

## Sounds Like USITT

Scanning the wonderful Bellman Archive of TD&T, looking for the first article about sound, I was pleased to discover *Professional Sound Facilities In The Theatre* in TD&T v01 #02, October 1965. I was even more delighted to find author Gary W. Gaiser, the Director of Stage Lighting and Sound at Indiana University, using the term “sound designer” in almost the same way we do today long before the earliest official designation we know of on a professional show in the US.

“The present availability of flexible electronic control of sound for theatre production allows the director to specify not only the necessary high fidelity sound effects the play demands but also a sound environment consistent with any style of directing. The resources of such an audio envelope permit the sound designer to interrelate prelude, entre-act, and postlude music with explicit and implicit sound effects specified by the play script and the style of the production.”

It is significant that Gaiser did not say “system designer”, he said *sound* designer, and if there was room to misinterpret what he meant, one needed only read a little further:

“As part of the theatre's ensemble of tools, [sound] should join other production arts in a compatible and aesthetically satisfying revelation, definition, and orientation of the environment and action. Once this composition is achieved, the entire design should be focused to reinforce the dramatic atmosphere of the production and yet not be obtrusive as an independent agent or force. Finally, the time-art demands of the theatre must be recognized...”

My excitement was tempered as I continued to work through the archive and the collection of Sightlines issues made available to me for research. Certainly, people were talking about sound but there was no push at the time to create a sound commission. To be fair, there really wasn't yet a solid commission structure in any area, the institute was still going about discovering what it wanted to be (an endeavor that arguably never really ends).

Between this first sound article in 1965 and Lee Watson's announcement of the formation of the Lighting & Sound Commission in 1981, I found no fewer than 23 articles in TD&T about sound including two issues devoted almost completely to sound (October, 1970 and Fall 1979). So our perception today that sound has only recently been “discovered” as one of the arts of theater is perhaps a bit suspect. Most of these early articles were focused on the technology of sound, but that was about to change dramatically.

The Fall 1979 issue of TD&T, the second “big sound issue” (with the first appearance of the human ear as cover model – in fact 25 of them in multi-color glory) included articles prepared by the Audio and Acoustics sub-commission of the USITT Engineering Commission, up to now the organizational unit of USITT involved with sound. Mostly focused on acoustics in the theatre, articles were included by Harold Burris-Meyer and Vincent Mallory, R. Laurence Kirkegaard, Russell Johnson, L Gerald Marshall, and a young man named Charlie Richmond, who contributed an article entitled *A Practical Theatrical Sound Console* describing his work in

developing low cost consoles that were actually designed for use in a theater, and tested “in battle”.

When Charlie Richmond began to intersect with USITT, he found himself frequently bumping into another fellow who seemed to be just as intensely focused on sound in theatre, Dr. John Bracewell. These two men would become key participants in the genesis of the USITT Sound Commission. I asked them how they met and how they got involved in USITT as part of a 2003 TD&T article:

John Bracewell: I first heard about [USITT] around 1964 from Charlie Reimer who was technical director at Florida State then. I went to my first conference in Los Angeles in 1969, if I remember correctly. Didn't make the next few conferences, and then went to the conference in San Francisco in 1972, where I first encountered Charlie. I got involved with Performing Arts Training and Education Commission (precursor of Education Commission) there, and I got more deeply involved shortly thereafter as P.A.T.E. Vice Commissioner, then Commissioner.

Charlie Richmond: The first time we met was in San Francisco in 1972. I displayed a prototype matrix console made from a Uher Mix-5 and two Advent graphic equalizers (just being used as a matrix of sliders) at their fledgling 'trade show' at SF State College. Because this venue was so far away from the meetings, I actually only met one person that I recall: John Bracewell.

I also displayed our Model 816 at the Anaheim USITT conference in 75 or 76 and bumped into the sound designer Shawn Murphy, who was working at Disneyland. I worked under Shawn at ACT in 1970 until he left and I took over his job. Again, at USITT in Seattle in '79, I displayed a prototype computerized sound system (made with an Ithaca Theatre Lighting console) as well as our regular Model 816Q. Again, I bumped into John Bracewell and Bob Scales and was invited back by ACT (who got the USITT 'Company of the Year' award) to design Romeo and Juliet on the new 816Q they just bought for the Geary.

Flash forward to April 1981; USITT President, Lee Watson writes:

USITT owes a ticker-tape parade to Vice President Randy Earle for his long and successful stewardship of the Commission structure. *During the past year he has responded to a felt need and added a new Lighting & Sound Design Commission.* (Italics added).

Charlie Richmond was named as the Co-Commissioner for Sound, and Richard Devin as the acting Co-Commissioner for Lighting (Devin was simultaneously being “kicked-up” to Vice President for Commissions).

In the September 1981 Newsletter, Richmond stated the purpose of the new joint commission as follows:

The Lighting and Sound Design Commission provides a forum for research and discussion in the less graphic, ephemeral design elements. The Commission serves the needs of design personnel in projects dealing with aesthetics and processes of design for theatre, television, architecture, and film.

Devin wrote in the October 1982 USITT Newsletter:

We continue to work toward identifying areas that the Lighting and Sound Design Commission should attack in solving problems and establishing better communication in the profession, especially in areas related to design process and aesthetics. If you have ideas for needs/solutions or work you would like to do, please contact us.

The dual Lighting and Sound commission continued for several years. Appearing the same year in the next sound-focus TD&T (Winter, 1981, V17 #4) John Bracewell's pivotal article *Sound as a Design Art* is the first that explicitly and definitively sets forth the argument that sound is a design art, worthy of taking its place at the design table with scenic, costume, and lighting. In this sound issue, only this one article referred to the design of *sound*, the remaining six articles were focused on sound technology, or sound system design and installation. Still, this was an impressive collection of articles for a single issue, and it highlighted the growing recognition of sound in the theatre. In Fall of 1982 a new Associate Editor for Sound, Rollins Brook, appears on the masthead of TD&T. In Spring 1983, Brook begins a regular column on sound.

Looking at the conference schedule for Corpus Christi in 1983, it is evident that the sound contingent of the Lighting and Sound Commission was hard at work. There are 7 sessions listed with sound focus, even though one might have to make a difficult choice on Thursday night at 7:30 between attending the session in Room 26 "Ambiophonics of Sound Systems" and the session next door in Room 27 "Divorce, Burnouts and Heart Attacks".

By 1984, it had become clear that both Lighting and Sound were important areas of focus in their own right. In the Fall, 1984 Newsletter, V.P. for Commissions Dick Devin announced:

The Board of Directors approved the dissolution of the Lighting and Sound Design Commission and the formation of two distinct Commissions with separate Commissioners and budget lines. The new Lighting Design Commission and the Sound Design Commission will focus on issues that deal with both design and technology that are appropriate to their interests. The Commissioners are: Sound Design Commissioner - Charlie Richmond; Lighting Design Commissioner - William Warfel.

Fall 1987; another pivotal individual in the history of the Sound Commission surfaces in print when Richard (Rick) Thomas writes an article for TD&T (Fall, 1987, V23 #3), about the issue of union representation for sound designers. The discussion of efforts to gain representation similar to our visual artist colleagues would go on for many years - in fact, it would wait for the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to finally be resolved. According to his recollections recorded in a fascinating video made for the USITT *Living History Project*, Rick became involved with the USITT at the suggestion of Lee Watson and Van Phillips. In 1979 at the Seattle convention, Rick participated in a panel with Harold Burriss-Meyer on the topic of "What is Sound Design". Over the next 30 years, Thomas would chair at least one session in all but three USITT national conferences.

With the Winter 1987 TD&T issue, Charlie Richmond took over as Associate Editor for Sound, and began to write the *Sound:* column. In the Summer 1987 issue,

Richmond's article *Theatre Sound Leads Film Sound?* poses a fascinating question about the similarities and differences of film and theatre sound designers, and the functions of sound score design and reinforcement design, marking the return in print fully 6 years after Bracewell's 1981 article, of the discussion of sound as a design art rather than primarily a technical craft.

In 1988 the success of Richmond Sound Design Ltd. as providers of the first functional computerized audio control system was consuming increasingly much of Charlie's time, so he made the difficult decision to step down as Commissioner of Sound, passing the baton to Dr. John Bracewell. Richmond continued to serve USITT as a Director at Large of the Board, and continued to serve as the associate editor for sound for TD&T. In Spring and Fall of 1988 he wrote a pair of articles entitled *A Sound Future* on the nature of the machine/designer interface, which explored the way that computers pass information to the designer, and the ways that the designer or technician can use the computer to control the sound system.

In the Winter 1988 TD&T (V24, #4), Rick Thomas, now a Vice Commissioner of the Sound Commission returns to print with the first article to appear in TD&T that confronts the issue of copyright with regard to sound in the theatre. This thorough article, written more than 20 years ago, describes a conundrum that is still very current. The commission will return to this issue several times in the ensuing years, and in fact will return to it again from a slightly different angle with a session at the 2010 conference.

In the Spring 1989 issue (V25, #1), another name that will return at the 2010 conference appears when UK sound designer and recordist John Leonard pens *Money for Nothing*, the firmly tongue-in-cheek sure fire guide to success for the young designer-to-be - or perhaps that should be "wanna-be". (John will be the Sound Commission International Sound Artist, sharing his work and wit on our opening session Wednesday, March 31 at 1:30pm.)

Charlie Richmond's Spring 1990 article *Theatre Networking Through MIDI* continued his efforts to chronicle developments in the technology of control systems for performance. He describes several systems that were using MIDI to control sound playback using Richmond Command Cue software. The article reports on the work under way with the MIDI Manufacturers Association to "create a truly useful MIDI communication standard for the theatre environment." (This work was performed largely on the USITT Callboard MIDI Forum, and culminated in the adoption of the MSC (MIDI Show Control) standard by the MIDI Manufacturer's Association (MMA) and the Japan MIDI Standards Committee (JMISC) in 1991.) This was followed in the Winter 1991 issue with another Richmond article that would create something of a stir. In *Automated Redundancy (Through Redundant Automation)*, he begins the article on what seems like a frightening note:

"It was inevitable. In the theatre, as in many other industries, technology is threatening to put people out of work. Those threatened are the ones we work with and rely upon: our colleagues and friends - and ourselves. Why did I imagine that live theatre and performance art would always be immune to this threat?"

But this was clearly an opening ploy, as he developed the story of how show control technology would reshape the industry he went on to point out:

“Even with memory lighting systems, computerized rigging controls and programmable sound, the complement of stagehands required to run a typical show has not radically altered. Most theatres have one person for each of those systems, just as they did for the manual systems which preceded them.”

Hindsight reveals that he was largely correct in his predictions for the way that technology would change many aspects of running shows, and that he was also correct that the move to computer control would increase rather than reduce the number of people working on a typical show. Not surprisingly (as Richmond predicted in the article), there was an immediate stormy response from at least one reader, and even stronger response from attendees of sessions in the Boston 1991 conference where Charlie attempted to explain the system. Over the course of several future articles, Richmond would try to “cure the apoplexy” of the responders with cogent explanations of how control systems would really work. But the topic remained a hot button for many years to come. Richmond would return to it with numerous articles in TD&T appearing from Winter 1992 through the Summer of 1993. While he was repeatedly accused of advocating rigid computer control of technical aspects, most often the thrust of Charlie’s articles was about the necessity for *maintaining* and *enabling* human control – again and again he made the point that there are places in the interface where there is no substitute for a live (alert) human being!

In 1991, Rick Thomas became Co-Commissioner with John Bracewell, and in 1992 Bracewell stepped down and Thomas became the Commissioner.

At this point in the story, it seems important to make note of the service Charlie Richmond and John Bracewell performed for this community of sound artists through their long and exhaustive efforts to build the USITT Sound Commission into a viable entity. Beginning long before the Lighting and Sound Commission was formed, their involvement would span more than two decades, and would build the solid foundation on which the current work of the commission depends. Reading their early articles reveals that both were uncannily perceptive about the future of the industry, and both were willing to expend enormous energy to get us there. On second thought, that would be *here*.

The Winter 1995, TD&T once again devoted the bulk of its article space to sound. *The Dramatic Auditory Space* by Rick Thomas and Ken Bell, opens with:

“This article presents concepts developed regarding sound control and placement, and the relationship of the auditory space surrounding the audience and the dramatic production. Its purpose is to assist in the development of the “spatial” repertoire of the sound score designer. [...]the sound score designer needs to develop the ability to work with sound in the theatre in three dimensions from both a technical and aesthetic perspective. We will explore the basics of space in sound score design, with attention to various acoustic decisions, and will demonstrate how various effects and moods can be created.”

This important article emphasized that in the work of the sound designer the aesthetic and technical blend together, though to many observers only the technical

craft is immediately obvious. Other articles in this same issue covered using computers to create sound cue sheets, sound scores in sequencers, and speaker plots prepared with CAD.

By 1995, considerable momentum had gathered in the sound commission. A group had come together that would remain active until the present day. Conference sessions were expanding to the point that USITT would eventually limit the number of sessions an individual commission would be allowed to present.

Rick Thomas continued as commissioner from 1992 through July 1996 when Martin Gwinup would join him as co-commissioner through July of 1998. Also in 1996, the Sound Commission welcomed an international Sound Design guest, one David E. Smith, recently arrived from the UK. (David became a member of the Sound Commission, and would subsequently chair sessions in every annual convention until 2007.) In 1998, Tom Mardikes took on the leadership of the Sound Commission, serving as Commissioner through July 2000.

The Harold Burris-Meyer Distinguished Career in Sound award was established by the USITT in 1999. The first award went to Abe Jacob, known as “the godfather of Broadway sound” (Abe would later receive the USITT Award at the 2008 conference in Houston, and is the subject of the monograph *The Designs of Abe Jacob*, written by Rick Thomas and available through USITT publications). The next two Harold Burris-Meyer awards would go to Charlie Richmond in 2000, and John Bracewell in 2001, who both, like Burris-Meyer himself had been honored as Fellows of the Institute. Subsequent recipients of the Burris-Meyer award would include Tony Meola in 2002, Dan Dugan in 2003, Jonathan Deans in 2005, Don & Carolyn Davis in 2006, David Collison in 2007, John & Helen Meyer in 2008 and Jack Mann in 2009.

In July 2000, Mike Hooker assumed the mantle of Sound Commissioner. Meanwhile, Rick Thomas was busy pursuing his passion for recognition of sound as a design art by making his presence known in OISTAT meetings. He was named Vice Commissioner for International Liaison, and by 2000, he had nearly single-handedly succeeded in moving OISTAT to create the Sound Design Working Group. This international connection was bi-directional, involving many of the USITT Sound Commission members in activities abroad, and connecting us to international sound artists who became a regular part of sound commission programming each year. Since that time, the Sound Commission has given the International Sound Artist guest pride of place as the first session held each year. Those international artists often became “hooked” on USITT, and many of them would return in subsequent years to participate in the conference.

Together, the USITT Sound Commission and the OISTAT Sound Working Group began talking about something extraordinary – the first-ever international gathering of sound designers. The Royal National Theater and the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, UK offered to make their facilities available, and the event was held in the summer of 2002. Reporting on the event, this author wrote in the Summer 2002 TD&T article *Sounds Like a First*:

“A Colloquium on Theatre Sound Design, the first such meeting of international sound designers ever to occur, was attended by more than forty sound designers from sixteen countries. [On the trip to London,] Rick Thomas noted ‘This is a

truly unique gathering, focusing on the dramaturgy rather than the technology of sound design, and it is an important step in raising the prominence of sound design within the industry, in academia, and with audiences.”

Connections made during this breakthrough event led to collaborations and interchanges that resonated in the commission and the institute for years to come. The newly formed OISTAT Sound Working Group met during the colloquium to plan activities for the 2003 Prague Quadrennial, which would be the first to include specific focus on both sound and lighting design as legitimate disciplines within the scenographic arts. The October 2003 issue of Sightlines reported on OISTAT meetings held during the 2003 Prague Quadrennial the sound working group’s activities were detailed:

“The Sound Working Group expressed enthusiasm for the efforts to include sound at the 2003 PQ. The group’s activities included nine presentations for the Scenofest Stage, the first International Theatre Sound Score and Music Composition Exhibition, sound design for the Costume Working Group’s Fashion Show, and design and installation of the sound system for all the Scenofest Mainstage events.”

The OISTAT Sound Working Group would continue to work closely with the USITT Sound Commission in ensuing years, participating in the 2005 World Stage Design Exposition in Toronto, the 2007 Prague Quadrennial, and the 2009 World Stage Design Exposition in Seoul. This collaboration is ongoing with preparations under way for the 2011 PQ.

In 2004, David E. Smith became the Sound Commissioner, in 2006 David also joined the Commissions Steering Committee. In 2006, William Liotta was named Co-Commissioner with David, and in 2007 Smith stepped down and Jonathan Darling became Co-Commissioner with Liotta. Inevitably, this article has left out more than it has included in sketching the history of this very active commission. Space precludes going into detail for more recent years, but one look at the exciting programming for the 2010 conference listed on the USITT website suggests that far from resting on laurels, the commission is moving forward at a brisk pace. We hope to have you join us for the exciting ride to come in the next 50 years.

Dave Tosti-Lane was a founding faculty member, Head of Sound and long term Chair of the Performance Production Department at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. In December 2014, after 33 years as faculty and 22 as Chair, he retired from Cornish and is pursuing freelance design, consulting and writing. He is currently the Commissioner of the USITT Sound Design and Technology Commission, Associate Editor for Sound Design for TD&T (the journal of the USITT), and Vice Chair of the Pacific Northwest Section of the Audio Engineering Society (AES).