

Special **Training** Section

Language Of The Heart

A renowned West Coast institution inaugurates a progressive sound degree program. By Evan Henerson

An aspiring technician can study lighting, costumes and scenic design at any major university's drama program. Not so for sound design, arguably technical theater's most overlooked or taken-for-granted component, which is one reason why the launch of the new Master of Fine Arts in sound design at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) this fall has been so rewarding, yet problematic.

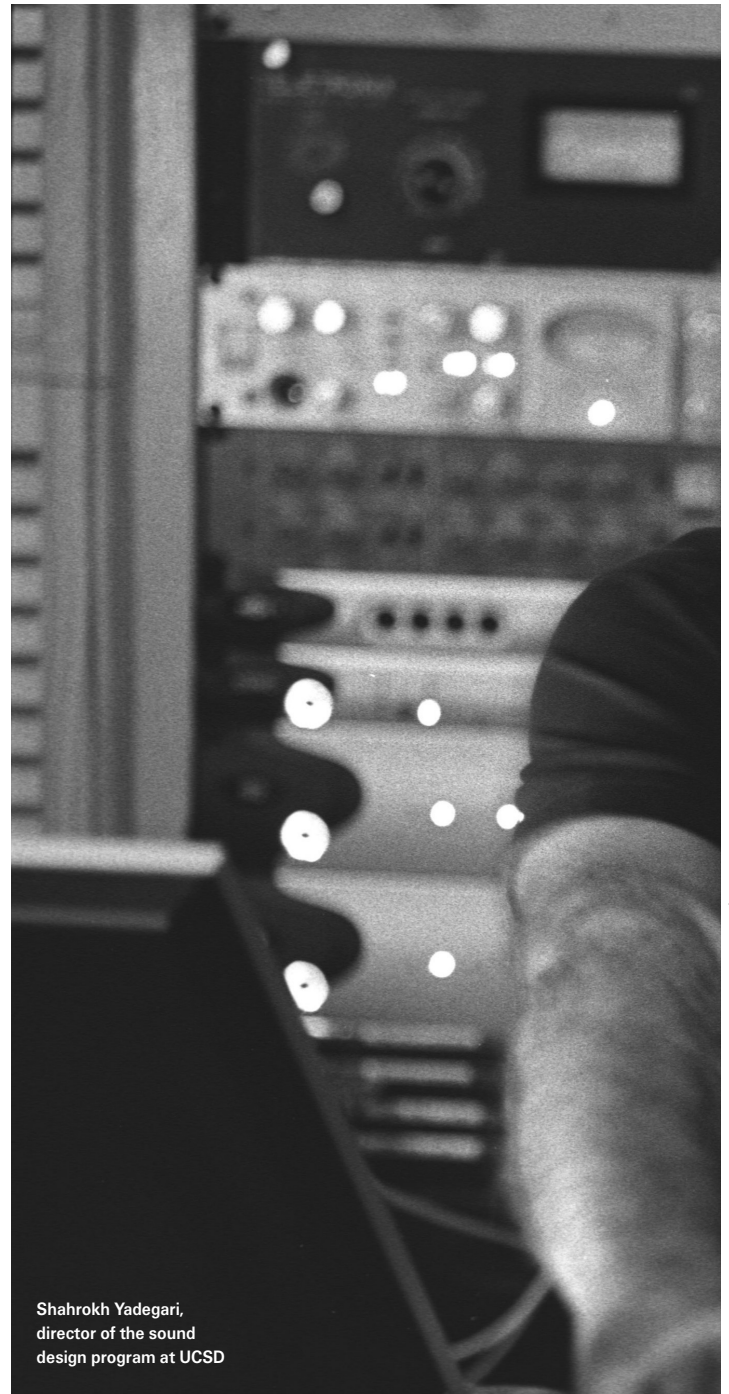
"Sound is going through the same revolution that light design did in the early 1900s," says Shahrokh Yadegari, an assistant professor in the department of theater. "Sound has always been a very important element of bigger productions on Broadway, but there's still no Tony Award for it. Because getting sound equipment has not been easy in smaller places, they haven't paid attention to sound. I should also say that we're a very visual society, and visuals are more important, even though sound is the language of the heart."

Three applicants applied to inaugurate UCSD's program; all three were accepted. Starting this quarter, they're following the interdisciplinary approach to sound design laid out by program administrator Yadegari, UCSD's Department of Theater, the university's California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2) and the Center for Research in Computing and the Arts (CRCA).

If those campus institutions sound like a morass of high-tech alphabet soup, that's the direction that a revolutionary approach to sound design must take. "We have perhaps the

most advanced digital cinema departments in North America," says Yadgari. "The idea there is to bring scientists and artists together, and while the science and technology have to be very progressive, they would like the science to be developed with the same artistic vision that an artist would use. UCSD has been thinking about having this program for a number of years, but they were not interested in a traditional sound design for theater. They wanted something quite progressive."

"The university is interested in new frontiers of technology," notes Theater Department Chair Charlie Oates, "and our department was very enthusiastic that sound design be at the forefront."



Shahrokh Yadegari,
director of the sound
design program at UCSD

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The program's eight-quarter (nearly three-year) course of study includes classes with titles such as the Poetics of Sound, Crossing Boundaries and Real Time Design. The department's interdisciplinary structure means that aspiring visual artists, actors and technicians may end up in the same classroom experimenting with ways that real-time sound processing can accompany performance. Students in an in-development MFA in dance theater also figure to benefit from the sound design students' work.

Yadegari's own graduate research, conducted through UCSD's Critical Studies and Experimental Music Departments, focused on audio processing techniques that allow a designer

to control a non-fixed soundscape, which can change as the play progresses.

"I think one of the areas electronic music can be extremely successful in is theater," says Yadegari, who has worked regularly with director Peter Sellars. "Electronic music is about sound and timbres. Now with the possibility of having multi-channel recordings, you can create soundscapes so this becomes an auditory set for a play. Electronic music is very resourceful for creating such environments for theater."

Through Calit2, students have access to a 4K projector and a motion capture room. "The computer can pick up different joints and elements moving and put them together," explains

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Yadegari. "You can map the movements of a person or an animal to sound, which would be something for dance."

In addition to their classwork and teaching assistantships, third-year MFA students will have the opportunity to serve as apprentices for designers at the La Jolla Playhouse, which also has a partnership with UCSD. That regional theater is the birthplace of such recent Broadway hits as *Jersey Boys*, *I Am My Own Wife* and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

But before they get to the professional ranks, the sound design students can expect to have full plates. "They're going to be actively designing practically all the time," says Oates. "They're going to

be busy."

Given the rather eclectic nature of this program, it's hardly surprising that its first students have diverse backgrounds as well. The first three students include a man from Germany with a background in experimental theater, a former UCSD undergraduate who had worked with Yadegari on the music/technology side of things and a sound technician looking to retrain as a sound designer.

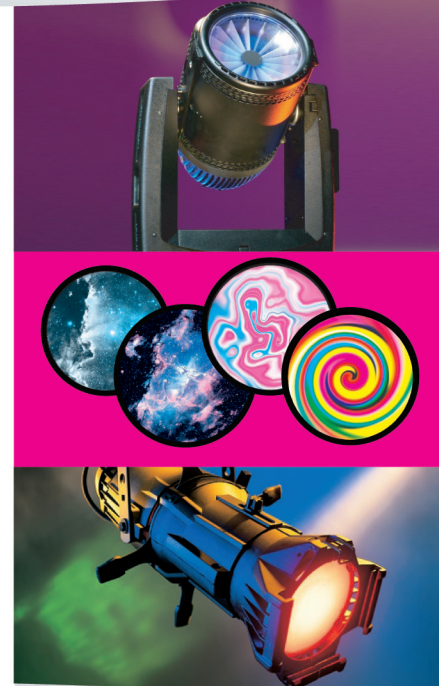
Toby Algysa, who had experienced life at UCSD while pursuing an undergraduate degree in Interdisciplinary Computing and the Arts, elected to re-up for graduate studies largely as a way of continuing his

work with Yadegari. He had designed regularly for campus productions and for San Diego's Youth Theatre, but discovered that employment opportunities didn't necessarily abound for technicians with an interest in sound.

The MFA program, therefore, offered a new and intriguing opportunity for Algysa to hone his craft and take his studies in a new direction. "Sharokh is an inspiring teacher and a very nice person to take a class with," says Algysa. "I was a musician and I liked to perform, but I found the stuff I wanted to affect the audience with wasn't so much theatrical-performance based. Sound design for theater really lends

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itself to this live element. Through sound design you can add so much to a script or take a lot away."

"The students do get training in the technical and programming aspects," adds Yadegari. "The major point is to train them to become artists who can use the technology in a way that serves the storytelling as well as the aesthetics of theater and dance."

For more information about this program, visit the website at www.ucsd.edu. **SD**

Evan Henerson is a lifestyle/features writer who covers theater for the Los Angeles Daily News.



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