

Voice-Movement Skills Onstage and Off, for Performers in Theatre, Music, and Dance

2nd Auxiliary Study

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Objective: When singers and dancers use voice in performance, they need the same physical/vocal skills as actors, who frequently need to sing. And performers in all three categories use voice-movement skills to teach, audition, present, and communicate with colleagues. Yet, curricula for singers rarely include speech or movement, dance curricula lack voice, and actors lack singing. Focusing on genres missing from the pilot project, this second auxiliary study investigated performer perspectives on voice-movement skills after two weeks of integrative training.

Design: Three professional performers (two actors, one singer) participated in a 90-minute class after video recording one minute of individual performance. Over the next two weeks, they had two one-hour sessions each with the Principal Investigator, then recorded another performance before contributing to a videoed discussion of responses to the training.

Results: Subjects focused on areas of particular interest, e.g., relating singing and acting, efficient physicality in performance and practice, language and the phrasing of text, and a sense of *ease*, regardless of the task.

Conclusions: The most experienced performer made the most dramatic changes from pre- to post-training; all performers showed greater confidence and freedom in the second recording. Based on videoed discussions and researcher observations, participants benefitted from: (1) practical information on efficient breath management and shape changes in the vocal tract; (2) letting go of extraneous physical movements; (3) exploring the rhythms and contours of speech; and (4) connecting directly with other performance views.

Key words: voice-movement, integrative training, breath management, vocal tract, singing, acting, movement, performance

INTRODUCTION

When singers and dancers use voice in performance, they need the same physical/vocal skills as actors, who frequently need to sing. And performers in all three categories use voice-movement skills in auditions, teaching, presenting, and communicating with colleagues. Yet, curricula for singers rarely include speech or movement, dance curricula lack voice, and singing is often missing from actor training. As a result, gifted performers may be highly skilled in some areas and justly apprehensive in others!

Integrative training brings it all together and fills in gaps, so that performers can meet a wide range of physical/vocal demands. Yoga, Pilates, and other movement modalities connect with voicing in any position, moving or still,¹ while the use of language and an element of *play* are inherent in the mix.²

The purpose of this research was to compare perspectives across disciplines after a brief period of training. To date, voice research has focused primarily in the direction of singing, whereas the current project embraced all vocal tasks, their physicality, and their relation to movement.³ The research questions were:

1. Given their respective skill sets and specializations, how will participants differ in their response to integrative training?
2. How will individual performers use information in similar or different ways?
3. How will relating across techniques make for greater efficiency, ease, and freedom for all participants?

Based on studies with actors (Nilsson, Laukkanen, Syriä 2020,⁴ Melton, Bradford, Lee 2020⁵), singers (Melton, Bradford, Lee 2021,⁶ Steinhauer, McDonald, Estill 2017,⁷ Thurman, Welch, Theimer, Klitzke 2004⁸), dancers (Hass 2019,⁹ Melton 2015,¹⁰ Wozny 2014¹¹), and related theatre artists (Melton, Tom 2022,¹² Berry 2008,² Wise, Pikes 2001¹³), expectations were that:

- Clarification regarding efficient breath management and shape changes in the vocal tract would positively impact both vocal sound and ease of movement
- Knowing a wide pitch range is available for speaking as well as singing would contribute to ease and the ability to *play* vocally

- Allowing the *body* and spirit to express would lead to personal discoveries and greater confidence overall

Dancers in the pilot project worked in multiple genres, while actors and singers tended toward specialization. This qualitative, auxiliary study was designed to broaden the range of performance genres represented by actors and singers.

METHODOLOGY

Design

In a large rehearsal studio at the National Opera Center, New York City, three professional performers (two actors, one singer), all in good health and widely different in age, experience, and specialization, took part in the following activities:

1. Subjects video recorded approximately one minute each of performance (their choice), before participating in a 90-minute voice-movement class led by the Principal Investigator.
2. Over the next two weeks, each subject had two one-hour sessions with the Principal Investigator.
3. At the end of two weeks, subjects again recorded one minute of performance each (the same or different material from #1), then contributed to a videoed discussion of individual responses to the training.

Video recordings were for reference only.

Subjects

All subjects had done degree programs in the US. Actor 1 was the first of two siblings born in the US after his parents immigrated from Haiti. Actor 2 was a second generation US mainland Puerto Rican. Both had experience with singing, but little formal training. The Singer was a highly-experienced jazz musician, educator, and international performer based in NYC.

Material

Actor 1 did a monologue of John Buchanan Jr. from *Summer and Smoke*, by Tennessee Williams, for the first recording and sang “If I Ain’t Got You,” by Alicia Keys, for the second. Actor 2 sang the jazz standard “All of Me,” by Gerald Marks and Seymour Simons for both

recordings. The Singer played on an Irish penny whistle (tin whistle), then sang “The Water is Wide,” from a Gaelic melody, in the first recording. For the second recording, she improvised on Clifford Brown and Jon Hendricks’ “Joy Spring,” using movement, singing, and a range of other vocal sounds.

Instrumentation

Individual performances were videoed using Photo Booth. The final discussion was recorded with an iPhone 13-PRO (2021 Model), along with Standard LED (10" Size) Light Ring, Raya FRB-USB-10.

RESULTS

Subjects focused on areas of particular interest, e.g., relating singing and acting, efficient physicality in performance and practice, language and the phrasing of text, and a sense of *ease*, regardless of the task.

DISCUSSION

Participant responses

There were actually two videoed discussions in this study: one with Actor 2, who was unable to attend the final session; and a group discussion. Both were highly valuable and provided new insight into the lives, challenges, and professional requirements of working performers .

Actor 2 spoke Spanish, and had taught English as a second language. She enjoyed singing, especially jazz, and was delighted with the singing component of the research study. Staccato arpeggios begun on all fours, then moving about the room, helped her to “feel the shape.” She was intrigued with the “rhythms of language and the phrasing of text.”

She also discovered that “no transition was needed” between speaking in performance and speaking in real life. “I don’t have to turn it on and off.” While glottal fry had been her everyday speech default, she easily sang over two and a half octaves. “Expressing” in performance had often been difficult for her, “because I was not allowed to express myself as a child. It helps to check in with my body, instead of giving in to fear or doubt.”

The group (duo) session began with an explorative exchange between Actor 1 and the Singer:

A1: Have you ever performed anything besides singing? Dancing, or acting?

S: Yes, I've been in musicals and classical plays, have done a bit of acting all the way through.

A1: How do you feel some of the things you took from acting translate into singing?

S: That's such a rich topic. [Acting] does relate in an important way to singing because of emotion. Not every type of acting may go in the direction of whatever your true emotions are, but for singing, I try to tap into that. For jazz, for what I do, it's important to be who you are, where you are when you are.

What about you? Do you have a way to access singing, the acting valve into singing, or singing lessons into acting? Do you see a connection, for yourself?

A1: Yes, absolutely! I think working with Joan especially, gave me the opportunity to explore how working on singing can translate to acting because it's all instrument. So, being familiar with that instrument and what notes you can play with it gives you more tools and ways to communicate when playing a character, or singing a song, or telling a story.

There was a moment during the training where I was singing and Joan said, "You didn't do that when you were acting." It was a habit, I was moving my head a lot. And I was able to [see] it's not about, "Oh, I'm singing," or "Now I'm acting." It's about connecting *everything* for the purpose of whatever is being communicated.

S: So, was the head moving something good because you were freer, or something that was unneeded?

A1: It was unneeded.

S: That also happened to me. I'm an older person, teach as well, so with Joan's attention and expertise, I became aware of all the unnecessary movement I see in other people...It wasn't a big jump to say, "Oh, my gosh, how do I cure that?" So this work has been really great...To have a vision or feeling of what it would be like to shed some of that is very affirming.

Subjects shared backgrounds, described performance environments, and acknowledged critical issues facing current-day artists.

A1: I started performing in church, where we had a kids club and did skits in front of the church. Then I was on sets for film projects and trained with Atlantic Theater Company, where we worked on stage as well.

S: I come from a musical family, and from vaudeville, where you have to act, dance, sing, and play a million instruments, and you got to do it now! I feel like that is in me...What key? What tempo? Who's the audience? Music for whatever. My brother, classical musician, and my sister, the dancer, get to warm up, come out on stage and people are sitting in chairs...I'm more of an entertainer...I used to sing in the subway when I first moved here. Now everybody's going to work and you get a street performance. For me, it's about finding a balance between adapting to the industry to keep moving along, and still staying true to me as an artist.

Later she spoke of living in Europe: "I sang acapella in cathedrals and caves—my favorite thing to do! And if I can't have that wonderful sound space, I love a less formal situation where people are not passively listening, kids are running around...people get up to dance, or sing along..." And the parallel to Shakespeare's plays performed out of doors was straightaway acknowledged!

A1: I left school. I was doing university for two and a half years and ended up leaving because going through the system of getting all this information, [then] remembering it for a test, felt pointless. I wasn't interested in what I was doing, so had to ask myself why I was doing it if there was no fulfillment from it. I ended up exploring... tapping more into artistry and feeling

S: I was a single mom. I was always a singer, then I became a music teacher and it wasn't my dream, because I hate authority and schools are full of authorities...So every class was a show, that was natural for me...but it can devour your life's blood because it's a one-way exit. When I sing, something else happens...

The disconnect between what an artist needs in the way of training, and multiple-choice tests on subjects of little interest is a current concern for faculty and students alike. S: “If you’re an artist, you’re constantly composing, creating, and it makes us kind of inside-out people.”

Rich conversation continued, and concluded with thanks.

Research limitations

As with any research project, there were limitations, which inspire us to plan future enquiries. Limitations in the current study were primarily scheduling complications that changed the makeup of group interactions.

CONCLUSIONS

While all participants benefitted from: (1) practical information on efficient breath management and shape changes in the vocal tract; (2) letting go of extraneous physical movements; (3) exploring the rhythms and contours of speech; and (4) connecting directly with other performance views, individual responses and applications were unique:

- Actor 1 discovered the relation of singing to speech and the use of language.
- Actor 2 connected improvised movement to phrasing and communication.
- The Singer married physical exercise with creative sounding, and incorporated stillness and ease into storytelling.

All subjects showed greater confidence and freedom in the second recording; the most experienced performer made the most dramatic changes from pre- to post-training.

Relating across disciplines in open discussion seemed almost magical for these performers, as it confirmed clearly the role of direct conversation in integrative learning.

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