

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY KATHERINE SCHEIL

The Sound of Theatre: From the Ancient Greeks to the Modern Digital Age.
By David Collison. Eastbourne, UK: PLASA Limited, 2008; pp. 280. \$49.99
cloth.

doi:10.1017/S0040557411000160

Reviewed by James Phillips, Mount Saint Mary College

Although mechanical sound effects and sound reinforcement have been a part of Western theatre from the earliest Greek plays, little has been written on the importance of sound in the development of Western theatre. Even if we exclude playwriting, acting, and directing and limit the discussion to only the history of theatrical design and construction, most volumes, even those written in the past fifty years, treat sound design and operation as a lesser endeavor when compared to the big three of scenic, costume, and lighting design. David Collison's *The Sound of Theatre: From the Ancient Greeks to the Modern Digital Age* attempts to correct this oversight by detailing the history of sound in Western theatre as an early effort to provide realism and later as a means of amplification for human voices and musical instruments.

Collison comes to the topic with a great deal of experience and credibility, having worked as a sound operator and designer, primarily in the United Kingdom beginning in the early 1950s. His mastery of cueing sound effects on turntables was so admired that legendary British directors including Sir Peter Hall and Sir Laurence Olivier demanded that producers hire Collison as their soundman. In 1962, while the resident sound designer for the Old Vic Company, he was the first to be given credit on both the program and poster. Over the course of his more than thirty-year career he worked with nearly everyone involved in bringing amplified sound to the theatre.

The most substantial and illuminating section of Collison's book—Part 3, "Sound Recording and Amplification"—is as much a personal memoir as it is a history of recording and amplification. Collison traces the development of electrified theatrical sound by recounting his journey from a lowly assistant stage manager to a highly skilled sound designer. Much of his story is told through anecdotes, his own and those of other sound designers, and it reads like a transcription of backstage war stories. Collison tells of designers fired from productions at the whim of temperamental stars, and of producers who tried to overcome a poor script by boosting amplification, such as in the 1962 London musical *Blitz!* There are a number of insights into important productions, such as how Olivier, in his production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, wanted six echoes of Stanley's famous line, "Stella!" Lacking the technology to create electronic

echoes, the only solution was to use six turntables and four technicians to achieve the effect.

Because of the length and time of his career, Collison is also able to detail the technological changes in amplified theatrical sound over the second half of the twentieth century. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s the work of the sound designer was almost exclusively limited to sound-effect creation and playback. Collison recounts his firsthand experience operating cueing systems, from Panatrope turntables to various tape-reel systems to tape cartridges, and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of each system. Although clearly fond of some of the outdated equipment, he always advocates the use of superior technology.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, sound equipment was largely acquired through rental suppliers because the cost to purchase and the relative lack of experienced soundmen kept producers from investing too much in an area generally seen as the least important element of a successful production. The three major English companies, Bishop Sound, RG Jones, and Stagesound, all fought to maintain business by locking in lucrative contracts or providing more technologically advanced equipment. The cautionary tale of Bishop Sound, whose twenty-year run as the dominant supplier of audio equipment in the United Kingdom ended when they failed to convert to the new technology of reel tape, is told as an example of the difficulties of maintaining market dominance in a specialty of continuing rapid advancements in technology.

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s Collison was almost accidentally one of the most sought-after musical sound designers. In a fascinating series of remembrances, he details the explosion in microphone, speaker, and mixer technology as well as the change from a naturalistic sound to an overtly amplified sound. According to Collison, the 1972 London production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was the tipping point for the large increase in sound amplification equipment and the corresponding cost of musical sound design. After *Superstar* received less than stellar reviews on Broadway and subsequent European productions, Collison was asked to redesign the sound and provide concert-quality amplification. Not only were thirty-two microphones used for the singers, but also a then astonishing thirty-seven were used to amplify the musicians. In a year when the typical musical sound system cost £5,500, *Superstar* cost nearly £20,000, and by 1978, *Evita* cost almost £60,000. The trend has only continued as fully computerized mixers now allow productions to have hundreds of microphones and thousands of speakers.

Part 3 of Collison's book is so entertaining and informative that it could have (and perhaps should have) been left to stand on its own. Part 1, "Mechanical Sound Effects," examines the use of mechanical sound effects and natural amplification techniques in Western theatre from the Greeks until the twentieth century. Though there's nothing groundbreaking in the research, it does offer a good overview of the history of sound-effect creation. Part 2, "Development of Electrical Sound," is a chronology of the development of sound reproduction and transmission. While likely engaging to those with an understanding of acoustics and audio engineering, it suffers from being too brief for the hardcore audiophile,

yet too technical for many casual readers. Both parts offer excellent information and a wealth of illustrations and photographs, but ultimately neither is as enjoyable as the story of Collison's career in sound design.



Violence against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts. By Kim Solga. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; pp. 248. \$85 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S0040557411000172

Reviewed by Karen Britland, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Kim Solga's book *Violence against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts* is "about violence against women around the turn of the seventeenth century" and its "pernicious erasure in cultural texts of all kinds" (1). With early modern drama as her central preoccupation, Solga asks "how and why does violence against women go so spectacularly missing" at a moment in theatre history "often described as brutally spectacular" (1)? "What role," she asks, "does early modern England's heady performance culture play in the shaping of this central absence, and what legacies does it leave for theatre makers, theatre scholars, and theatregoers working on its remains now?" (1). The book's cover blurb presents her project as "both a history and an ethics," and, in the first chapter, Solga—who suggests that "the work of Shakespeare, Webster, Jonson, Middleton, and others . . . makes a consistent investment in the obvious oppression of women"—poses such questions as: "How do we square this work's enormous cultural capital with its profound distance from contemporary attitudes toward social justice and human rights?" (2).

This book is most interesting for the ways in which Solga relates her central thesis (the cultural invisibility of violence against women) to both the early modern period and contemporary theatre production. "Can we find ways to perform the *history* of [this] elision," she asks, "rather than just repeat [the] elision again and again for fresh spectators?" (4). After an introductory first chapter that lays out her critical and theoretical debts and provides illustrative examples of her thesis through a discussion of Peter Hinton's 2006 Stratford production of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Solga writes, in turn, about *Titus Andronicus*, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Changeling*. Each chapter deals first with the early modern context of the plays' themes (rape, domestic violence, etc.) and then considers contemporary productions of each of Solga's chosen plays.

To my mind, it is this second aspect of Solga's book that makes it particularly worthy of attention. Solga discusses Deborah Warner's 1987 RSC production of *Titus Andronicus* alongside Julie Taymor's 1999 film version of the play, noting that the latter interpretation "comes closer than Warner's to managing . . . a feminist performance of early modern sexual violence" (56). She also considers Katie Mitchell's 1991 RSC production of *A Woman Killed with*