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The House of Bernarda Alba

By Joe Court and Veronica Santoyo

Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the play *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and our approach to the sound design. We touch on themes of the play, our approach to the piece, desired outcomes, and the final product, which was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We each wrote separate essays that we then stitched together. We also have included a response from student members of our Foley team, student members of our cast, and members of our audience. Because of the setting of the play, the performance space, and the themes the team wanted to explore, we decided Foley sound was the best way to go. A Foley team was assembled and we began work. When the pandemic hit, the production was cancelled, but not before we had one performance, in the rehearsal room, a month before our planned tech. The sound team was able to get one rehearsal where they rehearsed with the cast. The performance that followed was a testament to the creativity we had all committed to when the process started.

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The Spanish poet and dramatist Federico Garcia Lorca says about theatre, *“Theater is poetry that rises from the book and becomes human enough to talk and shout, weep and despair.”* And then, *“One needs to rehearse for a long time, and very carefully, to achieve the rhythm that ought to govern the performances of a dramatical work. To me this is very important. An actor cannot wait a second too long before opening a door... The hardest thing to achieve in the theater is to have the work begin, develop and end in accordance with an established rhythm”* (Lorca xv). I often think about this, the precise rhythm on stage as a story unfolds. Rhythm, beats, heartbeats, live performance...

The House of Bernarda Alba, Lorca’s masterpiece poetic drama, is a story that centers around one female household in Andalusia, Spain, as its inhabitants begin an extended mourning period for the father who has just passed away. Bernarda Alba extends absolute control over her five daughters, and orders them all to keep their everyday affairs and themselves within the walls of their house, separated from the outside world, which she deems as dangerous and untrustworthy. Yet, she cannot control the inner will of her offspring, and in this lies the tension of the story. This is the drama that I directed and staged in collaboration with Joe Court, sound designer for the play, and other designers and actors.

The setting for this story is stark and symbolic, using a single visual image, that of the house within, simply, a room. In Lorca’s stage directions: *“A very white inner room in BERNARDA’s house. Thick walls. Arched doorways”* (193).

The effect is one of monotony as shown in the unbroken whiteness of the walls. In short, the space feels claustrophobic to the characters who inhabit it. Yet, there is a world outside of the house. The characters listen to this world; they sit and they imagine it through the sounds that invade the sterile inner atmosphere.

How do you convey the claustrophobia of characters yearning to get out? How do you make the house emotionally three-dimensional? Perhaps, we recreate the house and the world beyond it, allowing it to speak, literally sound out, and hence tantalize our perceptions. Our production realized that in order to achieve this effect, sound – key component of the world of this play – should be live, not recorded. **(VS)**

Our goal was to make the house sound alive, lived in, active. Early on, Veronica and I decided Foley would be the best way to go. The size of the performance space worked against using recorded sound – it is a small-ish black box. One advantage of the small space was that we wouldn't have to mic the effects, which helped add to the realistic feeling of the sound of the house. The active environment we wanted to create and amount of sound needed would have sounded fake with speakers in static position offstage. With Foley, we could create the environment of the house in a realistic way. We could move throughout the entire space and really create an active house. Because the Foley work would need to be performed every night, and would be fairly complex, Veronica had the idea to cast a team of actors to act as Foley artists. She also decided on male identifying actors since, even though there are no men in the house, the presence of men in the form of Pepe el Romano and the men of the village looms large over the house. The Foley actors could also provide the vocal effects of the men of the village.

I met with the Foley team early on to do a version of table work. I was able to hear the ideas they had from their script study, as well as provide them with ideas of what to look for in rehearsal, and how to respond to it with sound. We then went through the script and figured out where the script indicated sound, as well as potential spots for non-diegetic sound. We then began to map out, in each of those moments, what we might want the sonic environment to be. **(JC)**

The Foley team paid attention to sounds and their effects indicated by the playwright: *"A great shady silence envelops the stage... Church bells are tolling"* (193). *"We hear a jingling of bells in the distance"* (240). *"There is singing in the distance, coming closer"* (241). *"Offstage tambourines and carrañacas play. There is a pause in the conversation, everyone listens in sun struck silence"* (241). *"We hear distant voices... They stand listening, not daring to take another step toward the outside door"* (258). *"Outside a woman screams, and there is a great uproar"* (261). *"There is a loud thud from the other side of the wall"* (263). *"Bells are heard, very far off..."* (267). They further noticed what the characters say, how they react to what they hear, and the imagery sound conveys for them: Maid, *"My head is bursting with those tolling bells"* (193). Poncia, *"The last prayer - I'm going to listen. I love the way the priest sings! In the Pater Noster his voice rose higher and higher-like a water pitcher being filled little by little"* (196). Adela, *"He's out there breathing like a lion"* (286). Finally, they were asked to visualize the sounds that are not explicitly mentioned in the play, sounds that arose in their imagination as they immersed themselves in the world of the play. By the time rehearsals started, the sound team arrived with a wealth of sonic information for the soundscape within and without the house of Bernarda Alba. **(VS)**

The Foley artists and I also came up with a list of props they would need based on our table work. I tasked my assistant sound designer with pulling these props as requests came in. We pulled a Foley door, and at the time of the cancellation of the production my assistant was in the process of building another. Hand bells were used to replicate the ringing of bells in a church. Dishes, cutlery, and brooms replicated daily chores of sweeping and cleaning in the house. A pair of shoes and a wooden box were utilized to replicate the stallion kicking the stable wall. Anything they could think of to manipulate backstage to create the reality of a house that was alive, they requested. They also provided the voices of outside environment, men outside the house, men returning from the fields. A member of our team, Evan Morales, played guitar, so he was tasked with providing transition music he composed.



Photo by Veronica Santoyo

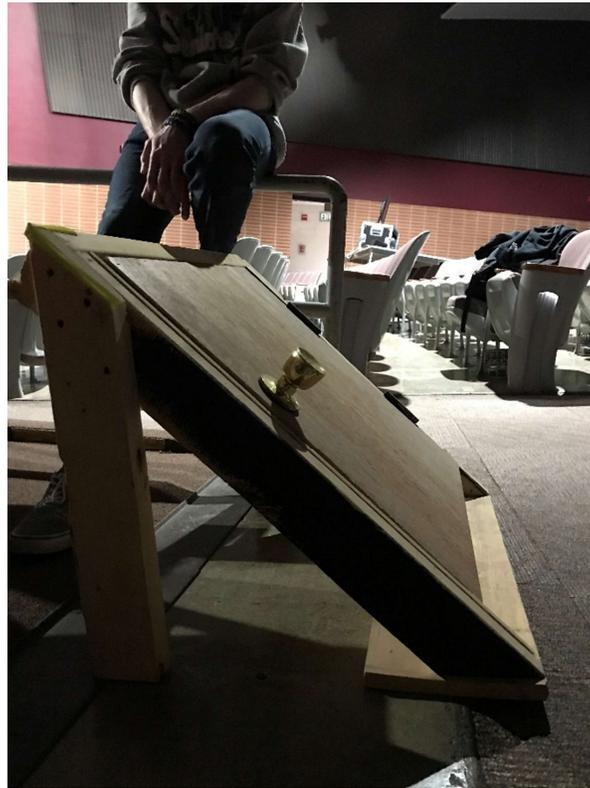


Photo by Josh Brinkman

The plan was for the student Foley artists to attend rehearsal when called and develop the Foley effects. I would check in during stumble-throughs and designer runs to give advice and help shape what the Foley team had come up with. Once we got into tech and dress rehearsals, I would be out front shaping the final product. **(JC)**

One month away from our expected opening night, with the entire play blocked, we had just begun to introduce the live sound into the staged performance... Then Covid-19 made its appearance, and within two days our production was shut down. I remember the day when we were told our expected performance run would not happen as originally planned; it

was Wednesday, March 11th, and we had just started our rehearsal for the day. We were uncertain if we would be able to show our work in any way to an audience. Not knowing exactly how this would pan out, I changed the rehearsal plans for that day, which were to do a start and stop run of the play as we slowly blocked in the sound, which we had barely started scoring into the scenes the day before. Instead, I indicated to the cast of actors and Foley artists that we would run the play without stopping unless absolutely necessary. I asked the sound team to go ahead and add the sounds they had previously listed to experiment with during our sound rehearsals, almost giving them carte blanche to create the soundscape as the play moved forward. I established a set of five signs using my hands that would help me communicate with them as the play ran nonstop, to convey any thoughts I had about the sound being implemented: thumbs up, thumbs down, volume up, volume down, cut sound. Perhaps it was the knowledge that we were losing our dramatic creation, perhaps the urgency of the moment, or the uncertainty, or just the intimate knowledge that the actors had developed with their characters and the Foley team with the soundscape of the play, but whatever it was, we were indeed able to run the show without pause, and as each scene played out the sounds emerged, creating a world for the story being enacted. That day, we completed blocking the sound for the entire show in one rehearsal run instead of the expected one or two weeks of rehearsal time we had originally planned for this purpose.

The following day we had the chance to do 'a run' of the show with an audience of about 40 invited spectators. It would be the only time we would perform our work before an audience. Spectators were seated in an L configuration around the stage. Our rehearsal room had a view of the outside green from the north side of the room, large windows lining the

wall across its entire length. Natural light, classroom chairs, cubes, spikes on the floor to indicate set dimensions, basically, a stark rehearsal room in which to tell the tragedy created by Lorca; no stage lights, no costumes, no set, only rehearsal props. Yet, we had actors, and we had Sound! Six in the evening, actors in place, spectators seated. *The House of Bernarda Alba* began...

It started in absolute silence... Suddenly, church bells... The rehearsal room gave way to another place and time! We were peeking into the privacy of this Spanish household, the intimacy of the space in full display. Aside from the very genuine performance work of the actors, there was one other element that was forcefully taking the audience to the narrative place: sound! In my spectator's eye, the village church emerged when I heard the bells tolling repeatedly throughout the first scene. I imagined the men, so absent within the house, when their voices were suddenly heard, rising and falling as they chatted and drank wine on the patio on the other side of the living room quarters. Later in the story, I visualized these men when I heard their singing voices as they passed by the house on their way to the fields. I marveled at the stallion forcefully kicking the stalls. I perceived the night air as the wind blew around the house, and I imagined the landscape that this air covered. I felt the household beat with the sounds of washing dishes, doors opening and closing, and chairs falling to the ground. In this sense, sound itself covered for every other design element, and because of it, the room became the house where these women live their unrelenting lives. **(VS)**



Evan Morales - Male Chorus and Foley Team - Photo by Talon Reed

The result was amazing. The Foley artists, with only two real rehearsals behind them and in a space that had no scenic elements (only rehearsal furniture), created the sonic environment of a house that was alive. One of the moments that struck me the most was the men coming back from the fields, singing (241). In reality, we had discussed the Foley artists starting to sing in a hallway adjacent to the theater, with Evan Morales playing guitar (the sheet music for this moment was provided in the script). They would then process down the hall towards an upstage entrance and leave through an exit backstage. They would be carrying farm implements that would clank together as they walked, adding realistic sounds of the men coming back from a day at work. In the room that night the Foley artists were only able to cross from one side of the room to the other. Even without our ideal environment, the desired effect was achieved. The live sound created a palpable sense of calm and desire in the room. You could feel the characters longing for the freedom they were not allowed.

There were also some unexpected moments. The Foley artists had requested glass bottles of various sizes that they could blow across the tops to create different “wind” tones. During the scene when the housekeeper Poncia talks with the daughters about men coming to their windows late at night (227-232), the Foley artists started blowing across the bottles. Because they were using bottles of different sizes, with different sized openings, an interesting harmonic resonance was created. It perfectly captured the tension in the play as the characters related their experiences with forbidden encounters with men late at night. In talking with the Foley artists after the final rehearsal, it was something they had tried for the first time the night before and had been encouraged by Veronica to keep. **(JC)**

A.J. Dorough (junior acting major), member of the Foley team

As a then-sophomore acting major who had no experience in any area of theatrical design, working as a member of the live sound team for *The House of Bernarda Alba* was a very interesting experience for me. This task required me and the other members of the sound team to read the script and look for any moments where sounds were written in, as well as find moments that could be emphasized with sounds. We all collectively compiled an extensive list of environmental and dramatically compelling sounds, and once we narrowed down our options, we then began finding ways to make those sounds with different objects. For example, we mimicked the sound of horses stomping by repeatedly smacking two halves of a coconut against one another, and we emphasized the feeling of discomfort in certain moments by blowing into glass bottles. It was a very fun experience that taught me a little bit about what it means to be a sound designer. Even more significantly, the experience also turned out to

be very beneficial to my acting training in ways I didn't expect. In my 'Movement for the Actor' class that spring, we had been spending a lot of time emphasizing the importance of awareness of everything within our environment and how to incorporate that into our work. Although I had a basic understanding of that concept and how to implement that in scenes, being a member of the live sound team helped me to push that understanding a step further. I had to be totally aware of what was going on in the play in order to know the precise moment a sound should be recreated, as well as what sounds would emphasize certain moments based on what was going on in the script. Every sound was essentially reactionary, and to react properly we had to be completely aware of the environment; there could be no room for even the slightest distractions. This is especially true as an actor... in order to react truthfully to the given circumstances of our scene, we must keep our focus on everything that is happening in the world of the play. Although I had a basic understanding of this before, being on the sound team increased my understanding and appreciation of this aspect. Now, I hope to find new ways to implement this awareness into my work in the future.



Carmia Lowe - Amelia

Natalia Galiana Torres (freshman acting major), actor, played 'Fourth Woman'; Foley member; understudy for Prudencia

I was part of the ensemble in *The House of Bernarda Alba* and I also had the chance to contribute to some of the live sounds that occurred in the play. As an actress, these sound effects helped me get into character and into the world of the women being represented in the story. When we hit the last rehearsal prematurely and were unable to reach opening night because of Covid-19, listening to the live sounds being created was very heartwarming for me and made the story credible. Live sound felt like it had been meant to be a part of the production right from the start. The sound enlivened the story Federico Garcia Lorca had written almost a century before. Contributing to the creation of that sound and being able to hear the reality within the play made me so thankful for the chance we had of bringing the production to life. On the other hand, I also had the perspective of being from Spain, where the play was set. Hearing some of the sounds really brought me back home and reminded me of the little Spanish villages that I visited growing up. It made me feel nostalgia and at the same time it warmed my heart. In my opinion, sound design was a great asset to this production and was one of the most fundamental characteristics that brought the play and its story to life.

Paige Demba (junior acting major), actor, played Angustias



Figure 1 Lexi Angel - Adela, Janae Robins - Poncia, Paige Demba - Angustias

Prior to working on the production, I had never experienced the live soundscape that Foley provides for the world of a show. I remember not knowing exactly how it would affect the show before hearing the sound team's work for the first time. Everything felt more visceral and heightened. I could feel the wind, the birds, the power of the men singing, and the kick of the stallion. The sound was also unique with each run. I found it very exciting, especially compared to pre-recorded sound effects. The Foley team was effectively part of our ensemble. Furthermore, the emotional arc of the show was very intense, and the Foley team helped us stay fully engaged with it.

Eva Patton (acting faculty), audience member

I don't know that I'll ever be able to fully articulate what a magical night of theatre it was to anyone who wasn't there. I believe there were 30 or 40 of us in the audience – sitting in folding chairs – surrounding the floor taped out as the stage that the students were to inhabit in a week but couldn't because Covid had arrived and we had to close the school. Within moments of getting settled in our seats, we began to hear sounds – the toll of a church bell, the washing of dishes, the wind rising and falling, the kicks of the stallion horse in the barn, the opening and closing of doors, the sound of men chatting in the patio. We were being magically transported from this florescent lit rehearsal room in Muncie, Indiana to a Spanish village, the house of Bernarda Alba where the mourning and passion were palpable, thanks to the inspired acting and authentic soundscape that immersed us for the next two hours in the reality of this painful story. No lights, no set, no costumes, no makeup; I've never experienced anything quite like it. It was one of my favorite nights in the theatre ever.



Figure 2 Janae Robinson - Poncia

Parker Hickey (junior acting major), audience member

The addition of Foley sound transported the audience in this space into the world of the show. As soon as I started to hear the trickling water and miscellaneous nature chirps my whole body was relaxed and in a state that allowed me to feel the story and fully engage in it even when there weren't any actors on stage. I could tell that the people around me had the same magical and spiritual experience of hearing these sounds created live by performers. My senses were taken over and I was fully enthralled by the effect that it created.

Devion Ross (junior acting major), audience member

For me the Foley sound added another layer of reality as not only were the sounds performed live but they were also thorough in the way they were performed. The simplistic, abstract method, for example, of using a water bin and such to convey running faucets in the house, made the audio of the show so visceral and specific that it really allowed me to believe in and see the world outside of the house, and it helped paint the images within the house as well. Once again, it was an absolutely amazing performance, especially to have still been in the stages of rehearsal progress.

Ogunde Snelling (senior acting major), audience member

When I heard that Covid-19 was going to cause the rest of classes in the Spring 2020 school year to be completely remote, thus also cancelling the remaining productions and subjecting them to one final rehearsal with an audience weeks before their scheduled opening, the first thing I said was

“I have to see Bernarda Alba, there's no way I'm not seeing Bernarda Alba.” I did not know it would be one of the most powerful and moving performances I've ever seen. The tension in the room was palpable. I had no idea what was in store for me. From the very beginning, the sounds of horses, birds, a guitar, amongst others, painted a picture of Spain which gradually filled the room, and gradually brought tears to my eyes. I could feel vibrations swelling through my body in the only way I know humanly possible. The release I felt by the end of the show was unlike any experience I've had in theatre.

Sarah Jenkins (Managing Director), audience member

As I remember watching the final rehearsal of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, in the context of the soundscape, the first thing I think about is the Foley artists being all men playing for a performance company of all women, sans one. I remember at times looking at the quintet of Foley actors and seeing on their faces the same emotions I was feeling when watching the rehearsal. They were as much a part of the play as the actors themselves, just in a different context. They told the same story, but in a different way. It was moving to see the music and sounds being created live.

In *Bernarda Alba*, the first and last word we hear Bernarda say is “*Silence*,” the first and last notes, if you will, of this tale, which Lorca subtitled “A Drama of Women in the Villages of Spain.” Silence frames the rhythmic unfolding of Lorca’s narrative. We see before us a theatrical symphony in three acts that swells through various tempos and movements as the story progresses and reaches its explosive dramatic conclusion. The tempo Lorca

utilizes reminds us of our heartbeats, various beats per each breathing minute, the tonal measure of our inner emotional life. I daresay that live sound provided much of this heartbeat and gave dimensionality to the actors' words, actions, and expressed emotions. The environment of the house and what lay beyond it paradoxically became a fictionalized reality. It brought immediacy to the playing space, and a landscape in which the characters could flourish.



Figure 3 Paige Demba - Angustias, Alexandra Chopson, Bernarda Alba

We did not have our eight-performance run for this production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*. We did have a final rehearsal stripped of spectacle, unfolding in a utilitarian space. Yet, magic ensued. If ever a story came to life it was there in that rehearsal room, at 6 pm, natural daylight enveloping the space, and the sounds of a world invading the air in which the actions of the characters unfolded, timelessly it seemed, within an hour and thirty minutes. **(VS)**

WORKS CITED

García Lorca, Federico, et al. *Three Plays: Blood Wedding, Yerma, The House of Bernarda Alba*. 1st ed, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993.