sound functions in the theater to invoke and mediate between imagination and reality, time and space, presence and absence, thinking and feeling, and present moments and potential futures. I propose that theater sound design functions to establish and de-establish subjectivities, relationships, and meanings that resonate through the narrative world of performance and within the cultures and societies in which performance occurs. Furthermore, sound design’s most significant contribution to theater performance is that it functions affectively to create a group experience. While sound in the theater, working simultaneously and in conjunction with narrative, can connote semantic or symbolic meaning, it also works on us before linguistic reflection, before thought, at the very threshold of feeling.

In the pursuit of these this goal I have followed, researched, sat with, questioned, listened to, watched, and trained with New York City-based theater group SITI Company. Founded in 1992 as the Saratoga International Theater Institute, SITI
Company is led by award-winning artistic director Anne Bogart, who is known for her long history of experimental theater work, for extending and popularizing the innovative performance training and rehearsal technique known as Viewpoints, and for leading the graduate theater directing program at Columbia University. Through her collaboration with Tony Award-winning sound designer and company member Darron L. West, sound has become an integral part of SITI Company’s playmaking process. The company’s engagement with sound in performance, during daily actor training, and in the art-making process is the subject of the dissertation. While others have written critically about the company (Brestoff, Cummings, Lampe, Dixon and Smith), there are no studies on how sound in particular functions within their work. The company’s embodiment and deep integration of sounding and listening among the elements of performance make for a theater that is able to engage with audiences in a complex, multivalent way.

By focusing on SITI Company, the discussion involves a particular kind of theater. This project is generally about what sound does in the performance of plays and not in musical theater. Furthermore, what SITI offers is the performance of plays that are created collaboratively. In contrast to professional productions in either commercial theater or in most American regional non-profit theater, SITI Company shows are either developed collaboratively or work with a completed script that is then subject to further development by the company, sometimes layering one narrative over another. Though the company does not do musical theater per se, they do rely heavily on music and movement. SITI Company creates new work that grapples with art, politics, and the social and intellectual problems of contemporary life and does so through a commitment
to pursuing their collaborative artistic partnership over a long period of time. Their sound-oriented working methods and interests and their established and well-regarded stature in the American and international theater communities make their work a productive site for my inquiry. SITI Company’s daily engagement with sound guides my questions. Through this project I hope to make more clear the extent to which SITI influences contemporary theater practices, drawing conclusions that move beyond SITI’s work toward a general consideration of the experiences and significances of theater sound design.

This project draws on recent literature in theater sound and affect theory. While I do not wish to merely respond to what has been characterized as “turns” toward affect and toward the sonic, there has been a significant surge in scholarship in the new field of sound studies (Sterne, Kahn, Erlmann, Toop, Cox, Drobnick, LaBelle) and in studies involving affect theory (Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi, Sedgwick, Seigworth and Gregg, Berlant, Grossberg, Stewart). Richard Rorty invoked the word “turn” when he marked the passage in the history of philosophy from its ancient concern with “things” and the Enlightenment concern with ideas to, with his 1967 book *The Linguistic Turn*, a postmodern concern with words (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* 263). What is called a “turn” is a shift in critical writing toward new interests or problems that only at certain moments seem to become apparent or articulable. The linguistic turn of the 1960s presented the “text” as the most important (or perhaps even the only) object of analysis, arising in such statements as Jacques Derrida’s oft-cited claim that “there is nothing outside of the text” [*il n’y a pas hors-texte*] (*Of Grammatology* 158) and Roland
Barthes’s attempt to move the object of analysis from the work itself to its extended text (*Image-Music-Text* 155-64). I do not wish to essentialize these perspectives, particularly Barthes’s, which will be reconsidered later in this dissertation. However, the repercussions of this move have been significant, including positive moves toward a democratization of knowledge and subjectivity in the academy through the establishment of various area studies programs and the recognition of identities and perspectives that were not politically possible before, but unfortunately maintaining the philosophical divide between mind and body.

One of these new areas of academic focus, visual culture studies, grew out of an interest in reading visual culture as a text, an important and daunting prospect as media continues to have an increasingly significant role in contemporary life. The recent emergence of sound studies may be understood as a response to the reification of culture as distinctly visual and textual, as well as a response to continually changing technologies that have brought not only the visual and textual, but also the sonic within easy grasp of many people worldwide, allowing for the rapid global distribution of local and now trans-local image, text, and sound. Theorists such as R. Murray Schafer, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong may have reacted against the linguistic turn and visual culture by bringing attention to sound and “orality” as aspects of culture that they felt were overlooked at the time. Acoustic ecology emerged, drawing attention to the sonic, but unfortunately maintaining a Cartesian philosophical split in experience, separating the mind and body by reproducing in the sonic the same problems that they reacted against in visual culture studies. The split between seeing and hearing and its respective pairing
with notions of exteriority and interiority, objectivity and subjectivity, thinking and feeling, and space and time has been referred to by Jonathan Sterne as the “audiovisual litany,” which both describes and prescribes a certain set of cultural values or “prenotions” (*The Sound Studies Reader* 9). Whether one studies visual culture or sonic culture (or some other kind of culture altogether), the encounter between the body perceiving and the body perceived is dynamic and multi-faceted, involving not only all the senses one can bring to bear on perception, but the fact of their inseparability.

While sound studies is a relatively new field, critical works on theater sound are just now beginning to appear. Sound designer and scholar Ross Brown’s recent book *Sound: A Reader in Theatre Practice* is a welcome addition to this new field, providing the important notion of sonic dramaturgy—that is, a play’s dramaturgy as realized sonically and sound in theater performance understood in terms of dramaturgy. In his reader, Brown lists ten books published by sound designers between 1936 and 2001 that he believes to be the entirety of the English language canon on theater sound design. Mostly how-to guides for amateurs and professionals, only three include considerations of sound as dramaturgy. Each book “assumes that the sound practitioner primarily provides a service to a director in relation to staging a literary text” (*Sound* 15). Brown’s use of the word “practitioner” to describe the theater sound person—somewhere between technician and designer—is indicative of the twentieth-century ambivalence within the industry to recognize the creative, aesthetic, and narrative possibilities of sound in theater performance. The theater sound maker at the beginning of the twentieth-century is considered a functionary of the artistic will of the playwright or director. In this view,
sound designers are not creative artists, but technicians—“noise boys,” as they were sometimes called. Brown also states that there is “no mention in any of these books of collaborative, devising practices or of ‘alternative’ forms of theatre” (Sound 15).

Western theater artists and scholars have been slowly rediscovering sound as a creative, even authorial, aspect of theater in the last forty years, and in the last fifteen years, have witnessed an incredible surge of interest in the sonic. Why this sudden interest? What has spurred the so-called “sonic turn” in the theater? As Jonathan Sterne reminds us, changes in the auditory experience of everyday life and our resultant expectations of sound in art are largely determined by commercial interests (The Audible Past). The conditions for the realization of new sounding and listening technologies are economic. Brown relates changes in sound design practices to the influence of cinema and the buying power of consumers:

Immersive, ‘surround’ or auditorium sound had been used experimentally from time-to-time, but became more frequently used in the 1990s. This partly reflected a broader cultural shift. The experience of new surround sound technologies in the home and in cinemas had not only made surround sound easier for the audience to accept, but also made it a ‘must have’ consumer accessory. The desire to extend the electroacoustic metaspace into the auditorium was therefore not only an artistic one but also a commercial one. Audiences now not only accept, but expect electroacoustic sounds coming at them from all sides when they are watching drama. In other words, the imaginary auditory world of the
play has been reintroduced into the auditorium which for hundreds of years had been off limits. (*Sound* 170).

When we ask how a theater performance sounds, we are asking about a performance’s overall meanings as understood sonically. How does a “sonic understanding” supply a unique filter for thinking about or feeling our way through a performance? I want to suggest that attention to the sonic and its dramaturgical significance in theater offers the attentive theater participant possibilities that might not otherwise present themselves. This project tracks what is involved when we apply a sonic filter to theater. When we start to pay attention to the sonic in theater performance, some basic questions arise, such as: What do we hear in a particular performance? How are the sounds heard related to the action of the play? How are the sounds related to time, place, or specific people, objects, or ideas in the play? How do we sense or perceive sounds? How do the sounds make us feel?

Each of these questions responds to the overall sense of the sonic dramaturgy of a production. Brown describes sound design as “a crafting of the aural experience of theatre,” and goes on to describe two ways that design can influence the experience:

The first is the aural attention focused on *the organization of noises within mise-en-scène according to the dramaturgy*. This organization might be made in a semiologically functional way (the doorbell or the birdsong that denotes ‘outside in the country’) or in a more melodramatic way: sound (maybe music) that
underscores or offers ironic counterpoint to the emotional vectors of the performance. (“Sound Design” 342).

He refers to this mode of sound design as “dramaturgically organized noise” (9). The basic question here is: What are the sounds that are heard in a theater performance? The arrangement of sounds in response to the action and visual plan of the play determines their meanings, leading the audience member to ask: How are sounds meaningful according to their temporal and spatial arrangements in relation to everything else going on in performance? Does a sound occur at the same time as a visible stage action? What is the relationship between them? Does the sound seem to come from a specific location, and if so what information does its definable location and directionality give us? As Brown points out, a semiotic understanding applies well to sound “effects,” enabling the audience member to “read” a performance based primarily on relationships between the sonic and the visual. But semiotic readings can also be made of sound and music that is used in what Brown calls a “melodramatic” way. A well-known song used to underscore a scene may predictably connote specific meanings or representations for audience members. But despite a reliable degree of cultural knowledge shared by an audience, individuals may feel very differently about the connotations. Thus, communication by signs will vary greatly from person to person based on their personal and social histories.

The two organizational structures contained within Brown’s sonic dramaturgy, what he calls “functional” and “melodramatic,” echo a distinction that is central to sound in film theory but that has been theorized to a lesser degree in theater, that of diegetic and
nondiegetic sound. *Diegesis* is a Greek word referring to the narrative or the world of the story. Sounds that come from within the world of the story are referred to as diegetic. Brown’s examples of the doorbell and birdsong would, in most cases, fall within the world of the story and be considered diegetic. Music is considered nondiegetic (sometimes called “extradiegetic”) when it comes from outside the world of the story. The musical underscoring of stage action often falls into this category. Though nondiegetic sounds and music come from outside the diegesis, they are heard and understood in terms of it. Both diegetic and nondiegetic sounds serve specific functions for a production. Generally speaking, diegetic sounds offer an “objective” understanding of stage actions, while nondiegetic sounds lead audiences to an understanding that is “subjective.” Objectivity here refers to sounds that constitute the world of the story. They may not relate to the everyday life of the audience but they make up the everyday life of the play. Who or what is the subject whose point of view is reinforced through musical underscoring? This is an important question for theater sound design. The distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound is dependent on the specific ways that sounds are employed in the context of the performance and the consequent relationship between the audience and the characters and actions of the play.

The significance of sound as dramaturgy to our experience of theater is great. However, the “dramaturgical organization of noise” is only part of our understanding. According to Brown, the second way that sound design can influence the auditory experience of theater is:
the organization of the audience’s hearing: the subtle modification of the auditorium acoustic or ambient presence using artificial reverberation, the subliminal use of ambient effects or subtle electroacoustic reinforcement of certain elements of the performance, all of which subtly changes the audience’s psychoacoustic disposition towards the mise-en-scène. (“Sound Design” 342)

Brown calls this sound design mode “theatrically organized hearing” (Sound 125). Sounds, organized in such a way to have various relations to a play’s dramaturgy, must be presented in specific ways. The way a sound “sounds” affects how theater participants listen and position themselves in the actual and imaginary worlds of the theater. How sounds are presented and perceived gives the listener just as much information as what the sounds are (or what they are the sounds of). A designed sound offers a sonic object in a specific relationship with the world of the performance. Because the theatrical moment often offers a collision of multiple worlds, actual and imaginative, a designed sound may convey several meanings, sometimes seemingly at odds with another.

Diegetic and nondiegetic sounds and music offer theatergoers different ways to relate to the imaginary world of the theater. While a useful distinction for sound designers, composers, and directors, diegetic and nondiegetic sounds exist on a continuum. Robynn J. Stilwell refers to a “geography of the soundscape” in film that allows for changing relationships between narrative film’s sounds, characters, and the audience (Stilwell 187). She also points out that sound is not the only element of film
that can relate to the diegesis in this way: “one could argue that the visuals of your basic Busby Berkeley extravaganza are far more ‘nondiegetic’ than the music” (188).

A geography of the theater soundscape ought to map not only the diegetic relations of sounds, but also the relative presence or proximity of sound and music. Sounds may be heard as foreground, background, or perhaps somewhere in between. A theater production makes sound in many ways and on many different levels, from sounds articulated by actors’ mouths, the noises performers’ bodies make, sounds made by the interaction of stage machinery, and music played live, to sounds and music that are pre-recorded and emerge from speakers onstage or placed in the auditorium. Sounds come into our perceptual spheres at different times, with different durations, and with varying intensities, both overlapping and existing side by side to create a multilayered fabric. The layers of sound may be thought of as moving on different trajectories to create a complex matrix of relations with audience members. Stilwell suggests, “just as diegetic and nondiegetic, foreground and background are neighboring but not parallel axes, so are empathy and anempathy and their close neighbors, subjectivity and objectivity” (190). Though nondiegetic sound can offer a subjective viewpoint on a moment on stage, aiding the attendant’s participation in it, the music does not by necessity seek to create a relation of identification for the audience member.

Theater sound, whether diegetic, nondiegetic, or somewhere in between, can create an affective relation between stage action and audience, a relation of feeling. But feeling does not necessarily lead to identification. The use of anempathetic sound, characterized by “indifference,” brings this idea to the forefront. As Michel Chion
writes, “This juxtaposition of scene with indifferent music has the effect not of freezing emotion but rather of intensifying it, by inscribing it on a cosmic background” (Chion 8). The cosmic background here is the diegesis. The emotions felt by audience members are brought into sharp relief by their relationship with the play’s everyday life. As Stilwell explains, sound operates on a multiplicity of planes to create a complex of feeling:

Empathy/anempathy is the relationship that the audience, presumably conditioned by the gestures in the music, has with the character: they recognize and identify with the feelings that the character is experiencing, and may feel them, though in an attenuated form. When we talk about subjectivity in film and film music, the connection between character and audience is more intense and more enveloping. Anempathy can be ‘objective,’ an observation and even understanding of a character’s feeling, but it can also be a rejection or abjection of those feelings—neither closer to nor further from the character’s feelings (on the objective/subjective axis), but rather perpendicular to them. (Stilwell 191)

Though Chion claims that anempathic sound is characterized by indifference, the intensification of feeling created by its use relies on empathy. Audience members are moved both emotionally and physiologically by the juxtaposition of sound and action. In this case it is the sound itself that may be said to be indifferent to the action, playing on regardless of what occurs onstage. The audience may or may not identify with a character whose actions play out against the background of such indifferent sound, but in either case the audience’s feelings rely on their empathetic relationship with what they
experience on stage. The sound’s indifference puts the audience’s feelings, whatever they may be, in sharp relief.

Theater sound design is intentional and immersive. It is often thought of as either sound “effects”—recognizable sounds that indicate “things” in the seen or unseen environment—or as “soundtrack”—that is, musical underscoring of scenes, familiar to film-going audiences. These two categories form the general basis for discussions of diegetic or non-diegetic sound. My analysis will not only address these two elements of sound design, but will also consider the voices of actors and the sounds made live by the movement of people and objects on stage. Each of these four kinds of sound may be performed live in the space (again, whether they are seen or unseen) or may be played back through a recording.

Sounds that occur outside of the scope of the narrative presented on stage also affect and become part of the performance, whether created by the audience or from sources beyond the theater auditorium. Like the theater, the sonic experience of everyday life is also immersive, a process of immersion in not just one acoustic “world,” but often in multiple worlds, whose sonic constitutions divert our attentions from one world to the next. According to Kahn, Cage shifted “the production of music from the site of utterance to that of audition” (165). In the theater the particular framing given to audition helps to determine how sonic stimuli are incorporated into the overall effects of a performance. Yet, as Adrian Curtin points out, sensory experience in the theater is foundationally comprised of unintentional, everyday sounds in which we are also immersed and through which designed sound is perceived. The total sound makes up
what he, after acoustic historian Emily Thompson, refers to as the “soundscape” (Curtin 218).

The term “soundscape,” originally coined by Schafer, has been highly influential to anthropologists like Steven Feld, who expanded Schafer’s acoustic ecology through his concept “acoustemology”—that is, acoustic knowledge or knowing by sound. Brown stresses the contingent nature of acoustemology when he defines it as “a repertoire of sounds which are culturally defining” (Sound 17). Although the designed sound of a performance influences the audience’s perception of its overall acoustic experience, the design cannot fully account for the experience. Sound is experienced doubly: phenomenological experience and the social construction we make of it. This perceptive doubleness includes all things aural, including both soundscapes (as Curtin defines it) and sound designs. But Curtin’s distinction is useful because the theatrical performance is grounded in its specific socio-historical context through its soundscape. The designed sound seeks to create a sonically immersive, imaginative world that may have little to do with the material conditions of its performance; indeed, it may actively ignore them. Even if a production in some way takes into account the sonic elements outside of the sound design, the production may be performed in many locations or over a long period of time, and the designed sound may not be updated to engage anew with the changing conditions. Those changing conditions as they are experienced acoustically comprise the soundscape itself. It is always new and specific to the individual subjective experiences of each person present for the theatrical performance, and yet it always also refers to a collective experience that is the specific culture in which the performance occurs.
Echoing this, Curtin quotes Emily Thompson, who writes, “a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment” (quoted in Curtin 219). It occurs presently and refers to a contemporary moment’s concerns, regardless of the time-space of a given imaginative world.

A consideration of sound in the theater asks not only what theater sounds like,¹ but also how theater determines meanings through a sort of cultural sonar, in which sound functions to locate the self within the world. It follows that understanding how theater sounds is also about considering what strategies for listening we bring to the theater. To understand the cultural resonance of a production and its sound design, it seems prudent to also lend an ear to those sounds that, though present during the performance, are ignored. When dealing with my cases, I will attempt to be specific about which of the various kinds of theater sound I mean at any given moment.

As I situate this project at the intersection of sound and feeling in the theater, I assume a position of participation with my object of inquiry. By giving attention to that which is heard and felt in theater performance, I open myself to the possibility of an affective engagement on a greater level than by restricting myself to visual spectacle and textual analysis. As I will explain further in what follows, I cannot restrict myself to any one mode of sensory experience. What I can do is highlight the multiplicity of my experience at the theater and emphasize the social interactions particularly facilitated

there by sound. In this endeavor I am aided in my selection of SITI Company, for they create theater that emphasizes the multiple and the possibilities of the collective.

My position of participation in this project is akin to “listening awry,” Jim Drobnick’s appropriation of Slavoj Zizek’s theoretical stance, “looking awry”—that is, to approach the problem from a perspective that is “interested rather than objective” (Drobnick 10). I am interested in how we hear things in theater and what effects sound design has there. My attention is not “objective” in the sense that I might be somehow “unbiased” in my response to what I hear. Neither does my point of view allow me to speak for the experience of others. Perhaps the most important reason to deny objectivity is in order to allow for the existence of what Henri Bergson calls the “virtual” in this project—that is, the possibility that in addition to what is actualized in the following pages, there might also be an excess or potential for other meanings that remains unrealized but that may nonetheless “move” the reader. Bergson writes, “This actual, not merely virtual, apperception of subdivisions in the undivided is precisely what we call objectivity” (Matter and Memory 71-2). Deleuze interprets this to mean “that the objective is that which has no virtuality” — whether realized or not, whether possible or real, everything is actual in the objective” (Bergsonism 41 italics original). I “listen awry” in order to approach the issue from a perspective that is not preordained by institutional ways of knowing—at least insofar as this is possible—allowing for the richness of experience that underlies that which is actualized in these pages, rather than one interpretation, the right one, scrubbed and presentation-ready. It is an allowance for
a little messiness in experience and the realization of an excess within the encounter that resists interpretation and allows for other possibilities.

Throughout, I attempt to attune my body and mind to the theatrical moment through my attentive listening. I will follow the example of SITI Company Artistic Director Anne Bogart in bringing a high degree of focused attention to the rehearsal room or research site. Bogart leans forward as she perches on her stool, in order to better attend to what actually occurs in the room, rather than what she may expect to happen. For Bogart, “Listening is fueled by interest and curiosity. It is a discipline and an action in the world” (And Then 59). Sounding and listening are “actions in the world” because they put forces into motion. To “listen awry” is to bring my attention to “sound’s heterogeneous significance” (Drobnick 10) and acknowledge that I have a stake in what I give my attention to. There is attention in my thinking—in interpretation, memory, expectation, and imagination. And there is attention in my feeling—in my body, my perceptions, and in my encounter with sensations. I attempt to attend to the nuances of change.

This dissertation utilizes ethnography as a primary research method. Whether as an audience member or a workshop student, I have engaged in participant-observation at many stages of the project. Accordingly, most of the chapters offer first-person narrative descriptions of my experiences attending to sound and affect with SITI Company and sound designer Darron L. West’s work. I intersperse these first-hand accounts with my critical reflections on the experiences and existing scholarship on similar experiences of working with SITI Company or their techniques. It is my hope that a self-conscious,
embodied engagement with the issues and questions of this project will enable me to write critically about an experience that moves beyond imagination or speculation and toward my lived and “felt” experience of an event shared among people. The two-fold perspective of the participant-observer moves back and forth between taking part in performance and thinking critically about it, even as it is happening. In my own experiences as an audience member, these perspectives often seem to shift of their own accord as I get caught up in performance or find myself resisting engagement in the performance event. It is my hope that the reader will not find these shifts in voice off-putting, but that they will serve as reminders of the everyday, commonplace nature of events that also happen to be performances, and thus are outside of the ordinary.

The name given to this ethnographic mode of research, participant-observation, admits to a bias toward the visual. In order to write credibly one must maintain the somehow objective distance provided through the metaphor of observation, even as the researcher embeds him or herself in the research site as participant. For this project, my role as participant means that I take part in the process of theater performance and not just its product. As anthropologist Tim Ingold questions, “Could not such engagement – working practically with materials – offer anthropology, too, a more powerful procedure of discovery than an approach bent on the abstract analysis of things already made?” (20). Perhaps my role might be better described as that of “participant-listener” or “-feeler.” Yet, I do wish to maintain my critical perspective. It seems that I must attempt to strike a balance between the two modes, especially because in this project sound and affect are both sites of inquiry and methods of research. They are what I give attention to, and they
comprise how I conduct my research—that is, I become physically involved with sound and affect, while at the same time attempting to notice my response.

This method is a kind of phenomenology. I place myself at the center of the encounter and attempt to give a detailed account of it. But despite my use of the term “phenomenology,” what I seek in the theater experience is not an “essence” that will encapsulate what theater is. I acknowledge that the experience of which I write is mine, and not the experience of all audiences at all times. Bruce R. Smith provides a way forward, stating, “A methodology that insists on the embodiedness of all knowledge and yet recognizes the cultural differences that shape that knowledge might be called ‘historical phenomenology’” (“Listening” 49). Smith, who writes primarily about the acoustic ecology of theater performance in early modern England, wants his readers to try to place themselves in the Globe Theatre to hear its particular acoustic environment. But perhaps more importantly, he seeks the specificity of the social experience of the theater at that time. Not only does a play sound different in the Globe than it does in the Blackfriars Theatre across town, but the ways that the experience sounds different from one theater to the next and from one time to another have to do with the socially and culturally specific relationships that performers and audience members have with producing and perceiving sound.

My site of inquiry is much closer to home. I acknowledge that my analysis of sound in contemporary theater performance is informed by culturally conditioned modes of listening and perceiving sound in everyday life. I am not mining a distant archive in order to reconstruct the ways that a culture from the past might have heard performance.
But I want to be clear that what I hear in performance is a product of the everyday culture that creates and consumes this particular theater. Even though my cases are contemporary, I am still embarking on historical phenomenology.

In addition to conducting participant-observations of performances, rehearsals, and daily training with SITI Company, I also made audio recordings of interviews with company members and have maintained correspondence with them. I visited the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts on two separate occasions in 2011 and 2012 in order to spend time with archival recordings of SITI Company shows and non-SITI productions that included sound designs by Darron West. Through the company’s generosity, I obtained recordings of the two SITI productions that provide cases for this study. I am grateful for SITI’s willingness to support this project. Without their participation and continuing correspondence, my thinking and writing would be impoverished.

The mixed methodological approach, including ethnography, practice as research, archival research, historical phenomenology, and critical analysis, suggests the interdisciplinary reach of this project. This project, though situated within theater and performance studies, draws upon philosophy, semiotics, and literary theory. Given further time and research, the project could benefit from casting an even wider net to include cognitive science. The steps of the process have involved different bodily configurations and engagements because the fields of study touched upon by the project and the conversation I wish to facilitate around and within my cases have seemed to require it.
In chapter one I explore sound in theater history in order to provide some context for my theoretical discussion and the cases that will follow. Changing technologies of sound have influenced how theater artists have imagined and created theater. Architects, playwrights, and producers in both Western and non-Western theater traditions designed, wrote, and presented theater to “sound” in the specific ways that the cultures from which they produced their work expected or allowed for. The history presented is in no way comprehensive but serves to make the point that if the history of theater is examined through sound, one begins to understand the significance of sound in theater history and its role in facilitating the social experience of theater.

Chapter two frames a theoretical discussion of sound design and its effects with a rather confusing experience of auditing a theater performance. The experience lays out the terms for the discussion, providing several problems within the physical and cultural reception of theater sound. Phenomenology and imagination are the two poles between which theater performance lives. Sound, experienced through a listener’s total sensory apparatus, serves as a bridge between the poles and facilitates a collective experience at the theater, not only for the audience, but also including the performers. Theater attendants experience sound’s durations, intensities, rhythms, timbres, frequencies, and their associations with the sonic in relation to both the actual events occurring—that is, what actors, technicians, musicians, and managers physically do during the performance—and the imaginary moments of the performance’s story. The affective weight of sound in these moments opens listeners to a deeper connection to the production and to one another. Audiences and theater practitioners alike come to the
theater with culturally conditioned expectations and assumptions about how the sonic is meaningful. Cognitive associations and identifications with sound and music are cultivated and facilitated through affect. But despite the pervasive role of affect in everyday life, affect itself is difficult to write about satisfactorily. It is, as Felix Guattari notes “hazy, atmospheric, and nevertheless perfectly apprehensible” (158). The “atmospheric” character of affect reveals its affinity with sound. Both affect and sound are “perfectly apprehensible” without lending themselves to easy explication or critical interpretation; they are felt, but perhaps not understood. I close the chapter by alluding to the possibility of a more satisfactory interpretation of affect through theories that will be applied in later chapters.

Chapter three introduces SITI Company and their working methods, emphasizing the company’s process of theater creation and differentiating the role of sound designer within the company from that of sound design within the field generally. I analyze my participation in a five-week training with the company to discover the extent to which SITI works with sound. The company’s foundational techniques, the Suzuki method of actor training and Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints work, have for the last twenty years engaged the company in a daily embodied conversation that contributes to the creation of a unique sonic dramaturgy.

In Chapter four SITI Company’s Radio Macbeth provides a rich case in which to explore the relationships between voice, sound, and affect through Barthes’ notions of “the grain of the voice” and signifiance. The third of three SITI productions exploring the work of Orson Welles, Radio Macbeth plays with acoustic extensions of time and
space and the affective possibilities of the voice. Theater is revealed as inherently “haunted” in a production that layers a fictional confrontation of personalities within Welles’s Mercury Theatre over their rehearsal for radio broadcast of Shakespeare’s play. Directed as well as designed by West, *Radio Macbeth* explores the actual and metaphorical reverberations and resonances of sound.

Chapter five focuses on SITI Company’s *Under Construction*. While *Radio Macbeth* utilized a classical text referring to events that actually took place nearly eight hundred years ago in order to tell the story of a historically-based but fictionalized event occurring just seven-five years ago, *Under Construction* provides a kind of collage of scenes juxtaposing a mostly white, privileged America in the 1950s with its transformation at the end of the twentieth-century into what Tadashi Suzuki calls “a new/different America” (“Creating” 83). Peircian semiotics provides a way to examine sound’s relationship with affect. My analysis of the production focuses on two Peircian sign classes, the *icon* and the *index*. Using these two kinds of signs sound is shown to have embodied effects on listeners that facilitate experiences of sociality, while allowing for possibility and multiplicity in interpretation.

Finally, chapter six concludes by returning to the question of sound’s functioning in contemporary theater. As Brian Massumi writes in his foreword to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, “The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?” (xv). Sound and listening are encounters of affect and feeling, collisions that are, knowingly or
unknowingly, put to effective use in theater performance. While acknowledging that the dissertation leaves new directions for future research, the project positions theater sound as an important contribution to theater practice today.
CHAPTER 1: SONIC DRAMATURGIES

Theater artists create worlds that unfold in time with audiences, and these worlds have specific relations to the contexts within which they are produced and consumed. All theater artists are dramaturgs, each working on the play or production and its sensations and ideas. The word “dramaturgy” refers to a play’s narrative structure, the historical contexts in which the play exists, and the overall meanings or intentions of the play. Whether playwright, actor, director, designer, musician, stage manager, or technician, each person influences the overall effect of the theater experience by contributing an aspect of the whole. Their work does not exist for its own sake, but rather is an attempt to make clear the dramaturgy of the overall creation. Thus the sound designer does not merely make sounds happen during a performance, but rather is responsible for the crafting of a world’s becoming through her or his particular medium. Sound effects technician Frank Napier, in his 1936 book Noises Off: A Handbook of Sound Effects, stresses the dramaturgical over the technical, saying, “Do not become a crank, and overload your productions with noises. After all, ‘The play’s the thing’” (117). It is our experience of an imaginary world, our part in its emergence, and that world’s relation to our everyday life that gives the theater meaning. In the theater all participants, even audience members, are dramaturgs, making stories and sense of everything offered.
Sound design is not new to dramaturgy. Many examples exist of playwrights, theater producers, and performance makers who have carefully considered the aural effects of their work and the importance of sound to the audience’s experience of theater. Without carefully crafted acoustic environments the effects of theater would be diminished greatly. With this in mind, the acoustic design of theater and performance spaces is and has been a central concern for producers. The reflective solid stone surfaces of the roofless, steeply raked and fan-shaped ancient Greek theater combined with its actors’ resonant wooden masks to produce god-like, one-way communication of actor to citizenry. As Brown states, “When full of absorptive human bodies, these theatres are virtually free from sonic reflectivity, save that of the skene front which helps throw the sound of the performance forward into the auditorium” (Sound 154). Speech clarity was achieved in theaters of this period, but for performers there was little or no sonic atmosphere or sense of “warmth.” The audience, J.G. Landels points out, can understand the actor in one of these theaters, but “he must take this on trust: there is practically no response from the auditorium” (“Assisted Resonance” 92). In his De Architectura, a first-century BCE text that resurfaced in fifteenth-century Italy and went on to influence hundreds of years of theater architecture, Roman engineer Vitruvius discusses the possible use of resonant urns in ancient Greek theaters to address the lack of aural warmth there. Several ancient Greek theaters existed in Italy for Vitruvius to explore, and fragments of bronze vases, known as êcheia, were found scattered throughout the auditoria. The vases may have been placed throughout the auditorium and
tuned to different frequencies in order “to prolong and accentuate the tonality of music or voice (rather than the diction)” (Brown, *Sound* 155). Brown acknowledges the ongoing debate among acousticians about what the effects of êcheia might have been, noting that similar vases have been found hidden in Renaissance era churches, temples, and mosques, and highlights “the particular importance [Vitruvius] attached to achieving an acoustic quality that balanced functional clarity and intelligibility of sound within an aesthetically pleasurable degree of resonance” (*Sound* 156).

Theater history is in many ways a history of technologies. Sterne suggests that a productive way to examine a particular society is to look to its technologies and consider the cultural, material, and political conditions that created the possibility of those technologies (*The Audible Past* 1-2). Acoustic technologies that made creative use of reflective surfaces, resonant building materials, and auditorium shape enabled the remarkable development of London’s Tudor-Stuart era theater culture, helping to produce a theater experience that was not only primarily an auditory one, but also one in which audience members were compelled to respond vocally. In encircling, open-air theaters such as the Globe and the Swan as many as two thousand audience members could listen to a performance from within sixty feet of most performers. With empty space under a stage built of resonant wooden boards, the playing space functioned much like a cello or double-bass, especially reinforcing low-pitched male voices—a notable technological innovation for a society that forbid women’s participation on stage, though not in the audience. With this in mind Bruce R. Smith writes what he calls an historical phenomenology of early Modern England, developing the concept of “the O factor” to
describe the oral/aural culture that found its fullest manifestation at public commercial theaters, where “the subject is involved in sound as a physical act (a performance), a sensory experience (something heard), an act of communication (a projection of psyche through the body into the world) and as a political act (an act done because of, for or with other people)” (Brown, *Sound* 50).

A warm or energetic resonant space can have powerful effects when used for performative or ritual purposes. Like London’s Globe Theater, Japan’s traditional *Noh* theater used wooden stages built before open-air auditoria. Though *Noh* theaters are not shaped like London’s Globe, they are built to emphasize their physical and spiritual resonance. Tadashi Suzuki points to empty pots that are often buried in the ground under the stages as a way to improve the audience’s ability to feel vibration. The extra resonance has dramaturgical significance:

This is not only for the sake of technical effectiveness – the hollow ground makes the sound of stomping resound better – but it is a procedure to create an illusion that the actor can conjure up earth spirits or the spirits of ancestors who have returned to the earth, in order to acquire their energy. The resonance enforces the physical feeling of responding to the spirits. (Suzuki, “Culture” 167)

The feeling of sound can be at once physical and spiritual, inviting theater practitioners from around the world to put acoustical design to work for them. Citing a recent study published in book and documentary video form by Paul Devereux, Brown notes that many Neolithic religious sites made use of the physical shape of natural and built stone
enclosures that resonated at a frequency of about 110 Hertz, the same male-voice amplifying frequency emphasized in the outdoor theaters of Tudor-Stuart London and in the design of religious architecture since the medieval period (Brown 150).

Not all innovations in architectural design were intended to amplify sonic frequencies. Changes in theater design emphasize cultural shifts in the various ways that the senses work together to experience performance. For instance, lighting technologies in eighteenth-century Paris opera houses combined with changing audience demographics to produce, by the early nineteenth-century, a theater experience that was, for the audience member, silent and private, allowing visual spectacle to take precedence by turning down the decibel level of the audience (Johnson). In the European theater the growing desire for visual spectacle had begun at the end of the seventeenth-century. It increased in the French court, the re-opened commercial London theaters, and through the influence of Italian opera and fascinating new technological experiments like de Loutherbourg’s 1781 *Eidophusikon* (Hardcastle 299) and, by the nineteenth-century, image projection technologies that eventually led to the cinema. Stage action increasingly occurred in a space separate from the audience. By the end of the nineteenth-century, the advent of sound transmission, recording, and playback technologies again transformed the theater experience by allowing it to include facsimiles of “real” sounds, in addition to the long-standing tradition of using musical instruments or specially built devices, like the thunder sheet or wind machine, for specific sound effects. Writing in 1904 in the *Strand Magazine* about the use of the phonograph on stage, Harley Vincent suggested that, “The innovation is likely to spread, and will surely
prove a considerable economy for the smaller theatre, where the outlay on stage noises of
the human and musical sort is not trifle” (422). The silent cinema relied on the
conventions of the melodramatic theater, with musicians (or at least a piano player) just
visible below the screen at the front of the auditorium. But as “talkies” began to be
produced, sound moved away from the screen and into the auditorium. Speakers were
hung around the audience, and sound became detached from its visual source.

Bell’s 1876 telephone and Edison’s 1877 phonograph had detached the voice
from the body and from time. The ease with which early twentieth-century consumers
accepted phonographic technology contributed to the increasing demand for the realistic
reproduction of the sounds of life onstage, while at the same time allowing for sound to
come from multiple worlds, the world of the play occurring on stage and a world that
encompassed the experience of the play from the audience. The distancing effect that
resulted from the reproduction of real-world sounds, offered for the private contemplation
of the voyeur-spectator, paved the way for further technological innovations, including
acoustically motivated architectural choices for business and everyday life (Thompson).

Acoustic design attempts to create the conditions for the possibility of sonically
realized worlds. Playwrights have imagined what those worlds might sound like. Just as
Sterne asks about the conditions for the possibility of technological change, we might
question the conditions or concerns that influence a dramatist’s aural fixations. We could
look to a playwright’s dialogue to imagine the kind of verbal world in which the writer
lived. I do not mean to draw the conclusion that playwrights speak the way they write. I
would feel sympathy for the friends and neighbors of Samuel Beckett or David Mamet if
that were the case. What I mean instead is that the sonic details of a piece of theater, however unlike everyday life, come from a place of cultural expectation and memory. Playwrights respond to the world in which they live and to the social conditions they have inherited. The aural worlds they offer us on paper, realized through dialogue and through unspoken stage direction teach audiences how to listen. The complexities involved in productions of plays that are not contemporary or in devised work that includes historical material can be great, for in these cases the production team must deal with the differences between the various cultures referenced and the context in which the production is created and experienced. The audience hears the performance with ears that have been tuned by their culture. But a play or other source material that was written hundreds of years ago in another culture altogether involves its own listening strategies. A production’s sound design teaches the audience how to listen to the world of the play through its negotiation of inherited auditory cultures and the sonic world of the audience.

*The playwright as sound designer*

Many playwrights design the sound of their plays as they write them, inscribing their auditory connection with the particular culture they inhabit. In act three, scene two of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Caliban invokes a rich auditory world that straddles nature and culture:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,

Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,
That if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked,
I cried to dream again. (169-70; 3.2.127-135)

Bruce R. Smith notes that The Tempest, one of Shakespeare’s last plays, was written specifically for the Blackfriar’s Theatre, an indoor performance space that was shaped and sounded very different than the outdoor Globe Theatre. Shakespeare’s work in particular relies on the imaginations of the audience to envision that which is described to them orally. Yet the actors’ voices were not the only sounding elements of the Tudor-Stuart theater; music and sound effects were also an important part of performance. As Smith points out, “Though falling well short of a thousand, the twangling instruments of the Blackfriars broken consort are nonetheless called upon to supply for the audience, at several points in the play, soothing sounds of the sort Caliban claims to have heard on the island many times over” (The Acoustic World 337). The musicians, playing from onstage and within full view of the audience, underscored the scene, sonically realizing the world described by Caliban. But the consort did not supply all that he calls for. Caliban’s words invoke a much richer sonic world than the musicians could realize. The underscoring worked with the writing to create more than either could alone, invoking a verbal world of imagination, reinforced by visibly played music.
Some playwrights create their auditory worlds through dialogue alone, communicating the ideas, themes, feelings, and images of the play through rhythm, rhyme, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, and other rhetorical devices, in either poetry or prose. The nineteenth-century American obsession with race, class, and difference is heard in the prevalence of explicitly written dialect choices in many of its plays and entertainments. Anna Cora Mowatt’s 1845 play *Fashion; or, Life in New York*, described by Myron Matlaw as “America’s finest nineteenth-century comedy” (Matlaw 27), opens (after a Prologue in the classical style) with a typical expository scene between two servants, “ZEKE, a colored servant” and “MILLINETTE, a French lady’s maid,” in which the main characters, the setting, and the theme of the play are presented all at once through the servants’ gossip:

ZEKE. Dere’s a coat to take de eyes ob all Broadway! Ah! Missy, it am de fixin’s dat make de natural born gemman. A libery for ever! Dere’s a pair ob insuppressibles to ‘stonish de colored population.

MILLINETTE. (*Very politely.*) Oh, *oui*, Monsieur Zeke. (*Aside.*) I not *comprend* one word he say!

ZEKE. I tell ‘ee what, Missy, I’m ‘storidinary glad to find dis a bery ‘spectabul like situation! … What I wants to know is your publicated opinion, privately expressed, ob de domestic circle.

MILLINETTE. You mean vat *espèce*, vat kind of *personnes* are Monsieur and Madame Tiffany? Ah! Monsieur is not de same ting as Madame—not at all.

ZEKE. Well, I s’pose he ain’t altogether.
MILLINETTE. Monsieur is man of business, Madame is lady of fashion.

Monsieur make de money, Madame spend it. Monsieur nobody at all,
Madame everybody altogether. Ah! Monsieur Zeke, de money is all dat is
necessaire in dis country to make one lady of fashion. Oh! it is quite anoder
   ting in la belle France!

(Mowatt 32)

Mowatt invokes a cosmopolitan America, full of archetypal characters whose differences
are described aurally through the various dialects and accents they employ in their
speech. The play is about appearances; the title is Fashion, after all. But the differences
in these appearances clash sonically in the different ways the characters speak. In the
second line of the play, the French maid Millinette establishes a relationship with the
audience with an aside, confiding, half in English and half in French, that she can’t
understand Zeke. The audience is immediately led to perk up its ears in order to listen for
difference.

Some dramatists call for pivotal sound effects in order to complete important
stage action. Henrik Ibsen ends his final play, When We Dead Awaken, written in 1899,
with an onstage avalanche, echoing another play-ending avalanche from much earlier in
Ibsen’s career. Brand, written in verse in 1865, is a philosophical play about the search
for God and the right way to live. The title character is a young Christian priest and an
idealist. At the end of this long play, Brand has isolated himself through his
uncompromising standards, including the sacrifice of his son and wife, and is swept up in
an avalanche brought on by an attempt to shoot down a great hawk. As the snows cover the entire valley and all of its villagers in a thunder of noise, Brand calls out to God, asking if his life of will in the name of religious principle is for nothing. A voice rings out above the sound of the avalanche: “He is the God of Love” (105). The voice may refer to the ending of part one of Goethe’s Faust, when a voice from the heavens responds to Faust saying that his wife is saved. But is the voice at the end of Brand God speaking? Or is it Ibsen himself? When Ibsen repeats this death by avalanche in When We Dead Awaken thirty-four years after Brand, the echoing voice of Maia calling over the sound of the avalanche—“I am free as a bird! I am free!”—is a reminder of Brand’s sacrificial hawk that brings on the deadly avalanche and an echo of the mysterious voice at the end of Brand. From When We Dead Awaken:

The mist-clouds close in over the scene – PROFESSOR RUBEK and IRENE, hand in hand, climb up over the snow-field to the right and soon disappear among the lower clouds. Keen storm-gusts hurtle and whistle through the air. The SISTER OF MERCY appears upon the stone-scree to the left. She stops and looks around silently and searchingly.

MAIA: I am free! I am free! I am free! No more life in the prison for me! I am free as a bird! I am free!

Suddenly a sound like thunder is heard from high up on the snow-field, which glides and whirls downwards with headlong speed. PROFESSOR RUBEK and IRENE can be dimly discerned as they are whirled along with the masses of snow and buried in them.
SISTER OF MERCY: (Gives a shriek, stretches out her arms towards them and cries.) Irene!

(Stands silent a moment, then makes the sign of the cross before her in the air, and says.) Pax vobiscum!

MAIA’S triumphant song sounds from still farther down below.

(119)

Maia is free in death. One avalanche was not enough for Ibsen to find freedom. Perhaps in the second, Ibsen ends his restlessness. Regardless of his reasons for revisiting the avalanche, the theater-going audience may have understood its significance in classical theater history. Whether through the arrival of the gods, Medea flying off on a dragon-led chariot, or perhaps something simpler like a strictly human intervention, a \textit{deus ex machina} often supplies a surprising transformation of characters’ fortunes with an accompanying impressive spectacle that surely included sound. As Brown notes, “The traditional role of theatre noises was largely symbolic. Elemental noise such as rain, wind and thunder, in classical tradition, were a sign of something being wrong in the cosmos” \cite{sound36}. Ibsen’s use of elemental noise to close his play (and career) fits into this classical tradition.

The challenge for the stage sound effects technician would have been how to create enough sound, how to continue it for the required duration, and how to create the sense of movement required for the avalanche to occur onstage. This may have been accomplished by several stage mechanisms from clashing thunder sheets hung behind the
upstage curtain to cannonballs let loose down “thunder runs” that started in the grid above the stage and moved out over the auditorium itself to give the sense of the avalanche’s terrifying speed and weight. The stage mechanism, like the *deus ex machina*, is part of a long tradition in the theater that was, by the early seventeenth-century, already considered by some to be mere gimmick. The 1616 Folio version of Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour* begins with a prologue that prefers “deeds, and language, such as men do use,” to the mere stage effects that the groundlings wish to see:

> He rather prays you will be pleas'd to see
> One such today, as other plays should be:
> Where neither chorus wafts you o'er the seas,
> Nor creaking throne comes down, the boys to please,
> Nor nimble squib is seen, to make afeard
> The gentlewomen, nor roll'd bullet heard
> To say, it thunders, nor tempestuous drum
> Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come;
> (5)

The phrase “roll’d bullet heard/ To say, it thunders” is a description of a mechanism very like the thunder run still in use at theatres in London and elsewhere at the end of Ibsen’s career. “Chekhov, Ibsen and Shaw,” sound designer John A. Leonard writes, “all wrote complex sound effects into their plays, and the sound designers of the past hundred years were required to produce these by purely mechanical means. Much ingenuity went into
the production of the devices such as wind machines, rain boxes, thunder sheets and
thunder runs to serve the demands of the play” (5).

Perhaps the most famous sound written by a playwright in the canon of Western
theater occurs twice in Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. In act two: “All sit lost in
thought. The silence is broken only by the subdued muttering of FIRS. Suddenly a
distant sound is heard as if from the sky, like the sound of a snapped string mournfully
dying away” (357). The sound causes Madame Ranevskaya to shudder and reminds Firs
of “the troubles” that led to the Emancipation. Again the sound is heard at the play’s end,
after Firs is inadvertently abandoned, locked up in the house: “A distant sound is heard
that seems to come from the sky, the sound of a snapped string mournfully dying away. A
stillness falls, and nothing is heard but the thud of ax on a tree far away in the orchard”
(393). The sound of the breaking string is famous in part because it is so difficult to
satisfactorily realize. After all, what is it? Is it, as Lopakhin suggests, a bucket broken
loose in a faraway mine shaft? What does the sound mean? How is it meant to be heard?
These are all questions about the sound’s dramaturgy.

*Sonic dramaturgy*

The use and interpretation of stage sound in general is, as I have already stated,
contingent upon culturally specific conventions and modes of listening. The audience’s
relationships to narrative and their perspectives on the performance experience are
mutable, providing a range of intimacy, empathy, identification, and critical distance.
Such long-serving theatrical devices as the aside and the chorus can momentarily bring
the audience closer to a specific character or point of view, while at the same time offering critical distance on another. Modern day productions of Tudor-Stuart plays engage with the material in ways that are very different from their first productions. A modern day understanding of theater sound’s relation to diegesis does not apply neatly to the theater practice of another time. As David Lindley explains,

> it is vital to understand the fundamental differences between [music’s] operation in the Shakespearean theatre, and the purposes it serves in modern productions. For while the music for which Shakespeare calls does heighten atmosphere, or gives a particular emotional colouration to speech and action, it is always part of the world of the play itself, heard and responded to by the characters on-stage, and not, as in later theatrical practice, or in film and television, an independent adjunct for the audience’s ears only, acting as commentary or metatext. (112)

Theater sound’s relation to narrative exists on a continuum, rather than a simple diegetic or nondiegetic understanding. In the case of the Tudor-Stuart theater, which included some visible sound sources, like onstage musicians, and others sources that were not visible, such as thunder that was created by rolling cannonballs across the floor of a room above the stage, music may be thought of as offering both subjective commentary on the action and objective “reportage” of the audible content of a scene. Music may have created a mood or atmosphere at Shakespeare’s Globe, but according to Lindley, “instrumental music – whatever symbolic weight it might carry – is almost always
assumed to be audible to the characters on stage” (Lindley 112), thus creating an “objective” mood within the narrative world of the play.

Chekhov also offers examples of blurred relations to sound. His plays respond to a century of melodramatic practice by introducing silences. States describes what occurs in a Chekhov silence in this way: “the tactile world, the visible world (which the talk is aimed unconsciously at keeping at bay), this history-in objects, quietly encroaches on the human… Suddenly you can hear the ticking of objects and the ceaseless flow of future into past: the world is no longer covered by conversation” (States, Great Reckonings 74). Sound in Chekhov’s plays shift from the singular subjectivities reified in melodrama’s nondiegetic music, in which one can almost always identify whom to cheer and whom to hiss by their music, to the possibility of a subjective understanding of the objective: “the ticking of objects.” Perhaps these sounds of the everyday may be heard in terms of Chion’s anempathy. It could be that after the late night confessions of Irina, Masha, and Andrei in act three of Chekhov’s The Three Sisters, when all is said and everyone finally leaves the stage, the sound of the fire alarms down the street raises the intensity or depth of feeling we have for this family. The juxtaposition of sounds in the opening scene of the play—the conversation between the sisters, the clock striking twelve, Masha’s absent-minded whistling, and the laughter and snatches of conversation from the soldiers in the parlor—provide a rich matrix of sounds heard in layers of foreground and background, objectively offering subjective viewpoints on the action. Chekhov’s pauses presage not only Beckett, as States points out (74), but also the silences of John Cage. “It is within
this bed of ambiguity that [Chekhov] plants his sound effects, on the cusp between audibility, touch and imagination” (Brown 75).

This chapter’s discussion of writing sound for the theater and acoustic theater design is by no means intended to be comprehensive. This project is not a history. But it is necessary to place the ideas I wish to explore within the context of a history of practice. Theater sound has a history as long as the theater itself. Just as there are many histories of theater, there are many histories of theater sound that should be undertaken. This project explores current practices and attempts to theorize about them. One hopes the ideas explored here may provide particular filters through which future histories of theater and performance may be written.
It is Friday, February 11, 2011, and I am visiting New York City in order to do research in the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. It is a quick trip, less than three days, but I have made time to see a new play called *Compulsion* by Rinne Groff at The Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival. I am excited because I have never been to the Public and because I am researching the work of sound designer Darron L. West, who designed the production’s sound. I take notes during the performance, paying close attention to sounds in the performance and their possible meanings. West’s design seems to use sound in largely predictable ways—as a device to link scenes and cover scenic changes and as an emotional trigger in what proves to be a very dramatic performance.

But there is something that is different. Early in the performance an almost imperceptible rumble begins, continues for about thirty seconds, and then fades away. The rumble returns again and again, and with each reoccurrence, my attention turns more toward it. There is a looming darkness in this play about a Jewish man’s obsessive need to share Anne Frank’s diary with a potentially anti-Semitic American audience. The palpable difference between the deep rumbling sound and other moments of underscoring is how it affects my whole body. The sound is audible, though just barely, and might be easy to miss were it not also tactiley perceptible. Every time I perceive the sound, I feel it first, coming up through my feet and my seat, before I hear it. The sound grows but remains way in the background, before fading into nothingness and leaving a noticeable
stillness into which lead actor Mandy Patinkin’s emotional growls and whines become even more pronounced. I become increasingly focused on this particular sound, trying to determine its source and its meanings. It doesn’t seem to correspond to the protagonist’s emotional fits or to the beautifully operated marionettes that he interacts with during imaginative private moments. Noting the visible speaker setup of the theater, I begin to guess at the number and placement of subwoofers under the audience’s seats. The subwoofers seem not to be used in any other sound, but the rumble returns again and again. Finally, at intermission I turn to a young couple seated next to me and ask if they heard the sound. The young woman looks at me as though I have asked an odd question and replies, “Do you mean the subway?”

It is then that I remember where I am. It is not that I hadn’t realized I was in a theater and in this theater in particular; it is just that I hadn’t allowed for the possibility that the world outside of the theater would encroach upon the imaginary world of the performance, a world that I helped to realize by engaging with it. I am in New York City, but not the same New York City of the play. It is 2011, and the trains will continue to run below me periodically throughout the second act. After I leave the Public Theater they will continue to run beneath the building and the city all night long. I am immersed in the barely perceptible sounds of the city while listening to the performance. One sound field can be sensed through the other. This is the sonic context of the performance.

There are many notable aspects of this experience, but I want to distill it into five ideas that will form the basis for my argument about how we perceive and understand
theater sound. Some of these ideas may be obvious; others may be contentious. I present them here in the most bald fashion and will undertake to explain further in what follows.

Number one: Theater is at once an act of the body and of the imagination. Because sound affects us through our skin as well as through our ears and yet is seemingly incorporeal and invisible, sound in the theater is particularly well suited to play with and emphasize the relationship between the body and the imagination. Our imaginations work to make narrative and affective connections whether or not a performance intends to communicate them. The world and action of the play come movingly to life because the various designed and rehearsed aspects of the play, from the script to the puppets to the sound, are enacted in the same space and time as the audience, who share the experience bodily. Sound is a potent tool for stimulating and directing our imaginations. The imagination, however, is not solely of the mind. The “looming darkness” I grasped in the play’s story and world relied on the low sound that so flummoxed me. My encounter with that sound occurred in my body. Its meaningful resonance relies upon the embodiment of the encounter.

Number two: We experience the world through all the senses simultaneously and inseparably. Theater is experienced through the senses and feelings before “meaning” accrues. Though there may be an emphasis on visual spectacle in theater history, what is seen is experienced at the same time as what is heard, felt, and even smelt and tasted. I experienced the low rumbling sound during Compulsion first and perhaps most vividly as vibration. I felt it through the skin, muscle, bones, and tissue of my body. I experienced the sound through the perceptual modes of touch and hearing together. At the same time,
I saw well-lit scenes occurring on the stage and attempted to associate what was heard and felt with what was seen. What I heard and felt did not seem to connect directly with the onstage moments in which I heard and felt them, but they did lead me to a feeling about the play that I could not quite put my finger on. When those vibrations ceased they left rich absences, vacuums of feeling that aided the actors.

In addition, I experienced the un-designed sound of subway trains passing below during the performance of *Compulsion* in a way that had nothing to do with representation. The sound affected my experience, even though I could not identify, understand, or even emotionally relate to it clearly. Theater sound works on the listener immediately, changing our relationship to the continual and complex stream of sensations we experience without our cognitive understanding of those changes.

Number three: Sounds may be thought of not as objects but rather as events. In other words, sounds are generally caused by occurrences in the world, but are not objects that fly from their sources to our ears. Sounds physically *occur* and have material effects independent of human perception. The use of sound in the theater relies upon our experience and knowledge of those effects. Sound in the theater offers us sonic events that are manipulated artistically in order to change listeners’ relationships with the imaginative events of the play. The low rumble I heard during *Compulsion*, despite being an un-designed aspect of the soundscape of the performance, referred me to the reality of loud, sustained, low-pitched sounds in the world. When the building gently vibrated with the tons of machinery moving rapidly below it, the sensations I experienced were interpreted as force, movement, and danger—“looming darkness.”
Number four: The context of sound design is a socially constructed world of noises. During a theater performance we hear a play through the sonic context in which the performance resides. Sound is employed in culturally specific and identifiable ways in theater. I experienced the performance of *Compulsion* through the sensations of New York City, however distant, minute, or perhaps insignificant those sensations might have been. Had I experienced the play in Kansas City, Beijing, or anywhere else, my experience would have been different. In this way all performance is site-specific and contextually—that is, socially, culturally, and historically—contingent. Rarely do performances acknowledge this.

Number five: Theater sound can reinforce and concretize a singular meaning, but can also open up interpretation, offer multiple perspectives, and create ambiguities that may lead to new possibilities. The low rumbling sound in *Compulsion*, though not a controllable aspect of the production, worked in parallel to the designed aspects of the production to create new meanings. Theater sound resonates, literally and metaphorically, in the spaces between narrative and everyday life, connecting listeners to multiplicity and possibility.

These five points roughly form the bones of the project’s overall argument. Although the example I begin with will not suffice to demonstrate every aspect of the discussion that will follow, the effects that it had on me and the questions that it provoked in me provide the impetus to begin.
**Phenomenology and imagination**

Theater is a double bind. It is simultaneously an experience of the body and of the imagination. Whether from my seat in the auditorium or on my feet on the stage, I engage the theater as a body, but I do so mindfully. I am neither body, nor mind alone; I am both body and mind together. As Douglas Kahn puts it, “Humans perceive the world while being within the world; they are implicated within it and are not somehow outside looking in or on” (Kahn 27). In my everyday life, my experience of self and my relationships with other beings (defined as broadly as possible) are constituted by the interplay between body and mind. To use Phillip B. Zarrilli’s term, I experience the world as a “body-mind” within it. The theater is a potent site with which to question this relationship because the relations between body and imagination are emphasized in theater performance.

Theater is an embodied experience, offered and received by and through the material bodies present. The actuality of bodies, of materiality, is perhaps what makes theater or dance a categorically different experience than that of the cinema, a point made especially evident in video documentation of live performance events. On video a theater performance is nothing like the experience of having been there. It is the same event, but it lacks the living, breathing materiality of people sharing time, space, and imagination. This is why such documentation is often referred to as an “archival” recording. Like costume pieces, programs, newspaper reviews, and letters, video documentation is “ephemera.” Theater is ephemeral; you have to be there. Herbert Blau refers to the “surpassing body” as the nagging reality that, despite our abilities to write about or think
through the endless chain of significations in which meanings seem to constantly slip away, the body is where, what, and who we are right now, and it is through the body that we understand anything at all. The body is “that impertinent presence which constitutes the expressiveness of codes or the apparent life-force or vitality of signs” (Blau, To All Appearances 120). We can chase the signs if we wish (and once begun, the chase is difficult to relinquish), but it is only as we find ourselves in the signs that they take on meaning for us. “I am in my body the way that is simply inescapable, not to be deferred or lost as on the freeway in the metonymic appearances of a referential chain, nor reconstituted in the eternity of ideology as a linguistic subject, though I am that, too, to all appearances, which keep us tautologically in the double bind” (Blau, To All Appearances 121).

Audience members are not separate from the actual world of the performance. They share the physical environment with the performers, breathing the same air and sharing the time and space of the theatrical encounter. The audience does not share in the preparation of the performance, but the performance itself comes to life because of the attention, the affective energy, that the audience brings to it. It is a collective embodied experience. The shared time and space of theater emphasizes the material aspect of the encounter.

While the body of the performer and the body of the spectator are inescapable parts of the performance event, the theater is also an intensely imaginative experience, in which memory, representation, and expectation create narrative and interest. As participants at the theater, we engage our imaginative capacities in order to experience
something new, a new moment with new ideas and feelings. We seek out the new moment, putting together sensations and perceptions to create feelings, thoughts, and meanings. It is our imaginations that put these pieces together. The phenomenological attitude does not consist in the self simply being acted upon, receiving the world’s stimuli. Instead the self acts while being acted upon. Seated in the auditorium, seemingly passive, the audience member must take an active interest in the event in order to discover his or her own connection with it. As Kahn explains, “The object does not extend itself to the waiting individual: the individual finds it. And if meaning and feeling resides there, it is because the individual finds a piece of himself or herself” (Kahn 27).

But, meanings, if they exist, exist not only for me, but also for us. Theater meaning is found and created in the shared experience. The sound of the train rumbling below the theater during the performance of Compulsion transmitted an intersubjective, social experience that everyone in the theater shared, whether or not they recognized the actual cause of the experience.

In the theater we participate in creating fiction, the action of fashioning a world. If what unfolds before the auditor is interesting, engaging, or compelling, it is not just a new experience; it is an experience of newness. Often what occurs at the theater does not take place in our own lives just so. Sitting in the auditorium, we get to experience the “just so” in person, breathing the same air as those going through it and sharing the imaginative act with other audience members. Though audience members do not speak the words or go through the actions occurring on stage, they do more than simply passively and objectively observe the events. Instead, they get involved with them. They
experience sensations, feelings, and thoughts that they otherwise would not, and they value the experience enough to spend their time, energy, and money on it. This experience is not the same as living the events, but the privileged position of the audience member invites a more focused and involved attention to the moment than a passerby might experience in everyday life.

We are called to witness at the theater. The theatrical action is crafted, heightened, and somehow made more energized through the focused energies of performers working in time with the realities of space. Though the imagined events on stage are not “real,” the physical actions that create them actually occur and generate real feelings and thoughts. The theater is generally a safe place to experience risky or impossible events. Those events, experienced at the intersection of the actual and the virtual, can change our perspectives, and in that way their significance can be very great. Even in stage acts of skill that do not involve representation or illusion, from circus acts like juggling or tight-rope walking to performance art works such as Marina Abramović’s bloody Rhythm 10, in which our fascination may be held not by what we willingly imagine to be happening but by what is, amazingly, actually occurring, our involvement in the unfolding events is measured by our willingness to imagine ourselves doing what we see being done. What does it feel like? What are the repercussions of a mistake? What is at stake? We become participants, engaged in and moved by the actions before us. In this way the performance of skill and risk gains energy and significance.

Though there may be no mimesis involved in these performances of skill, performances in which the performer actually does what she appears to do and makes no
attempt to impersonate another person or entity, there is empathy. Empathy involves the body-mind imaginatively reaching out to discover someone else’s situation from the inside. Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis describe the difference between sympathy and empathy, stating, “To sympathise is to feel for someone: they remain distressed but outside oneself. To empathise is to feel with someone: one is imaginatively not outside but in their shoes” (195). Shepherd and Wallis cite psychologist Theodor Lipps’s 1897 theory of Einfühlung as an important influence on our current understanding of empathy. In his theory, “perceivers respond to the characteristics or qualities of an object and simultaneously project their own characteristics or qualities into it. The process is both responsive and active; it receives the content of the object perceived and also reaches out towards it, embracing its distinctness” (Shepherd and Wallis 196). Sympathy and empathy are complicated and sometimes contradictory feelings, not least because they can occur at the same time, allowing the spectator to simultaneously identify with and remain distanced from the object of their “fellow feeling.” Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster notes that the term “empathy” in particular has come to reside “within the domain of psychology where it has been investigated largely as an emotional, and not physical experience” (Foster 10). She goes on to point out that some scholars have taken to refer to the experience as “kinesthetic empathy.” “The fact that the experience of empathy needs to be qualified with the adjective ‘kinesthetic’ belies the pervasive assumption that emotional and physical experiences are separate” (Foster 10).

The audience’s reactions to the swallowing of swords or other performances of danger and risk can be wildly varied, simultaneously riveting and repelling to individuals
experiencing the same performance. The response is kinesthetic, meaning that the observer’s body acts in response to the action of another. As I watch the performance of swallowing a sword, I may start with riveted fascination, but begin to feel disgust as I “go through the motions” of sword-swallowing: my throat opening, attempting to stay open as long as possible, imagining the feel of steel sliding into my throat, down my esophagus, down… how far? Until finally I retch at the thought and feeling of what I observe. My empathy for the performance may lead me to amazement, my sympathy to admiration for the performer. And yet the experience may keep me from ever wanting to witness another sword-swallowing performance.

Empathy reveals that the body-mind and phenomenological imagination are vitally important to the theater. As Bert O. States, one of the few theater scholars to have attempted a detailed phenomenological accounting of theater performance, describes his task, “The phenomenological critic strives to show how theater becomes theater – that is, how theater throws up the pretense that it is another kind of reality than the one constituting the ground on which its pretense is based” (“The Phenomenological Attitude” 372). Our sense of the fictionalized moment, embodied before us, and our interest in bodily, mindfully, and feelingly attending to that moment is what brings theater to life.

_The Dramatic Imagination_ by Robert Edmond Jones encapsulates this idea in its third chapter, “The Theatre As It Was and As It Is.” In what Jones imagines to be the prehistoric birth of theater, his storyteller moves from narrating a tale around the campfire—“this is what happened”—to enacting the story. The moment is embodied
before willing and appreciative witnesses. The storyteller appoints an audience member, “Ook,” to don the lion’s skin and in this moment the appointee becomes a lion. He is still himself, but he is the lion too. He becomes the first actor. The great lion hunt is recreated. The man playing the lion wears the skin of the actual lion. He growls and roars like a lion. He is not a lion, but he is still scary to the audience. The storyteller throws his imaginary spear and the lion falls down dead. Then, as Jones relates, “Now Ook takes off the lion’s skin and sits beside us and is himself again. Just like you. Just like me. No, not quite like you or me. Ook will be, as long as he lives, the man who can be a lion when he wants to” (12). Though we cannot possibly know if Jones’s speculations about the origins of theater are correct (and the primitivist tone with which he tells his story surely reveals more about the culture in which these speculations were shared than about the pre-historical period in question), his story emphasizes the interplay between the body of the performer, the imaginations of the audience, the living embodiedness of the event, and theater’s potential to transform experience.

As individuals we use our imaginations in our everyday lives to think through what might happen in the distant or immediate future or to replay past events. What Jones makes vivid in his essay is that drama is evoked when we use our imaginations collectively (12). In his story Jones deliberately gives his prehistoric characters language, saying, “I know a better way to tell you. See! It was like this! Let me show you!” (11). That moment, according to Jones, is the “instant drama is born” (11). Unlike Jones, however, I would consider the possibility that this moment pre-dates humans’ ability to use language. It is our imaginations that create interest. Language is not necessary to
imagine. Peter Brook relates an allegory about theater in his book *The Shifting Point*, stating that it is *interest* that compels us in the theater and that sustains our lives (242). I turn toward what interests me and give it my attention. When a collective interest is raised in the theater, it results in a willingness to believe in the truth of a dramatic representation. Theater performance thrives as a result of audience attention. The communal leaning forward in our chairs generates an extremely valuable level of intensity. Bernard Beckerman states,

> Leaning forward in one’s seat, which reflects strong involvement in a presentation, mirrors the forward thrust of the dramatic action. … Imaginatively we follow a path that runs parallel, not to the events themselves, but to the shifts of tension either between characters or between ourselves and the performers. This process may be called *empathetic parallelism*. (*Dynamics* 149)

With the term “empathetic parallelism,” Beckerman implies a “total process of interaction: the perception, the sustaining of illusion, the experiencing of sensation, and the physical and/or mental adjustment to that sensation” (*Dynamics* 149). If we have been to the theater before (and even if we haven’t), we know that what is onstage is not the same as everyday life. We partake of theater because it is exciting and strange, because it leads us to think and feel things that we otherwise wouldn’t, and because it reveals something about life. It is not a replica of everyday life, even when it purports to be. Theater offers experiences and perspectives with which to return to our everyday life. Even in the production of a play without a storyline, actions on stage can ignite
imaginations, leading audience members to make personal and collective associations. Audiences sense, feel, think, and perhaps even change their ways of being, all through the interplay of embodied imagination. Because of this interplay, those involved in the process of theater creation are intensely interested in using and understanding imagination and its possibilities.

Sharing sound

Theater sound is rooted in a shared experience, working between people and connecting audience members with performers and with one another. People hear and feel the intensities, rhythms, frequencies, and timbres of sound together in the theater, and the experience works in concert with stage action. Theater music is often thought of or referred to as accompaniment. But to say that music, sound, or noise is background to the lives and problems of the narrative is to simplify the relationship between the sonic and what occurs on stage and to ignore its embodied effects on those attending. The sonic elements of theater move alongside of, in counterpoint to, and sometimes even against stage action, giving rise to complex feelings and meanings in an experience of multiplicity. The larger question here is what work theater sound accomplishes, because, as Steve Goodman writes, “It is always more useful to ask what something can do, its potential, rather than what it is, its essence” (6).

Theater sound is sensed and processed by auditors’ whole bodies, through “the primacy of the synesthetic” (Goodman 9), and not only through hearing. Sound’s tactility is just as vital to our appreciation of or reaction to sound as is its audible
qualities. As sound designer and Robert Wilson collaborator Hans Peter Kuhn states, “our perception is not working in separate sections, rather in a concert of all senses” (qtd. in Brown, Sound 113). When an audience experiences sound, the experience occurs in multiple sense organs by a crowd whose embodied listening encourages further attention. The physical experience of sensation becomes the embodied experience of perception and the cognitive experience of association and reflection. Stephen Di Benedetto tracks this progression: “By engaging the web of our sensations, the event becomes accessible to our consciousness by both physical and intellectual means. The use of sound is a useful example because we can both listen to dialogue as well as monitor the ambient noises of the space that we share with the performers or their proxies” (144). The ambient noises of the space and the designed sonic ambience combine to create an atmosphere of sound that may or may not be attended to. While listening to spoken or sung dialogue, an audience member may not pay attention to these other sounds, but the atmospheric sounds may be physically and perhaps metaphorically felt. If the sounds are not registered intellectually but make a physical impression, they will influence how the dialogue—or any element of the production that is consciously attended to—is sensed, perceived, felt, and understood. Acknowledging that sound’s materiality has sensual, vibratory, textural, or physically intensive effects on audiences opens up new possibilities for theater production. An auditor’s body offers resistance to sounds that are sensually felt, and this resistance is an inclusion of the audience, who become physical participants in the event. Yi-Fu Tuan writes, “Touch, unlike the other senses, modifies its object. It reminds us that we are not only observers of the world but actors in it” (Tuan 78-9). The
audience’s embodied participation through multiple senses attunes them to a play’s narrative and meanings.

Theater sound is understood in terms of stage action. Audience members see and hear what happens on stage while simultaneously hearing sounds, music, or noises that are unseen. Whether or not the unseen but heard stimulus makes sense in accordance to the concurrent stage action, the sound is felt or understood in relation to it. Melodrama offers a clear expression of this, with thematic and character-driven musical motifs that announce entrances, intensify action, and direct an audience to feel specific emotions and identify with certain points of view. The sonic does not have to operate this way in the theater, but there are traditions of it extending at least as far into the past as Tudor London. Ross Brown points to “the use of ‘vilest out of tune music’ in Marston’s _Malcontent_ at the Globe in 1603 to herald the entrance of the villains, a familiar feature of melodrama” (_Sound_ 60). Sound in the theater often connects the attendant to what occurs on stage by intensifying the sense of the moment’s presence, immersing the audience and offering an intimate or “felt” perspective on it. As “vilest out of tune music” begins, the audience understands that it indicates the imminent entrance of villains. Perhaps groundlings at the Globe would have taken the cue as an opportunity to participate in the stage event by preparing to hiss the villains. The music climaxes with the characters’ entrance, fulfilling its promise. The auditory is heard in relation to the action onstage, which is perceived visually, aurally, and perhaps to a lesser degree through touch, smell, and taste. The fact that groundlings ate and drank during
performances had an effect on their experience of the performance. As Di Benedetto explains:

When all of our senses are invigorated, the data they receive is cross-fertilized and influences our perceptions of all the senses. As our bodies transfer attention from one sense to the next, we begin to form a picture of the event. As we untangle that weave of sensations we can become more precise in our physical responses and our conscious understanding of the event. (151-2)

The precision with which we respond and make conscious meaning is facilitated by this interplay of the senses, all of which offer information and sensation in relation to the stage action.

The ways that sound is used in the theater are historically and culturally contingent. Theater is an intervention in a specific everyday culture. Theater sound is meaningful only in terms of that culture’s learned relationship with hearing and sounding. *What* is heard when a sound plays in a theatrical moment, whether understood in terms of the object that is assumed to make the sound or the particular audible qualities of amplitudes, frequencies, rhythms, and timbres that make up the sound, will be meaningful only in terms of *how* audience members expect the sound to be meaningful. David Howes notes that there is a “continual interplay between sensuality and sociality” (*Sensual Relations* 56). The sensual is meaningful in terms of the social, and audible worlds—social networks of sound—teach us how to hear them. The categories themselves—sound, music, noise—carry significant cultural and historical meaning. If
sound helps to lead theater to an experience of presence, that experience’s meanings are limited by the audience’s expectations. As Bruce R. Smith notes, “Presence is what a given culture takes to be presence” (The Acoustic World 12 italics original). Jim Drobnick warns, “however apparent sound’s unique qualities may be, it is important to guard against essentializing sound as an autonomous realm” (10). Sound is heard within a context. In the theater, sound’s context is especially complex, including all the audience members’ functioning senses and faculties of perception, the action on stage and generated imaginatively by the production, and the historical and social milieu in which the performance takes place. Thus, theater sound is not “an autonomous realm,” but like other aspects of production is in relation to the intended and enacted theater event. The very ways that audience members take in the sonic is fraught with expectation. Drobnick notes, “it must be remembered that listening is as much a learned behaviour as it is a perceptual function” (11).

Listening and relating to theater sound is a social experience. But the experience is both individual and collective. When we actively listen at the theater we give our attention to the performance, aiding the performers as they manipulate time and space in order to share a story, a feeling, an idea, or an experience. The thoughts and feelings of individual audience members are generally not shared during the performance itself and will vary greatly from person to person. Sitting in the audience, I am alone with my thoughts. The specific associations or connections I make with the theater event may not be universally shared. But perhaps most associations are cultural and will be recognized by many audience members, forming what Barthes might consider an extended text.
According to Barthes, “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” (*Image-Music-Text* 146).

For Barthes, listening is not only psychological, but perhaps more significantly an action. He recognizes three distinct kinds of listening. The first is about survival, a physiological attention to that which indicates the presence of predators, prey, or “the approaching footsteps which might be the mother’s or the beloved’s” (*The Responsibility of Forms* 245). The second kind of listening involves the deciphering of cultural codes, such as spoken or sung language. This moves beyond feeling toward cognition. The third kind of listening for Barthes “does not aim at—or await—certain determined, classified signs: not what is said or emitted, but who speaks, who emits: such listening is supposed to develop in an inter-subjective space where ‘I am listening’ also means ‘listen to me’” (246). Barthes’ third kind of listening, in which “*listening speaks*” (259), indicates active involvement on the listener’s part, a kind of identification with and desire for the speaking subject. The extended text of theater sound is a culturally determined set of meanings, an inherently social experience of sound in the theater that is, nevertheless, also private as the listener sits in the dark with his or her own thoughts and feelings. Sound and music help to initiate and perhaps guide the movement of those private thoughts and feelings, whose makeup is at least in part culturally specific and that is experienced collectively.
Theater sound and affect

Sound works “in the friction between us” (Blau, Take Up 84 italics original) to create a participatory, embodied experience that is shared not only between audience members at the theater, but also with actors and other performers. Sound communicates feeling, but not the same feeling for all listening. It initiates the movement of affect, a physical impingement that is shared among attendants. Sound’s intensity, movement, and conjunction with the action, people, and visual spectacle of the theatrical moment affects us viscerally. The presence, absence, and movement of sound change us, regardless of whether or not we understand sound as the cause of or contributor to the change. Many theater-makers today, conscious of the ubiquity of noise in everyday life, are bringing more conscious awareness to sound in their work. As opera and theater director Peter Sellars writes in Deena Kaye and James Lebrecht’s Sound and Music for the Theatre: The Art and Technique of Design, “Sound is the holistic process and program that binds our multifarious experience of the world. Sound is our own inner continuity track. It is also our primary outward gesture to the world, our first and best chance to communicate with others, to become part of a larger rhythm” (x).

Christoph Cox describes affect as a body’s “dynamic relationships with other entities” (Cox, “How Do You”). This is a definition so broad as to seem almost unusable. Yet, the affective qualities of sound—the ways that sound can literally and figuratively “move” us—create dynamic relationships with stage action, with the actors performing those actions, and with audience members caught up in the sensual and associative experience of listening at the theater. Affect is so much a part of everyday
life, and yet it is so difficult to quantify that it is frequently ignored. As Felix Guattari notes, “affect remains hazy, atmospheric, and nevertheless perfectly apprehensible” (158). Affect is apprehensible because it apprehends me: I am held in “a kind of contact zone,” that is “a tangle of potential connections” (Stewart 3).

The world affects us in ways that we cannot always immediately understand, though our body registers the change. An audience member caught up in an intense meeting or parting of two people on stage may respond to the sound marking their meeting with goose bumps on their arms or chills down their spine or the small hairs of their neck standing up. Though it may not be the sole cause of such a physiological reaction, sound can deepen the intensity of such a moment because it seems to exist simultaneously outside of us and within us. Sound’s rhythmic vibrations, amplitudes, and frequencies can physically strike or pass through and affect any material within range, human or non-human, living or not. Sounds also stimulate imaginative associations that may be realized as thought, may invoke memories, or may simply evoke feelings. Prior to imagination taking hold of an audience member’s attention though, sound’s first encounter with the audience member will be one of affect.

The term affectus is found in the Ethics of the seventeenth-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza. Translators of his book have rendered the Latin affectus variously as “emotion” and simply “affect.” In either case, Spinoza roots affect in the body and considers it an aspect of the body’s possibilities, its becoming rather than its being. “By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained” (Spinoza 154). If affect is a kind of feeling
in the body, it is emphasized through changes in its intensity that transform the subject’s ability to express itself and to exert force in the world. As Brian Massumi defines it in his foreword to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, affect is “an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act” (xvi). A “prepersonal intensity” is a movement in the body that prepares the subject to feel, to move, to express emotion, and to exert will. It is an unconscious response to the world. Affect is about the conditions of everyday life—what Deleuze terms the “virtual”—because it is not yet actualized in feeling, thought, or behavior. It contains the possibility for all things and conditions the future, which becomes actualized in the present.

Affect is about relationships between bodies that cause one another to change. It does not exist outside of the relationships that it expresses. The word “body” may be defined broadly to refer to human or non-human bodies or objects, but may also refer to an idea, concept, or social structure. For Spinoza and Deleuze, a body is most usefully defined in terms of its ability to act. Deleuze and Guattari note, “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 257). Danily Rutherford describes it in just these terms, saying, “Affect… is a phenomenon – not a stand alone thing in the world… but a term called forth through a relationship with an apparatus, which is as much a part of the concept as the idea we identify at its heart” (n.p.). Rutherford urges us to move beyond definition, however, toward function. “Instead of asking what affect is, perhaps we should be asking where
this concept comes from and what it is doing. What kind of analytic apparatuses are entangled with it? What happens to the world when we use this tool?” (n.p.).

The analytical apparatus I wish to entangle with affect is theater sound. Certainly sound design is an artistic and aesthetic project, a dramaturgical endeavor that aims toward realization within the context of theater performance. But I wish to also describe the presence and use of sound in performance in analytical terms to better understand just what performance does to the experience of social life.

Affect and sound are both aspects of everyday life, but I have drawn special attention to them because of their strong intersubjective affinities. The experience of sound is a social experience that brings object and subject together and subject and subject together in mutual vibration. Moreover, the vibratory social experience of sound is a shared experience of affect. It is feeling and movement in its virtual state, ready to be actualized in any number of directions. Theater is a sensory playground involving a dramaturgy of all our senses, our feelings, and our imaginations.

My focused listening during the performance of Compulsion may be thought of as listening not just to the performance but also about it. That is, I also listened to that which surrounded, bordered, and defined the performance by its difference from it. There were many sounds during the performance, in addition to the one that I focused on, that were not part of the sound design: sounds of the audience shifting in their seats, coughing, turning pages of their programs, whispering. These sounds I was able to immediately identify and let pass unheeded. These were the expected sounds, those that accompany many performances at the theater. I effectively discriminated between these
“everyday” sounds (sounds that are nevertheless specific to an event we consider outside of the everyday) and the sounds that existed within and for the world of the performance. I kept the theatrical frame(s) of the performance in place, but inadvertently allowed for the inclusion of the everyday into the theatrical world of the play by trying to make that bothersome sound fit. This was an accident. Had I understood what that low rumbling sound was, I might have mentally set it aside, paying it no more mind than I did to the sounds of the building’s ventilation system. But because I had worked so hard during the first act to let this sound be purposeful, both abstracting it from its (or any) source and allowing it to resonate affectively, I found that during the second act I anticipated its arrival and it continued to be meaningful, though I paid it less conscious attention. The sound seemed to fit, even though its occurrences did not coincide with the play’s dramatic actions and did not represent anything in particular. For me it offered a feeling that resembled the overall content of the play, but did so, interestingly, on a rhythm all its own.

Representation is a centrally charged issue in the theater. Sound design, operating in conjunction with the other elements of theater, must accept the challenge of representation, but it may do so in ways that are different from the visual. Drobnick explains:

Representation and interpretation, for example, are issues in which sound shares with pictures and text, yet sound reconfigures these very issues by inflecting representation with affect, and interpretation with embodiment. The act of listening is not an activity done remotely; it inevitably invokes corporeality, it
envelops listeners, and… it resounds within the body. The types of ‘literacy’ involved with listening are strikingly complex; they not only exceed but challenge the conventions of visual and textual models. (10)

Affect is part and parcel of representation as configured by sound. In the theater the sonic and visual are rarely offered in isolation from one another in the act of representation, presentation, or narrative. When the sonic and visual are separated, the absence of one or the other, only serves to highlight its absence and focus attention on the changing intensities of our affective encounter.

In what follows, then, I will focus my attention on affect within the sonic encounter of theater, exploring how sound creates sociality among performers and auditors and the ways that the affective sonic encounter lays a foundation for the realization of representation on stage. Theater group SITI Company, whose work is the subject of chapters three, four, and five, actively works with affect through a practice of affective listening and a sensual, embodied relationship to sounding and sound design.
Innovative New York City-based theater group SITI Company celebrates their twentieth anniversary this year. A hallmark of their work is attention to sound design as a dramaturgy that negotiates imagination and embodiment. Though sound design in the theater is not SITI Company’s only or even its primary concern, their focus on paying attention to the empirical in performance combines with their daily work with music, sound, and vibration to make them an interesting and productive case with which to explore the relationship between sound design and acting in theater practice today. Tony award-winning resident sound designer and director Darron L. West works each day in rehearsal to create, in the words of company member Barney O’Hanlon, “something for the performer to press against.”

Since the company’s inception, it has trained daily, using two very different techniques, the Suzuki method of actor training and Viewpoints. The two methods of working develop great physical and mental concentration, not only in onstage performers, but also for those in the room attending to the onstage event. The attentiveness and discipline they bring to their work encourages interest and attention in the audience. The goal of their training is the creation of what company members refer to as “density.” This chapter explores the ways that sound in particular contributes to a process of generating and transforming densities in SITI’s training and productions. This chapter will focus on the embodied experience of the actor and the various ways that the development of an ability to respond to both large and very small changes in one’s
environment becomes significant to a play’s dramaturgy. Suzuki and Viewpoints training focuses the actor on sensation and the body. The audience’s imaginations and the actors’ abilities to create a vivid sense of fiction rely on their sensing bodies. SITI Company actors have developed a practice of “affective listening.” As Brian Massumi states, “Affective listening is what a sensing body does. The mind alone cannot listen affectively. On the plane of a sensing body, listening is synesthetic, with senses participating among each other” (Parables 35). To listen affectively is to attend to change in whatever form or degree it becomes apparent with one’s whole body—not in thought alone, but through sensation, perception, feeling, and thought. Affective listening is listening not only with one’s ears and not only as a mental activity. As described in chapter one, affect here refers to the movement of force or intensity and a resultant change in ability to act. The “affective” part of affective listening involves the body as a resonator, putting the listener in a relationship with that which is sensed.

In this chapter I argue that the vibratory qualities of sound, experienced through multiple sense organs, have affinities with the practice of Suzuki and Viewpoints. This daily training regimen, focusing on the sensing body and practiced by SITI over the last twenty years, make them keenly responsive to sound. Through his sound design work it is clear that West, though not physically embodying the Suzuki and Viewpoints practices by moving, speaking, and acting onstage as the company’s actors do, nevertheless is attuned to the training and its effects. His attention to the rigorous bodily density that Suzuki practice creates and his own ability to listen affectively, honed through the company’s study of the Viewpoints, allow him to contribute to the process of generating,
maintaining, and transforming the densities that make SITI’s work so compelling. This chapter will introduce SITI Company and its working methods. The notion of “density” will be defined and complicated. Suzuki and Viewpoints will each be examined and their relation to sound questioned. The chapter will close with a discussion of the ways Suzuki, Viewpoints, and sound design work together to create compelling acting in SITI Company’s work. Throughout I will draw upon scholarship on Suzuki and Viewpoints, my participant-observations of a five-week training session with SITI Company in the autumn of 2012, interviews I conducted with company members at that time, and critical analysis of SITI’s training and rehearsal practices.

**SITI Company**

SITI Company was founded in 1992 in Saratoga Springs, New York as the Saratoga International Theater Institute by American director Anne Bogart and Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki, bringing together a company of actors that had spent time either with Bogart in New York City or with Suzuki and his company in Toga, Japan. Founded with a mission to develop and create work as an ensemble, to train together continuously and with people outside the company, and to work with artists and for audiences around the world, SITI combined Suzuki’s training method, drawn from traditional Japanese performance forms *Noh*, *Kyogen*, and *Kabuki*, and Bogart’s research in Viewpoints, which came from her work with the postmodern dancer Mary Overlie, who first articulated the Viewpoints. SITI Company’s inaugural productions were *Orestes* by Charles L. Mee, who became the only playwright in SITI’s membership, and *Dionysus*, a
co-production with Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT). The following year SITI created *The Medium* and took it to Suzuki’s Toga Festival in Japan. SITI and SCOT collaborated on one more production following SITI’s trip to Toga, *Waiting for Romeo*, which was performed in Saratoga Springs. At SITI’s conception Suzuki told Bogart, “You choose the place… because in five years I will have other things to do” (Bogart, *A Director Prepares* 16). Since that time Suzuki’s relationship with the company has been one of encouraging support but not direct involvement. In 1994 and 1996 SITI returned to Toga with two more original company-created shows. The cross-pollination of SITI and SCOT during those years was crucial for the development of SITI’s working methods and for establishing SITI’s membership. Several of SITI’s current actors came from and continue to maintain a relationship with SCOT.

Bogart pinpoints a conversation she had in the 1980s with Théâtre du Soleil Artistic Director Ariane Mnouchkine as the moment in which she realized the necessity of forming a company in order to pursue her artistic goals. As Bogart relates, “When I asked her why she works only with her company, she looked sternly at me and said, ‘Well, you can’t do anything without a company. Don’t get me wrong, companies are difficult. People leave and break your heart and the hardships are constant, but what are you going to accomplish without a company?’” (*A Director Prepares* 15). Ensemble work is a defining element of SITI Company. Working as a company means investing one’s time and energy in the group. While each company member also works outside of SITI Company, they are all invested in and supportive of what the company creates. The result has been a large output of work—at least thirty-eight pieces of theater in their
twenty-year history, many of which remain a part of their active repertory. They have spent their time with classics, ranging from the work of Strindberg and Coward to Shakespeare and Euripides, but the majority of their work has been the creation of original theater, some created in collaboration with such groups as the band Rachel’s, the Martha Graham Dance Company, and the Bill T. Jones/Arne Zane Dance Company. SITI is known for highly precise, ensemble-based, experimental performance that questions theater, art, culture, politics, and the history and legacy of America in an increasingly global world.

In 1995 SITI Company brought *The Medium* and *Small Lives/Big Dreams*, a show devised from the five major plays of Chekhov, to the Actors Theatre of Louisville for the Modern Masters Festival in which Bogart was honored. It was there that Bogart and Darron L. West, then a sound designer at Actors Theatre, worked together for the first time. The collaboration was so immediately successful that they decided to make it a long-term one. West joined the company and became SITI’s resident sound designer. What worked about that first meeting between West and the company and what has continued to mark West’s relationship within the company is his degree of active attention and contribution. He attends most rehearsals, trying out sounds, music, and ideas with the ensemble, often even acting as another director in the room. West’s work is to offer specific attention to the impact that sound and listening has in rehearsal with actors. This degree of daily involvement is rare among designers, who routinely have multiple projects going at once and, more significantly, may view their work as primarily affecting audience reception and not the rehearsal and performance of acting.
Brown notes that sound designers have had to fight in order to be considered creative artists with a dramaturgical role in the playmaking process (Sound 11-5). Yet despite the twenty-first-century acceptance of sound design as an artistic scenographic element contributing to a performance’s overall meanings, many designers refrain from being a creative voice in the room during rehearsals, preferring or perhaps simply expecting to do their work in private after observing the work of actors and the director. Even if only showing up to the “designer run-through” rehearsal allows a designer to get as much information as she or he feels is necessary to go into the studio, it deprives the rehearsal process of an engagement with what may be discovered together through sound.
Such an engagement is not just about ideas, about what is written in a script. It is about what the sensation of sound and attention to listening affectively can do in rehearsal and in performance. The engagement takes place in the actors’ bodies. As West relates in an interview with Caridad Svich, “The moments that seem in my plays that the design explodes and takes the stage for a bit are soundly (pun intended) rooted in the bodies that are participating with the cue… It’s both things going on at the same time: the sound creating the space and the time and the act of the actors cutting through it defining it even further” (West, “Active Sound” 184). What West highlights here is not only the actors’ participation with sound design, but in some cases their resistance to it. Sound becomes a material that the onstage performer works with and alongside of. The company’s ability to bring the onstage bodies of actors and the elements of design together as participants that actively make choices to work in accord, in parallel, in opposition, or in some other relationship has much to do with what SITI Company members call “density” developed through daily practice of Suzuki and Viewpoints.

*Density: a psychophysical approach to the actor’s presence*

During training, company members often used the word “density” to refer to the actor’s presence. Company member Ellen Lauren called it “a brightness.” It is the attractive force that makes certain actors interesting on stage. Audience members are drawn to actors with stage presence; they cannot look away. Meanwhile other actors, try as they might, are not noticed or do not interest the audience. The actor who has developed and can maintain presence holds a certain magnetic force, an ability to charm
the audience, that makes the most mundane stage tasks interesting and filled with interest. Scott T. Cummings, in his book documenting SITI Company’s *bobrauschenbergamerica*, notes, “The trainings in tandem aim to develop – and maintain – performers with a powerful and dynamic presence, even in stillness or when doing ‘nothing’ on stage, so that their work commands attention through its energy, focus, interest, and truthfulness. The goal is to be, in a word, undisposable” (Cummings 108). This is precisely what American actor training programs, immersed in psychologically based pedagogies of acting, often find impossible to teach students.

The use of the word “density” to describe stage presence suggests that what is being created through the training is something to do with the physical characteristics of bodies in space and something in bodies that can be physically worked and strengthened, like a muscle. Stage presence is an attractive force. In order to be undisposable actors needs to bring gravity to their beings. Although figurative meanings of the word gravity come to mind, these connotations rely on the physical relationships inherent in the “attractive force” we call gravity. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, gravity may be defined as “the degree of intensity with which one body is affected by the attraction of gravitation exercised by another body” (“Gravity, n.”). The *OED* also states, “Since the weights of bodies are proportional to their masses, their specific gravities are in the same ratio as their densities; and in some scientific books the term density has displaced specific gravity” (“Gravity, n.”). Though I am not suggesting that an actor’s stage presence has to do with his or her physical weight, it seems that an actor who is able to create a “specific gravity,” a relationship of attraction between the actor and the
audience, generates stage presence by psychophysical means—that is, through the relationship between the actor’s physical and affective actions and the audience’s perceptions and experience of them. This is a difficult concept to understand. I will attempt to triangulate SITI’s use of the word “density” and the concept as they embody it. The goal of Suzuki training in particular seems to be to develop this “specific gravity.” As Suzuki states, “By applying this method, I want to make it possible for actors to develop their ability of physical expression and also to nourish a tenacity of concentration” (“Culture” 163). The ability to express through the body, even in stillness, a feeling or point of view requires focused energy. The size of the performance space and the level of audience interest, changes the degree of intensity required on the part of the actor. Actors need to experience the intense requirements of the challenging performance conditions in order to develop density.

Phillip B. Zarrilli has spent more than thirty years researching psychophysical approaches to actor training. He brings together his own and other scholars’ research to address questions of actor training and presence in Acting (Re)Considered: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. The hatha yoga, t’ai chi, and South Indian martial art kalaripayattu that we practiced together each afternoon when I was his student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the early 1990s was my first introduction to the use of full-body, martial forms to create onstage presence. The goal, like meditation, was to bring one’s awareness and complete attention to the activity at hand, whether sitting, executing a movement sequence across the room, or responding to an offstage whistle in Samuel Beckett’s Act Without Words. Through daily practice in his Asian Stage Discipline class,
I was offered a way to *be* my body—not to be *in* my body—that was different from Stanislavsky-based acting classes, in which the body was usually an afterthought, expressed in questions such as, “What do I do with my hands?”

Psychophysical acting unifies the body and mind, assuming that an actor’s body is not separate from his mind. Theater scholars and practitioners such as Artaud, Grotowski, Barba, Schechner, Lendra, Wangh, and others have acknowledged the singular importance of the perceptive and communicative body on stage and its central place in the theater experience. This focus on the unified bodymind has come with an explosion of intercultural performance, through works by Mnouchkine, Brook, Suzuki, Barba, and others, and has been a welcome shift away from “Method” acting, which was derived from Stanislavsky’s early articulations of his work and which remains the generally assumed basis for technique in most American actor training programs.

This change in focus brings its own challenges, though. Zarrilli and Auslander both raise objections to discourses of presence in the theater, Auslander referring us to Jacques Derrida’s phrase “the metaphysics of presence” (“Just Be Your Self” 53), to invoke the heavy transcendental baggage of Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl. Auslander applies Derrida’s notion of *différence*—the idea that, though occluded, the Other is always contained, is actually emphasized through its occlusion, semiotically in an object’s meaning—to the various revelations of “self” espoused by Artaud, Brecht, and Grotowski. He finds their assumptions about the body problematically essentializing. Zarrilli, rejecting a purely deconstructive approach to presence, stresses the need for a non-dualistic conception of the actor’s work: “A reified subjectivist notion of ‘presence’
is as complicit in a dualist metaphysics as is the Cartesian ‘mind.’ Neither provides an adequate account of the ‘body’ in the mind, the ‘mind’ in the body, or of the process by which the signs read as ‘presence’ are a discursive construct (Zarrilli, Acting 15). Zarrilli recognizes that body and mind are not separable and agrees with Merleau-Ponty’s statement that “[T]hinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the ‘there is’ which underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body… that actual body I call mine (The Primacy of Perception 160-1).

The fascinating semiotic trace of signification can be “read” by actors or audience members, while still allowing for people to be grounded in their bodies, each a locus of sensations that, through its ability to make choices, is full of the possibilities of the next moment. The actual body is not fixed; it is becoming something new: itself. It is simply becoming. To be “in the moment”—a frequently heard phrase in a psychologically oriented acting studio—is to do only the task at hand and not to worry about what just went wrong and what might come next. Though very simple, being in the moment is also extremely complicated. The present moment always already contains many perspectives and many layers of reality, including memory, habit, habitus, and potential. Our experience of the present is subjective, but the present is shared. We are a part of moments that cascade into and overlap with other moments, which may be experienced in a multiplicity of ways.

The actor’s presence is a complete body, not a body alone, but a thinking body that contains “the sharp edge of a perceiving consciousness” (Zarrilli, Acting 15).
Presence is maintained physically, mentally, and affectively in order to be and in part by being sensitive to the world within which the performance occurs and to the fictive world of the play. The audience member, too, may have a sensitive body-mind. But it is the actor who trains to create density.

How we experience the theater event depends on our role within it. We may sit in the auditorium, move on stage, stand just offstage, or have some other bodily relationship to and within the event. Regardless of our particular position, though, if we are there because we choose to be there, then what we do is attend. We give our attention. We may get distracted from time to time. We may even doze off sometimes. But if the theater event is what we judge to be an interesting one, we willingly give our attention, and the event holds it. The unfolding moment is a live occurrence that happens in its own changing time and space. We designate the place and time of the event—eight o’clock at the theater, for instance—but once begun, time may seem to slow, speed up, reverse, jump forward or back, or stop all together, and our perception of space likewise may contract, expand, or transform in myriad ways. As audience members, this is what we look forward to: a series of moments, in some way different from everyday life, but embodied live before us that creates an impression. Beckerman, Brook, Schechner, and others suggest that what is unique about the theater has to do with bodies: bodies performing, bodies attending, and the relationships between them. Theater artists often think of themselves as storytellers, but what they are doing is manipulating time and space for the benefit of everyone involved, with or without a coherent narrative. The actor is the one on stage before the audience that (one hopes!) is able to do this. We
value the actor’s skill at manipulating time and space, but we all experience the change whether we are onstage or not, and we are able to take in the experience, to go through it, because of our bodies. The materials that the actor works with are time and space, enacted through activities, behaviors, and actions that are undertaken with his or her body, another material. These material conditions are immediately recognizable by audience members because those same conditions make up all of our lives. What the actor does and experiences, the audience also feels, albeit without actually accomplishing the actions. For Zarrilli, the experience constitutes performer and audience member alike:

For the actor, whatever the actions and tasks to be performed, these are the “material” conditions of his or her work. By means of these material conditions not only are meanings and experiences created for, by, and with the spectators, but also for the actor. The actor’s “who I am” cannot be divorced from the “who we are.” Individual and collective identities form a negotiable dialectic within the arena of performance practice. (Zarrilli, Acting 22)

Theater sound excels at the manipulation and transformation of time and space. Whether used diegetically or extra-diegetically, theater sound moves time and space by holding and changing intensities. Sound is uniquely able to move us. We experience everyday life through all available senses at once. The bodymind senses and makes sense of the world nearly at once. Hearing is difficult (or perhaps impossible) to isolate in experience, and we experience the sonic in a multiplicity of ways. Even if we could
isolate the phenomenology of sound, it would not yield a simple or singular meaning. Yet, thinking through the experience of the sonically nuanced theatrical moment is a fruitful way to understand the theater we make and perhaps the motivations behind it. I would suggest that, in addition to thinking, feeling through the same moment of sound on stage might lead us to even more interesting uses of theater sound and more compelling acting.

*Suzuki and the body*

It is ten o’clock in the morning, Monday, October 8, 2012, the beginning of the third week of a five-week training workshop with SITI Company. I am at SITI’s office and studio on the third floor of the 520 building on Eighth Avenue in midtown Manhattan. Two weeks of training, forty hours in the studio, have passed by quickly. The workshop is divided between two groups: about fifteen people who have trained with SITI Company before and a group of twenty-four beginning students. Many students have come a long way to participate in the workshop. Some live in New York City, but others are in the city just for the workshop. Students come from Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Finland, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Thailand, Australia, South Korea, and China, as well as the United States. Many of the beginning students are in their twenties, but there are a few of us in our thirties, and one beginning student is in her mid-forties.

I have been in the studio, dressing, and stretching for forty minutes. Training is physically strenuous, and we are expected to be ready to work at a very high level of
concentration when class begins. Muscles must be warm; the body-mind must be awake. I left the house where I am staying in Brooklyn at 8:30 and spent the commute reviewing the texts for class: the opening to Dante’s *Inferno*, a choral speech from a new play called *Niobe* by company associate Deborah Wallace, and one of Oberon’s monologues from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Now that I am in the studio and stretching, I feel good, limber and eager. Training is enjoyable for me, a welcome and rare opportunity for me to practice acting. Though I have acted professionally since the late 1990s, the past six years during which I have pursued graduate study have left little time to work on stage. I am rusty. Suzuki training comes first for the beginning group. The advanced students are across the street in a rented studio for Viewpoints class. We will work for one hour and forty-five minutes, then switch.

The trainings, both Suzuki and Viewpoints, are not simply movement exercises, intended to shape the body, though that is often how they are viewed and taught in American university training programs. When asked about this view of his training, Suzuki stated, “Any time an actor thinks he is merely exercising or training his muscles, he is cheating himself. These are acting disciplines. Every instant of every discipline, the actor must be expressing the emotion of some situation, according to his own bodily interpretation. That’s why I don’t call them exercises (*undo*) or physical fitness teachers don’t go on the stage. We do” (qtd. in Brandon, “Training” 36). We are reminded daily that the moment we step onto the studio floor to work we are making an entrance on the stage. Implicit in this admonition is the awareness of being watched by an audience, of actively performing. Performing the Suzuki training means providing for oneself an
image, target, or circumstance with which to be in some sort of active relationship. This is not about showing or expressing some sort of pre-determined emotion. The work is an exercise of the imagination, but the faculties involved are not solely mental or psychological. The body or more accurately the body-mind must be focused on the imaginary idea. With the whole self engaged in this task, a fictional world may be created that can be felt by onlookers. Though audience members will not perceive the details of the actor’s image, they will sense an active, embodied imagination at work, a body-mind that is engaged in a reality different from their own.

Though I am eager to work, I am also wary. Mention to anyone in the theater who has heard of Suzuki that one is training and the first thing they will ask about is your feet. The practice involves forceful stomping of the feet on the floor. The training’s main purpose is to generate what Suzuki calls “animal energy” in the actor through a specific relationship between the actor’s center and the ground, practiced through what Suzuki calls the “grammar of the feet.” Stomping my feet on the studio floor for two weeks and the walk of my morning and evening commute have given me very sore feet. In fact, for the last week they have been visibly bruised and in pain. I have been soaking my feet in the evenings, but do not expect the stomping to become easier or less painful. On the recommendation of company members, who at first simply offer a wry smile and a shrug when I tell them about my feet, I have begun to make less noise when I stomp, using no less force, but bringing the foot down silently on the floor. The “silent stomp” engages the muscles in a slightly different, arguably more difficult way. Rather than allow the impact with the floor to stop the downward muscular force, the actor must stop
the foot with an opposing use of the muscles before it strikes the floor. The physical
engagement and work involved for the muscles is perhaps greater than striking the floor
as hard as possible.

Figure 2: Suzuki basic number one during training with SITI Company, October 4, 2012.
Company member Ellen Lauren is in the middle right in the dark tank top, and behind her
in the grey shirt is the author. Photo credit: SITI Company.

During the first two weeks of Suzuki training we learned the four basic forms,
several stylized walks performed to music, sitting and standing statues, and “stomping
and shakuhachi,” a movement sequence performed to music that functions as an energy-
raising endurance test. Seven SITI Company members teach our classes, though
occasionally others drop in for a session to train. The seven we study with are Ellen

Figure 3: Suzuki basic number two. SITI Company begins each rehearsal and performance with Suzuki training, here on the set of Under Construction, 2009. Photo credit: SITI Company.

Lauren is teaching our class this morning, while Araiza, Ingulsrud, and company member Tom Nelis are there to participate in the training. The benefit to students of working alongside company members is great. We are able to model ourselves after them, imitating their physical postures, demeanor, breathing, and concentration. In the training I try to work as often as possible near a company member, whose “density” can be felt. Lauren was one of the first Americans to train in Toga with Suzuki and came to SITI from the Suzuki Company of Toga. She continues to perform and train with SCOT,
whose sensibility she brings to her teaching. She speaks little, preferring to show as
simply as possible when a correction is needed, and values discipline above all.

Instructors rotate from class to class, giving students different insights on how to
do the forms. The instructors bring their own interests and change the order of exercises
or the focus of the class from the previous day’s agenda. For the first two weeks of
training we have usually started with the basics, pushing our abilities to work with
intensity within the forms, and finally building up to end the day with “stomping and
shakuhachi.” When class begins on this day, as usual Lauren instructs us to “come
down” to the front area, the audience area, and sit together facing the rest of the studio,
the stage space. She then asks us to turn to our neighbor and choose to be either A or B.
Having divided the class in half, she asks the As to come up to the
stage. We have
learned to move into position, whether entering or exiting the stage, as quickly and
efficiently as possible. Rather than moving into lines facing the front for basic number
one, she brings us up to begin with the exercise that has ended our previous days’ work,
stomping and shakuhachi.

We move to different parts of the room, facing in all directions, and stand still
with feet together, arms at our sides, hands held loosely as though closed around bamboo
poles, and prepare for a workout. We are already on stage and already performing. The
music begins – “Shinnai Nagashi” by Ricardo Santos. It is a 1960s pop orchestration for
big band of what may be a traditional Japanese melody that never wavers from its
constant off beats. It is played loudly enough to hear over the stomping that will soon
begin. This song has been used by SITI and SCOT for this acting discipline since it was
first developed by Suzuki many years ago. With the eight count introduction, each of us sink slightly into a bent knee position, a height we will then be expected to maintain for the duration of the song, and as the melody starts we begin to stomp forcefully in time with the music, bringing the legs up and down as sharply as possible, while displaying a placid calm in the torso and face. I allow my stomping to move me slowly around the room, though I resist the forward motion. I am attempting to restrain myself from traveling too quickly, breathing hard, swaying my shoulders, or revealing any struggle in my facial expression. As Suzuki writes in *The Way of Acting*:

I ask that the actors strike the floor with all the energy possible; the energy that is not properly absorbed will rise upwards and cause the upper part of their bodies to tremble. In order to minimize such a transfer, the actor must learn to control and contain that energy in the pelvic region. Focusing on this part of the body, he must learn to gauge continuously the relationship between the upper and lower parts of his body, all the while continuing on with the stamping motion. (9)

The music, which, after a little more than two minutes of stomping, has changed from where it began, returns to its original key, signaling us to begin our slow journey to the far upstage area, where we each prepare for the end of the song by spacing ourselves evenly at the back and turning toward the audience. The music comes to an end with a bit of a flourish. We land our last stomp together, hold still for a moment, and then fall to the floor, landing crumpled on our sides and still.
I am breathing hard. My eyes are open, but all I can see is the floor and the person in front of me, her back rising and falling rapidly as she too attempts to steady her breathing. I notice the soreness of my feet. My pelvis, hips, and lower abdomen feel energized. I am very warm. I hear the sounds of struggle all around me. Now the music begins: a single Japanese flute, a shakuhachi, beginning low and gradually becoming the sound of something new rising and moving forward in its own time. With the sound, I begin to move. I am still breathing hard, but I work to calm my breathing, to contain my struggle. Very slowly I begin to shift my body over my center of gravity. I pull my torso over my hips while sliding my legs in and then spreading my knees. My forearm steadies me, but I do not raise myself with my arm. I want to engage the muscles of the center of my body in order to accomplish this task. My breath is steady and calm now. I give myself a strong base from which to rise. I push my knees together, raising my pelvis. I am attempting to rise straight up, as though emerging from the ground. Before I do, I bring my focus up, gazing the length of the studio and over the heads of my peers sitting on the floor at the front of the studio. I gather an image in my mind to hang on to, while my body struggles, and I place the image at the end of my gaze. I pull one leg up from the hip, tuck my toes, and then push up with the foot. The top of my right foot still presses against the floor, and I use it like this to push myself up. Now my thighs burn as they take the weight of my body. I rise slowly until I am standing, facing the audience. I am aware that others around me have already risen, and some are still struggling to do so. I begin to walk forward, very slowly moving toward my seated classmates. I realize that a drum has joined the flute, signaling that, yes, I should have begun walking by now.
Others have begun walking before me. We are all coming together in a line at the very front of the stage space, about two feet in front of the seated audience. I come into line as the shakuhachi begins to slow its wandering melody. It holds its last note, and I stand in line with my mates, gazing forward, holding onto the fictional focus that has held my attention since I began to rise. I am now dripping with sweat – my forehead, my back. I am hot now, even more than when I was stomping. My vision darkens at the edges, while I focus on that one spot before me. The last note of the shakuhachi slows and dies away into stillness. I am still. The world is still. Lauren says, “All together, speak the Midway text. Speak.”

Midway on our life’s journey,

I found myself in dark woods,

the right road lost.

[breath]

To tell about those woods is hard,

so rough and tangled and savage

that thinking of it now,

I feel the old fear stirring.

[breath]

Death is hardly more bitter.

(Dante, *Inferno* 5; 1.1-5)

We are still for a long moment…
And then she asks us to “come down.” This is the first five minutes of class.

Figure 4: Stomping and Shakuhachi. Samuel Stricklen and company members Tom Nelis, Ellen Lauren, Akikio Aizawa, and J. Ed Araiza rise up with the sound of the Japanese flute on the set of Under Construction, 2009. Photo credit: SITI Company.

The Suzuki training and the stomping and shakuhachi exercise in particular forces the actor to work with an energy that is wholly different from everyday life. It works with opposition in the body to create physical power at the body’s center from which the actor moves, speaks, and acts. As the actor gathers his or her energies in to the middle of the body, the actor’s focus and attention go out beyond the audience. Density is generated within the actor and in the air surrounding him, which Suzuki admits, “is achieved by completely changing the quality of what we might call the raw,
unconcentrated body of everyday life” (Suzuki, “Culture” 166). Suzuki acknowledges that concentration is developed through control of the breath (“Culture” 165). Focus on the breath is common, though certainly not exclusive, to many non-Western performance forms. Zarrilli, discussing Indian dance-drama kathakali, states, “Control of the breath is one of the most important means to creating the ‘power of presence’ in the performance” (Zarrilli, “What Does It Mean” 138).

Suzuki’s method of actor training draws upon the traditional Japanese performance forms noh and kabuki, especially the use of the performer’s feet. He developed his exercises during his production of Euripides’ The Trojan Women. The training served multiple purposes. It directly addressed the extreme performance demands of the piece and its touring schedule. The training utilized the performance vocabulary of the production—the choreography and text—and thus allowed actors to rehearse as well as train. And the training also enabled new chorus members to cycle into the cast through the years that the production stayed in the Suzuki Company of Toga’s repertory (Bogart, Clarke et al).

Through Suzuki training the actor creates the maximum physical problem for herself and, as quick as she is able, grabs hold of her center in order to regain control. This challenge occurs over and over again, building up tension or energy. Suzuki explains, “… there is this almost unbearable tension in the actor, because he is using unnatural movements and voice to express natural emotions… The secret of this kind of acting is instantaneous release of suppressed action, then suppression (that is, nonaction), release again, and so on… I suppose you call it tension, but it is not muscular tension. It
is psychological tension” (qtd. in Brandon, “Training” 40). The training is not comfortable, but it cannot be easy or comfortable if it is to fulfill its purpose. It is an attempt to violently throw the body out of balance in order to create the opportunity for the actor, in surmounting the challenge, to generate the focused muscular tension required to speak and move, the mental concentration to sustain the imaginary events, and the affective changes that may make the actor truly expressive. The body reveals its ability to transform the relationships of its parts. In so doing, the actor creates density.

Sound also has the ability to create densities or affective changes. The sonic as material—sensed not only through hearing, but also through a body’s tissue (human, non-human, or non-living material) as vibration or pressure—can have startling and unexpected resonances that may run counter to cultural assumptions and theories of meaning. Steve Goodman, in his book *Sonic Warfare*, writes, “Affect comes not as either a supplement or a replacement to the preoccupations of cultural theories of representation, but rather as an approach that inserts itself ontologically prior to such approaches, thereby examining the very conditions of possibility for a sonic materialism and the ethico-aesthetic paradigm it would entail” (10). The actor who trains everyday to create such densities is more able to listen affectively and respond to designed sound in ways that are not reductive, predictable, or reifying. Goodman suggests affect theory as a way to move beyond systems of representation that pre-determine identities and concretize relationships. This, for him, is both an artistic and ethical endeavor.
Viewpoints and immanence

When Suzuki training is paired with Viewpoints the actor who has worked to generate density also practices affective listening. The two practices focus on different but complementary acting skills. The difference, at least for the beginner, might be expressed as an inward focus in Suzuki training and an outward focus when working with the Viewpoints. As Eelka Lampe states, “The different focus on the internal or the external experience is not so much confronting the performer with a contradiction as it is presenting a creative paradox: ideally any performer should work with the highest internal and external awareness simultaneously” (Lampe 185). Sound design, as approached by SITI Company, negotiates the creative paradox outlined by Lampe, bridging internal and external awareness through its vibratory capacities.

The Viewpoints are nine aspects of everyday life, roughly divided into the categories of space and time. Cummings notes, “As Bogart herself is quick to point out, [the individual Viewpoints] are ways to describe something that already exists, a theoretical or descriptive vocabulary that divides theatrical performance into constituent aspects of time or space” (13). Everyday life, even life onstage, cannot be experienced only in terms of its individual aspects. But the Viewpoints provide ways to emphasize or express those individual aspects of everyday life. Bogart learned to use the Viewpoints working with Mary Overlie when they were both faculty members of New York University’s Experimental Theater Wing in the late 1970s and early 80s. Overlie left New York for Europe, and Bogart continued experimenting with the Viewpoints on her own, eventually developing five distinct ways of thinking about and engaging with space
and four ways to do so with time. These nine Viewpoints are tools that SITI Company uses to engage with sensory experience. From the beginning of training we are told that we are experts on the Viewpoints already. This is exactly the opposite of the beginning student’s relationship with Suzuki training.

Figure 5: Playing with the Viewpoints. Samuel Stricklen and company members Stephen Duff Webber, Tom Nelis (behind), J. Ed Araiza and Ellen Lauren (background) playing with the Viewpoints during rehearsals for *Under Construction*, 2009. Photo credit: SITI Company.
The Viewpoints of space are architecture, floor pattern, shape, gesture, and spatial relationship. An awareness of space onstage includes the architecture of the theater space and the scenic design, the pattern of movement across the stage floor, the shapes actors’ bodies make and the way those shapes become gestures when used to communicate intention, and the spatial relationships that exist between actors (Bogart and Landau 9-12). Practicing the Viewpoints of space one at a time enables actors to consider not only their own perspective, but also that of other actors and, significantly, the audience. The Viewpoints of time are tempo, duration, repetition, and kinesthetic response. It is the speed at which events occur, the length of time that individual events extend, the repetition of events, and the bodily response or reactions to events (Bogart and Landau 8-9).

All these elements are at play at all times, not just for performers, but also for anyone attending to them. The elements of space and time cannot be separated from experience, but by paying attention to one aspect at a time in training, actors learn that they can emphasize certain Viewpoints or attempt to bring various aspects into juxtaposition with one another. As Cummings states, “By articulating a shared vocabulary, the Viewpoints helps an actor to pay closer attention and to be more articulate in taking action. The greater the actor’s awareness, the more frequent, precise, spontaneous, and varied are his reactions” (117). Viewpoints training shows actors that the various relationships they have with ongoing events occurring both onstage and off are matters of choice. An actor can choose to respond kinesthetically to something occurring in the audience because the training has enabled her to notice it. The shared
vocabulary enables an ensemble of performers to more easily express changing relationships to time, space, the audience, and each other individually and as a group. The training is intended to allow performers to create configurations of experience that differ from the ordinary, but it does so by paying focused attention to ordinary aspects of experience and then putting them together through improvisation and rehearsal.

Figure 6: Anne Bogart and Darron West preparing the Viewpoints “jam” on the final day of SITI Company’s 2012 summer training institute at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. West, wearing headphones, is seated in front of his laptop. Photo credit: SITI Company.

During Viewpoints training, O’Hanlon would often remind us that what was interesting was to be found outside of us. By turning our attention away from ourselves and from psychologically motivated desires, new relationships, stories, and events could
emerge in improvisation. Cummings highlights this point, stating, “Attention radiates outward, from the self to the immediate environment to an expanding horizon of possibilities. While this outward focus has its physical, perceptual limits, in principle it extends to infinity. In this sense, the ethos of the Viewpoints is open, inclusive, and all-encompassing” (117). There is always something new and interesting to be discovered when improvising with an awareness of Viewpoints. The inclusivity of the practice allows for theater that puts equal emphasis on the various aspects of performance. Each element of the theater—the script, actors’ bodies, movement, costuming, spectacle, music, etc.—carries equal weight for SITI Company. Their productions generally convey ideas, questions, and meanings through stories, but those stories are often created and expressed in ways that can surprise an audience.

In an interview with the author at SITI’s studio in New York City, O’Hanlon admitted to an obsession with coexistence. In SITI Company’s work the tools they have to work with, the individual Viewpoints, allow them to make choices about what happens onstage. Often very contradictory things occur and exist alongside one another. These contradictions function to wake up performers and audiences alike. In our interview, O’Hanlon, quoting Bogart, asked, “How can we create a situation in which the audience can both see and hear?” (O’Hanlon). In a mass media saturated world, in which much of our everyday has been on some level “produced” to make the target audience either feel or desire to feel something specific, this is a radical question. The proposition of seeing and hearing simultaneously involves contrast. If all elements of a theatrical moment function to communicate the same message or meaning, audience members may feel
incapable of choosing how to react. Their reaction is predetermined by a production, which only requires that the audience fulfill it. Audience members may choose not to feel what the production is attempting to get them to feel. But in the case of “resistance,” audience members no longer have an interest is staying with the performance.

Figure 7: Barney O’Hanlon and Anne Bogart in rehearsal, 2013. Photo credit: SITI Company.
O’Hanlon’s “obsession with co-existence” is an interest in performing theater that, in the words of Cummings, “will stimulate the audience’s attention and activate their spectatorial will” (129). SITI Company attempts to allow audience members to do their own thinking and feeling. Acting teacher Richard Brestoff compares Viewpoints to Brechtian estrangement through the juxtaposition of contradictory elements in which “meaning is suddenly layered in a way that startles us” (Brestoff 250). To juxtapose various elements that do not merely reiterate or reinforce meaning is to introduce difference, the possibility of otherness, and noise. As Kahn posits, “The existence of noise implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an other, an other that attracts difference, heterogeneity, and productive confusion; moreover, it implies a genesis of mutability itself. Noise is a world where anything can happen” (22). SITI Company’s work allows for both the metaphorical and literal inclusion of noise.

Viewpoints training is an explicit attempt to bring about a Deleuzian plane of consistency or immanence to the theater. Each of the Viewpoints is just as important as any other in performance. Though in training the actor isolates the Viewpoints in order to learn how to make choices about them (for instance, what sort of shape the body might take in a given moment), the Viewpoints do not exist in isolation. As I explore the spatial relationships that I have with other actors, I am aware that what I am doing is happening at a certain tempo, that particular actions have the durations that I give them, and that I have various relationships with the architecture of the room. Exploring any one of the Viewpoints, also involves working with the others, though I may not give them more than cursory attention. When actors embark upon open improvisation using the Viewpoints,
they are bodies entering an immanent plane that Deleuze might define by longitude and latitude:

A body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity. We call longitude of a body the set of relations of speed and slowness, of motion and rest... We call latitude the set of affects that occupy a body at each moment, that is, the intensive states of an anonymous force (force for existing, capacity for being affected). *(Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 127-8 original italics).

A body by this definition is in relationship with other bodies on the plane of consistency (or immanence) through its motion and rest and the force that it exerts on and receives from the other bodies there. Viewpoints is a kind of geography for mapping out experience on stage, for tracing not only where something exists at a given moment, but in what configurations it exists with all other elements in performance.

*Sound, acting, density*

Suzuki training attempts to concentrate muscular energy in the body through vibration, while Viewpoints training turns outward to become more receptive to empirical phenomena, to listen with the whole body. Sound exerts a vibratory pressure that resonates within a single body and amongst an ensemble. Though sound is just one aspect of a moment on stage (or of experience in general), its capacity for movement and intensity make it an apt bridge connecting the two methods of training.
One of the dangers of sound and music design is its power to determine an audience’s emotional reaction. According to Bogart, “There are two ways of thinking about the audience. The first is to want everyone in the room to feel the same thing… The second way is to create a moment onstage that triggers different associations in everybody in the audience” (Bogart and Linklater 104-5). Barney O’Hanlon described dealing with this challenge in rehearsal for company member Charles Mee’s play *Hotel Cassiopeia*:

Sound or music… is something for the performer to press against. Not as a rival, but as a support… Thank god we have Darron… We can have very strong conversations with Darron. I can say to him – and this happened a lot in *Hotel Cassiopeia*… I would say, “Darron, you’re playing my emotional beat for me. Don’t do that.” You know, by putting on a piece of whatever sad music. I said, “Darron, you’re playing my beat. Don’t play my beat. It’s MY beat. I get to play it. You get to do something else.” (O’Hanlon)

Sound is uniquely able to “move” us, doing so physically and emotionally. It also stirs our thinking, bringing us memories, and creating social relationships. O’Hanlon’s request that West play something that did not reinforce or amplify his emotion was an attempt to allow the audience to experience feelings other than what O’Hanlon’s character might have felt or expressed in that moment. It also offered O’Hanlon the possibility of change within his own emotional interpretation. By playing something “not
as a rival, but as a support,” West offered O’Hanlon and the audience sound that stood out against the other elements and that was stronger for its independence from them.

When I asked O’Hanlon why he used certain pieces of music in Viewpoints classes, he demurred to answer before finally admitting, “I think that certain pieces of music create environments and suggest things very strongly, and more than anything there are pieces of music that suggest time zones. I don’t want to say mood, cause that’s not right. It’s time zones. You know… tensile structures” (O’Hanlon). An instance of theater sound, configured as a “tensile structure,” is a moving individuation under great pressure. Deleuze would call it a *haecceity*, a particular “thisness” that offers the actor something to press against, something to contrast their own brightness. As Deleuze and Guattari explain in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “The plane of consistency contains only *haecceities*, along intersecting lines. Forms and subjects are not of that world… A *haecceity* has neither beginning nor end, origin nor destination; it is always in the middle. It is not made of points, only of lines” (263). Despite (or perhaps because of) Deleuze and Guattari’s idiosyncratic vocabulary, a more specific description of improvising with the Viewpoints would be difficult to find.

SITI Company creates theater on a plane of consistency, in which time is no more important than space and light no more important than text. Continuous training in the Suzuki method and with the Viewpoints as an ensemble for twenty years have enabled them to work at a high level of precision, to listen affectively, and to work with sound in new and interesting ways. As Adel Jing Wang writes, “To feel into sounds is to vibrate with the variation of sonic intensities, rather than to control or signify them” (Wang).
SITI actors train, in part, in order to be able to create and respond to vibration. O’Hanlon describes music on stage as a partner, something the actor works with that helps to create interest for the audience:

There’s a breathing together between what’s coming out of the speakers and what’s happening in my body, and ultimately this notion of density is so the space around you can be dense, so that the space around the performer can be as important as the space the performer’s occupying. And this creates a presence that is for an audience something that is attractive, that you to go to, that’s undeniable. And the reason that we train is to try to maintain that for longer and longer periods of time. You know, ‘cause it’s hard to do. And to hold space both interiorly and exteriorly, and… space, like music, is something you can press against. It’s a partner. It’s there to support you. (O’Hanlon)

The support of music or sound is something that holds or literally moves the listener. But in SITI’s practice, it can work in contrast, in parallel, or in some other relationship with actors and audience members, simultaneously contributing to the “density” of the space around the performer and offering a point of view on the action or moment in which it occurs. It is “something you can press against.”
CHAPTER 4: REVERB, RESONANCE, AND EMBODIED SOUNDS IN RADIO

MACBETH

Reverberation is the action of driving back, of return and response. In Brown’s words, “Reverberation is the diffuse effect of spatial and temporal extension, as reflected sound waves bounce back and forth between the walls or surfaces of a room or a containing space” (Sound 145). To reverberate is to vibrate with the impact of a force and to return that force, slightly diminished, to the sender. Resonance, according to Brown, is used to refer to “spatially responsive acoustic effect, including echo and reverberation,” but “more specifically refers to the way in which enclosed spaces appear to ‘ring’ with sound; that is to say, the way a space accentuates or prolongs some sonic frequencies more than others” (Sound 146). Theater auditoria and sound systems are specially constructed in order to allow for and control resonance, accentuating the impact of sound. Reverberation and resonance are physical and can be felt in the body and heard in the fullness of sound. But they also operate outside of the realm of the immediately physical. When a sound lingers through reverberation it holds space and suspends time. Reverberation, resonance, and echo, though slightly different acoustic effects that transform sound’s relationship to time through its spatial interplay, “aesthetically modify the way sound is perceived” (Brown, Sound 147). Theater sound’s reverberations, resonances, and echoes foreground imagination and memory, effectively manipulating space and time through sonic interactions with bodies.
This chapter examines SITI Company’s *Radio Macbeth*, a production that debuted in 2007 at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio after receiving a workshop showing at The Public Theater in New York City. Directed by Anne Bogart and Darron L. West with sound by West, the production emphasizes the corporeality of the actors’ voices, acoustic transformations of time and space, and a rich intertextuality along the lines of Roland Barthes’s notion of text as “a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” (*Image-Music-Text* 146). Sound and voice root the production’s “intertext” in the shared experience of performance, while simultaneously invoking and manipulating time and space. My analysis of the production applies Barthes’ notion of “the grain of the voice” to understand the workings of the sound design and its relationship to acting. The “grain” offers a way to theorize sound’s affective utility in theater performance.

*Ghostly resonance*

Darkness and silence are customary markers for the start of a theater performance. The lights go down on the stage and in the auditorium, the audience comes to a hush, and then the lights come up on stage. In some cases sound begins, leading the lighting and the audience into the world of the play. Either way, the theater event is marked in time and space by darkness and silence, separating the performance from everyday life. Even outdoors temporal and spatial separation from the ordinary is a defining aspect of theater. The event takes place *here* and *now*. It has a starting point and an ending. These boundaries allow us understand the event itself, while contextualizing it within a specific
everyday. The boundary between the ordinary and the performance event has been the rich subject of much debate and experimentation at least since the early twentieth-century, eventually inspiring the formation of the scholarly discipline of performance studies in the latter half of the twentieth-century, and continuing to occupy the attention of theater and performance artists today. Darkness and silence serve to mark and can question the borderline between performance and the everyday. In a 2003 interview, West said, “Sound deals with, defines and helps manage time and space in the theatre, and silence is the palette that all of that rests on” (“Active Sound” 185).

SITI Company’s *Radio Macbeth* begins in the dark and in silence. After the auditorium lighting goes to black, just enough light comes up on stage to reveal a room, an open space with a curtain in the back on one side, extending into the fly. The room is just barely lit with pools of very low light, leaving the viewer wondering what lies in the darkness. Where are we? We don’t know. Neither do we know what is happening. The play has begun, but we are still in the dark and in silence. Perhaps undetected by the audience, actor Stephen Duff Webber sits center stage on a folding chair, staring out into the auditorium. He is still and, in the dark, easy to miss. If the audience realizes he is there, they sense Webber suspended, mouth open, in a moment that is neither a starting point, nor an ending, but somewhere in between. The moment of suspension doesn’t last long, but in that time actor and audience are in the dark together, waiting for something to happen. Suddenly there is a clatter of noise ofstage startling both audience and actor. Webber turns noisily toward the sound, drawing our attention to him for probably the
first time. He is tense with listening. A voice or two sound off to the right. Webber stands and runs offstage into the darkness, away from the oncoming voices.

Figure 8: Stephen Duff Webber and Ellen Lauren in Radio Macbeth, 2007. Photo credit: SITI Company.

Webber plays Orson Welles, and this is Welles’s Mercury Theatre Company, gathering for a rehearsal of a radio broadcast of William Shakespeare’s Macbeth. As perhaps Shakespeare’s darkest play, it seems appropriate to linger awhile in the dark, to sit in the liminal space between the everyday and the theatrical or between the phenomenal and the imaginary. The silence and darkness are incomplete, however. As in John Cage’s 4’33” we are not truly in silence, though we are in a very deep quiet, out
of which the slightest sound will be very noticeable. Likewise, we are not in total
darkness, but in enough light to emphasize how little we can see. It is silent and dark in
terms of the reality of the play, but this world has not yet made clear its rules. The
protracted silence and darkness serve to focus the audience’s attention from the very
beginning. In the near absence of the visible the audience attends to the acoustic. The
play starts with suspension. Emerging from this state of suspension, sound sets off the
action of the play. How exactly this is a radio version of the play is not immediately
obvious, but it is clear that sound in this performance is an important method of
encounter, discovery, and narrative.

In chapter one I noted that creating performance with historical material makes
for complicated listening. Because we necessarily listen through culturally and
historically contingent strategies of aural perception, a modern day production of a play
by Shakespeare negotiates multiple sonic cultures. Marvin Carlson, Joseph Roach,
Herbert Blau, and others have written extensively about different aspects of the strange
phenomenon of performing or attending a play that has a history of production. Past
performances are evoked when the familiar words ring out from the stage once more. As
Horatio asks, “What, has this thing appear’d again to-night?” (Shakespeare, Hamlet
1.1.21). When the ghost of Hamlet’s father appears again on the battlements, not only
does the audience understand that the event has occurred before in the imagined past of
the onstage world, but they may also remember past performances of the play, previous
Hamlets, or other roles they may have witnessed the actors play in the past. Carlson
names this phenomenon ghosting, noting that “ghosting presents the identical thing
[audience members] have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context” (The Haunted Stage 7). When I hear a play over again, the memory of its previous iterations informs the experience, “because it is memory that supplies the codes and strategies that shape reception, and, as cultural and social memories change, so do the parameters within which reception operates, those parameters that reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss has called the ‘horizon of expectations’” (Carlson, The Haunted Stage 5).

Furthermore, though the “ghosted” theater performance offers a fascinating site with which to consider one’s own reception of a play, all theater performance enacts (or re-enacts) an experience of memory, re-membering (re-populating plays before our witnessing senses), and re-cognition (to think through the play and the experience again). Theater, Carlson writes,

\[
\text{is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts. The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection. (The Haunted Stage 2)}
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Carlson cites Elin Diamond for an explication of the language involved in the history of theater production, words such as “\text{remember, reinscribe, reconfigure, reiterate, restore.}” As she explains, “‘Re’ acknowledges the pre-existing discursive field, the repetition within the performative present, but ‘figure,’ ‘script,’ and ‘iterate’ assert the
possibility of something that *exceeds* our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines new unsuspected subject positions” (Diamond, *Writing Performances* 2 italics original). The past in the present that is the “Re” also finds itself in the sonically oriented terminology that frames this discussion: Re-sonance and Re-verberate. Both of these words describe the prolonged experience of sounding again and more specifically sounding with or against. Sound experienced spatially through the pronounced body of acoustic space is also an experience of time announcing itself over and over, even as it suspends its forward motion. The excess to which Diamond refers—“the possibility of something that *exceeds* our knowledge”—is affect. It shapes or reconfigures the potentialities of the present, actualized in the very next moment.

The original performances of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* would have been heard in an aural environment very different from that of any production today, and an audience member attending those performances would have brought along a very different culturally-determined “horizon of expectations” than would an audience member attending the plays today. Even within the culture of early seventeenth-century England, a single play would likely pass through several disparate aural cultures. A.R. Braunmuller weighs evidence of the possibility that *Macbeth* premiered at the court of King James I, perhaps for the visit of the king’s brother-in-law King Christian IV of Denmark between July 17 and August 11, 1606 (8). A court performance for the newly made Scottish king of the United Kingdom, who was believed to be descended from the Banquo of Shakespeare’s play, would have sounded very different from the performance that Simon Forman attended at the Globe Theatre on April 20, 1610 and wrote about in
what has become known as the *Booke of Plaies* (reprinted in Chambers 337-8). Smith has provided detailed research on the acoustic differences between the outdoor Globe and the indoor Blackfriars Theatres, noting not only that the differing shapes and materials of the theaters resulted in spaces that “sounded” differently, but also that the aural and participatory expectations of the respective audiences of these venues were different (*The Acoustic World* 206-45).

A history that Shakespeare plundered to write many of his plays was the expanded edition of the *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, written by Raphael Holinshed and published in 1587, a decade after the first edition’s publication. The historical Macbeth that Shakespeare found in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* was King of Scots until killed in battle by Macduff in 1057. It gives us some perspective to consider that we are closer in time to the first performances of *Macbeth* than Shakespeare was to the events dramatized in his play. The aural world that Shakespeare imagines and perhaps invokes is a place far removed from his own loud and aurally active early seventeenth-century London. But it was also a world that was in the contemporary public consciousness through King James’s ancestral claim and in the contemporary interest in witchcraft. The king himself had written a pamphlet on witchcraft. Richard France writes that “James was known to believe that the ship carrying his Scandinavian bride-to-be had been scuttled by sorcerers bent on preventing this Protestant princess from reaching her Catholic intended,” but also notes that the king’s pamphlet, which

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determines that “tales of witchery could not be substantiated, came after the production of
Macbeth” (31). Whether or not the play was created to gain favor with the company’s
new patron, it addressed issues that were alive in the contemporary culture.

In a theatrical world created out of the past there are imaginary echoes of sounds
of other cultures. This is particularly true in theater that offers its verbal component in
language that is unlike the everyday speech used in the audience’s culture (or cultures).
Shakespeare’s Macbeth is primarily presented in verse. The few prose sections include
the Porter’s comedic speech and conversation with Macduff in act two, the intimate act
four scene between Lady Macduff and her son just before they are murdered, and Lady
Macbeth’s act five sleepwalking scene, narrated by the doctor and gentlewoman. Though
poetry was not the everyday speech of early seventeenth-century London, it was not only
expected at the theater, but also heard in sermons and other public addresses. The verbal
world of early modern England was rich with a variety of spoken forms.

What SITI Company offers in Radio Macbeth, however, is not Shakespeare’s play
alone. Radio Macbeth adds at least two additional layers to Shakespeare’s Macbeth. The
first is a story of Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre. In 1936, under the wing of John
Houseman, Welles made his New York theater debut at the age of twenty in a wildly
ambitious and highly successful Federal Theatre Project production that set the play in a
fictionalized early nineteenth-century Haiti in which Macbeth is reconfigured as Haiti’s
Henri Christophe. The production, which came to be referred to as the “voodoo”
Macbeth, capitalized on the Federal Theatre Project’s stated mission to put as many
actors to work as possible by employing a cast of over 120 actors, most of whom were
African American. Welles went on to create his Mercury Theatre and began a successful radio career with Mercury Theatre On the Air and the Campbell Playhouse. Though Welles returned to *Macbeth* in three different media, he never again set the play in the Caribbean or worked with an almost exclusively African American cast. Welles and the Mercury Theatre recorded an audio version of *Macbeth* for commercial release with Columbia Records in April 1940 with Welles in the title role. In 1947 he presented the play on stage in Salt Lake City, Utah. His film of *Macbeth* was shot in Utah and released commercially the following year. In both of these productions, as in most of his work, Welles took the title role.

What is significant about this twelve-year span of working on *Macbeth* is the license Welles took to craft his own versions of the play. Discussing the “voodoo” *Macbeth* of 1936, Bernice Kliman notes that Welles used “Shakespeare’s script as an open resource, to be exploited at will” (Kliman 117). Among Welles’s innovations was the use of sound effects intended to root the play in an imaginary Haiti and increase the affective power of the narrative. Kliman writes, “To intensify the omnipresence of the supernatural elements further, the 1936 script often calls for a ‘Voodoo effect’, the sound of drums and at times chantings, distant rumblings of thunder, an aural underpinning of almost all the action” (Kliman 118). Backstage musicians created the sonic tapestry of the play “under the distinguished Virgil Thomson’s direction” (Kliman 115). Sixteen years earlier Eugene O’Neill had shown great interest in the affective power of sound with his play *The Emperor Jones*. The play pits the title character, an escaped African American convict made ruler of an island in the West Indies, against his own imagined
enemies, his “formless fears.” Employing the ceaseless beat of the drum in seven of the play’s eight scenes, O’Neill used sound to rhythmically attune the audience with the character of Jones. Welles was five years old when O’Neill’s play debuted, but the Federal Theatre Project produced a tour of the play in 1938 (“Federal Theatre (Memory”). It seems likely that Welles knew the play well and may have attended performances during the tour. A poster in the American Treasures of the Library of Congress archives for Welles’ 1937 production of Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, includes an illustration of a skeleton beating a drum, while an hourglass lies at its feet. Actor Jack Carter starred as Macbeth in Welles’ production and played opposite Welles as Mephistopheles in Faustus (“Federal Theatre (Memory”). In O’Neill’s play and Welles’s productions of these two Tudor-Stuart plays, the sound of the drum is employed or referenced in order to invoke the dark magic of witchcraft, doing so in problematic, racialized terms that question the audience’s identification with a character’s subjectivity.

Two years after his startling debut on the New York stage with Macbeth, Welles shocked the country with a radio broadcast of Howard Koch’s adaptation of H.G. Well’s The War of the Worlds, one of the most significant events of American radio broadcasting history (figure 10). Radio’s still new sonic experience of technological mediation displaced space and time in everyday life. “Between the 1930s and the 1950s,” writes Brown, “the development of radio, film and television brought immediate and mediated space into coincidence in daily life” (Sound 32). The broadcast of War of
the Worlds on October 30, 1938, “created such confusion among those who missed its beginning, that people took to the streets in Martian hunting posses” (Brown, Sound 32).

SITI Company’s preoccupation with American artists and arts history has led it to explore the work or influence of Robert Rauschenberg, Martha Graham, Jason Rhodes, Joseph Cornell, Norman Rockwell, Leonard Bernstein, Virginia Woolf, Robert Wilson and George and Ira Gershwin. But the company has spent more time with Orson Welles than with any other single artist, creating three productions touching on his work or life between 1999 and 2007. The first was a staged reading of Howard Koch’s radio play War of the Worlds that debuted at the West Bank Café in New York City and played several venues before touring the country in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York’s World Trade Center in which thousands were killed. The effect of touring this show about the destruction of New York City by aliens in the immediate aftermath of September 11 was the creation of a nation-wide community needing to grieve and talk about what had happened. West notes that the tour was one of the most successful projects SITI Company has ever done and referred to the company as “emissaries from New York” at the time. In an interview West said, “There were moments during that tour that were really moving and intense” (Personal interview). Each performance was followed by a public discussion that often went on as long or longer than the performance of the play, including one attended by the playwright Arthur Miller and another in which the company was surprised by an old man who had been a young intern in the Columbia Broadcasting Service studio on October 30, 1938 and had witnessed the broadcast. He was brought on stage and recounted his story of the night for
the audience. As West recalls, “I had not thought about [composer] Bernard Hermann and the orchestra really being in the room. It was a fascinating night. We didn’t want to say goodbye to that guy” (Personal interview).

Figure 9: Orson Welles with the orchestra in the background during the 1938 War of the Worlds radio broadcast. Photo credit: Associated Press.

The 2000 debut of the radio play was followed a month later by the opening of a play written for SITI Company by Naomi Iizuka. This play, also called War of the Worlds, premiered at the Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Humana Festival of New American Plays and tracks the life and work of Orson Welles through the recollections of his collaborators. Webber, who played Welles in the radio play, continued with the
character in Iizuka’s play, and again played Orson Welles when the company debuted *Radio Macbeth* seven years later. The three productions (*War of the Worlds* – the radio play, *War of the Worlds* – the stage play, and *Radio Macbeth*) form a body of work with Webber’s Orson Welles as the lynchpin. Webber ghosts his own performances, moving from one production to the next. An audience member witnessing all three productions over the span of seven (or more) years may recall the image of Welles seated center stage, staring out at the audience and functioning as a still centerpoint, around which the action of both Iizuka’s *War of the Worlds* and *Radio Macbeth* hurtle. In Carlson’s words, “the memory of that recycled material as it moves through new and different productions contributes in no small measure to the richness and density of the operations of theatre in general as a site of memory, both personal and cultural” (*The Haunted Stage* 3-4).

Much of the richness and density ghosted through the recycled material of the three productions has to do with voice. As Julien Allen puts it, “First and foremost Welles was a voice” (“Orson Welles the actor”). Webber, in addition to his tall, open frame, and upturned brow, brings his rich baritone voice to the part of Orson Welles. His portrayal is not an impersonation of Welles. Webber does not attempt to match the pitch, inflection, or timbre of Welles’s voice. Webber’s voice differs from Welles in resonance and does not reproduce the educated, Transatlantic dialect that was especially prevalent in stage, radio, and film during the early part of Welles’s career. Yet, as I listen to Webber speak, I constantly find Welles’s voice echoing in my mind. Webber’s performance ghosts Welles. As David Thomson tells us, by the time *Citizen Kane* was released in 1941,
Orson Welles was already famous for one of the greatest voices of the 1930's. It was a voice for poetry and promotion, for alarming the nation with “The War of the Worlds” or resonating with the secret insights of “The Shadow.” It was a great voice, but one so sure of itself that the streak of charlatanism could hardly be excluded. And just as “Citizen Kane” is a picture that takes sound as seriously as sights, so it is obsessed with the pattern of speech and applause, oration and manipulation. It hears in Orson Welles's voice astonishing, rapturous conviction, and the urge that may sweep a speaker off his flat feet. To this day, there is hardly a movie anywhere that so asks us to distinguish bombast from sincerity. All of that came from people who couldn't get Orson's tricky voice out of their heads. (“Was It Citizen Hearst or Citizen Welles?”)

Webber, taking on the challenge of the tricky Welles voice and persona in *Radio Macbeth*, balanced between bombast and sincerity, ghosts his own performance in the earlier two plays, while also ghosting Welles’s extended relationship with *Macbeth*.

In *Radio Macbeth* one sifts through the layers of meaning—SITI’s three productions, Welles’s versions of *Macbeth* for stage, radio, and film, as well as the public event that was the 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast, and the long production history of Shakespeare’s play. *Radio Macbeth* is a decidedly postmodern creation, concerned with using one story to tell another and thus letting echoes and reverberations present an experience of simultaneity and multiplicity. The interplay of ghosted productions, voices, and personas forms a complex of meaning best understood by
considering the relationships between them. In the words of Carlson, “One of the major reorientations of postmodernism has involved a shift from the romantic or new critical view of each work of art as essentially self-contained to a view of each work as existing in and best understood through a web of intertextual relationships” (*The Haunted Stage* 126). *Radio Macbeth* is best experienced with an active imagination that is able to move freely across the historical moments and production histories referenced through its many ghostly resonances.

Rebecca Schneider, questioning what remains of the past when it appears again in performance, writes, “To the degree that it remains, but remains differently or in difference, the past performed and made explicit as (live) performance can function as the kind of bodily transmission conventional archivists dread, a counter-memory – almost in the sense of an echo” (75). If the archivist dreads the echo from the past, it is perhaps because echoes seem to detach themselves from their sources, bouncing through time and space. When real life is fictionalized as it was by Shakespeare in his *Macbeth* and by SITI Company with *Radio Macbeth*, or when fiction determines real life as it did for some during Welles’s broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, performance detaches itself from its source and yet lingers on like an echo that takes on an extended life, defying its categorization as ephemeral. Its sonic character is part of what gives performance its extended life. Listening, we are challenged to remember the living people who lived through or inspired the events of *Radio Macbeth*. As Schneider writes, “We are also and simultaneously encouraged to articulate the ways in which performance, less bound to the ocular, ‘sounds’ (or begins again and again, as [Gertrude] Stein would have it),
differently, via itself as repetition – like a copy or perhaps more like a ritual – like an echo in the ears of a confidence keeper, an audience member, a witness” (75). The difference in the reverberation, its bodily excess, is what Barthes refers to as the “grain” of the voice.

The grain of the voice and sound’s bodily writing

Though Darron West confided to me that there really isn’t much to Radio Macbeth’s sound design, the subtlety and care with which the actors’ voices and the designed sound work with one another make for a production in which sound is of primary concern. In an interview with me last October he admitted, “It was a lot of work about how to use the voice in the room. That was the only thing for me because I had seen those actors move for so many years, and I thought… you know, I saw the Midsummer that the company did, and my whole thing about that show was, ‘they need to stand still and speak’” (West, Personal interview).

Orson Welles is conducting a late-night rehearsal for a broadcast of Macbeth with his Mercury Theatre. It is a first read-through of the play for the characters, and as they speak, they are consciously listening to the sound of their voices in the room. The actors are speaking the text feelingly, listening for the sound of their voices to return. The members of the acting company have arrived at the space in twos, some coming in quietly, others noisily falling over things in the dark, still others arguing as they come. Their sharp footsteps, the snap of wooden folding chairs, the half-heard conversations—all the everyday noises prepare us for Shakespeare’s first words. Kelly Maurer, playing
the older female star of the company, has arrived with the first wave and, seating herself at a small table facing the audience downstage left, looks over the first few pages of the script, until finally she speaks in a clear voice,

When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lighting, or in rain?
When the hurlyburly’s done,
When the battle’s lost and won.
That will be ere the set of sun.
Where the place?
Upon the heath.
There to meet with… Macbeth.

(Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 1.1.1-8)

Everyone stops and gives their attention to Maurer as she speaks these first lines, knowing that, whatever they were doing, the play has begun. Her voice is rich and rooted in her stillness, coming from deep inside her. It is a different sound than any we have yet heard in the performance. With her pronunciation of the name of the Scottish lord, someone offstage slams the keys of a piano and the sound rings out. By now everyone is involved. Maurer says,

I come, Graymalkin.

Paddock calls. Anon!
And all answer,

    Fair is foul, and foul is fair.
    Hover through the fog and filthy air.

    (1.1.9-12)

The invocation has been made by all present, their voices speaking the familiar words that seem to call forth the voices of the ages. Welles has still not appeared, but they have started without him.

When Welles finally makes his move, he does so by turning out the lights. It is the voice of Welles that announces his presence and through which he controls the proceedings. With only the flame from his zippo lighter to follow visually, we listen to Webber’s rich voice—reminiscent of, though different from Welles’s distinct voice—as he sets the scene and stumbles around in the dark. The script that SITI Company uses for *Radio Macbeth* is the cutting that Welles created for his 1940 radio broadcast. Scenes are reordered, some lines are cut, and a few stage directions are added to provide the listening audience the context they might obtain through the visual *mise-en-scène* of a stage production. In the dark Webber, as Welles, calls out, “Our story is laid in Scotland, ancient Scotland, savage, half lost in the mist between recorded history and the time of legends.” Company members laugh with recognition. The audience still cannot see. Welles continues, “The cross is newly arrived here. Plotting against Christian law and order are the agents of chaos, priests of Hell and magic, sorcerers and witches.” Someone turns on the lights to reveal Webber, tall and rich looking in his suit, topcoat,
and hat, centerstage, winding up the tale and the cast. “Their tools are ambitious men!” He continues, “This is the story of such a man.” He claps a hand on his lead actor, a dapper Will Bond. “And his wife.” Welles tosses his hat at Ellen Lauren, dressed head to toe in red, who will play Lady Macbeth. The scene is set, and my listening has been attuned to sounding events—collisions, footsteps, voices—in the dark, and they are now focused with the director’s gesture, his arm held high, paused, waiting for attention, then pointing to his chosen actors to recommence the play. In one dramatic (and unspoken) gesture, I understand: “And… action!”

Gian-Murray Gianino begins as Ross, and all listen. But when Akiko Aizawa begins speaking, the cast disperses, no longer listening, instead getting ready for their next “entrance,” reminding me that this rehearsal is for a radio production. Interestingly the story of *Macbeth* is here de-emphasized, as audience members watch what else is happening in a sort of backstage peek. At the same time the sound of Aizawa’s Japanese-inflected English stands out. Cutting through all of this is the first voice on a microphone in the production: Will Bond as Macbeth in the play’s first aside. With his elongated “Glaaams…” the cast stops and turns to look, and the audience has a moment to take in the changed acoustic.

Up to this point, the particular acoustic of the room (that is, the stage and auditorium) has been emphasized for me. With the masking removed from the back of the stage, the clop of footsteps, the brush of clothing, the turning pages of scripts, and the voices of actors reverberate in the space in such a way that does nothing to mask that we are in the space with them. We are there with them in the same space as silent witnesses
to the events of the rehearsal. The imaginary space of the story of *Macbeth* is present in the words spoken, but what the audience sees and hears affectively is not the story of *Macbeth* at all, but a story of Orson Welles’s and his company. My imagination works its way through the several layers of what SITI offers. What both facilitates and cuts through these imaginaries is the insistent encounter with sound in its materiality.

Figure 10: Will Bond in *Radio Macbeth*. Photo credit: SITI Company.

The acoustic closeness of that “Glaaams” removes the play from the room for a moment and places it in my ear and in my body. The surprise of that moment suspends all action with an intimacy that offers a raw, non-representational body through the mediation of the microphone’s processed sound. As Susan Hiller describes, “Touching someone’s ears with your voice is actually a very intimate contact. In this sense, voice is physical, voice is body. Body is evoked and transmitted by voice, and not represented” (138). The moment surprises the characters as well. They show us that they hear and
register the change when they stop and look. The word Glamis, pronounced “Glaaams” by Bond, sounds strange and removed from reality not only because of the palpable change in acoustic space effected by the microphone and sound system, but also because the word is more sound than meaning. What is Glamis? If one did not know the play (or perhaps medieval Scotland), one might not register it as a name at all, but only as a guttural sound emphasizing the corporeality of Bond’s voice.

The change is an affective use of sound, in which the encounter between bodies is emphasized. As previously defined, I am using affect here in the Spinozan sense of ability to affect or be affected as enunciated by Deleuze and Massumi. The moment reveals the “grain” of Bond’s voice. Barthes refers to the “grain” of the voice as “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs” (Image-Music-Text 188). For Barthes, the theoretical value of the “grain,” which does not exist in the beautiful voice homogenized for mass consumption, is “the emergence of the text in the work” (Image-Music-Text 188). The emergent “text” or intertextuality is the resonance of the actor’s body and its echoes of the past productions that I outlined above. But the grain is not only found in the speaker’s encounter with his or her own language. As Barthes admits, “What is more, leaving aside the voice, the ‘grain’ – or the lack of it – persists in instrumental music; if the latter no longer has language to lay open signifiance in all its volume, at least there is the performer’s body which again forces me to evaluation” (Barthes, Image-Music-Text 188). Barthes’ term signifiance, borrowed from Julia Kristeva, is sometimes translated as signification, but means just the opposite. Signification is the signifier’s fulfillment in that which is signified, but signifiance is a
process, a play of signs, in which the subject is not constituted but lost (Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* 10). In other words, the “grain” of the voice is the continual process of writing the intertext, what Barthes (again borrowing from Kristeva) calls the *geno-song*—“what is produced at the level of the *geno-song* is finally writing” (*Image-Music-Text* 185). The writing, the continual reshaping of meaning, feeling, and possibility is ongoing. Timothy Scheie writes, “*le corps* emerges as the figure of exemption from meaning” (70). But it is not that the body doesn’t *mean*, it is that the body’s meaning is not fixed.

As explained earlier, sound’s resonance in a body accentuates certain frequencies more than others. More specifically, “resonance is a sound bouncing back and forth at one particular pitch more than others. This is the effect of a phenomenon called the ‘standing wave’, which happens when the wavelength of a certain frequency of sound corresponds proportionally with one of the volumetric dimensions of a containing space” (Brown, *Sound* 146). Brown also notes, “Standing wave resonance occurs in dense objects” (*Sound* 146). Perhaps SITI Company actors, with their commitment to a method of training (outlined in the previous chapter) that cultivates muscular and affective density in the body, could utilize their bodies on stage to create something like a standing wave in which they produce greater than everyday sounding resonance and embodied presence.

Ellen Lauren as Lady Macbeth in her sleepwalking scene emphasizes the corporeality, the “grain” of her voice, by focusing not on meaning, not on words, but on sounds and their relation to the resonating body that creates them. West mixes in a quiet,
slowly moving musical layer that tenderly holds the acoustic space. It is against this sound that Lauren is able to press and play, the sound of her voice and her body becoming affective material as it passes through the changing acoustics of the onstage microphones’ reverberant spheres. Intermittently throughout the scene, actors Bond and Maurer as the doctor and the gentlewoman comment on the scene through a microphone that is close, dry, and intimate. The sonically layered moment is a rich dramaturgy for a production that ghosts Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Orson Welles’s productions of the play for stage, radio, and film, and SITI Company’s own production history. “[R]esonance,” writes Brown, “the spatiotemporal buffer which ‘holds’ and savours the acoustic moment for a fraction of a second, is the place where the art and ideas of theatre performance meet with the flesh and bone of the audient body” (*Sound* 125 italics original).

In SITI Company’s *Radio Macbeth*, the grain of the voices, the sounding bodies in space, and the subtle emphasis on changing temporal acoustics through microphones and reverberation ghost a long and complex theater history, while creating new ever-changing meanings, feelings, and possibilities. Barthes’ “grain of the voice” provides an analytical approach that reveals affect. The *geno-text* that he seeks in the voice that reveals its relation to its own physical and cultural history is at work in *Radio Macbeth*. 
CHAPTER 5: ICONS, INDICES, AFFECT, AND POSSIBILITY IN *UNDER CONSTRUCTION*

My focused listening during the performance of *Compulsion* at New York’s Public Theatre, described in the first chapter of this project, may be thought of as listening not just to the performance but also about it. That is, I also listened to that which surrounded, bordered, and defined the performance by its difference from it. There were many sounds during the performance, in addition to the one that I focused on, that were not part of the sound design: sounds of the audience shifting in their seats, coughing, turning pages of their programs, whispering. These sounds I was able to immediately identify and let pass unheeded. These were the expected sounds, those that accompany many performances at the theater. I effectively discriminated between these “everyday” sounds (sounds that are nevertheless specific to an event we consider outside of the everyday) and the sounds that existed within and for the world of the performance. I kept the theatrical frame(s) of the performance in place, but inadvertently allowed for the inclusion of the everyday into the theatrical world of the play by trying to make that bothersome sound fit. This was an accident. Had I understood what that low rumbling sound was, I might have mentally set it aside, paying it no more mind than I did to the sounds of the building’s ventilation system. But because I had worked so hard during the first act to let this sound be purposeful, both abstracting it from its (or any) source and allowing it to resonate affectively, I found that during the second act I anticipated its arrival and it continued to be meaningful, though I paid it less conscious attention. The
sound seemed to fit, even though its occurrences did not coincide with the play’s
dramatic actions and did not indicate anything in particular. For me it offered a feeling
that resembled the overall content of the play, but did so, interestingly, on a rhythm all its
own.

*The iconicity and indexicality of sound*

Just how do we interpret these sounds, whether intentional or not? By asking
what a sound might “resemble” and “indicate,” I wish to highlight sound’s semiotic
possibilities, and here I will turn to Charles Sanders Peirce, mostly by way of
ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino. The semiotic categories Peirce referred to as the *icon*
and the *index* provide a model by which we can better understand sound design’s effects
in and beyond theater performance events. Through such a model (or models) sounding
histories of the theater and sounding trajectories for the theater may be more possible. I
suggest that our experience of self depends in part on how we respond or situate
ourselves in relation to sonic stimuli. What is heard and felt as sound “moves” us
physically, emotionally, and cognitively. We feel it and it sets the imagination in motion,
combining sensation with memory, fantasy, and possibility.

Signs, according to Peirce, can be anything. Turino paraphrases Peirce’s
definition of the sign as “*something that stands for something else to someone in some
way*” (“Signs” 222). The model is composed of three things: the something (the Sign or
what Peirce calls the Representamen), the something else that the sign stands for (the
Object, either an actual object or a concept), and the way that someone perceives it (the
Interpretant, the effect created within the observer – this could be a feeling, physical reaction, or language-based thought process) (Peirce, *Philosophical Writings* 99-100). Whereas a Saussurian semiotic model would insist on a dyad of signifier and signified, both understood as language, the Peircian triadic system not only is not bound to linguistic objects, but also incorporates the resultant effect of one thing standing in for another. This effect can become the new sign, which may then stand in for another object, resulting in a new effect in a possibly infinite chain or “train of thought” that allows complex and sometimes contradictory layers of meanings to accrue (Turino, “Signs” 223).

Sounds as Peircian signs communicate meanings at a pre-linguistic level. We may identify with sounds without knowing precisely what they refer to. One of the ways we are affected emotionally by sounds and music is through identification with them. Our identities are, as Turino describes them, “the affective intersection of life experiences.” We feel our sense of self, our own place within the world, intensely. Turino points to “the specific semiotic character” of expressive arts, particularly those that do not rely directly on language, as the reason why they are so meaningful for us without being something we can describe (“Signs” 221).

In Peirce’s system there are three groupings (called trichotomies) of signs: the first, about the sign itself (what is it?); the second, concerning the object represented and how it is represented by the sign; and the third, regarding the kind of effect created in the perceiver. There are ten signs in total, and each one is “divisible by [the] three trichotomies,” which means that each sign can be considered in terms of its three aspects:
the sign itself, the relationship of the sign to the object it represents, and the effect created in the auditor (Peirce, *Philosophical Writings* 101). Icons and indices are part of Peirce’s second grouping of signs and comprise “the specific semiotic character” to which Turino refers. Because icons and indices (and a third class, *symbols*) describe the relationship between the sign and its object, they are useful for thinking about representation and analyzing art. We can use these semiotic classes to consider how stage actions—from simple to complex occurrences—might be understood by an audience member.

The icon communicates by resemblance. Iconicity is identification. We feel we get it because it seems like something we recognize. When we think of something as iconic, we understand it as being of a certain style, even of determining that style. Iconicity is a quality of being. Music can be broken down into many different qualities—tempo, rhythm, melody, timbre, etc.—and each one may serve to resemble something different. Noises have these qualities too, but significantly they also often carry knowledge of the source of the noise. Sounds are recognized because of the listener’s experiences and memories of the world. But even when a sound’s source is not visually apparent or otherwise known by the listener, its other qualities may remind the listener of other sounds or non-sonic sensations or memories. Thus sonic signs are potentially a dizzying condensation of many objects and many effects.

When the sign is realized in actual life and there is a direct or causal connection, a co-occurrence between the sign and its object, we call it an index. One thing indexes another. The classic example is smoke indexing a fire, but sound designers know that sonic examples abound. Birdsong indexes a bird and leads the listener to that bird’s
natural environment; the sound of wheels on gravel indexes a vehicle and may signal the arrival of a character on stage, though you may not see the vehicle. You understand the one thing because it is directly connected with the other. The sound of rain combined with actors hunching over may index an onstage downpour. We understand that the characters on stage have been caught in the rain and soaked, though we can see they are actually dry. Iconicity seems natural. A style is a style because it has recognizable qualities that just seem right together. An index, however, can contain many meanings, even contradictory ones; and this perhaps is why Peircian analysis is so useful for theater sound design.

The use of musical motif to indicate the arrival of a character onstage is a leap to the Peircian sign class of the symbol because our association of music and character or music and theme is culturally learned and understood. But the sign contains the index and the icon within it. With a sound or musical theme played during the first happy appearance of an important relationship in a play, this association adheres in our minds. The next time the theme is played it may accompany the painful severing of this relationship. We experience the sadness or perhaps anger at the same time that we remember the joy, love, or erotic feelings we experienced when we first heard the theme. When it plays later, we will likely remember both occurrences, and neither character need even be present. As Turino writes, “Once such indexical relations have been established… actual co-presence of sign and object is no longer required… Of key significance to a theory of musical affectivity, indices continually take on new layers of
meaning while potentially also carrying along former associations—a kind of *semantic snowballing*” (“Signs” 235).

Our associations with certain sounds are dependent on our personal life experiences, and certain contexts or genres frame sounds to influence the effects they may have in us. But because of the effect of “semantic snowballing,” in which a great many associations, both from within the theatrical context and also from our individual and social lives, congeal within a single dramatic moment, sounds may convey meanings in ways that we have no ability to think, rather we may experience them “feelingly,” perhaps as chills up and down the spine or unexplainable sobbing. If the connection between sign and object is strong in the listener’s mind, the arrival of the sign can bring on unexpected emotion. If this connection is personal it can be even more meaningful. As Turino relates, “Indices are experienced as ‘real’ because they are rooted, often redundantly, in one’s own life experiences and, as memory, become the actual mortar of personal and social identity” (“Signs” 229).

Sound design is just one aspect of a theater production, just one part of a single moment of theater, in which the audience member is offered the simultaneous work of sound, lighting, scenic, costume, properties, and music designers, and seen and unseen stage performers, from actors, puppeteers, and musicians to stage technicians and managers. Depending on the particular theatrical moment, we may experience each of these elements at once. But even when seated in the dark with only a single sound or musical instrument playing, we experience that moment of the performance with all of
our physical senses and with as much sensibility as we can muster. We feel, we move, we think, we imagine.

The information communicated by an index begins with the recognition afforded by an icon; that is, the index contains the icon. This is a general principal of Peirician semiotics: higher order signs contain lower signs. The relationship between object and sign described by a symbol contains an element that indicates its connection with the real-world object, which in turn has an iconic resemblance to it. The icon is a quality that we recognize. The index gives us information. As Turino explains,

A “wince” initially functions iconically to express pain or displeasure because it “looks like” other expressions of displeasure. Primarily it is indexically related to emotional states through co-occurrence. All indices depend on an initial iconic moment of recognition… [A] rising melodic line and crescendo might function iconically in relation to excited speaking voices. This is true at an early part of the semiotic chain, but the real impact of these signs is based on the fact that rising pitch and volume when speaking co-occurs with excited states and we interpret these signs as being the result of excitement (the object). (“Signs” 252)

The motivic use of sound in theater, film, or opera helps the viewer to follow, anticipate, and become involved in the actions of a story because of qualities we recognize (iconicity) and because those qualities are understood to indicate specific emotional states, feelings, or moods.
The symbol describes a relation between object and sign that is culturally agreed upon. As Turino states, “Whereas the meanings of indices are dependent on the experiences of the perceiver, and thus can be quite fluid and varied, the meanings of symbols are relatively fixed through social agreement” (“Signs” 228). The connection between sign and object in a symbol is made through the use of language and arbitrary. The word “cow” has no more connection with an actual cow or the idea of a cow than does the French word “vache.” Despite the fact that different languages have different words for the same things, there are aspects of words that seem to contain an audible likeness to the visual (or other) characteristics of the objects they represent.³ Vowels and consonants, expressing a wide range of variable details, combine with pitch (frequency), loudness (amplitude), and movement to resemble the objects their constructions represent. That those combinations are culturally specific and arbitrary does not diminish this connection. In this way Peircian symbols contain indices and icons, creating a complex sign that is understood on several levels.

*Peirce’s interpretants as affect*

For the purposes of my analysis, I focus on the icon and the index because they operate on the level of “gut-feeling.” Not only does the symbol involve cognition, but the word is commonly understood in a way that differs from Peirce’s more specific meaning and is therefore confusing. Furthermore, the effects that icons and indices have

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in listeners are of a kind that are sometimes referred to as sub- or unconscious. This is only to indicate that they are spontaneous reactions to a sign, not involving cognition of language-based concepts. They do involve consciousness, which is to say sensing, perceiving, and responding.

Peirce describes three different types of effect that the sign and its relation to its object can produce: *emotional interpretants*, *energetic interpretants*, and *sign interpretants*. The first of these is, as Turino states, “a direct, unreflected-upon feeling caused by a sign” (“Signs” 224). Turino points out that other signs can also involve emotion and cautions the semiologist to think of this reaction as a feeling or sense (or perhaps even a mood). This seems to me to be well described by the word “affect,” a capacity for change that can but doesn’t necessarily always bloom into a fully realized emotional state. The second interpretant listed above is “a physical reaction caused by a sign, be it unnoticed foot tapping to music, an accelerated heartbeat from a police siren, or unreflexively drawing a finger back from a hot stove” (“Signs 224). Perhaps it is because sound itself is invisible and because often the source of sounds is beyond our view that the “unreflected-upon” effects of icons and indices, what Peirce calls emotional and energetic interpretants, are often the results of sonic signs. Turino, writing about one aspect of sound, confirms this, stating, “Music involves signs of feeling and experience rather than the types of meditational signs that are about something else” (“Signs” 224). In what follows, then, my examples will rely on signs whose relation to their objects may be described as iconic or indexical.
Affective listening

It is April 22, 2011 at New York City’s Dance Theater Workshop (now known as New York Live Arts) on West 19th Street. I have been fortunate to spend the previous week with SITI Company, listening to and observing their rehearsals for Under Construction, and I am about to attend the first preview performance. Audience members enter the theater noisily, seat themselves, and carry on their conversations as they watch the actors already on stage. A few of the actors greet people they seem to know, while others check on props, talk with one another, or dance through the stage space. Finally, with all actors gathered in a line downstage, actor Tom Nelis says, “Alright, let’s get this thing started.” The audience, now a full house, cheers and quiets down. Nelis begins,

Tonight we are gonna do for you scenes number 6, 79, 29, 22, 67, 107, 18, 57, 122, 5, and 41. 41. This version of the script is the way the show has been done with the SITI company, and it seemed to us that these scenes in this order are wonderful. But, in the future, when we (or others) do the show, it may be that we want to throw out some of these scenes, write some new ones, change the order of things. And so, in this way, the piece will remain, like America, permanently under construction. (Mee, Under Construction n.p.; prologue)

Nelis blows a note on a pitch pipe, scats an arpeggio down to his starting note (“Bum, bum, bum, bum”) and sings: “I love those dear hearts and gentle people / Who live in my home town / Because those dear hearts and gentle people / Will never ever let you
“down,” and Bing Crosby gradually joins in, reverberating over the sound system and through the auditorium as though echoing through the memories of time gone by (n.p.; prologue). In this way the show moves from an opening statement that invites the audience to imagine a multiplicity of stories and consider how their telling actively and continually reshapes our lives and identities as Americans to a stable “home sweet home,” a place where “gentle people will never ever let you down,” an America enshrined, referred to, and revisited again and again in popular culture from Norman Rockwell to Mad Men and Wes Anderson’s Moonrise Kingdom and in the current polarized political culture of the United States. The song’s first verse complete, the rest of the acting company step out of line one by one to fetch the costume pieces and scenic elements that lie fully visible on the outskirts of the playing space, and gradually a world is created.

The singing style that Nelis emulates is Crosby’s famous croon. The iconic value of this sound is introduced with the note of the pitch pipe, the brief scat-singing, and the warm, round tone of Nelis’s voice. As Crosby’s voice enters, the iconicity of the moment is confirmed and the song begins to function as an index. I recognize the voice playing through the speakers and notice Nelis still singing. Crosby’s voice crescendos and the two voices become one. The sound coming through the speakers occupies a different acoustic space. It is saturated in reverb, making the moment feel thick and viscous. The connection between the onstage singer and the sound of a bygone era is apparent. The console television is placed in the corner and its black and white screen is turned on. Sawhorses and two long wooden 2x4s are placed prominently downstage. Chairs are
brought in to surround the makeshift table. Three rambunctious “boys” begin passing a football over all the activity from one corner of the stage to another. The song, having continued through all the stage action, begins to fade as Thanksgiving dinner becomes imminent. Through the nostalgia of this opening song, a point of view is established that will then be critiqued for the rest of the evening’s performance.


Bing Crosby’s voice lingers in my mind over the course of the performance and mixes with many other sonic relics of the 1950s and 60s, both recorded music and text spoken live. The tension between these and the contemporary music with which they are juxtaposed comprises a large part of my fascination with the sound design for *Under*
Construction. The end of “Home Sweet Home” returns after the Thanksgiving meal has been abandoned. Offering his prayer of thanks for a world of security—“these days there is nothing between us and a hurled rock but a big picture window made of glass, this is how safe we are,” (figure 11)—the father, played by Stephen Duff Webber, singles out each person for his cheerful criticism and is finally left standing alone at the head of a dinner table that has been deconstructed piece by piece (n.p.; Scene 6, Thanksgiving). He picks up the last sawhorse and leaves to the reverberating tones “Home… home sweet home,” almost as though he is walking back into the past from which the song came.

The three aproned women of the cast return to clear a table that is now gone. Actress Ellen Lauren says, “What I want…,” almost as though she is surprised to have the opportunity to tell anyone. One at a time they begin describing their desires, each more outlandish than the last. The women, alone with one another, now voice a long list of their most personal desires, growing in an accelerating crescendo until Avril Lavigne’s “I Always Get What I Want” crashes over the sound system and the women thrash-dance in a tangle of hair and thrown dinner trays. The moment is in striking contrast to Crosby’s “Home Sweet Home.” The loud sounds of distorted electric guitar and drums ring in our ears and vibrate our bodies. The unleashed female is raucous, wild, and violent. The recorded music cue does not reverberate in the same way as the previous one did. It sounds “dry” and close. Whereas the Crosby music cue, drenched as it was in reverb, seemed to come from memory, the Lavigne is less in my mind and more in my body. The song has effects that can be described as emotional interpretants and energetic interpretants: It raises my pulse and makes my head bob with the uptempo beat. It feels
different from what has preceded it, and it is a good feeling. It establishes a dangerous undercurrent that is present just under the surface of the safe, patriarchal home. For me the moment indexes the coming second wave feminism of the 1960s and 70s. At the same time, the song is commercialized pop, and I am reminded that Lavigne’s rage for having her subjectivity recognized can be packaged and sold. The three women rock out for a verse and chorus, and then abruptly the moment is over. The music stops playing and the lights shift to spotlight Nelis as our reliable narrator from the world of Bing Crosby once again. The contrast between Lavigne’s pouty, punky 2004 song and the re-established world of the 1950s is immense, and my mind and body function together to perceive this contrast.

About seventeen minutes and already seven scenes and many contrasting music cues into the show, actor Barney O’Hanlon leads an abrupt shift by delivering the new scene’s opening narration as a set of instructions to both the acting company and the audience: “a salesman comes into a hotel room, puts his sample case on the bed, turns down the covers, gets in bed” (n.p.; Scene 74, Travelling Salesman). The company gets to work, using the same pieces we’ve seen as the Thanksgiving table to transform the stage space into the salesman’s hotel room. O’Hanlon asks, “Eben, play something?” And sound engineer Eben Hoffer plays the next music cue, a prepared piano piece by John Cage. O’Hanlon listens, focusing our own listening, and shrugs in response to Hoffer’s selection. This is a departure from the music we’ve heard so far, which has been decidedly popular. As a Peircian sign, it functions iconically by offering a sound that is at once familiar and strange. It indexes a piano, and for those who recognize it,
minimlist art music. In this way it sets a time and place, 1960s New York City. But especially for those who do not recognize the music, it establishes a new tone through its quality of estrangement. Nelis, our narrator, becomes the salesman, crosses to the upstage right corner of the playing space, and sits on the 2x4s that are now his bed. The television we saw at Thanksgiving dinner sits in its same spot, this time silently playing a scene between two men. I hear a woman’s voice over the speakers—“Mic check. Mic check. One, two. One, two,”—and my attention is drawn to actor Makela Spielman, who crosses, trailing her microphone cable, to lean against the downstage left proscenium wall. The scene is set, all other actors exit, and Nelis leads the next shift by turning on the bedside lamp over his shoulder. The lights and sound shift abruptly to spotlight Nelis reading in bed.

The music changes mid-cue to another piano, this one is further away and less insistent than the prepared piano. It soothingly prepares me for Spielman’s voice, which through the microphone, sounds close to my ears. Soon a saxophone begins a melody over that piano and indicates a genre, film noir. The sonic index contains the iconicity of the style, but it also makes me think of specific instances of noir from classic films and television to Garrison Keillor’s “Guy Noir, Private Eye” on his National Public Radio show *Prairie Home Companion*. She begins speaking what Nelis, in the far upright corner, reads to himself:

Beebo Brinker

by Anne Bannon

Lost, lonely, boyishly appealing--
this is BEEBO BRINKER.

She landed in New York, 

fresh off the farm...

her only certainty was

that she was different.

So innocent

she did not notice

that women watched her

when she entered the room.

(n.p.; Scene 74, Travelling Salesman)

As I listen to Spielman’s rich voice and watch Nelis, I experience an interestingly strange doubling of subjectivity. It is a woman’s voice reading pulp lesbian fiction in the mind of the male salesman, a male fantasy of lesbianism for his voyeuristic ears. With Spielman’s voice coming over the microphone and through the auditorium speakers, a very close acoustic space is created. It is as though I am reading what he is reading, that it is me sitting on that makeshift hotel bed. At the same time I can see Nelis and Spielman in their separate worlds creating the singular experience that I am sharing with them. By the third Anne Bannon book, I hear Nelis speaking aloud some of the descriptions from the back of the books along with Spielman. Then it is just the salesman speaking alone, and the acoustic changes from feeling close and in my ear to distant and no longer belonging to me. These vocal shifts of acoustic space and subjectivity function
as icons, but rather than determining fixed meanings, allowing me to identify with one point of view, they keep open the possibilities by continually changing from her voice to both together to his and back again. These shifting icons, heard with the indexical soft jazz underneath, keep me listening and wondering where we will go next. The iconic elements of the sounds and music used in the performance and their indexical layerings build a complex web of physical, emotional, and cognitive responses in me.

**Peirce, Affect, and Possibility**

I have argued for the use of Peircian semiotics to aid in the analysis of theater sound design and to better understand the affective functioning in the relationship between sound design, acting, and audience reception. I believe the icon and index are especially useful here. As Turino notes, “The crucial link between identity formation and arts like music lies in the specific semiotic character of these activities which make them particularly affective and direct ways of knowing” (Turino 221). But I hope that in the presentation of my examples I have also made clear that I do not rely on my understanding of Peircian signs to simply read a performance as one might read a book. Every person in the audience will have a different experience at the theater. Each will “get” certain references and miss others, based on each person’s life experiences. But, as I argue, because sounds are not “over there,” visibly before us like the salesman on his 2x4 bed, but rather seem to be all around us and resonate in attendants’ bodies and minds, a model that lets us question our physical and emotional responses to experience, as
Peirce’s icons and indexes do, is a helpful way for us to think about the possibilities of sounds in the theater more clearly.

Figure 12: Final art installation in Under Construction, from the 2011 New York City production at Dance Theater Workshop (now New York Live Arts). Photo Credit: Natasha Lee Martin.

Returning again to the performance of Compulsion, I found that the sonic interruption of the performance by the world outside offered rich possibilities to a show that intended a comparatively fixed set of meanings. I was better able to think through my experience of that show with an understanding of icons and indices. Though I have not undertaken a complete, moment to moment analysis of Under Construction, I think the examples I have selected reveal that Peircian semiotics is particularly useful for the
analysis of unorthodox work, like *Under Construction*, that offers an ever-changing
topography of experiences.

SITI Company’s piece is about transformation, possibility, and hope. As actor
Leon Ingulsrud says at the play’s end, “This is what human beings do. This is the human
project. We are in a constant process of construction, making and re-making, as long as
we are alive” (n.p.; Scene 147, The Future). Through its use of sound, *Under
Construction* suggests new trajectories for America, what Tadashi Suzuki calls “creating
a new/different America” (“Creating” 83). Using Peirce’s model we are able to more
clearly understand and think about what theater sound design allows us to feel and know.

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4 For those who were unable to attend either the 2009 world premiere at the Actors
Theatre of Louisville’s Humana Festival or the 2011 New York debut of *Under
Construction*, I refer readers to a promotional video made by SITI Company and
available for viewing at https://vimeo.com/42208415. Though only two minutes long,
the video offers a rich example of the kind of semantic snowballing to which Turino
refers. In contrast to the Bing Crosby that begins the play, the heavy metal music that
runs through the first half of the video is a later point in a trajectory the play is
documenting. The image that first appears with it in the video and that is the music’s
only accompaniment in the show is the full stage cross of Leon Ingulsrud, a large man
made larger by five-gallon bucket shoes, football pads, and a batman Halloween mask.
After the video’s “intermission,” we are treated to a quartet, sung straight from the
barbershop. The audio from the song continues while scenes with different emotional
content play out, offering the viewer a layering of indices. The collage effect of the
different scenes playing over the heavy metal music is not how the production itself
played out, but it is illustrative of my point. The lyrics of the quartet, “Ma! She wants to
marry me,” land on the image of Ellen Lauren in a seductive red dress and begins the
video’s final song by the band Calexico. The music and dance at this point in the show
could not have been possible in the America of Bing Crosby’s “Home Sweet Home.”
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This project has attempted to convince the reader of the significance of sound design in contemporary theater practice by moving beyond common assumptions of the purposes of the “soundtrack” and reconfiguring the location of sonic activity in audient and sonorous bodies. Critics have long debated musical meaning in the theater without satisfactory conclusion, while audiences have enjoyed, even savored the sounds of theatrical performance, finding rich possibilities therein. Brown describes “the audience’s cultural familiarity” with music in the theater as “a kind of participatory dramaturgy, while the cadences and rhythms of the music still do their work of underscoring emotional vectors in the liminal space between performance and reception” (Sound, 65). An audience’s cultural familiarities with what is heard in performance is a kind of ghosting from one performance to the next as well as the more important work of moving beyond the theater to understand performance in terms of everyday life. How are sound, voice, music, and noise in performance related to the world an audience will return to when they leave the theater? While many audiences are offered clear and fixed meanings for the sounds and sights they experience in performance, perhaps a dramaturgy of multiple meanings and possibilities might offer audiences a more satisfying theater experience through the participatory activity of doing their own thinking and feeling.

SITI Company’s mode of theater creation, in which “one can both see and hear,” might be such a model. A daily part of their practice, SITI’s relationship with sounding,
listening, and vibration opens their work to affective possibilities. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “The sonorous… outweighs form. It does not dissolve it but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude, a density and a vibration or an undulation whose outline never does anything but approach” (2). SITI’s work attempts to approach meaning without fixing it in place. They do so by cultivating an active relationship with sensation and affect that is especially pronounced in the ways they work with sound. Deleuze and Guattari identify three “compounds of sensations” in art that may be identified in SITI’s work. These compounds of sensations are:

- **the vibration**, which characterizes the simple sensation (but it is already durable or compound, because it rises and falls, implies a constitutive difference of level, follows an invisible thread that is more nervous than cerebral);
- **the embrace or the clinch** (when two sensations resonate in each other by embracing each other so tightly in a clinch of what are no more than ‘energies’);
- **withdrawal, division, distension** (when, on the contrary, two sensations draw apart, release themselves, but so as now to be brought together by the light, the air, or the void that sinks between them or into them, like a wedge that is at once so dense and so light that it extends in every direction as the distance grows, and forms a bloc that no longer needs a support). Vibrating sensation—coupling sensation—opening or splitting, hollowing out sensation. (*What Is Philosophy?* 168)

Suzuki actor training, as practiced by SITI Company, involves embodied work with vibration, while the composition process, as led by Anne Bogart and informed by
Viewpoints practice, attends to the vibration of intensive moments on stage, the embrace or clinch of two sensations resonating together—like the embodied sounds of Ellen Lauren and the second sound of her sonic body reverberating as she sleepwalks through the spherical pickup of onstage microphones, and the withdrawal, division, distension that makes up Viewpoints work in general as it operates on the plane of immanence.

I have focused on affect in SITI Company’s acting and sound design work because the experience of multiplicity—what Barney O’Hanlon calls “the theater of coexistence” (O’Hanlon, Personal interview)—an acknowledged goal of the company, involves the power and ability to affect and be affected. Cox points to a body’s “dynamic relationships with other entities” (Cox, “How Do You…”) as a description of affect. In an effort to address the difficulty of writing clearly about affect—“hazy, atmospheric, and nevertheless perfectly apprehensible” (Guattari, 158)—I have applied the theories of Barthes and Peirce. Barthes’s “grain” of the voice, the embodied excess involved in the process of signification, both individual and cultural, I suggest is affect at work. By confining myself to the work of only two of Peirce’s ten sign categories, the icon and the index, I am able to identify affect in what he describes as emotional and energetic interpretants. The endless chaining of signification for Peirce, in which interpretants become signs that then have another effect in the auditor is alike to Barthes’s ever changing, ever growing process of signification. Both are affect, and both theories have enabled me to think about SITI Company’s work and the relationship between sound design and acting in general.
Sound, affect, multiplicity, co-existence—these are all aspects of SITI’s theater practice. When Anne Bogart was asked what legacy she and the company might leave for future generations, Bogart replied, “it’s actually a way of leaving a legacy of a way of being together” (Conversations with Anne 507). The unique relationship between sound design and acting practiced by SITI Company is a way of being together, a commitment to the social experience of theater practice and theater reception, a theater of co-existence.
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