

Building a musical speech in an actor's body

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the enhancement of musical elements in a speech collaborates with the actor's performance in the context of an on-stage performance, bringing together music and theater. For this purpose the paper explores creative musical processes supported by studies on semiotics, performance, emotion and charisma. It ends with a report of an experiment that began in 2002 with theater undergraduate students, which has since become my main research focus.

Keywords: Performance; speech; actor; music

One of the most difficult tasks for a theater teacher is to convince the students of the importance and power of their words on an on-stage performance. Delivering words on a stage scene, as everything else in that context, requires a complete planning, and strategies have to be thought ahead of time, preparing and understanding the very subtle qualities of sound. This is where music comes in. This paper is an attempt to call attention to the sound qualities hidden in an efficient, artistic speech, this "invisible" but very perceptible stimulus that has powers beyond our systematic knowledge.

It is known in the theater literature that Sarah Bernhardt had a voice that "floated" around her and sometimes her eyes "would follow it" (Jouvet *cited in* Aslan 2007:11). All of us are capable of recognizing a familiar voice and are frequently emotionally moved by it. It has been an intriguing coincidence for me to find that "direct" appearances of "God," in sacred texts, are through speech, its voice is heard, God is made real through sound without visual contact. Many rituals around the world involve sound

and talking from unseen beings (Shona in Zimbabwe, Suyá in Brazil, Pigmies in Central Africa for example). Considering these instances of theater, family, religious texts and ritual, if I place them in a semiotic context, I can call the sign differently, but the object in all of them is sound. The interpretant, the effect brought to my mind, has an emotional appeal that alters my body, making it a *dicent* sign, a sign that “is interpreted as really being affected by its object “ (Turino 1999: 229), the object is the sound. Speech requires a muscular movement that involves breathing, which is the link between speech and body – both in movement. The speech also causes body responses that can be on different locales, from skin, to muscles, to emotions. When the sound wave touches our body it is a stimulus that has consequences of the direct type. It is an experience. You feel it as true, happening and actual, as it should be for *dicent* signs, which are understood “to represent its object in respect to actual existence” (Peirce *cited in* Turino 1999:.229)

The theater experience should cause in the audience this type of effect of realness, trueness. Theater has touchable people in front of you, you can feel their breath, their body gets the impact of your movements and sound waves and they react to it, which in turn are absorbed by those actors who make little changes in their performance, and so on. Theater creates a communion, a sort of participation where the audience is the omnipresent witness and shield of the whole act establishing a relationship with people on stage. In certain cases of theater performances, a frame of participatory event, in Turino’s terms (2008), can be brought in and the effect of real experience is enhanced, creating what Schechner calls transportation and transformation .

According to Schechner, performance “is a behavior that is ‘put on’” (Schechner 1986: 121) and has qualities that involve a play of identities, in a paradigm of liminality, as Victor Turner (1974) puts it. A performance is also a speech generated in rehearsal “in an effort to ‘meet’ the text” (Schechner 1986:120). This effort will yield two effects: it can transport and/or transform the people involved. In the play, the performers can be absorbed into their roles but they return to their selves at the end. Schechner calls it a transportation experience. There is also the

transformation type, and the performer cannot go back to who he was in the beginning, because he was transformed during the process. The first type is closer to common Western theater experiences on plays written by Westerners about Western subjects/worldviews.

The second type is closer to what we know as rituals, but also present in the theater practiced in the East such as Noh, Kathakali, Ramlila, and others.

Transportation and transformation are also options for the audience. Transportation is a common trait of common Western theater, as we saw above, and the audience will not be changed by the performance. In the transformation case, we would have a participatory event and definitely the audience would not be the same at the end of the performance. In my opinion, these two possibilities of performance can be pigeonholed only for the purposes of understanding. In reality, they can happen both at the same time, because of the relationship established, the dialects of human contacts that can cause innumerable and unpredictable effects, especially in the case of theater. For me, the difference between performances in altering people's identity goes from very subtle adjustments and new ways of thinking to a complete change of thought and ideas, as if in a scale. The art experience can do this as we can detect in common practice, but not yet fully explain scientifically.

It is known in the theater literature that the closest that we had in recent times trying to put together, in a systematic way, music and theater was the experience by Dalcroze (1865-1950) and Appia (1862-1928) at Hellerau in 1911-13. However, from my point of view, most artists and art-thinkers misunderstand this experience because Dalcroze was interested in developing a music methodology. Even though he got ideas and elements from theater and dance, he had no interest in thinking about a theater method or an actor/dancer training that involved music. However, this link between music and theater does exist and has to be explored when one has in mind a proposal of performance with a new perspective on interpreting roles and training actors for a speech. This is my goal. I

want to focus in the sound and its production by a body to pinpoint crucial aspects of speech, which will put this “chemical” process to work.

Human speech is not a natural given. We can produce sounds as can many other animals, but to manipulate these sounds in order to give them meanings was a long process. Even nowadays a child is taught to talk by another human who already speaks, hence, has the skills of sound manipulation developed. It happens so early and so intensely in our lives that we forget that it was learned, and as so, it can be re-learned, re-thought, re-arranged. This behavior can be revised when we learn another language for example. When talking about sound manipulation I am already thinking about music and the relation between music and body through elements of breath, rhythm, speed, intensity and movement, which come to play a very subtle but powerful and efficient role when observed in speech. Thinking towards this direction, speech gets elements of persuasiveness that “go without saying” but with “singing,” which signifies that persuasiveness come with a hidden layer of musical elements, that is explored in oratory and rhetoric. Luis Tatit in Brazil (1987), a semiotician of popular music, shows how important persuasiveness is in this realm of musical production, because it combines compatibility (superposition of modes of tension) with efficiency. Popular music is “popular” because its sound structures persuade (1987:.3-5)_

There are common people who are very attentive to these sound details and they learn these skills at a more profound level, because the manipulation of sounds goes beyond expressing words and thoughts but also expressing emotions. I follow Perman’s (2010) definition of emotion here: “processes of evaluation and response to signs that alter important ideas and habits of the self” (p.434). So, what I am saying is that there are people that know how to “alter” other people’s ideas through elaborated utterances that spur emotional responses. This sort of responses is felt as true, real and since one had them one believes in what is said without questioning.

On top of these premises, there is also charisma that has to be considered when studying the relation of actors and audience through speech. Max Weber (1864-1920) called attention to charisma in his studies of

leadership and the exercise of authority (1946). Weber saw charisma as a personal trait, a personality quality that gives special and super-human powers to its owner, who, in turn, is considered a visionary invoking inspiration. According to Harvey (2001) charismatic leaders have an outstanding rhetorical ability, hence their utterances are very important. Studies of charisma have been developed since Weber's time and nowadays there is an approach that considers charisma as theatrical (Howel and Frost, 1989 cited in Boje, n/d, Gardner and Avolio, 1998, Boje 2003, 2008, Falco, 1999) and, J. A. S. K. Jayakodi (2008) calls attention to the affective dimension of charisma. For this paper I am combining some of House, Spangler and Woycke 's concepts of charisma:

Charisma refers to the ability of a leader to exercise diffuse and intense influence over the beliefs, values, behavior, and performance of others through his or her own behavior, beliefs, and personal example.... a relationship or bond between a leader and subordinates or other followers involved by emotional impact (1991: 1-4)

I am not saying that an actor is a leader or should have this in mind when performing. What I am saying here is that an actor on stage needs to perform in a way that makes the audience to follow him and believe that what he is doing is true, as if endowed with charisma. In order to do that his actions and movements, through body and speech need to establish a performance relationship that has an emotional impact on the audience. This impact can have an influence on the public, which, in turn, through their responses, can also influence the performance in course and the performers. The elements playing here to make this whole process to work pass through music, because the sound and the sound waves touch people directly, on their skin, and responses are given to this stimulus in a direct way, as true, as real.

I have developed, during the last eight years or so, a methodology of teaching actors how to speak taking into consideration the four parameters of music: pitch, duration, intensity and timbre. Through the knowledge of how these parameters work, learning them, practicing them on words and vocal utterances, creating with them as in a musical composition, makes a big impact on how their utterances are received by the audience. This skill makes the actors handle their performances on stage in order to establish

a bond, transporting and or transforming the spectators and themselves in a truly communicational process through the arts, the expression of emotions.

I work on it as a sort of creative workshop, little by little, building up the musical skills applied to the vocal sounds combined with voice-breathing techniques. To work on pitch, we go from primal sounds, to phonetics, to singing. Students are required to sing *a cappella* imitating popular Brazilian singers such as Elis Regina or Néelson Gonçalves, or others. I do not impose that girls imitate female singers and vice versa with boys. Since I am training theater actors it is a good exercise to try to imitate the opposite sex's utterances. What I do require is that the students follow exactly the same places of breathing, the same mannerisms, the same dialect of the chosen singers, and that they follow closer the intonation, in order for others to recognize the tune. But they do not need to sing absolutely in tune, as I would require if they were music students.

To work on duration there are a lot of elements to practice, mainly pulse, speed, rhythm, and silence. I work with them in this order, initially, to make things easier. One of the exercises is to follow on time the pulse of a waltz, or another genre that is easy to feel the pulse and move to it. Through this exercise they perceive the agogic – the variation of speed during performance – and feel the flow of the music. They also begin to learn how to listen, which is a very important requirement that can only be attained with practice. Dictations, games, motor coordination and independency of movement are used to practice rhythm and they are encouraged to compose a song from a poem, with the objective only to perform, not write down their composition.

To work on intensity, they are required to move according to romantic pieces, mainly, with their bodies. Initially they show larger movements with forte and fortissimos, and small movements with piano and pianissimo. But they also have to work on oppositions: when listening to forte they do small movements, if they listen to a crescendo in sound, they make diminuendo with their bodies, an inward trajectory, from outside movement to body-centered movement.

To work on timbre, besides the common exercises of recognizing different instruments' timbre, I also make them to create timbres with their voices, trying to imitate things of daily life such as a door ringing, a printer with problems, a characteristic sound around, an animal. So, an interesting game is to make a vocal sound for each body movement made. Known words are prohibited. These exercises are fun to do and students learn through playing.

Finally, I bring all this knowledge together with the composition of vocal scores. They are required, over a small piece of dramaturgical text, to compose a score to it, using and managing the parameters and keeping in mind what they want from the audience, where they want to lead their attention, where to expect their reactions. Nevertheless, the score is to be written down after various practical attempts of trial and rejection, rehearsals "to meet the text," in Schechner's words above.

The very first time that I could check the results of this long process with students was last year, 2010, through the theater department in Paraíba state, Brazil. The play is called *Lata Absoluta* (Absolut Can). The play writer is my colleague, Paulo Vieira, well known in this region of the country. The text could be described as absurd theater drawing influence from Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and others. *Lata Absoluta* has two characters on stage, two women. We had two actresses to play them: Cecília Retamoza and Celly de Freitas who were my voice students for six semesters, who learned and practiced most of the exercises described above. The text is very hard to memorize and it does not say much, as we can see in the very first dialogue:

Márcia: Shit!
Nanda: What is it?
Márcia: What are we going to do?
Nanda: I don't know. Do what?
Márcia: I don't know.
Nanda: So, whatever.
Márcia: But I cannot bear it!
Nanda: Bear what?
Márcia: Doing nothing.
Nanda: So, do something.
Márcia: What?
Nanda: I don't know, damn!
Márcia: Mam, but you don't help!
Nanda: To help in what? (Vieira, n/d, my translation)

The text goes on for almost an hour and a half like this and the actresses were able to bring a lot of movement, fun and different meanings to the text throughout, playing with sounds and using the musical parameters that we worked so much. One of the scenes that was most commented on is towards the end, when the characters are talking about humanity. Here, the actresses perform a dialogue between a monkey and a parrot discussing this theme, making the body movements and the voices of these animals, applying the musical parameters as in a music composition.

I heard a lot of compliments from my colleagues, experts in theater, that the voice work was really good. Thus, I think that my goals were reached. Talking with the students, they feel and think that now they have a different understanding and awareness of speech sound. They know now how to work towards accomplishing the musical goals of speech in order to move the audience, influencing them through their actions on stage, in an attempt to alter ideas and habits of self, making identities even more flexible.

Different audiences have seen it and were touched by it. They commented on the body work (which was proposed by Valéria Vicente, another colleague) and on the voice work. Many of them just enjoyed and came to me later to tell me that they were impressed. Even though it is too early to make any conclusions because owing to work that has to be done, I think that the path is a promising one and music and theater when worked together can communicate deeper; it can have an important role in changing people's lives.

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Author's biography

Adriana Fernandes got her PhD from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in Ethnomusicology. She is full-time professor at Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brazil, teaching voice for acting in the undergraduate program in theater, and ethnomusicology in the music graduate program. Her research interests are the connections between music and other arts.