

Double-hinged doors: the RSAMD's voice work in Training and Theatre
They go on such strange geometrical hinges/You may open them both ways.¹

Ros Steen, Head of the Centre for Voice in Performance, Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and
Bill Wright, Lecturer in Voice, Centre for Voice in Performance, Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama

Introduction

This paper is designed to accompany a practical, intensive voice workshop based in the core techniques of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama's Centre for Voice in Performance. Of the two modes of discourse, paper and workshop, the latter, potentially, is by far the more eloquent.

Once we put aside the model of Technical Rationality, which leads us to think of intelligent practice as an application of knowledge to instrumental decisions, there is nothing strange about the idea that a kind of knowing is inherent in intelligent action.....the know-how is in the action - a tight rope walker's know-how, for example, lies in, and is revealed by, the way he takes his trip across the wire. (Schön, D., 1983, p. 50-51)

While the paper can and will give information about the work, it of necessity deals with *knowing that*, while the practical work speaks of itself, of *knowing how*, locating knowledge and understanding in the cells of the body. This embodied knowledge arises from within the reality of the temporal workshop and is particularly personal and individual, unable to be shared completely by any other; the paper, although existing beyond the time of its creation and able to be shared by many, can in its presence only attempt to capture and disseminate something of the work in its absence. In this way, the relationship between the two modes mirrors that of the Centre's research into the work - a systematic investigation *through* practice to produce new knowledge and insights *in* practice - which is subsequently captured in words after the temporal event itself. And just as the voice work flows between two poles: an internal connection with self and an external connection with others, the *double-hinged doors* of the title, the paper will reflect that structure. It will first focus on the work's internal connection to the RSAMD before widening out to its external connection with the theatre/performance profession, re-turning again to map the influence and changes the professional connection brought to the conservatoire work, before turning back towards the future. At the same time, the multiplicity of viewpoints that arises because each person has a unique experience of the work will be represented in the paper by diverse voices, articulating their complementary but different perspectives.

Voice (DG)²

¹ Webster, J., Duchess of Malfi Act IV sc ii l 221-222.

² David Gallagher, professional actor and member of the Actors' Research Workshop in Voice led by Ros Steen

In our work last time it felt to me that we were committed to trusting on one hand the text and on the other one's own body. Not very well expressed, I know, but it really was all about holding the cerebral process back at this stage...Of course the mind plays a part in this, but it's fully engaged in serving the needs of the body as it explores its remote (and sometimes dark!) areas, rather than trying to be damned clever. (Gallagher, D., 2004)

The Internal connection (i)

Voice at the RSAMD, from its inception, followed the principles of training first developed by Elsie Fogerty at the Central School of Speech and Drama (Cole, M., 1967, p 45-46). It continued to follow that tradition as it evolved and was developed by its most notable exponent, Cicely Berry, in her work with the RSC. (Berry, C., 2008, p 165) The Central approach came to be identified as the British mainstream tradition of conservatoire voice training and, Steen, appointed as a lecturer to the Voice Department in 1983, taught that work for several years. In 1990, as a result of a meeting between her and an ex-student of Berry's, Nadine George, her work began to take another direction. It opened to that of George's own approach which had moved far from its origins in her training at Central.

In 1962 while I was at Central, I met Roy Hart, who was doing research work on the human voice. Roy was a white South African who had won a scholarship to RADA in the 1940s. I worked with Roy in London for 10 years and then went with him and the Roy Hart Theatre to France in 1975. In 1990 I returned to England to do research on the work with Roy on the voice and linking this to the work with Shakespeare and the classic text. (George, N., 2005, p33-42)

The vocal technique that George developed is based on the principle that four different qualities of voice, two male and two female, exist within each human voice and the vibration, energy and quality of these sounds, sung from the body, are linked directly to text. The work starts with breathing exercises in pairs, one person making their own internal connection to breath while the other facilitates an energised release of breath from the deep body source of their partner. Once the internal connection to the breath and energy flow has been established - an 'energised calm' - it is followed by breath and energy outflow to the external connection - to the space and to others - both individually and as a group. There follows work on sung sound where the fixed intervals of the piano provide a structure for guiding a vocal exploration into the 4 qualities of the voice followed by the speaking of 4 Shakespearian lines, one for each quality, which 'places' them in the body. The lines are used as a bridge between sung sound and speech. This work in place, a more extended exploration of the voice can develop in direct conjunction with the text, after which text is spoken on 'full voice', a term George uses to describe the biggest possible vocal sound that is supported by breath. This leads to a fully articulated text which taps into a visceral power that has the ability to challenge existing perceptions of the voice. The last stage is to reduce the voice to an appropriate size for the space and drama retaining the vibrated quality of the larger vocal commitment in what George would call the 'decrescendo'.

In this way the voice work allows actors:

to enter the text and embody it, literally; that is, the whole text is vibrated through the body and voice of the actor in order for it to be transmitted to the body of the listener, in the moment of speaking. This vibration of the text in the body means that the text, rather than simply being understood intellectually or felt emotionally and then 'acted', is connected deeply to where the voice actually comes from: to the physical source of the creative energies and impulses.... (Steen, R., 2005, p 43-57)

Steen started training in the technique in 1990 and has continued to research her own voice with George ever since.

Voice (RS)

Within the sound there's depth, beauty, richness and levels and a lot of hard work both in the moment - staying, not running away – and in the life to this point – staying not running away. (Steen, R., 2005. n.p)

Wright was introduced to the work of George in 1991, while studying acting at the RSAMD. Years later, when teaching acting, he was also asked to lead a voice class and recalled the influential voice work from his training. Consequently he decided to study the work further and his experiences at an international workshop of George's in 2006, both personal and professional, were profound. He joined the staff of the Centre for Voice in Performance a year later.

Voice (BW)

The ways in which the text streamed out of me were very organic...I found I was able to access an emotional response from myself and the audience simply by going into an 'oo' sound. It seemed to tap into the sorrow Othello was feeling as he contemplates murdering the woman he loves. But from those tears I could stop, take direction, and then use the sound to get back in, often with a great deal of laughter in between. (Wright, B., 2006. n.p)

The External connection (i)

As part of Steen's research work at the Academy she had, over many years, forged professional partnerships because of her role as a voice specialist in production. One particular partnership was with the internationally renowned Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, Scotland's new writing theatre. Her relationship with the theatre had begun in the late eighties but had particularly blossomed with the arrival of Philip Howard in 1993 as Associate and then Artistic Director. In 1997, with the remounting of David's Harrower's play, *Knives in Hens* for the Edinburgh Festival,³ the opportunity arose for an enhanced role for the voice specialist in production. Steen proposed working

³ The premiere of *Knives in Hens* took place at the Traverse Theatre in June 1995. Steen worked on accents, language, storytelling and the first stages of the vocal technique only.

full time on the show, pioneering George's vocal technique as a medium of rehearsal itself.

What I really want to offer is to work on the actors' voices and the text using Nadine's work on a daily basis, from read-through to First Night.[to] go further in seeing what a voice person could offer the production process.
(Steen, R., 1997.n.p)

Every day the actors did the voice work - breathing, four qualities and individual voice work leading into text - directed by Steen, often physically in the space, while Howard initially observed and listened. One of the cast members later wrote of double-hinged doors, opening to both internal and external connections in his acting:

Voice (LH)⁴

I see the exercises we do in the four sounds, up and down the ranges, like running back and forth along a long corridor. As I go along I'm able to throw open doors to many and various rooms. These rooms obviously contain all kinds of vocal range, power and potential but as we know there's more. The work also opens doors on our emotions. Indeed, some sounds and emotions have seemed to me to be so inextricably linked sometimes that it's not clear which is prompting which or where either are coming from. I'll stretch my analogy to breaking point by saying that sometimes some of the doors you come upon are closed tight, you know there's something behind it but it takes a long time to find the key. Others are merely stiff and require a good hard-worked shove to open it. Once a door has been opened it seems to open easier next time and I feel it will never ever be locked tight again. (Howden, L., 2004)

The rehearsal work released many embodied physical and vocal possibilities which Howard took and integrated into the final production. As a direct result of that experience, plans were laid to work together in the same way on a much larger scale with Michel Tremblay's *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer*, co-directed by Steen and Howard for the Traverse in a co-production with the Barbican theatre, London in 2000. Joyce McMillan described the play in her theatre review for the Scotsman as a 'staggeringly beautiful and honest piece of writing about our deepest religious impulse'. (McMillan, J., 2000) It is written as a spoken mass for 11 voices and makes the highest vocal demands on its cast who have to work both as a chorus and a juxtaposition of solo voices, often overlapping and conflicting. *Solemn Mass* showed just how successfully Scotland had been resourcing itself in innovative theatre practice. Voice specialist and director, with their joint history of work rooted in a common commitment to voice work as medium of rehearsal, were enabled to bring to the production the fruits of their years of research.

⁴Lewis Howden, cast member of *Knives in Hens* and member of the Actors' Research Workshop in Voice led by Ros Steen

Philip Howard and Ros Steen direct a complex business with assurance. The rhythms and linguistic resonances of this play demand close attention and get it from a splendid cast. It would be counter to the structure and intent of the piece to pull out individuals among them, so it suffices to say that each performs their choral function with dexterity and beauty. (Cramer, S., 2000)

The Internal connection (ii)

After exploring the application of the vocal technique as a medium of rehearsal within a range of professional performance contexts⁵ Steen began to consolidate that work in the vocal curriculum at RSAMD where it became its mainstream voice practice in 2006. The establishment of the National Theatre of Scotland that year coincided with the evolution of the Voice Department into a Centre for Voice in Performance, the RSAMD's national centre of excellence for the teaching, practice and research of Voice in Performance. At its core was not only George's technique based in the uniqueness of each individual human voice but the work's innovative integration into the theatre/performance making process itself. In 2008, Nadine George was appointed the RSAMD's first International Fellow in Voice and began to work with staff across the Academy.

Meanwhile the relationship between the acting department and the voice department within the RSAMD had become much more closely integrated as a result of the new practice originating in the profession. Through its work in rehearsals, the voice department moved from being seen as a 'skills' department to one where voice practitioners were equal partners in the creative process. The enhanced voice specialist role in production underwent further evolution when Acting Lecturer Joyce Deans⁶ and Steen began to co-direct public performances of Shakespeare, integrating acting teaching, voice work and movement work into an enhanced learning experience for the students.

Our collaborative rehearsal process draws on a wide variety of teaching strategies. First, further points of technique are revisited by the directors/teachers on the spiral model, encouraging deep learning. Second, our co-directing approach itself is a paradigm for the integration of disciplines within the acting process:

[Ros] had already introduced us to the four energies of the voice in previous sessions....however it was not until rehearsals started and we began to put these techniques into practice that I began to appreciate how the use of these energies....are essential to the actor's process of development of character...with Joyce's visual eye...examining the impulse behind each movement.

This integration is facilitated by having two directors who can afford to give each actor 'twice the amount of time....to discuss, explore, support or

⁵ Productions included *Lazybed*, *Greta*, *Chic Nerds*, *Kill The Old Torture their Young*, *Heritage*, *King of the Fields* (Traverse) *Transatlantic*, *Home* (lookOUT) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Dundee Rep)

⁶ Joyce Deans originally trained as an actor at RSAMD 1975 – 78 before subsequently going to Paris to study movement at *Ecole Jacques Lecoq*, Paris 1978-80 and becoming a director.

challenge'. Third, two pairs of eyes and ears homing in on the same scene from different angles also open up possibilities faster and further than one director and questions the notion of production authority, traditionally the preserve of the solo director, because it refuses to favour any single viewpoint. Everything is exposed to the cut and thrust of multiple perspectives which tests every possibility, every choice in the crucible of practical action before subjecting it to reflection and discussion in the complex, delicate negotiations inherent in the multiple discourses of rehearsal. (Steen, R., and Deans, J., 2007, p150-151)

The outcome was a closer artistic integration of voice and acting disciplines within the conservatoire setting.

The External connection (ii)

At the same time as the enhanced vocal practice continued to evolve in the training at the RSAMD, Steen was researching her work further with professional partners. After the National Theatre of Scotland was launched in 2006, John Tiffany, Associate Director, began to work on his acclaimed production *Black Watch*. He asked Steen, with whom he had collaborated for over ten years, to work on voice and text. Apart from specific roles the voice work had to play,⁷ the main function became its contribution to the ensemble nature of the company and building an extended use of company voice. The voice work with its disciplined approach was akin to the intensive physical and military training the actors had to undergo. The direction of energy through the voice not only allowed access to the flow of energy and feeling in the performer, but also focused it in a very precise way that balanced the precision of movement the actors were to use in the space. In his book *Emotional Intelligence* Daniel Goleman describes flow as representing :

perhaps the ultimate in harnessing the emotions in the service of performing and learning. In flow the emotions are not just contained and channelled, but positive, energized, and aligned with the task in hand.... Paradoxically, people in flow exhibit a masterly control of what they are doing, their responses perfectly attuned to the changing demands of the task. (Goleman, D., 2004, p90-91)

In her review of the production, Susannah Clap made reference to this level of performance flow in the *Black Watch* ensemble:

Brilliantly staged in an old drill hall cavernous, clanging and lit with brutal clarity, so that the shadows are black, and the action keeps on reverberating this is documentary and lament, accusation and elegy. The dialogue is clenched and full of curses. The soldiers are sinewy scraped, as if they've just shaved in cold water: they speak bluntly; they move with a precision and

⁷ The close-knit group of squaddies portrayed in the production needed a specific Fife accent, the use of the voice had to be scaled for large site-specific locations, the particular demands of speaking verbatim text had to be addressed, the voices had to be balanced with sound track, movement and video images and the voices of living politicians had to be replicated.

accord which shows the power of being in a unit and a fighting force, and which exposes as totally flabby most theatrical attempts to mimic the martial. (Clapp, S., 2006)

More importantly, *Black Watch* again demonstrated the unique connection of innovative voice work and professional theatre linked by conservatoire training. Several members of the company were graduates of the RSAMD.

Future Directions

*Voice (JA)*⁸

I think it's excellent that you are doing a workshop with directors too. It will be very interesting to see how they respond when it's something the actors find so enlightening. Exciting times! (Austin, J, 2005)

The growth and reach of the Centre's voice work has been steadily moving forwards with RSAMD leading industry practice. Additionally the work has been taken into an international partnership with Athanor Akademie in German. Research voice workshops have been set up for professional actors both by Steen and Wright.⁹ Directors who have had experience of the work in their rehearsal rooms with Steen have started to study the work themselves in order to research its connections with the directing process. Most recently, in an exciting departure, first year students who were working with Dundee Rep Theatre on its 5-star production of *Peer Gynt* became vocal warm-up leaders, taking the company into the voice work established in their conservatoire vocal curriculum and reinforcing the value of the work to themselves and their professional colleagues to fellow RSAMD students on their return.¹⁰ Just as we find in the voice the merging of the internal and external connections is a seamless continuum – the doors opening either way – we find the work flowing in both directions from training to profession and back again. Ultimately, however, it speaks for itself.

*Voice (PK)*¹¹

Last SundayIt stopped being about voice or even sound. I was barely aware of producing sound. It was only in the silences between notes that I was completely conscious of having made a noise. It was like looking back or hearing an echo. My whole body was there. I felt very relaxed. the sound happened to be coming from my mouth but I felt like I was resonating and moving off from everywhere, in all directions. And each note was a separate happening. Every time I opened my mouth I felt like I was declaring myself.

⁸ Julie Austin professional actor and member of the Actors' Research Workshop in Voice led by Ros Steen.

⁹ Steen's workshop is run for established professionals while Wright has introduced the work to actors who have not previously trained at RSAMD.

¹⁰ Steen was appointed voice practitioner to the newly established permanent ensemble company of Dundee Repertory Theatre in 1999 when she introduced the voice work to the company. She continues to work with it still.

¹¹ Pauline Knowles, professional actor and member of the Actors' Research Workshop in Voice led by Ros Steen

"This is who I am, now, at this moment." And each note was a declaration of a different self from the previous, because I had moved on. (Knowles, P., 2007)

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