

Q & A Discussion Series: Sound Design

By Jennifer Gilg

TAG continues its series on the TAG Awards' technical categories with a Q & A Discussion with sound designers Molly Welsh ("MW") and John Gibilisco ("JG"). Molly Welsh has designed sound for SNAP! Productions, the Shelterbelt Theatre, BlueBarn's Witching Hour, and Creighton University. She won the TAG Award in Sound Design for her work on I Am My Own Wife at SNAP! Productions. John Gibilisco is Master Electrician and Resident Sound Designer for the Omaha Community Playhouse. He has won TAG Awards in Sound Design for Ragtime, South Pacific, and Starkweather, all at the Omaha Community Playhouse. Here are some thoughts from Molly and John as we close in on nominations for the 2009-2010 season.

Q: What are the components that make up "sound design" for a production? Sound effects like ringing phones seem obvious, but what other things fall under the umbrella of "sound design?"

MW: To me, everything the audience hears from the time they walk into the theater until they walk out is part of the sound design. This could include: Pre-show music, pre-show announcements, sound effects that happen in real time (doorbells, phones ringing, etc.), sound effects that comment on the moment (double take cartoon noises, a ting when someone has an idea, etc.), music/sound that underscores scenes to heighten the mood for the audience, music during intermission, ambient noise to tell the audience where we are in space and time (wind, rain, applause, zoo animals, in a noisy bar, etc.) transition music to drive the play forward between scenes, any microphones on stage and off stage, and any speaker placement.

JG: Sound design includes a combination of elements. Thinking back on the season at the Playhouse, I have recorded scores of voice work and live musicians and have created live Foley effects and period radio broadcasts (both created and actual radio archive). Crash boxes, canned effects and wireless mic reinforcements and micing effects are also part of sound design. I utilized the beautiful music from the original production of Almost Maine and re-mastered Alex North's original music from the 1949 Broadway production of Death of a Salesman. Antiquated recordings are not always suitable for production, but with a little luck and some digital magic the restored tracks add wonderfully affordable character and charm to a production. Speaking of phone rings, I have a live phone ring generator from the old North Western Bell Co. along with a collection of old phone bells. But I also have gathered a number of recorded rings that range from the antique to a modern cell. I hope some day to use a rain stick and good old fashioned thunder sheet. There is a ton more that goes on behind the scenes as well, like paper work, research, operator training, equipment, budgets etc.

Q: The TAG Awards category for sound design does not distinguish between musical and non-musical productions. Does your work as a sound designer change when you design for a musical rather than a straight play?

MW: A sound design for a play is very different from a musical. In my experience with musicals there is a director, a music director, a choreographer and one audio technician/sound board operator who tries to make all three of those folks happy and add any recorded sound effects that the orchestra can't generate.

JB: Yes, very much so. For musicals, we break sound into 2 separate

items. Part 1, "reinforcement" of the production with boundary mics, wireless body mics, and orchestra mics. Part 2 is sound effects/ environmental ambiance/ transition and underscore music. In this setting I have partnered with guest designer Tim Burkhart for the past 22 years. Tim is responsible for the overall design and engineering of a musical production, while I create whatever effects are required. In both plays and musicals I rely heavily on our directors and stage managers for input as I do not have the luxury of being part of the rehearsal process until tech.

Q: For a non-musical production, the addition of music is generally discretionary. What are some of the things you consider when deciding whether to add music to a production and where to include it? Is that your call or the call of the director?

MW: The decision of whether or not to have transitional music or underscoring fits in with the bigger picture. Sound has to have a function. It has to fit in with the overall concept of the show. The overall concept is usually decided early in production meetings with all designers and the director present. Adding any sound at all to a production has to mean something to the show and it has to be "on purpose," just like any move an actor makes or line he utters has to

be "on purpose." If the choice has been made to underscore scenes or use transitional music as part of the sound design, then a sound designer gets to figure out how a particular piece of music affects the rhythm of the scene/transition/concept/etc. We ask ourselves things like: Does this piece of music fight the actor's rhythm? Make the audience hold their breath? Allow the audience to laugh? Let the audience relax? Cause them to lean forward in their seat? Drive the scene or transition forward? Let the audience take a breath before we move forward?

JG: When adding music to a show I always give careful consideration because music has the power to transport you someplace else instantly. It's tricky business. You don't want to move the audience to the wrong place! The period of a play tends to influence choices in mood, styles, instruments, tempos, countries, atmospheres and the familiar. Of course, the decision on where and when music is used is always a collaborative effort with the director. In most cases (but not always) the instrumentation and the composition need to be harmonious with the on-stage character. An example of that is the solo french horn passage used at the top of Mr. Roberts as Roberts stands watch on the ship's bridge, alone in the night. For the play Driving Miss Daisy, a playful composition of a cello and a bass for transitions is a perfect reflection of Miss Daisy and Hoke's characters. Sometimes casting choices influence my music decisions. Some actors hear underscore and naturally blend with its timing and energy. However that is not always the case, and then, even a perfect piece of music competes and becomes noise pollution. With only 4 days of tech it's not always a good idea or fair to drop music underscore on an actor's scene work. In general, I hate hate preshow and intermission music. I'll create it if need be but I prefer to be left alone with my thoughts. Ditto on curtain speeches and recorded announcements. I understand the need but I don't have to like it! My dream on the subject of music is to employ local musicians to compose original music for our productions.

Q: What are some of the things you think TAG voters should consider when judging the success of a sound design?

MW: Consider what role sound played in the production. Did it take away from the show? Was it distracting? Was it specific? Did it confuse you? Was it memorable? The hardest part about the

answers to those questions is that sometimes you don't know what the designer's intentions were. Maybe the music was supposed to be distracting. Sometimes the goal of a sound design is to blend in and not be remembered. Sometimes the goal is to slap the audience in the face and make them pay attention. My advice to TAG voters is to think big and outside the box. Ask questions like: Did it move you? Did it empower you? Did you get something out of it? Did you like what you got?

JG: That's a tough question. Sound is so ephemeral. Its difficult look at it the way you might observe the texture and color of a costume, or set piece, or even lighting. So I guess: does the work collaboratively support what occurs on the stage? Also: creativity, composition of design and execution.

Q&A Discussion Series: Properties Design

By Jim Martin

Our series of articles focusing on TAG Awards' technical categories continues with Properties Design and features two well-known "props goddesses" in Omaha. Rhonda Hall (RH) has won or shared the TAG Award four times (I Am My Own Wife; Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean; Visiting Mr. Green; and Splendor). Amy Reiner (AR) has been on staff at the Omaha Community Playhouse since 2000, doing properties design for over 60 productions. She received the TAG Award for Backstage Excellence in 2009.

Q: What IS a "stage property?" and why should an audience member care?

Both: A stage prop is anything used on stage by an actor. It can also mean the furniture and set dressing, depending on the facility. Properties help establish the tone, the mood, and the time frame for a show.

Q: Props design is much more than simply finding or buying items and placing them on the stage. The job must include research, phone and computer searches, and plain old footwork. How do you approach the task?

RH: Before the computer, I did a lot more leg work. I would spend time with many of the local antique dealers in town and do research at the library, as well as visiting with family and friends. Now I spend a lot of time on the computer.

AR: The computer is vital. I also visit local museums and stores like Army Navy Surplus. Retro style stores can give you quite a bit of insight.

Q: Choosing and placing props on a stage in a relatively large auditorium must differ from a small, close-to-the-audience stage area. A prop could lose its effectiveness if the audience could not see it or recognize what it is. How do you deal with that?

RH: I went to a college with a black box and have worked in several small spaces like the Norton and SNAP. I've learned that you have to be especially authentic in small spaces. (You can read the titles on the books!) Then I worked for Opera Omaha, the Playhouse, and the Symphony (Holiday Fanfare) and found out about the other extreme. I learned to go to the various sections of the theatre to watch and get an idea what something looks like from the balcony. And I've done mid-size venues like Chanticleer which is somewhere in the middle.

AR: I have both a black box and a proscenium theatre at the Playhouse which gives me both arenas to work in. I do find myself at times on a large scale show making certain props more realistic, not

for the audience but for the actor so that they can really get into character on each level.

Q: A script drives some prop needs, either explicitly (telephone calls are made during the play) or by context (books for a library; dishes for a kitchen; groceries for a convenience store). Beyond those minimums, how does your own experience/expertise blend with the collective vision of the director and the rest of the technical staff?

AR: I have quite a bit of creativity once the initial decisions have been made. Discussions with the director on how the prop is used by the actor and with the scenic designer on how the prop needs to look are first on my list. After I know those two things, I am mostly on my own for decision-making. Many props end up being what I call a "crossover" prop – that's when it involves other departments like our shop, lighting or costumes. I always ok the final look and things can often change after that, but if a prop master has done the research, it usually comes out ok!

RH: It is a collective vision with some productions; with others, I just use my own judgment. You must consider the requirements of the technical staff and the ease of the prop for the actors. Production meetings at the time of the read through is the ideal situation; then all the technical staff can work together and know if there are special requirements, e.g., the phone ringer needs to work from the phone; set lamps must really work; some props need to blend into the color scheme of the costumer. *(Continued)*

Q: Stage properties are built, borrowed, bought, or pulled from stock. What has been the most unusual or difficult item you've had to come up with for a show and how did you do it?

RH: Well, I have to say the iron lung for City of Angels. I found one at St Joseph Hospital Museum and then an actor worked at Creighton and so I had a connection to start with. That production was difficult because it was a play about the filming of a movie in the 30's. The movie was done in black and white. It made me realize that it was not only black and white but many shades of gray.

As a freshman in college, I was challenged by an upper classman to get the Catholic Bishop's ring for his character of Cardinal Wolsey in Anne of a Thousand Days. It was an excellent lesson in "if you don't ask, you won't get it." Either the Bishop saw the fear in my eyes or he liked my telling him how lovely his new furniture was and what a joy St Mary's of the Plains was to attend. I will never forget his words when I walked out with the ring: "It's Priceless!!"

AR: My favorite was for a show called You Should Be So Lucky. I had to build a piece of artwork by Alberto Giacometti that was mistaken for an ashtray and then ended up as a swivel chair by the end of the show. It took a while to complete, but ended up working perfectly! It's often hard to mimic an artist's ideas and make them work for a production.

Q: When you are able to see productions at theatres in Omaha or elsewhere, you probably notice the props and their use more than most of us. What makes a property design stand out in your eyes?

AR: It stands out for me when I am NOT noticing it -- when it really takes me to the location or time period of the story unfolding on the stage.

RH: What makes a good prop design is when it does not stand out or take you out of the moment ... although I am intrigued when I see a prop that is very unique and wonder where did they find it or how it was made.

Costume Design

By Debbie Krambeck

Next in line in the articles featuring the TAG Awards' technical categories is costume design. Our two experts are Nancy Ross (NR), who is a two-time TAG award winner for costume design (Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks, Kiss of the Spider Woman) and vintage clothing extraordinaire, and Jenny Pool (JP), who has studied costume design at UNO and been designing costumes for various production companies around Omaha for years.

TAG: What brought you to the world of costume design? What about it keeps you there?

NR: I have always loved costumes since going to the movies and watching the credits for costume design. My favorite was Edith Head. I started designing clothes back in junior high for fun. I attended Simpson College where I had a double major in Home Economics and Art, which was as close as I could get to costume design. My daughter, Laura Marr, and her husband, Doug Marr, started the Diner Theatre in 1983. It was Laura that asked me to do costumes and props. That was 27 years ago. I have been designing costumes for SNAP! Productions since their first production Bent in 1993. I keep doing it because I enjoy it so much and feel like it's a way for me to give back to the community while still doing something I love.

JP: Honestly, I don't know what got me started. I have always loved theatre and as a major at UNO I did work study in the costume shop, so that would be where it officially started, but I've always sewn, my mom taught me when I was 8, and I crafted and just... made stuff. When I was little it was crucial to me that everyone knew what they were wearing in the pretend world we were creating, before actual pretending could start.... so really I've always been a costume designer.

I stick around because it's always new. If one project is boring or hard, the next one will be totally different. Or if you didn't get to do this great idea you had, you can tuck it in the back of your mind, because eventually, you'll find a time to use it. Even the craziest idea gets used sometime down the line.

TAG: When finding and creating costumes for a production, what are the most important things a designer needs to consider?

NR: Do the costumes reflect the period of the show? This is something that is very important to me. If the costumes are not in period, I will not work on the show. Do the costumes go with the set? The costumes and set should work together. Do the costumes fit the actors? Do the costumes reflect the storyline of the play?

JP: Well, partly it's determining the answer to that question. What I mean is, that it's so different for each show that it's rarely the same thing. But really the most important thing is to ask yourself what you can do to help tell the story, and how can you help the audience have the experience that the director or production team as a whole has decided they are to have.

TAG: Out of all the costume designs you have created in your career, which one has been the most rewarding and why?

NR: Kiss of the Spider Woman and I Am My Own Wife – I worked on Kiss of the Spider Woman with Ron Osborne. Because it was more of an eerie-themed show, we were able to have a bit more

“play” with the costumes. The show opened around Halloween, and we were able to find some really fun fabrics, like spider-netting. My favorite fabric from the show was an olive green fabric that appeared to be almost moldy. We were also able to use a 1920s coat from my collection. I always enjoy using the vintage pieces in shows. I also enjoyed I Am My Own Wife as the dress had to fit a man, but allow him to move in and out of many different characters quickly, which was a challenge.

JP: There really isn't one answer for that. I was very proud of Seascape. It was my first free-lance job, so I was really testing the limits of what I could do in my basement, without a full shop behind me. And for them to have been so well received, it was a real confidence booster, and I needed that at the time. Reefer Madness is another one I am proud of. That was a costuming marathon, that show has SO MANY costumes! I had some great help, but again, I was testing the limits of what I was capable of, still working out the basement, managing myself, and keeping track of those projects I had delegated out. My favorites in terms of the visual impact they had on the show, and drawing the audience into the world of the play would be Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and most recently Venus at IWCC. I really designed those shows, not just costumed them. So I have a top four.

TAG: Imagine you are sitting down to fill out a TAG ballot. What types of things would you consider in determining the top costume designs of the year?

NR: Do the costumes fit the palette of the show? The costumes and the set should almost be like a painting and work well together. I also try to consider the resources available to the designer and how those resources were used to achieve the end product, whether it's vintage or modern.

JP: Did the costumes serve the play? Sometimes beautifully made costumes are not "good" costumes because they distract from the play, or they are clearly pretty for pretty's sake. Did they go along with the general aesthetic of the rest of the design elements? Is it a full set of costumes, or did the designer pick a favorite character, or actor, and make them look good and ignore the rest? We all have our favorites... but an audience member shouldn't be able to pick out which one it is.

TAG: What's the one thing you believe every single person should know about costume design?

NR: It isn't as simple as it looks. It takes time and patience to first find the clothes, which can be difficult, especially when vintage items are required, and then make sure they fit the actors and the show. Costumes are just as important as all other aspects of the show - if there were no costumes, there wouldn't be much of a show.

JP: Contemporary realistic designs (in other words dressing people like they would dress in real life) is JUST as hard, and in some cases harder, than elaborate period or artistic designs. It's not a "fun" job. It's something much bigger and more complex and frustrating and exhilarating and, ultimately, rewarding than something that was just "fun" ever could be.

Lighting Design

By Debbie Krambeck

Up next in our series of the TAG Awards' technical categories is lighting design. Our two experts are Tom Reardon (TR), who is a three-time TAG award winner for

lighting design (The Rainmaker, Wait Until Dark, The Grass Harp) and Liz Kendall (LK), who is currently the Technical Director for the Theatre Arts Department at Omaha South. Both have been designing lights for various production companies around Omaha for years.

TAG: When you are first presented with a script, how do you go about determining what the lighting scheme will be for the production? What are the general steps a light designer goes through?

TR: I usually like to read a script through three times before talking to anyone else. My first read-through of a script is fairly fast – I'm looking for the plot overview and the general emotional content of the work. The second read is a much more detailed read, looking at character development and how the emotional content of the play changes over time – doing a French scene breakdown. The third read is more technical – looking at each scene for setting, time of day, actions (windows opening, light switch flipped, etc.), specials needed, etc.

Then it's time to talk to the director to make sure we're on the same page in interpreting the author's meaning, laying out the general concept in terms of emotional content using colors, intensity levels, effects, etc. And coordination with the rest of the design team – set, costumes, sound, to make sure the general scheme will work. At this point I also need an idea of the instruments available and the budget. This is really the critical part of the design. The lighting needs to underscore and modulate the emotional content of the work so having an understanding of the psychology of light and color is critical to a good design. The more detailed technical stage of design, such as number of instruments and their placement, comes as the blocking is refined.

LK: One thing that seems to routinely escape the students I work with is that reading the script through once is not enough. The first read is for overall content and mood. You have to go back through sometimes several times to look for specific clues such as a need for a chandelier, or a scene taking place with the lights turned "off." After the initial script research, a lot of the specifics are determined through dialogue with the other members of the production team, particularly the set and costume departments. Color and cueing are crucial to a good lighting design. Placement of the lights is often influenced heavily by the set placement and the limitations of the theatre. Costumes and the paint choices of the set need to be considered when choosing gel. Color creates mood and gives the audiences clues. For instance, we have been trained that a deep blue must mean that it is dark in the world of the play. A good cue, for most shows, should be felt, not necessarily noticed.

TAG: Each theatre has a different space, different light boards and different equipment available to them. While working with different production companies, has this been a challenge for you? How do you deal with it?

TR: Not really – there are only a dozen or so different types of instruments, so getting acquainted with their capabilities (light quality, intensity, beam angle, etc.) is not that hard. Once you get a good plan of the space, you can sit down at the drawing board or computer and get a good idea of how you can place the instruments and how they'll react in the space. And all light boards come with a manual.

LK: Really, there are more similarities than differences between the venues in this town. A Fresnel has been the same technology for 25 years. The new Source Pars are just an updated twist on the old par cans. While an Altman 360Q probably doesn't hold a bench focus

anymore, and may not produce the same quality of light that a newer Source 4 does, they are both ellipsoidals; the principles are the same. Even the Source 4 has been around at least 10 years now. The light boards are all similar enough that with a manual available, at least the basics can be hashed out. The only completely different syntax is when a theatre uses a dmx converter and PC software. Even then, the language is the same.

TAG: Out of all the lighting designs you have created in your career, of which one are you most proud and why?

TR: Temporary Help – Shelterbelt 2005.

Because when I evaluated the design after the production ended, there wasn't one thing I could think of to do differently – usually I have some “Oh – I should have thought of that” moments.

LK: I don't work as only a lighting designer very often. At South, Dave and I are the production team. I can have some pretty heated design discussions with myself.

TAG: For the typical TAG voter who has little experience with lighting design, what types of things should we look for when completing our ballots in the lighting design category?

TR: A good design is one that just pings the sub-conscious, so it's easier to notice bad design than good. Do hot spots pull focus? Is the light intensity wrong for the mood? Is color wrong for the mood? Etc.

LK: With the exception of a few shows that call for “flash and trash,” something more bold and snazzy like concert lighting, a lighting design should support the other aspects (a green dress should look green not brown) and enhance the mood of the piece without being distracting or an element you notice in its own regard.

TAG: Here's your big chance – what's the one thing you wish everyone knew about your field?

TR: Lights (and sound) are probably the hardest items in a play to evaluate correctly, since their effect is supposed to be subtle - but everybody knows that. What a lot of people probably don't realize is just how hard it is to be subtle.

LK: Just like one shouldn't be expected to build a set by themselves, hanging and focusing a light plot is done more easily and much more safely with more than one person. Please, don't take your lighting designer for granted.