

Cultural Daily

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Huh?!? Audiences Deserve Better Sound Design

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, June 3rd, 2015

In Deaf West Theatre's production of *Spring Awakening* at [The Wallis](#), you can understand the actors who sign the songs better than the actors singing. That's because the sound design is haphazard, and the audio mix, on the night I attended, was uneven, not responsive to the ebb and flow of voice in relation to the live musical instruments.

How sad. The audience misses out on Steven Sater's heartbreakingly, involute lyrics, like these that open the show, which, if you could hear them, would make you cry from the first A minor chord:

Mama, who bore me,
 Mama, who gave me
 No way to handle things,
 Who made me so sad.
 Mama, the weeping,
 Mama, the angels
 No sleep in heaven
 Or Bethlehem

Or these:

Haven't you heard of the word of your body?
 O, I'm gonna be wounded.
 O, I'm gonna be your wound.
 O, I'm gonna bruise you.
 O, you're gonna be my bruise.

I know the lyrics because you could hear them clearly when *Spring Awakening* had its original Broadway run at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, and I saw the show more than once. That's also a reason I know that good, clear sound is possible. However, we rarely get it in theatre and music venues.

Sylvie Drake, *Cultural Weekly*'s theatre critic, told me, "I long ago gave up understanding what they're saying at all shows, especially the ones with music. It never seems to work. I now make it a

point to request a script for (a) ALL new plays and (b) something like this one, not new, but newly interpreted. Some theaters make it a practice to automatically provide one, which tells you something in and of itself.”

It's not just a theatre problem, and certainly not a problem with The Wallis itself, which is a wonderful space with good sight-lines and acoustics. It is a matter of attention to the live audio mix and the way microphones are used to capture, or not capture, the performance. I've watched, and appreciated, music artists like [Andrew Cole](#) refuse to start his set at the [House of Blues](#) until the sound mix was right. Good for you, Andrew, and thank you. The audience deserves great sound.

One recent evening I went to [HOME](#), a venue in Beverly Hills that hosts a Thursday jazz night. ([HOME](#) is a twee acronym for House of Music and Entertainment. Sadly, it is neither.)

I might have been able to forgive [HOME](#)'s inhospitable, cavernous design and harsh lighting, if the sound had been good, but it wasn't. (Actually, I could not forgive the harsh lighting. Who wants bright table-spots at a jazz club?) When the singer began, you literally could not understand a single word. Why? Here, the sound is disadvantaged from the get-go because the mixing panel has been foolishly placed to the far left of the stage and out of the way, so the mixer cannot hear the sound in the house. Compounding this insensitive sound design choice, the proprietors don't seem to care.

I went up to the evening's host after the first song and let him know we could not hear the singer. “Yeah, it's a problem,” he said, and walked away. Tellingly, he didn't go over to the mixing board and try to make any corrections; he just let the night play out, content to watch people order over-priced food and drink.



Thursday night Jazz at [HOME](#) in Beverly Hills

As someone who has spent years of his life in theatres and performance venues, believe me when I say it does not have to be this way. Excellent, clear, well-balanced sound is entirely possible. In fact, with newer technologies, it is easier than ever before. It simply takes venues that value sound quality as much as all other aspects of the audience experience, and producers who put the resources of time and attention toward achieving it.

Top image: Daniel N. Durant (Moritz) and Krysta Rodriguez (Ilse) in Deaf West Theatre's production of Spring Awakening. Photo by Kevin Parry.

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