

## VASTA PAPER : VOICES OF SCOTLAND.

### Introduction

A guid moarning tae a'body and a waarm walcum tae yin and aa. In a meenit I will be makkin mysel mair comprehensible by owersetting ma scrievins intil English but I thocht it meet tae let ye hear something in Scots, yin o' Scotland's three heidmaist leids, as my speak today concerns voice work in the natioun o Scotland and ayont tae the wider vyce community we aw bide in. (1)

In this short paper, I intend to talk about the particular voice work I am engaged with, both in training young actors and in my work as a professional theatre voice associate in Scotland, England and Europe.

I will

- outline the nature of the work
- discuss its role in actor training
- refer to the establishment of new working practices in professional theatre leading to an enhanced role for the voice specialist in production
- conclude with suggested future directions for the work

### The nature of the voice work.

In a recent article for the VASTA journal, I discussed my voice work in some detail and, as time is limited, I refer you to the article for a fuller explanation than I can give just now. There I discussed how, for the last 15 of my 23 years voice teaching, I have studied voice with Nadine George one of the original members of the Roy Hart Theatre Company. George studied with Hart himself for many years before leaving the company in 1990 to take the work in her own particular direction, a process she has also written about in a companion article for the VASTA journal.

The essence of George's, and now my work, is the development of the four different qualities of voice, two male and two female which exist within every human voice. These are first explored as sung notes, using the fixed intervals of the piano for guidance, and then as speech in a process detailed in the article. The work has been described by one writer/director as *ultrasound for the point of impulse*. [2] It is an approach that puts the body and voice rather than the head at the centre of the acting process and rehearsal period.

It is therefore no surprise to find that the relationship between the Acting department and the Voice department within the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama is very strong. Integration of the work of the two departments has taken place to such an extent that in recent years productions have been co-directed by directors and voice practitioners as equal partners in the creative process alongside the more traditional roles of director and voice coach.

## The work's role in the training of young actors.

My voice work sits comfortably besides more traditional approaches within the Voice department of the Academy. The department since its inception has been a leading and strongly influential one in the School of Drama as a whole, involved in the full range of undergraduate and postgraduate performance courses. Jean Moore has guided it since 1980 when she took up the position of Head of Department as an already highly experienced voice teacher. The continuity of her leadership has been a major factor in securing for the department the widespread respect it enjoys nationally and internationally.

The department recognises the uniqueness of each individual voice and places the connection between the voice and the individual at the heart of its work. While recognising that today's creative artists have to have a flexibility of vocal expression in order to accomplish the many demands of an extremely demanding market, the department seeks to train actors who are recognisably their own person in their voice, that is, who have ownership of a voice that is distinctively and exclusively theirs.

In first year, students undergo a rigorous conservatoire training in all aspects of voice, with technical work being in the mainstream British tradition best exemplified by Cicely Berry. However, towards the end of the year, students begin to study George's vocal technique introduced by George herself. Throughout the second year, I continue to teach this vocal technique, mediated by my own experience and practice. At the end of the year it is fully integrated into the rehearsal process of the Shakespearian productions which are the core of study of the summer term. These productions form the central part of Scotland's *Shakespeare in the City* Festival and next year will also contribute to the RSC's *Complete Works Festival*. Additionally, it is hoped to take the shows to the *Gdansk Shakespeare Festival* in Poland.

Within the context of classes, each individual will take part in the group breath and energy work as well as warming up in the four qualities before researching each quality, one at a time, in ever increasing depth. Within the context of rehearsals, each day begins with the foundation group work on breath, energy, quality of sound and text followed by one of two approaches, depending on what is being rehearsed that day. If it is a scene, the text will have vocal energy "broken through" it, that is, the text will be spoken on full voice with highly physically vibrated energy. Again, this is described in the article. As the text is repeated these vibrations start to tap into underlying, even subconscious creative impulses connected to the thoughts and feelings of the text. The impulses are physically experienced and consciously repeated before the actors explore when and where to move in the performance space as suggested by the internal physical and psychological impulses for the words. The embodied pool of choices can then be taken and worked with by directors who proceed knowing the work has 'cut to the chase', short-circuiting hours of discussion or 'playing around'. If the rehearsal is exploring detailed character work with individuals the actor will work in a more extended way at the piano to open up the voice through one quality. He or she will immediately use the vibrated, embodied voice s/he has been contacting to open up and release the acting possibilities for them in their text. Sometimes two actors will

work in this way, tuning in to each other's vibrations before playing their scene together.

In the third and final year, actors have individual lessons where their vocal development continues, tailored to their particular artistic and personal needs. The importance of this work to young actors is that it quickly and simply helps them to confront and accept their own particular body and voice in order to develop its use. At the same time it directly addresses how they work, that is, what it is that facilitates or limits what they permit themselves to accomplish. The desire to be creative and exciting is often tempered by the fear of exposure that these things imply and the balance of risk to comfort is one that has to be negotiated all the time. This technique holds young actors, at an often insecure stage in their lives as artists and people, within a clear, safe structure that allows them to go into themselves and their voices slowly, bit by bit, in order to explore and embody that exploration securely. The result is they know what they are doing, where they are going and how they can get there not just with a teacher but, crucially, by themselves, through having a technique able to support them both as actors in training and throughout their working lives.

#### New working practices in professional theatre.

The use of voice work as a medium of rehearsal outlined above was one I actually pioneered in professional theatre before introducing it to the Academy. Over many years, I have been fortunate in forging partnerships with open-minded directors who have been willing to give their rehearsal room over to me for the sake of what the work can offer them creatively. Working side by side with the director, rehearsal days begin with breath, energy and warm-up work in the four qualities before more detailed vocal exploration which is then brought to bear upon the text through my vocal direction. Collaborating with directors in this way has led to an enhanced role for the voice person within professional theatre practice.

One such partnership has been at the internationally renowned Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh where the work has been an integral part of the rehearsal process for several productions. These productions have also given me the chance to explore the different energies and musicalities of Scots as opposed to English, whether it is the language of different historical times (wonderfully re-imagined in David Harrower's modern classic *Knives in Hens*), a range of subtly different social registers such as the the Scots translation of Michel Tremblay's *Solemn Mass for A Full Moon in Summer*, co-directed by myself and Philip Howard, Artistic Director of the Traverse or a broad spectrum of dialects ranging from the Ulster Scots of Nicola McCartney's play *Heritage*, to that of Shetland in Sue Glover's *Shetland Saga*. Here is just one sample of Scots from Sue Glover's modern classic, *Bondagers*, set in the Borders :

*Maggie* :        He can take his pick o bondagers...gin he knows how. But some  
                      o those lassies wear two faces – one for the hiring, and another  
                      for the farm! Just so long as the lass can shear – I can't work  
                      harvest, not with the bairns. Just so long as she takes to the  
                      bairns!

See and pick right, Andra. Pick a good maister! Dinna say yes to the first farmer that slaps your hand and offers a dram. There's questions to be asked! Two rooms! I'd like a house with two rooms. The maister at Langriggs bigged a new row of houses – all with the two rooms.... [3]

## Future Directions

As a voice person in theatre in Scotland and increasingly south of the border and abroad, I find this work in growing demand. For some time now I have run independent workshops for actors dedicated to pursuing advanced development of their voices as a group. The company nature of the exploration has been crucial to the workshops' success. Writers are becoming interested in what the voice work can offer them in terms of developing the voices of their characters and now I find directors who have had some experience of the work in their rehearsal rooms want to study it themselves in order to pursue a deeper understanding of the actor's process and to share a vocabulary and language of body and voice with them. More recently the attention of the fledgling Scottish National Theatre has turned to what I am doing. Two years ago, the Scottish Executive, Scotland's devolved Parliament, gave funding for the establishment of a National Theatre which was envisaged as a commissioning body, not a building based theatre. Its remit was to provide a showcase for the best of Scottish theatre and to create work of international significance which would represent Scottish culture abroad. It is intended that a studio for experimental work be opened along the lines of the National Theatre Studio in London and I have been approached with a view to bringing the voice work to the studio which would enable me to put my process itself under the microscope. For I am still developing this work, trying to understand it more fully in order to answer some of my unanswered questions. Can it be integrated more fully into the rehearsal process? Can a production be completely rehearsed through the voice work only? And what of the work itself? I know it works - experientially I know it works - but how exactly? How can I find the right language to express what is going on to others? The research continues but I am sure of one thing. The answers will be rooted in the work I continue to do on my own voice.

## Conclusion.

Scots hae the wird fae bein bonny fechtors wi a dern streak o passion and poetry. It wis said that the Celts o lang syne yaised to gae intae battle wi reid-hoat waves o ecstasy thrummin through their veins. Nooadays that passioun can be witnessed oan the terraces in every toun in the land whaur fitba, the beautiful gemme is played. [4] One of my visions for Scotland is the establishment of a generation of trained actors and directors who not only share a common understanding and language of theatre but a shared practice. We live in theatrical times where the gulf between predominantly academically-driven directors and practical people of theatre can still loom large. While, of course, I accept not everyone would want to do this voice work or work in the ways I have outlined, I am redd up by hoo ma natioun,

smaa, galus, gleg oan its feet and licht eneuch tae manouvre is already rinnin wi the baa forrit intae the gemme but wi a lang bluitter oot tae the horizon ayont its shores. [5]

[1] *A good morning to everybody and a warm welcome to one and all. In a minute I will be making myself more comprehensible by translating my writing into English but I thought it fit to let you hear something in Scots, one of Scotland's three main languages, as my subject today concerns voice work in the nation of Scotland and beyond to the wider voice community we all live in.*

[2] Nicola McCartney, writer and director, verbatim summer 2005

[3] Bondagers by Sue Glover published in Made in Scotland : An Anthology of New Scottish Plays selected by Ian Brown and Mark Fisher published by Methuen Drama 1995

[4] *Scots have the reputation of being excellent fighters with a hidden streak of passion and poetry. It was said that the Celts of long ago used to go into battle with red-hot waves of ecstasy throbbing through their veins. Nowadays that passion can be witnessed on the terraces in every town in the land where football, the beautiful game is played.*

[5] *...I am fired up by how my nation, small, impish, sharp on its feet and light enough to manouvre is already running with the ball forward into the game but with a long kick out to the horizon beyond its shores.*

Ros Steen

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