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The Magic of the Space: An interview with Niall Brady and Steve Fanagan about *Room* (2015)

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Niall Brady and Steve Fanagan's post-production sound work on *Room* (Abrahamson 2015), focusing on their working methods and collaborative approach with each other, director Lenny Abrahamson and editor Nathan Nugent. The film takes a striking approach to post-production sound design, relying heavily on sound to build a credible narrative world, despite the first half of the film being set in an extremely confined and soundproofed space.

KEYWORDS

sound design

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Lenny Abrahamson

Steve Fanagan and Niall Brady are based at ScreenScene and Ardmore Sound, leading post-production facilities in Dublin and a key part of the small but now thriving Irish film industry. *Room* is their third collaboration with director Lenny Abrahamson, previously working together on *Frank* (2014) and *What Richard Did* (2012). An Irish-Canadian co-production, *Room* has won multiple awards and nominations, including an Oscar nomination for Best Picture, and an MPSE (Motion

Picture Sound Editors) USA nomination for Best Sound Editing (Dialogue and ADR). *Room* tells the story of five-year-old Jack (Jacob Tremblay) and his mother, Ma (Brie Larson), from Jack's point of view. Imprisoned together in a soundproofed shed by their captor, Old Nick (Sean Bridgers), Ma hatches a desperate plan for her and Jack's escape after years of confinement. Having been born in captivity, Jack is initially unaware of the world outside Room – for Jack, Room is a world of fantastical possibility rather than grim confinement. Their escape means that Jack must learn to cope with a much bigger, brighter and louder world, readjusting his senses accordingly. This interview piece discusses the working process and creative approach that enabled Brady and Fanagan to craft *Room*'s vivid sound world. As part of a relatively small production, both took on multiple roles, with Fanagan as sound designer, sound effects editor and re-recording mixer, and with Brady as dialogue editor, ADR supervisor and supervising sound editor. This interview is abridged from several interviews carried out by Nessa Johnston at ScreenScene in Dublin and via Skype in early 2016.

Nessa Johnston: Tell me about the process of working on *Room*. At what point did you come into it?

Steve Fanagan: It was clear around the time we were working on *Frank* that *Room* was going to happen. Those conversations are very informal, but begin quite early on, and so we were thinking about it and talking about *Room* before they shot it. Because we had started to talk about it before they went and shot, we began to build a sound library for them [director Lenny Abrahamson and editor Nathan Nugent], as we knew that the Room space itself would be a weird challenge for them in offline. As they edited they were going to need sounds, just simple room tones, but they had to be room tones that were neutral because it's a soundproof space. We needed to try and piece together a library of almost still airs that had different characteristics and different pitches and tones to them. By the time they were heading away for the shoot, they had this collection of hundreds of gigabytes of sound to start thinking about.

Niall Brady: Myself and Steve work quite closely together. Steve made recordings around his house, I recorded things in my own house – it was just about recording some source material, some textured material that might be an ingredient in the film.

We know there's going to be a room space and it's not going to be like any space we've recorded before. There are no sound effects libraries on the shelves that say: 'this is the *Room* sound!' so you start by just gathering things.

SF: We also figured there'd be little details like air con and different hums and ticks, cistern filling – little environmental sounds that might become useful. I think one of the big challenges with *Room* is that the first half of the film is in that space, but time passes. There are time cuts, but you're in the same day, it's just later in the day, and a really simple way to illustrate that is in the room tone change, in the sound.

NJ: It's really interesting that the sounds you started with were basically silences.

SF: Working at the studio you have access to a lot of dead spaces like ADR booths and mix theatres, so that was really a starting point. What does this room sound like that's supposed to be dead? And of course, silence doesn't really exist, it's just the absence of modulating sound like a car by or a siren in the distance, but there's a tone. At different times of day there are different tones, and if you turn the air-con off or turn it on, it changes, or if you turn some machine on it hums. It became this cool exploration of that sort of sound. Niall was doing the same – he got some really cool stuff up in his attic, because that's where his water tank is, so he captured that fizzle. It's almost silent. He was recording things in the middle of the night to make sure the outside wasn't getting in.

NB: I've an attic space, so I went in under the eaves and recorded there. We have a central cupboard that serves as the flue for the gas that has a closed door and something that ticks inside it, so I recorded that. I don't know if those things ended up in the film but they become textures. So Nathan had something to cut with at the start of the edit.

SF: We became quite mildly obsessed with finding little spaces where we could get these almost 'nothing' airs. They're actually really characterful. And when you combine several of them to make a scene, suddenly you have these nice little, almost musical, sounds. When played together there's suddenly quite a bit of character and depth to them. *Room* had to be that – it had to be a dead space. Yet, within that dead

space, there's so much character, both visually and personality-wise, that some of what those airs should be immediately became obvious as we started watching it. We wanted a sense when Old Nick visits that some of the outside world would get in for the briefest moment and it feels different. Once he's in, everything has to feel more oppressive, and again tonally, with air, with very subtle use of EQ, you can make it feel that way, without playing the *Jaws* music! You're trying to figure out a very subconscious way of saying something's not right here. Or the world has suddenly become more claustrophobic. When Old Nick comes in, the magic of the space goes away. Jack is stuck in the closet, we're often stuck in the closet watching as Jack watches – we suddenly end up in this much more confined space. And it's the one time that *Room* feels small, I think. All that was playing on our minds as we collected these sounds and then figured out what to do with them. Another thing that we did in all those spaces – those dead spaces – was record impulse responses, so that we could then build reverbs. We used Altiverb to create reverbs from these bespoke IRs. Again, we were looking for that sound that's a dead space, but it's not nothing, it's something; it has to have a character.

NJ: You worked on the sound for *Room* in pre-production and then in post-production.

SF: Because they shot in Canada for several months the next conversations we had about it were when they completed filming and were beginning to get into the edit proper, their first pass on it. A few weeks after that I began to work on the sound; it was probably the earliest I've started to work on a film in post proper. When Niall and I work together he tends to work on the dialogue and ADR and he's the supervising sound editor; I look after the effects, the Foley and the sound design. I also mix, and there's another of our colleagues that mixed with me, Ken (Galvin), who I mixed *Frank* and *Room* with. In the weeks that followed, they had their first screening coming up for financiers and invested parties and decided that they wanted to do some sort of simple but effective 5.1 temp mix. So Niall and I spent about five days just prepping that, cleaning things up a little bit, doing very surface work, working with the effects that Nathan had been cutting, cleaning up the dialogue and then doing a one-day mix.

NB: We spent a bit of time cutting the scenes in the police car and in the hospital because they were technically problematic. They had to roll down the windows in the police car because there was condensation building up, and as a result there was this wind blowing across the microphones, so we spent a lot of time with those scenes early on. We made it functional for those early screenings – people could hear the dialogue and so story-wise knew what was happening. We were able to serve the function of the scenes early on, but then through talking with Nathan and Lenny, we know that they're going to want to be very subjective and have control of the scene, and for that you need control of the recording process. The picture edit of these scenes pretty much stayed the same, but evolved sound-wise throughout the mix. We knew that we'd want to be very subjective and very *with* Jack. He's very small in those scenes and is experiencing the new external world in quite an internal way. We knew we were going to want to process the policewoman's voice, put it into a reverb space, in a spacey place that's very much from Jack's point of view, but you need a controlled recording for that. And we knew that when we got into the sound editing proper we would need to re-record those voices. These scenes are good examples of where ADR becomes part of the design process. Happily all the actors were very good at ADR, that's where the actor brings their craft to sound post, they go back tonally to the same place and deliver the lines again. And my contribution is to edit it together – the function is that the new reads are in sync, and the design is that it retains the emotion of the story and the emotion of the performance.

SF: While they continued to cut picture I was cutting the sound in parallel. Basically working on the bigger effects ideas, which were mainly environmental sounds. Some of it was internal, like where we go subjectively into someone's head. Things like the door, which might seem like something that was always there, had to be created and thought about. It was one of those sounds that developed over time.

NB: I recorded this big ship container, there's a big heavy door mechanism on that. I drove down to record that container, then drove back, and on the way home recorded the inside of the car, for the police car sequence. Everybody recognises overt sound design – 'that's cool sounding!' – and that's why it's gratifying for *Room* to be considered and thought of in a 'sound design' way, because there's nothing very overt, other than the door mechanism, which has that kind of weighty element. But

that's never bigger than the film. It's functional to the film. And Steve's work on *Room* is so good because it's not overt sound design, but it's so completely of the world. And Lenny's films are always that – veracity is so important to him in his moviemaking. That doesn't mean you can't go stylised, because obviously the police car sequence and the escape sequence are heightened and stylised, but it has to feel true to that world, true to the feel of the movie.

SF: Over the course of the next several weeks we delivered a number of different mixes, so every time Lenny and Nathan went out and did a screening for Film4 or to the States to show it, we would do an updated version of the temp mix. It was a really nice process, for me it was giving me this experience I don't usually have on a film. I think that probably in total we did maybe five of those temp mixes across the sound post schedule – from that start point all the way to the final mix. It gave us this nice pause, and it gave me the opportunity to play things for Lenny and play things for Nathan. Rather than having a session at the beginning of the movie where we spotted and they told me where the sounds were going to be, we began a process of back and forth trying to figure out what it should and could be. So, I found it a really rewarding experience. It was the longest I've ever worked on a film. I'd love it to be the way I work on all films, but not every film is going to be in a position to offer you that familiarity. It's amazing to be involved with a film and get to know it really well, and I suppose – this sounds kind of naff – figure out what it's asking you to do, what it's suggesting you do. Time is always against us on any job because you're deadline-based or budget-based, but the more time you have the more you get to figure out the details.

NJ: So you're starting with sound before any of the film has been shot.

SF: Yeah, and obviously we'd read the book, then the script. What's good for me is that I started thinking about it, and then I was working on something else, but *Room* was somewhere in the back of my head ticking over. So as I'm cutting sound for whatever else I'm working on I find little things. Or I'm out in the world and am suddenly acutely aware of a particular sound because I know I need to recreate it for *Room*. And so we started collecting sounds and finding ideas. I find that the sooner I read the script the sooner I can start, and that process rolls out. It's a nice way to do it.

NJ: I'm often quite frustrated by how people often think of sound as somehow more 'technical' than image.

SF: I think it's the opposite. It's similar to photography. The technical knowhow needs to be there, but it's actually the *feeling* of that depth of field that we respond to emotionally or not. It's very similar I think, in a funny way. I guess essentially while sound can be technical, you always make sure that it's only as technical as it needs to be. Actually what sound really is is story and emotion and feeling. And so when you respond to these sounds, you hope that whoever you're working with will have a similar response to them, as you cut them, and as you piece them together to help tell the story.

NJ: When you were working with these sounds and working collaboratively, how did you talk about them?

SF: I find that then when I actually start to present work, rather than talk about what I'd like to do, I try and cut something, because often what you're trying to do and how you express it verbally can be quite challenging. The best thing to do, if you have an idea for someone, is to play it to them, and let it evolve from there. And so then you get into subjective conversations, like, 'oh this needs to be deader' or 'let's try and do something with a bit more life', and you get into those terms. You start trying to figure out what that person's meaning of that term might be. When you work with someone on several films that becomes much easier. I think Lenny is this incredibly open filmmaker, so if you suggest something, he's open to that suggestion and he's open to seeing it play out, and he'll make a very definitive call on whether he likes it or not. Lenny gave me that space and gave Niall that space to figure things out and present, and that's a really nice place to be in.

NB: In dialogue editing, it starts with the function. My job is to be aware of what tools we can use, and if the director asks for a certain effect, to know how to do that. So part of the design is knowing the tools, and knowing what the capability of the tools are.

NJ: So it's as if the sound design has a life of its own, in a way, that's greater than one individual's decision making?

NB: I think so. When Steve is working he does such amazing work, and it's so textured, but he also does great work to make things feel as though they're in the world, so nothing can feel *on top* of the film. There's all that work that Steve is doing, and that I'm doing, and that Stephen Rennicks (the composer) is doing with the music, and then we'll do the mix. There are all these things that everybody is doing but the real design of the track comes when Lenny is in the room and he says 'let's have more of that' or 'let's have less of that'. That for me is the real design place. On a small level I design the dialogue track, and Steve designs the effects track, but the sound design for me is when those elements are shaped together and that is ultimately the director's vision and the editor's vision. But the important thing for the sound designer is to be able to take notes from the director and to render those notes as something believable in the world.

One of the things that struck me when working on *Room* was that sound-wise you just have to be aware of possibilities of things, and what they might achieve for the film, and how they might become something else. There's the scene where Ma lies in close to Jack, just before Nick comes in for the escape sequence, and there's a heartbeat momentarily in the final mix. Initially that just came up because Brie's radio mic was so close to her heart. The editor heard her heart beating and put that in during the edit. The recording of Ma's heartbeat was an accident – that was where the radio mic was, and it was gained up in such a way that it was picking up her heartbeat – but Lenny and Nathan were aware of its emotional significance and so kept it in the tracks. It became a little motif in that moment of the film. Being aware of the possibility of that sound, and how it might serve a purpose in the story, is so important. Sound design tends not to be a single person's omnipresent singular diktat – it's lots of parts working together, and a director just knowing where the strengths lie.

NJ: Were there any other moments in the *Room* sound design that were particularly difficult to get right at first?

SF: With our approach to anything in any film, the sound kind of evolves. With *Room* there were a lot of sounds that just took time. The door is a good example. It's not that the first time you don't get it – it's just the first time you're *never* going to get it. You can put something in that's going to work and be the thing, but you're always looking for a version of it that's *unquestionably* it, if that makes sense. I don't think I ever quite hit where I want to be first time. What often happens for me is that I cut *way* too much stuff. And I find if I mute one or two of these elements it gives it space and I think, ah, it's working. With the escape scene, that's probably the scene that took the longest in some way, shape or form, because it's a long sequence, and it has to be exciting. The music is doing a huge amount of work, but I wanted to cut the scene as if the music wasn't there, and figure out if I can make this exciting with no music, because then I know that when the two things play off each other, it hopefully should be that bit more visceral. It's actually the first time the door fully opens, when Old Nick kicks it open, and he takes Jack out in the rug. That's the first time the outside world has really washed in, and it had to feel almost like an airlock. But it can't be sci-fi, it has to be real, or has to have a heightened realism. So there's a big challenge in that.

And then, once the rug is out and Jack is in it, out in the world, that's the first time Jack has heard *anything* beyond the four walls of Room, likewise for the audience at this point in the film. Like, *what would you hear?* Then you start thinking about the real sounds and you think, if you were hearing them for the *first time* what would they sound like? And if your heart rate was going at ninety, because you were terrified? Not only has he been warned that this is a dangerous thing he's doing, he's also having a sensory overload. Imagine never having seen daylight, he's seen it through Skylight but he's never been out in it. Suddenly he's catching glimpses of it through this rug, but at the same time he's trying to keep completely still. So we started to think about birds, and wind, and there are lots of fallen leaves – it's kind of autumnal. We tried to take a very close-up version of the sound, so you had that kind of detail, as if it was almost too close, and yet still pushed back into the world a little bit.

It was a really interesting challenge, because there are changing perspectives – sometimes you're in the rug with him, sometimes you're looking at the rug from the back of the truck with Old Nick in the front of the truck. You have this idea that each time the truck slows down, he's potentially going to try and get up and get out.

There's also the big question mark over whether or not he'll actually manage to unroll himself. All of that had considerations. The Foley team did this brilliant thing recording with a transducer mic for inside the rug. And I recorded a lot of effects where I took mics and I put them into cushions, and moved them around and tried to figure out the sound of what it's like if you're in something that close. It was about trying to figure out how much of each of those effects were needed, and how to hit the perspectives. Sometimes you've a bird's eye view on the truck, sometimes you're in the truck with him, sometimes you're in the rug with him, sometimes you're in the cabin of the truck with Old Nick. Figuring out how to hit those cuts without it being disjointed is important. It has to feel natural, even though it's heightened. There's this balance of many, many considerations to try and get right. And, at the same time, remember that the music is going to overpower everything. That point where he actually gets out of the rug and he looks up at the sky for the first time, we knew it needed to do something, and in the end it ended up being about wind, so you just hear a little bit of wind. And he's feeling the wind for the first time. We tried to imagine if that was us, and if that was the first time we'd ever felt the wind blow in our face, or seen the sky and sun for real, outdoors. He has that moment where he realises, 'Oh shit, I've got to get out of this truck right now', and it all comes crashing back in. That sequence runs through him hopping out of the truck and hitting his head so we go subjectively into his head for a while. He's faced with this big dog and he's never seen a dog before. He's faced with this person with the dog and he's never seen a person before, other than Ma and these glimpses he catches of Old Nick. There are so many things going on that would be so overwhelming. And it felt like a really lovely opportunity to do some of that emotional work with sound.

NJ: So you knew all along there was going to be music in that sequence. Did you know what the music was going to be like?

SF: It was always that song ('The Mighty Rio Grande' by This Will Destroy You), which was really cool, because it's an amazing piece of music. As I worked through that scene I'd flip the music on and off, so I'd work for ages on my own on the scene then flip the music back on and try and figure out how I was going to shape around it. Because I was going to end up mixing the effects with the music in the final mix, I was able to start making some of those considerations beforehand.

NJ: So you ultimately had control over the final mix?

SF: Exactly. But the final mix is definitely led by Lenny. It was something that was evolving, and by stopping and doing those temp mixes every so often, we were getting closer and closer to what we thought that balance might be. It felt like we were always pushing in a wonderful direction with it. It's a matter of figuring out what the best version of it was going to be. And the picture edit was changing as well, so there were considerations all along. Niall was doing this great stuff with breaths for Jack and we knew that we needed to hear them as well. Even though there's all this music, sound design, sound effects and Foley, at times you knew you just needed to hear a breath, a gasp, a moan. That detail again. One of the rules that came pretty early on, that Nathan had worked into his edit, was that we need to feel Jack – we're in the wardrobe with him, we always feel his breath in a way that keeps you close to him. It was doing a lot emotionally and storytelling-wise for us. All of that fit in to that sequence as well and was always part of the challenge of it. Ultimately, we were responding to a sequence that had been beautifully shot, acted, directed and edited. There's something about when you work with a really great picture editor – as you cut sound, the way that you join images or overlap or prelap the sound from image to image becomes very intuitive, because whatever the natural rhythm for that scene is reveals itself to you. And you can figure out, 'Oh, this shot to this shot I should let some of the sound postlap' or, 'This shot to this shot should just be a hard cut'. You begin to really feel that from what they've done. I can't give enough credit to that editing process in terms of creating a space for what we do in sound.

NJ: Especially if you're working in parallel with the edit rather than getting a locked picture and it's a matter of 'do sound now'. Picture and sound can evolve in tandem.

SF: Absolutely. Sometimes, when you start to add the sound, when you start to hear a dialogue scene cleaned up, as that process is being eked away at, you realise, 'Actually, we can hold this shot longer' or, 'We need to cut from this scene quicker'. Some of those rhythms become apparent because suddenly something that felt like problematic dialogue - because of a difficult environment or whatever, and you want to get out of it - when it's cleaned up you realise, 'Actually we can stay in this now'.

So there's definitely a huge benefit in picture and sound working side by side. For me it felt like a privilege because you're getting an insight into how the editor is thinking about the film as they cut it, but you're also getting to spend enough time in the world that you feel like you've poked around in all the corners and explored it. You take more risks with what you're trying to do if you know that you have the time to make mistakes. And often, in making those mistakes, if that mistake is made up of ten parts, then there's that one part that's your little doorway into the good idea.

NJ: *Room* had a team of how many?

SF: It was predominantly myself and Niall. But we also had another sound editor, Peter Blayney, who came on for three weeks and cut some dialogue while Niall was travelling for ADR. Foley would have been two people for ten days, which is Caoimhe Doyle the Foley artist, and Jean McGrath the Foley mixer at Ardmore. So, at our largest, it would have been myself, Niall, Peter, Caoimhe, Jean and Ken Galvin, the other re-recording mixer. There's a great group of people in the two facilities that support our work as well, but as a sound department, it's small.

NJ: Congratulations on being involved in an Oscar-winning film, and congratulations for the MPSE nomination. Can you tell us a bit more about that experience?

NB: It was amazing to get the MPSE nomination. What's quite gratifying about that process is that you have to fill out the forms, describing the challenges of the film and how you approached them – it's that important thing of theorising your job, realising what you've done and being able to talk about it. To be able to write about and present that material and for it then to be nominated, was very rewarding. I felt gratified for us all. To get nominated with the quality of the films we were nominated with, and the size of the films we were nominated with – the crews on them are massive, and the level of specialisation on those films is massive. I'm delighted *Bridge of Spies* won the award, because it was a dialogue award, but in a year when there were other films that were very much about dialogue storytelling – *Bridge of Spies*, *Big Short*, *Spotlight*, it was really gratifying to be felt worthy of being placed alongside them. MPSE is originally an American organisation and tends to be quite

American-focused in the films that get nominated. So to push through that, and to get the film seen, and for it then to be recognised as good work was really great.

What's even more gratifying is that it helps us to say that we know we're doing great work, because not all the films we work on will ever get to be seen at that level. *Room*, by virtue of how well it did and how good it is, and pushing through to an Oscar run, allowed our work to be seen much more widely. Most of the films that we work on are relatively small Irish films, relatively low budget films that will hopefully have a favourable festival run and will maybe break through to be seen by wider audiences. So when a film does break through it is lovely that the sound work is considered of a standard worthy of recognition by our international peers and those whose work we so admire. Although, the idea of 'small Irish films' seems to be changing at the moment –they're suddenly everywhere, a twenty-year 'overnight' success!

SOURCES

Abrahamson, Lenny (2015), *Room*, film, Ireland/Canada: Element Pictures.

Abrahamson, Lenny (2014), *Frank*, film, UK/Ireland/USA: Element Pictures.

Abrahamson, Lenny (2012), *What Richard Did*, film, Ireland: Element Pictures.

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