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Wren Ross' New Take on Old Time Audio Theater

By Jess Garrett



Picture yourself transported to a bygone year, your family gathered around a large wooden radio, a warm fire crackling nearby. You're eagerly awaiting the next installment of your favorite audio theater:

An escape from the problems of the world. The music rises, the actors bring the characters to life, and you gallop off with a "Hi-yo Silver! Away!"

I had such an experience recently with twenty-five fellow actors, friends and family, though we were gathered, not around a radio, but in Soundscape Boston, Michael Moss' gorgeous sound studio in Fort Point's trendy neighborhood.

We were there to listen to our performances in the finale of an "Audio Theater" class, taught by the incredible Wren Ross. Wren's teaching skills and capacity to give actors practical and creative tools arise from her longtime expertise as one of Boston's prominent voice over artists. With her guidance over five weeks, we chose short scenes from classic plays, worked with a partner to discover our characters, and recorded the scenes with Wren's direction and under the skillful ear of engineer Kevin McLaughlin of Soundtrack Studio in Boston. Bruce Lundeen, a documentary cinematographer and producer who joined the class to explore the other side of the microphone said, "Working in the sound studio with such great caliber people and Wren's guidance is magical."

Listening to the finished pieces, many of us closed our eyes and went where the scenes took us. Wren and Kevin's nuanced sound choices transported us into the action. I found myself swept away by the sound of tinkling glasses, a piano, and the mating calls of frogs, into a bar in New Orleans, where Liz Callahan flirted in sultry tones as Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The sounds of coins clinking into a pay phone spell doom as Eddie, chillingly played by Steve McGarry, calls immigration on his niece's beau in *A View from the Bridge*. In my scene from *A Doll's House*, the incessant ticking of a clock punctuates the final moments of a ruined relationship before the clock strikes and a door slams forever.

Dalip Khalsa, a family member of one of the actors, commented, "The whole format for the Audio Theatre listening event was so enjoyable. We got to hear each scene and then the actors talked to us about what it was like to create the scene. I've never been to anything quite like it."



left, Wren Ross. Photo by Carole Photography.

middle - top to bottom, Logo graphic design is by William Dahlgren.

Wren Ross set up her next "listening" performance with her audience at Soundscape Boston. Photo by Jess Garrett.

Steve McGarry and Tim Corbett discuss their roles in *View From the Bridge* at Soundscape Boston. Photo by Jess Garrett.

Kevin McLaughlin and Tim Corbett recording at Soundtrack Boston. Photo by Jess Garrett.

returned home after living away for five years. "It's hard, as a parent, to see your kids as grown adults who make their own decisions. As in the play, Andy thought that my nagging around the house was disappointment in him. Rehearsing the play opened a line of communication and became a joke. I would start to nag and Andy would say, 'Okay Amanda...' When I needed some help around the messy house I would say, 'Now Tom...'" Richard Congelosi, who performed scenes from both the *Odd Couple* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* explained his process of "Getting over my self-doubts to see what the script/character are actually saying and feeling."

Wren has an uncanny ability to zone in on just the right questions to make a scene richer. She says, "I encourage my students not to think of themselves as 'actors performing a piece' but rather as behavior detectives searching for clues about their character: What pivotal life moments contribute to their choices and actions? When investigating these questions, actors stop 'performing' and their work becomes more authentic, dynamic and memorable.

In my case, Wren helped me find emotional nuance in a scene where I could have gone just for anger. In *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, Nora goes from being a doll-like wife, to realizing that to grow up she must leave her patriarchal husband, played heartbreakingly by Chuck Holleman, who punishes her like a child. Wren helped me uncover all the ways Nora might want to stay; the ways she might hope her husband will join her in a marriage of equals so she can know herself without having to slam the door. That reflection gave me more inner conflict to work with, which added more dimension to the scene.

If you'd like to unwind with an old-timey radio experience of classic scenes, curl up by the fire and click on any of the pieces at: <http://wrenross.com/blog/.com>

And if you want to feel the magic of exploring a character or scene yourself, learn about Wren's ongoing classes at

www.wrenross.com.