A Guide to Sound in Theatre

Sound is used along with Lighting and Set to create atmosphere and a sense of place and time in theatrical productions. Sound falls into two main areas: Live sound and Recorded sound.

Live Sound generally includes the use of microphones to amplify voices and instruments, or less frequently the creation of live sound effects on stage (similar to Foley in radio).

Recorded Sound includes anything that has been previously recorded elsewhere and is played through a variety of devices: CD, laptop, qlab, phone etc

The path that sound has to travel through to be heard on stage is as follows:

Sound Source-----------Mixing Desk-------------Amplifier------------Speaker

The Mixing Desk allows several different sound sources to be played at the same time, for example someone speaking into a microphone whilst a piece of music plays in the background. It also allows sounds to be heard through many different speakers either all at once or at different times. Mixing desks can also allow effects such as Reverb and Delay to be added to live voices and instruments to add atmosphere and interest to the sound. Digital mixing desks have these effects inside the desk and can be added virtually to a channel, however on Analogue set ups there are separate Outboard units which require the use of cables to insert between the desk and the effect and back again.

Speaker Set up

Generally a Theatre will have a Stereo PA (Left and Right Full Range and Sub Bass Speakers) and sometimes a centre speaker. In a Theatre production there may also be Spot (Effect) Speakers where specific sound effects will appear from, for example from behind a door or piece of set to signify coming from another room or space. Musical productions that include live musicians may use Fold Back speakers where a specific mix of the band will be sent to a speaker positions facing the musicians. Dancers may require similar speakers on stage to hear the music.

Different Theatre set ups may need different speaker placements, for example Theatre in the Round and Thrust stages will need more speakers in order to cover the whole of the audience; or larger auditoriums sometimes need more sets of speakers to cover the seats nearest the stage and those farther away.