

Masque Sound's Diamond Jubilee

Inside one of Broadway's longest-running productions

By: David Barbour

In October, Masque Sound held a cocktail party to celebrate its upcoming 75th anniversary in 2012. The event took place at the New Amsterdam Theatre on 42nd Street. It was a felicitous choice: Once the standard-bearer for Broadway glamour, the theatre fell into decline, endured years of servitude as a grand movie house, and was restored by the Disney Organization. Today, it is one of the most attractive and coveted of Broadway venues. Masque Sound can hardly be said to have fallen into disrepair, but, like the New Amsterdam, its fortunes have been inextricably linked with those of the Broadway theatre. The world of *Idiot's Delight*; *On Your Toes*; and *Red, Hot and Blue!* (to name three signature hits from 1936) is very different from today's home of *Jersey Boys*, *Mary Poppins*, *Memphis*, and *The Book of Mormon*, yet Masque has remained an integral part of the Broadway scene for the better part of eight decades, a long-run record that few companies can match.

In addition, Masque Sound has provided its own unique solution to the conundrum that has compromised so many companies in this industry: how to grow and diversify without turning into a faceless corporate entity. Broadway is a much more complicated and expensive place than it was in the '30s, but, then as now, the big winners are those who understand that this is a business built on service and relationships, not a slavish devotion to the bottom line. It's a lesson that has stood the company in good stead as it has moved beyond the core business of supplying sound gear for Broadway shows.

The founding trinity

Masque was founded by a trio of Broadway stagehands: Mac Landsman, Sam Saltzman, and John Shearing. The Shearing family was already deeply involved in theatre; Shearing's father, Arthur, was a prop man at the Metropolitan Opera, and Shearing himself had rotated through various Broadway scene shops as a

carpenter. In 1936, of course, there was no sound reinforcement for Broadway shows, and the idea of a dedicated sound designer wasn't even a distant dream. But someone had to provide the effects—the ringing telephones, radio broadcasts, off-stage noises, and thunderstorms—that were necessary parts of nearly every production, along with the backstage paging systems that kept shows running smoothly, and this was enough to get Masque Sound off to a running start.

Each of the original partners brought unique skills to the venture, notes Geoff Shearing, Masque Sound's current president. His grandfather managed the shop and Landsman handled the business end. Saltzman, he adds, "was an electronics visionary." As an example, he adds, "We were in the closed-circuit television business in the 1930s, broadcasting surgeries to medical students." (Few people realize it today, but broadcast television was a reality in the late '30s, and its wider



The company's 70,000-sq.-ft. headquarters in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

implementation was scuttled by the onset of World War II.)

The new Masque Sound had one big advantage over the competition—there wasn't any. "At the time, there was no comparable company," says Geoff. (Sound Associates, Broadway's other major long-running sound supplier, opened for business in 1946.) In fact, it's not too much to say that Masque's founding partners arrived at a critical moment, when hand-made sound effects gear (think thunder sheets and rolling wind machines) were giving way to electronic reproduction methods. And, of

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course, there were bigger technological developments to come.

As the 1940s passed into the 1950s and sound reinforcement for musicals gradually became a standard practice, Masque was at the ready, providing the shotgun mics and supersized loudspeakers that were employed in those days. (Among the company's clients were the original productions of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*.) Even then, the company had acquired its nimble survival skills. For example, speaking of the World War II years, Geoff Shearing says, "Masque did a lot of USO shows, including Irving Berlin's revue, *This is the Army*, on Broadway." As a result of this government-related work, he says, "the company had access to gear at a time that many others didn't."

Change came in a major way in the '50s, as Saltzman died, leaving no heirs. The Landsman and Shearing families nevertheless

retained their interests in Masque. The next two decades saw the major expansion of sound on Broadway, with pioneers like Jack Mann, Abe Jacob, and, a little later, Otts Munderloh, developing audio systems that were remarkably sophisticated for the time, including the use of the first wireless microphones.

Although the Broadway Internet Database lists Masque Sound as providing sound design services as early as 1947—for the Broadway debut of J. B. Priestley's drama *An Inspector Calls*—it was in the '60s and '70s that large-scale reinforce-

ment systems came into their own. Geoff Shearing's father, Jack, one of the original Broadway sound designers, designed a number of shows, including *The Great White Hope* (1967), with James Earl Jones; the smash hit revival of *No, No Nanette* (1970); the Tony-winning musical *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1971); the ultra long-running *Grease* (1972); *Seesaw* (1973), staged by the great Michael Bennett; and *Over Here!* (1974), which brought the Andrews Sisters to Broadway and featured a company of future stars, including John Travolta, Treat Williams, Ann Reinking, and Marilu Henner.)

By the early '80s, however, Geoff Shearing says, there was increasing tension between the shop, John Shearing's bailiwick, and the business side, overseen by the Landsman family. When John Shearing died in 1982, Jack Shearing "delivered an ultimatum, offering to buy out the Landsmans or be bought out," his

son says. The resolution was that the Landsmans would take over Masque Sound. A bank loan was obtained, and then, Geoff recalls, "The employees staged a revolt. It was rumored that they even contacted the bank" to express their displeasure at the deal. The Landsman's financing fell through and the Shearing family became the sole owners of Masque Sound.

This, of course, was an excellent time to be in the sound business, as the Broadway musical was undergoing yet another transformation, this time by the arrival of Andrew Lloyd Webber and the team of Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schoenberg, pioneers of the through-composed pop-opera format. Shows like *Evita*, *Les Misérables*, and *Phantom of the Opera*—all of which made little or no use of dialogue—required new, highly processed sound designs to allow audiences to understand their lyrics. At the same time, American musicals, like *Dreamgirls*, further expanded on the pop-opera idea, drawing on American pop music styles. The stage was set for the rapid expansion of the sound designer's role, providing new opportunities for companies like Masque Sound.

The third generation

Geoff Shearing, who took over from his father in 2007 and represents the third generation of Shearings, was already steeped in the business of Broadway sound. "I worked *Phantom of the Opera* and toured with *Les Miz*, mixing and so forth," he says. "I walked into *Les Miz* and people knew my grandfather." He adds, smiling, "He was infamous for working without a shirt, with a cigarette dangling out of his mouth." Even with the family entrée, he had to prove himself, of course, and, speaking of both the business and art of sound design, he comes across as uncommonly knowledgeable. Recalling his days as a mixer, he says, "One of the more enjoyable parts of the job is learning how to serve many masters;



Stephanie Hansen, Masque Sound's general manager, and Geoff Shearing, the company's president.

you're often caught between parties with different needs and you have to learn to negotiate them." After many years of working on shows, however, he moved into the company's corporate events division before becoming president.

In recent years, Masque Sound has undergone a growth spurt. Like every other lighting, scenery, and sound supplier, all of which once could be found up and down Manhattan's West Side, Masque vacated its 51st Street headquarters,

moving first to Branchburg, New Jersey, then to Moonachie, before settling on its current location, in East Rutherford, in 2004. At 70,000-sq.-ft., it's a very impressive space.

At the same time, the company grew in other directions. In 2002, Masque purchased Orlando, Florida-based Professional Wireless systems, which specializes in wireless microphone rentals, installations, and the development and manufacture of RF-related gear. Its key products are the G4 and G8 amplifiers/combiners and

the PWS Helical Antenna, which is billed as providing better performance than traditional antennas in wireless communications. The product is said to be especially useful in large-scale events "where the benefits of its circular polarization and 14dB of passive gain are of great benefit for both transmission and reception applications." The company typically provides RF services at the Super Bowl, the NBA All-Star Game, and Disney World's Christmas Parade. It is also a dealer for Shure, Quantum,

Sennheiser, Lectrosonics, AKG, Clear-Com, and other audio brands.

And, in 2007, Masque opened up a permanent systems design and installation division, providing AV systems for a wide variety of venues. Key projects have included the James L. Dolan Recording Studio at NYU; the Gracie Theatre at Husson University in Bangor, Maine; St. Bartholomew's Church in Manhattan; the New Victory Theatre on 42nd Street; and the DiMenna Center for Classical Music in Manhattan's West '30s.

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Another key development was the arrival of Stephanie Hansen, who joined the company seven years ago, first as director of business development and for the last three years as general manager. Personable and outgoing where Shearing is quiet and thoughtful, she has played a key role in helping to define Masque's core business aims and to help increase profitability. She has also helped to liven up the company's image, commissioning the famed graphic artist Milton Glaser—who co-founded *New York* magazine and created the “I Love New York” logo—to revise Masque's graphic image. It depicts a youthful, vaguely Renaissance figure in a mask; turn it upside down, however, and you see a bearded face from the same era, also in a mask.

Interestingly, Hansen comes across as one of the rare individuals to enter this industry from the outside who is capable of facing, and embracing, its whimsical, even bizarre, aspects. “Geoff always reminds me of the cyclical nature of this business,” she notes, cheerfully.

And it may well be the secret of Masque's success that the company

manages to combine good business practices with a high level of service—aims that are not always easy to pursue simultaneously. Shearing adds, “Any MBA who looked at the way we do business would get a shock. So often, you have to make counterintuitive decisions based on relationships.” As he notes, every new Broadway show poses challenges—designers want the newest gear and general managers want to keep costs down; squaring this circle is one of Masque's biggest challenges. Further

complicating matters, a show may quickly fail, leaving the sound gear supplier on the hook, having sunk a lot of money into new purchases.

Even with such evergreens as *Phantom of the Opera*, *Mamma Mia!*, and *The Book of Mormon* on the company's client list, any Broadway season packs plenty of surprises, many of them unwelcome. For example, this fall, Masque supplied gear to the new musical *Bonnie and Clyde*, which closed after only 36 performances. Another attraction, *Hugh Jackman, Back on Broadway*, was a monster hit, but, because of the star's busy movie schedule, a limited run of 61 performances was all he could spare. “Sometimes you're lucky for not getting a show as for getting it,” says Shearing, noting that even the most anticipated production may prove to be a major disappointment.

This spring, however, the company has a full plate, with such upcoming Broadway productions as *Newsies*, the new Disney musical, which was a big hit in its tryout at New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse; Mike Nichols' new staging of *Death of a Salesman*, starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman;

Nice Work If You Can Get It, which matches a new book by Joe DiPietro to a score of Gershwin standards; and *Once*, the critically acclaimed Off Broadway musical, which transfers to Broadway this month. They join a lineup that, aside from those mentioned above, also includes *Jersey Boys*, *Memphis*, *Seminar*, *Venus in Fur*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Sister Act*.

Shearing notes that Masque is successful because it balances good relationships with designers and technicians on the one hand and with key suppliers—such as Meyer Sound, DiGiCo, and d&b audiotechnik—on the other. It doesn't hurt that such eminent Broadway names as Brian Ronan (*The Book of Mormon*) and Andrew Keister (Broadway's current *Godspell*) are former employees. But there's much more to it than that, says Hansen: “We control costs, and we maintain a stable work force. People always comment on how clean and organized our shop is. When you order our gear, it's clean, in working order, and has been QC'd thoroughly. We feel good about being the preferred supplier of many designers.”

Of course, with such a reputation, it's not surprising to hear that suitors have come calling. “Some of our competitors have tried to buy Masque,” says Shearing, adding that he will name no names. He is quite clear, however, that such a deal is not in the cards. “We feel responsible to the people who work for us. We have many family members in the business, and we don't want to work for others.” Hansen adds, “We like to control our own fate.”

Talking to Shearing, it seems clear that he feels responsible not just for maintaining Masque Sound today, but making sure that it has a healthy future as a family-owned business. “I don't want to be the Shearing who sank the ship,” he says. Based on the evidence, there seems to be little or no chance of that. ☺