

Sound

The Need for Union Representation for Sound Designers

RICHARD K. THOMAS

Charlie Richmond's "Sound" column in the Summer issue suggested that USA supported a sound designers' local. This was based on old information and was written prior to the USITT Conference.

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One of the topics I have researched over the last few years is the difficult subject of union representation for theatre sound designers. Acceptance of sound as a design element faces similar resistance as lighting design did in the 1940s. Unfortunately, the dissimilarities between sound and other design areas have made a similar acceptance more difficult. However, there appears to be a viable solution at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

My interest in this area began, quite naturally, while I was a guest sound designer at a highly reputable, professional regional theatre. There were the usual problems—equipment not working for levels (at the local hi-fi shop for repair), a somewhat timid freshman who had never seen a reel-to-reel tape recorder before who was to serve as the sound board operator (cheap labor), and the sound designer inadvertently left off the posters and marquee (although it had been agreed to in the sound design contract). But when I walked into the theatre to discover the sound technician standing on tiptoe from the top of a ten-foot stepladder while reaching over his head to solder a replacement midrange to the Radio Shack speakers in midair, I knew there had to be a better way.

The logical place to start seemed to be United Scenic Artists (USA). After all, I was a designer, and USA seemed to represent the rest of the design team—scene designers, costume designers, and lighting designers. In November 1984 I was in-

vited by USA Local 350 to Chicago to discuss this issue with the USA board. The board seemed to voice a good deal of support for this idea. However, USA was involved at the time in a possible merger with Local 829 in New York, and was also heavily involved in negotiating a standard contract for LORT theatres. The sound design question would have to wait. In the meantime it was suggested that I survey the field and find a group of sound designers who would be willing to work on the union representation issue. Two possible problems were also discussed: some of the membership felt that USA was a union for *visual* designers, not *sound* designers. Secondly, a sound design union was already being formed under the jurisdiction of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) to represent Broadway sound designers.

I contacted Jack Shearing of Masque Sound in New York, who gave me some background on the forming of IATSE Local 922, the sound design local that was formed in July 1985.

One of the problems for the Broadway sound designers was gaining recognition for their work. It is surprising to note that Abe Jacob has designed sound for twenty shows that have won Tony Awards, yet he has never won a Tony himself. He has never even been nominated. They don't give Tony awards for sound design.

But the problem of recognition goes much deeper than the size and type of billing a designer receives. The lack of acceptance of sound design as a fourth department along with scenery, costumes, and lights has made working conditions difficult and often compromised the esthetics of the sound design. The sound designer and board operator were considered a part of the elec-

trics department under the master electrician. Most electricians knew a good deal about lighting and not enough about sound. Another practice that was particularly problematic was a carry-over from lighting: the designer was not allowed to touch the sound equipment. Although an acceptable practice for lighting, this is not at all conducive to good sound design.

Working conditions also varied greatly from theatre to theatre due to the lack of standard contracts. Issues such as the use of assistants, copyright protection, royalties and rights in future productions, and the ability to specify both the equipment and sound board operator had to be renegotiated for every show. This may have been relatively easy for the "old timers" but hard for beginners. Particularly difficult to negotiate (and often forgotten) were programs for employer-funded health annuity and other benefits.

There was also the problem of education and dissemination of information regarding new ideas and technologies. The group wanted to find a way to stay better informed about new technologies, such as TEF analysis. New products were being introduced every day—some with a strange new interface called MIDI. Computer technology offered incredible new potential for sound in theatre. An organization was clearly needed to maximize the flow of information and use of these new abilities.

And finally, I got a very real sense from Jack Shearing that this was his way of "giving back" to an industry that had been very good to him. Clearly the top Broadway sound designers do not need a union for the typical union problem—money! Many pull down six-figure incomes and can set their own working conditions. These are designers who have

acquired a good deal of experience in a very difficult business who are trying to make working conditions better not only for themselves, but for their successors.

Jack and I continued to keep in touch on this question as I started receiving responses to my survey. Most of the respondents expressed an interest in obtaining union affiliation. Only one felt that the existing union representation was adequate for theatre sound designers—a member of IATSE Local 922. The group was small, but vocal.

In April 1986 I organized a panel to discuss the organization of sound designers. Bob Shook spoke for USA Local 350 and Jack Shearing spoke for IATSE Local 922; Tom Mardikes from the Missouri Repertory Theatre and Michael Holton from the Seattle Repertory Theatre also spoke. One of the main results of the discussion was the realization that there were many conceptions as to what a sound designer was. Largely it seemed that what a sound designer did on Broadway was different from the typical practice of a regional or university sound designer. Although by no means mutually exclusive, Broadway-based sound designers were doing a lot more *sound reinforcement design* while regional and university sound designers seemed to be more heavily involved in *sound score design*. Jack Shearing recognized that this was an important difference that would need to be addressed by any union representing as diverse a group of people as sound designers. He called later to discuss the possibility of establishing an affiliate membership for regional and university sound designers.

This was an interesting possibility, but not one without its problems. A second survey again revealed that regional and university sound designers felt a good deal of bias against representation by IATSE. Most felt that since USA represented other members of the design team, it was the logical union for sound designers.

However, the experience of the Broadway designers was again similar to our experience: USA was reluctant to act at that time. IATSE was interested and offered several advantages to the Broadway designers. Most of the group were already members of IATSE and typically worked in houses under IATSE jurisdiction. This arrangement would allow the

members to handle sound equipment in theatres (unlike lighting designers). The League of Professional Theatres in New York was also willing to work with IATSE, which made acceptance and standardization easier.

In fact, the primary bias against IATSE seemed to be that IATSE was a union for stagehands. However, this is simply not true. Besides stage employees, IATSE also represents film

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designers, makeup artists, and many other artists and designers. With 65,000 members in 700 locals, it dwarfs USA by comparison.

Some were concerned that affiliation with IATSE would prohibit sound designers from working in non-IATSE houses. Jack assured me that this was neither true nor of interest to the union or the local. The purpose of this union was to promote sound design, not restrict it.

While some expressed reservations about IATSE, there were also some important comments made regarding USA membership, notably: "I

would . . . question whether USA would be willing to accept sound design as a 'full partner' or whether it would continue to be treated as a 'shunned stepchild.'" Given the opposition of some USA members to crediting the sound designers in the same size and type as the visual designers, this was not a wholly surprising comment.

Besides USA and IATSE, the second survey posed a third alternative—creating a separate union. The response was very enthusiastic: "it could . . . address sound designers' specific needs [e.g., a specific fee structure to present to producers and a certain amount of bargaining advantage]." The major reservation expressed was: "How strong would an alliance of sound designers be if it were out on its own?"

In April 1987 a follow-up was held at the USITT National Conference in Minneapolis. Bob Shook and Jack Shearing again addressed a room full of sound designers. The news from USA was disappointing: the union was still reluctant to act. The minimum anticipated time before sound designers could be accepted in the union was estimated at four to five years. The report from IATSE was more promising: the local was actively seeking to start an "Associate Membership" for theatrical and sound designers in regional and university theatre. The main advantages of the associate membership were that the union would essentially allow university and regional sound designers to start their own organization. IATSE strongly supports local autonomy in regard to contracts, membership, and testing. At the same time, it would allow this group to utilize the resources of both the Local and IATSE in general.

After lengthy discussion, the group decided to pursue the affiliate membership of IATSE Local 922. A committee has now been formed to accomplish this. The members and their addresses are:

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Purdue University
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(317) 494-8150

Tony Tate
c/o Old Globe Theatre
PO Box 2171
San Diego, CA 92112
(619) 231-1941

Robert Neuhaus
c/o Goodman Theatre
200 S. Columbus Dr.
Chicago, IL 60603

Tom Mardikes
Missouri Repertory Theatre
4949 Cherry St.
Kansas City, MO 64110
(816) 276-2964

David Budries
Sound Situation
Hartford Stage
130 Griswald St.
Glastonbury, CT
(203) 633-1952

Jack Shearing
c/o Masque Sound
331 W. 51st St
New York, NY 10019
(212) 245-4623

The committee is currently gathering information from sound designers who have expressed an interest in joining such a union. It is also very interested in seeking out others who are professionally employed in theatre sound design. Specifically, the committee needs to know:

1. The percentage of gross income earned from sound design;
2. The percentage of sound designs done on a free-lance basis versus as a resident designer;
3. The average salary per design;
4. The issues the union needs to address;
5. How many potential members already work under an IATSE contract;
6. How much potential members would be willing to pay as an entrance fee.

Responses may be communicated to any of the committee members. ■

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