

Joe Payne

Sound Designer, Composer, Digital Media/Projections Designer

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April 30, 2023

Research/Creativity Activity Statement

As a theatre artist and part of a storytelling team, dramatic action and human interaction is important to me. The way one moment fits into the next, how it expands or contracts with tempo, dynamics, vibrancy, or complexity, and how it supports or influences the people in the room, excites me. Regretfully, this is the most difficult thing to show in a design portfolio. The following is meant to give context to the work, and to convey what I hold dear, if not apparent when viewing/listening to the individual work. I am proud of the work that I do. As such, I have included every production that I have designed since my promotion to Associate Professor at The University of Tennessee in this portfolio.

I have been a professional sound designer for 27 years, have composed music for theatre for 20 years, and have been doing projections in one form or another for 16 years. Why sound, music, and projections? Because I am thrilled about how each of these elements enhance audience performer communication, intensify emotion, help locate the characters in believable and interesting worlds, and propels the energy of the story. Ultimately, I am an artist. My medium is time. I build and transform emotions and spaces through time.

I have always been more interested in music that is emotionally driven rather than technically proficient. I write music that fits a particular action or beat, enhances its mood, and drives us forward to the next moment, giving a sense of unity to the world of the play. As such, my process may seem a little backwards to those who are formally trained as composers. I start with orchestration, not melody. Tempo and instrumentation often have the most effect on mood, so I find instruments that feel like the character, location, or genre, and let them dictate melody through experimentation and noodling. I usually create an entire score out of four or five motifs, because I feel strongly about audience connection through recurring themes. Typically, at this point, everything goes on hold until I see rehearsals, when I take these themes and generate cues that belong to given moments. I have found that this methodology works well as a teaching tool for student sound designers who want to try their hand at composition.

I treat sound effects as music and music as sound effects. My compositions are often textural and ambient like soundscapes, and my effects are melodic, and tempo driven like music. I use them interchangeably but am happiest when they overlap. There is nothing like a spritely piece of music with garden birds happily chirping along. You'll notice that it is a recurring theme in many of my Shakespeare designs.

My portfolio has always leaned heavily towards sound design and music. Because of the connections I have made, and the theatres I work with, most of my creative projects are sound rather than media design. As a freelance projection designer, I often find myself relegated to slideshows and backdrops. Even so, I do what I can to treat each with artistry and detail to make sure my projections are emotionally rooted and drive the show forward through subtlety, or excess, as the storytelling demands. At the University of Tennessee, I give most of the interesting and extravagant projects to graduate students and am thrilled to do so. Externally, I have made a place for myself in the projections world by becoming the founding commissioner for the USITT Digital Media Commission. I have used this position to amplify the voices of artists and craftspeople in the field, and to help normalize practices throughout education.

What follows in the portfolio/dossier, is a snapshot of every production that I have designed over the last five years. While each page is unique in content, most will have an audio collage or soundscape, which gives my sonic approach, atmosphere, and mood of the production. Some will have video clips, primarily showing projections. All will have pictures to give context. A few will have interesting paperwork.

Important sound and composition projects include the Utah Shakespeare Festival production of *Hamlet*, for its reorchestration and adaptation of period Russian music, the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park production of *Sooner/Later*, for its modern and intimate themes, and the Clarence Brown Theatre production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, for its world building and character driven detail. The sound design with the most complexity, and the one that almost killed me was the four and a half hour *The Conclusion of Henry VI: Parts Two and Three* for the Utah Shakespeare Festival. The simple set and small cast size relegated all world building to lighting and sound. Battles, intrigue, and deception; we took the audience on a wild ride through England's history. New generations would show up in more modern dress, while the old generations would be stuck in the past. The further we advanced the story, the further towards the present we came, until Richard of Gloucester showed up in full modern dress. The music and sounds reflected the artificial passage of time.

The projection design of Marble City Opera's *Shadowlight*, is highlighted for its use of abstraction and integration. Even though it was essentially a slideshow, Riverside Theatre's *Almost Heaven; John Denver's America* had constant imagery that uplifted and propelled the music forward. *Candide*, for the Clarence Brown Theatre and the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra remains a highpoint of my career. Mostly locational backdrops, it was epic in globetrotting scale, with a fabulous forty-five-foot mapped banner, and plenty of content based in emotion to help root the story and characters. The projection design that was the most sophisticated, was Clarence Brown Theatre's 2021 version of *A Christmas Carol*. The backdrops were unified in style and tone, and the immersive effects drove the production's spectacle.

Thank you for taking the time to review this work.

- Joe Payne