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Sonic Icons and Indices at the Theater

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It is February 2011, and I am visiting New York City in order to do research in the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. It is a quick trip, less than three days, but I have made time to see a new play called *Compulsion* by Rinne Groff at The Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival. I am excited because I have never been to the Public's historic Astor Place building and because I am researching the work of sound designer Darron L. West, who designed the production's sound. I take notes during the performance, paying close attention to designed sounds and their possible meanings. West's design seems to use sound in largely predictable ways—as a device to link scenes and cover scenic changes and as an emotional trigger in what proves to be a very dramatic performance.

But there is one thing that is different. Throughout the performance in seemingly random moments a very deep rumble begins. There is a looming darkness in this play about a Jewish man's obsessive need to share Anne Frank's diary with a potentially anti-Semitic American audience. The palpable difference between the quiet, rumbling sound and other moments of underscoring is how this sound affects my whole body. It is audible, though just barely. It might be easy to miss were it not also tactilely perceptible. Every time I perceive it, I feel it first,

coming up through my feet and my seat, before I hear it. It grows but remains way in the background, before fading into nothingness and leaving a noticeable stillness into which lead actor Mandy Patinkin's growls and whines become even more pronounced. I become increasingly focused on this particular sound, trying to determine its source and its meanings. It doesn't seem to correspond with the protagonist's emotional fits or with the beautifully operated marionettes that he interacts with during imaginative private moments. Noting the visible speaker setup of the theater, I begin to guess at the number and placement of subwoofers under the audience's seats. The subwoofers do not seem to be used in any other sound, but the rumble returns again and again. Finally, at intermission I turn to a couple seated next to me and ask if they heard the sound. The young woman looks at me as though I have asked an odd question and replies, "Do you mean the subway?"

It is then that I remember where I am. It is not that I hadn't realized I was in a theater and in this theater in particular; it is just that I hadn't allowed for the possibility that the world outside of the theater would encroach upon the imaginary world of the performance, a world that I helped to realize by engaging with it. I am in New York City, it is 2011, and the trains will continue to run below me periodically throughout the second act. After I leave the Public Theater they will continue to run beneath the building and the city all night long. I am immersed in the barely perceptible sounds of the city while listening to the performance. One sound field can be sensed through the other. This is the sonic context of the performance.

Writing about this experience more than a year later, I listen to the sounds of my small, quiet office: my fingers typing on my laptop's keyboard, the air moving through the room from the ceiling ventilation duct, and a very high-pitched ringing or hum that could be the fluorescent lights overhead but that I think is probably my own ears. I hear another world on the other side

of my closed door: people talking and moving, and then stillness. A third world plays in my mind: the memories of that performance, which as I explained above contained a sonic collision of at least two separate worlds. This essay will describe a way to understand the effects of the various sonic sensations of theater performances using the semiotic system of Charles Sanders Peirce. I will focus on two Peircian sign classes, the *icon* and the *index*, and follow my explanation of them with examples from SITI Company's *Under Construction*. Using Peirce I hope to show that sound design is a rich tool with which to make theater, even when you have a subway under your building. But first an important distinction must be made between sounds that are intentionally designed for theater and those that already exist there as a part of the everyday life of the performance venue.

Sound Design and Soundscape

Live performance events, whether or not they include designed sonic elements, are contained within soundscapes, which historicize them, marking them sonically in time and space. Purposeful and rehearsed sounds—live and pre-recorded voices, music, and sound "effects"—intermingle with other sounds—sounds of the everyday, sounds that exist before, during, and after the performance event. Performance spaces make their own noises. They breathe, squeak, and noisily perspire. Audiences experience the spectacle from within the "auditorium," the listening place, but they, too, create sound during a performance. Actors and stage managers often dread the sounds audiences contribute, because they are annoyingly uncontrollable. Yet the audible physiological response of an audience is absolutely necessary and desirable for a

performance to come to life. As others have argued persuasively,[1] active audience involvement at the theater creates a culture of performance that allows a society to practice and determine its values. Actors and theater-makers attempt to create and present work that will encourage audiences to engage with the performance on this level. We long for sympathetic resonance.

What is the relationship between the sounds of a play and the sounds that surround and contain a performance? The particular sound that bothered me so much during the performance of *Compulsion* did so because it seemed out of place. I focused on the sound precisely because, for me, it didn't easily make sense. I wasn't able to clearly attach the sound to an object, feeling, character, idea, or action in the play, so I tried out various potential meanings in my mind, "auditioning" them, so to speak, and could land on none. While the "bother" this sound caused for me signals its efficacy at opening up the often closed loop of theatrical representation, in which what is sensed is attached to a specific (closed) meaning and possibilities drop away until a single meaning is derived from the performance, what concerns me here is the process of listening that I undertook while experiencing the performance.

Theater sound design is the practice of making sounds that sound in particular ways and as a result have specific dramaturgical resonance. Ross Brown divides sound design into two categories or modes, "dramaturgically organized noise,"[2] by which he means sounds, noises, and music that are selected and arranged to have particular dramatic effects, and "theatrically organized hearing,"[3] which encompasses the myriad ways that sounds can sound, focusing on acoustic space and its relation to time. Theater sound design is intentional and immersive. The

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[1] See, for instance, Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999) and James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*, (Berkeley: U of CA P, 1996).

[2] Ross Brown, *Sound: A Reader in Theatre Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

[3] Ibid., 125.

sonic experience of everyday life is also immersive, a process of immersion in not just one acoustic "world," but often in multiple worlds, whose sonic constitutions divert our attentions from one world to the next. In the theater the particular framing given to sounds helps to determine whether and how they are incorporated into the overall effects of a performance. Yet, as Adrian Curtin points out, sensory experience in the theater is foundationally comprised of unintentional, everyday sounds in which we are also immersed and through which designed sound is perceived.[4] The total sound makes up what he, after acoustic historian Emily Thompson, refers to as the "soundscape."[5] Perhaps a consideration of sound in the theater asks not only what theater sounds like,[6] but also how theater determines meanings through a sort of cultural sonar, in which sound functions to locate the self within the world. It follows that understanding how theater sounds is also about considering what strategies for listening we bring to the theater. To understand the cultural resonance of a production and its sound design, it seems prudent to also lend an ear to those sounds that, though present during the performance, are ignored.

My focused listening during the performance of *Compulsion* can be described in one sense as listening not just *to* the performance but also *about* it. That is, I also listened to that which surrounded, bordered, and defined the performance by its difference from it. There were many sounds during the performance, in addition to the one that I focused on, that were not part of the sound design: sounds of the audience shifting in their seats, coughing, turning pages of their programs, whispering. These sounds I was able to immediately identify and let pass

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[4] Adrian Curtin, "Defining and Reconstructing Theater Sound," in *Theatre and Performance Design: A Reader in Scenography*, ed. Jane Collins and Andrew Nesbit (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 218.

[5] Ibid.

[6] This brings to mind Roland Barthes's famously derisive comments on music criticism, "(little parlour game: talk about music without using a single adjective)," in "The Grain of the Voice," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (NY: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179.

unheeded. These were the expected sounds, those that accompany many performances at the theater. I effectively discriminated between these "everyday" sounds (sounds that are nevertheless specific to an event we consider outside of the everyday) and the sounds that existed within and for the world of the performance. I kept the theatrical frame(s) of the performance in place, but inadvertently allowed for the inclusion of the everyday into the theatrical world of the play by trying to make that bothersome sound fit. This was an accident. Had I understood what that low rumbling sound was, I might have mentally set it aside, paying it no more mind than I did to the sounds of the building's ventilation system. But because I had worked so hard during the first act to let this sound be purposeful, both abstracting it from its (or any) source and allowing it to resonate affectively, I found that during the second act I anticipated its arrival and it continued to be meaningful, though I paid it less conscious attention. The sound seemed to fit, even though its occurrences did not coincide with the play's dramatic actions and did not indicate anything in particular. For me it offered a feeling that resembled the overall content of the play, but did so, interestingly, on a rhythm all its own.

Sonic Icons and Indices

Just how do we interpret these sounds, whether intentional or not? By asking what a sound might "resemble" and "indicate," I wish to highlight sound's semiotic possibilities, and here I will turn to Peirce. I believe the semiotic categories he referred to as the *icon* and the *index* conceptualize a model by which we can better understand sound design's effects in and beyond theater performance events. Through such a model (or models) sounding histories of the theater and sounding trajectories for the theater may be more possible. I suggest that our experience of self depends in part on how we respond or situate ourselves in relation to sonic

stimuli. What is heard and felt as sound "moves" us physically, emotionally, and cognitively. We feel it and it sets the imagination in motion, combining sensation with memory, fantasy, and possibility.

Signs, according to Peirce, can be anything. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino paraphrases Peirce's definition of the sign as "*something that stands for something else to someone in some way.*"[7] The model is composed of three things: the something (the Sign or what Peirce calls the Representamen), the something else that the sign stands for (the Object, either an actual object or a concept), and the way that someone perceives it (the Interpretant, the *effect* created within the observer – this could be a feeling, physical reaction, or language-based thought process).[8] Whereas a Saussurian semiotic model would insist on a dyad of signifier and signified, both understood as language, the Peircian triadic system not only is not bound to linguistic objects, but also incorporates the resultant effect of one thing standing in for another. This effect can become the new sign, which may then stand in for another object, resulting in a new effect in a possibly infinite chain or "train of thought"[9] that allows complex and sometimes contradictory layers of meanings to accrue.

Sounds as Peircian signs communicate meanings at a pre-linguistic level. We may identify with sounds without knowing precisely what they refer to. One of the ways we are affected emotionally by sounds and music is through identification with them. Our identities are, as Turino describes them, "the affective intersection of life experiences."[10] We feel our sense of

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[7] Thomas Turino, "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music," in *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 2 (1999): 222.

[8] C. S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 99-100.

[9] Turino, 223.

[10] Ibid., 221.

self, our own place within the world, intensely. Turino points to "the specific semiotic character"[11] of expressive arts, particularly those that do not rely directly on language, as the reason why they are so meaningful for us without being something we can describe.

In Peirce's system there are three groupings (called trichotomies) of signs: the first, about the sign itself (what is it?); the second, concerning the object represented and how it is represented by the sign; and the third, regarding the kind of effect created in the perceiver. There are ten signs in total, and each one is "divisible by [the] three trichotomies,"[12] which means that each sign can be considered in terms of its three aspects: the sign itself, the relationship of the sign to the object it represents, and the effect created in the auditor. Icons and indices are part of Peirce's second grouping of signs and comprise "the specific semiotic character" to which Turino refers. Because icons and indices (and a third class, *symbols*) describe the relationship between the sign and its object, they are useful for thinking about representation and analyzing art. We can use these semiotic classes to consider how stage actions—from simple to complex occurrences—might be understood by an audience member.

The icon communicates by resemblance. Iconicity is identification. We feel we get it because it seems like something we recognize. When we think of something as iconic, we understand it as being of a certain style, even of determining that style. Iconicity is a quality of being. Music can be broken down into many different qualities—tempo, rhythm, melody, timbre, etc.—and each one may serve to resemble something different. Noises have these qualities too, but significantly they also often carry knowledge of the source of the noise. Sounds are recognized because of the listener's experiences and memories of the world. But

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Peirce, 101.

even when a sound's source is not visually apparent or otherwise known by the listener, its other qualities may remind the listener of other sounds or non-sonic sensations or memories. Thus sonic signs are potentially a dizzying condensation of many objects and many effects.

When the sign is realized in actual life and there is a direct or causal connection, a co-occurrence between the sign and its object, we call it an index. One thing indicates another. The classic example is smoke indicating a fire, but sound designers know that sonic examples abound. Birdsong can indicate an outdoor environment; the sound of wheels on gravel may indicate the arrival of a character on stage, though you may not see the vehicle; a musical motif may indicate the arrival of a hero. You understand the one thing because it is directly connected with the other. The sound of rain combined with actors hunching over may indicate that the characters on stage have been caught in a downpour and soaked, though we can see they are dry as can be. Iconicity seems natural. A style is a style because it has recognizable qualities that just seem right together. An index, however, can contain many meanings, even contradictory ones; and this perhaps is why Peircian analysis is so useful for theater sound design. With a sound or musical theme played during the first happy appearance of an important relationship in a play, this association adheres in our minds. The next time the theme is played it may accompany the painful severing of this relationship. We experience the sadness or perhaps anger at the same time that we remember the joy, love, or erotic feelings we experienced when we first heard the theme. When it plays later, we will likely remember both occurrences, and neither character need even be present. As Turino writes, "Once such indexical relations have been established… actual co-presence of sign and object is no longer required… Of key significance

to a theory of musical affectivity, indices continually take on new layers of meaning while potentially also carrying along former associations—a kind of *semantic snowballing.*"[13]

Our associations with certain sounds are dependent on our personal life experiences, and certain contexts or genres frame sounds to influence the effects they may have in us. But because of the effect of "semantic snowballing," in which a great many associations, both from within the theatrical context and also from our individual and social lives, congeal within a single dramatic moment, sounds may convey meanings in ways that we have no ability to think about; rather we may experience them "feelingly," perhaps as chills up and down the spine or unexplainable sobbing. If the connection between sign and object is strong in the listener's mind, the arrival of the sign can bring on unexpected emotion. If this connection is personal it can be even more meaningful. As Turino relates, "Indices are experienced as 'real' because they are rooted, often redundantly, in one's own life experiences and, as memory, become the actual mortar of personal and social identity."[14]

Sound design is just one aspect of a theater production, just one part of a single moment of theater, in which the audience member is offered the simultaneous work of sound, lighting, scenic, costume, properties, and music designers, and seen and unseen stage performers, from actors, puppeteers, and musicians to stage technicians and managers. Depending on the particular theatrical moment, we may experience each of these elements at once. But even when seated in the dark with only a single sound or musical instrument playing, we experience that moment of the performance with all of our physical senses and with as much sensibility as we can muster. We feel, we move, we think, we imagine.

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[13] Turino, 235.

[14] Ibid., 229.

The information communicated by an index begins with the recognition afforded by an icon; that is, the index often contains the icon. This is a general principal of Peirician semiotics: higher order signs may contain lower signs. The relationship between object and sign described by a symbol may contain an element that indicates its connection with the real-world object, which in turn may have an iconic resemblance to it. The icon is a quality that we recognize. The index gives us information. As Turino explains,

> A "wince" initially functions iconically to express pain or displeasure because it "looks like" other expressions of displeasure. Primarily it is indexically related to emotional states through co-occurrence. All indices depend on an initial iconic moment of recognition… [A] rising melodic line and crescendo might function iconically in relation to excited speaking voices. This is true at an early part of the semiotic chain, but the real impact of these signs is based on the fact that rising pitch and volume when speaking co-occurs with excited states and we interpret these signs as being the result of excitement (the object).[15]

The motivic use of sound in theater, film, or opera helps the viewer to follow, anticipate, and become involved in the actions of a story because of qualities we recognize (iconicity) and because those qualities are understood to indicate specific emotional states, feelings, or moods.

The symbol describes a relation between object and sign that is culturally agreed upon. As Turino states, "Whereas the meanings of indices are dependent on the experiences of the perceiver, and thus can be quite fluid and varied, the meanings of symbols are relatively fixed through social agreement."[16] The connection between sign and object in a symbol is made

[15] Ibid., 252.

[16] Ibid., 228.

through the use of language and is arbitrary. The word "cow" has no more connection with an actual cow or the idea of a cow than does the French word "*vache*." Despite the fact that different languages have different words for the same things, there are aspects of words that seem to contain an audible likeness to the visual (or other) characteristics of the objects they represent.[17] Vowels and consonants, expressing a wide range of variable details, combine with pitch (frequency), loudness (amplitude), and movement to resemble the objects their constructions represent. That those combinations are culturally specific and arbitrary does not diminish this connection. In this way Peircian symbols contain indices and icons, creating a complex sign that is understood on several levels.

For the purposes of my analysis, I focus on the icon and the index because they operate on the level of "gut-feeling." Not only does the symbol involve cognition, but the word is commonly understood in a way that differs from Peirce's more specific meaning and is therefore confusing.[18] Furthermore, the effects that icons and indices have in listeners are of a kind that are sometimes referred to as sub- or un- conscious. This is only to indicate that they are spontaneous reactions to a sign, not involving cognition of language-based concepts. They do involve consciousness, which is to say sensing, perceiving, and responding.

Peirce describes three different types of effect that the sign and its relation to its object can produce: *emotional interpretants, energetic interpretants*, and *sign interpretants*. The first of these is "a direct, unreflected-upon feeling caused by a sign."[19] Turino points out that other signs

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[17] See Richard K. Thomas, "The Sounds of Time," published in Ross Brown, *Sound: A Reader in Theatre Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 177-87.

[18] I realize I have given short-shrift to the Peircian symbol here. My explanation of Peircian semiology is intended for readers who may not have encountered Peirce before. The entire system of ten different sign classes deserves a much more thorough working through, and I encourage the reader to turn to Peirce himself as well as Turino and others for a more detailed explanation.

[19] Turino, 224.

can also involve emotion and cautions the semiologist to think of this reaction as a feeling or sense (or perhaps even a mood). This seems to me to be well described by the word "affect," a capacity for change that can but doesn't necessarily always bloom into a fully realized emotional state.[20] The second interpretant listed above is "a physical reaction caused by a sign, be it unnoticed foot tapping to music, an accelerated heartbeat from a police siren, or unreflexively drawing a finger back from a hot stove."[21] Perhaps it is because sound itself is invisible and because often the source of sounds is beyond our view that the "unreflected-upon" effects of icons and indices, what Peirce calls emotional and energetic interpretants, are often the results of sonic signs. Turino, writing about one aspect of sound, confirms this, stating, "Music involves signs *of* feeling and experience rather than the types of meditational signs that are *about* something else."[22] In what follows, then, my examples will rely on signs whose relation to their objects may be described as iconic or indexical.

SITI Company's **Under Construction**

It is April 22, 2011 at New York City's Dance Theater Workshop (now known as New York Live Arts) on West 19th Street. I have been fortunate to spend the previous week with the SITI Company, listening to and observing their rehearsals for *Under Construction*, and I am about to attend the first preview performance. Audience members enter the theater noisily, seat themselves, and carry on their conversations as they watch the actors already on stage. A few of the actors greet people they seem to know, while others check on props, talk with one another, or

[20] For more on this particular definition of "affect" see Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002). For application of this notion of affect to sound in everyday life see Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2010).

[21] Turino, 224.

[22] Ibid.

dance through the stage space. Finally, with all actors gathered in a line downstage, actor Tom Nelis says, "Alright, let's get this thing started." The audience, now a full house, cheers and quiets down. Nelis begins:

> Tonight we are gonna do for you scenes number 6, 79, 29, 22, 67, 107, 18, 57, 122, 5, and 41. 41. This version of the script is the way the show has been done with the SITI company, and it seemed to us that these scenes in this order are wonderful. But, in the future, when we (or others) do the show, it may be that we want to throw out some of these scenes, write some new ones, change the order of things. And so, in this way, the piece will remain, like America, permanently under construction.[23]

Nelis blows a note on a pitch pipe, scats an arpeggio down to his starting note ("Bum, bum, bum, bum") and sings: "I love those dear hearts and gentle people / Who live in my home town / Because those dear hearts and gentle people / Will never ever let you down,"[24] and Bing Crosby gradually joins in, reverberating over the sound system and through the auditorium as though echoing through the memories of time gone by. In this way the show moves from an opening statement that invites the audience to imagine a multiplicity of stories and consider how their telling actively and continually reshapes our lives and identities as Americans to a stable "home sweet home," a place where "gentle people will never ever let you down," an America enshrined, referred to, and revisited again and again in popular culture from Norman Rockwell to *Mad Men* and Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom,* and in the current polarized political culture of the United States. The song's first verse complete, the rest of the acting company step out of line

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[23] Charles L. Mee, *Under Construction*, http://charlesmee.org/html/construction.html.

[24] Ibid., Prologue.

one by one to fetch the costume pieces and scenic elements that lie fully visible on the outskirts of the playing space, and gradually a world is created.

The singing style that Nelis emulates is Crosby's famous croon. The iconic value of this sound is introduced with the note of the pitch pipe, the brief scat-singing, and the warm, round tone of Nelis's voice. As Crosby's voice enters, the iconicity of the moment is confirmed and the song begins to function as an index. I recognize the voice playing through the speakers and notice Nelis still singing. Crosby's voice crescendos and the two voices become one. The sound coming through the speakers occupies a different acoustic space. It is saturated in reverb, making the moment feel thick and viscous. The physical connection between the onstage singer and the sound of a bygone era is apparent. The console television is placed in the corner and its black and white screen is turned on. Sawhorses and two long wooden 2x4s are placed prominently downstage. Chairs are brought in to surround the makeshift table. Three rambunctious "boys" begin passing a football over all the activity from one corner of the stage to another. The song, having continued through all the stage action, begins to fade as Thanksgiving dinner becomes imminent. Through the nostalgia of this opening song, a point of view is established that will then be critiqued for the rest of the evening's performance.

Bing Crosby's voice lingers in my mind over the course of the performance and mixes with many other sonic relics of the 1950s and 60s, both recorded music and text spoken live. The tension between these and the contemporary music with which they are juxtaposed comprises a large part of my fascination with the sound design for *Under Construction*. The end of "Home Sweet Home" returns after the Thanksgiving meal has been abandoned. Offering his prayer of thanks for a world of security—"these days there is nothing between us and a hurled

rock but a big picture window made of glass, this is how safe we are,"[25]—the father, played by Stephen Duff Webber, singles out each person for his cheerful criticism and is finally left standing alone at the head of a dinner table that has been deconstructed piece by piece. He picks up the last sawhorse and leaves to the reverberating tones "Home… home sweet home," almost as though he is walking back into the past from which the song came.

The three aproned women of the cast return to clear a table that is now gone. Actress Ellen Lauren says, "What I want…," almost as though she is surprised to have the opportunity to tell anyone. One at a time they begin describing their desires, each more outlandish than the last. The women, alone with one another, now voice a long list of their most personal desires, growing in an accelerating crescendo until Avril Lavigne's 2004 song "I Always Get What I Want" crashes over the sound system and the women thrash-dance in a tangle of hair and thrown dinner trays. The moment is in striking contrast to Crosby's "Home Sweet Home." The loud sounds of distorted electric guitar and drums ring in our ears and vibrate our bodies. The unleashed female is raucous, wild, and violent. The recorded music cue does not reverberate in the same way as the previous one did. It sounds "dry" and close. Whereas the Crosby music cue, drenched as it was in reverb, seemed to come from memory, the Lavigne is less in my mind and more in my body. The song has effects that can be described as emotional interpretants and energetic interpretants: it raises my pulse and makes my head bob with the uptempo beat. It feels different from what has preceded it, and it is a good feeling. It establishes a dangerous undercurrent that is present just under the surface of the safe, patriarchal home. For me the moment indexes the coming second wave feminism of the 1960s and 70s. At the same time, the song is commercialized pop, and I am reminded that Lavigne's rage for having her subjectivity

[25] Ibid., Scene 6, Thanksgiving.

recognized can be packaged and sold. The three women rock out for a verse and chorus, and then abruptly the moment is over. The music stops playing and the lights shift to spotlight Nelis as our reliable narrator from the world of Bing Crosby once again. The contrast between Lavigne's pouty, punky song and the re-established world of the 1950s is immense, and my mind and body function together to perceive this contrast.

About seventeen minutes and already seven scenes and many contrasting music cues into the show, actor Barney O'Hanlon leads an abrupt shift by delivering the new scene's opening narration as a set of instructions to both the acting company and the audience: "a salesman comes into a hotel room, puts his sample case on the bed, turns down the covers, gets in bed."[26] The company gets to work, using the same pieces we've seen as the Thanksgiving table to transform the stage space into the salesman's hotel room. O'Hanlon asks, "Eben, play something?" And sound engineer Eben Hoffer plays the next music cue, a prepared piano piece by John Cage. O'Hanlon listens, focusing our own listening, and shrugs in response to Hoffer's selection. This is a departure from the music we've heard so far, which has been decidedly popular. As a Peircian sign, it functions iconically by offering a sound that is at once familiar and strange. It indexes a piano, and for those who recognize it, minimalist art music. In this way it sets a time and place, 1960s New York City. But especially for those who do not recognize the music, it establishes a new tone through its quality of estrangement. Nelis, our narrator, becomes the salesman, crosses to the upstage right corner of the playing space, and sits on the 2x4s that are now his bed. The television we saw at Thanksgiving dinner sits in its same spot, this time silently playing a scene between two men. I hear a woman's voice over the speakers—"Mic check. Mic check. One, two. One, two,"—and my attention is drawn to actor Makela Spielman,

[26] Ibid., Scene 74, Travelling Salesman.

who crosses, trailing her microphone cable, to lean against the downstage left proscenium wall. The scene is set, all other actors exit, and Nelis leads the next shift by turning on the bedside lamp over his shoulder. The lights and sound shift abruptly to spotlight Nelis reading in bed.

The music changes mid-cue to another piano; this one is further away and less insistent than the prepared piano. It soothingly prepares me for Spielman's voice, which through the microphone sounds close to my ears. Soon a saxophone begins a melody over that piano and indicates a genre, film noir. The sonic index contains the iconicity of the style, but it also makes me think of specific instances of noir from classic films and television to Garrison Keillor's "Guy Noir, Private Eye" on his National Public Radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*. She begins speaking what Nelis, in the far upright corner, reads to himself:

> Beebo Brinker
>
> by Anne Bannon
>
> Lost, lonely, boyishly appealing--
>
> this is BEEBO BRINKER.
>
> She landed in New York,
>
> fresh off the farm...
>
> her only certainty was
>
> that she was different.
>
> So innocent
>
> she did not notice
>
> that women watched her
>
> when she entered the room.[27]

[27] Ibid.

As I listen to Spielman's rich voice and watch Nelis, I experience an interestingly strange doubling of subjectivity. It is a woman's voice reading pulp lesbian fiction in the mind of the male salesman, a male fantasy of lesbianism for his voyeuristic ears. With Spielman's voice coming over the microphone and through the auditorium speakers, a very close acoustic space is created. It is as though I am reading what he is reading, that it is me sitting on that makeshift hotel bed. At the same time I can see Nelis and Spielman in their separate worlds creating the singular experience that I am sharing with them. By the third Anne Bannon book, I hear Nelis speaking aloud some of the descriptions from the back of the books along with Spielman. Then it is just the salesman speaking alone, and the acoustic changes from feeling close and in my ear to distant and no longer belonging to me. These vocal shifts of acoustic space and subjectivity function as icons, but rather than determining fixed meanings that allow me to identify with one point of view, they keep open the possibilities by continually changing from her voice to both together to his and back again. These shifting icons, heard with the indexical soft jazz underneath, keep me listening and wondering where we will go next. The iconic elements of the sounds and music used in the performance and their indexical layerings build a complex web of physical, emotional, and cognitive responses in me.

I have argued for the use of Peircian semiotics to aid in the analysis of theater sound design. I believe the icon and index are especially useful here. But I hope that in the presentation of my examples I have also made clear that I do not rely on my understanding of Peircian signs to simply read a performance as one might read a book. Every person in the audience will have a different experience at the theater. Each will "get" certain references and miss others, based on each person's life experiences. Because sounds are not "over there," visibly before us like the salesman on his hotel bed, but rather seem to be all around us and

sometimes even inside us, Peirce's model of icons and indexes, which lets us question our physical and emotional responses to experience, is a helpful way for us to think about the possibilities of sounds in the theater more clearly. In the case of *Compulsion*, I found that the sonic interruption of the performance by the world outside offered rich possibilities to a show that intended a comparatively fixed set of meanings. I was better able to think through my experience of that show with an understanding of icons and indices. I think Peircian semiotics is particularly useful for the analysis of work without such fixed meanings, like *Under Construction*, which offers an ever-changing topography of experiences. SITI Company's piece is about transformation, possibility, and hope. Through its use of sound, *Under Construction* suggests new trajectories for America.[28] As actor Leon Ingulsrud says at the play's end, "This is what human beings do. This is the human project. We are in a constant process of construction, making and re-making, as long as we are alive."[29] Using Peirce's model to analyze some of those constructions, we can more clearly understand and think about what theater sound design allows us to feel and know.

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[28] For those who were unable to attend either the 2009 world premiere at the Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival or the 2011 New York debut of *Under Construction*, I refer readers to a promotional video made by SITI Company and available for viewing at https://vimeo.com/42208415. Though only two minutes long, the video offers a rich example of the kind of semantic snowballing to which Turino refers. In contrast to the Bing Crosby that begins the play, the heavy metal music that runs through the first half of the video is a later point in a trajectory the play is documenting. The image that first appears with it in the video and that is the music's only accompaniment in the show is the full stage cross of Leon Ingulsrud, a large man made larger by five-gallon bucket shoes, football pads, and a batman Halloween mask. After the video's "intermission," we are treated to a quartet, sung straight from the barbershop. The audio from the song continues while scenes with different emotional content play out, offering the viewer a layering of indices. The collage effect of the different scenes playing over the heavy metal music is not how the production itself played out, but it is illustrative of my point. The lyrics of the quartet, "Ma! She wants to marry me," land on the image of Ellen Lauren in a seductive red dress and begins the video's final song by the band Calexico. The music and dance at this point in the show could not have been possible in the America of Bing Crosby's "Home Sweet Home."

[29] Ibid., Scene 147, The Future.