



Devisers in the dark: reconfiguring a material voice practice

Electa W. Behrens

To cite this article: Electa W. Behrens (2019) Devisers in the dark: reconfiguring a material voice practice, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 10:3, 395-409, DOI: [10.1080/19443927.2019.1637372](https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2019.1637372)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2019.1637372>



© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 12 Dec 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 146



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



* Dedicated to babies and
ACT 14.

Devisers in the dark: reconfiguring a material voice practice

Electa W. Behrens*

Camilleri puts forth the idea of the post-psychophysical: training is moving beyond the mind/body binary towards the complexity of negotiating the body/world. Performance practices today embrace an ever-wider range of what voice can do and be as well as what role it takes in a larger composition. What does this mean for training? This article proposes that there is a growing need for non-anthropocentric compositional voice practices. It proposes a voice training which draws on new materialism, object-oriented feminism (OOF), and aurality studies and employs strategies from theatre in the dark. Theorists such as Eidsheim and Kendrick argue that ocularcentrism, the privilege of sight in Western culture, is so normalised that radical strategies are needed to return to the potentiality of sound. The article describes a case study at the Norwegian Theatre Academy, in which training the voice in darkness was explored. It outlines two exercises and discusses an alternative theoretical/practical base for the human sounder in relation to dynamic worlds. Key areas discussed are how darkness facilitates: voicing self/selves; voicing together – (de)composition; plasticity as a way to talk about sound objects/actions; and applying Home-Cook's 'tending to', Jarvis's performing (im)materiality of darkness and Machon's discussions of the haptic and (syn)aesthetic as training principles. This article aims to contribute to the intersection of the fields of new materialism, aurality, theatre in the dark and deviser training.

Keywords: darkness, voice, devising, new materialism

Introduction

This article explores working in the dark as a methodology for training the vocal deviser's compositional voice. Why work in the dark? I will argue that it is a useful strategy to address some of the emerging needs of the performer working in an intercultural and trans-aesthetic context.¹

- 1 Previous studies by McAllister-Viel (2010 and 2018) and Thomaidis and Macpherson (2015) as well as myself, among others, have made a case for intercultural voice practices and the importance of a critical theory approach supporting practical voice work. My own practice-research has aimed to reconsider voice work for the contemporary performer, including articles on overarching principles (Behrens 2015), an intercultural approach to text work (Behrens 2016), an ethical approach to song (Behrens and Berkeley Schulz 2017) and a spatial approach towards training as holistic practice (2019, forthcoming). This article builds on these foundations and explores a materialist approach to voice work with a focus on sound.
- 2 Due to lack of space, I will not pursue a lengthy analysis of Camilleri's work, especially as it focuses on training in a broader sense. Instead, I take his key argument as a provocation and question towards voice studies. I here acknowledge, as Camilleri also argues, that the conception of binaries has historical roots in the West and is fruitful to consider not as a given but rather as how it provokes critical thought.
- 3 As a team of teachers/researchers we produced the short book *Responsive Listening* (Eeg-Tverbakk and Ely 2015), which outlines some of the approaches employed at NTA. Research project website: <https://www.hiof.no/nta/english/research/projects/material-strategies/>.

In my studio at the Norwegian Theatre Academy (an international experimental conservatory dedicated to alternative approaches to performance), the most pressing issues I encounter in terms of helping a student to 'be heard' usually have little to do with their physical resonance, but rather with their ability to 'stage themselves'; to work compositionally in a way that gives them agency in how their voice confirms, destabilises or deconstructs the body that we see voicing, and their ability to engage proactively with the resonances at play in the cultural/social spaces they meet (see also Eeg-Tverbakk and Behrens 2019). As a voice teacher, I am necessarily a dramaturg. This is part of a larger shift. Camilleri, in *Performer Training Reconfigured* (2019), proposes that the fundamental question on which Western training has been focused for the past 100 years is changing: 'Beyond the mind-body binary that psychophysicality seeks to supersede, the post-psychophysical questions the human-non-human dichotomy that remains intact and unchallenged in previous paradigms' (Camilleri 2019, p. xi). He proposes 'bodyworld' as the 'new' binary: "'I" am not simply a "bodymind". "I" am a "bodyworld", an assemblage of human and non-human components' (Camilleri 2019, p. 62 italics original).²

This study proposes working from a new materialist standpoint, supported and disrupted by object-oriented feminism (OOF), and aurality studies. It is a case study of pedagogical research conducted at the Norwegian Theatre Academy (NTA), which is part of an ongoing focus on materiality and specifically part of the research project *Material Strategies* (2018–2019).³ This article unpacks two exercises and the supporting theory. I argue that darkness, as an (im)material that performs (Jarvis 2017), is a theoretical and practical 'world' for training which foregrounds the phenomenology of sound and its materiality. I discuss different ways in which darkness destabilises the ear of the student as composer and how this opens up the possibility for other modes of experiencing and composing together with materials. Key areas are how darkness facilitates: voicing self/selves; voicing together – (de)composition; plasticity as a way to talk about sound objects/actions; and Home-Cook's (2015) 'tending to', Jarvis' (2017) performing (im)materiality of darkness and Machon's (2007, 2013) notions of the haptic and (syn)aesthetic in immersive theatre – as training principles.

New materialism, aurality and even dark theatre are areas with a significant history of scholarship. Yet Coleman, Page and Palmer (2019) remark that '[u]ntil recently, the new materialisms have mainly constituted a conceptual field, viewed as "high" theory'. The theatre in the dark I am familiar with exists as a wide range of professional artistic practices but not as training approaches. This article looks to contribute to a less-developed area within these overlapping fields: how these theories might be applied as a foundational training. Darkness is an immediately graspable and down-to-earth framework to which practitioners can relate, and it makes space for these complex theories to become intuitive embodied training.

From devising to darkness

I did not start out wanting to work in the dark; it suggested itself to me as an answer to a question. Devising offers the possibility (more than text-based theatre) for all the elements of performance to be primary leaders of a dramaturgy. Yet, as I have argued (Behrens 2011, 2016), voice/sound work often still comes late in a process and/or takes singular and often supportive roles.⁴ Thomaidis (2016) writes about '[t]he lineage of anti-voice prejudice (*voice encapsulating that which is old-fashioned, mainstream, or linked with much debated notions of disembodiment*)', which is present in performance studies and has been used as an argument for the limited use of the voice in that tradition. Conversely at NTA, the structure of the programme encourages alternative approaches to dramaturgy and voice, body, space. Our curriculum is grounded in yearly 'Independent productions' in which acting and scenography students devise work in groups and the staff aim to create a learning environment which embraces mutual respect for all aspects of performance. Yet my experience is that this overall ethics is not always enough to shake the voice out of its traditional roles when devising.

I will discuss one influential theoretical strand of our overall education and explore how discipline-specific methods, in this case darkness, allow this philosophy to become practically applicable.⁵ Our teaching philosophy is informed by new materialism. This philosophical approach offers a non-anthropocentric worldview suggesting a flat ontology in which objects and humans have agency and entangle with each other. Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk, my colleague at NTA, writes:

Science has shown that every thing, including humans if they are to be seen as things, are made of particles ... Hodder comments '[A]t the atomic and sub-atomic level we see that matter "becomes" rather than "is"' (2012: 209). If this is the case, we can speak of the ways in which matter flows from one form to the other, and into and with each other ... Hodder is concerned with how difficult it is to stop our dance with things, constantly creating new and broader networks of entanglements. (Eeg-Tverbakk 2016, p. 214)

Of any performance material, voice is, perhaps, one that most naturally resonates with new materialist thinking and should, theoretically, be easily implementable in flat-structure work based on material entanglements. Rather than a table or body, which have their misleadingly concrete edges, the voice is easily understood as moving among other materials: 'surround sound' is a familiar idea.

Yet what the materiality of the voice is, is debated and multiple. What are we composing with? Nina Eidsheim (2015, p. 91) argues that the voice is a process, a verb, and rejects the idea of the 'figure of sound'. Other theorists, such as Dolan and Kane, champion (differing) ideas of a sound object. Kane, who writes about acousmatic sound, asserts: 'By bracketing an effect from its source and cause, I transform a sound from an event into an object' (Kane 2014, p. 8). Kane studies sound effects and the transformative potential of sound: sound that can take us to alternate realms, away from the present moment. Dolan argues for an object voice that stems out

4 I do not mean to suggest that in some pieces the voice being used in any of these ways is problematic, it might just be correct for that piece. My provocation is on the level of training: do we train voice in a way which limits how students think in terms of how the voice might be involved in devising?

5 My colleagues in the voice department, Øystein Elle and Ruth Wilhemine Meyer and I share similar concerns and they actively engage with these questions in their own pedagogy and research.

of Lacan's psychoanalysis. He reminds us of the slippery nature of the voice: 'In a curious bodily topology, [the voice] is like a bodily missile which separates itself from the body ... but on the other hand it points to a bodily interior' (Dolar 2006, pp. 70–71). His 'object voice' is one that frees the voice from being a mere subset of language (meaning-making) or aesthetics. Instead, it is a voice in between subject and object, of traces, and as such, opens up new landscapes of presence and absence. Ihde's work accounts for this seeming paradox of sound in its many forms via his idea of the auditory enigma: that sound can be both directional and surrounding (Ihde 2007, p. 77). Katherine Behar, drawing on the brain research of Malabou, offers a term which I find encompasses these various ideas successfully: plasticity, 'the threefold capacity for giving form, receiving form, and destroying form' (2016, p. 112). Behar writes: 'Plasticity is a near perfect description of the material quality of being an object'. Rather than having to be either/or, Behar's metaphor, applied to voice, allows the other proposals (voice as action or object) to be in relation to each other as part of the same material with dynamic edges (2016, p. 112).

Introducing alternative theoretical concepts of 'what voice is' can be important for a reconsidered approach to voice in composition, but these are difficult to apply when the 'pure voice training' a student receives is deeply embedded in anthropocentric ideas. Even in training schools which work with non-psychological methods, voice training is still often grounded in the human body. But who is sounding if not a 'self'? A non-anthropocentric approach in which a voice does not 'produce' sound – but is rather part of intra-actions, a 'mutual constitution of entangled agencies' (Barad 2007, p. 33) in which no one isolated object affects the other (causality), but all are instead entwined phenomena which cannot be separated (Bohr) – is radically different from the familiar trope of 'finding your natural voice'. How can we extend voice work outward from its focus on the vocal chords, lungs, lips as the starting point of sound; from the materiality of voice being only its vowels, consonants and melodies?

Within voice studies, Tara McAllister-Viel, Thomaidis and myself, among others, have argued that the voice is not only physical, but necessarily cultural, social and political: it cannot be approached by a voice training as 'neutral' and the metaphor of the voice as machine is outdated. Such approaches acknowledge the immaterial material of the voice, the personal history and complexity of the human being an integral part of how someone sounds, just as much as their larynx. However, an over-focus on the uniqueness of these material aspects, if misunderstood, might create a voice training which is primarily autobiographical, limiting how the other materialities of the voice may come forward.

What pedagogical 'culture' encompasses an understanding of the voice which moves beyond these paradigms? Behar (founder of object-oriented feminism), writes from a new materialist approach about the complexity of material that is both physical and immaterial. She addresses the messiness of materiality in terms of the political 'baggage' that terms like 'object' bring with them; a woman as an object has very different connotations than a table as object. Her approach embraces these multiple materialities, arguing that there are three main areas to be considered

when getting into ‘what it means’ for someone to be an object. These are: politics, ethics and erotics. She encourages ‘employing humor to foment unseemly entanglements between things’ and encourages ‘being “in the right” even if it means being “wrong”’ (Behar 2016, p. 3). In my studio, I use her work as the base of the kind of atmosphere and attitudes I encourage, which open a training ground between the physical and political/personal. As Heidi Fast and Milla Tiainen (2018) write:

When considered through a new materialist lens, the interconnected workings of body and voice are not only about the mediation of culturally recognizable markers of identity or about how the flesh and bones of particular bodies shape the sounds and multi-sensory experiences of a voice ... they are understood as consisting of incessant physiological processes and corporeal practices in which biology and culture dynamically intermingle.

A new materialist approach such as this is not new. Artist practitioners such as Norie Neumark, Eli Belgrano, Tiainen, as well as Thomaidis and Eidsheim, have all contributed significantly to the field. There is established scholarship which explores these ideas on the level of professional practice, describing strategies appropriate to a voice working out from an established aesthetic materiality. In this article, I am enquiring about the field of foundation training: what these ideas might offer to the voice without a long history of working with vocal forms. As noted, new materialist ideas can be complex to grasp. I propose that darkness as the overarching method is a situation which embodies materialist ethics and notions of entanglements in a very concrete way. In a theatre piece, darkness is an (im)materiality that performs. I argue that in a training context it becomes the (im)materiality that teaches.

The materiality of sound in the dark

As discussed by many, including Macpherson (2015) and Ihde (2007), the normalised hegemony of vision as the primary sense has a limiting effect on the perception of sound:

it was the emergence of vision in ancient philosophy that forged an inextricable link between sight and object, as our eyes were established as the chief means by which we cognate the difference between ourselves and the world ... This primacy of sight has produced the notion that the world is only fully known when it is visually evident, therefore sight ... became something of a meta-sense. (Kendrick 2017, p. 3).⁶

⁶ None of these authors, nor I, argue for an exclusion of one sense in favour of another. They offer rather historical context from which to consider what have become normalised relations to the senses today.

Could it be that this normalised primacy of sight, and the subject/object distinction it offers, is a subconscious hindrance in terms of how we perceive/work with voice? Is that why I just unconsciously used the verb ‘perceive’ to speak about sound? Is this pattern so invisible that it affects how we work with dramaturgy even at a school where the support of the equality among performance materials is strong? Aurality scholars, such as Kendrick (2017, pp. 73–102), Home-Cook (2015, pp. 116–124)

and Alston and Welton (2017) have written about dark performances as examples of a situation in which the aural sense is able to explore its full potential and act ‘on its own terms’.

For voice training, the most obvious benefit of working in the dark is the choice it gives the performer about how they give sound to self. In art where the voicer is seen, the voice must necessarily be in dialogue with what we see. If the sonic act is released from the visual signifier, the material has greater possibility to surround, transform. It allows the performer to choose what information they wish to share about their race or other aspects of identity, or whether they wish to lie. In the dark, through voice, you can transform from man to woman, cat to ocean. Alston and Welton (2017, p. 129) call these ‘aural subjectivities’ and argue that they have the characteristic of being quick to shift. Kaja Silverman (1988, p. 80) also discusses how sound is inherently subversive: ‘it can spill over from subject to object and object to subject, violating the bodily limits upon which classic subjectivity depends’. In analysing film sound, she puts forward that ‘the female voice is as relentlessly held to normative representations and functions as is the female body’ (Silverman 1988, p. viii, emphasis original). Working in the dark offers students the possibility to explore a ‘voice which refuses to be subordinated to and judged by the body – a voice which resists the norm of synchronization’ (Silverman 1988, p. 83). The acousmatic voice can be migratory and emancipated. Jarvis writes about the non-image potential that working in the dark offers; darkness confounds mimesis at its base, you cannot take a picture of the dark. His example is a performance about the ‘ugliest woman in the world’, a woman with hair all over her body who was put on display in a freakshow in the mid-1800s: ‘Julia-as-dark-matter creates “more possibilities” for her auditory representation to signify beyond a body image; biographical character is visually emptied out, becoming a space to be filled in with pluralistic acts of mental picture-making’ (Jarvis 2017, p. 102). This flexibility, as we can see, has not just poetic meaning, but also political. Darkness can be an interesting strategy for differently abled artists, including deaf artists, for whom sound is more than something we hear.⁷ All in all, darkness has the potential to open the range of expression for artists who come from a variety of backgrounds to choose the world they sound in, to or with.

As compositional training, darkness itself, as Jarvis (2017, p. 89) writes, ‘performs’. Yet at the same time it is (im)material. An interesting example of this could be Xavier LeRoy’s *Low Piece*, which begins with the choreographer announcing:

We are going to begin now. What we propose is that we spend the next 15 minutes ... having a conversation. When the time is up, the lighting person will shut off all the lights. It will be dark for a few minutes. Don’t be afraid. Then we will go on. (Noë 2010)

Noë writes how, in the performance they saw, the conversation exploded, loud and raucous once the lights were turned off: in the dark, people started to speak their hearts instead of just ‘performing’ being the

7 A compelling example is artist Christine Sum Kim’s compositions which work with sounds we do not hear. Sarah Mayberry Scott (2017) makes an interesting case for how differently abled artists offer a needed move away from what she calls the ‘aural fixation’ of sound studies towards an ever-extending conception of what sound ‘is’.

good audience. One of LeRoy's colleagues commented to me that this piece was radically different in different countries (Louise Höjer, private conversation, October 2018). The agency of the darkness is concrete and significant, even when the dramaturgical strategy is as banal as just turning off the light.

Darkness offers the 'self' flexibility while simultaneously opening a fluidity in terms of the role of the audience. Jarvis (2017, p. 104) names what many identify as a great potential of working in darkness as 'indeterminate spectatorship'; there is a slippage between the role of audience as passive listener and active agent. To take one example of many, in the 'ugly woman' performance, the fluid role of the audience opens up greater space for empathy between sounders and listeners. Kendrick writes about the specificity of such a fluid relationship based on sound instead of sight. She describes 'sonic spectatorship', stating that 'it is not just that what we see is formed from sound, but that to spectate is on sound's terms' (Kendrick 2017, p. 129). Several contributors in Alston and Welton's volume mention that sound in the dark can work almost like film in the sense that place can shift instantaneously: it is not physical scenography that is shifting, only the imaginative film in the mind's eye/ear. Various artists have explored these potentials with different sonic material. Several of Beckett's works are almost dark theatre pieces in themselves, going deep into the possibilities of language. Sabrina Hölzer explores music: she has made dark theatre pieces where audiences lie on beds of real grass and hear live classical music played by performers who hover above them and move in space.

Other companies, such as Sound&Fury, Fye and Foe or Extant, have taken further the haptic immersivity of dark theatre, the heightened cross-sensuality that occurs when darkness, sound and touch are choreographed.⁸ Another significant example is the work of Verity Standen, who made the piece *Hug*. In this piece, blindfolded audience members were hugged by a singing performer and then led on a journey in space and music. This is a significant piece in terms of exploring what the interactivity of sound on sound's terms means. It offers us another bodily relation than the one we normally have to a sounder: 'To feel somebody's thorax vibrate as they tackle an elaborate counter melody feels like the most immediate, visceral experience of music as human expression' (Lukowski 2014).

Across the different aesthetics explored in the dark, from Beckett to *Hug*, the experience of indeterminate spectatorship is interestingly consistent. George Home-Cook (2015, p. 144) talks about how this ambiguity can generate an audience relationship of 'tending to': that they are part of making an atmosphere manifest. Sound, in lighted theatre, is often used as something which underlines a dramaturgy, or 'tells us what we should feel' via musical cues or is the text that 'tells the story'. In the dark, sound gains both a heightened possibility to guide (especially in immersive work), but also interestingly it gains a greater porosity: the audience is often more aware of the voices in their head, and how these affect what they hear. As Machon (2013, p. 127) writes of

8 Cavallo and Oshodi (2017, p. 172) talk about Extant's work with the haptic. Machon (2007) citing Rodaway's usage writes: 'Haptic ... emphasises the tactile perceptual experience of the body as a whole (rather than merely the fingers) and also highlights the perceptive faculty of bodily kineasthetics (the body's locomotion in space) (Rodaway 1994: 44)'.

immersive practices: 'By embracing the sensuality of the exteriority of these worlds and the place that you take within it, it also accentuates the individual interiority of that experience fusing external and internal sensations throughout the event'. Darkness is an element which can facilitate the *voice's* arrival in its full 'corporality' and haptic potential: it is Dolar's 'bodily missile' as a plastic material which stretches and explodes across 'external/internal' borders of performer/audience. Dramaturgically, it is a place where erotics, ethics and politics have different agencies since they are not immediately fixed to the image, and where one can shift between the different ways in which sound can 'make meaning' as fast as film: sound can set the scene and then be the subject in a matter of seconds.

The theoretical framework presented above is the 'world' I bring to my teaching via my terminology, manner of being in the room and how I feed back. The exercises are the 'body'. Behar's playfulness with its materialist specificity, the attitude I encourage. The two exercises discussed here represent the base of a training. In my work, this has led further into creating group voice/object/space compositions in the dark as well as greatly influenced how I tutor devised projects.⁹

⁹ I want to thank my students at NTA and particularly ACT 14 for the journeys we have taken together in the dark.

Alone in the dark? Reconsidering the self

In making this task (Figure 1) I was asking: how can an exercise challenge our positionality in relation to objects? Eidsheim argues that we cannot separate sounding from listening. Scientifically, a sound is a wave which vibrates various bodies. She proposes that we think of the voice as 'intermaterial vibrations' (Eidsheim 2015, p. 10). Instead of a sounder and a listener, they are simply bodies which are moved by the same sound:

'it' [sound] is not something external that an internal 'I' senses. There is indeed no separation between 'it' and 'I' ... since sound cannot exist in a vacuum, a given material circumstance and its articulation comprise as much of what we ... understand as the sound as what we may point to as the sound. (Eidsheim 2015, pp. 155–156)

Thomaidis and Macpherson (2015, p. 4) put forward the idea of the vocal in-between: that meaning is not made by the listener or sounder, but in the space in between. Cavarero (2005) locates sound always in relation to the ear of another and Nancy (2007) turns the focus to the practice of listening. On the working floor I often use the catchphrase 'your voice is not about you – it is just as much about the wall off which it resonates'. Reminding the performer that the sound they make is immediately an assemblage of different materials of which they are only one, can be a first step in unhinging the anthropocentric focus within voice work. Darkness blurs the edges between you and the world, facilitating this step away from the self.

Voices in darknesses

You have no single 'true' voice. We all have a variety of 'truths' living within us to which we can give voice. These voices may be your mother tongue, the language you speak daily, a childhood nonsense language, Shakespeare, your telemarketer voice, your stand-up comedian voice, your singing voice, how you cry when you are alone, to name a few.

Objects also have at least as many voices as we.

Create a short score, maximum 5 minutes, which includes 3 sonic materials. You can combine work with your voice and object voices as you choose, or they can sound separately. You will perform them – in the dark. The audience will sit, blindfolded in the centre of the space. Make clear choices about how you enter, how you transition, exit and where you are in space during your score.

Figure 1 Compositional exercise for performers and objects

In this exercise, objects and voices are offered equal stage time. The fact that we do not know whether to expect the sounding of a human or an object immediately shifts the positionality of the listening ear. Being 'taken by surprise' by the sound of an egg cracking when we did not know the egg was there, or a sound we cannot place, allows the listener to experience not the sound that satisfies the expectation put forward by the image but, rather, the sound as an unfolding range of texture, melody, percussion. The materiality, rather than the human/non-human nature of the source, is central. Voicers can choose to linger in ambiguity, in the outskirts of volume or form. In this sense, acousmatic sound opens up a fluidity between subject and object and awakens the deviser to the roles that space and time have in 'making a sound'. Being in the dark also trains the voice in similar ways to 'traditional' voice practice. The performer cannot use gestures to compensate for unclear articulation or lack of volume, for example: to convince us about the voice with the body. Instead the darkness demands 'more', asking voice to be the primary channel of presence; yet at the same time it frees the performer from needing to relate to themselves as finite human body or psychological self having to 'act' as they sound.

In many traditions of working with voice, especially in relation to speech, the 'authenticity' of the voice is still often judged primarily on a human scale. The voicer might listen for the resonance of their words in other humans; waiting for their joke to 'land'. This listening to the audience is specifically human. The voices of objects do not approach the sonic dialogue with other materials in this way. Being in the dark both creates a level playing field where objects and humans can be equal voices, but also a site where the differences between these materials are tangible.

Objects resonating in a space foreground the 'reality' of the physical walls, ceiling, floor: we hear them as being 'in the now' of the space we are also in. Texts which suggest that they are from another space (the

text of a monologue, for example) can sound ‘out of place’: the performers may be focusing on an imagined materiality (or setting) which the audience do not partake of. In the light, we might suspend our disbelief, if the physicality suggests the contract of fourth wall acting, and our ears will experience the unnatural quiet of the theatre space as natural. In the dark, however, our ears tend to listen differently, searching for anything that might unexpectedly come upon us. I would suggest we are hearing more as intra-actions, noticing how the sounds we hear corroborate, or do not, the information we receive from our other senses. If the performer moves one material, the text, outside of its present entanglements, without somehow manifesting the materiality of that other (fictionalised) world in the present now, the text, or sound, can often be experienced as ‘untrue’ on a visceral level. In this sense, the darkness is a special kind of lie detector in terms of voice work. Yet it does this by uncovering not whether the vocal output was ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (according to the aesthetic values of singing or speaking), but whether or not it was a body aligned with a manifested world. I am not suggesting that text work needs a ‘soundscape’ to bring an imagined place into the dark room. Often subtle shifts in time or space allow for the materiality of that other world to entangle with the one the audience has inhabited up to that point.

Group darkness: decomposition

In new materialism, there is a focus on the agency of all materials – that humans are not those who ‘make the decisions’. In a performance context, this asks fundamental questions about what we consider ‘composing’ to be and what we denote as its building blocks. The following exercise is an approach which aims to give space for Barad’s *intra-action* as the primary principle of relation. The exercise Vocal Spectrum starts out with a series of vocalised stretches done collectively in physical formations, ending up in an improvisation (see Behrens 2011 for an early version). It can be done in low light, and/or encouraging the performers to close their eyes as much as possible. It is not done in complete darkness at the beginning, simply for practical reasons. The stretches prepare the individual’s body to become sympathetic resonators and the closeness of performers to each other increases their possibility to sense sonic touch.¹⁰ After this exercise has been established through several repetitions, I open two more levels of difficulty: (a) you are allowed to move (first back and forth in lines radiating out from the centre, then as you wish) and (b) you are allowed to take the position of non-sounding listener. The group is shifted from being a polite circle to being a messy amoeba where ‘anything can happen’.

Trainees are encouraged and challenged to explore the whole range of the voice, including text, song, noise, silence. They are also asked to notice when their own voicing, or the voicing of the group, becomes a subject, an atmosphere, a music or a space. It is significant to note that even with something as ‘free’ as a sound improvisation without a theme, performers very often limit their sounding to ‘musical’ sounds, thinking that these exhibit that they are ‘listening to their partners’: they are

¹⁰ Yvon Bonenfant has worked extensively with sound and touch, ranging from the haptic nature of both to ‘vocalization [a]s [a] kind of social touch’ (2008, p. 109).

limiting their use of sound based on normalised categories of 'acceptable sound' from Western music traditions. Eidsheim (2015, p. 11) asks:

does any music exist ... independent of that which a culturally structured and informed sensory complex gives rise to ...? Or ... is the music we can sense in any given cultural moment merely a reflection (or indeed a confirmation) of our limited ability to perceive that moment?

I ask: what happens if we approach a sound improvisation not as a site for compositions, but for decompositions? For exploration of the places where forms appear to fall apart? Is it here that we might be able to hear new musics, be open to alternative entanglements? As an exercise for a group that will devise together, this kind of work has several functions. Firstly, it is an important step that the sonic predispositions of the group arise, so that all can be aware of, and consciously work with and against them. Secondly, it allows individuals in the group to be provoked by other members' sounds that are unfamiliar to them. Lastly, this openness to a range of sounds and aesthetics is key in terms of allowing the improvisation to open for the variety of materialities which may be present and the possibility to move between these different bodyworlds rapidly.

What is the function of darkness here? It is very common that sound improvisations are done with closed eyes, as participants often get self-conscious and are unable to 'let go' if they are watching each other. Watching can also create a coercive atmosphere, where different participants consciously or unconsciously try to 'pull someone over to their sound'. I acknowledge these two broader reasons. What I am however interested in here is to discuss how darkness and movement work as strategies which destabilise the notion of the composer as a fixed and human position. Guck acknowledges that analysing music on the page is not an accurate description of the music as event in time and space. He proposes that '*taking listening rather than composing* as an analytical focus means that who counts – the listener – is different from theory's usual orientation' (in Eidsheim 2017, p. 5, emphasis added).

I look to open up for the experience of Home-Cook's 'tending to' – which he explores as an audience experience – as actually a key positionality of the composer, in order to make space for intra-active work. The darkness increases the visceral need for this care and makes even more resonant the time between sounds, the generative space of new entanglements that happen. This position of 'not full control' is an audience/witness position often explored in immersive work. Machon writes about how this destabilising position increases that person's haptic sensitivity and (syn)aesthetic experience. She quotes Maxine Doyle, the choreographer of *Punchdrunk*:

Audiences have to become part of the choreography, have to engage on a kinetic level in order to survive. It becomes quite Darwinian. If you're not responding on a physical level you lose out – sometimes physically – you have to develop your physical intuition. (Machon 2007, p. 7)

I am interested in how such a sensitised and intuitive position, arrived at through instability can be a creative starting point to train from. In terms of voice, Berkeley-Schultz of Theatre ZAR speaks about ‘composition as a survival technique’.

If you think of traditional singing ... the youth simply has to try and catch what he/she can in that situation when the song is sung... I like to bring some of that survival experience in song into the workshop space. (Behrens and Berkeley-Schultz 2017, p. 194)

Vocal Spectrum is not a song in a setting, but it does have a ‘life of its own’: it is not possible to stop the composition to figure out ‘what works’. Instead, the performer must, in the moment, ‘solve’ how to engage – often by letting go. Students sometimes comment: ‘it was too loud, I just had to move’, or ‘I could not tell even if I was sounding or not, but I was part of it’, or ‘I don’t know how, but we all just stopped at the same time’. These are visceral reactions to compositional elements. I suggest that such an entry point to making form allows performers to connect to forms their voices make – as ever-evolving vibrations that move, rather than signifiers.

As I understand it, a material approach to composition with the voice would mean, in its most basic terms, that a composition is not just about sound, but about sound in its intimate entanglements with the other materials present. This exercise is a layered experience in which darkness is a key element that opens the materiality of voice to other materialities. Camilleri, drawing on Ihde, discusses the multistabilities of performance: that what we do in an exercise, for example, is affected as much by the changing sociomaterial *world* (how we arrived at the rehearsal room, for example) as by our body doing the exercise.¹¹ As McAllister-Viel (2009, p. 173) writes, the voice is also an instable site of learning as it negotiates its own multiplicity. The assemblage of these bodies and worlds creates what Camilleri terms a dynamic hybridity. This exercise is not just about increasing the range of sounds you make, but rather looks to confront the performer with this instability as the generative base state of the composer.

Sound improvisation in itself is a way to train composition not as a reflective practice (sitting in a room writing on a paper), but as a haptic feedback loop of experience: you make the next sound in direct relation to what happened before. Improvisation with others has the potential to thwart the possibility of a singular voice having a greater compositional say, increasing the interrelational nature of sound. Multiple bodies moving while sounding destabilise the ear, allowing the element of sound in space to have greater agency within the composition. Darkness is the key and the monkey wrench. It is the key which increases the experience of the elements mentioned above, taking them to another level of intensity. The way the (im)materiality of darkness performs/trains, is the monkey wrench: in this destabilised position, the performer/student may find that the way in which they experience their senses gets shaken and they react in surprising ways. The ear that cannot only listen to sound, but must work together with the skin and other senses to negotiate distance, orientation and so forth, is an ear fed with a variety of haptic experience

11 As Barad (2007, p. x) notes about writing: it is as much formed by the ideas as it is by the coffee you drank – or for me, by the memories of late night writing interrupted by a crying baby, whom I have now just held, heartbeat to heartbeat until the crying stopped. Do you hear?

and hence a voice which speaks in relation to, not just a sonic world, but one which includes many materials. Ideas of 'listening' and tending can create an atmosphere of seriousness in students. My OOF attitude as a leader, encouraging the messy, the wrong, the political, the visceral as well as the full range of speech, sound, songs, autobiographical material, screams, silence, hopefully increases the possibility of sonic meetings which do not just repeat received patterns. In this way, I also aim to integrate the work started in the first exercise: the individual does not just become a 'neutral sounder', but rather negotiates their own fluidity and difference within the larger whole. I experience this as the beginning of an alternate approach to hearing and thinking vocal composition which emphasises its intersubjectivity, immersivity and agency: opening up to the three-dimensional nature of sound as organising principle of sensual meetings.

Hybrid voice training

Training voice in the dark is a hybrid practice between 'pure voice work' and devising. It aims to build upon the embodied trends of voice practice which encourage an integrated bodyvoice, yet situate them in the destabilising darkness. The first exercise offers a playground in which the performer can explore their own vocal materiality as multiplicity which also includes extending their body with objects. In Vocal Spectrum what surfaces as key elements of composition are not musical/textual forms but, rather, the immaterial material of the performer and performance moment, the space, distance, movement and time. 'Listening as tending to', rather than 'sounding as production of signs' is the organising compositional principle proposed. More than creating different disconnected ways to use the voice, this approach aims to train the performer's plastic voice, which can move smoothly between its different materialities. In terms of allowing voice to potentially take a new role in devising, perhaps the key is not to ask 'what role' but rather to argue with the 'a'. It is not about aligning 'a' body with 'a' world, but rather practising moving between various constantly shifting worlds with an in-stable and multiple materiality: the voicer as dynamic hybrid of bodyworld. This can then be applied in more complex compositional contexts in the dark, or in the light.

References

- Alston, A. and Welton, M., eds., 2017. *Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Barad, K.M., 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Behar, K., 2016. *Object Oriented Feminism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Behrens, E., 2011. *VOCAL ACTION: from Training towards Performance*. Thesis (PhD). University of Kent.
- Behrens, E., 2015. Manifesto in Praxis; Calling for a (Re)considered approach to training the Performers Voice. In: C. Eeg-Tverbakk and K. Ely, eds. *Responsive*

- Listening: Theater Training for Contemporary Spaces*. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Arts Press, 54–69.
- Behrens, E., 2016. Training a Performer's Voices. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Journal Training*, 7 (3), 453–471.
- Behrens, E., 2019. The Performer and Space. In: S. Graffer and K. Kipphoff, eds. *Norwegian Theatre Academy since 1996*. Oslo: Vidarforlaget, forthcoming.
- Behrens, E. and Berkeley-Schultz, D., 2017. Songs of Tradition as Training in Higher Education? *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*, 2 (2), 187–200.
- Bonenfant, Y., 2008. Sound, Touch, the Felt Body and Emotion: Toward a Haptic Art of Voice. *Scan Journal*, 5 (3). Available from: http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=126 [Accessed 21 June 2019].
- Bonenfant, Y., 2018. Voice, Identity, Contact. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*, 3 (2), 107–113.
- Camilleri, F., 2019. *Performer Training Reconfigured: Post-Psychophysical Perspectives for the Twenty-first Century*. London: Methuen Drama.
- Cavallo, A. and Oshi, M., 2017. Staring at Blindness: Pitch Black Theatre and Disability-led Performance. In: A. Alston and M. Welton, eds. *Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 169–195.
- Cavarero, A., 2005. *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Trans. P.A. Kottman. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Coleman, R., Page, T., and Palmer, H. 2019. Feminist New Materialist Practice: The Mattering of Methods [online]. *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* 4. Available from: <https://maifeminism.com/feminist-new-materialisms-the-mattering-of-methods-editors-note/> [Accessed 17 June 2019].
- Dolar, M., 2006. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Eeg-Tverbakk, C., 2016. *Theatre-ting, Towards a Materialist Practice of Staging Documents*. Thesis (PhD). Roehampton University.
- Eeg-Tverbakk, C. and Behrens, E., 2019. What the Body Says: How a Materialist Approach to Vocal Actions can Open for New Dramaturgical Strategies to Performing Personal Stories. *IPPT*, Gothenburg, January.
- Eeg-Tverbakk, C., and Ely, K., eds. 2015. *Responsive Listening: Theater Training for Contemporary Spaces*. New York: Brooklyn Arts Press.
- Eidsheim, N. S., 2015. *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Fast, H. and Tiainen, M., 2018. Voice. *New Materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter*. Available from: <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/v/voice.html> [Accessed 17 June 2019].
- Home-Cook, G., 2015. *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ihde, D., 2007. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Jarvis, L., 2017. Creating in the Dark: Conceptualising Different Darknesses in Contemporary Theatre Practice. In: *Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 88–112.
- Kane, B., 2014. *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kendrick, L., 2017. *Theatre Aurality*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lukowski, A., 2014. Hug Review. *Time Out London*. Available from: <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/hug-review> [Accessed 17 June 2019].
- Machon, J., 2007. Space and the Senses: The (Syn)aesthetics of Punchdrunk's Site-Sympathetic Work. *Body, Space & Technology*, 7 (1). Available from: <http://doi.org/10.16995/bst.151> [Accessed 17 June 2019].

- Machon, J., 2013. *Immersive Theatres, Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.
- Macpherson, B., 2015. "Body Musicality": The visual, virtual, visceral voice. In: *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience*. London: Routledge, 149–161.
- Material Strategies. 2018–2019. Material Strategies: Research project funded by the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme. Available from: <https://www.hiof.no/nta/english/research/projects/material-strategies/> [Accessed 5 April 2019].
- McAllister-Viel, T., 2009. (Re)considering the Role of Breath in Training Actors' Voices: Insights from Dahnjeon Breathing and the Phenomena of Breath. *Theatre Topics*, 19 (2), 165–80.
- McAllister-Viel, T., 2010. Voicing Culture: Training Korean Actors' Voices Through The Namdaemun Market Projects. *Modern Drama*, 52 (4), 426–448.
- McAllister-Viel, T., 2018. *Training Actors' Voices: Towards an Intercultural/Interdisciplinary Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Nancy, J.L., 2007. *Listening*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Noë, A., 2010. The Power of Performance. *Cosmos and Culture*, 13 (7). Available from: <http://www.xavierleroy.com/page.php?sp=69caa2510bce2be93732e5c2739db89-ba96ccaaf&lg=en> [Accessed 5 April 2019].
- Scott, S.M., 2017. Re-orienting Sound Studies' Aural Fixation: Christine Sun Kim's 'Subjective Loudness'. *Sounding Out!* Available from: <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2017/06/05/re-orienting-sound-studies-aural-fixation-christine-sun-kims/> [Accessed 5 April 2019].
- Silverman, K., 1988. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema, Theories of Representation and Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Thomaidis, K., 2016. Verbatim Practices, the Acoustics of Training, and Giving Voice: A Voice Studies Afterthought. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training Blog*. Available from: <http://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/2016/05/verbatim-practices-the-acoustics-of-training-and-giving-voice-a-voice-studies-afterthought/> [Accessed 22 Oct 2018].
- Thomaidis, K. and Macpherson, B., eds., 2015. *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience*. London: Routledge.