Playing with Sound
An Interview with Shelley Roden

An award-winning Foley artist working at Skywalker Sound in Northern California, Shelley Roden has created and performed in Foley sound effects for more than 250 live-action films, animated films, and film series. Her recent projects include Universal Pictures' *Jurassic World: Rebirth* and *How to Train Your Dragon*; Warner Bros. Pictures' *F1: The Movie*; Pixar's *Inside Out 2*; David Fincher's *The Killer*; and the Tony Gilroy series *Andor*. With a background in athletics, music, and theater, Roden improvises, experiments, and plays to create new sounds. A dedicated mentor to aspiring sound artists, and filmmakers, Roden has spoken at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Drexel University, Ithaca College, Sonic College in Denmark, and also annually at Virginia Commonwealth University's department of Kinetic Imaging (where she is an affiliate faculty member). Roden is at work on a book featuring personal interviews with veteran Foley artists. **Key words**: film production; Foley editing; *Inside Out 2*; sound design; sound effects; *Toy Story 4*

American Journal of Play: What is a Foley artist?

Shelley Roden: Foley artists perform sound effects for film, television series, and games. We use physical tools to craft sonic impressions of the objects and actions seen on screen. Our sounds create a three-dimensional world that audiences imagine and believe. Most of the time, audiences experience Foley sounds viscerally or emotionally through the characters and the story because performed Foley sound effects live within the context of the visual.

Thousands of Foley sound effects are crafted for every project. Each sound effect is performed as a separate Foley cue. Foley cues include footsteps, props, cloth, and organic textures. The art of Foley is both in the performance and in the creative process of exploring and discovering sounds through the manipulation of physical objects and materials. Many of these

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physical tools used are not literal representations of the objects or action seen on screens. Foley sounds are recorded by a Foley mixer, an engineer who uses digital and analog tools to further shape the raw sounds delivered by the Foley artist through the microphones.

AJP: Can you describe your Foley stage?

Roden: The Archives Foley stage at Skywalker Sound is an acoustically treated room the size of a small aircraft hangar. A large cinema screen is mounted at the far end of the room, allowing us to perform the action accurately in sync with the picture. Microphones are positioned throughout the room on movable stands. A substantial pane of glass separates the Foley stage from the control room, where our Foley mixer works to record and mix the sounds we perform.

The stage appears to be a combination of a music recording studio, industrial work site, and charity shop. The stage floor is partitioned into sections containing dirt, forest textures, gravel, cobblestone, hardwood, steel, and broken glass. Poured cement floors varying in pitch and composition run from front to back. One side wall is a door that slides open to the outside, allowing us to drive vehicles onto the stage. Opposite that sits a poured-cement, 450-gallon tank, a 50-gallon tank, and a splash pit for water manipulation.

Large objects such as car parts, metal pipes, modular floor surfaces and chairs are stored in racks and containers or hung on the wall behind the screen. Labelled boxes stacked on rolling metal racks contain tools ranging from "gadgets that whirr," "eyeglasses," "ceramic debris," "rings and shings," to "backpacks and purses." One of my favorite features on our stage is sound designer Ben Burtt's eight-foot metal thunder sheet I had mounted on a hoist arm that can pivot from the wall. I appreciate that Ben gave us permission to use this legacy prop on our stage.

AJP: It sounds like a kind of playground. Do you think that's accurate?

Roden: It is a playground where Foley artists and our sound design colleagues can experiment and explore with physical tools. Everything is labelled and accessible because I wanted the stage to be user friendly for any colleague searching for inspiration. Thoughtful features, like the three drawers of mallets beside the thunder sheet, encourage play. In this space, we are able to create any sound we imagine. When we have guests tour the Foley stage, they are bewildered, enchanted, and inspired.

AJP: How did you become a Foley artist, and what sort of formal training and

related study did you do to prepare you for this career?

Roden: I became a Foley artist by accident. I had no idea there was such a career, so I had no specific ambition to pursue it. My film studies began at Ithaca College, where I majored in film and photography and minored in art and audio. Like most students, I first focused on the visual aspects of filmmaking and served as the cinematographer on fellow students' film projects. When a film professor steered me toward production sound recording and editorial, I became enchanted by the musical world of sound.

Ithaca began to offer a semester in Los Angeles with a focus on internships. In Los Angeles, I obtained an internship at a postproduction sound house. I loved working with physical film and magnetic stock and dedicated myself to learning the role of apprentice sound editor. As the industry transitioned to digital and the company acquired Foley, ADR (automated dialogue replacement), and dubbing stages, I taught myself to edit on a digital audio workstation and worked with student directors, using the new facilities to record and create the sound effects and dialogue soundtracks for their films. When my first client requested Foley, I borrowed the Foley stage after hours, and with the help of colleagues who knew what they were doing, I performed Foley for the first time. When one colleague told me I have a natural talent and encouraged me to pursue Foley, I placed that suggestion in the back of my mind. I only began to actively pursue Foley when I realized film editorial apprentice opportunities were fading away.

My first job as a paid Foley artist was on a film directed by an Ithaca alumni friend. Once I secured work on an independent Foley stage, I had no idea how to do my job. I kept getting hired because of my enthusiasm and willingness to work hard even though the discomfort of being inexperienced made it challenging.

AJP: Was there anyone particularly influential on your development as a Foley artist?

Roden: I was fortunate to come from a working-class family because I inherited a built-in determination to learn and master a very difficult craft. In the beginning of my career, I worked as a solo artist on low-budget films with very limited prop and floor surface resources and short recording schedules. Through trial and error, I learned and discovered my own methods. Working with limited resources made me even more inventive. I relied on the Foley mixers who recorded and mixed the material to help me learn how the microphones heard the sounds I was creating. I would go into

the control room for playbacks to better understand how to manipulate the frequencies of my materials and use microphone placement to achieve the best outcome. I would rent DVDs of art films and Hollywood films and listen to the Foley. I began reaching out to Foley artists whose work I admired. I would ask for suggestions and aim for the quality that they achieved in my own work. As I advanced, I acquired my first union job and began working with more experienced Foley partners who were inspirational because each had their own individual way of working with physical materials. They showed me how to nuance my footstep performances, the most difficult thing to master as a Foley artist.

AJP: The biologist Mark Bekoff has written that "play is training for the unexpected." Can you tell us about your own childhood play and how it might have prepared you for the kind of creative and improvisational work you do today?

Roden: I was a child who suffered to contain my boisterous energy while in the classroom and during girl scout meetings, so I would spontaneously burst into interruptive vocalizations. I found freedom outdoors on the school playground that had a castle, a rocket ship, and a balance beam course to explore. At home I played alone, creating my own obstacle courses in the backyard using tools found in the garden shed. I borrowed my mom's cassette player to improvise made-up songs and record commercials, cracking up while playing them back against cartoons with the sound turned off. My neighborhood friends and I played hide-and-seek in nearby pollywog park or performed made-up theatrical performances, twisting around the tiny ornamental wooden fence by my mom's rosebush like acrobats and charging neighbors ten cents a show. My mom was lead singer in a barbershop quartet, and I would passively listen to their rehearsals while quietly drawing. Later I listened and analyzed my own music and practiced translating the sounds by ear so I could play the notes or beats on an electronic keyboard.

My ability to shift from quietly focusing on one thing to being active and performing is so strong because these are natural states that I bounced back and forth between as a child. Engaging in improvisational, imaginative play and practicing creative resourcing of found materials helped me develop skills that would later prove useful while creating and performing Foley.

AJP: You've talked elsewhere about how you and your Foley partners shop at sur-

plus and thrift stores for the tools you use in your work. Can you describe that process? What kinds of things are you looking for?

Roden: As Foley artists, we create sounds for real objects like tea cups and saucers or for imagined objects like magic weapons. Because of this, I think of Foley sounds in terms of musical notes and textures. I look for a multitude of shapes and sizes in one material category. To make a selection, I imagine that the objects will be hit or rubbed with my hands, a mallet, a brush, a glove, another object, or work as a resonating tool. The varieties of tones and textures are endless, so searching is a never-ending daily ritual. I recently acquired a broken folding Adirondack chair that was discarded on the sidewalk and labelled "free." As I wrestled to open it I discovered a world of wooden creaks. Another time there was a rusty ironing board with a free sign that emitted a deafening metallic screech when opened. While thrift or salvage yard shopping, I have found tools like an industrial stapler that has doubled for the ka-chunk sound of a sword disengaging from a hilt, a silver platter that has doubled as a ping for when a shield is hit, and a wooden salad bowl that was turned upside down and dragged across a hardwood floor to create a friction ronk.

AJP: Part of your work resembles the kind of loose parts play, or the repurposing of materials not originally intended for play, that many playworkers and early childhood educators champion. Can you give us some specific examples of how you've combined multiple found objects and loose parts to play with and create sounds for films?

Roden: To create the physical sound of the character Anxiety plucking the belief springs that are attached to Riley's sense of self for *Inside Out 2*, first I wanted to anchor it with a fundamental sound that had a feeling of connectivity and vibration. I consulted with a piano technician about how to achieve the resonant sound of a piano string being plucked without getting the tonal sound of the piano key. Using the grand piano on the Skywalker scoring stage, I dampened the strings using a ruler and the pedal while a friend recorded me plucking a low string. Back on the Foley stage, this sound was layered with a metallic zhing that was created by striking coiled copper wire against a decorative steel sundial. To create the sound of Baby Groot's feet dancing in the opening scene for *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, I hit two small wooden temple blocks against a folded bamboo scroll over cement. The temple blocks gave the tonal sound of his tree-root feet, and the bamboo added a texture like the woven tree bark that Groot is made from.

AJP: Play scholars and toy designers often talk about the value of playthings based on what kinds of play they afford. For example, a rubber ball has the potential to provide nearly endless play possibilities. What is the most versatile toy or tool in your toolbox?

Roden: The most versatile tool I use is a four-foot by two-foot steel cabinet that I took from the garage of our house, which was built in the 1950s. The cabinet holds my weight so I can walk on top of it to create the footstep sounds for the *Andor* Ferrix workers mounting a small transport. I can use it as a resonator that will amplify and expand the sound of a rusty hinge creak as I hold the hinge against it. The cabinet opening is large enough to place other objects inside. I have placed an iron wagon wheel that I found in my yard inside of the cabinet so that when I hit the wagon wheel I hear the sound of that object resonating inside of the steel cabinet chamber.

AJP: Speaking of toys, you did award-winning work on the 2019 animated film *Toy Story 4*. Are there any particularly memorable moments from creating the sounds for that movie?

Roden: The most memorable part of creating sounds for *Toy Story 4* was establishing the sounds for Woody and Buzz's footsteps. Although these sounds had been previously created by Foley artists who I admire, we were given the freedom to invent new sounds. I imagined performing Buzz's footsteps with my hands with a prop that would reliably deliver a pleasant full-bodied plastic heel-toe sound for his footsteps. I stumbled across a palm-sized triangular night light that had a substantial hollow body. I used my hand to play that plastic triangle against a cement surface, rolling from two sides of the triangle to one side. It sounded like the heel-toe of a footstep. This sold as Buzz. I imagined performing Woody with my feet because he was humanlike. I did not wear cowboy boots for Woody because a lot of real cowboy boots sound either unpleasantly high and clicky or low and clonky. A veteran Foley artist had gifted me a pair of boys' dress shoes that sounded like a perfectly balanced and defined hard heel-toe for Woody's cowboy boots, so I used these to become Woody.

AJP: Sometimes you are charged with making sounds for something no one has ever seen or heard before, such as an alien surface or spaceship. How do you go about producing a completely new sound?

Roden: Each Foley cue is a mystery to solve. Because we do not have every single literal object and material that you see on screen available, the visual guides me but it does not dictate the tools that I will use to create the sound that

I want to hear. I begin by imagining a sound for the action that I see on screen. Then I hold the sound in my imagination, sometimes singing it, sometimes talking to myself as I wander around the stage, remaining open to inspiration as my analytical brain selects the tools that might give me the outcome I am imagining. Once these random objects are gathered, I am ready to play. We will roll picture as I manipulate the tools, performing in sync with the action. Whether or not it worked is determined by playback, when we hear the sound in context with dialogue and music. This is a wonderful fact that forces me to suspend judgment until the moment of playback.

AJP: You've also created sounds for video games. How does that experience compare to working on films or television?

Roden: Working on cinematics for games is similar to working on films or television because these are the linear narrative parts of the game. Creating assets for video games is quite different, as we are tasked with creating a library of sounds to be triggered by the game audio engine. Foley is performance in sync with picture, so when tasked with creating assets for games, ideally a game client will render brief animation clips that loop. This helps us perform in context with the object or character that we are making sounds for. If we don't have visuals, we rely on our imagination to inspire the action. Game assets require several sound samples with as much variety as possible, so it is very physical work.

AJP: One last question: Outside of your Foley work, what is your favorite way to play?

Roden: I truly love the daily practice of playing with tools and performing and collaborating with fellow artists who inspire me. Outside of work, I strive for a balance of physical, mental, and restful play. My husband is a composer and bass player, so we explore the boundaries of sound and music for films we choose to work on. I tinker with musical instruments that I inherited from our late nephew—a harmonium, clarinet, melodica, accordion, and a broken Japanese lute. I sit quietly and draw as I did as a child, exercising and remembering the talent that got me accepted into the most selective art school. I walk with my husband, quietly observing and exploring our neighborhood or the woods. I row or snowboard with girlfriends. And I love dancing more than anything else, especially when it is unstructured and expressive. I do not hold back.