

THROUGH MY
VIEW FINDER

A SOUND DISCUSSION

Arun Vaidyanathan

There's no escape from the creative bug for the director Arun Vaidyanathan, who grew up in Sirkali, a small temple town in southern India and now resides in Garden state, New jersey. Arun's creative ideologies have been moulded by a mix of eastern and western cultures and philosophies. He seeks to make a niche for himself by replicating this in his movies - and marrying the East & the West. Even as his many-year dream comes to fruition with Achchamundu! Achchamundu!, it is only the beginning of another of Arun's dreams: to transcend parochial borders, and make films for everyone.



Most of the reviews on my first film 'Achchamundu' quoted about the performances looking so natural. Although we have to give credit to the talented cast members of AA (Prasanna, Sneha and John Shea), one thing that enhanced the performance was 'Live sound' or 'Synch Sound'. Lots of people ridiculed me for choosing this path and I still remember, one of the filmmakers even told me that it will never work for our audience at all since they were so much used to 'dubbing'. Right from the media, critics and the audience who enjoyed the film, they felt the difference in the sound. The kind of efforts what we put in making a good 'sound' did really work in our favor.

Most of the times, good sound means good background score back home. There is nothing wrong with it. But that alone doesn't make a good sound for the film. Hollywood films sound amazing – Main reason is the way they record sound and mix the same. They have a dedicated team of members who excel in the respective departments and they all work hard in re creating most of the sounds, which happen in a story. When I recently visited LA, I had an opportunity to visit the sound stage of 'Rise of the planet of the apes' and met the Foley artist Don O Connell. Mr. Connell is the one who is behind most of the big studio films (Gladiator, Bourne series, Pirates of Carrebean etc) we all watch and enjoy. He was such a humble person and took me to a tour of his entire stage. I am amazed by the details and nuances, which they carefully restore in their stage and to my luck; they were doing foley of 'Rise of the planet of the apes'. The professional approach is what makes the films more enjoyable while we watch them in theatres, especially good ones. Although, an independent film can't afford a budget like studio films for sound, still we can pull off decent sound if we have the heart, effort and right kind of professionals.

My sound mixer Dennis Haggerty did a fantastic job and was so patiently doing



Dennis Haggerty - Location sound mixer of AA

his routine of recording the dialogs and sounds although he didn't understand tiny bit of Tamil. While we mixed the film, Marti Humphrey (The Grudge, Drag me to Hell) was praising the quality of sound recorded during production. There are so many professionals involved in creating a good sound and their contribution makes a huge impact in seeing the story unfold in front of us.

Doing live sound is tough especially in Tamil films – Main reason is most of the actors especially heroines don't know or care to learn the language. Even in Achchamundu, Sneha had a tough time initially (Thanks to some of my tongue twisters) but she put her heart and soul in learning the language. Prasanna, being a Trichy born and bred tamil guy, it was a cake walk for him. Both of them rehearsed all their lines meticulously. They used to even call me during lunchtime and passionately enact the scene for me. Another reason is, the quality of sound in theatres. There is no uniformity or code of law, which is followed in our theaters. Most of the hard work in creating good cinematography and

sound is lost because of the quality of theatres in most areas. Although I see a major revamp in theatres, we still have miles to go in that sector. Government needs to help theatre owners in terms of ticket prices; taxes and theatre owners also need to take it up on their sleeve. A good theatrical experience means more revenue for films and in turn, growth of industry.

I thought of interviewing two young professionals who are qualified and working in sound every day of their life for this important topic. Kunal Rajan, born in Pondicherry, educated in Singapore, settled in LA and currently working in Hollywood/Indian films (LXD, Endhiran/Robot, Gajini) . He came to know about Achchamundu thru my blog and worked with me in each and every step of Achchamundu's postproduction sound. He was a great asset to the entire team and his energy is contagious.

KUNAL RAJAN

Importance of Sound design - What's your take on the same? How do you think our

Kunal Rajan at a LA Mixing stage



industry back home encourages this department?

A lot of people don't understand the importance of sound and take it for granted. Only when you watch a movie with bad sound you will realize how much difference sound can make for a film. Each and every aspect of making a film is a form of enhancing the storytelling experience. How effective sound can help telling a story is what can be considered "Good Sound" or "Bad Sound" in a movie. There are very few filmmakers in India who have made really good use of sound in their films.

Until Resul Pookutty won an Oscar for Best Sound Mixing for 'Slumdog Millionaire', around 75% of the audiences were unaware of something called "Sound Design" or "Sound Mixing" for films. Slowly, the audiences are appreciating good sound, which in turn is making the filmmakers pay importance to the sound of their movie.

Considering you have worked in Bollywood/ Hollywood films, what do you think is need of the hour in South Indian films especially?

According to me, standardization of cinema theaters is the first thing that needs to improve. There needs to be uniformity all over India. Each theater has the sound set to levels that is convenient for the Operator which is why one movie might sound good in one theater and bad in another. This is part of the reasons why filmmakers are not interested to spend the time and money to get their films to sound as good as possible... because except for a few multiplexes, no other theaters will be capable of reproducing the quality of sound that was created for

the film. Even though most theaters claim to be DTS or Dolby Digital, they are rarely calibrated to the actual specs required by DTS and Dolby.

Can you explain the various departments in sound?

The Sound Design process of a film involves lot of steps to get the final product that is being presented to the audiences in the theater. It starts with a dialogue team working on the dialogue recording, editing... Then simultaneously there is a team of sound editors who are working to get all the sound effects like a gun shot, explosion, car crash, doors opening closing added in. Once all the sound effects and dialogue is in place, we then get the music from the music director and do the "Final Mix" of the film. The Final Mix is the process where the dialogue, sound effects and music are married together to create a sound that can move the story forward.

Experience of working in Jon Chu's LXD

Working on LXD has been one of the best possible experiences a sound designer can ask for. LXD is a dance series created by director Jon M Chu (of STEP UP fame). LXD is a story about dancers with superpowers. Usually, a good sounding movie is about how realistic you can make the movie sound. But LXD is just the opposite. LXD is all about pushing the envelope, doing something out of the box and totally new. As a Sound Designer, working on LXD is a dream come true where I get the freedom to try new things on every episode and go completely crazy with the Sound Design.

Do you think live sound is possible in India? How come Slum dog millionaire was able to successfully pull off Live sound although Mumbai is filled with various external sounds?

Live Sound is very much possible in India. It just depends on how much effort the director is willing to put. It's not easy to do live sound in India... but not impossible. Bollywood films have been doing live sound in their films successfully for over 10 years now. Movies like LAGAAN, BLACK, GHAJINI are some examples of Hindi films where live sound was done extremely well. One of the biggest problems with Tamil Cinema is most actors don't speak the language which makes it impossible to do live sync sound. Kamal Hassan and Mani Ratnam are two people who have really tried hard to promote live sound. Hey Ram, Virumaandi, Ayutha Ezhuthu are great attempts for Tamil Cinema. I wish other directors can see how much difference it could make to have good live sound for a film. It could totally take your film to a whole new level.

Your favourite films

Quentin Tarantino is one director who is very particular about sound in his films. He would even move a few lights on set, if they were coming in the way of the sound recordist. Inglorious Basterds is one of my favorite films as far as sound goes. The way Tarantino has used sound as a part of the story telling process is brilliant.

Do you think people can make a career out of this profession in India? Your tips for aspiring sound professionals.

People can definitely make a career out of sound. Especially these days, as the audiences are starting to realize the importance of sound and when filmmakers are slowly starting to go the extra step to make their films sound good, it's a great time to be in the Sound Business. India needs more talented Sound Designers / Sound Mixers to take sound in Indian Cinema on par with Hollywood Cinema.

Anand Krishnamoorthy, who is known to most of the tamil film fans as the kid in Anjali, Sathi leelavathi and currently he is working as a sound professional in Tamil films. (Unnai pol oruvan, Manmadhan Ambu). Anand went to the University of Bristol (London) to pursue an M.A. in films, specializing in sound, direction and production

Its time for us to look into his point of view next month – (To be continued)