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Acoustic Ecology and the Perception of the Deaf Community in Theatrical Sound Design

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At its fundamental level, Theatre is a multi-disciplinary art form. It gathers threads from the literary world, from the visual arts, from music, and from dance. Audiences experience a theatrical performance with multiple senses. They see performers move about an artistically designed space, hear their words, and the music—both figurative and literal—of the world they inhabit. Yet if an audience member's disability inhibits the performance's communication, is that audience member really experiencing the production at all or are they experiencing something else, something incomplete?

In May 2012, I had the experience of sound designing a production of Aditi Brennan Kapil's *Love Person* for a theatre company in Boston. The play—an exploration of communication through English, Sanskrit, ASL, and technology—features a deaf character, her lover and translator, a shy technology-empowered professor, and his rather outgoing love interest. Thematically and technically, the producers wished to cater to an audience with the same make-up as the cast of characters—some hearing, some not. As a sound designer, this challenge particularly resonated with me. How could I create a design that would be accessible to both the hearing and deaf communities?

With this production passed, and my success at bridging the hearing-deaf gap in theatrical sound design certainly mixed, I have been researching this problem anew. At face value, the hearing community's understanding of sound suggests that sound and music are simply not for the deaf. Rationally, this must be a fallacy. Sound is a physical force and while our ears are designed to interface with the force in a particular way, this does not mean that that is the only way sound may be perceived. In his book, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*, Eric Clarke writes, "Perception must be understood as a relationship between environmentally available information and the capacities, sensitivities, and interests of a perceiver" (Clarke 91). In this paper, I will use Clarke's concept of perception and other theories of Acoustic Ecology to begin to define how the Deaf¹ Community relates to manufactured sound effects, soundscapes, and music in a theatrical environment and to provide methods sound designers and researchers can take to enhance the experience of hearing-impaired audiences and bring more equity to the experience of sound in theatrical productions.

¹ I am attempting use the conventions of "deaf" and "Deaf" as defined by Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren in her article "Hearing Differences across Theatres" where she writes:

"Deaf" with a capital "D" identifies particular members of the deaf community whose culture is passed through sign language; "deaf" with a lowercase "d" refers to those who have an audiological hearing problem, but who may not consider themselves members of the Deaf culture (Kochhar-Lindgren 10).

Consequently, I will use "Deaf" when referring to a group with a cultural identity and "deaf" when speaking of those with a disability that may or may not find themselves part of a the "Deaf" subculture.