

Experiencing *Sprechgesang* – Theatre’s Forgotten Instrument

By Susanna Uchatius and James Coomber

A report on a workshop conducted as part of Nightswimming’s Pure Research program, in association with Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University. Conducted at SFU’s Woodward’s Centre, in Vancouver, June 13-15, 2011.

The People in the Room: the researchers and the people they worked with

Susanna Uchatius: the Artistic Director of Theatre Terrific has a deep interest in writing for and creating inclusive provocative theatre with those who have developmental, physical, mental health, language, speech, gender challenges, along with actors with no apparent challenges. Susanna is one of the researchers.

James Coomber: a composer, musician, music director and sound designer. He is interested in new forms of music theatre, musicians as actors, and music pedagogy for actors and non-musicians. James is one of the researchers.

Trevor O’Rourke: a classical opera singer who also trained in Flamenco Cante in Seville and presently sings and plays percussion for local Spanish dance companies. He agreed to participate in this research as a subject.

Keiran Naugler: a 20-year-old who loves to sing. He lives with adrenoleukodystrophy (locked-in-body syndrome) causing extreme difficulty in speaking. Yet, he can sing freely, without the physical struggle required to speak. He has performed with Theatre Terrific and wishes to continue performing. Kieran agreed to participate in this research as a subject.

Brian Quirt: Artistic Director of Nightswimming. This edition of Pure Research was its first foray into Western Canada in partnership with SFU Contemporary Arts in Vancouver. Brian and DD Kugler served as dramaturgs for the research process.

DD Kugler: Professor with SFU Contemporary Arts. He worked with Brian and Rupal in choosing the recipients for Pure Research, dramaturged the project prior to and during the process, contributed research funds, oversaw SFU’s contributions of space, equipment and personnel, and documented each day’s activities.

Rupal Shah: Nightswimming’s Producer administered Pure Research and attended most of the sessions to record, photograph and deal with sundry details that arose during the process.

Leora Morris: served as Nightswimming’s Intern Dramaturg, attending each day’s process to record her observations of the research process.

The original questions we proposed to research, where they came from, and why they interested us:

Is there a primal element missing in the classic theatre's pedagogical approach to the study of speaking text? Are there other untapped approaches that would assist the actor in accessing their full voice? If so, what are they?

Where did that question come from?

The initial glimmer that led us to that question was: How can one use singing as a tool for advanced open natural acting...for pure communication. For the beginning theatre student, the great task at hand is to speak text in a natural authentic manner. As students we practice our lines, do the character work and speak the text. Many take this for granted. There are those with various disabilities such as Kieran, who due to his circumstances (please see the story...*The Boy Who Talked* at www.theatreterrific.ca), present an anomaly. He could sing quite clearly, but talking was extremely difficult for him. How could that be? And, in that mystery, was there something there that we as vocally able theatre artists had missed?

We had a number of lofty reasons and goals for looking at this question:

- To better understand the voice as a whole entity
- To assist the player and the voice in becoming one
- To establish possible navigational coordinates needed to make this 'becoming one' possible
- To support the voice in developing performance and communicative elements that perhaps have not been discovered or fully utilized.

What we did when we found out that we had been selected for Nightswimming's research program

In our application, we had drafted a simplified method for researching our question, but now we realized that even though we had been granted the ship and the winds to sail it, we were wholly inexperienced as pure researchers. As theatre artists our goals were always towards production, performance and product.

So what did we do? We decided we had to become personal. We decided to create a personal intimate questionnaire for Kieran and Trevor as our research 'subjects'.

Why did we do that? We realized that we were asking them to use a very personal instrument in an intimate studio with us and others as witnesses. Thus, it seemed appropriate to consider the textures of their personal lives, become familiar with the shadings and experiences that would effect such a personal instrument as the voice. Answering a personal questionnaire would give them and us signposts into how, when, why, where, what and with whom they do or don't speak or sing. We asked about early years, music, movies, books, singing and songs, sports, places, people and some other stuff. Trevor filled his questionnaire online. Susanna and James, as researchers, spent a number of hours questioning Kieran. (Something that we found out during this process that we can see now as extremely relevant; *conversation in a group makes it easier to speak...to sing...or to communicate at all.* This may sound stupidly simple, but as we discovered later, it is actually quite profound.)

We were aware that there are mountains of research on the human voice, so we came up with the idea of approaching the work in a pure scientific form. James drafted a set of precise experiments that included sounding, singing and speaking in a wide variety of contexts and combinations

using known, unknown or improvised material. For example, an experiment might be to sing from a body part using a known song or to talk from an emotional place using unknown text.

Along with these experiments we also used Susanna's three-part ritual working process. We planned to start each day with a ritual circle: Enter (done in silence with a stone, this establishes presence and acceptance) and continue on with a physical and vocal warm-up and on into the exercises we had planned as part of the research. We would end with an Exit ritual to provide acknowledgment and closure for the day's work.

We drafted three days worth of this process and entered our first day flush with a set of procedures to follow.

Day One Observations and Discoveries

Our first experiment was investigating the voice in the body using known material. We told the subjects that the focus was their own body with no relationship to anyone else.

We placed Trevor and Kieran on opposite sides of the room, facing away from each other, in an attempt to capture their individual vocal experience. As researchers we set ourselves apart, standing separate. We asked them to repeat known sounds such as breathing, gasping, ah-ing, etc., that are familiar to just about anyone. Then we asked them to face one another and laugh like two Santas. Immediately the relationship changed. The emotion of the laughter became real. This was heartening.

Then, we moved on to text. Both Trevor and Kieran supplied text from movies they loved. We asked them to speak the text, changing the properties of sound by making it quieter, louder, softer, harder, higher, etc. We asked them to include the body in the text meaning that they speak from their big toe or their ear. This proved very difficult and they both got stuck. So, we asked them to sing songs that they knew....to each other.

First Revelation! We realized that our preconceived assumptions about the best way to approach vocal work—meaning start first with sound, second invite words in and third, because it is so huge, leave singing to the end—was really dumb! It was the **singing** that immediately invited relationship, response, connection and opened the voice.

We did not realize what we already knew: that the very reason why we were interested in researching the space between speaking and singing is the clear awareness that singing does something to the voice, to the physical body and to the psyche. Knowing this, we had still set our very first experiment in the traditional format of study: sounding/text first and singing much later.

Our first revelation then was that we should trust our own inner knowledge rather than following prescribed pedagogical procedures. We decided that singing should come first. It amazed us how ingrained the 'supposed to' of practice can become. Despite wanting to look at different pedagogical ways of voice study, we had inadvertently fallen into the well-beaten path of attempting text first and thereby shutting the door of communicative authentic voice for both Kieran and Trevor. At the day's end James and Susanna gathered at the local JJ Bean café, plotting out the next day's work and vowed to pursue a different approach.



James and Kieren

Day Two Observations and more discoveries

We decided to break away from the planned experiments and to do so listed different ways that we communicate, meaning when and where we sing, speak and sound. For example: Sing a repeated phrase, or create the sound to a video, or tell a story together. We numbered these and decided to approach the work with the idea that we would throw in a vocal ‘kink’ that would discombobulate each voicing. For example, in the midst of a Kieran and Trevor voicing the word hippopotamus together, James and Susanna began singing “Merry Christmas”. The idea of this experiment was that in society we adjust to what is expected and if that expectation is disturbed perhaps the voice could be joggled into new territory.

But we were still in the mode of following set procedures. So we made further adjustments.

We started with singing. We wanted to investigate the different ways that we could communicate through singing. When Trevor and Kieran sang a song together, they did a call and response led by James: we had them speak in call and response, we had them sing with piano accompaniment and without, and we set up a scripted conversation that we initiated. We chose one word, hippopotamus, and broke it down phonetically and did all of the above with it.

But nothing formed or took off. It dawned on us that perhaps the researcher and subject relationship was blocking something in the subject’s voices. The us and them needed to become the ‘we’. We all needed to step into the work together. So all four of us went to the piano and played with pitch and melody together in a conversational way. Something happened, something let go and slipped open; but at the time we were not aware of what *that* was.

We continued the list of ways we communicate: greet each other from a distance, repeat machine sounds, create the sound to a video—anything we could think of.

Second revelation! Because all four of us did the work together, we found it much easier to navigate with the voice. No one person was in the hot seat. Fear dissipated, risks were freely taken by all, self-judgment disappeared and the enormous advantage of the communal aspect of voice became apparent. As researchers it became clear that it was a great advantage to take off the lab coats (metaphorically) and get dirty with the subjects.

In the afternoon we had planned to attempt a connection with emotions and the voice.

So we briefly reverted back to the lab coats and asked Trevor and Kieran to have an insult war using sounds. We thought that they would explode by throwing expletives at each other and that

their voices would open in gleeful swearing. This did not happen. We failed to see that a personal context, a reason to swear, is necessary.

This lovely blunder turned some lights on. We asked Kieran and Trevor to share a private personal story. We hoped that this would raise the stakes and that their voices would become freer and more authentic.

Halleluia! They did. That personal stake, a story that was about them, led to a long, full rich authentic voice exchange. We all felt it, even though it was a private hushed conversation. After their personal exchange we asked questions. Both Trevor and Kieran's answers were long, detailed and their voices were full and rich.

Listening to them, we realized that this experience provided something very different from the previous experiments. The intimate personal sharing had provided Kieran and Trevor with intense focus, immediate relationship, the opportunity to risk trust, giving and receiving. Each of their voices became freer.

At the end of the day, James and Susanna went off for a two hour debriefing on what worked, what didn't, why and what to do on the final day.



Susanna

Day Three Observations and a Major Breakthrough

Looking back on Day One and Two, we asked ourselves, since speaking is so difficult, why doesn't Kieran sing everything? Then he could make himself understood. We asked ourselves: how much and what do we need to do to build/work/support Kieran so that he could vocalize his thoughts clearly?

We started day off with a song, fooled around musically with it and then we talked about favorite movies. Why did we like that particular one, etc., and then talked about it together. We gathered by the piano, James played and we sang three well known songs: "Mary had a Little Lamb", "Silent Night" and "White Christmas". Then we started a conversation about the movies we all loved all to the melody of "White Christmas" while James played the melody on the piano.

Major revelation! We could have gone on forever! We were all participating equally, having great fun interacting. We discovered that speaking-sort-of-singing our thoughts to a melody was amazingly freeing. This was *Sprechgesang*. James stopped playing the piano and the conversation went on and on and on; it was like dancing in voice!

We stopped and took a break.

When we returned, we again sat around the piano and James played. We changed the song to a Spanish melody that Trevor was more connected to. Our talk/sing, *sprechgesang* conversation became even deeper and more personal. We were not confined to the happy tone of “White Christmas” but rather followed the tone of Trevor’s chosen melody. Then we got Kieran involved. James began to play single notes on the piano, such as a single C-sharp, so there was no pressure for melody or any musical expectations.

The voice, the world of Kieran and ourselves opened up, simply, like warm water over ice.

James played random notes...we continued talk/singing...without any set musical ideas...instead our voices became something between singing and speaking...it was not restricted to the idea of melody and it also was released from the strictures of speaking. Our voices lived somewhere in the space between talking and singing.

James: Kieran, can I ask youuuuu...is this haaaaard?

Kieran: Noooooo.

James: Howwww does it maaaaake you feeeel?

Kieran: I feeeeeeel like I’mmmmm normal. What noooote is that?

James: It’s a Beeeee-flat.

Compared to any other time any of us had ever had a conversation with Kieran, this was the most detailed, lengthy and full cup of Kieran we had ever heard.

What was that all about and why was that important? Kieran, and we with him, had accessed that place between singing and speaking. It seemed as if that space is a huge storage vault. It’s full of emotional events, connections, memories, personal heritage, beliefs, confusions, fears—just about everything that makes you, you. When you are voicing in that space you release your judges, you are swimming in waters of your own universe and there is no such thing as error. It is your personal vocal fingerprint...or, coining a new word: vocalprint.

What do we do with this discovery?

Some possibilities:

- In a class situation you could access and share personal emotional events, thoughts or ideas...it could be as simple as what movie do you like and why...using a talk/singing voice. In that sharing, there may be a release from the normal social academic strictures that possibly hamper the voice, thereby supporting an authentic emotional stake in the text.
- Taking that first text that you are asked to learn in theatre class, and using *sprechgesang* in the learning process would allow the student to access his/her own truth in that text.
- Is there a way to develop your own unique melody/*sprechgesang* as individual as the way you walk, the way you dress, the way you laugh, etc? Could a person have their own unique ‘vocalprint’ that would bring rich tones and shadings to voices and the characters they speak for on stage?
- Would using *sprechgesang* alter how we perceive what is correct in speaking and singing?

Perhaps the great differentiation of voice in *sprechgesang* could open huge untraveled vistas of voice in the art of theatre?

- “I cannot sing” is a phrase said by many, but few would say, “I cannot talk.” It would be of great interest to actively pursue the space between the two. For the performance student, to navigate and experience that space is to better know who they are and what we can do with their instrument.

Susanna, James, Trevor and Kieran went through a remarkable process in this three day journey. We formulated a concise scientific process, started with it and quickly realized that we didn't even know the terrain we were traversing. The joy in this is that we were in a sort of scientific *sprechgesang*. There were no judges, no terms of loyalty to a production, no rules other than showing up with a plan (of sorts), no goals to meet or specific outcomes demanded. The process allowed absolute freedom. We discovered more than we ever thought possible. If theatre is to develop and discover new vistas of method and process, Nightswimming's Pure Research program is a tool of enormous worth.



Kieran, Trevor, Susanna and James

We offer a brief coda from the lead researchers, Susanna and James.

What Filled Susanna's Cup at the End of an Incredible Journey

Doing theatrical pure research seems an anomaly in some ways. How does one research something as ethereal and esthetically eclectic as theatre-making? Making theatre is all about building something from nothing. Everyone has a different take, like or dislike, truth or falsehood. Yet, I have always believed that we are born with an innate ability to recognize authenticity. As we grow older, our ability to voice that authenticity becomes blurred by self and social judgment. As Artistic Director of Theatre Terrific I have the honor of working with a fantastic range of different forms of authenticity. For many people who do not fit into the 'normal' picture of walking, talking, thinking, speaking, singing person, the very negotiation of their difference has carved a path that is uniquely authentic in its own right. Voice is one of the great divides. From the observations of this incredible journey, it would seem that the place in our voice between singing and talking is a hidden connector, a tunnel, a cave, a library, gravity-free, an ancient tablet, and above all, a mutual meeting place where anything is possible and acceptable.

Kieran and Trevor both showed us their voices and for a milli-second I experienced my own voice; it didn't live in the correctness of its sound but rather in the authentic free space, that must

be *sprechgesang*. I want to go there and I want to support others going there because I think that there are riches beyond imagination in the voices that venture the journey. I am immensely grateful for the rousing revelations, in just three days!

Sounding Off...One Last Note From James

I'm always fascinated by the moment when words are transformed into song. Suddenly a character, a person, a relationship, a moment, is charged with an inexplicable depth of possibility. I'm also fascinated with how easily we shy away from the territory of singing...the hidden rules and expectations we accept without any questions at all. What I'm walking away with from our research is a way to stumble through the roadblocks of the voice, into a place between places that is challenging and rewarding. It simultaneously captures the individual and creates an unspoken bond within the group...a sung bond of sorts, that forces the participants to be fully present, and risk a lot in the moment, all for a stronger sense of communication. It's an exciting place...and I'm humbled that I was given the chance to dive in and find some further questions and possibilities.

For more information about Theatre Terrific: www.theatreterrific.ca

For more information about Nightswimming: www.nightswimmingtheatre.com