

Verses That Hurt

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Jeff Zahos, Sound Design

Project Description

Verses That Hurt is a collection of poetry published as a book in 1996 edited by Amy and Jordan Trachtenburg. It features poetry by authors who participated in the "Poemphone" phenomenon, where people (previously poets or not) left newly composed poems on a voicemail account, the number for which was public and widely known (in the poetry world). People could call and just listen to the newest poetry, or contribute. Though the lion's share of poetry came from New York poets, it attracted poets from all over the world. The book is a collection of poems by the editors' favorite contributors, some pieces from "Poemphone", some not.

This project was proposed to me by Grant Bowen, who is pursuing an education that integrates many different areas of theatrical study. Verses That Hurt has been a favorite read of his for over ten years, and he imagined that staging theatrical readings of some of the pieces within it it would offer an opportunity to exercise several of his creative interests that he would not normally engage in a KCPA production.

For me, this project posed a perfect opportunity to get my feet wet as a theatrical sound designer - Because it was conceived and "programmed" much like a musical concert, (we called the order of poems "the set list"), it fit my interests and experiences well. The demands of the situation and equipment limitations dictated that I would truly be *performing* the sound design.

Planning and Process

This project was beneficial to me in many ways outside of the sound design experience it offered. As I'd gotten to know Grant over this year, we discovered we shared much artistic common ground, and for this reason, he included me in the planning of this project from the start. Seeing and assisting the process of building a theatrical production from the start gave me a unique view of many elements important to theatrical collaboration, a view that took me far beyond seeing just what I needed to do as a sound designer. Some of these other elements were:

- Statement of purpose
- Establishment of rules for the collaboration
- Generating interest in others, selecting performers
- Selecting other non-performing collaborators
- Developing a "marketing" approach
- Building the script (or "set list") from the available material
- Assisting with directorial, staging, lighting and other decisions

...Outside of my role as sound designer, I believe the experiences as an "theatrical event producer" and as "creative collaborator" were the newest, and the most valuable to come out of this production.

In the weeks leading up to our residence in the Armory theatre, Grant and I spent some time in the space, imagining what type of audience experience it lent itself to, and how we could serve our purpose through each element of the experience. We had decided that our purpose was to create an experience where the interest to the audience comes from the uniqueness, the weirdness of each poet, and in turn for them to reflect that it is uniqueness

and weirdness that makes interest in life, and in some ways defines a most central aspect of humanness.

To that end, the actual script was left open to what poems the performers wanted to read.

Design Description

Practically, the sound design consisted of three main elements:

- CD Playback of music and pre-recorded voiceovers
- CD Playback of a soundscape cue
- Sound reinforcement for the open mic portion

The sound design was guided by a few main ideas/circumstances:

- The decision of musical underscoring was based on exchange between the performer, me and Grant
- Some pieces would include voiceover interruptions, or would be "performed" completely as a recording played back during the show
- The intention of creating a sense of urban placement of the experience (i.e. the feeling of being *in a city*, not *in a theatre*)
- Available equipment/Equipment limitations
- The experience would be much like a concert - The performers were not experienced actors, but rather poets and poetry fans themselves.
- Open Mic portion - Following the prepared, poetic-musical-theatrical portion of the experience, there would be an open mic for

Musical Underscoring

For the pieces that had musical underscoring, the music ended up being selected by the performers. Playback was achieved from a CD player, through group sends on the console, through the house system's amplifiers and front left and right loudspeakers. Through the technical rehearsal process, new versions of the disc were generated with corrected volume levels to minimize necessity of fader-riding (although some was still needed).

Voiceover

The voiceover recordings were made using a Zoom H4 Digital Handheld Recorder. The voiceover cues were included on the CD with the musical numbers.

Urban Soundscape

The most unique and challenging part of this design was creating the feeling that the performance was actually taking place in a subterranean urban setting. Grant and I arrived on the idea that when empty, the Amory theatre feels a lot like a basement club or bar. Additionally, the two openings upstage left and right resemble the entryway to staircases or escalators in a subway station. It was decided that we would use sound to *transform the theatre in to a subway station*. This meant that a sound system would need to be placed backstage, to play a soundscape which was literal and realistic and would potentially interrupt performers. We liked the idea that this space was imperfect for performance, and that performers would have to deal with the space they were given, much like in the uncontrolled space of real life.

A CD cue of 80 minutes' length was played as a constant atmosphere in the space during the performance. It was essential to create a realistic feeling, not just suggest the idea of "subway station".

Equipment Limitations

I generally enjoy the challenge of working with limited means, and this situation presented such a challenge. There would be no automation of cues, only the manual operation of the two CD players and the house sound system would be useful only for underscoring and voiceover. Given the nature of the event, the setting, and the artistic intent of the production, the equipment available perfectly suitable, and probably more appropriate than more complex systems (for instance with computer-based cueing or other automation).

Open Mic

A microphone, stand and cabling was set up following the prepared portion, for anyone to read, recite, perform any poetry they wished.

Equipment

(2) Snow Sound Loudspeakers
(2) QSC Amps (one for backup)
(1) Shure SM58
(1) Tripod boom mic stand
Various microphone and speaker cables

House sound system, including Yamaha 24-channel mixing console and two of the four JBL loudspeakers

(1) Zoom H4 Digital Handheld Recorder
(1) Sequoia-based DAW

Reflections

To the end of creating a realistic feeling of being in a subway station, I felt like I was successful. Two people, both former New Yorkers, made unsolicited comments to that effect. One stated that her heart rate went up each time she heard a train approaching, an involuntary response preparing her to run to catch the train. Another commented on the accuracy and impact of the soundscape, and that it made her nostalgic for her days living in New York.

Though it was not my decision, the choices of musical underscoring were very effective, and spoke to the idea that in this situation, creative contribution could be distributed among all collaborators and yield effective results. When music was used, each piece supported the message, mood or intent of each poem, and helped the performer make a convincing delivery to the audience (either by helping the performer's state of mind, or influencing the audience's interpretation of the piece).

Appendix

- Set List > < Cue list
 - *I Am A Great Poet - 1
 - *Evil Children - 2
 - *Sleepover - 3 (Projector)

Heatwave
Fellas Sestina
*Pigs - 4
Whose Music
Weatherman
It's Saturday
Butt
Love Letter
Hardcore
*Let's Have Sex - 5
Cyberslut
Sonnet 25
*Victim of Telephone - 6>11
*How Much Longer - 12
Psychic Friend
*Crossing - 13
*I'm Sorry - 14
Cantaloupe
Fuck Art
I'm Am A Great Poet