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How to Listen: Theater Sound Designer Michael Rasbury Creates Earth Recordings

July 16, 2008 — For theater sound designer Michael Rasbury, a perfect get-away from the sounds that constantly bombard us in the modern world is a five-minute retreat to nature with his microphone, earphones and recording machine. On these mini-retreats he listens selectively and records the everyday sounds that many people don't take the time to hear. During times away from his teaching duties in the University of Virginia [Drama Department](#) and while on trips to create soundscapes for professional theater productions, Rasbury records these sounds of nature. While on sabbatical this spring, he spent time honing his recording skills capturing sounds of wind, water, people, animals and machines. He compiled these recordings on a Web site — [Earthrecordings.com](#) — and allows others to download and use the sounds in their own sound creations.

Rasbury uses a portable digital recording system and special microphones that sit above his ears and utilize the head as part of his recording process. The head-related transfer function, or HRTF as the process is called, gives the sense of 360-degree sound, he said. He records the sounds at a high resolution to achieve the purity of sound he is after.

"When you listen back to these recordings you get the sense that you are sitting right in that moment in time," Rasbury explained.

Rasbury anticipates various uses for the Web site. For his work the sounds will play an important role in his professional sound design projects. He's already familiar with what's recorded and the quality of the sound. In his role as teacher, he will direct his students to use the recordings on the Web site in class exercises in which they will develop their own soundscapes. He hopes that other academics and professionals will find other uses for the sound files.

The recordings are what Rasbury refers to as "phonography," a kind of shorthand of sound that has roots in the folklore tradition of using field studies to preserve some aspect of our culture. In Rasbury's case, he is attempting to preserve a part of our natural auditory culture for future generations. It's a lofty goal and not so easily attainable in our noise-filled world, he said.

"You know the only thing you can count on in life is change, and everything is changing in life all the time, including our natural and cultural environments. They are vanishing and should be preserved," Rasbury said.

He recently recorded the sound of a whippoorwill to add authenticity to his sound design for "The Lost Colony," the outdoor drama on Roanoke Island, N.C., for which he has created the soundscape the last three years.

"Who knows if we'll have whippoorwills in 50 or 100 years," he said.

Rasbury has been recording sounds since high school when he would compose small musical compositions just so he could practice his recording techniques. Over the years he honed his skills as a musician and composer and later developed his career as a sound designer for theater productions. He has a bachelor's degree in music and master's in theater from Louisiana Tech University and views these as some of the building blocks in his development as a sound designer.

"I'm self-taught," Rasbury said. "I always had a love for recording and the technology surrounding it as well as music. I wanted to know everything about these interests and set about trying to do so at an early age. Sound design came out of combining the things I learned about music and sound technology earlier in life with what I learned later as a graduate student in theater."

When he was in school there were very few programs that offered sound design. Today, Rasbury said, about 20 percent to 30 percent of university theater programs teach sound design. He also noted that the field of sound design is rapidly growing and varied. Sound designers can be those who design or install and customize sound equipment in theater and other venues and have detailed knowledge of electrical engineering or the physics of acoustics. Others, who call themselves sound designers, create sound or music and blend these to produce a soundscape to support theatrical and large entertainment productions.

Rasbury brings a philosophy of sound design that stresses minimalism. "I ask the question at the beginning of every project: Does this play really need sound, other than the actors' speech?" If the answer is yes, he then approaches it from the actors' point of view. "Given what the person onstage is thinking, what would it sound like if I was asked to



Michael Rasbury (click for high-res version)

(Photo: Jane Haley)

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Contact:

Jane Ford
 Senior News Officer
 (434) 924-4298
jford@virginia.edu

underscore this? What would the thunder sound like if it were raining outside given what's happening on the stage psychologically to the person thinking it?"

Rasbury brings this perspective to a project currently under development — "Max Understood." He co-wrote the play with Nancy Carlin, a director he has worked with over the years at the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival. In this production, Rasbury blends his talents as a musical composer and sound designer in a work about an autistic child that is loosely based on his own family situation.

"I tried to write an anti-musical that utilizes environmental sounds that over time begin to connect musical patterns. You know autistic kids are overwhelmed by various environmental stimuli, including sound. So an example of a piece of music from the play would be something beating rhythmically, like a horn outside or a telephone ringing against that. Then the strings come in, then piano and the instruments combine with the sounds," Rasbury said. "It's me watching my son thinking if I could take a piece of music out of his head, what's making him tick? What would it sound like? It's what a sound designer does for every moment in a play."

The play was first presented last year as a staged reading at the Foothill Theatre's "New Voices" program in Nevada City, Calif. and was well received, Rasbury said. The play's most recent presentation was as a staged reading at the nationally recognized Eugene O'Neill National Music Theatre Conference in Waterford, Conn.

— *By Jane Ford*

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