

‘Next year’s words await another voice’: British Sign Language and voice work with D/deaf actors at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland¹

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In 2015, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) in Glasgow introduced a BA in British Sign Language (BSL) and English for Actors, the first of its kind in Britain (since renamed BA Performance). Alongside planning and teaching on a range of BA and MA courses I was approached (due to specific interest) to evolve, design and teach the new module ‘Register and Text’ for this course. The module was designed in conjunction with Solar Bear, a professional theatre company that aims to ‘embed inclusion and accessibility into Theatre’ (Solar Bear 2016). The module is team-taught with Rita McDade, a specialist in BSL and Co-ordinator at the RCS; as a result, my planning has also undergone several stages of collaborative development.

The Aims, Content and Learning Outcomes were designed specifically to enhance professional training and skills applicable to the industry. My areas of focus were text and vocal technique, paralleling the direct experience of the BA Acting course, but adapting the subject area, content and delivery for the particular needs of D/deaf students. D/deaf refers to students who are Deaf (BSL users) and deaf (hard of hearing students using English as a first language and may use hearing aids or lip read).

How mainstream Voice work (particularly the sound-based element) was going to be translated, I was not quite sure, but I was interested in whether it could enhance the training of D/deaf actors in the same way as their hearing counterparts. I needed to consider what adaptations would be necessary when working with activities such as breath, sung sound, tone work and the Four Qualities of Voice, all of which are fundamental elements of Nadine George Voice Work (NGVW) particularly (though not exclusively) with those whose first language is BSL. NGVW has been researched, created and developed by Dr. Nadine George of Voice Studio International, is the chosen technique of The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and is unique in that it places the person rather than the voice itself at the heart of the learning.

With little prior knowledge of D/deaf performers or the D/deaf community, background information gained through two workshops—‘An introduction of how to work with BSL’ and ‘D/deaf awareness training’, both led by Rita McDade in 2015—was invaluable as a starting point to my experience. The key points that informed my developing approach were:

1. Attempting to meet the students halfway by using basic Sign Language (Level 1) would allow me to be accepted and respected by the group more quickly.
2. Look at the person you are talking to, rather than the interpreter.
3. Asking D/deaf performers to close their eyes removes a second sense and leaves performers extremely vulnerable.
4. Touching performers on the back is not acceptable (unless they are aware of your

¹ The title references Elliot T.S (2004 [1969], p. 194) *The Complete Poems and Plays*. London; Faber and Faber.

presence).

5. If speaking, use the mouth shape in a normal, rather than over-exaggerated way.

6. Visual aids help with explanations.

In 2008, I had journaled that my first experience of NGVW with Professor Ros Steen, the former Head of Research at the RCS who established the Centre for Voice in Performance, had allowed me to access my own power,

[n]ot just the power of my voice, but the huge power held within my body. It was frightening, exciting and empowering all at the same time, and from that moment I knew that this work was different from voice work I had experienced before. (Drake 2013, p. 27)

I wanted to research whether this empowerment could be translated through the body into BSL or Visual Vernacular (VV), a unique physical theatrical form which uses elements of poetry, mime and gesture, as an introduction to the usefulness of voice work to D/deaf acting students.

The core technique of NGVW, from its genesis with Alfred Wolfsohn (1896-1962) in the trenches of the First World War, to the explorative work of Roy Hart (1926-1975) and The Roy Hart Theatre in Malérargues, was developed by George and taken into conventional actor training researching sung sound as a way of connecting to and embodying the authentic human voice.² It offers work that is ‘body centred and organic to open up the potential for improved creative expression on a number of different levels’ (Birch 2013, p. 14). The work deals with authentic human sound and not the idea of a ‘perfect voice’, permeating barriers and allowing both practitioner and student to accept that we are all human and have a right to stand in our own voice, whatever that means to an individual. This is particularly relevant to D/deaf performers who may have a different, if not complex, response to voice as it is taught conventionally.

In adapting and repurposing the work in this direction, I was in direct communication with the founder of NGVW. Observation of my teaching and direct feedback from Nadine George have continued to aid my development of her work. On 3rd May 2019, in a private email exchange, she wrote:

Mel Drake’s work, which adapts my work on the human voice for D/deaf actors, is an organic progression of the work I have been doing for 35 years. I developed the work of Alfred Wolfsohn and Roy Hart so that it would be accessible for everyone to work with.

² Alfred Wolfsohn was a singing teacher and philosopher. Roy Hart, born Rubin Hartstein, was Wolfsohn’s pupil. His work focussed on singing, spoken text and psychology. The Roy Hart Theatre in Malérargues was established by Roy Hart in 1974. Nadine George was a founder member.

Certain contributing factors contained in the work have proved to aid the learning process; one of them is structure and form. Exercises are repeated and remain constant throughout the technical exploration. At the beginning of the process the basic outline is learned, but, as the student becomes more competent, specific technical details are added alongside a repeated structure which helps to cement it into the long-term memory. By working with repetition and building on learning, the individual's focus is 'deeper and more immediately engaged in the work... The structure affords security for further depth of exploration also enabling confidence and allowing students to be present in a given moment' (Drake 2013, p. 27).

Breath work

The initial sequence begins with hands-on breath and body work. Students work in pairs on mats placed in a circle. This part of the work only required small changes and adaptations. The first was the arrangement into a large semi-circle rather than a full circle, so that the students working on their partners could easily glance at the interpreter (standing in front) if they needed re-assurance of the movements. The second was asking that continual physical contact was maintained in order not to surprise the person lying on the mat (as one of the sequences begins with a student lying on their front) and, finally, that the eyes of the student being worked on could remain open. Students were encouraged to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth on the vowel shape AW (ɔ:) using an H in front of the vowel HAW (hɔ:); this ensured work with breath rather than sound. The students had learnt the mouth shape through demonstrations, the use of mirrors and diagrams. The outgoing breath needed to be guided forward and felt by a partner's hand. This was to encourage a stronger breath flow, which was deeply connected into the body and ready to be connected to the sung sound during the next stage (voice work) at the piano.

As we continued working, the repeated structure allowed students to feel comfortable in closing their eyes, enabling them to find a deeper internal connection. The circle became tighter and there was less concern about the hands leaving the body for a short time.

The technique is a non-judgemental process inviting the student to develop individually. This became particularly important when working with D/deaf actors, as within their daily experience many students saw themselves as being judged by the hearing community and facing audism. In 1975, American communication and language researcher Tom L. Humphries coined the term 'audism' to describe the belief that the ability to hear makes one superior to those with hearing loss: 'people who continually judge deaf people's intelligence and success on the basis of their ability in the language of the hearing culture' (Bauman 1975). In our work, and with further experience, peer supported learning was encouraged, allowing the technique to be further embedded by experiential learning outside the formal environment; this aids confidence and adds to student ownership of the work.

While BSL students relate to the importance of breath and body work as performers, the use of spoken voice or making sound is also a political question arising from previous learning environments, practices and language. Connotations to prior school systems are often unfavourable and the use of voice or speech harbours the same insecurities as working in a

second language. Statements such as 'I made big decisions to *never* use my speech voice,' made by a BA Performance student, emerged directly in connection to a previous institution that forced the student to do so.

Similarly, exercises which focus on technical placements and use terminology such as 'correct', 'incorrect', 'right' or 'wrong' also set up the distinct possibility of failure and reluctance to participate in voice-based activities and seemed to relate to previous student experience, including speech therapy trainings and technical articulation work. Voice work, therefore, had to be approached more carefully, with explanation and discussion of why it was instrumental to the actors' process.

Voice work

Based on sung sound (rather than singing), NGVW uses the principle that '[f]our Qualities of Voice, two male and two female, are present in each individual human voice. The vibration, energy and quality of these sounds from the body are explored and linked directly through the text' (Steen and Wright 2008). During voice training with the D/deaf actors, piano-based vibration work begins with the first Quality, *Deep Male*, which George links to the stomach (abdominal connection), based on the vowel AW (ɑ:). Students had used this mouth shape throughout the breathing sequence HAW (hɑ:) and therefore were able to move directly from breath work to sound work at the piano without changing the mouth shape.

When setting up the piano-based work it is usual for a semi-circle of chairs to face the piano. One at a time, each student stands in front of their chair and shares their voice work with the group. This configuration was less effective for D/deaf students as it was necessary for the students observing to see the face and body of the student sharing their work. The student working was also unable to feel the vibration from the piano at this distance. I experimented with turning the piano and asking the student sharing their voice to stand on the far side of the piano, which meant that they were facing the group; however, the view of the whole body remained restricted. I finally decided on the piano facing the group, with two rows of chairs parallel to each other, with the piano at one end, central to the action. Each student stood to the side of the piano (one hand on top) facing the group.

Firstly, students were encouraged to feel vibration through the piano and via the wooden floor. They also requested a demonstration. Initially, the BSL students found it difficult to know whether they were making any sound. Guided by a combination of the BSL sign 'Voice On' and feeling vibration at the level of their larynx, they began to understand the difference between breath and voice.

The first student to volunteer had some hearing. She commented: 'wow, wow, wow, I don't know how to express the feeling'—and her reaction was such that the BSL students became immediately curious and wanted to explore. With added confidence, initial vibrations became stronger and transferred through the body, becoming more intense. One BSL student reflected: 'My body is tingling all over; I can feel it in my legs'.

After an initial exploration, the students were given a line of text from *Macbeth*, which George links to the first quality of sound: ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand’ (Shakespeare 1977, p. 24). They were asked to communicate this to their peers through BSL or VV (or spoken voice) using a maximum of four movements. The first attempts predominantly used the face and hands and, despite guidance, lacked the full-body experience I was hoping for. Students were then asked to repeat the piano work, immediately followed by the line of text and using the full-body vibration and energy felt from the sung sound. A student using speech reflected: ‘I feel enraged I could commit a murder, not in my head but in my body’. A student using BSL reflected: ‘there is power in my body; there is a fire in my stomach’.

As the students continued with the work, they began to recognise a change. One of them commented: ‘I can feel the energy right through my body. It’s as if you *are* the character’. Their initial *idea* of the character of Macbeth grew to a deeper ownership of the character which was connected deeply into the *body*.

As the exercise progressed, it was possible for students to leave the security of the piano and to stand facing me (mirroring the hearing actors). It was then that something remarkable happened. One of the profoundly deaf students began to move her voice up and down as the notes were played on the piano. I asked her how she was doing this: ‘Doing what? Oh, I’m copying your mouth shape and where the breath is in your body’.³

Text work, visuality and spatiality

Text work also proved challenging, including the line of text from *Macbeth*. Initially, I understood that the students would be able to read text as written, but discovered that this was not the case as BSL has a different grammatical structure, making the experience similar to that of a student with English as a second language. ‘In English, for example, we have SVO, the Subject, Verb, Object. “I(S) made (V) some pancakes (O)”’. [...] BSL uses a different concept, of Time-frame, then Topic then Action or a Comment; “Yesterday (time frame) pancakes (topic) made (action/comment)”’ (Appa 2017).

This discovery was made after struggling to understand why written text was an obstacle I had not anticipated. I considered simplifying material but was unhappy that this might dilute the RCS’s high-level training and preferred the creative challenge of keeping the work in line with the standards of the BA Acting students but finding new ways to deliver the training.

I began with poetic text focussing on telling a story through words and meaning rather than including characterisation (a later development). Finding my usual approach with familiar text—for instance, Pablo Neruda’s poetry—too abstract in length, language, and depth of meaning, I needed to make a different choice to facilitate the students’ learning and turned to Haiku.

³ Unfortunately, this happened towards the end of exploring with the first cohort (2015-2018), but this work is ongoing and I aim to explore this further.

Everything I touch
with tenderness, alas,
pricks like a bramble.

(Issa 2014[1928])

Rita McDade translated the text into BSL. This enabled a thorough understanding of the language, allowing us to have a deeper discussion of possible underlying meanings or metaphors. BSL, recognised by the British Government as a language in its own right since 2003, is a Visual Spatial Language, and preparation and use of visual reminders helped with the continual flow of exercises. As a visual aid, text was provided on screen or paper (words and pictures, for example a bramble); this acted as a reminder and allowed time to process ideas, which were ultimately developed into a performance of the text. Over time, the complexity of texts was increased and student confidence grew, allowing the first cohort (2015-18) to be confident in finding, researching, exploring and performing a wide range of texts.

While working, adaptation was also necessary in the studio spaces used. The wall colour (white) proved challenging, as focusing on an interpreter against a white background became strenuous for the students, affecting concentration. Drawing the existing black curtains was a solution, but caused another difficulty as interpreters dress predominantly in black (their dress code) and disappeared into the background. The interpreters agreed to wear coloured, plain clothing which further aided the concentration of students.

Moving forward

The productive challenges encountered through such learning activities have encouraged me to consider gradually building up the complexity of texts until we have explored a full range of styles. More importantly, experience thus far has encouraged me to be curious, to ask more questions and to push boundaries. Recently, for example I ran a workshop where I was told that a deaf/blind student would be attending. My first reaction was ‘How does that work? What do I need to do?’ In reality the answer was a straightforward one; ask questions, focus on the needs of the individual and make small changes. I look forward to continuing research with the present cohort of BA Performance students and the exploration of each individual human voice.

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Biography:

Mel Drake is a Lecturer in Voice at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, a freelance voice practitioner and an accredited teacher of Nadine George Voice Work. Mel trained as an actress and holds an MA in Voice Studies from The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She has taught in a number of leading drama schools and training centres in the UK as well as working internationally in Sweden, France and Malta. Most recently, Mel has been researching and developing NGVW with D/deaf actors in training and performance. She co-presented her initial findings within the Scottish Parliament for Scottish Innovation 2017 and for Culture Republic, Developing D/deaf Cultural Engagement at Glasgow Film Theatre.