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**Sample essays 2023**

**California Institute of Arts**

# Statement of Purpose Ashish Dharmadhikari

## "Your artist’s statement should discuss your goals and their relationship to your past experience, as well as evidence of your interest in performance based design whether in theater, film, installation, writing or other related forms."

Last summer, while aurally interpreting the script of Lorca’s ‘Yerma’, my biggest challenge was bringing to life the ‘shepherd’s horn in the distance’. My initial choice, the authentic sound of a conch-shell horn actually used by Andalusian shepherds, was rejected by the director as not sounding ‘musical’ enough – ironic, considering a conch shell can’t produce polyphonic melodies, as I know from personal experience, and in this script, Lorca is fairly specific about the horn being a conch-shell one. After many iterations, I finally used a fragment from a melody played on the lur, a wooden tube played in Nordic countries. While its inauthenticity offended my sensibilities as a student of history, this gave me a valuable lesson on one of the key principles of all audio design disciplines. Namely, the anticipated perception of a sound effect is more important for its selection than its source, or its ‘genuineness’ for that matter.

Interpreting scripts for the theatre is something I grew up doing, initially as an actor. Acting in musicals through my school years was followed by straight plays in college. After graduating from one of India's best known liberal arts colleges with a degree in History, I started looking for work instead of a Masters degree or professional course. I didn’t want to spend time studying something that had little to do with what I was going to actually do in life. And appropriately enough, my first professional engagement was in theatre, as an actor in The Legend of Ram. Not only were the audio/visual special effects and soundtrack edifying; doing continuous runs of 15 to 20 physically demanding shows without losing any of the emotive qualities of my performance was invigorating training in theatre discipline.

Since then, I’ve held four formal positions, and executed any number of professional assignments. My professions, in series or parallel, have ranged from actor to television producer to copyeditor to voice artiste to musician to sound engineer to composer to sound designer. But despite jobs and financial pressures, I’ve managed to stay within shouting distance of theatre. And over the last three years, I’ve segued from primarily actor to primarily sound designer.

Sound design, as a discipline, is situated in the interstices of my two greatest loves, theatre and music. It is also a field that combines technological creativity with creative technology in a way that few others do. I know that my strong background in theatre, albeit as an actor longer than as a sound designer, will be an asset in my study of sound design. After all, one is designing sound to help the actors make a script come alive for the audience. And having extensive qualifications in learning, creating, producing and recording music is a considerable advantage, in sync with the demands of most sound designing jobs. Aside from being able to compose requisite music scores for a theatrical production myself, my familiarity with a substantial range of instruments, genres and ethnic musical traditions enhances my rendition of cultural and geographical specificities while interpreting a script for sound design.

Through all my professional endeavors, I see a common thread — creation of quality content in a creatively satisfying yet perfectionist manner. I like working towards quality. While some may have seen me as a ‘jack of all trades’, I knew that in these places I was learning more than just television production or video editing or how to QC a music CD or how to write line-notes or how to use Pro Tools or Reason. I was trained in and can do all those things too. But what attracted me to these jobs were the originality of work, and the excellence of the finished product I created. Whether it was 27 minutes of TV programming that made classical music come alive, a best-selling music album series with well-researched sleeve-notes, an exceptional soundtrack for a children’s animation spot, or inventive music pieces for a multimedia theatre installation. It is this obsession with quality that now leads me to desire further education at Brandeis University.

I’ve picked up the requisite real-life people skills. For example, I know that just sometimes, your job as a sound designer is to simply allow the director to dictate exactly what sounds he wants — after all, you’re implementing his vision, not yours. I also have many ideas in terms of sound and music. What I now need is to build a larger vocabulary and develop a wider skill-set, in order to be able to express and concretize the ideas that I may not be able to adequately articulate as of now. I want to consolidate the knowledge I’ve picked up over the years, by studying things more systematically. Hence graduate school: I am looking for a disciplined, academic environment, where asking for the theory behind a certain theatre practice or culture is not considered irritating ‘idle curiosity’, responded to with a “Just do it, don’t ask questions!” I would like to work with professors and colleagues who get as excited as I do about sound, design and theatre; about the little things, or things that we all know, but are still marvels of nature. Like phase cancellation in live sound. Like music’s dependence on physics — note X being note Y's nth octave because the ratio of the two frequencies is the nth power of 2. Like the algorithms governing Pro Tools 7.4’s new ‘elastic time’. Like the world-wide ubiquity of ‘modal’ music, in forms ranging from the Greek echos to the West Asian maqam to my beloved South Asian raags.

As a freelance sound designer in India, one struggles against a general lack of awareness about our discipline, as well as a lack of adequate funds. And finding one’s creativity and vision continually cramped is a little frustrating. A very basic attraction of American colleges, and concomitantly of moving temporarily or permanently back to the United States, is that there, sound craft is recognized as a valid profession and art, and there are resources that can be spent on going the extra inch to create an exceptional soundtrack for a play, film or installation. Furthermore, I know that I like learning better in an academic atmosphere. And I know what a luxury higher education is, something most fresh college graduates don’t often realize in their hurry to join the working world. Professionally, I know that I have a lot to learn before I am ready to take on my dream projects, such as being creative sound designer for my beloved Disney animation movies, or technical sound designer for my favorite rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar.

There is no program that is equivalent, or even comparable in terms of rigor and academic-creative challenge, to the American university system BFA, at least in my discipline of Sound Design, in my corner of the world, India. Having spent my first six years in USA, and subsequently having experienced India’s rich cultural and historical heritage to the utmost, I feel that this is the perfect time and opportunity to re-explore my American roots; particularly among the diverse and vibrant campus population of St. Louis, bringing to it a wealth of learning gained in so vastly different a society. And the distinctive blend of courses in the sound design curriculum here are ideally suited to my diverse range of interests and experiences.

To create quality work-product, you need a well-trained imagination, powerful interpretive techniques and rigorous technical skills. These can be developed the slow and diffused way in the ‘school of life’, as I’ve done so far, or they can be studied and imbibed, methodically, at college. I feel that the latter better harmonizes with my current learning aptitude. I believe that the sound design program at the Brandeis Theatre department will not only help me focus my energies, but will utilize and blend the diverse elements of my professional, cultural and educational background, giving me something whole and powerful: an intellectual tool, with practical training in using it.