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INTO VIEW

Keeping it real (as much as possible)

M. Scott Grabau's lighting and sound designs help pump life into theater

By James Hebert
ARTS WRITER

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There are times when the job is enough to make M. Scott Grabau lock himself away in the bathroom.

Times like, for instance, two Wednesdays ago, when Grabau went looking for the perfect sound effect for a play and happened to find it in his own tub.

Grabau was finishing the sound design for North Coast Rep's current production, "The Nerd," but still wasn't satisfied with one audio punch line: The sound of a bag of shoes and socks falling into an unseen pond, as called for in the script.

"So I was in my own bathroom with a microphone and a computer and a bathtub full of water and a grocery bag full of shoes," he recalls, "trying to figure out: 'How do I make this funny?'"

The comic value of that spectacle aside, Grabau's work doesn't always play for laughs. In his work as both a lighting and sound designer, he covers as much emotional range as any journeyman actor.

For the climax of the absurdist play "Biedermann and the Firebugs" at Cygnet Theatre, where Grabau is resident artist, his mix of far-off sirens and crackling flames evoked the terror of a town burning down.

For Sam Shepard's "Curse of the Starving Class," also at Cygnet, he created sounds for a voice-altering refrigerator that symbolized a haunted family's malnourished dreams.

One of the shows he says he's most proud of is a 2005 Cygnet production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

"There were kids in that show, but no kids in the cast," he explains. "So we did a lot of work creating recordings that actors onstage could interact with."

He and the show's lighting designer, Eric Lotze, also teamed to create the illusion of a thunderstorm – "one of those wonderful things where sound and lighting have to work in unison," Grabau notes. "If they don't, everybody knows it."



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M. Scott Grabau samples the seating at Cygnet Theatre, where he is resident artist. The fact Grabau designs both sound and lighting might seem unusual, but to him theatrical design is a single art, "not a bunch of subcategories."

THEATER ARTIST: M. Scott Grabau

SPECIALTIES: Sound and lighting design

RECENT WORKS: Sound for "Biedermann and the Firebugs" and "Curse of the Starving Class," Cygnet Theatre; sound for "Smell of the Kill," North Coast Repertory Theatre; sound and lighting for "Room Service," Avo Playhouse (Moonlight Stage Productions). Current project: sound for the comedy "The Nerd," North Coast Rep.

KEY QUOTE: "I'm going through the same sort of process a stand-up comedian would, saying: 'OK, I played it like this last night and it worked. And I played it a little differently tonight and it fell flat. The sound cue is great, but let's try different timing and see if it sells better.'"

Grabau's fascination with creating soundscapes started early – he was probably the only kid on his block in Stockton who owned his own sound mixer.

But he also recalls being transfixed by David Hersey's lighting design for “Les Miserables” when he was a bit older, “and saying, ‘Yeah, I want to do this.’”

And lighting is mostly what he did, through his undergrad years at Humboldt State University and then two years of graduate work at the University of Kansas, followed by studies at UCSD.

“When I finished my (master of fine arts) degree at UCSD,” says the 35-year-old Grabau, “I was known in this town lighting designer. I put out my shingle and said, ‘Oh, by the way, I still do sound design.’”

“Be careful what you wish for because now I book three sound designs for every lighting design.”

The job is not always about inventing effects. Grabau also chooses music for many shows, often delving into his own digital collection (heavy on old TV themes, a personal indulgence). In other productions, his work is relegated to more of a background role.

Grabau likens it to “when your job as an actor is to stand in the background and hold the tea tray. You'd much rather be out there giving lines, but somebody's gotta hold the tea tray, and sometimes as a designer you're doing that.

“But then there are moments like the ending of ‘Biedermann,’ when the sound design is the action of the moment. Those are particularly gratifying times for a designer, when you know you can take front and center with your contributions to the show.”

Even if credit must be shared with a rubber duck or two.

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