THUNDER

A most dramatic atmospheric device, thunder is usually a component of the larger theatrical effect of a storm, which combines the sound of rain and wind and the requisite lighting effects. Each aspect supports and heightens the naturalism of the others and so their timing and orchestration is crucial in the creation of a realistic environment. For example, thunder often serves as the announcement of a storm rolling in, cracking in the distance before the sky has clouded over, before the characters have realized what lies ahead in their narrative. In this particular version, it is shortly followed by rain and a decisive shift towards darkness in lighting.

The following things are worth considering in the creation of thunder: a successful simulation of this sound requires confidence in the technique used, or you will produce an unrealistic and impotent sound. Confidence is also required in that any attempt at silencing the device used before it has ceased to rumble at its natural pace will result in a unnatural almost comical effect, and so, as with all sound effects, the practice and tuning of the instrument used is imperative. Secondly, the space of the theatre must be carefully considered in the selection of the technique based on desired volume. Also, the space must be assessed to determine if it allows for a roaming thunder-device that will produce a moveable sound that mimics the naturalistic effect of the storm entering and exiting the theatre, surrounding the audience and heightening their physical experience.

There are many ways to create a realistic thunder effect. The least desirable of which is the recorded version, which always tastes of the speaker from which it came. If you don’t frequently require the use of thunder in your theatrical endeavours, the simple ripping of a heavy cotton cloth stretched between two confident stage hands can effectively simulate the sound, however it can be slightly unpredictable and wasteful in the long term. The same sheet can be used for other related storm sounds.

There are several classical methods which may also suit your needs. The Thunder Sheet is a piece of sheet-iron or aluminium, securely suspended from above and fixed with a handle on the bottom edge. The disadvantage with this method is the inability to easily relocate the sound if the layout of your theatre allows for the construction of an immersive effect. The Thunder Cart, as its name suggests, is a heavy wooden cart with a box-top fitted with a resonant sheet-iron base. It is filled with various-sized cannon balls, and mounted on uneven, octagonal wheels so that when it is wheeled back stage at the appropriate pace, the movement creates an effectively violent rumbling sound.The cart is mobile and so it is the desired device if you plan to move the location of sound throughout the theatre. The Thunder Gallery is the most commital construction as it will permanantly occupy a large part of the back stage area. Its construction also requires either an experienced craftsperson or a lot of trial and error in sonic experimentation in the construction of the instrument. It is an inclined series of zig-zaging wooden channels or gutters which should be on a lighter slope to mimick the slow beginings and tapering off of the sound.The gutter is fixed with intervals of sheet iron which is activated,in an effect similar to a pinball machine, with a cannonball released from the top. One consideration with this technique is that there is not much possibility of variation in the sound as it is a static object with its own particular cadence.