

The Choral Revolution

Pure Research 2007

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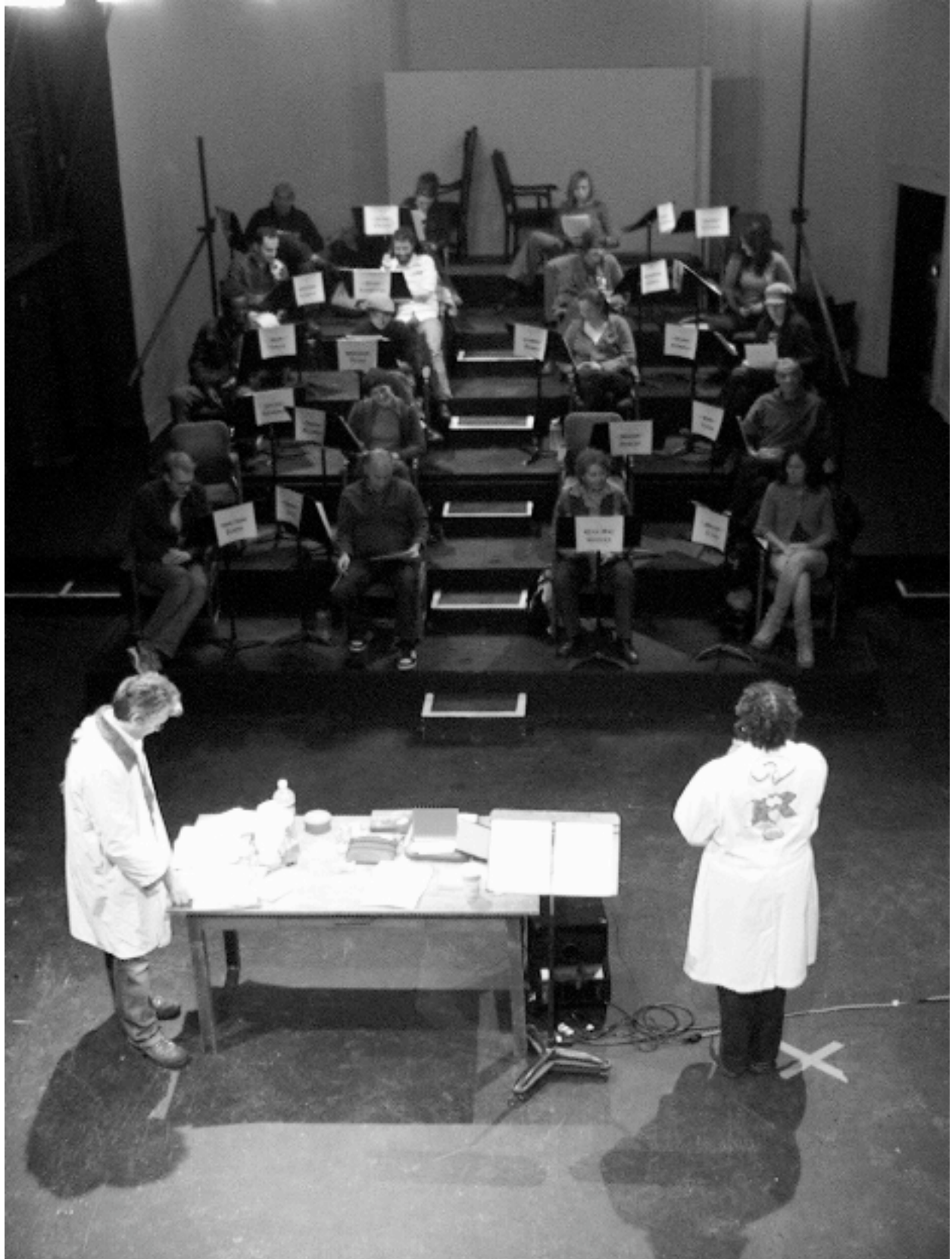


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Introduction

A DIRECTOR'S NIGHTMARE

You are going to direct a one-person show. You audition twenty actors. You select an agile, accomplished artist whom you are convinced will carry the part. But instead of contacting the actor yourself, you delegate to your Stage Manager. Your Stage Manager delegates to his shy, teenage assistant, who missed the production meetings because of a high-school basketball tournament. Instead of calling the one actor who got the part, the hapless ASM, unclear on the task, calls all twenty on the audition list...and tells them all they got the part!

So on the first day of rehearsal, they all show up. You are confronted with 20 confused actors who thought this was a solo piece. At first you are at a loss, furious, overwhelmed. But then you have a thought. The thought turns into a question...a good question: Can a one-person show be pulled off indeed enhanced, by 20 actors working as a chorus?

This is the question upon which most of our exercises and experiments over the course of our three days with Pure Research, were founded.

We imagined ourselves the director caught in the above scenario. What would we want to know about choral work heading into such a situation? What knowledge would help us know where to begin? Can a chorus of twenty create and communicate the concerns and agendas of one character as effectively as one solo performer? What is spoken choral unison and when do we tire of it? When and how does clarity break down? How is dramatic momentum sustained or impeded by a chorus? When is a chorus just too much fat? What methods, vocabularies and choral effects might we hit upon (on purpose and by mistake) over the next few days that we may carry into future rehearsals with future choruses? What 'mistakes' can we make now that will save time in the future? What knowledge will help us streamline future rehearsal processes?



Glossary

TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Choral Unison: More than one voice speaking the same text, or vocalizing a sequence of sounds at the same tempo, employing identical rhythm, scan and inflection.

Pitch Perfect Choral Unison: More than one voice speaking the same text, or vocalizing a sequence of sounds at the same pitch and tempo, employing identical rhythm, scan and inflection.

Dissonant Choral Unison: More than one voice speaking the same text, or vocalizing a sequence of sounds at the tempo, employing identical rhythm, scan and inflection, BUT consciously attempting to do so at different pitches.

RP = Research Participant. The ten men and ten women who made up the experimental chorus will sometimes be referred to as Research Participants

VL = Volunteer Listener



Theories, Experiments, Results

We had exactly three days in the theatre and a total of eleven hours to work with our chorus. We wanted to make each moment count. Each morning, we planned and revised choral exercises. Each afternoon we led our chorus through simple exercises which were secretly tests. We knew we could best use our time if people were having fun so we encouraged a structured spirit of play.

1. ON ACHIEVING CHORAL UNISON

Preliminary theory:

- o The imposition of stress on a chorus will affect their level of cooperation.
- o Exercises that create camaraderie and a sense of common purpose lead to discussions essential to creating choral unison.

1a) Choral Unison Experiment

The purpose of this game was to create a spirit of camaraderie and set a playful, competitive tone for the upcoming days. But it was also to observe how undirected groups go about achieving a vocal blend and unison.

First exercise. Day one. We broke the twenty RP's into four groups of five. Each group was instructed to construct and memorize a neutral text. The neutral text was based on their names and what they had eaten for breakfast that morning. They were given half an hour, at the end of which they would perform their text.

While the groups were building, memorizing and rehearsing their neutral texts, we primed a Volunteer Listener. She would listen to each group blindfolded. She was told that one chorus would comprise four RP's, another five, another six, and another seven. Her challenge would be to guess which was which. But we had lied! As indicated above all the groups were exactly five strong. The group that would fool the listener into identifying it as the smallest (in other words that hid its numbers most effectively) would win.

One chorus was made up of five women. Another of five men. The two remaining were of mixed gender. The all male group was given a handicap: three of the five spoke English with noticeable accents. We were curious to see if this would impede the effectiveness of their choral unison.

RESULTS: As expected, a leader emerged in each chorus. By leader, we mean someone who would count the group in and 'conduct', and would also tend to mediate discussion between group members.

Two groups spoke their neutral texts in very slow, deliberate, almost expressionless unison. The all-man group (with the accent handicap) spoke remarkably softly, almost timidly, perhaps in an attempt to subsume all traces of their accents and vocal timbres to one even blend.

The other two groups hid their numbers by speaking at conversational speed, impressing the listener with sudden crescendos and rhythmic modulations, perhaps in an attempt to dazzle and suggest that only the smallest group would be able to pull this off.

Volunteer Listener Response: We only had one Volunteer Listener. We blindfolded her and gave her two chances to guess the relative sizes of each group. The results from our Volunteer's first round of guesses varied from the results of her second round. But through some arithmetic, we determined a pecking order. The triumphant group was actually the one that played most with volume and expressivity. The all-male and the all-female groups tied for second place.

Another outcome of the experiment was exactly what we had anticipated: a playful, gently competitive, relaxed and permissive environment was established. We believe this allowed much of the following work to proceed smoothly and effectively.

2. ON DIRECTING METHODOLOGY FOR A CHORAL PROCESS WITH REGARD TO CONVEYING CHARACTER AND EMOTIONAL STATE

Preliminary theory:

- o When directing a chorus it is more effective to use straightforward vocabulary based on agreed upon archetypes than using nuanced directorial suggestions.
- o There are seven commonly used "vocal stances" that a chorus regardless of size will be able to convey.
- o A principal distinction from character working with a single actor is, the larger the chorus, the less likely it is to achieve success when using directives comprised of nuance and subtle suggestion.

2a) Archetype vs. Nuance Experiment

Prior to Pure Research, we came up with seven 'Archetypal Vocal Stances':

- Voice of Celebration
- Voice of Sorrow
- Voice of Mother
- Voice of Authority
- Voice of Wonder
- Voice of Doom
- Voice of Reason

In formulating the above list, more questions presented themselves: Could a chorus be indirectly steered towards presenting nuanced emotions or subtle 'states of being' (for example: frustration, disappointment, bashfulness)?

We separated our RPs into two choruses of ten. Each group of ten was made up of five men and five women.

One chorus worked with Nick on the Archetypal Vocal Stances. Nick and his gang revised the seven Archetypal Vocal Stances. Actors were finding the above list rather abstract. For the purposes of the game described below, the RPs needed to work with more 'playable' Vocal Stances. This is the revised list:

- Voice of Joy
- Voice of Anger
- Voice of Power
- Voice of Sorrow/Lamentation
- Voice of Awe
- Voice of Fear/Anxiety
- Voice of Confusion

After working with Nick this chorus of ten, presented, in unison, a neutral text. The neutral text was the list of characters from George Seremba's *Come Good Rain*. Their colleagues (the other ten RP's), with their backs turned, attempted to identify, without having been privy to this list, which archetypal stances were being communicated.

Archetypal Vocal Stance results:

Size of Chorus	Archetypal Vocal Stance	What Others Heard
10	<i>Joy</i>	Joy, Rejoice, Anticipation, Excitement, Hopeful, Jubilation
10	<i>Anger</i>	Anger, Dictatorship, Command, Tyrannical, Authoritative(ian), Strict, Stern, Controlling
10	<i>Power</i>	Exasperation, Reverence, Pleasure, Awe, Instructional, Dominational, Sexy School Mistress, Seduction, Detached, Removed, Functional (receptionist)
10	<i>Sorrow/Lamentation</i>	Sorrowful, Grief, Mourning, Sadness, Longing, Despair, Agony, Wistful
10	<i>Awe</i>	Awe, Desirous, Wistful, Wonder, Desire, Sensual, Inspired, Love, Friday Night Anticipation, Disbelief
10	<i>Fear/Anxiety</i>	Fear, Anxious, Pain, Shock, Surprise, Concern, Dismay, Upset, Caught, Doubt, Questioning
10	<i>Confusion</i>	Confusing, Malaise, Jaundiced, Reluctant, Hesitant, Groping, Unsure, Doubtful, Guessing, Indecisive, Questioning

These results show that nearly all of the vocal stances were successfully conveyed.

The second group worked with Rebecca on expressing more nuanced emotions/states of being/expression. This exercise was particularly difficult because of the abstract quality of the discussion. We shied away from overtly deciding what each suggestion "meant" and instead ended up talking about the rhythmic and technical qualities we wanted to portray. These were rehearsed with the same neutral text, then presented to the ten colleagues. The ten colleagues, again with their backs turned, hazarded guesses as to which nuanced emotions/states of being, these were.

'Nuanced suggestion' results:

Size of Chorus	Nuanced Suggestion	What Others Heard
10	<i>Frustration</i> (quiet, upward inflection)	officiousness, curtness, fed up, anger, impatience, frustration, terseness, summoning, reprimand, wonder, peremptory, annoyance, irritation, exasperation, cold, intolerance
10	<i>Bashfulness</i> (fatigued slidey whiney)	doubt, disbelief, wonder, surprise, questioning, tentative, guessing, curiosity, unsure, uncertainty, ambivalence, hesitance, concern
10	<i>Disappointment</i> (clenched staccato)	Boredom, snoozeville, whiny, apathy, exasperation, fatigue, ennui, cynicism, fed-upity, bitterness, anxiousness, disdain, terse, jaded

The results show that this method was not successful. Rebecca believes this is because the chorus was not in absolute intellectual agreement, and without a choral leader to give a line reading of the technical interpretation, therefore cooperation was impeded and a "one voice" state was not achieved.

2b) Directing Using Acting Intentions Experiment

The next step was to find out to what extent character could be conveyed by a chorus when employing standard acting intentions vocabulary (or verbing). We chose a neutral text.

We had all twenty RPs speak the neutral text in unison as if it were a line of dramatic text. We rehearsed it seven ways. Each time the chorus was directed to speak the line with a different intention: complaining, consoling, amusing, remembering, upbraiding, motivating, and pleading

We were also curious about how the size of a chorus can affect its ability to express or convey a plausible character/character type. To this end we did not always call on all 20 voices. Sometimes we had the text spoken by blocks of 10, 5, 2 and 1 voice.

We then had Volunteer Listeners answer the question: "Who spoke? What kind of Character just spoke?"

Results:

Size of Chorus	Acting Intention (verb)	Perceived Character
20	<i>Amuse</i>	Tim Horton's Employee, Girly Girl, Person in Bubble Gum Ad, Character in Commercial, Happy Chef, Children at Housewife's Club
5	<i>Motivate</i>	MacBeth Witches, Someone casting spell, Witch, Amateur Actor as MacBeth, Fake excited Girl, Fairy Godmother
1	<i>Plead</i>	Bored Man, Accountant Tabulating, Actor, Language Teacher, Accountant, Teacher, Stressed out Father or employee
10	<i>Remember</i>	Someone Figuring Out a Problem, Classroom Kid, Someone Figuring Puzzle and Succeeding, Someone Cracking Code, Inventor, Confused Person, Remembering Sky, Math Student Solving Equation, Tim Horton's Employee About to Fall Asleep Before Making
5	<i>Upbraid</i>	Miss Bossy Boots, Someone in a hurry, Flighty Girl, Insistent Group of Young Girls, Mean Sister, Teenager in Commercial, Angry Boss, Frustrated Character
1	<i>Upbraid</i>	Criticizing Professor, Angry Authority, Determined Actor, Someone About to Explode, Impatient Character, Bossy Clerk Who Thinks He's Boss, Character Suppressing a British Accent
20	<i>Complain</i>	Older Person, Bored Teenager, Weary and Bored Person, Bad Impression of a Jewish Grandmother, Striking Group of Employees, Fed Up Person, Unenthusiastic Classroom of Children
20	<i>Console</i>	Loving Person, Caring Parent, New Age Singer, Mother Calming a Child to Sleep, Caring Mother, Working a Spell, Person Confiding
2	<i>Console</i>	Secretive Person, Young Mother, Older Sister Caring
5	<i>Amuse</i>	Enthusiastic Boy, Enthusiastic Young Man, Excited Brother, Voice in Video Game Ad, Guy Who Just Won Lottery

We had hypothesised that the larger the group, the less clearly a character/character type could be conveyed. But upon compiling these results, we are convinced that even larger choruses, speaking in unison, could, with time, allow an audience to feel they were being addressed by one, plausible, articulated character.



3. ON HUMOR AND COMEDY

Preliminary theory:

- o As with a single performer, a chorus can effectively employ the parts of humor including: irony, wit, satire, jokes, figures of speech and humorous characterization.

3a) Joke Telling Experiment

We rehearsed a series of jokes, one liners and had a volunteer listener come into the room and stand on an "X". When the listener hit the mark, the chorus delivered the joke.

Results: Most of the time, it did not work, the jokes were not funny and did not make the VL laugh. This posed a complex communication problem of which the visual element (having 20 people try to look you in the eye) was a significant contributing factor that we were not able contend with in such a short time. We have posted an audio clip of our conversation with the chorus relating to the choral telling of jokes and comedy as the best representation of our findings at www.cheerleaderchronicles.com.

3b) Laughing Experiment

All this joke telling led us to ask the question, Can a chorus deliver a genuine believable laugh and how would we achieve that? We developed an exercise which began with us asking an RP to laugh. She laughed. We then asked the rest of the chorus: 'What kind of character would have laughed like that?'. As a group, we decided this was the laugh of a rather uninspired, teenage boy watching TV. The chorus then rehearsed the laugh in pitch perfect choral unison. (Nick had notated musically the pitches of the laughter so that it could be rehearsed as a melody). We did this two more times; developed and rehearsed two more laughs.

A group of several Volunteer Listeners was then brought into the room and the chorus performed the laughs. We asked the VLs "Who laughed? Which Character or type of character just laughed?"

Results:

Size of Chorus	Attempted laugh of	Perceived Character
20	<i>Uninspired Teenage Boy Watching TV</i>	Fat Man/Smart Dude, Homer Simpson/Thelma, Jock Girlfriend, Cave Man/Homer's Surfer Sister, Tired Old, Dry Cynical Disappointed Boss, Kung Fu Giant, Disbelieving Teenager
20	<i>Uppity, Sarcastic, Fake, Desperate Housewife</i>	Evil Villain, Hysterical Lady/Witch, Stepmother/Meryl Streep, Asian Student/Evil Stepmother, Crazy Lunatic, Birdy/Witch, Nasty Snobby Neighbour, Boss's Wife, Nasty Queen, A Young Woman/Naughty Scary Older woman
20	<i>Sports Guy OR Delinquent</i>	Nerdy Student/Drunk Guy, Sandra Bullock, Beavis and Butthead/Dorky Older Brother, Stoner, Dwarf/Short Stubby Fairy Creature, Someone with Hiccups, Nose Full of Snot, Sick Man

The results show that the perceptions were in the ballpark of the character, but perhaps the most telling result from this experiment was that the chorus was able to laugh in pitch perfect unison and on cue. Timing and tone were not an issue. However this question would have been more revealing were the laugh delivered as part of a scene where the delivery had dramatic stakes attached to it.



3c) Communicating wit 'in character' Experiment

When looking to explore humor with the chorus we had to address the practical theatrical concern of a character's use of wit in a dramatic context. We took a short, witty beat of 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and cast five RPs as each character (Bracknell, Gwendolyn, Algernon and Jack) Of course, the wit of each line could only be conveyed effectively if the RPs all had an appreciation for Wilde's famous characters. We assigned one choral leader per character- someone who knew the role, play and scene dynamics very well. The choral leaders went off and worked the scene and then taught the other four RPs their part. Nick then added blocking and the RPs moved through the space acting out the scene in a sort of bizarre Matrix like theatrical event.

Result: The wit of the scene played out superbly but the pitch perfect unison of the five RPs per voice added a strange otherworldly quality to the scene. We have included an audio sampling to illustrate at www.cheerleaderchronicles.com. Afterwards the RPs described it as a strange experience in that, for example, when Gwendolyn speaks to Jack, one of the Gwendolyns remarked that it was actually impossible to meet the eyes of any one particular Jack, as it felt false, she had to deliver the line to *all* of the Jacks.

4. ON GENDER AND HOW IT CAN EFFECT THE DRAMATIC QUALITIES OF A WORK

Preliminary theory:

- o There will be a distinct qualitative difference in an audiences ease of hearing text delivered by a group of women speaking in chorus vs. a group of men speaking in chorus.
- o The male and female choruses when working on a text with a designated choral leader will employ different approaches to achieving choral unison

4a) The Choral Leader And Gender Experiment

RPs were separated by gender and they were given a high stakes excerpt from *Come Good Rain* by George Seremba. Each group was given the chance to work on the text with a choral leader and then with a director.

Result: The gender divide! Women are easier to hear than men. After some discussion with the chorus and VL's we now theorize that this comes from the fact that the human ear has a much easier time hearing, therefore comprehending words spoken in a higher register. Lower male voices are more chesty- therefore it is more difficult to discern words spoken chorally by men. It would be interesting to do a piece where men are asked to speak pitch perfectly in falsetto and to reassess this theory.



5. ON CHORAL EFFECTS AND ENHANCEMENTS ON MATERIAL MEANT FOR A SOLO VOICE

Preliminary theory:

- o SATB as applied in singing can also be applied to spoken choral work.
- o Blocking aside, when working in rhythmic and pitch perfect unison in there is not a large difference in the time it takes to rehearse one actor vs a chorus of actors.
- o There is a qualitative difference in the experience of listening to a given text spoken by 1, 2, 5, 10, 20 actors in unison
- o A song arranged for and delivered by twenty spoken voices can have an equivalent emotional/physical impact as the same song sung by a singer.

5a) Song Lyric Scored For A Speaking Chorus Experiment

We broke the 20 RPs into four sections depending on their natural vocal registers; Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass. We had them read, learn and rehearse a score based on the lyrics to 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' in which the sections worked sometimes in unison, sometimes in counterpoint. We played with volume, pitch, fugal (or staggered) entrances, and density. Perhaps for lack of a better term, it was an exercise in sound poetry.

We rehearsed this piece to bring it to a performance level which was achieved, score in hand in just over an hour. We then asked our group of VLS to respond to the piece by writing down what images came to mind while they were listening to the piece.

Results: The following are some of the images the VLS noted as their feedback: Church choir, chain gang or christmas jazz choir working on syllabic rhythm without specific pitch, christmas pageant choir/conductor/classical music, a train a race a collision a thermometer rising a roller coaster, blue black brown, soldiers angels men and women separated christmas choral tap dancing bar scene.

Leaving character and vocal stances and dramatic intention, etc. aside, this 'God Rest Ye' exercise was an opportunity to play musically with the sound of non-singing voices. An opportunity for Nick (as a composer) to experiment with sonic effects, combinations, male/female vocal juxtapositions and rhythms. And also to hear the difference between pitch-perfect choral unison and dissonant choral unison (see glossary of terms above). The dramatic weight of this piece was strongest when the score was nuanced with imagistic intentions, for example, when Nick asked one section of the chorus to say "rest" as if putting down a heavy load, the effect was quite dramatic. Had we had more time, we would be interested in combining this kind of sonic, almost musical exploration with the creation of character.

5b) Text With Strong "Musical Cues" Experiment

We rehearsed the performance poem, *Cadence* by Jem Rolls twice before presenting it in two different proximity's to a group of volunteer listeners. This exercise looked at the benefits of working with a contemporary text with a strong rhythmic drive and the effect of proximity to an audience.

Results:

Volunteer Listener response to <i>Cadence</i> by Jem Rolls	
<i>Response after hearing from 10 meters away from chorus</i>	<i>Response after hearing from 1 meter away from chorus</i>
<p>-female-male "stereo was somehow easier to follow/clearer than "surround" sound... perhaps because we are more used to expecting the clear assignment of male female voices?</p> <p>- I could "target" my different speakers, varying my focus</p> <p>- I felt more relaxed</p> <p>- It was awesome. Powerful. The back of my neck, tingly excited. My head started bobbling with the beat especially towards the end as the rhythm sped up.</p> <p>-more visceral response. Sonic painting that traverses through my entire body and through the space. Highs and lows were moving. More three dimensional</p> <p>- the two times were different mostly because the closer they get the more monotone it sounds. I wished I'd been able to move around too so that I could be closer to the women because I think they are somewhat easier to understand, low pitch adds distortion, I found myself physically moving to the rhythm.</p> <p>-It was like being on a train, being caught up in the rhythm of the words and the pace and the cadence of the words.</p>	<p>-for me there was an intimacy issue- the close performance was like wearing headphones! Both were very musical! less about the words and more about the rhythms</p> <p>- there was a greater sense of proximity, suddenly a few voices were <u>very</u> intimate while others provided the background</p> <p>-I felt the whispering to be more intimate at the closer proximity. Was expecting the hollering in close proximity to be way too loud, but it wasn't too loud Dynamics were more varied in close.</p> <p>-I got tense, then relaxed, I looked at performers and heard individual voices</p> <p>-When they were closer and they whispered it was creepier-they got under my skin. Closer also allowed it to resonate a little more.</p> <p>-some voices stood out more in the chorus, the sounds seem to only wick over our heads. Less moving.</p> <p>- I paid more attention to the three female voices closest to me instead of the circle as a whole. I paid attention to their enthusiasm and the tapping of their boots as they got caught up in the sound of their own voice.</p>

It only took two rehearsals before we attained near perfect unison. The piece evoked an interesting physical response from the VLs as noted in some of the feedback.

5c) The Invisible Chorus Experiment

Using the poem *Song of A Citizen* by Czeslaw Milosz, the chorus performed the text from behind a riser; a puppet portraying the central character for the audience. Parts of the text were delivered by solo voices and parts with the entire chorus. We asked the VLs to respond on the difference between the two experiences.

Results:

Size of Chorus voicing puppet	Text	How it made the Volunteer Listeners feel:
1	Sections of Song of a Citizen, a poem by Czeslaw Milosz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -distant, ethereal -like in a personal dialogue, getting insight into one soul -spoken to by a "character" or performer, I felt "addressed" -the puppet hadn't started moving with the solo voice began so I didn't subjectify it. -attentive alert, focussed on puppet -A clearer understanding of the text yet a diminished sense of the story. The story becomes mortal, less godlike or epic. -the need to empathise -like the puppet is speaking directly and that it is dramatic prose (monologue) -like being in a children's fairy tale, especially with the solo male voice at the beginning
20	Sections of Song of a Citizen, a poem by Czeslaw Milosz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -grounded, firmly planted, solid -like listening to humanities murmur -present at an "event", a performance, I feel myself in a <u>wash</u> of sound -socialist propaganda, or cyborgs -relaxed, warm, fuzzy -Overwhelmed. There is more power. Feels epic. the tale is considerably grander. However I start to lose some of the meaning of the text and being led by the emotion of the group. -moved. multilayered person-soul, I like the clashes in sound, the range in voices -like I am listening to poetry. It's more difficult to discern meaning, as it is lulling. -that it is harder to hear and understand the text. Perhaps i am listening more to the sound of voices together like waves.
1	Except from <i>Come Good Rain</i> , a play by George Seremba	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -lonely -like the puppet wasn't quite fulfilled -a (surprising) mismatch between voice, puppet, subject matter -more like the puppet is speaking -touched (female voice), wonder -Sympathy. I am a spectator watching and listening. Detached. -not much -like the character speaking is the voice of the puppet -alone in this task, alone facing death
20	Except from <i>Come Good Rain</i> , a play by George Seremba	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -secure -confused -I hear a "political speech", a staged declaration -I imagine the group of people -Solo voices being reinforced, sense of familiarity -Powerful. <u>Included</u> in the emotion of the moment and feeling a part of the chorus. -because it repeated, I began to only listen to sounds/music and not the meaning of words -like it slows down a bit. I still made the association with the puppet but it feels more omniscient, less personal and intimate. - I heard it more clearly as it was a repetition of the first solo lines. I felt it was an emphasis of what had been said.

A puppet is an effective theatrical device to demonstrate the theatrical difference between a solo voice and a choral voice.

Impact

The Chorus members expressed that performing as one voice was perhaps more demanding than performing solo due to the constant suppression of instincts. It required an extreme form of cooperation.

After such an intense period listening to choral speech the researchers noted a change in their hearing. Rebecca commented "I suspect I was experiencing something of an after effect from 'the choral force' The next day I also found myself hearing things in choral unison, what I mean by this is that I heard choral tracers."

One of the discoveries that came from of this diverse group were memories and stories of previous choral experiences, even some from the 1970's. Though some may think of it as a relic, we have passed the choral tradition along for thousands of years.

Conclusion

Twenty people or, shall we say an actor with 20 heads, speaking in choral unison would become tiresome after a certain point. Breaking the unison, but continuing to keep 20 voices alive simultaneously opens a world of possibility not just for creating delight and awe in the audience, but for deepening and even re-imagining dramatic characters; exploring their contradictions, their hidden agendas, trawling their souls, conjuring their pasts and moving them forward in the story all at the same time! At this level, something not unlike opera could spring from spoken choral work.

Yes, a chorus twenty strong could effectively perform a text written for significantly smaller casts. We believe it could do so without clumsiness - without corrupting the inherent intimacy of pieces written even for solo performer. Perhaps swimming in these possibilities is a new form of music theatre.

Or perhaps there is nothing new about any of this at all. I am tempted to believe that if the ideas expressed above, were put into practice, we would stage something uncannily similar to the play presented the day *before* Thespis' play went up at the City Dionysia c.534 BC; the day before he (allegedly) stepped out of the chorus and addressed the audience as a solo actor.

Appendix 1:

Research Participants

We hired twenty Toronto based professional actors. We selected a diverse and dynamic group of mixed gender (half men, half women), vocal quality and age.

The chorus members were: Anousha Alamian, Sarah Bezansen, Jay Bowen, Leanna Brodie, Anna Chatterton Jayne Collins, Diana Donnelly, Megan Dunlop, Megan Flynn, Shawn Hitchins, Elva Mai Hoover, Noah Keneally, Earl Pastko, Freya Ravensbergen, Julian Richings, Katherine Sanders, Derek Scott, Jonathan Seinen, Seife Tesfaye, and Norman Yeung.

Our volunteer listeners were all theatre goers and included MFA students of the U of T Centre for Study in Drama, theatre practitioners, and academics.

Glenn Morris Theatre

We met in a small theatre, formerly a church, the Glenn Morris on December 3, 4 and 5th 2007. It was graciously provided by the University of Toronto Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama. The chorus was comfortably seated on a bank of risers with music stands. We positioned them in four rows, one row of five, all men including those with accents, the second a mix of men and women, the third all women and the fourth another mixed gender group. The researchers and their equipment occupied the floor in front of them. There were several areas in the building where we were able to work as smaller groups, such as the stairwell, a balcony, and the carpentry shop below the theatre.

With such a large group of people it was prudent to identify ourselves and have a visual signal to denote "working time". With typical cheerleading flair, the researchers donned matching crisp white lab coats with satin appliqué question marks with gold lettering when it was time to get to work. This proved to be a fun and highly effective technique, very little time was lost in set up.

Texts used

Excerpts from *Come Good Rain*, a play by George Seremba
Except from *Cadence*, a performance poem by Jem Rolls
Except from, *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde
Song of a Citizen, a poem by Czeslaw Milosz
Come Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen as arranged by Nick Carpenter
and various short rhymes and jokes.

Appendix 2:

Practical Observations

On uniting as a chorus

- Allow the chorus to work things out for themselves and establish a technique and common vocabulary before imposing directives.
- "Stressing" the chorus is a good way to build vocabulary, it got the actors to talk openly about their individual interpretive style.
- Despite being part of a much larger unit, each chorus member was active, creative and engaged.
- A spirit of camaraderie and common purpose is essential to effective choral work.
- Each chorus member has to "agree to agree" in order for the meaning and nuances of the text to be conveyed. This can be directly compared to a single actor making clear choices.
- Extreme cooperation is a central tenant of choral work.

On directing a chorus of actors

- A chorus leader who sets and or 'steers' tempo, volume and cadence is an essential component of choral work.
- Using a choral leader is not always necessary.
- We spoke in "actor terms" using words like "pull here", "take a beat there" etc.
- We gave just enough direction to color the performance but not so much as to require individual interpretation in order to perform the texts.
- We often talked about rhythmic observations and pauses.
- Some confusion arose when we asked the group to break into SATB according to speaking voice. We found it helpful to relate to musical instruments. Soprano and alto became trumpet and saxophone respectively.
- A group of trained actors can achieve sustained choral unison (2 minutes) within 6 hours of group work. Point is- it doesn't take that much longer to rehearse a chorus if you treat them as one (very interesting) actor.
- A chorus can have a choral sensitivity to comic timing
- The more a chorus understands how it fits dramatically, aesthetically and thematically into the world of the story it is helping to tell, the more effective it will be in serving the story.

On unison

- As in singing, it is possible to get a group of 20 actors to speak a text in rhythmic and pitch-perfect unison.
- Pitch perfect unison requires many chorus members to speak outside of their natural vocal range and therefore the overall sound comes across as affected, eerie, otherworldly, comical.
- Pitch perfect unison ended up being relatively easy to achieve although the men tended to be one octave lower (we allowed this). Probably the best illustration of the effect of pitch perfect unison would be in the *Importance of Being Earnest* text when we had 5 people on each part. The feedback we got was that it did sound almost otherworldly. when asked which character was the most vivid. The clear "winner" was Gwendolyn. This five person actor had created (by necessity to get the wit across) a very lilting and melodic delivery for the line. This character's delivery gave us shivers exactly because of the tone and delivery.
- Moving from the expressive confinements of choral unison into more complex sonic choreographies and staging will enable a 20 person chorus to successfully convey subtle emotions and nuanced action. The question still burns in our minds after a intense three day research period with a chorus of twenty fine and generous actors.

