



Essay Music, Movement and Madness in Heightened Text

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Music, Movement and Madness in Heightened Text



Kevin Crawford trained intensively with Roy Hart from 1967, before becoming a Founder Member of Roy Hart Theatre. He performed in many landmark productions by this company, resident in France, up to the late eighties. Subsequently he moved from France to Ireland where he was full-time faculty at The School of Drama Trinity College Dublin. He returned to France in 2002 as Guest Professor at the University of Arras. Since 2004 he has headed the Actor Programs in Physical Theatre at the Accademia dell arte in Italy. Directorial credits include *The Bacchae*, *Oedipus*, *The Persians*, *Wolf's Bride* and most recently *War in Heaven*, *Savage Love* and *Tongues*. Kevin graduated with an MA in Voice Studies from Central School of Speech and Drama

I am always asking myself questions when I go in to facilitate a class or confront a text for rehearsal and performance. I always feel a little apprehensive as if my “tools of the trade” were so slight, so puny compared with what appears to be the rock of text or acting challenge we must pit ourselves against. And then once in the space, in the room, in the time designated for that tussle, sometimes a dialogue installs itself, gently, invisibly. The rock assumes less opaque dimensions; it yields itself to our intuitive promptings; it even begins to swap its hard contours for the malleable stuff of clay. In its yielding we gain in confidence and mould the text and play, fitting our psyches and bodies to the now pliable form: breathing life into the twisting literary shapes.

Time and again we are presented with seeming dead ends: time and again I sit (or stand!) in the space and only a persistent obstinate belief we will make it through keeps me riveted to the spot: hoping by sheer attrition to wear the enemy down: to patiently await the turning point in a struggle that has no name, but that is so familiar to actors, directors and teachers alike.

Over the years I have evolved a series of measures, strategies one may call them, to deal with these challenges. They are inspired by mentors I have worked with, whose work I have subsequently adapted to the specifics of text and actors. They have come about as intuitive responses that tend to approach the problems tangentially offering fresh perspectives and alternatives. The exact process by which this approach operates remains a mystery for me. I can only observe and note when it is apparently successful.

Sometimes a book comes along, like a message in the night and it illuminates my practice; starts giving names to some of the occurrences in it; proposes refreshing ways of looking at experiences in life and art. One such book for me is *Musicophilia* by Oliver Sachs. *Musicophilia* proposes some novel ways of looking at how our complex psycho-neurological networks function, particularly in relation to movement, language and music. Reading his case histories and reflections gives me some clues to understanding my own work and its application in the actor's training and performance. With that book I can revisit “scenes” of teaching and start giving words to the feelings and thoughts I have had.

It is mysterious how an exercise that seems abstract, almost neutral can sometimes have a profound and lasting effect. One such exercise is a simple one.

Actors work in duos: my only instruction is that they should touch fingertips together (generally right index to right index) and that they should maintain a steady pressure between the two fingertips while they move in space: the pair of actors are asked not to lose the sense of pressure or contact, whilst they move also from lying on the floor to standing. Once this is established I feed them other information. I invite them to play with eye contact and focus, to experiment with accelerating and decelerating the movement, to observe what I call *punctuation* (stops and pauses in the movement) and isolation, where only one of the two move while contact is still maintained. Throughout this we start to employ free sound: gradually I invite actors to introduce a line or phrase of a text they know by heart; incrementally filling this out into a more substantial textual expression (somewhere between 14 and 30 lines).

Heightened Text, Verse and Scansion

Music, Movement and Madness in Heightened Text by Kevin Crawford (continued)

Subtly the movement, the interpersonal dynamics and the text start to intertwine: disconnected and heterogeneous texts reveal sudden resonances, complicities. A speech from *Macbeth* might be pitted against the words of a song by Jacques Brel. And both song and text seem to reveal themselves freshly through this incongruous twisting of two bodies: sometimes the texts overlap, or they follow on from each other, other times they counter harshly. Often the new *context* the text or song finds itself in forces a revision in the moment of its meaning, draws out unforeseen resonances, provokes emotional and imaginative surrender.

Repetition often plays an important part in this: so does a sense of musicality, musicality in the balance of movement and sound: musicality in an awareness of overall crescendo, decrescendo and dynamics between the two actors. Sense and meaning establish themselves within that physical, vocal and verbal score. It is almost as if meaning is born from the intention of touch and balance rather than from a predetermined motive.

Oliver Sachs speaks about the running debate for more than two thousand years as to whether music and language evolved in tandem or independently. “Did speech, in fact, precede music... did song precede speech... or did both develop simultaneously?”¹ What we call *Heightened Text* seems to me to place language and music closer together. In *Heightened Text* so-called musical elements of rhythm, repetition, rhyme and dissonance strike us, as well as the overt meaning and overall intention. The listener is jostled on several levels and the enjoyment comes from both the sense and the sound. My use of contact improvisation has become a lens through which two actors can play with different planes of meaning, music and action.

In his study of cochlear amusia (distortion and hearing loss caused by deterioration of the cochlea and its precious network of inner hair fibres), Sachs points out the difference between the organ of hearing itself and the way the cerebral cortex maps what it hears. He posits that in some cases the brain can rectify the distorted perceptions received from damaged cochlea: “Cortical mappings are dynamic, and can change as circumstances alter.”² He goes on to affirm: “Thus one has to see the brain and ear as forming a single functional system.”³ It seems to me that we are confronted with similar phenomena in speech where thought, physical utterance and feeling knit together in complex ways.

In the exercise I mention above I am often astounded by the seemingly unconscious way in which the actors strike meaning in the midst of movement sequences that apparently are not derived from their text. Often they themselves are surprised by these meaningful encounters. Occasionally an actor will assert that they have experienced a wealth of meaning and connection

they have not felt before. Why is this so? Could it be that the brain is always looking for meaning, always determined to embrace even the most illogical situation and turn it to its advantage? Could the search for meaning be a kind of by-product we could allow our cerebral mapping to look out for while we struggle with the nuts and bolts of movement and word?

Still on the same theme Sachs points out, “Thus if a finger, for example, is immobilized or lost, its cortical representation will become smaller... If, conversely, the finger is used a great deal, its cortical representation will enlarge.”⁴

I can't help thinking about the concentration on the contact of the two fingers in this exercise and how it, in its turn, mirrors or mimics a concentration on the moment-to-moment changes in word pressure, consonant exactitude and vowel richness. The sheer focus on finger pressure with a partner may stimulate our cortical responses in such a way that words, phrases and entire speeches can be refreshed.

I will mention one more exercise that is certainly maddening for the actor but can, once more, be beneficial in revitalizing cortical connections between sound and meaning, perception and imagination. I ask the actors to work with a text they know well by heart. I ask them to break down their vocal and verbal expression into four constituent elements; we describe these as: time (the ability to start, stop, accelerate, decelerate); pitch (going up and down in pitch); volume (ability to vary soft and loud); timbre (the ability to change the quality, resonance and colour of a sound without changing pitch). Once we have clarified this I ask the actors to perform their text while using only ONE of the above parameters; for instance, limiting themselves to variations in time to the exclusion of pitch, volume or quality. Of course it is impossible to completely exclude all other variables but the actor tries to explore each of these restricted modes of performance. By being restricted, though, they are forced to review their strategies for speech and patterns of expression. I would call these their expressive or verbal pathways. Now I ask the group to pair up and one actor directs the other, deciding when to switch from one variable to another. We add further layers to this by mixing two or three parameters: the actor may change timbre and time but not pitch or volume for instance.

This exercise infallibly produces confusion and perplexity as well as some humour in the actors, but it also can reap some rewards. The sheer fact of dividing the sound of words from their contextual meaning (formed by a synthesis of time, volume, pitch and timbre—what we might loosely call intonation) stimulates the connections between cortex and verbal expression. It is almost a form of verbo-neurological callisthenics: flushing out those neural pathways through resistance and the necessary

increase in will, focus and imagination needed to counteract the reduction in verbal material.

Commenting on the case study of cochlear amusia referred to above Sachs affirms: “And I, as a neurologist, am filled with wonder...that through intense musical activity, attention, and will, Jacob’s brain has literally reshaped itself.”⁵ I cannot claim that the exercises and studies I mention above are sufficient to repair damaged brain-speech connections, but they do prove to be surprisingly useful in refreshing our habitual verbal and acting stances. They inhibit the easy responses and promote a more finely tuned or sharpened perception. They challenge our assumptions and in so doing they stimulate a renewal in both our critical and creative functions.

The kinds of games I have described above are particularly useful for the actor who is investigating a text, burrowing into its linguistic mass, using movement-based improvisation and musical variation. But they can also be a positive spur to texts that are vitiating, lifeless, precipitating the actor into a new arena of verbal and kinaesthetic experience. Used judiciously they can enhance the rehearsal experience and maintain sharpness in verb and action in performance.



Endnotes

1. Sachs, *Musicophilia*, p.242.
2. Ibid, p.135.
3. Ibid, p.137.
4. Ibid, p.135.
5. Ibid, p.142.

Bibliography:

Sachs, Oliver. *Musicophilia Tales of Music and the Brain*. London: Picador, 2007.