

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<p><b>Institution:</b> The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London</p>
<p><b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 35: Music, Dance, Drama, and Performing Arts</p>
<p><b>Title of case study:</b> The Professional Development of Theatre Sound</p>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Ross Brown's research has been instrumental in shaping theatre sound into a specialist discipline in its own right. It has influenced the practices, organisation and status of sound within professional theatre. Constructing a dialogue with a potentially hostile theatre industry over two decades, Brown's central formulation of a '<b>dramaturgy of sound</b>' has changed the ways in which theatre professionals, independent artists, academics and specialist students think about and work with sound. In doing so it has helped make sound design a more central artistic consideration of theatre production and thus <b>raised its profile in the industry</b>.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Brown began as lecturer in sound design at Central in 1994 and his research has three main phases. <b>Phase 1, 1998-2001</b>, saw research done as creative practice in professional settings. Noting the impact of emerging technologies in the early 90s it explored the potential erasure of category distinctions between music and sound effect. Conceiving of theatre sound as composition, Brown sought to establish the terms on which the auditory experience of theatre may be modelled as a coherent designed whole, as in scenography. This was noted in Susannah Clapp's <i>Observer</i> review of an early piece of his creative practice as research: 'One of the distinctive features of <i>I Am Yours</i> [at the Royal Court Upstairs] ... is the creation of a <b>scenery of noise</b>' (output 1). This led to the formulation of the concept of a 'dramaturgy of sound'. In order for this to make a difference to industry practice it had to be comprehensible by that industry, so it was initially tested in specifically industry-based contexts and publications: presentations for Tonmeister Association conference (Germany 1998), professional sound seminar at the Theatre Academy of Finland (Helsinki and Stockholm 1998) and publications in trade journals. This testing in industry settings was to continue.</p> <p><b>Phase 2, 2001-2006</b>, began with a colloquium which drew industry professionals together with academics. It saw a concentration on the research's theoretical implications, with more dissemination in specifically academic contexts. Drawing on discourses from dramaturgy, musicology and aural phenomenology (outputs 1 and 2), the concept of 'dramaturgy of sound' questioned both the dominance of visuality in design and the compartmentalising of sound as purely 'technical' practice. At the same time there was focus on shaping the appropriate mode of articulating and documenting the concept. Brown was one of the earliest academics to develop new forms of artefact-based reflective documentation. These were described by the RAE 2001 report as 'a model for practice for the unit of assessment'. From here research <b>experiments in documentation of process</b> were aligned with the industry's interest in presenting artefacts of sound design within the format of the design exhibition. The results were offered for commentary in 2005 at the academic PARIP conference (Leeds) (output 3) and the industry-run World Stage Design Exhibition (Toronto), where Brown's documentary artefact won a bronze medal. This work of documentation was collected by the British Library's Sheffield Theatre Archive project and paved the way for sound's arrival as a scenographic element on equal terms with the visual, a moment</p>

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formally marked when Brown was invited to contribute to the *Reader in Scenography* (2010) (output 4).

In **Phase 3, 2006-2013**, Brown applied his insights to wider areas of social practice, offering **sonic operations of theatre as models for analysis**, with an AHRC-funded research project on silence and aurality in public life (output 5). From this widening of focus emerged his historically-grounded large-scale modelling of theatrical sound in the 2009 monograph *Sound* (output 6). The book is the first and, to date, only work to attempt this. In doing so it has enhanced understandings in theatre studies while also establishing links to study of sensory culture and social science-based sound studies. And it has changed industry practice.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

All materials, unless otherwise stated, are available both electronically (except 6) and on paper on request.

- [1] Brown, R. (composer) 1998 *I Am Yours: Shared Experience at the Royal Court*. Practice as Research Artefact: British Library, National Sound Archive recording, cat no.1CDR0035120. Composition, output type J. Submitted for RAE 2001. (Disseminations include: Brown, R. 2001. 'The Art of Sound Design: Real and imaginary soundscapes', *Theatre Design and Technology* 37(4): 38-43. Brown, R. 2002. 'The Dramaturgy of Small Sounds', in *Maxis* (Conference Proceedings). Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press; )
- [2] Brown, R. 2005 'The Theatre Soundscape and the End of Noise', *Performance Research* 10(4) 'On Techne': 105-119. ISSN 13528165 Peer-reviewed journal article, output type D. Submitted for RAE 2008.
- [3] Brown, R. 2006 *16 Essays on Composing for Theatre*, peer-reviewed presentation first shown at PARIP international conference 2005 (University of Leeds). Archived at British Library Sound Archive, catalogue C1142/24 (University of Sheffield Theatre Archive Project). DVD, Other form of assessable output, output type T. Submitted for RAE 2008.
- [4] Brown, R. 2010 'Sound Design: The scenography of engagement and distraction', in *Theatre and Performance Design: A reader in scenography*, ed. J. Collins and A. Nisbett. London: Routledge. ISBN 9780415432108 Peer-reviewed chapter in book, output type C and listed in REF 2. Submitted for REF 2014.
- [5] Brown, R. (principal investigator) 2007-8 'Noise, Memory, Gesture: The Theatre in a Minute's Silence', AHRC grant, with resulting publications: 2009 'Noise, Memory, Gesture', in *Performance, Embodiment, and Cultural Memory*, ed. C. Counsell and R. Mock. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. ISBN 9781443811200 Peer-reviewed chapter in book, output type C; 2013 'The Eleventh of the Eleventh of the Eleventh: The theatre of memorial silence', in *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged sound as mediated cultural heritage*, ed. K. Bijsterveld. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag. ISBN 9783837621792 Peer-reviewed chapter in book, output type C and listed in REF 2. Submitted for REF 2014
- [6] Brown, R. 2009 *Sound* (Palgrave Readings in Theatre Practice). Basingstoke: Palgrave. ISBN 9780230551886 Peer-reviewed authored book, output type A and listed in REF 2. Submitted for REF 2014.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Brown's research has generated new ways of thinking and speaking about theatre sound and changed its status as a professional creative practice. Its impact may be seen in the **practices of sound designers**, their **professional organisation**, the approaches of **directors** and **equipment manufacturers**, **training** within industry and the emergence of a **specialist academic discipline**. Evidence comes from institutions across the world.

The steps towards these impacts began with creating formal opportunities for industry discourse. These laid the foundation for establishing the professional status of theatre sound. Crucially, Brown's early research was embedded in creative practice in professional settings. This gave him authority within the profession (a review of one show pinned over the sound desk at the National Theatre studio). Building on his standing as practitioner Brown convened a sound design colloquium in 2002 (sponsored by Central, the National Theatre and the International Organization of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians (OISTAT)), at which **sound designers** and **academics** from 13 countries heard Brown present his idea of 'dramaturgy of sound' (source A). Inspired by the implications of the research two designers, Steve Brown and Rick Thomas, invited Brown to help set up a Sound Working Group (SWG) of OISTAT, as a vehicle for promoting the new thinking about sound. They strategically located SWG within OISTAT's Scenography Commission as 'artistic' rather than 'technical' practice, achieving the first inclusion of sound design in a scenography exhibition (Prague Quadrennial 2003), leading to significantly increased profile at Prague 2007. The 2002 colloquium also drew **equipment manufacturers** into the project of elevating sound: d&b audiotechnik describe how they became involved in the planning of sound design exhibits (source C1). In 2013 a second colloquium, at the Lyttleton Theatre, was curated by emerging designer Donato Wharton, who learnt his trade within Brown's conceptual framework.

This research has helped change the ideas and practice of **five** groups of people. Among **professional sound designers** leading designer Paul Arditti notes that 'Ross's academic research can be provocative' (source C2), which Finnish designer Kristian Ekholm expands on: *'The contexts in which sound designers have to work [are] rapidly changing... This means sound designers have to ... be able to think laterally and in an innovative way, and not be constrained by orthodox approaches. Brown's book provides ... strategies for thinking outside the box. There is very little other published theory ... on the aesthetics and the ways in which sound works in relation to dramaturgy and the specific live contexts of conceptual theatre sound design, and his holistic view of theatre sound has made a huge impact on me'* (source C3).

Among **directors** Nancy Meckler and Jonathan Holloway both learnt new approaches to sound. Holloway says: *'This research undoubtedly changed the ways in which I worked with sound and music, and was of influence to sound designers and composers with whom I have subsequently worked'* (source C4). Most recently the artists' group Platform-7 took inspiration from Brown's work in staging their remembrance event, *Silent Cacophony*, on London's Underground network (source B).

**Equipment manufacturers** d&b audiotechnik state that their own practice was taken forward by Brown's research: 'dialogue with ... Brown, as a researcher in the field, in relation to our research and development agenda ... provides us with useful stimulus.' This then had impact on relations of industry and HE: 'Our subsequent involvement on many industry projects together bears testament to the advantage of academic and industry co-operation' (source C1).

Among **industry trainers** the Royal Court's Head of Sound, David McSeveney, uses Brown's book in training all his new staff. One such is Helen Skiera: *'chapters and subjects were revealed that began informing my practice. [I]n reading the work, I became aware of other sound designers and theatre practitioners describing their own work in conceptual terms, rather than purely practical;*

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*and really for me, this is the first time that I was aware that this really existed* (source C5).

Finally, sound design **teachers** and students across the world are being influenced by Brown. *Sound* is a standard text on dramaturgy of sound in UK universities and used heavily outside the UK: 'almost every MA-thesis in our department contains at least one citation from your book' (Jari Kauppinen, Theatre Academy of Finland, source C6). Professor Rick Thomas, Purdue University, says: '*I consider ... Sound to be one of the most significant contributions to the field of theatre sound design and composition.... It is required reading in the Graduate MFA program in theatre sound at Purdue University, as it is at several other prominent theatre sound programs in the United States*' (source C7). At Carnegie Mellon academic and professional designer Joe Pino says *Sound's* impact on him was equal to that of Cage's *Silence*: it '*has been pivotal in providing a much needed matrix with which to analyze, evaluate and understand the Art of sound design*' (source C8).

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Theatre Sound Colloquium 2002 file**, comprising delegate pack, schedule of events, list of delegates in attendance, and distributed material (available in hard copy on request). Copies of keynote and other hand-outs on Dramaturgy of Sound available at <https://www.iiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/filearea.cgi?LMGT1=THEATRE-SOUND&X=40E46E200E4C00E6B9&Y=r.brown%40cssd.ac.uk>
- B. Silent Cacophony file**, comprising website of the Silent Cacophony project, <http://www.silentcacophony.co.uk>, together with a note explaining how the piece was inspired by Ross Brown's research, including an email from John McKiernan, the project's director, to Brown (24.03.13) headed 'Remembrance 2013: Silent Cacophony & your idea' (available electronically or on paper, on request).
- C. Testimony sources**  
These are available on request either electronically or on paper.
1. Managing Director, d&b audiotechnik GB
  2. Paul Arditti, Sound Designer
  3. Kristian Ekholm, Sound Designer
  4. Jonathan Holloway, Artistic Director, Red Shift Theatre Company
  5. Trainee Sound Designer, Royal Court Theatre
  6. MA course leader, Theatre Academy of Finland
  7. Prof Richard K. Thomas, Purdue University
  8. Prof Joe Pino, Carnegie Mellon University