Verbatim practices, the acoustics of training, and giving voice: a voice studies afterthought

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Coming out of the 2016 TaPRA Interim Event of the Performer Training Working Group, 'Training to Give Evidence,' gracefully organised by Kate Craddock and hosted by Northumbria University, certain provocations around the ethics of verbatim, documentary, and auto/biographical performance still resonate with me. To navigate such a rich landscape, I would briefly like to outline some thoughts in relation to voice.

Voice and vocal practices were, implicitly or explicitly, a recurrent trope in many of the papers and practical demonstrations. As part of his opening provocation on mimicry and impersonation in verbatim theatre, Tom Cantrell shared interviews with actors that have engaged with the genre. Ken Drury, in an attempt to distance his approach to acting from impersonation and the creation of exact copies, stated that he was mainly interested in the (real-life) person's behaviour. By contrast, Jason Watkins started accessing his character through locating the accent and was mainly preoccupied with rhythm – not necessarily of words, he hastened to footnote, but rhythm of thinking. There is an intriguing underlying assumption perhaps emerging here; acting has to do with behaviours, actions, feelings and thoughts, but the role of vocality in training and performance is at best acknowledged when recast in the shadow of the above, or, at worst, implicitly equated with mimicry.

As a voice studies practitioner-scholar, I constantly come across deeply embedded assumptions about voice, and, when interacting with scholarly environments more closely

affiliated with performance studies, sometimes these assumptions transform into a certain type of polemics. Bodies speak the truth; voices can hide it. Actors are trained into speaking classical/mainstream/canonical texts; performers/artists honour their own voice or prefer to work with the untrained or the amateur. Body-first approaches to text are (ideologically) valued more, and the trained actor as a 'talking head' has been criticised consistently by a lineage of influential practitioners and makers in the UK.[1]

The rich programme of the event, however, proved to (inadvertently) be an opportunity of showcasing fresh approaches to voices. Lexi Strauss shared her thought-provoking talking paintings, with moving mouths inserted in the images and recorded material overlaid so that there is an uncanny sense of a still artwork narrating a real story. In Richard Gregory's presentation of Quarantine's work, we saw dancers and non-dancers in *Wallflower*, trying to 'remember all the times they danced,' and at various points, they would move, simultaneously speaking out the context of, and memory associated with, the dance. Amy Golding shared a snippet of Curious Monkey's new project *Leaving*; the two actors listened through headsets to interviews related to the social care system, and spoke the recorded texts in real time, shifting between the accents, dialects, and vocal mannerisms of various interviewees. Steve Gilroy and third-year students of the University of Northumbria performed an extract of their verbatim piece *In the Middle of the West*, based on the Oklahoma bombing of 1995 and its aftermath (also re-appropriating the opening song of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical). The students, as was revealed in the Q/A, had to mostly rely on recordings of their 'characters' as they couldn't find pictures or videos for most of them online, and some of the key skills they felt they developed when making the piece were patience, precision and attention to detail: they had to not only recite the text but attend to every breath, interrupted word, sigh, or sound—all the non-verbal elements of

spoken delivery. Kate Craddock, culminated an excerpt from her *GB Project* in a profoundly embodied scream, which was created by imitating the gestural language of a chest-beating Iraqi man in the news. The list could go on, but what I hope becomes evident is that in our practices, voice has evolved into a spectrum much broader than speaking the text (or singing the song).

This is not however how we discuss it. I drew attention to this resonant variety of performance acoustics because discussions during the event tended to centre elsewhere: on verbatim artists' process versus electronic media journalism, on characterisation and embodiment, on community, ethics and representation. Voice was mentioned as part of (poignantly stimulating) larger projects, but was not discussed on its own terms. What is the issue with saying 'I do voice'? Or, 'I *also* do voice'?

The lineage of anti-voice prejudice (*voice encapsulating that which is old-fashioned, mainstream, or linked with much debated notions of disembodiment*) in training and, more broadly, performance studies is not the only reason for not engaging with voice in this way. And given the historical association of voice training with accent neutralisation or 'proper' delivery of classical text—with its attached educational and socially exclusionary politics—it is far from unjustified. Another reason is, however, the paucity of critical vocabulary that we employ to talk about voice. Performance studies, by contrast, has developed multiple vocabularies for the racial, gendered, ethnic, affective, posthuman, biodiverse, ecological, intersectional performances of the body.

As I illustrated through my previous catalogue of voice-related practices, it is not, for example, that voice was absent from *the event*; it was either absent from *discourse*[2] or it

was only discussed through the terms and methodologies of other practices, disciplines and areas of concern. Responding to [Lazlo Pearlman](url)'s performance, during which he stripped completely to reveal the autobiographical/evidential potential of the body and then implicated the audience into a heartfelt finale of couple dancing, one participant confessed how resonant she found that this communication only happened between bodies, with no words involved. And Lazlo added that the intention was to avoid using words when inviting audience members to join in the dance. Words, for me, were fully present, nonetheless. The piece was performed, without any breaks, to a soundtrack of versions of the song '[Dance me to end of love](url).' Why weren't these sung words discussed or acknowledged? Why didn't we unpack the impact of a well-known voice, singing a well-known song, on the affective intimacy we found ourselves sharing (and exchanging)? Lazlo may not have spoken, but a voice in the space was repeatedly uttering 'Dance me…'. Similarly, after the performance of *In the Middle of the West*, another participant enquired about the potential blackness of a vocal persona performed by a white student-actress; the question was not fully answered and the subsequent discussion geared more towards the trainee's process and the bodily language that resulted from the verbatim script. Kate Craddock, after offering snippets of nuanced and wide-ranging vocal work, and admitting that finding [Gertrude Bell](url)'s voice was one of the most time-consuming tasks in the rehearsals, remarked that her core concern did not lie in presenting Bell's voice but with presenting a rounded version of Bell. What is the implied distinction, I wonder? Why did the discussion veer away from racialised speech or crooning voices? Why couldn't we, as a collective of performance practitioners and scholars, fully articulate our responses to vocal practice? Given the plurality of voicings showcased in the event and the constitutive interest of the group in training, how could we move towards listening-*in* more closely to the intricacies of vocal practices and listening *out* for an expansive discursivity around vocality? How can we understand and unpack performer

training (also) as an acoustic phenomenon, resounding not only with fixed rules of delivery or standardised versions of spoken regionality, but also with speaking dancers, headphoned trainees, narrating screens, recorded and multiply mediated voices, interdisciplinary vocalities, voiced feedback, vocal interactions, and, significantly, vocal potentialities that can interrupt monolithic versions of voice? How do we go about developing an acoustics of training?

Voice, however, regained prominence in the event as a metaphor, that of 'giving voice.' Alison Forsyth reminded us that verbatim practices can give a literal 'voice' to certain people/groups with a cultural/social space, in/through a more grass-roots approach. A similar concern, even though not in these exact terms, was encountered in Jane Arnfield's proposition that the performer of verbatim texts (of a Holocaust survivor, in this case) becomes a 'first surrogate' of those stories, and the student-performers admitted to being exhaustively preoccupied with following the voices of their 'characters' exactly, because they wanted to do them justice, and because these were real people (unlike characters— outside inverted commas—that one can perform as they choose). 'Voice' here stands for 'person' or 'self,' and leads us to a discussion of ethical responsibility and representation. I have touched above on the emerging vocal multiplicities of voice as practice, but I also want to propose the benefits of the multiple voice as metaphor. Voices are multiple, situationally performed, diachronically evolving, and are not only expressive (of a fixed/presupposed self)—they can be constitutive too. As a bilingual voicer, I am all too aware that I speak in completely different tones, registers, or rhythms in English and in Greek; this does not have to do (only) with linguistic parameters. My adapting and adaptable vocalities make me the voicer that emit them. If I were to be interviewed and performed verbatim as a 'character,' I would have already provided my interviewer with a vocal version that emerged processually through our

interaction. The problem is not that the performer would then voice a *version* of me (is there anything else, in any case?). It is that by conflating my voice with me, without discussing it in these terms, they would have not attended to the constructed nature of voice, and to their part in making this constructed voice sound forth. Voices are immanent in-betweens (and perhaps Alex Kelly alluded to this when, in his paper, he stated that 'whatever the story the person opposite you wants to say is the story you want to hear'). Engaging with the metaphor of voice in complex ways, beyond the 'voice equals self' formula, can help push the (undeniably pertinent in verbatim practices) discussions of ethical responsibility decidedly beyond accountability and towards ethics as constant negotiation and process. From 'I am voicing a person I met, who might also be my audience' to 'I am voicing a person I met, who might also be my audience, and I can *do* things with that voice—because I *have already done* things to that voice when it spoke to me—as long as *this process is ethical*.' Perhaps, as a voice researcher, I am reading too much into an event whose organisers and participants were focused on other issues. But it is precisely this intellectual proximity (*verbatim practices tend to involve some sort of vocal practice*) and the high quality of these rigorous discussions and sharings that foreground for me the urgency to think-through current performance studies discourses in vocal terms. And to look forward to delving deeper into the discussion of voice, as a diverse practice and a multiple metaphor, in upcoming events around performer training.

References

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[1] Joan Littlewood and Peter Hall were among those using the phrase (see Holdsworth 2006, p.51 and Rubin 1994, p.911).

[2] For a sustained critique of the silencing of the voice, see Cavarero 2005, and for its impact on training, Barker 2015 and Thomaidis 2015.