

Voice - Art - Performance

The application of the techniques of Voice Movement Therapy for the theatre - An account of a rehearsal process.

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Three lone figures on a sunny September morning, staring out to sea through the thick paned glass of The Old Lighthouse at Dungeness, a sad and haunting melody reverberates around the dome, catching time in its hand and letting it dangle, sit and play, within its palm. The song is intimate, held within this moment, this seemingly ancient space, yet also reaches beyond, out into the vast expanse of glittering sea and its unfathomable horizon. Three voices beautifully meld together, without words yet each unquestionably understanding the nature and content of the Air they weave around them.

This 'scene' took place on a research trip to Dungeness during the rehearsal period for *Between Friends* by Fiona Graham, a show for 7-9 year olds which was to tour schools and theatres in the South East of England, commissioned by Komedica Theatre in Brighton. I was on board as director and Nettie Scriven was the designer. The three of us had worked together when I performed in Fiona's *Crivelli's Garden* for Theatre Centre in London, and from this experience a number of common interests emerged:

- We wanted this piece to have a strong but sparse visual language.
- We shared an irresistible pull towards and love of the paintings of Paula Rego.
- We had a desire to approach the text through a physical and vocal medium.

Since qualifying in Voice Movement Therapy, I have been Voice Consultant on a number of productions, most notably for Theatre Centre and in collaboration with its director Rosamunde Hutt. With *Between Friends* I wanted to experiment with the idea of putting the vocal work at the centre of the rehearsal method, making it an integral part of the development of the performance. As director and voice worker I was afforded the opportunity to continually refer to and integrate the vocal explorations of the performers.

In *Between Friends* the writer wanted to explore the idea of friendship and the nature of a triangular relationship: what are the things shared 'between friends' and what comes 'between friends'. We developed these ideas over a period of time, in consultation with each other (writer, director and designer) and with young people we were making the play for. Prior to this development week, I came across a picture which I thought held the story Fiona was gently putting together. In Paula Rego's painting *The Prey*, two girls whisper and watch, someone is on the outside, a third person, although not featured in the painting is present. What has been said? What has happened? Questions of loss, betrayal, fear and hurt began to emerge.

Between Friends is a beautiful and haunting portrayal of three young people thrown together in the face of adversity. Set in a lighthouse off the coast of Madeira, near Portugal, the three children watch and wait. Under the threat of an erupting volcano they were sent on a boat to safety, only to be shipwrecked by a violent storm. The Lighthouse Keeper rescues the children and brings them to

the relative safety of his lighthouse. The next morning he gets into his boat and disappears into the horizon. They do not know where he is going, if or when he will return - he is mute and so has said nothing.

This is a play about three young people Poppy, Pearl and Rico, caught in a situation which holds uncertain boundaries of safety, and no real parameters of how to behave. There are no adults there so they can do what they like - but who is going to look after them - it is cold, they are tired and very hungry. Rico sits and sews, his stifled sobbing giving way to the song his father taught him. Pearl immediately jumps in as 'mother' and desperately attempts to make everything "warm and cosy". Poppy takes control and rules the roost - she is used to being on her own. Taking on the voice of her mother she declares, "I would like tea in the shade of the juniper tree and dinner on the veranda at half past seven. Mr Lisboa will be back from the volcano and I want little Poppy fast asleep. Tonight we have an important meeting and there will be no time for children". Poppy's voice is loud, demonstrative and full of authority - it is hard to disobey her as she wields her power over the others. However, when the rescue boat comes into sight, with Rico's Dad and Pearl's Mum waving from the deck, Poppy is thrown into the centre of her abandonment and cries out: "No-one's coming for me... Nobody cares...No-one's come to take me home". Her inner voice of fear and vulnerability is revealed.

The visit to the lighthouse in Dungeness offered us exciting possibilities for character and vocal exploration. Open to the general public, we had to be mindful of other visitors, but this immensely tall and conical edifice with all its echo and reverberation proved too tempting, and we could not remain silent. With the permission of the bemused but intrigued 'door keeper', lonely calls and wails were soon to be heard. "Don't wake the ghost", she said, "his tobacco smoke can still be smelt sometimes as you pass a certain point on the stairs". Our Lighthouse Keeper from *Between Friends* was instantly evoked.

Before we entered the lighthouse, I framed the visit for the actors. They were to enter the lighthouse in character, and explore the place physically; to be in it; to feel it; not think it. Asking: where does my body want to be? Not, where should it be, according to the text. The actors were to find a place where they felt safe and content, whilst noticing where they felt uncomfortable. How did the space affect them? What was it like to be in the belly of the lighthouse, on the stairs, or out on the ledge? They were left on their own in near silent contemplation for about half an hour. The tension and sadness of these three 'children' waiting to be rescued was unbearable. Rico was sitting on the ledge, sewing and quietly singing to himself. Poppy, who had been running up and down the stairs, shouting and planning how to scare people, was now staring out to sea, still and scowling. Pearl was lying under the lantern at the top of the lighthouse, examining the cogs in the wheel and the colours of the lens. I brought them together and set a vocal improvisation: they were to imagine it was the moment from the play when the rescue boat came into view. In contrast to the jubilant and uplifting rendition of celebration I had imagined, the song was gentle, tender and melancholy, sung in the flute timbre with a considerable amount of free air and occasionally dropping into the mournful depths of saxophone. At the same time, the melody held a

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strong life energy which linked the three lone faces pressed against the glass. On reflection the actors were as surprised as I was to find that their song revealed sadness; full of longing and yearning. They felt they had "grown up a bit", that there was a sense of togetherness and that to leave the lighthouse was yet another loss.

Later that day, Nettie, the designer, set the actors the task of making a sculpture from bits of things they found of the beach (after Derek Jarman whose house and garden were nearby). The sculpture was to represent the homes the characters had left and were not sure if they would ever see again. Once they were built, I asked them to give a direct vocal response to the sculptures they had created, to travel the journey through their homes. Barley, who played Pearl, found a rich and strong timbre in clarinet, drawing on her characters independence and resourcefulness. We had worked extensively in rehearsal to find the clarinet range, which was new to Barley who worked predominantly through flute, and who as a dancer was not used to using voice and text as a medium of expression. However, in this instance, her voice quickly dwindled to silence: her house was safe, bright and sunny, but also showed her father's footprint, who when at home from sea, carried with him an oppressive and omnipotent presence. As the play progresses Pearl's voice strengthens: in beautiful symmetry Barley, the actor, began to revel in her new found full and resonant clarinet timbre, truthfully reflecting her inner strength and authority.

Rico's sculpture was wild and expansive but represented a safe and comfortable enclave from which he could come and go without fear. That day on the beach, the usually passive, gentle, wise and wistful boy ran uninhibited, singing freely, racing between clarinet and flute with wild whoops and cries as he darted about. The sound was full of vitality and humour, an energy which would have left Alex on the beach all afternoon had I not brought the improvisation to a close.

That day on Dungeness, Stephanie took a few steps closer to the core of the inner world of her character. During the vocal improvisation in the lighthouse, she felt Poppy to be "at her worst". Faced with the prospect that there may be no-one on the boat to take her home, Stephanie touched into Poppy's feelings of desolation and powerlessness. Her sculpture was made of cold grey stone, built like a circular tower, with "walls to keep her in". Her vocal journey through this cold and stony monolith, remained locked in clarinet, hollow, hard and lifeless. She wandered through the corridors. "How did you feel?" I asked. "Small and insignificant", she replied. I ventured further, "What happened?" Stephanie thought for a while. "I didn't meet anyone. There was no-one there".

The day before I had set an exercise where the actors were to imagine their characters as one of the timbres. Once identified, and using the posture usually associated with that timbre, they were to explore their character as represented in animal form. Once fully metamorphosed, they were to bring their character back to human form. What were the discoveries? What was retained? When do the boundaries blur and the character and animal merge? Stephanie, as Poppy, chose clarinet. She was massive, strong, staking out her territory, circling Rico, like a bull, full of show and bravado. However, as she worked the sound became more vulnerable. Stephanie felt she was "facing up to unbearable sadness" as held by

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Poppy.

The day after the visit to Dungeness, during a character hotseating exercise, I asked the actors to deliver a snatch of a song. Poppy emitted a series of short howls, sad, soulful and truculent all at once. The "unbearable sadness" was given voice, and Stephanie was finally able to access the saxophone timbre; a clear, open channel to Poppy's source of abandonment and desolation. Later, when we came to the part of the text where Poppy reveals her inner fears and is "overwhelmed by a wave of sobbing" (as written in the script) Stephanie became stuck. "I don't do sobbing" she said with a wry grin, reflecting the typical fear of an actor when faced with the task of emulating deep emotion. "But you've done it" I said, "use the sax timbre". The next moment my eyes were stinging and my spine tingling, as Poppy's words trailed out over the sob: "I am not going back...always alone in that huge empty house...no-one came when I called out". The actor had undertaken a journey, physical, vocal, artistic and imaginative which led her to the secret, inner core of the character she was to present to the audience.

The timbre/animal exercise as detailed above afforded the actors the opportunity of accessing the hidden sides, or even the 'underbelly' of their characters emotional worlds, hitherto only spoken about in the analysis of the text. Alex had found a sax sound for Rico, prowling around the room in bear like fashion, emitting low mournful sounds, touching into Rico's pain and hurt as he comes to terms with all that has happened. Barley, as Pearl, started with a strong high flute sound, devoid of any free air which transformed into a creaky violin. Moving between flute and violin, and working with the idea of an angel and a bird, a mighty creature emerged; a Gryphon, beautiful and fierce. Barley had found the side of Pearl that doesn't acquiesce, the side that says, "No. I will not be silenced."

It was time to introduce the *Dog Woman*, a series of paintings by the artist Paula Rego. Fiona Graham, the writer of our piece had long found inspiration in Rego's work and in turn introduced me to the possibilities her paintings hold. They are full of story and character, revealing and concealing the shadow side of human nature. Rego believes in looking the devil in the face: "If you are frightened it is better to draw it" (Rego 1992). She paints "to give fear a face" (1992). She describes her childhood as protected and was afraid of everything, the dark and the devil. She says she was always alone, that drawing was her language, her defence. "You can do in pictures what you cannot do in life" (1992). Germaine Greer describes her paintings as "deeply subversive...because she thinks in images and images refuse to compromise" (1992). Until recently, Rego painted on the floor, surrounded by big bowls of paint, squatting like an animal. On *Desert Island Discs* she describes how as a child she "drew all day...I made a noise, I went (she makes a low, guttural, 'mooring' sound), I'd sit on the floor and draw and draw...it's a comforting noise that unfortunately I still do today, like a rocking...a noise that's comforting, and anyway I don't really know because it comes out automatically". This didn't surprise me. I had already felt the connection between the voice and her paintings - you can almost hear some of them as you gaze. She paints the unspoken, the unmentionable, and they offer huge potential for vocalisation, especially the *Dog Woman* series of 1994. Here, "an animal presence lurks under

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the human one as a reminder both of all that is most vulnerable and all that is most alive" (Rosengarten 1997). These pictures spoke directly to the emotional landscape we were exploring in our rehearsal process and closely represented the characters journey's through the play: "The first *Dog Woman*, a wild, hurt beast, huge but supple, crouches in a barren, godless landscape marked only by a horizon line, her eyes rolling back in her head, mouth gaping in a terrible silent scream" (1997).

We were nearing Production Weekend, when time becomes a luxury, but I wanted to introduce a final exercise that would bind together all the work previously undertaken. The actors had come a long way; they had access to all the timbres and a vocal confidence which allowed them to push the boundaries a little further. I identified a number of paintings from the *Dog Woman* series which I felt reflected the physical language of our play. The actors were asked to choose the one they felt most clearly represented the essence of their character. They were asked to physically recreate the painting as accurately as possible, (they were all figurative) and then to begin to move it around the room. The three pictures chosen were *Baying*, *Grooming*, and *Dog Woman*. Dogs began to prowl the room. "How does this animal breath?" I asked, "How does your character breath when it feels like this? How do you move, sit, stand, lie down, crouch". The actors slouched, crawled, rolled around the room. Working on the interface between human and animal, they travelled through the shadow sides of their characters. Introducing the vocal counterpart to their physical motifs, a cacophony of sound, raw, visceral and primal, filled the room. "How do you watch and wait?" Low, growling, breathy sounds. How do you spy?" Snarling, then silence. "How do you advance, pounce, attack?" Angry, hurtful, hard sounds fly around the room. Later, in the dress rehearsal, witnessing Rico and Pearl's complicit betrayal of her friendship, Poppy stirs, rises on her haunches and turns, hurt, wounded and snarling. The *Dog Woman* is there in our play - a Rego painting brought to life.

In this rehearsal process, I had wanted to use the techniques of Voice Movement Therapy to get 'under the skin' of the characters. The play relied on finely tuned emotional responses on the part of the actors and I believe this extended voicework enabled them to access deep reservoirs of feeling, which in turn, was expressed physically, vocally, and in the characters relationships to each other. The aim was not necessarily to make the audience feel the same as the people in the play, but to entice them to follow their journey, identify with their stories, share and speak about their often silent emotional inner worlds and unbidden thoughts. I think we went some way to achieve this, and the quality of attention and sometimes electric atmosphere amongst the young audience and their adult companions, served to make it all worthwhile.

References:

- Rego, Paula (1992) Phaidon Art Video LWT
 Rosengarten, Ruth (1997) *Home Truths: the work of Paula Rego* Tate Gallery
 Publication