

I. Introduction

If theatre is really meant to reflect or speak for society, shouldn't its artists be representative of that society? According to recent surveys only 9% of the sound designers at LORT theaters are women, and only 5% of audio engineers in live audio are women. That means 9 times out of 10 the person behind the audio console will probably be a man. I know from classes I've taught that this still plays out in education as well. One semester I actually taught a class with 0% diversity, as in all white men. What is it that creates this disparity? Why aren't women taking these fields by storm? What about audio as a profession leads to these overwhelming numbers? To answer these questions, I asked a group of female audio designers/engineers some questions about the course of their careers and opinions on why this is. The women I interviewed work as designers and engineers, with career spans as short as 5 years to over 27 years. In asking questions of these artists I hope to get one step closer to understand why it's almost always a "sound guy" behind the console and possibly see if change is on the horizon.

II. How did you get into audio and why?

College and internships were most women's access to opportunities in sound. However, in many cases a mentor was involved, sometimes one who pushed them to strive more. A few women described stumbling into audio and afterwards just couldn't imagine another path. Veronica Strain, a local audio engineer described her choice; "Audio was the only career I felt that I could/wanted to do for the rest of my life". Others describe it as a slowly evolving career, which after a while "would feel wrong if I didn't do it". Most women I asked discovered it was a field that allowed them to combine interests such as music and technology, or music and theatre. "It allowed me to create music that fits into its own world and story line" said Shannon O'Neill, a professor and freelance designer from Louisiana. These women also seem to be people who enjoy a challenge. Amy Poliner, a freelance designer in California says she got into audio because "Audio

was the design element I understood the least about. As a visual learner, it presented an exciting challenge for me, while simultaneously appealing to the musician and performer in me". And Julie Ferrin, a California based designer and engineer, spoke candidly about the joy in being challenged by her job to use creative solving, "I pride myself on being able to make a shitty rig sound great. Anyone can be a great designer when given the best tools, but what can you make of a pile of shit?" These paths don't seem all that unusual than men I've talked to in audio design, although the almost all of women I interviewed had formal training in sound through a college or technical skills which isn't always the case with audio designers/engineers as a whole.

III. Mentorship

One study of fields such as computer engineering and the sciences emphasize the importance of mentorship and exposure to technology as factors in getting girls involved and engaged. Almost every woman I interviewed had professors, directors, audio engineers, or experienced designers who worked with them and actively mentored them. Most women thought that gender played little to no part in their relationship with mentors. Only one of my interviewees had a female mentor. She described working with them "Seeing how they navigate the professional audio world as females helps me identify how I should act." Although the majority of women didn't have female sound designers/engineers to mentor them, often they found female colleagues in other areas. Katherine Horowitz, a Minneapolis based sound designer spoke to this phenomenon "The women who have influenced my career and allowed me to grow are those with whom I've worked alongside as directors or stage managers, sometimes evolving our careers in tandem".

All of my interviewees have also gone on to mentor young technicians and students of both genders. There is some disagreement as to if mentoring women or men is a different process. One freelance designer responded, "I have mentored both and there is no difference". But on the contrary although most of her students seem very comfortable working on diverse teams O'Neill, who

teaches in Louisiana, says that when mentoring women “we work on how to be assertive and what to do if she thinks she is experiencing sexism”. She also recognizes that gender norms often cause “some female students to seek out men to help them with technology”. Many of the designers I interviewed took on female mentees and assistants often due to communication skills. “I find that women are better communicators. Which makes design meetings and tech very smooth” says Cricket Myers, a Tony nominated sound designer based out of Los Angeles.

V. Are their advantages or disadvantages to being a woman in sound?

In terms of advantages, many emphasize women’s skills as strong communicators and social agility. This can fix problems ahead of time “communication and personality are half the battle when collaborating in theatre” said Horowitz. For the educators I interviewed it is an advantage in recruiting, simply because of our scarcity. It can also be an advantage when working on projects with female artists, in building trust as was the case of one designer who worked with survivors of sexual abuse on a new play, as O’Neill described “I was designer/composer on that project, and I think the fact that I am female helped me build trust with our cast, which was comprised of survivors (no professional actors)”

In terms of disadvantages, many of my interviewees acknowledged that there is sexism present but it can run the gamut from nonexistent to strong resistance. A few female technicians spoke of working on larger crews where as one audio technician described “Often my strength or knowledge is questioned or I am hit on. I dress down and don’t wear makeup because I don’t want this sort of attention.” However sometimes subtler kinds of sexism is a tricky beast because, its often unclear if it is sexism or just frustrating co-workers. Often co-workers who have problems working for or with women will have problems working with men as well. How do you tell if it’s your problem or theirs? Particularly when you are in charge (as say the lead designer). Most women have developed specific coping mechanisms. “I don’t let their surprise or preconceptions linger. I

don't take offense to those preconceptions either, because that will only cause tension between me and the crew and will make it that much harder to gain their respect" said Myers. One hopes that potential gender dynamic pitfalls can be avoided however some situations of tension do crop up. One designer shared a story about budgets where her request for a budget upgrade (due to old, poor quality gear) was refused when "The year following me, the male sound designer made the exact same argument, and he received a \$5000 budget...though, that the sexism doesn't only come from the men. In the case above, the producer was a female". With more transparency some of these differences can be overcome, the more people share info about compensation, working conditions, a host of things that influence how we do our job the more we can navigate and improve the situation.

VI. Gear Fear

The question I was most hesitant to ask was about something I call "gear fear". In truth it's a sexist question, but in my experience men are more comfortable talking about gear specifications earlier in their careers, potentially "faking it til they make it". However, I wanted to ask the questions because it has been an issue in my career, initially I was overwhelmed by specifications and didn't feel I have a concrete handle on them until I started teaching. Ironically it was answering students questions that made me realize how much I knew. Most, but not all, of the women I interviewed said this was not a fear they felt strongly, however a few mentioned how incredibly helpful internet is in getting more information on technical details of the gear in question. It allows anyone to look up specifications (on site if need be). Poliner described designing for a theatre company early in her career "I was horrified I might blow up their expensive gear, so I spent most of my lunches reading about different gear I found online and watching You Tube videos on how it all worked. It is quite possible gear fear (whether its real or fictional) isn't about audio gear, it's about overcoming our desire to do it perfectly the first time. Exposure to more gear and a supportive

environment in which to fail/figure out were common stories among this group of successful women.

Why women don't get into audio?

Although the answers are diverse, visibility and access seem to be recurring themes. Some argued status quo of an all male profession is unappealing to young women. It's a profession where we have to adapt our behavior to be accepted. As one O'Neill explained, "there is a boys' club when it comes to sound and audio, and if a woman's first experience is working with a foul-mouthed curmudgeon who doesn't think it's a woman's place to even plug in an XLR cable, girls are not going to want to join the field. Why deal with that on a day-to-day basis if they don't have to?" This experience of "boys club" was not universal, Horowitz described how "Minneapolis is a fairly female friendly tech scene". Others concluded that freelance work in particular may not be attractive to women, "I think that being a freelance designer is VERY hard. And most of the women I have encountered chose to find a different path with more security. They find house positions, or full time jobs that pay their bills, and then just design on the side." said Myers. I would not disagree with the argument of difficulty in working as a freelancer it is not a path for everyone. However, that doesn't explain why costume designers at LORT theatres make up 68% of designers. What does explain it is gender norms and visibility. In costumes women occupy positions in all tiers, which creates a clear precedent and a path for a young female designer to climb the ladder to larger freelance designs. Visibility can also play a role for women seeking role models "I think sound design/audio technology isn't a very visible field, so few seek it out. A large number of sound people I've met fell into it by accident, and in the past men have tended to take a greater interest in engineering and technology, so men most often were the ones who stumbled into it" said Strain. However, seeing a woman do a job, is will at least make it clear that it is an option. Jeanine Tesori, the composer of *Fun Home* spoke in an interview of seeing a female conductor on a Broadway show:

“I remember seeing Linda Twine conduct when I was nineteen. She is this beautiful African-American woman who was in complete command with all of the men on stage looking at her every move...I didn't realize that you could make a life doing this at all. I thought music was something you just did; you practiced and then you played and there was no end game.”

Despite some of these stumbling blocks it does seem that more and more women are coming into the field. The youngest designer interviewed sent me a list of 7 other interviewees. The three instructors in the pool spoke of greater numbers of females taking their classes. I also asked if the teams they worked on were getting more diverse. The overall answer to that was positive, as Poliner observed, “Crews that have been more gender diverse have tended to be more energetic. Those crews also seemed to get to know each other better”. Although diversity (beyond gender) is also a problem in design in general, one designer observed in sound “I've seen almost zero people of color, it's perplexing”. This is part of a larger conversation about technical theatre and its lack of diversity, however I think it's the natural extension of all questions revolving around diversity.

I also asked these women about where they wanted to see audio in the future and beyond. Many had interest in interactive sound and installation work, particularly as it develops into cheaper and more available technology. A few designers expressed interest with more issues of legal/working conditions, specifically a unified copyright solution. Horowitz cautioned the most important thing she would want to pass on to younger designers to “*Learn your rights as an independent contractor and as a creator of intellectual property*”

My interviewees also wanted to see a greater understanding of what sound can do “learning how to better educate directors, producers, and audience members in what high quality sound is and how it affects how we perceive experiences”, said Poliner. It is difficult often to communicate these things to directors, that unawareness of how much craft and technical is involved in sound design/

engineering, or phrased better by Ferrin, “I wish people would understand how important sound is and what we have to deal with to get a good end product”.

The reason I wanted to write this article is because I love doing audio, but I think it's a mistake to remove who you are as a person from your artistic endeavors. And gender may or may not affect a small part of that. More than that my students are becoming designers and audio engineers and I wonder what the work place will look like for them. Will it be more gender diverse, and more racially diverse? The students I've worked with are clearly more conscious of how their gender and race play into their position in the world, much more so in the last year than previous years of teaching. Can we pull into the double digits percent wise in terms of representation in all levels of audio design which will allow us to mentor and develop young talent? And can the term “sound guy” die a sad death along with stewardess etc.? Speaking to all these designers made me realize how diverse we actually are as a group and how ready we are to welcome new members. As one engineer put it “I would really like young women entering work where there is little female influence and representation to not at all be discouraged”.