The Challenge of Theorizing the Voice in Performance

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Voice is a challenge, however we think about it, probably because we don’t think about it very much at all. We use and abuse our voices, joyfully and fretfully, all through our lives without giving them any attention unless there is a problem. We hear voices and obey or reject what we think we perceive without a moment’s thought on the nature of the voice itself, the sound that resonates in our bodies so lightly yet so deeply. When the voice is called upon to fulfil tasks of an extraordinary nature, such as performing a text in a live performance, thinking about its function, its manner, its style, or its health becomes not only significant but essential. It is not enough to train the voice; nor is it enough merely to acknowledge its existence: a theoretical understanding of voice, its nature, and its function is crucial to thinking through the challenges that accompany voice training for performance. The voice is not a stable site of authenticity and identity, since there is nothing inherently unvarying about the nature of identity. However, in re-imagining the voice (whether object ormedium) as a site of contestation, it is possible to engage with the voice as an entity in its own right, emerging as it has from its submerged status as either a metaphor for individuality or as a carrier of language. For the purposes of this article, the voice I refer to is the result of the physical act or process that brings sound waves into existence in the performance of a scripted text.

The voice of the actor is uniquely contingent upon the self constituted in the moment of speaking; in the case of the skilled actor – one who willingly, consciously, and whole-heartedly appropriates the text in the moment of speaking – the self of the speaker is made present in the performance of text, and the voice contains within its fluctuations and nuances the character that emerges from the actor’s engagement with the text. Even for an unskilled performer, the voice is the sound of the language provided by the playwright as well as the sound unique to the actor. In this sense, the performing voice has a unique identity, which is contingent upon the self of the actor. There are at least two intricately interrelated challenges disrupting the recognition of the voice as unique and defying perception of the voice as constituting the very presence of the actor, manifested audibly. By “presence” I mean the ability of certain actors to create the circumstances whereby the audience sees, hears, comprehends, and acquiesces in the illusion produced by theatricality. As Leslie Bennett and Paul Meier point out, “An audience can tell the difference between the actor whose silence is dumb and whose stillness is frozen, and the actor full of the freedom to speak or move, but who exercises restraint” (38). In the act (or more accurately, in the process) of being present, I suggest, the voice is the presence of the actor, not in an essentializing way that can be disregarded as empirically unfalsifiable (and therefore incapable of being rigorously addressed in scientific terms) but in that the voice is a physical manifestation of the presently occurring, unique self of the actor. Jacques Derrida points out that "the voice . . . has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind" (11), and, since modern neurobiology has demonstrated that the mind is informed by and responsive to the body and its continuous transformations, it follows that the voice reflects and resonates with those transformations. In this article, I do not propose to argue the case for the uniqueness of the voice but rather to elaborate on some of the challenges that present themselves in the course of attempting to theorize the voice in the performance of text, while addressing some aspects of the challenges the actor faces in allowing the transforming self to be heard and perceived as an original vocal performance text.

The first challenge arises out of the constraints of a culture that has traditionally valued the written word as the preferred resource for interpreting and analysing performance. This privileging of the written word both informs and is informed by the notion of the voice as a mere carrier of text, whereby the voice itself is assumed to be "synonymous with speech" (Titze xviii) and language. In a televised interview, Robert Lepage has observed that "[w]e tend to confuse voice, language and speech, and they are three radically different things; of course they are all interconnected, and they all serve each other's purposes. The voice is not language, and it's not speech; the voice is about the individual." Misconceptions regarding the differences between and among voice, language, and speech are implicated in the second challenge – the nature of perception, specifically where vocal performance is concerned. It is impossible to address the voice in the act of performing text without reference to language or speech, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss perceptions of the voice without reference to the way language has traditionally been privileged. Rather than confront this apparent symbiosis, I aim to focus attention on the voice itself in the act of making language audible or perceptible to another listener by means of speech. In order to address the first challenge, that of the tradition that privileges the written word, there are certain historical and philosophical conventions – of the western world, at least – that need to be addressed. These conventions have created the circumstances whereby the voice can be considered, on the one hand, in its material substance (as sound waves created in the body) without reference to the unique humanity of the being producing the sound or, on the other, as nothing more than a messy and potentially unreliable vehicle for language. Traditionally, it has been the project of western philosophy to universalize, "to eliminate the bodily singularity of every existent in the name of a universal, figural abstraction" (Kottman xxii). One consequence of this move has been our ignoring or denying that the voice, as Adriana Cavarero explains, "is not only sound; it is always the voice of someone" (148) and as such is unique.

The precise nature of the sound of each voice is contingent upon the complex structure of the human body. At its most basic level, as Floyd Muckey explains, "A complete investigation of voice production involves two steps: first, a study of the voice itself, or the various combinations of airwaves which affect the auditory mechanism of the listener; and, secondly, an enquiry into the action of the mechanism which produces the voice" ("Natural Method" 625). Most scientific studies address pathologies of the vocal system and provide vital information for the healthy maintenance and training of the performing voice while tending to support the concept of the voice as a mere physical mechanism, on a par with legs that walk or arms that carry. These studies are no more useful for understanding the nature of the performing voice than a study of the leg muscles is for understanding the nature of dance.

Comparing the performing voice to the performing body could be one way of rescuing the voice from its apparent "invisibility." Discussions of physical theatre and dance explore the body not only as a physical but also as a cultural and political entity. However, in order to focus upon the voice as a temporal entity, we need an appropriate vocabulary with which to represent both its invisibility and its materiality. In The House of Fame, Chaucer observes that

Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken,
And every speche that ys spoken,
Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,
In his substaunce ys but air (lines 765–68)

Voices are sound waves creating disturbance in the air, unavailable to our sense of sight; it is tautological, then, to describe a voice as "invisible." So how do we address the problem that the voice is so often unacknowledged, unrecognized and uncredited unless something goes "wrong," or unless something in the form of pathology intrudes into the listener's awareness?

Clearly, it is not "inaudible," the aural equivalent of "invisible," since its very audibility allows such "wrongness" to be heard. Even now, speech pathologists and voice scientists acknowledge that there is still much to be learnt about how the voice actually functions, which could explain, in part, why there has been so little scholarlymaterial published on the subject, compared to the philosophical and socially oriented studies of dance and movement. Joanna Cazden observes that, from perspective of what the voice-training community now understands, "until a generation ago . . . [the voice was] barely understood at all as a physical organ, therefore ONLY addressed via realms of mystery, metaphor" (Personal communication 28 May 2009). Nevertheless, mystery and metaphor are the currency of most voice trainers and practitioners and recent developments in voice science support the notion that, while imagery is neither "factually accurate" nor "precise," it is one of the most demonstrably useful tools in the process of facilitating healthy, dynamic, and effective voices ("Imagery" 2), as anyone working in the areas of speech pathology or voice training is aware.

The published, practical methodologies of voice trainers such as Patsy Rodenburg, Kristin Linklater, and Cicely Berry offer imaginative processes for developing the physical power and flexibility of the voice but generally fall short of articulating the philosophical underpinnings of their theories in ways that can be challenged. Cazden argues that there are hints and assumptions inherent in their writings suggestive of a "Rousseau-ian notion of individual freedom" and the concept of the "noble savage that remains when socially-based rigidities are peeled away” (E-mail communication 18 May 2009). Exploring the voice with reference to these and other underlying attitudes would, I propose, greatly enhance the current debate over the nature and status of the voice in performance. In a recent conversation, Philip Thompson suggested that greater emphasis among voice trainers upon “situating their methodologies within an intellectual framework” would also provide fertile ground for a more rigorous exchange between the practitioner and the scientific communities. As Cazden and Acker explain in their paper “Risky Dialogues,” there is currently an unacceptable level of suspicion and lack of creative dialogue between these two communities.

There are two major areas that offer clues as to how we came to this particular impasse: the traditions of “visualism” and those of “phonologism.”

With regard to the first, the language used to discuss our observations has been largely governed by visual metaphors. Don Ihde contends that “[v]isualism . . . may be thought of as an implicit reduction to vision whose roots . . . [that] lay at the center of the [classical] Greek experience of reality” (6; emphasis in original). Aristotle points out that “[a]bove all we value sight . . . because sight is the principle source of knowledge and reveals many differences between one object and another” (qtd. in Ihde 7; emphasis in original).

Reduction to the visual is demonstrated time and again in writings that ignore the value, sometimes even the actual presence, of the voice in performance. For example, in spite of the promising title, Martin Welton’s essay “Seeing Nothing: Now hear this . . .” examines the production War Music (performed in total darkness) chiefly in terms of the lack of light/ vision, referring only in passing to sound, the crucial element of the performance. His conclusion that there is “a certain veracity” to the claim that the performancewas “characterized by darkness, by nothing” (emphasis in original) is mitigated by his proposal that this experience challenges notions of “representation and interpretation,” having “important ramifications for a wider theory of theatrical performance” (154). With this I would agree, and suggest that a theory incorporating positive reference to the vocal contribution would be a greatly enhanced theory. Without losing access to concepts of abstraction or imaginative representation, it should be possible to acknowledge the substantial nature of the voice, and the fact that vocal sound affects not only the intellect, but also creates emotional and tactile responses which enhance the listener’s experience. Thus in the space of darkness, and in the absence of visual stimulation, the sound waves, both vocal and instrumental, provide the audience with an intensely experiential appreciation of the directionality of the sound – and therefore the proxemic elements created and encountered by the performers, their proximity and separation to each other, and to the audience members. The vocal qualities inform (subject to interpretation by the individual audience members) of the relative states of tension, ease, discomfort, joy and all the subtleties in between, depending upon the sensitivity of hearing, of empathy and indeed of prior experience of each audience member. It is quite possibly the sound of the voices in the darkened space that provides the sensation of “nothingness” mentioned by Welton in the first place.

There is no need for an audience to be consciously aware that this is how they arrive at their personal perception of the experience, but there is no harm in it either. In The Fall of June Bloom: A Modern Invocation,1 the character of June Bloom begins by directing the audience's attention to the voice, defining it as the "sound of the human self – my voice is me, audible" (Kennedy 3) just as her attention is distracted by another voice, that of her own worst fears (voiced by another actor). The audience is challenged to engage with the obvious fiction of an actor playing a part who appears at one moment to be speaking extempore to the audience, and the next to be encountering real or imagined beings in the same physical space. The effectiveness of the performance depends on the ability of the actors to create the illusion that they are speaking truthfully across a range of dramatically and stylistically diverse situations.

To speak "truthfully" as an actor is related to, but not identical with the notion of truth as it is generally understood in legal, philosophical, or linguistic terms. Truth in performance is an experience rather than a fact, and it involves both actor- and audience-engagement in the experience. In order for the experience to be perceived as truthful, the actor must have the skill and the conscious willingness to allow the contingent self to be heard. This is not the same thing as the tradition in western philosophy of crediting the voice with being the ultimate sound of "truth," a notion that is usually traced back to Plato (Kimbrough "Contemporary Theory" 262–63). And, while the associated conventions of "phonologism" may seem to have raised the voice to an elevated status with regard to the communication of "truth," they confused the issue by elevating the written word as well, in accordance the Aristotelian principle that "spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words" ("De Interpretatione" 16a: 3–8). Although Derrida claims that writing has been debased in this process of elevation (12), it is, nevertheless, the case that the sound of the voice as it makes language audible is too easily drawn into recalled being in the form of the written word (in our western-educated culture). Kimbrough refers to the "dominant structures afforded by typography and vision" ("Sound of Meaning" 265) as the foundational tools for acquiring knowledge. There is the temptation to "project onto speech itself the visual mark of thought" (Cavarero 42), abstracting the signified, or that-which-is-spoken-about, from its relationship with the producer of the thought, thus conflating speech with language. As a result, the physical and material substance of the voice is denied its role in allowing the existence of the thought to be perceived in the first place. Voice, in the act of speaking, gives body to thought, expressing it from the speaker's body to be perceived by the listener. Where the listener may choose to acknowledge consciously that what is heard is speech, what is perceived is the voiced thought shaped into the phonemes that constitute the spoken word. As the character Jerome puts it in The Fall of June Bloom,

[My voice] is a process of transformation from me to you. My thoughts evolve, and those that survive demand expression; they take aural shape within my breath inside my body, the vibrations set in motion swirl and blend and reform on their way into the room where you might judge them – wanting. I let them go, allow them to move freely through my bones, my skin, our shared space, your skin and your bones. (Kennedy 18)

Voice is ephemeral in that it occurs in time, structured by audibility and silence. It lingers in the mind, just as an image does. The written word is an image, and in reducing Logos from its status as the symbol of "universal reason" (Kimbrough "Contemporary Theory" 262) to that of a visual representation of thought, Plato aimed to establish "the visual as the guarantor of truth as presence" (Cavarero 42). This may seem to contradict the phonologic tradition, which Kimbrough describes as "designat[ing] a history of thought that sought for truth in the voice and rational discourse" (in other words, rhetoric) ("Contemporary Theory" 262). I would argue, however, along with Adriana Cavarero, that seeking for truth in philosophical terms is equivalent to seeking for a universal, inarguable ideal, or abstraction (42–43); this is a seductive ambition, but one which has been largely discredited by more recent philosophical, psychological, and indeed neuroscientific discussions, which call into question the notion of "truth" as something fixed and immutable, capable of being disseminated accurately and definitively. In fairness to the ancient Greeks, since a sound cannot be grasped or held up to view, it seems only logical (in terms of a culture that understood vision to be the means of accessing knowledge) to take the written sign of the spoken word as a more reliable, repeatable representation of the truth of that knowledge. At the same time, it becomes clear that the prioritizing of the voice as the giver of truth will lead to the confusion of voice and thought, or voice and the word, or voice and language itself, as speech occurs.

In attempting to rescue the voice from its impossibly high pedestal, Derrida challenges the Aristotelian view by addressing the connection "[b]etween being and mind, things and feelings" (11) as a form of translation of one into the other, the unspoken experience into the words used to signify that experience. The "absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning" (12) are revealed as unsustainable, unless one accepts the notion of the "idealization of sound," of the voice as the purest essence of being. Essentializing the voice has been unhelpful both philosophically and practically, since, by repudiating the fallibility that being human entails, it allows the role of the speaker to be characterized as something extra-human or outside of our intrinsic sense of what it means to be human. Derrida's project, however, while revealing the philosophical problem inherent in the perception of voice as essence, exposes the tendency to confuse voice with speech and language.

In the case of a performance that deliberately engages with abstract or non-textually intended sound – for example, a voice divorced from language – the voice may be relegated (in discussion) to the realms of metaphor and thus be wholly deprived of its phenomenological presence. Writing about the performance of a number of Samuel Beckett plays, Rene´e Riese Hubert observes that "the human voice can be compared to a modulated murmur resounding in a twilight setting . . . In Play . . . the organic human voice has completely disappeared" (243). Yet apparently words are spoken by "characters" (albeit at great speed) and "Play is filled with words": "[t]he man and the two women constituting the cast talk without taking a breath as long as the light persists." "Speech," in this case, Hubert claims, is a "'toneless,' 'unorganic' mechanical voice . . . the characters do not speak to express themselves or to reply to one another" (243). In order to justify her claim that this device results in a form of "silence," since the characters cannot be understood nor can they "understand" each other, she denies the existence of the "organic human voice." Voice has been subsumed into speech and, in this context, becomes a metaphor for unintelligibility. Even if one chooses to interpret the piece as the characters' having been taken over, possessed by an alien presence, it must be acknowledged that the actors' voices produce this illusion, that their sonic dexterity provides the audience with the uncanny gift of alien sound. Indeed, the result is demonstrably paradoxical.

Such comments on the performed works of Beckett are common, but ignore the physical demands of vocal performance; and while I accept the validity of exploring the abstraction of meaning, I would suggest that denying the organic presence of what Cavarero describes as "singular voices" is tantamount to supporting the myth that the voice is no more than a carrier of language. Thus, when the language is presented unintelligibly, the voice is assumed to carry no meaning and have no significance in its own right. Cavarero insists that

> [g]iven that it is nevertheless linked to the realm of the sayable – although this link becomes ever more bothersome – logos concerns itself with saying, but not with the human world of singular voices that, in speaking, communicate the speakers to one another . . . Chained to speech, but indifferent to the vocal, reciprocal communication of the speakers themselves, logos ends up moving toward a realm of mute, visible, present signifieds that come to constitute its origin and its fulfillment. (43)

In an important sense, the history of western culture is the history of the realm of mute objects. Yet, in performance, voice exists as a material, substantial event or sequence of events; it is the voice of the actor, the voice of the character, and the voice of the author. In the written text, voice exists metaphorically as the voice of the author and that of the character; however, it is also revealed as the inner voice of the reader. In spoken performance or in written text, voice is mediated by the individual perceiver, and this leads to the conundrum whereby the voice (both the heard and the silent versions) may be perceived by different listeners – all of whom are unique and have unique perspectives and responses – as expressing something subtly (or perhaps conspicuously) different.

Perception is the result of cognitive processes, and just as a voice is often confused with the impulse to communicate, so too is perception itself often confused with the object perceived or experienced. If we are to give voice due credit for the contribution it makes to performance, we need to differentiate between and among the voice, the thing perceived, and the "apperception," or how the perceiver interprets the perception.

Voice is a physical phenomenon subject to the laws of physics. As such, it can be measured by technical instruments in terms of what Patrice Pavis refers to as “objective factors – frequency, intensity, timbre” as well as verbal flow, pace, intonation, and stress (or emphasis); it is also recognizable as having “subjective factors . . . the most numerous, difficult to understand, and, above all, decisive in the analysis of voices, actors, and mise-en-scenes” (134). These latter factors, which include emotional intent, “the projection of the self,” and the “‘lived’ quality” (134–36) (what Roland Barthes famously referred to as “the Grain of the Voice” [188]), are at the heart of what the voice actually constitutes in the event of its existence. These are the qualities that led the ancient Greek philosophers from Heraclitus on to assume that, if there was such a thing as the Logos – which can be defined, according to Kimbrough, as “a divine and universal reason” – then the means by which such a thing was communicated, that is the voice, must be the carrier of that “universal reason” (“Sound of Meaning” 9). For the contemporary thinker, the problem is the confusion between the Platonic ideal or abstract pre-existing truth, on the one hand, and the actual spoken word, as voiced by a human being who is obviously not “ideal” or perfect, on the other. Hence the voice must be rescued from its pedestal and from the impossible position phonocentric excess puts the speaker in of being responsible for the absolute truth assumed to underpin spoken language, as against the singular truth, or fact, of the speaker’s presence in the moment of speaking.

One way round the impasse is to consider the voice as an event, or series of events, rather than as an object. As a temporal event, voice is not “a matter of ‘subjectivity’ but a matter of the way the phenomenon of sound presents itself” (Ihde 94). Ihde insists that the auditory event cannot be

> isolate[d] it from its situation, its embedment, its “background” of global experience . . . But just as no ‘pure’ auditory experience can be found, neither could a ‘pure’ auditory ‘world’ be constructed. Were it so constructed it would remain an abstract world. (44)

Yet the performance text, while itmay present or represent an abstract world, is nevertheless, for the length of its duration and within its relational context, an event that occurs. Likewise, the vocal performance text, while representing, imitating, or impersonating a particular speaker/character, occurs as a series of interconnected, interrelated, and self-referential events.

Sound is traditionally experienced as situating “hearing as the temporal sense and the ‘world’ of sound as one of flux and flow” (Ihde 85). Any perceivable vocal event is a combination of many mutually dependent events, both sequential and contiguous. Voice is usually encountered as the voice of someone, while the context of the play and the language spoken affect the “shape or directionality of temporal focus” (90) and the “potential,” which may be “futurally oriented” (91). “Potential,” in this context, means the expectations created by a particular tone, quality, or emphasis; when these expectations are met, the response may be experienced as comfortable, reassuring, or exciting; when they are not met the result may be boredom, irritation, or confusion. It may be a question of appropriateness and balance, what some would call “taste.” This factor is of particular relevance, for example, in the performance of Shakespeare, where familiarity with the text or with previous performances can have the effect of creating expectations in the audience (Ihde 92–93). The perception of the vocal event in phenomenological terms resides not only in the physical characteristics of the vocal sound, or the signification of the language, but in the “whole context” of the experience, including factors that may not be visible but that are nevertheless “co-present” (Selinger 267). Thus it was possible for director Judi Lehrhaupt, listening for the first time to a teleconferenced rehearsal of The Fall of June Bloom, to observe the differences between the various actors as

VOICE 1 active, connected with the thoughts behind the lines.
VOICE 2 didn’t seem connected to the words
VOICE 3 experimenting with ways to say the lines (Lehrhaupt)

In this instance, Ms. Lehrhaupt was unaware that, in fact, Voice 1 was performing learnt text on her feet, Voice 2 was cold reading while seated, and Voice 3 was reading the text aloud for the third time while seated. It could be claimed that the physical circumstances of the performance were in some way evinced by the vocal presentation, and while “experience cannot be questioned alone or in isolation but must be understood ultimately in relation to its historical and cultural embeddedness” (Ihde 20), experience must also be addressed with attention to the physical placement of the event in time and space.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it is “the role of the senses in perception” (qtd. in Baldwin 10) to remain invisible as they organize experience. We do not notice the role of the senses in organizing experience and “constituting” the physical world; it is precisely their business to make this role invisible to us (Baldwin 10). Clearly, this applies not only to the visible and tangible worlds but also to the audible one. In our consciousness of the nature of perceived sound, we realize that our perception of sound as such, unlike an audible experience, is usually dependent upon external factors drawing our attention to its sonic qualities. For example, in listening to birds while gardening, I am aware of birds, and I may perceive their twittering as pleasant or annoying, depending on the circumstances at the time. I would only question the nature of the sound itself in a context that drew my attention to my awareness of the sound, a kind of second degree awareness that interrogates my ability to hear in the first place or the nature of my perception of the sound: Can I hear as well as I used to? Am I hearing and perceiving the full range of sounds available? Am I able to differentiate between the calls of different birds, and if so, how do I do it? In other words, my awareness begins to explore my perception of the sound rather than my experience of it.

In order to engage with the voice in the act of performance, criticism needs to adopt a theoretical approach that acknowledges the whole person, a physical, thinking, functioning entity. Merleau-Ponty rejects Cartesian mind–body dualism,[2] and proposes, as Daniel Primozic describes it, “the notion of the body–subject in terms of the essential role the body plays in perception, knowledge and meaning” (15). This notion has implications for discussions about performance from the perspective of the actor as body–subject, as well as the listener/analyst/critic/audience as body–subject, since “it is impossible . . . to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts" (Merleau-Ponty, "Primacy" 15). The act of vocal performance requires the existence of the speaking actor, whose "body's animation is not the assemblage or juxtaposition of its parts"; that body is, as Merleau-Ponty explains, a "thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world and its cohesion is that of a thing" ("Eye" 163). "Intellectualism clearly sees that the 'motif of the thing' and the 'motif of space' are interwoven, but reduces the former to the latter"; the "experience of our own body [on the other hand] teaches us to embed [what we experience] in existence" (Phenomenology of Perception 148). This holds true whether the experience is that of performing or of listening to a performance. For example, in my reflections on my own work as a practitioner, my physical body can never be "merely an object in the world, under the purview of a separated spirit. It is on the side of the subject; it is our point of view on the world" ("Unpublished" 5; emphasis original). Such observations would be irrelevant, however, should they attempt to validate or explain the perception of a performance only in terms of either the actor or audience member. As Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, it is through relations in the world with other beings, other objects, that experience is perceived. His example of the handshake, whereby "I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching" (Visible 142) provides an analogy for the sound of the speaking voice, which occurs in the body of the speaker and that of the listener, creating the "fundamental fission or segregation of the sentient and the sensible which, laterally, makes the organs of my body communicate and founds transitivity from one body to another" (143).

In spite of Merleau-Ponty's conviction that "our world is principally and essentially visual," we need not succumb to the notion that "one would not make a world out of scents or sounds" (Visible 83). Within and between the bodies of actors and audience, the vocal sound exists as "object" interacting with matter and as "identity and difference" (142). The voice is not visible; yet its invisibility does not negate its substance or its tangibility. As vocal sound is shaped by language, it retains its identity as the sound of the speaker, and the sound is contingent upon and informed by the "sensible world or history . . . the present and the past, as a pell-mell ensemble of bodies and minds, promiscuity of visages, words, actions" (84). Thus, it is not the case that I know nothing unless I know language for communicating what I know. Knowledge does not reside in language, although language is required for its dissemination. Knowledge resides in what I believe to be integral to my sense of self, just as it is informed by my culture, society, family, and education. This is no less significant an issue for the actor of a learned text than it is for an extempore speaker. The language of the text, even before it is memorized, is always already interpreted and understood with reference to what the actor knows or believes. Someone's initial response to the language of a text more often than not draws upon the most obvious (to that individual) positioning of "meaning" in relation to his or her present view of the world. Getting beyond this superficial reading involves a rigorous scrutiny in the rehearsal room of the seemingly impossible hurdles (“I wouldn’t say that”; “My character wouldn’t say that”; “I’ll just rattle through the boring bits”), that the actor’s belief system places in the way. These apparent obstacles affect the decisions the actor makes and, consequently, inform the quality of the sound as it is expressed, becoming part of the voice that is ultimately perceived by the audience.

If I can return briefly to the language of contemporary voice-training methodologies, with all due respect for their utility and practicality, I would suggest that there is no such thing, in theatre, as a “natural” or even a “free” voice. The voice heard in performance is mediated; it is an illusion of a “natural” voice (when it is perceived as a “natural” voice). The actor is never just “speak[ing] to the point” as David Mamet would have it (22). The “unreasoning” belief systems of the individual (70) help to construct his or her physical state and, in turn, inform the sound of the voice. When the actor has consciously explored the beliefs and experience of a character, those explorations and subsequent understandings and possibly misconceptions will also affect and inform the quality of the sound. The problem Mamet identifies as “funny voices” (33) often points to an attempt to control the quality of the sound by consciously controlling the emotional life of the character; as Mamet indicates, this struggle is a lost cause. Emotions are a response, not a goal. I know what I want to do, “not by inspecting a feeling or state of consciousness as though it were an object, but by (imaginatively or actually) experiencing myself performing an action” (Newton 77). As even Mamet acknowledges, for the actor to create the necessary conditions to be able to seem to “speak out even though frightened” (Mamet 33; emphasis in original) requires “unlearning” the habits of self-control and acceptable behaviour that society and culture have embedded in our bodies, and this unlearning depends on training (32). Such training ideally incorporates (in addition to the practical skills required for professionally demanding use of the voice) a means of dealing with the consequent “freedom” from restraints.

With regard to the performance of “realism” or “naturalism,” the voice we recognize from everyday conversation does not project itself easily into a large space without force or strain; nor does it reveal subtle emotional shifts. Indeed, it doesn’t reveal extreme emotional states either; rather it exposes the attempt to conceal them. The “difference between the register of the voice and the register of speech” is significant in that the “voice indeed does not mask, but rather unmasks the speech that masks it” (Cavarero 24). This is evident in listening to a foreign language performance expertly delivered, when the intellectual and philosophical content of the text are inaccessible but the moods of the characters and the complexities of their inter-relationships are vocally apparent. In life, as against in the theatre, we are able to recognize constricted sounds containing restrained force as anger. When we hear these sounds in the theatre, they are more likely to impede our engagement with the context of the piece by raising irrelevant concerns about the actor’s voice. The character is more “believable” or acceptable as a character in the given context when the actor is able to create the illusion of an angry voice, as against presenting the obstructed sounds of a “genuinely” or “naturally” angry voice. However, while that illusion might be termed a fiction, the voice heard is, in fact, the voice of the actor, produced by a physical body and striking the auditory senses of the listener. It takes a high degree of training to achieve this illusion, to be able to sustain the power and creatively generated nuances of vocal quality while creating the aural illusion of emotional transformations.

“The meaning of his work cannot be determined from his life,” says Merleau-Ponty (“Ce´zanne” 61), and this dictum can also be applied to the work of an actor, when that work is the performance of a text, scripted or otherwise. Meaning, in this case, as in any form of art, is something that occurs between the performance of the artist and the reception by the audience. It is newly created in every instance, and for each member of the audience. However, as Merleau-Ponty also points out, any perceived meaning is, nevertheless, informed by the circumstances of the artist’s life and experience (“Ce´zanne” 71). Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, turns to the visual arts to elucidate his argument, and until there is a substantial body of philosophical discussion that engages with the voice to exemplify the nature of perception, it is necessary to draw upon examples such as these as analogues for the way sound acts in the service of a creative endeavour, such as the performance of a prior scripted text. For example, Ce´zanne’s painting was, according to Merleau-Ponty, “paradoxical: he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface” (“Ce´zanne” 63). He sought to “avoid the ready-made alternatives suggested to him: sensation versus judgment; the painter who sees against the painter who thinks; nature versus composition” (“Ce´zanne” 63); he refused to “separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear.” He discovered “what recent psychologists have come to formulate: the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one” (“Ce´zanne” 64). Likewise, to place upon the stage the kind of vocalizing we converse with in everyday life is to diminish the capacity of language to present even a representation of that life. If we speak the “artificial” text provided by an effective playwright in an everyday, conversational voice, then we prevent the audience from perceiving the characters inhabiting the world of the play. When we hear, in a theatre, what sounds to us like ordinary people inhabiting a recognizable everyday world, we are hearing, in fact, an audible illusion.[3]

Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Ce´zanne and his work depends upon an underlying philosophy of embodiment – his insistence that all experience is embodied and hence the body informs both awareness of and perception of any experience: “[E]ach of us is not so much a ‘consciousness’ as a body which ‘embraces and constitutes the world’” (Baldwin 10). Moreover,

> [O]ur embodiment brings to our perceptual experience an a priori structure whereby it presents itself to us in consciousness as experience of a world of things in space and time whose nature is independent of us. It is our “bodily” intentionality which brings the possibility of meaning into our experience by ensuring that its content, the things presented in experience, are surrounded with references to the past and future, to other places and other things, to human possibilities and situations. (Baldwin 10)

Such “bodily intentionality” surely applies in situations of self-awareness (of one’s own actions and perception) as well as in those involving the perception of others; thus, it offers both actors and analysts a way of comprehending the differences that occur in perceptual understandings between actor and audience and among various audience members. Each individual has a unique set of bodily intentionalities that result in a unique set of perspectival behaviours and responses. In the performance of text, the actor strives to share an experience with the audience, specifically an auditory experience; but this is only part of the challenge because the sounds of the spoken text are required to collaborate with the visual stimuli provided by the actors’ bodies, clothes, and movements, together with the arrangement of the performance space, the lighting, the soundscape (intentionally provided, or otherwise) and all the other elements of theatrical production that pertain to any given performance.

There are performance genres and styles that aim to overwhelm the audience’s awareness of the artificiality of the situation (of any performance situation) to a greater or a lesser extent, but short of being hypnotized, the audience is always “in the know” that what they are experiencing is a contrivance, an illusion of reality. Merleau-Ponty insists that

> [r]eflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis . . . it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical (Preface xiii)

Merleau-Ponty shows how art makes the “emergence of the ordinary world in visual experience ‘strange and paradoxical’” (Baldwin 13); so we can turn to the vocal performance of text to show how that performance likewise makes “strange and paradoxical” the emergence of the ordinary world in audible experience, especially if “[t]he artist is the one who arrests the spectacle in which most men take part without really seeing it and who makes it visible to the most ‘human’ among them” (“Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne” 69). Where the vocal artist is concerned, the voice is a physical entity that makes available to the audience the internal experience of the actor, who is, in that moment, also the character, surely a Merleau-Pontian paradox. This not to deny the role of language, or of speech, but rather to illustrate that “speech in turn, is an act that falls together with nonverbal actions under the category of action . . . It is the act with which some unique beings do not simply signify something, but rather communicate to one another who they are” (Cavarero 197). In the live performance of a prior scripted text, “who they are” encapsulates both actor and character. The voice is responsible for making them both available to the audience, and when this occurs, both are at one and the same time real and valid.

When Mamet calls his exposition on the nature of acting “true and false,” he describes nothing less than the way it is. The actor is nothing less than his or her actual, unique self – it cannot be otherwise. At the same time, the person speaking the lines is perceived by the audience as the character; and just as the physically visual presence of the actor may be discussed and debated with reference to the cultural, political, and socially gendered influences (for example) that create the impression as it is perceived by the audience, so the voice needs to be examined from political, social, and cultural perspectives, and the influence of various training methodologies needs to be explored.

Voice is obviously, because of the physics of sound and the fact that no two humans are identical, the unique sound of a unique individual. The challenge is to recognize how each unique voice contributes to the overall perception of the heard text and allows the actor to inform and transform the text, making it present to the audience in the moment of its execution. Such recognition can in no way be seen as a diminution or debasing of the contribution of the written language provided by the playwright; rather, it acknowledges the worth of the text by honouring the integrity of the voice which makes that text accessible to the audience. In the performance of Ancient Greek theatre, "[T]he tragedies spoke in sonorous voices through the persona, or masks, which later are held to mean also per-sona or 'by sound'" (Ihde 15). It can be no coincidence that Carl Jung decided to refer to the way an individual represents him or herself, as a persona. Thus, to take advantage of the fine tradition of dealing with the voice by means of metaphor: if, indeed, the personality of the individual can be translated as "that-which-is-carried-through-sound ¼ that-throughwhich-sound-is-projected" (Cazden Personal communication), then the voice, being contingent upon the physical constitution and circumstances of the speaker and the nature and the self of the speaker, constitutes the presence of the speaker. The voice in performance cannot present a "stable site of authenticity and identity"; nevertheless, when it presents the uniquely contingent self of the actor, it also presents the unique voice of the author and that of the character portrayed.Within this highly unstable combination of self and character lies Diderot's "paradox of the actor" who is him- or herself and, in the moment of speaking, is also the character as written.

Of course,Diderot is not referring to every actor who treads the boards and speaks a text but only to thosewho actually create a credible illusion that they are the characters they portray and, in particular, to those who are "present" in every sense of the word. Thus while, for practical purposes, we often assume that the voice is the site of identity, uniquely embodied, of the actor who is the character, this assumption does not fully take into account what the voice encompasses during the course of a performance, nor does it explain why sometimes actor–character integration is less than effective in engaging the audience's attention. The "vocal performance text," or the entire performance as voiced, is always unique but not necessarily original. Itmay take the form of a repetition, or a quotation, or even amere remembering of the text. An original vocal performance text must, by definition, reveal the text in newand surprising ways. Often we hear actors speaking a text, to all appearances intelligently, yet with an incomprehensibility that causes the audience/listener to "switch off," hearing the words but failing to register any particular meaning or intent within the words. In these cases, more often than not, the actor, while understanding the general sense of the language and possibly even the literal meaning of all of the words, nevertheless fails to engage, in the moment of speaking, with the need of the character to express him- or herself in precisely (and explicitly) those particular words (as against "sort of" those words). In such a case, the language spoken has been denied access to the constantly transforming self of the actor – in other words, the self of the actor is present in the room, but because that self has not been placed consciously at the disposal of the character and of the words chosen by the character, there is a rift between voice and text within which the self of the character seems to be concealed or rendered "inaudible." The words are heard, but the listener is unable to apprehend clearly the content of the words spoken. Such "muddiness" of expression is not necessarily due to any lack of experience or expertise on the part of the actor. For instance, in Robert Wilson's 1992 production of Gertrude Stein's Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights, which I saw at the Edinburgh Festival, he engaged non-English-speaking (German) actors to speak the English text "parrot-fashion," without comprehension, while providing what New York Times reviewer Stephen Holden described as "a series of slow-motion tableaux that [we]re as visually striking as they [we]re emotionally blank and stripped of social ramification." The result was a series of visually stunning images, accompanied by an aural soundscape that failed to provide the aural stimulation the human brain requires at decent intervals in order to remain awake. As Mladen Dolar suggests, "[W]e are social beings by the voice and through the voice" (14), and the voice is the medium that connects us each with each other, but it needs to be actively engaged by the speaker's self if it is to effect the connection. There is no need to divorce ourselves from the illusion of the performance, to "kill the butterfly" as it were, in order to examine the performing voice. However, we should be aware of the challenges inherent in the performances of text, whereby the language spoken is one thing, the actor's speech another, and the voice of the actor something else again. Just as all three inform and affect each other conterminously, so the awareness that this is so sits well with the ability to be immersed in a deeply satisfying theatrical encounter. Precisely what constitutes such an encounter is the subject of another discussion, but there can be no doubt that it is a measure of the effectiveness of the effort taken in rehearsal to integrate all three – language, speech, and voice – in order to generate, performance after performance, a series of original vocal performances. Equally, no theatrical encounter can be totally satisfying unless all of the voices offer original vocal performances, so that the overall vocal performance text gives access to insights and revelations, whether the audience is familiar with the text or not. Thus, it is the generosity of the actively sounding actor, who is willing – moment to moment – to be the self who needs to communicate, that makes it possible for the language of the text and the spectacle of the production to touch the audience; and this amazing feat is effected by means of the texture and the materiality of the voice and the uniquely flawed humanity it sounds.

As recent developments in actor training demonstrate, the voice is central to the experience of "joy and effortlessness" (Morrison 49) which is perceived as a dynamic, active presence onstage, the state Patsy Rodenburg describes as "readiness . . . full alertness, living, breathing, listening and reacting completely in the present" (218), and which Bert O. States refers to as "both calculated and effortless” (137): calculated in that the text has clearly been memorized and rehearsed; effortless in that it seems as if the speaker were doing no more than uttering the words that emerge from the need to express him- or herself. The apparent lack of effort is communicated by means of the vocal quality; the skilled voice, rather than the language whose conventions shape the sound as speech, brings together unique individuals – actors and audience – in a shared experience.

When an original vocal performance text occurs, the voice, in its substantial, physical presence as vibrations within the actor’s body, in the shared space, and in the body of the listener, is what connects them in Cavarero’s “reciprocal communication” (200), or Merleau-Ponty’s found “transitivity from one body to another” (Visible 143). The implications for actor training of this argument reach far beyond the need to integrate physical and vocal training, although such integration is a necessary element in an effective training program. In an essay by Nancy Saklad, David Richman is quoted as saying, “If I can’t hear it in the voice, I know it’s not happening in the body” (44). The bi-directional aspect of voice and body training is now beginning to take the form of integrated training, with explorations, such as those undertaken by Erica Tobolski and Sarah Barker at the University of South Carolina, into the ways in which “body influence[s] voice and voice influence[s] body in creating performance” (Tobolski and Barker 67). Such practical explorations need to be accompanied by theoretical investigations that both ground and challenge the concepts and functions of vocal performance.

At the 2009 Voice and Speech Trainers Association conference, Original Voices, three of the leading voice trainers in the United Kingdom and United States, Kristin Linklater, Patsy Rodenburg, and Catherine Fitzmaurice, all expressed interest in exploring more deeply the relationship between breath and thought and between thought and word. Breath, taken from the shared air in the performance space, instigates the movement of sound, and sound shapes thought into audible words that flow from, to, between, and within the bodies that constitute the cast and the audience; but the voice travels wider and sees farther than anything language alone can transmit, since voice is the sound of the human self, individual and unstable, capable of bringing together a community of individuals in a moment of shared humanity. In particular, in the performance of text, a skilled group of actors can create communities that encompass individuals both onstage and in the auditorium. Through the use of their voices, they can bring the world of the scripted play into being and make a space in time and sound that includes the audience in that world. The challenge now arises: we must continue theorizing the voice in performance in order to enhance the training of practitioners and the understanding of theorists, to their mutual benefit and the benefit of future audiences.

NOTES

1 The play The Fall of June Bloom: A Modern Invocation is the performance as research element of my doctoral thesis and was presented at the Voice and

Speech Trainers Association conference Original Voices, in New York 2009.

2 There is a strong case to be made that part of the legacy of Cartesian mind–body dualism has been the exclusion from the theatrical historiographical project of the physical actuality of voices.

3 I am still searching for an appropriate word or phrase that encapsulates this quality of the audible illusion without recourse to the imagery of vision.

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ABSTRACT: There are several inter-connected challenges inherent in any attempt to theorize vocal performance. Traditionally, the prior written text has taken precedence over the performed sound when performances are being critiqued and analysed. The language of visualism has contributed to misconceptions concerning the nature and function of the voice, while confusion regarding the differences among language, voice, and speech are bound up with the nature of perception itself. This article examines these challenges and argues that, since the performing voice constitutes the sound of the unique individual who is the actor, it contains within its fluctuations and nuances the character who emerges from the actor’s engagement with the text. Voice, therefore, is the site of identity, unstable yet uniquely embodied, of the actor who is the character. It is proposed that actor training would be greatly enhanced by the inclusion of a theoretical appreciation of the nature of the voice in performance.

KEYWORDS: Voice, performance, voice training, visualism, presence, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Adriana Cavarero