

I not only feel honoured to be invited to join A.L.Kennedy in this presentation to the Akademie der Künste of our work together, I feel very moved. The voice work I practise was born in Berlin and came to Britain. Today, it comes back to Berlin. It comes home once more. That I should have a part in this story was something I could not have imagined when I first encountered the work thirty years ago.

What are the origins of the work we have been doing together?

1917. World War 1. A young German-Jewish soldier lies wounded on the battlefield; shells bursting all around him.

*From somewhere I hear a voice calling 'Help, comrade! Help, comrade'. I close my eyes, shaking with terror thinking, 'How can a voice utter such a sound?'*<sup>i</sup>

The soldier crawls through the mud and eventually to safety where he is found under a pile of corpses, presumed dead but in fact alive. Who was he?

Alfred Wolfsohn was born 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1896 in Berlin. Having fought on the eastern and western front for his country he survived but was badly traumatised by his experiences. The terrified sounds and screams of the desperate, injured men haunted him until he lost consciousness. Doctors and psychiatrists proved unable to help him; neither could singing teachers help him re-create the sounds to exorcise them.

*The basic fault of most singing teachers lies in their concentration on the larynx. [but]....the voice is an instrument wholly dependent on the singer's psychical and physical state.*<sup>ii</sup>

Wolfsohn realised his recovery depended on his own ability to heal himself and he embarked on what was to be a lifetime's research to reclaim the human voice he had heard in the trenches – the heart's voice - a human voice whose expressive ability far outstripped that of conventional singing or speaking because it was freed from fear. He had understood, in his biographer's words,

*...that human vocal problems could not be resolved by medical or mechanical means. They needed the perception of the psyche, the self or self-understanding as the ultimate door into the freedom of and understanding of voice-expression.*<sup>iii</sup>

His life's work was an answer to his question: why were the voices of the dying more alive than those of the living?

For Wolfsohn, the uniqueness and range of each of our voices is inextricably bound up with the uniqueness and range of each of our lives. He believed that by working on the voice beyond its conventional boundaries – range, dynamic, gender - the human and creative potential possessed by each individual could be fully realised and expressed. For him, inspiration – breath - and inspiration - creative energy – were inseparable. By the early 1930's he was teaching singing and writing about his ideas, influenced in part by the work of C.G.Jung. But his work was cut short by the rise of the Nazis and he left the country in 1939 to come to Britain. After the war he taught in London and continued to write about his avant-garde ideas. Many people came to work with him among whom was an actor, Roy Hart, and it was he who inherited the leadership of the work following Wolfsohn's death in 1962. Working with Wolfsohn as his teacher Hart had developed an eight-octave vocal range which inspired composers such as Hans Werner Henze and Stockhausen to write for him. As an actor Hart took the work into performance contexts and founded the Roy Hart Theatre. One of Hart's pupils was Nadine George, a British actress who studied with him for many years and was a founder member of the theatre. She went on to bring together her mainstream British voice tradition with its emphasis on text with this European work on the extended voice of Wolfsohn and Hart to produce her own technique that combined these approaches. This is now known as Nadine George Voice Work or NGVW.

My own voice training was also in this mainstream British tradition and this is what I first taught as a voice teacher. That work was important in helping me connect actors to text but the work on the voice remained technical, focused as it was on developing the muscles of the vocal process. The voice was treated as an instrument which could be improved in order to give a better performance much as a violin is tuned. The connection between the violin and the player of the violin was missing. When I worked with George I knew what mattered was not my voice. What mattered was my voice was me. As I wrote subsequently:

*The connection between me and my voice was raw and pure, unmediated by thoughts of what I should sound like or was trying to sound like or what other people told me I should sound like.* <sup>iv</sup>

My voice was not simply my voice. It was my heart and soul. It was who I was. I knew that from now on I had to work in this new way.

In time, while still studying with George, I brought the work into the performance curricula of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) as well as into professional theatre in Scotland, working on many new plays as well as the classics. In 2006, the Centre for Voice in Performance was established at RCS to take forward the teaching, practice and research of the work. I led the Centre and its research agenda for many years before I handed over to my successor and continued to work independently.

In George's technique breath and creative energy – life energy - is consciously contacted deep in the body and then used to sing four qualities of sound from the body – two male and two female - which are in every human voice. These qualities are then linked directly to speaking. By this means the individual – writer, member of Akademie, person in the street - is enabled to contact the creative power of their voice and to work with that power in both an artistic context and in the context of their life. After warming-up in all four qualities or energies, one quality is singled out for further development and extension. During this vocal exploration the main aim is to prevent any attempt to shape, censor or judge the voice according to notions of what is acceptable or aesthetically pleasing. Every sound is admissible as an expression of the individual in that moment, cracks and breaks and all. This is not making sound shaped by an aesthetic but a process that exposes the realities of the voice and finds openings into power, feeling and expression, often in those areas which other vocal aesthetics eschew. The openings are then linked directly into words. This is the work we hope to demonstrate tonight.

In 2001 I was invited to teach as a guest lecturer at Athanor Akademie in Bavaria and my first published research paper, *Helena, Hitler and the Heartland*, examined

the work in that context. <sup>v</sup> The title came from a comment made by a student working on the qualities in conjunction with Shakespeare's character of Helena in *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. Her speaking voice presented in the high female quality before she spoke in German in the male chest quality. She stopped abruptly. "I don't like that sound", she said emphatically. "I sound like Hitler."

The actor had uncannily echoed Wolfsohn's own statement that a person's voice had to be open to all voices; that they must find those of the Jew and Hitler within themselves. In this working context, by giving voice to the dark as well as the light, the actor can find the life force of a character like Lady Macbeth and channel that safely in performance.

For a performance she was giving at the Edinburgh Festival ten years ago, A.L.Kennedy contacted me with a view to doing some work on her voice. She can talk about it for herself but for me it has been a pleasure and a privilege to have worked with her ever since. In my Professorial address to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in June 2011 it was her words that formed the basis of the presentation and that inspired – and continues to inspire - my own thinking and reflections about voice. As she says, why wouldn't finding your voice help you find your voice? <sup>vi</sup>

*When I speak of singing, wrote Wolfsohn, I do not consider this to be an artistic exercise, but the possibility, and the means to recognise oneself and to transform this recognition into conscious life.* <sup>vii</sup>

Transformative change – in one's work and one's life - is within reach of all of us here tonight and of everyone who has a voice and is willing to open the heart to new possibilities

Professor Ros Steen

8<sup>th</sup> May 2019

---

<sup>i</sup> A.Wolfsohn: Orpheus oder veg su einer Maske. Unpublished manuscript. Jewish Museum Archives, Berlin.

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iii</sup> Sheila Braggins : *The Mystery Behind the Voice*. Matador, 2012

<sup>iv</sup> R.Steen, editor : *Growing Voices* ([https://www.rcs.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Growing\\_Voices\\_online\\_version.pdf](https://www.rcs.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Growing_Voices_online_version.pdf) )

<sup>v</sup> R.Steen : *Helena, Hitler and the Heartland*. Published by VASTA 2005

<sup>vi</sup> A.L.Kennedy: *Proof of Life* in *On Writing*. Published by Cape, London, 2013

---

<sup>vii</sup> A.Wolfsohn: Orpheus oder veg su einer Maske.