

CROWD SOUNDS

All sound effects involve the work of invisible performers, but the sound of a crowd is exceptional in that it relies on the off-stage performance of a large number of individuals. Although it is experienced as a single entity, it can not be produced by a single stage hand working with an instrument. And though it appears to be a chaotic, disorganized sound, it can only be created by a chorus of multiple carefully rehearsed voices. These voices must be sensitively timed, containing sounds and words appropriate to the scripts, they must crescendo and fade out smoothly, and the voices must merge to form the entity of a crowd. The only potential fallacy in creating this effect is the deception that a small, well-rehearsed group can be made to sound like a larger one.

In a piece of theatre, the crowd is often considered as a single character, particularly if they are not visible on stage. Therefore, the particulars of each voice in the crowd are rarely scripted in the text. These individual performers are not considered as characters, as they often represent more than one voice. Despite the seemingly marginal quality of the role, it is strongly advisable not to allow the performers to default to improvisation or the use of non-words in the creation of abstract noise. This is their opportunity to script themselves.

The best approach, when one voice is attempting to simulate the voice of more than one, is to take several strains of dialogue, in different voices, fragment and reassemble it, performing this as a collage of voices in a selection of different tones, and displaying a range of emotions simultaneously. There is also the potential for creating non-vocal sounds, to support the setting of the script, such as feet stomping, marching, clapping etc. Playing multiple individuals at once is an obviously challenging task, which could be commended in any performer. However, the part of playing a voice in a crowd who never appears on stage is considered to be quite a marginal part. This role falls between the category of actor, extra, and stage prop. Therefore, you will most likely be working with untrained performers, especially in the event that you require many performers to create a large-sounding crowd.

For this reason, and in the best interest of the production, these performers must be cared for and made to feel essential to the performance. It must be stressed to the others involved in the production that their's is not an unskilled role. It requires sensitivity on the part of each individual, and thorough group coordination and cohesion. In spite the limitations of the role, it can be a good introduction to the world of the theatre, and an excellent testing ground for performance skill and dedication.

Despite its difficulties, the advantage to working with people is that it is almost impossible to find a recording that fits the particularities of a script and that sounds believable. There is also the possibility of dispersing the performers thought the theatre to create an immersive sound, and allowing for the unpredictable nature of live performance.