

The Long Road Home

As I write this, I am returning from the USITT National Conference in Toronto, Ontario with Kyle Ridenour, a graduate student in the Theatre Sound Program at Purdue University. We're both pretty charged up from the whole experience. I have to get busy and write this article, and it occurs to me that it might be fun to look at the general state of sound in the Performing Arts from the perspective of a graduate student standing on the precipice of this brave new world. So what kind of world is Kyle entering?

Well, the one word that comes to both our minds is *growth*. This USITT conference may have been the largest, most well attended ever. The show floor was bursting at the seams, and attendees were everywhere. The growing visibility of sound at the show should certainly encourage young specialists like Kyle. And in a couple of meeting rooms, what used to be adequately sized rooms couldn't hold everyone wanting to talk about theatre sound.

Inside these rooms we began to really gain an understanding of just how vital sound is becoming in the Performing Arts. For years, theatre sound was an orphan—neglected by theatre, scorned by the rest of the audio industry. But now there is an emphasis on quality that extends from the largest Performing Arts venues to the smallest theatres. These attendees craved information, and it was fun to see how all the vital disciplines required to provide great sound were represented and explored. One minute it was the engineering involved in taming hum and noise in theatre sound systems, and the next, critical listening sessions let participants hear composers explore the differences between MS (mid-sides) and x.1 surround sound playback (And while we're on the subject, keep in mind that in theatre, the x stands for any number you like, not just 5 or 7!).

The packed rooms provided additional clues about the general health of sound in the Performing Arts. Theatre educators huddled together to figure out how to pack all of the training necessary into limited curricula. Students networked with leading professionals and discovered that increasingly, it is a seller's market, as schools can't seem to supply the demands of the performing arts industry. And no wonder, as one tried to find a seat in a session targeted to end-users facing the daunting task of building or renovating their performing arts facilities. Given the high level of interest, it seems safe to speculate that new Performing Arts *complexes* might become the first boom industry of the 00's. These new facilities promise to be crammed full of high tech innovations such as digital networks that tie sound, video and communications together. Clearly the job market will need to continue to expand to provide competent artists, engineers, and technicians to maximize the potential of these new super-facilities.

Along with all of this growth comes the inevitable growing pains of progress. If the walls of the conference could talk, they would most certainly have reported the buzz that surrounded such difficult issues as union representation for sound designers and technicians, the implications of copyright law for sound in the performing arts, and a society that conditions its women at an early age to avoid a field that so desperately needs their contribution. But those same walls might also have reported a strange paradox to all of this growth--a *shrinking* globe, as participants continued to explore the culture of other countries through the sonic exploits of international theatre artists.

Finally, young people entering the profession today are also starting to witness the long overdue recognition that the performing arts industry owes its first generation of theatre sound practitioners. After being ignored for years by such prestigious organizations as the Tony Awards, it was gratifying to see the Institute establish recognition for lifetime achievement in sound, honoring legendary Broadway Sound Designer Abe Jacob as its inaugural recipient. It's good for those just entering the profession to know that recognition exists for the best of the best in our field. Awards such as this encourage them to set their hopes and aspirations accordingly.

So this is the world that our young sound specialists like Kyle are entering—a shrinking, expanding, thrilling mix of technology and art. And a distinct contrast to the isolation of that other phenomenon of modern communication, the Internet. The performing arts thrive on *live* artists, technicians, and engineers collaborating in front of a *live* audience—real humans in a real room. No aliases, no fooling. Humans need human contact, and that may be the most important guarantee that the current growth in attendance at the conference, and in the performing arts as a whole will continue. No wonder we're both feeling pretty charged up about the whole experience.