Strange Geometrical Hinges

They go on such strange geometrical hinges/You may open them both ways. (Duchess of Malfi 4.2. 221-222)

Two years ago I was delighted to have my chapter proposal accepted for a CDS book on Actor Training in the 21st Century. I began work, only to put it aside while awaiting confirmation of the project as another piece of writing became more pressing. Each time I returned to the chapter, I had to re-write what I had written and thus it went on until I stopped writing the chapter until further notice because it was simply becoming out of date on a regular basis. The activity of the Centre for Voice in Performance was moving fast, as charted in four published papers since the chapter writing began¹ So rather than follow my submitted chapter plan in this presentation, it seems more sensible to give an overview of my current research and where it's heading in the next year or two. Anything further risks being out of date once more. Before I do that, however, I need to put the current research in context and start with the evolution of the unique voice work of the RSAMD and the creation of its Centre for Voice in Performance.

The chapter was to have been titled: Strange Geometrical Hinges: the RSAMD's voice work in Training and Theatre, as the seamless continuum – the doors opening both ways between training and the profession – is crucial to the particular nature of the Centre's voice work.

Voice training has always been a key component of acting training offered by drama schools from their inception. Voice teachers have always been regarded as skilled specialists in their field but their role has essentially been classroom-based with a supporting role as vocal coach for productions. The role of the voice teacher, however, has been undergoing significant change at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Scotland's national conservatoire, as a result of innovative theatre voice practice first introduced to the Academy by Nadine George of Voice Studio International², nearly two decades ago. Initially, the new voice practice, taught by George and myself, existed in harmony alongside more traditional ways of teaching voice. At the same time I began to research and develop my own approach to the work in conjunction with professional theatre partnerships in Scotland where the innovative voice practice led to the evolution of the role of specialist voice

¹ Seein Oursels As Ithers See Us in Voice and Gender, VASTA, USA 2007; Co-Direction: How Creativity is Translated Educationally In a Moment of Rehearsal, R Steen and J Deans, ELIA Teachers' Academy Papers, 2007; Steen, R and Wright, B. Double-hinged Doors: the RSAMD's voice work in Training and Theatre, LIPA conference proceedings, 2008; What we may be: the integration of Lecoq movement and George voice work at the RSAMD by Ros Steen and Joyce Deans, VASTA, USA, 2009

² Voice Studio International is George's own international business. She teaches in the National Theatres and National Theatre Schools in Denmark, Sweden, France and Iceland in addition to her International workshops in London for voice teachers, actors and directors. See website www.voicestudiointernational.com.

person into creative collaborator in production.³ The resulting performance practice was brought back into the Academy as new and best practice in actor training and later director training.4 The specialist voice teacher's role within the profession continued to undergo further evolution from that of creative collaborator in production to co-director.⁵ This role was subsequently developed in the conservatoire setting by productions co-directed by myself and Movement/Acting colleagues.⁶ In these productions the voice work was instrumental in facilitating a closer integration of voice, movement and acting within actor training. With the establishment of the Academy's Centre for Voice in Performance and my appointment as Centre Leader.8 the innovative voice practice became the main approach to vocal studies in the School of Drama's acting and performance curricula. RSAMD was thus the first conservatoire in the UK to have pioneered George's technique as part of its voice curriculum and the first to have established it, through the work of the Centre, as its mainstream practice. In addition the work has continued as the focus of the Centre's practice as research agenda undertaken internally within the Academy and in externally in conjunction with the profession.9 So the doors between training and profession pivot both ways on their strange hinges, reflecting in macrocosm the pivoting doors of the voice work itself.¹⁰

The origins of the connection between Nadine George and the RSAMD's School of Drama go back to 1988 when George began planning to return to the UK to teach. George originally trained at Central under Gwynneth Thurburn and Cicely Berry but

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³ Steen, R. "Seein Oursels As Ithers See Us", p285 -8 in *Voice and Gender*, VASTA, USA, 2007.

⁴ Between 1999 and 2003 the RSAMD offered an MDra in Directing. At that time the voice work was an optional extra workshop for directing students. Between 2003 – 7 there was a revision of postgraduate provision and in 2008 a new MA(Classical and Contemporary Text) with an acting and directing pathway was launched. In the new programme voice work became part of the curriculum for directing students.

⁵ In 2000, Steen co-directed *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer* by Michel Tremblay with Philip Howard for the Traverse/Barbican. The production opened in Edinburgh 28/4/2000 and transferred to London on 17/5/2000.

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6 Ros Steen and Mark Saunders co-directed three productions for the RSAMD: *The Greeks* (2000) *Prometheus* (2001) and *Oedipus* (2002) and Steen and Joyce Deans co-directed *Twelfth Night* (2004), *King Lear* (2005) and *The Tempest* (2006) for the Shakespeare in the City Festival at the Arches Theatre, Glasgow.

⁷ Steen, R and Deans, J. Co-Direction: How Creativity is Translated Educationally in a Moment of Rehearsal, p 3-5, ELIA Teachers' Academy Papers. 2007

⁸ The Centre for Voice in Performance was formally established in the summer of 2006. Steen was appointed Centre Leader in the autumn of that year, becoming Head of Research and the Centre for Voice in Performance in 2008.

⁹ Research continued through a number of productions: *Heritage, The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek, Outlying Islands, Homers, The Nest, In the Bag, I was a Beautiful Day, Gorgeous Avatar, Tilt, strangers, babies, Carthage Must Be Destroyed, Night Time, The Pearlfisher, Cherry Blossom (Traverse Theatre) Little Ones, Singles Night (lookOUT Theatre) Winter's Tale, Measure for Measure, Duchess of Malfi, 12th Night, Monkey, Romeo and Juliet (Dundee Rep) Word for Word, the Big Bang (Magnetic North) The Small Things (Paines Plough) Mancub, Little Otik (Vanishing Point/National Theatre of Scotland) Black Watch (National Theatre of Scotland) Re:Union, Eclipse (7:84) Beneath You (Birds of Paradise) Resurrection (Oran Mor). A research voice workshop for professional actors, led by Steen was established in Aug 2003 and for directors in Oct 2005.*

¹⁰ Steen, R and Wright, B. *Double-hinged doors: the RSAMD's voice work in Training and Theatre,* LIPA conference proceedings, 2008. p 4.

In 1962, while I was at Central, I was introduced ..to a man called Roy Hart, who was doing research work on the human voice.....I worked with him for ten years in London. Then, in 1975, I went with him and the Roy Hart Theatre to France where I stayed for 15 years.¹¹

She returned to England because it was important to find out if

I could find a way of linking the voice work that I had done with Roy with the work on Shakespearian Text that I had done before I met him 12

While continuing to work in France and also Denmark, ¹³ George began to research her technique in conjunction with the Drama Department at the University of Birmingham.¹⁴ In 1990, on my invitation, she conducted her inaugural workshop at the Academy which I observed. I immediately asked George to work with me on my own voice.

This work was my missing piece of the jigsaw. While Cis's work strongly influenced my approach to helping actors connect with the text in practical ways, George's was crucial to a profound understanding of the nature of the voice and its direct channel into the heart of the acting process.15

For descriptions of the vocal technique itself see George's paper, "My Life in Voice" and my own paper "Helena, Hitler and the Heartland". 16

As part of my research work at the Academy, I had forged professional partnerships through my role as a theatre voice specialist in production. One particular partnership was with the internationally renowned Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, Scotland's new writing theatre. My relationship with the theatre had begun in the late eighties but had particularly blossomed with the arrival of Philip Howard in 1993 as Associate and then Artistic Director. In 1997, with the remounting of David's Harrower's play, *Knives in Hens* for the Edinburgh Festival. 17 the opportunity arose for me to propose an enhanced role for the voice specialist in production, working full time on the show, using George's vocal technique as a medium of rehearsal itself. The results of the production included an increase in the actors' physical and vocal resources intrinsic to

¹¹ George, N. "My Life With Voice", Shakespeare Around the Globe, Pg 33-4, VASTA, USA 2005.

¹² Ibid p34

¹³ George was teaching at *Le Centre du Rencontre* in Besançon, the *National Theatre School* in Odense, Denmark and Statens Theatre School in Copenhagen as well as for the Danish Actors' Union.

14 For an account of the development of her technique in conjunction with the University of

Birmingham see pgs 35 – 39.

¹⁵ Steen, R. *Teaching Voice in the New Millennium*, p15, International Centre for Voice, Central School of Speech and Drama, 2006.

¹⁶ "Helena, Hitler and the Heartland", in Shakespeare Around the Globe pgs 45-49 VASTA, USA 2005.

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

their performance of the text, the development of an ensemble united in approach and physical/vocal vocabulary, the vibration of the text through a richer physical and vocal spectrum than might commonly be achieved by normal methods and the establishment of a new creative collaborative model for the relationship between Director and Voice specialist. Although the work on *Knives in Hens* awaits a full write-up, key elements of the process are described elsewhere. ¹⁸

I continued to work with Howard, among others and in 2000 I was invited by him to evolve my voice specialist role further by co-directing Michel Tremblay's *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer*, for the Traverse and the Barbican theatre, London. Written as a spoken mass for 11 voices, the piece makes the highest vocal demands on its cast who have to work both as a chorus and a juxtaposition of solo voices, often overlapping and conflicting. *Solemn Mass* showed just how successfully Scotland had been resourcing itself in innovative theatre practice. Voice specialist and director, with their joint history of work rooted in a common commitment to voice work as medium of rehearsal, were enabled to bring to the production the fruits of their intervening years of research. ¹⁹

Meanwhile the relationship between the acting department and the voice department within the RSAMD had become much more closely integrated as a result of this new professional practice. Through its work in rehearsals, the voice department moved from being seen as a 'skills' department to one where voice practitioners were equal partners in the creative process. Certain key productions in the curriculum became designated 'integration' points drawing on the work pioneered professionally. The enhanced voice specialist role in production itself underwent further evolution when I began to co-direct public performances of Shakespeare with colleagues, integrating acting teaching, voice work and movement work into an enhanced learning experience for the students. A production of *The Tempest* for the Shakespeare in the City festival was written up as a case study of innovative teaching practice and the resulting paper *Co-Direction: How creativity is translated educationally in a moment of rehearsal* delivered to the ELIA Teachers' Academy in 2007.²⁰

Having incorporated this new work into the vocal curriculum at RSAMD ²¹ it officially became its mainstream voice practice in 2006. The establishment of the National Theatre of Scotland that year coincided with the evolution of the Voice Department into a Centre for Voice in Performance, the RSAMD's

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¹⁸ See for example Steen, R. *Teaching Voice in the New Millennium*, p18-9, International Centre for Voice, Central School of Speech and Drama, 2006; and "Seein Oursels As Ithers See Us", p285 -8 in *Voice and Gender*, VASTA, USA, 2007
¹⁹ 'Philip Howard and Ros Steen direct a complex business with assurance. The rhythms and

¹⁹ 'Philip Howard and Ros Steen direct a complex business with assurance. The rhythms and linguistic resonances of this play demand close attention and get it from a splendid cast. It would be counter to the structure and intent of the piece to pull out individuals among them, so it suffices to say that each performs their choral function with dexterity and beauty.' Cramer,S., 13-27th April 2000. Review of Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer. The List. ²⁰ The European League of Institutes of the Arts held its Teachers' Academy 12th-14th July 2007 at the University of Brighton.

²¹ Steen, R. "Seein Oursels As Ithers See Us", p283 -4

national centre of excellence for the teaching, practice and research of Voice in Performance. At its core was both George's technique and its innovative integration into the theatre/performance making process.

Soon after the launch of the National Theatre of Scotland, John Tiffany, its Associate Director, began to work on his acclaimed production *Black Watch*. He asked me (we had had collaborated for over ten years), to work on voice and text. The main function of the voice work became its contribution to the building of the ensemble. The voice work with its disciplined approach was akin to the intensive physical and military training the actors had to undergo. The direction of energy through the voice not only allowed access to the flow of energy and feeling in the performer, but also focused it in a very precise way that balanced the precision of movement the actors were to use in the space.

Susannah Clap made reference to this level of performance flow in her review of the production ²²

Brilliantly staged in an old drill hall cavernous, clanging and lit with brutal clarity, so that the shadows are black, and the action keeps on reverberating this is documentary and lament, accusation and elegy. The dialogue is clenched and full of curses. The soldiers are sinewy scraped, as if they've just shaved in cold water: they speak bluntly; they move with a precision and accord which shows the power of being in a unit and a fighting force, and which exposes as totally flabby most theatrical attempts to mimic the martial.

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

In 2008, the Academy inaugurated its first International fellowships. Nadine George was appointed the RSAMD's first International Fellow in Voice at the same time as Faye Lecoq, as representative of the Lecoq school in Paris, became the International Fellow in Movement. ²³ Both women were guardians of their respective fields of endeavour and both were leading two of the most important movements in 21st century actor training, but had never met. Joyce Deans and I brought about a meeting between them and in conversation, the links between their schools of training began to emerge more clearly. ²⁴ For the writers, already engaged in the process of researching the work, the conversation confirmed that the time had come to embark on a more detailed research investigation into specific aspects of both techniques.

²³ Both Fellowships were awarded in Nov 2007. In addition, the Academy awarded a doctorate to Fay Lecoq in July 2007 and to Nadine George in July 2008. Both were made a Doctor of Drama.

²² Clapp, S, 13th August 2006. Review of *Black Watch*, The Observer.

²⁴ E mail correspondence between N George and R Steen dated 16th and 17th October 2008, citing the links as 'in-depth work' (on body and voice respectively) done with 'international actors', not just actors from France and Britain.

The result was a co-written paper entitled *What We May Be: The Integration of Lecoq Movement and George Voice Work at the RSAMD,* due to be published this month in The Moving Voice: The Integration of Voice and Movement Studies, *The Voice and Speech Review, VASTA 2009.*

We already knew that each technique by itself leads the actor to tap a deep connection to inner resources which can then be used artistically. At the same time, arguably, these defined techniques can reveal those resources in greater depth and detail than the use of the actor's own emotions as a starting point. ²⁵ While there were many aspects of each technique we could have looked at, we concentrated on two central tenets of each approach: the relationship of George's vocal qualities to Lecoq's *les trois étages* ²⁶ and the relationship between neutral mask and what George calls 'the real voice'. ²⁷

We evolved an apposite, practice-based research methodology, conducting our primary research through a series of practical laboratory sessions consisting of empirical teaching and study followed by reflection and documentation. We also drew on our existing knowledge, research and professional teaching expertise as well as the evidence-based experience of others—students, teachers, professional actors and directors. We consulted written resources but were particular fortunate in being able to go directly to the sources themselves for clarification, Fay Lecoq and Nadine George.

George's vocal technique is based on the principle that four different qualities of voice, two male and two female, exist within each human voice. The vibration, energy and quality of these sounds, sung from the body, are explored and linked directly to text. She connects these energies and qualities to what she terms the stomach (or abdomen) the chest and the head, with two different qualities sharing the chest – the higher male and the lower female.

Les trois étages, or the three levels, is Lecoq terminology for the physical location of energy in the human body. The levels are divided into the pelvis,

²⁵ 'I do not search for deep sources of creativity in psychological memories'. Lecoq, J with J-G Carasso and J-C Lallias. *The Moving Body*, p17, Methuen, London. 2002 and

^{&#}x27;The technique gives you the mental and physical tools to play the parts. Feeling is not enough.' George, N as recorded in RS's journal of the International teachers' workshop, 2001. ²⁶ That is, 'three levels'. The word étage also refers to a ledger line on a musical stave.

²⁷ The 'real voice' is a term often used by George in her work to designate a voice fully expressive of the person and their life energy, which emerges out of the 'covered' or 'withdrawn' voice often used in everyday life. It is 'not produced' in any way but comes from a deep body source of the individual, and, importantly,

^{&#}x27;It goes back to the person's roots. I came from a working class back ground with a deep voice and a lot of energy and strong accent. I then went to a private girls' school where I took elocution lessons to speak well, this changed the source that I was drawing my voice from - it was coming from my head energy and not my body energy. Therefore it was not my real voice from its true source that I was using.' George, N. e mail to RS, 4th Dec 2008.

^{&#}x27;The voice carries what's in you, not you carrying the voice.' Steen, R. Workshop journal, 2007. Finally, as one of the actors from the Actors' Research Workshop wrote, Every time I opened my mouth I felt like I was declaring myself. "This is who I am, now, at this moment." Knowles, P. e mail correspondence with R Steen 2007

the solar plexus and the head. In both techniques the body 'as a means of dynamic and dramatic expression' ²⁸ is the basis of the work. ²⁹ Our research confirmed for us that George's four vocal qualities could be directly mapped onto Lecoq's *trois étages, Le bassin* corresponding to the deep male energy, and *La tête* with the high female quality. We discovered a hitherto unexplored *point d'appui*³⁰ or 'tipping point' in the complex area of cross-over of male/female energy in the torso with the two 'chest' qualities of George's technique – the high male and low female – correlating to an upward connection of the solar plexus to chest and a downward connection of solar plexus to abdomen. This crossover in the middle of the voice we also discovered gives great potential for more vocal openings at that point, as well as greater flexibility in the voice linked to powerful integrations of male and female energy. ³¹

The current final year, as we write, is the first cohort to have begun their voice training with George's technique from the start and also to have had workshops taught by George and François Lecoq themselves. Their reflections on the connections between both processes have been illuminating. One student explained that the two techniques were initially experienced separately until she began to prepare for a performance in the Athenaeum, the Academy's large proscenium theatre. Then she consciously connected François Lecoq's injunction to 'gather the space into you and own it' with the channelling of full voice into the space. She realised that she was filling the space freely and effortlessly through this synthesis. For the student, performance was finally where the two techniques crystallised. ³²

With the second part of our study, the relationship between neutral mask and what George calls 'the real voice', we found that the mask's ability to reveal the essence of the actor through movement was directly comparable to the vocal technique's ability to reveal the essence of the actor through voice and this is described at length within the paper. Again we reference the student experience from which, it is clear there are unquestionably deep connections between the two techniques. In addition we draw on the experience of professional actors and quote Jacques Bourgaux, (Lecoq and George trained)

For me the two teaching methods start from the same fundamental principle - there is no point in putting psychology and emotion first. You

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²⁸ LEM brochure for London workshop, September 2003, produced by the Lecoq school.
²⁹ 'This confirmed for me what I had believed for many years that real meaning comes from the body not from the head. In the moment that the actor speaks the words with vocal power and works with his breathing at the same time, he goes directly to the body. Because the feeling connection to the character and the text is coming directly from the body, the actor can repeat it again and again, developing it each time.' George, N. *My Life With Voice*. p38.
³⁰ Or, point of leverage. Marks Saunders in conversation with RS 19/11/2008. Another translation is fulcrum- the support or point of rest on which a level turns in moving a body. *Point d'appui* is an important term for Lecoq. It is also translated more poetically as *point of departure* in Lecoq's poem *Tout bouge*, quoted in *The Moving Body*, J Lecoq with JG

Carasso and J-C Lallias, Methuen, 2002, London.

31 For a full account of the research see *What we may be: the integration of Lecoq movement and George voice work at the RSAMD* by Ros Steen and Joyce Deans, VASTA, USA, 2009

32 Final year student H MacK in discussion with the writers 2nd Dec 2008.

have to start from the physical if you want to make conscious choices and have the power to repeat. The two techniques rely on observation and a scrupulous attention to detail.... having experienced for example a sensation that comes from the depths it is necessary to follow the path in reverse and dive in to see where it came from, how it was born and what relationship it has with the surface... and, of course, you mustn't dive in without good diving equipment and the technique which allows you to come back to the surface.' ³³

With this study we have moved forward significantly from our previous discoveries of the connections between the main movement and voice techniques at the RSAMD and their place at the heart of the rehearsal process. An enriched, integrated movement/voice vocabulary has emerged which is already making its way into actor training.³⁴ With two years of these International Fellowships still to run, new possibilities for integration will continue to be opened up for both staff and students alike.

At the same time as the research within the institution, the doors have pivoted on their hinges towards continued research with the profession. While leading the voice research workshop for actors I set up a similar workshop for directors in response to interest generated by their encounter with the voice work in productions. Lorne Campbell was a founder member having trained as a director with the RSAMD³⁵ where he had first undertaken the voice work taught by George and Steen. On graduation he was appointed to the Traverse Theatre and I subsequently worked on all of his productions there over the next six years.³⁶

His questions, arising from the nature of the work as part of the rehearsal process, brought about a proposal committed to moving the work forward into the next phase of exploration, research and development.

In the summer of 2008, the first phase of *Earthing the Electric*, a research investigation undertaken by the RSAMD in conjunction with the National Theatre of Scotland and the Traverse Theatre, took place. The investigation brought professional actors and directors together in a sustained and documented process to look at the application of the work of the RSAMD's Centre for Voice in Performance to acting, direction and rehearsal performance practice. In the first stage of the project a core group of directors came together to explore the use of this distinctive voice work in developing their own creative voice and to begin to examine the application of it to their direction process. Research laboratories were conducted by Steen in September 2008 and the evaluation of these is currently being undertaken.

³³ E mail to JD from Jacques Bourgaux, 29th Nov 2008

³⁴ For example, Steen in voice teaching this year began referring to the solar plexus as well as chest and used the 'energy cloud' in walking work; Deans now directly connects the 4 qualities and *les trois étages* in her rehearsal process.

 ³⁵ Campbell trained on the RSAMD's Master of Drama (directing) course from 2001-2002
 36 Campbell was a recipient of the Channel 4 Theatre Director's Scheme for 2 years form 2002-4 before becoming associate director of the Traverse Theatre until 2008 when he left to go freelance.

The initial research question the first phase sought to address was:

how can the voice work of the Centre for Voice in Performance resource the director's own voice and vocabulary as an individual and collaborative artist and how does it connect to the director's process? 37

In the documentation of the week by research assistant Mary Wells, herself an actor with long experience of the voice work, it was clear from the directors' feedback that personal creativity had been enhanced individually and in collaboration with each other. The 'seismic shift', 38 however, occurred when we moved, as it was perceived, from the territory of an exercise into acting and this was to have far reaching implications. My premise is that as many directors come to directing having tried acting first (at school or in University drama groups for example) it is important for them to negotiate the actor in themselves if they are to work in a deeper way with actors, that is, that they have to have made a particular accommodation with what one director called the 'bad actor/good director' sense of themselves. This was borne out by the heated and nervous response to that part of the workshop which gave the directors, and only if the impulse arose organically, license to move when speaking rather than standing still. Their expressed discomfort and difficulty with the opportunity to move was related to a feeling that they lacked what they perceived as the actors' ease with moving in space, because 'that's what actors are paid to do'. They were surprised to discover the physical discomfort in their own body was no different to that experienced by actors when they asked them to move. As one director said:

....I never prescribe where they're going to move...I rely on the actor to know where they want to go. It's never occurred to me that they might be scared of moving.

As Wells reflected afterwards

We [Wells and Steen] are both surprised that they think actors are any different. It shows a very ambivalent relationship to acting – and if they can't interrogate that then it has implications for their directing. ³⁹

Just as I believe that, as a voice teacher, I needs to reference the actor in myself in order to work at a deep level with actors, so by putting themselves back in the actor process I believe they will move to another level in what they do as directors 'rather than just watching and observing from the brain.⁴⁰ The next phase of the research needs to investigate this fundamental connection between actors and directors further if the understanding between them is to be deepened and then we need to examine what happens when directors and actors share this physical knowledge and understanding of the voice technique when approaching text? What might its effect be on the

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³⁷ From *'Earthing the Electric'* research proposal by Steen, R and Campbell, L , Oct 2007.

³⁸ Wells, M, Earthing the Electric documentation, 2008

³⁹ ihid

⁴⁰ Steen, R, as quoted, ibid

rehearsal process and what implications might that hold for moving theatre forward?

As Dominic Hill 41 summed up

How does one put to use what you access... how does this [the work] impact on myself in the rest of my life, not just in rehearsal...So that's been good, and I'm still left with loads of questions about taking it into the work. What it's done for me that I understand what you are saying, and now I want to find time and space to actually do it properly in terms of rehearsing something. 42

When that happens I have no doubt the findings of the research, whatever they may be will impact upon training too. But that is another door to be opened, in time.

July 2009

⁴² Wells, M, Earthing the Electric documentation, 2008

⁴¹ Dominic Hill is currently Artistic director of the Traverse Theatre.