

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

### ***Pilot Project***

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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. This qualitative study investigated performer perspectives on voice-movement skills after two weeks of integrative training.

**Design:** Six professional performers (two actors, two singers, two dancers) participated in a 90-minute class after videoing 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., singing, efficient breath management, shape changes in the vocal tract, and the dimension of *play* in preparation and performance. Accessing a wide pitch range, moving and sounding simultaneously, and allowing the *body* to speak facilitated technical efficiency, and acknowledging the uniqueness of each person appeared to neutralize the fear of not being “right.”

**Conclusions:** Based on the videoed discussion and researcher observations, participants: (1) benefitted from practical information on efficient breath management and movable parts of the vocal tract; (2) accomplished vocal tasks more easily when they were free to move; (3) preferred working with an accompanist to using pre-recorded tracks; and (4) felt more secure in their own work after two weeks of integrative training.

**Key words:** voice-movement, breath management, singing, vocal tract, theatre, music, dance, integrative training

## 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 to teach, audition, present, and communicate with colleagues. Yet, curricula for singers rarely include other vocal tasks or a connection to movement, dance curricula lack voice, and actors lack singing. As a result, gifted performers in all three categories—*theatre*, *music*, and *dance*—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,<sup>1</sup> while the use of language and an element of *play* are inherent in the mix.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> The research questions were:

1. Given their respective skill sets and specializations, how will actors, singers, and dancers differ in their response to integrative training?
2. Within each category—*theatre*, *music*, *dance*—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 performers in all categories?

Based on studies with actors (Nilsson, Laukkanen, Syriä 2020,<sup>4</sup> Melton, Bradford, Lee 2020<sup>5</sup>), singers (Melton, Bradford, Lee 2021,<sup>6</sup> Steinhauer, McDonald, Estill 2017,<sup>7</sup> Thurman, Welch, Theimer, Klitzke 2004<sup>8</sup>), dancers (Hass 2019,<sup>9</sup> Melton 2015,<sup>10</sup> Wozny 2014<sup>11</sup>), and related theatre artists (Melton, Tom 2022,<sup>12</sup> Berry 2008,<sup>2</sup> Wise, Pikes 2001<sup>13</sup>), 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* to speak would lead to personal discoveries and greater confidence overall

This was a qualitative study designed to access responses to voice-movement training across three performance disciplines. It also served as a pilot project to confirm expectations before embarking on auxiliary investigations within each performance discipline.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design

In a large rehearsal studio at the National Opera Center, New York City, six professional performers (two actors, two singers, two dancers), 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, participants 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

For the initial meeting, subjects were divided into two groups of three (one actor, one singer, one dancer in each), hence, designations “1” and “2” refer to those initial groups.

All subjects had done one or more degree programs in the US. Actor 1 was from Australia; Actor 2 was from Italy. Singer 1 was a jazz musician and teacher, originally from Canada; Singer 2 was a music theatre performer. Dancer 1 was a master teacher and choreographer; Dancer 2 was an international performer.

### Material

Actors did contemporary monologues from *A Life*, by Nick Payne (Actor 1), and *Harper Regan*, by Simon Stephens (Actor 2). Singer 1 did “Detour Ahead” (Carter, Frigo, Ellis) and accompanied herself on the piano; Singer 2 sang “Where Are All the People” (*Chaplin*) in the first recording, and “Hey There” (*Pajama Game*) in the second, using pre-recorded tracks. Dancer 1 taught “a little 1960s combo,” dancing and using voice, then in the second recording, sang “Summertime” (*Porgy and Bess*), first stationary, then as she danced. Dancer 2 sang and danced “All I Need is the Girl” (*Gypsy*) in the first recording, and sang “Forest for the Trees” (*Spitfire Grill*) in the second, both with pre-recorded tracks. In individual sessions, participants had opportunities to work with live accompaniment as well.

### **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., singing, efficient breath management,<sup>12, 14</sup> shape changes in the vocal tract,<sup>7</sup> and the dimension of *play* in preparation and performance.<sup>2</sup> Accessing a wide pitch range, moving and sounding simultaneously,<sup>5, 6</sup> and allowing the *body* to speak<sup>13</sup> facilitated technical efficiency, and acknowledging the uniqueness of each person appeared to neutralize the fear of not being “right.”

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Participant responses**

In her Introduction to *From Word to Play*,<sup>2</sup> Cicely Berry says, “...every word is an action.” There is a “wonderful, but subliminal, connection between the meaning of the words we use... their sound and the physical movement involved in making them.” Dancer 2 said, “I feel as if the boogie man has been taken out of voice and speech.<sup>15</sup> Voice is an instrument, but the body is the voice and the body is the instrument.”<sup>16</sup>

From Dancer 1: “Joan said, ‘Feel free to *enjoy* making the sound.’ Oh, the sound is movement. The vibration is just internal. So, even though it might not be something you can see

on the outside, there is movement...I loved that feeling when I sang on this last recording. It was really kind of emotional.”<sup>16</sup>

Actor 2: “Singing is something I never thought I would do, I thought I was a horrible singer...and now I just want to do it more. At first I was so nervous, but then I would be a little more comfortable...and the playful part really, really helped.”<sup>16</sup>

Actor 1: “The biggest thing I’ve learned is how to properly support the sound with breath,<sup>17</sup> and having that as a foundation, to play and explore the upper registers into areas I’m still figuring out...ranges and abilities I just wasn’t clued into.”<sup>16</sup>

Singer 2: “Pelvic floor has been the biggest thing for me<sup>18</sup>—Child’s Pose was a game changer! There was something about that relationship with the floor, all of a sudden the sound would just soar. It’s fun because now I’m taking that back to class and using it in my voice lessons—in my own way.”<sup>16</sup>

Dancer 1: “You have to make something your own to get what you want, and you must practice.” Efficient practice and the non-linearity of learning were integral to the conversation. Actor 1: “It’s correcting, adjusting, going down a new path.”

Singer 2: “This has been a challenging process for me ...I’ve been breaking out of barriers that I somehow created for myself, being the ‘I gotta do this right’ student...Sometimes you just gotta let all that go to find stuff.”

Actor 2: “Something else I discovered: we can have more or less space in our mouth to obtain different sounds. That really clicked for me...to get a certain range or sound, you can play with that.”<sup>7</sup>

While all subjects responded positively to the training, individual recordings provided valuable specifics regarding the use and translation of information. Performers at the highest level of experience showed the most remarkable assimilation overall, and performers who consciously set out to revise basic habits succeeded in initiating those changes. Even performers who chose to do the same material in both videos showed striking differences from one to the next, and work on other aspects of performance in individual sessions was often spectacular.

Diana Zuckerman, National Center for Health Research, says, “It takes time to establish a new habit...The goal is for [it] to become automatic...but that will only happen over time.”<sup>19</sup> While the current study introduced concepts that were welcomed and easily experienced by

participating performers, putting away *old* material is often needed in the process of establishing new habits.

Dancer 2 expressed yet a different view. He said, “You take a ballet class and it’s an hour and 45 minutes of not making sound. You’re very pulled up and pretty vertical the whole time. So, to be able to do that, and also be able to do the rib flare and the relaxed stomach and have those two ways of functioning in the body has been really helpful. As dancers, we can access quickly. Someone just has to show us, like, ‘Oh, here’s an orange crayon and a green crayon and a red crayon...’ okay great. We have smart bodies. It’s just that in dance training we don’t always have permission to function that way.”

Both dancers in the current study worked in multiple genres, whereas actors and singers leaned more toward specialization. Jennie Morton, osteopath, dancer, and specialist in Performing Arts Medicine, says, “Dancers tend to be quite diverse, usually to stay in work—too many dancers for too few jobs. The exception may be in the classical realm, but even that has changed significantly with the cross-over between Ballet and Broadway.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Industry blocks**

One of the challenges performers are dealing with now in auditions is pre-recorded tracks, which play all the notes, but with little musicality:

Dancer 2: “They send you the track, but it’s so fast and there’s no time to take a breath. How can I demonstrate to you as an artist, as an individual...?”

Dancer 1: “I’ve seen the turnaround from when there was a very giving and generous accompanist...The materials they give you are contradictory.”

Dancer 2: “You get a packet with the specialty side where you’re the lumberjack that cracks the joke and the singing feature with the high A. It’s weird...I’m not gonna be perfect for every job, but the stuff I’m well suited for won’t pass me by. What’s important is that I don’t lose who I am in the process.”

### **Research limitations**

As with any research project, there were limitations, which inspire us to plan future studies. Auxiliary investigations in individual categories are anticipated. Limitations in the current study included:

Singer 1 was unable to complete the research tasks because of an emergency, thus the final discussion was with five participants only.

Acting and Singing categories lacked multiple genres; hence, auxiliary studies will focus in that direction.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Given their respective skill sets and specializations:

- Actors found direct attention to breath management, singing, pitch range, and voice qualities to be extremely helpful.
- Singers valued opportunities to move while singing, and the relation of physical shape to sound production.
- Dancers welcomed alternative approaches to breath management, and the freedom to use voice in a range of physical contexts.

Within each category, participants responded to information as it allied with individual needs.

Relating across techniques dismantled barriers and clarified technical differences, so that performance in all categories became more universal, whole, and accessible.

Based on the videoed discussion and researcher observations, participants: (1) benefitted from practical information on efficient breath management and movable parts of the vocal tract; (2) accomplished vocal tasks more easily when they were free to move; (3) preferred working with an accompanist to using pre-recorded tracks; and (4) felt more secure in their own work after two weeks of integrative training. In order to continue that training, access to integrative work is needed in performance programs, and communication across disciplines is key.

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