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THEORY FOR THEATRE STUDIES

SOUND

SUSAN BENNETT

Theory for Theatre Studies: Sound

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*For Barnaby,
maestro of sound*

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SERIES PREFACE

Theory for Theatre Studies (TfTS) is a series of introductory theoretical monographs intended for both undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as researchers branching out into fresh fields. It aims to introduce constellations of ideas, methods, theories and rubrics central to the working concerns of scholars in theatre and performance studies at the opening of the twenty-first century. With a primary focus on twentieth-century developments, TfTS volumes offer accessible and provocative engagements with critical theory that inspire new ways of thinking theory in important disciplinary and interdisciplinary modes.

The series features full-length volumes explicitly aimed at unpacking sets of ideas that have coalesced around carefully chosen key terms in theatre and performance, such as space, sound, bodies, memory, movement, economies and emotion. TfTS volumes do not aggregate existing essays, but rather provide a careful, fresh synthesis of what extensive reading by our authors reveals to be key nodes of interconnection between related theoretical models. The goal of these texts is to introduce readers to a wide variety of critical approaches and to unpack the complex theory useful for both performance analysis and creation.

Each volume in the series focuses on one specific set of theoretical concerns, constellated around a term that has become central to understanding the social and political labour of theatre and performance work at the turn of the millennium. The organization of each book follows a common template: Section One includes a historical overview of interconnected theoretical models, Section Two features extended case studies using twentieth- and twenty-first-century performances and

Section Three looks ahead, as our authors explore important new developments in their constellation. Each volume is broad enough in scope to look laterally across its topic for compelling connections to related concerns, yet specific enough to be comprehensive in its assessment of its particular term. The ideas explored and explained through lively and detailed case studies provide diverse critical approaches for reading all kinds of plays and performances as well as starting points for practical exploration.

Each book includes a further reading section, and features a companion website with chapter summaries, questions for discussion, and a host of video and other web links.

*Susan Bennett (University of Calgary, Canada)
and Kim Solga (Western University, Canada)*

Sound: An Introduction

Sitting on the bus, walking across campus to class, travelling on a plane, working out at the gym and so many more everyday scenarios where thought, action and even perhaps sense of self are now typically accompanied by a soundtrack. It has become a commonplace to go through the day with headphones in ears, listening to a curated playlist, favourite radio channel, podcast, audio book or a randomized selection of music housed on a personal Apple or other branded mobile device. As fans of theatre, we may be subscribed to the ‘PlayMe’ podcast, ‘transforming drama for the digital age’ and allowing us to listen to original ‘Canadian Indie Theatre on a national and international scale’ (Expect Theatre). Often, of course, we choose a soundtrack to serve a purpose – change or set a mood, inspire an activity, provide us with street directions or just to block out the more unsettling and unwelcome sounds of daily life, especially those of a city such as traffic, machinery, too many other people. We live in a sound world that regularly serves as a barrier to noise pollution in the real world. Michael Bull describes our immersion in sound as an ‘audiotopia’, created by the ‘intense pleasure’ and ‘desire for continuous, uninterrupted use’ of iPods (2011: 528). More materially, Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld note that sound has been rendered “‘thing-like” – a commodity to be bought and sold on iTunes, a thing to be worn, as with personal stereos’ (2012: 5).

Even without headphones deployed, our daily lives are pervaded and distracted by music and other varieties

of ambient sound, part of a contemporary experience of elevators, stores, coffee shops and restaurants, gyms, hotel lobbies, art installations and so on. We are subjects hailed by these public space soundtracks, chosen not (or, at least, not just) to entertain us but more explicitly to put us in a mood conducive to shopping or eating or working out. Sometimes a soundtrack – often made up of classical music or opera – is designed and deployed to discourage us from lingering too long at a particular site (many public transit authorities have used this strategy). This plethora of everyday sound experiences Anahid Kassabian has usefully captured for us as ‘ubiquitous listening’ (2013: 40).

The number and variety of these commonplace sonic engagements make up a narrative of ‘human-technology coupling’, David Cecchetto would say (2013: 4), and it is hardly surprising that so many theorists have started to examine ‘the sonic turn’ of the twenty-first century. How do we understand the ways sound shapes theatrical production and reception? How have sonic practices informed the performances we make or attend? This book aims to think through the many elements of sound that inform theatre and performance and to provide critical entry points for engaging the breadth of theory across historical and disciplinary perspectives concerned with the nature of sound. Scholarship in theatre and performance studies for a very long time emphasized, sometimes almost exclusively, matters of visuality and of embodiment, even as it was recognized that sound in its various forms is an intrinsic part of any performance experience. It has long been obvious, after all, that audiences receive a great deal of information, not to mention enjoyment, through what they hear from the stage as much as from what they see. Gertrude Stein, way back in 1935, declared, ‘I say nothing is more interesting to know about the theatre than the relation of sight and sound’ (1957: 113). To this end, *Sound* will look at different theories and diverse performances that have explored and articulated how various sonic elements shape and inform theatrical production and reception.

While this book will explore critical discussions of the role of sound in theatrical production, it will also look at theoretical writing about sound more broadly and via cognate disciplines so as to measure the usefulness of this work for investigations of performance matters. With careful attention to relevant period studies that have thought through sound in specific historical contexts, as well as to key disciplinary and interdisciplinary texts, *Sound* will engage a wide range of theatre and performance examples as well as provide case studies so as to model a sound focus and methodology. But how, exactly, should we think of this topic of sound? As a starting point, then, let's take up Mark Grimshaw's definition: '*Sound is an emergent perception arising primarily in the auditory system and that is formed through spatio-temporal processes in an embodied environment*' (2017: 468, italicized in original).

What Grimshaw emphasizes is the relational nature of sound: we understand it through space, time and the body (all areas that have been amply theorized within theatre and performance studies). Also, we might note that he begins with an emphasis on the 'auditory system' and, thus, pays attention to the role of the listener. Grimshaw amplifies his gloss as follows:

The definition also stresses the importance of perceptual context and opens the door to an understanding of the dynamic relationship between sound and memory, experience, imagination, affect, and cross-modality. Thus, sound really is all in the mind and its emergent perception is formed from varying combinations of material, sensuous stimuli (possibly, but not necessarily, sound waves) or immaterial, non-sensuous phenomena (such as imagination and memory). (2017: 469)

Theatre director Peter Sellars, like Grimshaw, ties sound to memory: 'That is to say, sound is where we locate ourselves, not physically, but mentally and spiritually. Sound exists

inside our heads. It is our greatest experience of intimacy. It transports us' (1992). Hans-Thies Lehmann, in his oft-cited account of 'postdramatic theatre', calls for an 'independent *auditory semiotics*' (2006: 91, emphasis in original). And Lynne Kendrick asks us to think through 'theatre aurality', 'a mode of engagement that – because it cannot be captured by the eye – can exceed the boundaries by which our visible world is marked out for us ... sound can redraw the spaces and environments around us' (2017: xxii). In this book, we will explore a range of sound experiences and consider how production elements impact and affect audiences.

Sound is, in the sonic sense, a sampling. The goal of the book is to generate key questions and productive approaches that will encourage students and researchers to conduct their own investigations of sound in the theatres and performances they value. To this end, what should we consider as sound in a theatrical context? The term catches within it elements such as voice, music and song, sound effects, soundtracks, intended and unintended noises (what Mladen Ovadija calls 'environmental onstage and offstage events' [2016: 11]), acoustics, resonance, noise and even silence – many of these fully deserving of a theoretical study of their own and certainly all in need of careful explication and historicization. We might think, for example, that the category of sound effects is both transparent and transhistorical – what is the storm at the beginning of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* but a remarkable sound effect? But, in fact, this sonic term came into use only in the twentieth century in the infancy of the Hollywood film industry, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) providing the word's first citation from a 1909 advertisement in *Moving Picture World* for the makers of 'high grade sound effects.' The OED does, however, include the theatre in its annotation of common usage: 'a sound typical of an event or evocative of an atmosphere, produced artificially in a play, film, etc.', suggesting how this modern concept has been taken up multi-modally and made retroactively applicable to discussions of theatrical practice at any historical moment.