

Willard (Bill) Merrill 1926–2012



Willard Curtis Merrill died peacefully at home after a long illness from cancer. He was a pioneer in sound design for the Broadway theater. Known professionally as Bill Merrill, he introduced the

wireless microphone to Broadway in the late 1950's and was instrumental in turning sound

into a credited design element alongside set design, costume design and lighting design.

A sound design prodigy, with no formal training, he had not actually intended to be a sound designer. He came to New York City, as a young man in the 1950's, with his two best friends, Jim McKenzie (ACT San Francisco & Executive Producer Westport Country Playhouse) and Spofford Beadle (a producer and also House Manager of Phantom of the Opera for 17 years).

The three friends intended to produce shows. But the young Bill Merrill had a natural instinct for the principles of sound engineering and how to put them to work in the theater, which caused him to see and take advantage of an opportunity. He had found

his entree into the Broadway world he loved. He saw a need and met it. Asked the secret to his success in the sound business, he said it was his ears. His ability to hear things that others couldn't.

From 1965 until his death he was president of Port-O-Vox Enterprises, which he founded. The shows he designed included original productions of *The Music Man*, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, *Carnival*, *Peter Pan*, and *An evening with Nichols & May*. In the early days, Port-O-Vox manufactured their own wireless microphones.

In addition to designing specific shows, he also provided custom services and specialized electronics for the performing arts, and designed sound systems for numerous theaters

© 2013 AES

around the country whose venues had to accommodate a variety of shows.

He worked with many legendary performers. He wired Marlena Dietrich for her nightclub act at the Waldorf Astoria. When his parents visited from Wisconsin, Dietrich invited them backstage after the show, and to their delight and surprise, the great star made and served them tea in her dressing room. He like to tell how he put the wireless mike on Mary Martin for the flying sequences in "Peter Pan", and claimed that when she threw the fairy dust, he was standing under her just out of camera range and it landed on him. His longtime next door neighbor in New York City, is Sondra Lee, who played Tiger Lilly.

He enjoyed telling friends about the time

he went to pitch the new wireless mike to Ethel Merman. He met her at her apartment. She was amused, but incredulous at the suggestion that she would need such a thing, and politely declined.

Willard Merrill was a member in good standing of the Audio Engineering Society from the 1950s until his death. In October of 1960 he presented a paper at the AES 12th Convention entitled, "The Integrated Use of Miniature RF Microphones in Television Studio Production Versus Pre-Recording."

He last attended an AES meeting at Les Poisson Rouge in early 2009, at which the new sound system for the club was demonstrated. Les Poisson Rouge occupies the space that used to be the Village Gate, where, in

1968, Mr. Merrill had been the sound designer on the hit show "Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris." He was delighted to be in the space again and had good conversations with many of the attendees about the acoustical challenges of the space.

Bill loved being a "sound man" and took as much pleasure working for university athletic departments as he did working on Broadway. His last gig was at the age of 84 at Villanova University.

Bill is survived by his loving, long-term partner, Michael Mullins, as well as by his sister-in-law Jacky Merrill, his nephews Patrick Merrill and CJ Merrill, and his nieces Susan Lepore and Christy Sopko.

Michael Mullins