

STEPPING OUT

Bob Allen suggested that it might be interesting if I were to write an article on the foley scene, past and present. I agreed for two reasons: one was that although I grew up (and aged, too!) in the cutting rooms, I then had the audacity to work as a footstepper for the last several years of my working life. I might therefore be able to present some thoughts from both sides of the fence. I hadn't realised how promptly the activity would send my mind tumbling back over the past fifty years.

You'll notice I have already referred to the work as both foley and footstepping. We are told that the term foley derives from the technician Jack Foley, who originated the process in the States, but many UK technicians do not care for that expression and cling doggedly to the local idiom. Personally, I kind of keep a foot in each camp (if you'll pardon the pun), though footstepping seems an inadequate term to describe the wonderful noises that the young



BERYL AT WORK

experts of today create. On some movies, footsteps are a relatively small part of their work. Perhaps 'sound-effects artiste', though grander, is a more descriptive title with which to label the small band of people who create so many of the remarkable effects that we hear in movies these days: anything from a fly buzzing against a window to troops abseiling through jungle; from the gentle squeak of a romantic mattress to an elephant sitting on a car!

The aging process that I referred to above began at Ealing, the original Ealing under Sir Michael Balcon where I set about making my first million when I was fourteen. I was a messenger boy, then a runner on the set. After six months or so when it became clear that the first million was going to be hard to come by, I applied for a job as a cutting-room trainee. My motive was clear-cut - I liked the look of the machines they operated! And it was obviously a superior place to be because many of the technicians along that long, stone corridor wore white cotton gloves.

However, this article is not about me, but the foley scene, and my reference to Ealing is pertinent for that is where I first met the great Beryl Mortimer. I doubt if there was another technician in our fraternity who commanded more respect, or garnered more compliments, over the years of her illustrious career. I was once told that before embarking on foleys Beryl had been an understudy for actress Helen Cherry. Perhaps that came about because Beryl was able to ride a horse as Ms Cherry was to appear to do in a movie. (And, who knows, it's fun to consider that perhaps Beryl was asked if she could then create the sound of the horse's hooves in the studio afterwards?)

In those days, footsteps (I don't think I knew the term 'foley' yet) were shot only where strictly necessary for the English/US version; we spent no time gilding the lily. Anything on the original sound track that was considered useful for the relatively

simple Music & Effects track too was stripped off and laid into a separate effects track from where, during the final mix, it was fed into both the final dub and the foreign version track.

Beryl Mortimer, even then (and I'm talking of the fifties) was recognised as *the* footstepper. She was glamorous (and flirtatious), and I was mightily impressed that she never drove, but always arrived by hired car! Two other footsteppers were busy in those days: Fred Bell and his colleague, 'Laddy' Ladbrook. They were BBC sound effects men who used their accrued leave days to work 'outside' the BBC. Whether this arrangement was official or not, I was

never sure. But 'proper' footsteppers were used only on the more demanding sessions. Often we would drag a couple of girls from their offices and tell them to walk in sync with the artistes on the screen. What an impertinence!

Around 1956 35mm mag-stripped film appeared. Baynham Honri, the studio's technical adviser, wanted to know why it was not possible to record on that thin stripe of mag on the opposite side from the recording area. It was explained to him that this was purely a balancing stripe,

enabling the roll of mag to be wound evenly, but not long afterwards, after a bit of a lash-up, they were indeed recording on the balancing stripe. The quality was not great but it was considered adequate for background sounds - a crowd murmur, for example, atmosphere, or background traffic.

The advent of mag sound was traumatic for cutting-room personnel in one particular respect. We had always in the past fitted the post-sync (ADR hadn't happened yet) by sight-reading the modulation on the photographic track, matching the mods of the post-synch dialogue against the similar mods on the original dialogue track. The pattern of a good postsync line was often similar to the original and, therefore, easily fitted. Suddenly, with the introduction of mag stock, we were working blind! It is ironic that the facility to match mods has returned on the screens of today's digital workstations.

In the mid-sixties, I think it was MGM who first realised that every country that dubbed English-speaking films into their language was also charging for recording the movements which went missing when the original dialogue track was dropped. Soon, every distributor insisted on a complete Music & Effects track, giving us much more work. By this time it was the norm for feet and effects to be performed routinely by professional footsteppers, and ten days were almost automatically booked for the session on a feature production.

In 1967 I was the sound editor (I've always disliked the term dubbing editor and I'm not even sure I care for today's term, sound designer) on *Dance of the Vampires*, directed by Roman Polanski. Roman featured in the film, too, and his on-screen assistant was played by Alfie Bass. At the end of the session Roman needed to see a particular sequence and suggested he might hear the feet and effects with it. The story took place almost entirely in a snow-covered castle. Roman

liked the effect of the feet crunching in our snow (probably a mixture of salt and cornflour), and he noticed, at the end of a particular scene, that Alfie's boot squeaked as he was clambering through a door. Roman leaped to his feet - he was nothing if not enthusiastic - "Wonderful!", he cried, "His boot squeaks"! 'Only there', I pointed out, 'where he's having difficulty scrambling through the door'. "No, no, no", exclaimed Roman, "All the way his boot must squeak", (His grammar tended to go to pot when he became excited.) I explained that the session was completed; we had no time left and the foley artistes had gone. That of course was not a problem for Roman Polanski - after all it was only money! I was instructed to arrange another session, the footsteps were recalled and the Alfie Bass character was shot all over again with a squeaky boot - the left one only, Roman had decreed. Of course it created mild havoc; in those days we doubled-up characters on one track as a matter

of course. So this meant that we also had to re-shoot the doubled-up character, too.

Later we would record on 35mm fullcoated mag which gave us three tracks to use. It seemed incredible that we hadn't always done it that way. This developed further at the better-equipped studios into two tripletrack machines plus a mono to mix down upon, so complex tracks could be built up. These days it doesn't seem unusual to give each principal character his 'own track'.

In the early sixties I went to Beaconsfield where Independent Artistes was based, headed by Julian Wintle and Leslie Parkin. One of the resident editors there was Ralph Sheldon, whose assistant Pam Tomling became a full-time footstepper in later years.

Beaconsfield did not have its own dubbing set-up, but we were fortunate in having Anvil Films under their own roof within the lot, run by that lovely duo Ken Cameron and Ken Scrivener. All of our mixing was done (very successfully) with them. Their theatre also doubled as a foley studio: the carpet was rolled back and wooden covers removed to reveal six or so custom-built surfaces: stone, Marley tiles, gravel, earth and so on. Ken and Ken had shown foresight in making the surfaces much larger than many that were to be found in those days (larger, even, than some that exist now!) and they worked very

well. Many years later when they created their purpose-built footsteps & effects theatre at Denham I'm sure we were delighted to find that the surfaces were, once again, almost over-generous - and the sound, excellent.

It had been the norm that only the film editor had access to the colour cutting-copy, and as each reel was finalised two black & white dupes would be made for the sound editors, often of such high contrast that action in the shadows was hidden. By the 70s a reversal colour stock was available which helped us enormously.

Until the late 70s, stereo dubbing was a rarity reserved for 70mm roadshows and the biggest CinemaScope movies because each copy had to be magnetically striped, but the great Dr Dolby changed all that, and the need to prepare tracks for panning during the mix slowly became universal. No longer could we record on one track, say, an actor on screen left pouring tea whilst another screen right stirred his spoon: it all had to be planned and done separately. You can imagine how the

work multiplied and how twisted our knickers sometimes became!

It is interesting to look back over the years at the dramatic changes that have taken place on the foley scene from the time when we used to simply fill in the feet where necessary and the work was supervised by the one sound editor himself; the foley editor who specialised in feet and effects had yet to come. And, thankfully, the days have gone when production managers would ask if two people really were necessary for the session. Schedules sometimes dictate that only five days be booked for feature foleys, unless the film is spectacularly busy and enjoys a large budget (the Bond films are a good example). But the technological strides that have been made are astonishing. A few years ago I was employed on a

major and very busy feature to fit all the feet and spot effects that were being shot by another footstepper editor. I entered the cutting room on my first day to be confronted by a rack against one wall filled with 2000 ft cans of 35mm. I ran my eyes over dozens of them. 'Might as well start at the beginning', I muttered, 'which is reel one?' The foley editor waved an arm across the wall. "All of them", he replied. The physical work involved in breaking it all down and fitting it was enormous and time-consuming. Much more recently, I remember being mildly astonished at the end of a week when, having shot a mass of stuff on a very busy feature, I was handed a copy of the entire work on Exabyte which slipped comfortably into my pocket!

Gone are the days when, tramping around the very expansive surfaces at Pinewood, much-missed Peter Lacey would actually follow the footsteppers about with the microphone on the end of a boom. And some other venues have shaken off their dowdy image and no longer offer a single paving stone in a tiny room (containing a small monitor) on which we are expected to recreate the authentic' sound of dozens of people bustling along a pavement! The few major studios, understandably, have the most space for their foley and effects work, with large and well-spaced



surfaces, mountains of props and all the rest of the bits and bobs that are necessary to support the foley artistes they employ. But whilst the post-production houses (most of them, anyway, have made enormous strides towards creating well built and equipped foley rooms, there is still a problem getting, say, a rowboat into a London basement!

Occasionally the footsteps artistes, names are included in the end credits. And why not? They are relied on more than ever before to make a significant contribution to the final sound. But very often they remain anonymous. One reason for this is probably that the foley artistes are not known at the time that screen credits are put in hand. Or could it be that their contribution is not considered sufficiently important to justify that recognition?

Sessions these days are so often a frantic affair. There's little or no time for rehearsal or discussion - 'See it and do it' is the norm. The greatest (concludes

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improvement is the use of hard-disk recording with unlimited takes and `tracks' to build up separate layers of FX, combined with instant replay, especially now the picture is also on disc. Later, on the workstation, fine fitting, `reprints', stretching, pitch-changing and all the current miracles are available, but are we given the time to explore them fully? Only the expert survives - or should.

Not many years ago there were about eight or nine of us working permanently as footsteppers (though `permanently' is a misleading term; like our colleagues in other areas of film-production we have always experienced feast or famine). Now there are, I suppose, about fifteen or sixteen foley artistes permanently available - enough, most of the time, to furnish the needs of the industry. But where do the newcomers come from? And having found them, how do they learn? Not on someone else's time-restricted session and at the producer's expense, that's for sure. When Jenny Lee-Wright and Pauline Griffiths ran their `footsteps agency' some of their newcomers were dancers, or ex-dancers like themselves; young people who were fit and enthusiastic, with good timing and not nervous of microphones. (Though several of us have seen one or two people going through their paces until the microphone appeared and the red light went on - then they froze.) But both those very capable ladies were capable of `covering' for their less experienced assistants until they became proficient. Most of them did and are with us today, giving excellent service. This article wasn't meant to explore aspects of this kind, but the problem of training affects all departments.

Having virtually retired, I intended to write a simple resume of the changes that have taken place in the foley scene over the years, so I apologise for references to my own activities but they seemed mildly relevant at the time of writing. I have been reminded of so many experiences in this industry of ours that have inflicted pain on me from time to time, but also afforded enormous pleasure. My contemporaries and I have seen countless, undreamt-of changes over the fifty or so years that we have been members of the fraternity. Looking back, I can't help feeling that we all nurture one thought in particular - we'd love to do it all over again!

Finally, I am indebted to Peter Musgrave who kindly agreed to read this article to verify dates, clarify areas where my memory was at fault, and to make any further comments that he felt may be useful. In the event he did much more and his valuable contributions, all of which are contained herein, have done much to improve this article.

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