

Voice as a Vessel of the Collective Unconscious

Preface¹

An encounter of two practitioners carrying with them into the theatre lab session their shifting identities intersecting with religious and national heritage: american/jewish, and polish/christian.² An improvisation that opened territory for exploration of voice, movement, spirituality, feminism and whiteness. Material that inspired the performers-researchers to write and reflect in length about their perspective and perception of the same moment. Thoughts and associations that emerged in a powerful memorable way out of voicing and engaging with spiritual songs. Unexpected turn and realisation of the meanings created.³

INTRODUCTION

In this article – a combination of video and text, I source from the laboratory session mentioned above to analyse the phenomenon of voice as a vessel in the context of the Grotowski lineage of theatre practice. Using phenomenology and autoethnography, I bring together the reflections from two performers-researchers improvising in the session: Ben Spatz and myself.⁴ The improvisation I refer to became prolific material for further scholarly and artistic work. Namely, it supported my process of formulating a notion of *dreamvoice*⁵ discussed in this article. Therefore, I use the reflections from this session as a springboard to analyse the performative, psychophysical and spiritual aspects of the voice becoming a vessel of personal and collective unconscious.⁶

Voice as a Vessel

The word *vessel*, as defined in the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, can refer to a tube such as a blood vessel or a container holding liquid. Such a definition relates directly to physical objects or bodies. On the other hand, the *vessel* can relate to ‘a person who has a particular quality or who is used for a particular purpose’ (Cambridge English Dictionary n.d.). Hence, it can represent a person’s certain abilities or purpose associated with the role of a messenger, a transmitter, or a representative of individuals and communities. I extend here the application of the term *vessel* to the performative, psychophysical and spiritual properties of the voice expressed in the theatre context. As such, I suggest that the voice can bridge the internal and external, personal and collective, present and past.

In the post-Grotowskian theatre, the voice is an extension of performers’ presence ‘in a highly tuned-in, constant state of openness’ (Dowling 2011: 247). It exposes the performers’ *inner life*, the psychophysical process restaging itself dynamically in the moment-to-moment situations in response to each other. But when expressed through traditional songs, the voice becomes more than an extension of a performer’s presence. It turns into a *vessel*, or – as Ludwik Flaszen named it – a ‘vehicle’ (Flaszen 2010: 149) that connects a performer to the *collective unconscious*. Personal merges with collective. A performer starts finding a *line of life* in songs that were ‘inhabited by a lot of lives’ (Staniewski and Hodge 2004: 67). They become a transmitter for intergenerational lived experiences bound within and expressed through a song passed in oral tradition for decades or centuries. But the performer not only sings the lives of the ones who created and sang the song in the past. If the performer chose the song for a particular reason or if the song resonates with them on a not entirely explicable level, it may become an invitation to connect with their unconscious or their ancestors. Such

practice of ‘singing ancestors’ (Zubrzycki and Bral 2010: 258) in the post-Grotowskian theatre aims to liberate a performer’s energy and reach a heightened state of presence and emotional release. In this heightened state, the voice is used as a vessel to affect the audience and the performers themselves within musical and rhythmic structures. However, I suggest that the voice becomes a vessel not merely within traditional songs, but even in its tiniest kernels when a performer’s *dreamvoice* manifests.

Dreamvoice⁷

The notion of *dreamvoice* I refer to in this article is a term I formulated based on the phenomenon of *dreambody* conceptualized in process-oriented psychology (Mindell 1989) and extended from the Jungian dreaming while asleep. It refers to altered states and manifestations of archetypical figures while expressing vocally. It is an empirical phenomenon that appears through so-called inhibited, blocked voice or unintentional expressions, such as an unexpected crack in the voice or singing out of tune. The *dreamvoice* may reveal a performer’s perception of their own voice’s quality and capabilities, arising out of their personal life experience and also linked to their cultural background, in turn contributing to the way that a person expresses vocally. I suggest that the notion of *dreamvoice* offers an escape from the dualism of *right or wrong sounds*, contributing to the ‘rediscovery of forgotten potentialities’ (Laster 2016: 50) in embodying voice. But as much as in Grotowski’s work these forgotten potentialities reflected the vibratory qualities of traditional songs and the resonance of their musical structures, I refer to vibratory qualities of any kind of verbal or nonverbal expression that a performer unconsciously got rid of due to their shifting identity or was expected to block or stop using in a specific cultural context. Through such concept of *dreamvoice*, instead of focusing on **what the voice is or should be** – natural, authentic or organic – I reorient the question to **what the voice does, what it presses out** from the conscious and unconscious in the moment-to-moment situations and what communicational, emotional and transformational purposes in a person’s process it serves.

Collective Unconscious

In Grotowski’s work, the voice singing traditional songs became a vehicle for ‘the transgenerational transmission of collective memory’ (Laster 2012: 216). It became a tool to restore a connection with ancestors that could potentially lead to personal transformation and reintegration of identity. However, claiming that such a process can only happen by singing songs from the cultural heritage that a performer is conscious of overlooks all the other identities that a person might not be aware of. If, following Grotowski, we assume that by singing a traditional song, a performer inhabits the lives of the ones who sang it centuries ago, it becomes impossible to consciously determine the cultural heritage of every person. Moreover, as Laster points out, throughout Grotowski’s research, performers working with him sourced songs not only from their cultural or religious traditions but also outside of the culture they identified with. A song and the voice sounding through them becomes then a vessel, a microcosm of cultures and identities, their encounters and exchanges. In such a way there is a high probability that some of the identities a person may sound through the voice are experienced unconsciously. According to Arnold Mindell’s interpretation of Jung’s work, the more unconscious at play in a person’s process, the more dreaming through the body and – as I suggest – through the voice happens. This in turn guides to the manifestation of images and archetypical figures in one’s consciousness. As Mindell suggests:

For someone in contact with the unconscious, the archetypes are body impulses and their wisdom. Otherwise, the archetypes become the root images of complexes and diseases (Mindell 1990: 168).

What interests me in this context is investigating how the voice sounds out the collective unconscious and how one relates to the whole pallet of identities – familiar and unfamiliar, manifested through the voice. Does one accept them? Wrestle with them? Negate? Find peace in them? How does the voice express this relationship?

In the video that follows this paragraph, I source from my own experience of sounding, chanting and reflecting on the discovery of my *dreamvoice*. I do it in the company of another performer, Ben Spatz, reflecting on their experience and two witnesses, bringing all their identities into the laboratory studio. As I suggest through this reflection, the voice acting as a vessel – a messenger sounding unfamiliar or neglected sounds, can bring the collective unconscious to awareness and potentially liberate the archetype.

VIDEO

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwlSQ-f6kYk>

Figure 1. Ben Spatz & Ilona Krawczyk, *Screenshot from the Judaica laboratory session*, 2017. Courtesy of the Urban Research Theatre.

VIDEO - transcript

[00:02] *On the one hand, I feel like my whole body is singing and on the other, like my body is not there and something else is singing* (Interviewed performer 1).

[00:09] *I become a pipe filled up with air, or a pipe which doesn't need air, a transmitter, a vessel. The sound flows, vibrates through me, and the whole of me is vibrating with it* (Interviewed performer 2).

[00:24] 'Chanting has been used throughout the world for thousands of years for worship, ritual, strengthening community and healing. [It] is both a ubiquitous and ancient practice with many traditions such as Buddhism, Sufism, Hinduism, and Yogic traditions believing chanting to be a way of altering states of awareness and reaching full human potential' (Perry et al. 2022: n.pag.).

[00:45] **Footage from Judaica project | Laboratory session 31/07/2017**

[02:53] 'Grotowski [...] demonstrates the spiritual importance of physicality. His work literally maps the New Age experience into the body of the performer, renegotiating the terms of spiritual experience. The traditional Christian religions that manifest Augustinian theology are negated through the strength of his inclusion of the body' (Christoph (2017: 103).

[03:38] When the voice becomes a vessel, 'you don't know if it is you who is bringing about this voice or the voice that is bringing about you, and where the source of the sound is - ...

[03:50] ...in your mouth, [in] your chest, in your lungs, in your stomach, in your groin, or maybe in the room's walls, ceiling, or maybe in distant celestial bodies, in the crystal spheres of the universe' (Flaszen 2010: 149).

[04:50] Ben:

What arises for me now as the message from our paired dreambodies is the problem of the human shifted by a critical perspective into another formulation: the problem of whiteness. Now I see the whiteness of our bodies as undeniably related to our quest for the animalistic and our desire to recover our dreambodies.

[04:55] 'The Bible, the Greeks: What is the nature of these texts' openness to the whole world? On the one hand, for Levinas, they are available to the whole world; on the other hand, they *are* the whole world. The whole world is in these texts and the refusal of these texts, the failure to enter into them is also a failure to enter into the world [...] At issue is the possibility and desirability of avoiding song which is associated with intoxication, sleep, lack of seriousness, the technoprimitivity that attends modern audiovisual distraction...' (Moten 2018: 11, 25 In Spatz 2022: [9:55-10:27])

[05:30] Ilona:

I see Ben approaching me and realize that I am standing between two columns. This realization, together with what I hear in my voice, leads me to visualize some kind of temple in which I am a sort of mediator between the worlds — earth and spirit — who calls upon heaven / god / demiurge, or perhaps this persona in me, who is from the spiritual world.

[05:49] *I direct my eyes and my hands towards the ceiling while moving my voice towards higher notes in the head resonator. Through this I try to connect with humanity's spiritual nature and, in a sense, get out of my body.*

[06:31] *I build up more and more tension in my muscles, particularly in the pelvic area. Somehow, I sense that this is the place of division and tear between the two worlds, animal and human.*

[06:56] Ben:

I too see a clash between lower and higher, between the animal and what I am wrestling with as the written word.

[07:04] *I am reading from a book, but I am speaking its words according to a melody: a wordless mystical melody from a Jewish tradition.*

[07:12] *In a very concrete way, I am using this song to create a bridge between an academic text and my own embodied sounds and rhythms, mirroring in my own way the vertical struggle Ilona describes.*

[07:59] Ilona:

I listen to Ben chanting the text of the book. I am exhausted, feeling surrendered to some power that made me go through all of this. I realize the pain of being kept in this vertical world that does not allow me to howl: the pain of division, suppression, and the cost of being vertical.

[08:32] [O]ne access to the creative way consists of discovering in yourself an ancient corporality to which you are bound by a strong ancestral relation' (Grotowski [1989] 2001: 378).

[08:49] **Footage from Dreamvoice performance-installation | Rehearsal 27/01/2019**

COMMENTARY / CONCLUSIONS

The sequence from the Judaica project displayed in the video showed how conscious and unconscious phenomena of the *dreambody* and *dreamvoice* can manifest in an open or experimental context, generating a dramaturgy of performance practice through following and amplifying body and voice signals. More than that, it made me acknowledge something important about my identities. As a Polish woman who was baptized and brought up in the Catholic faith, and who at the same time has a close connection with nature deriving from Slavic pagan mythology and beliefs, I often struggle with the perception and placement of the body in Christianity, particularly in relation to the four dogmas about Holy Mary.⁸ Looking at them from a feminist perspective, I perceive these dogmas as a tool for disembodiment, disconnection from nature, and damaging women's connection with their bodies. Although during the session with the Judaica project, my intention was to work on the process of embodying voice, the realizations I made through the *dreamvoice*, gave me a chance to touch upon some aspects of my cultural background and life experience. It also inspired my imagination and creativity to explore this sequence further in the 'Dreamvoice' performance-sound installation, which was the final piece for my practice-as-research Ph.D.

In the performance devising, the struggle of the division between the worlds and the paradox of the body's role in Christianity related to the figure of the Messiah, I, therefore, associated with Mary – the link between the worlds, the mother of the Messiah and the woman submitted to greater forces. On the vocal/musical level, I decided then to use *Ave Maria* by Schubert – a composition from classical music that would first require me to use a head register and from which I could then carry on with my *dreamvoice* expression manifested during laboratory session with Judaica project – the voice cracking and breaking between registers. The heightened state of presence I would achieve whenever I performed *Ave Maria* with the breaking sounds would turn my voice into a vessel but in a very different way from my previous experiences.

Singing has always been a means of expression that would transport me to a different world. In the past, at my younger age singing in church in a choir, I felt I was becoming a vessel, a transmitter between the people I sang to and God. Or I felt as if I was connecting to God through my voice while singing. As if I was becoming this voice, a vibration in which my whole body would disappear, or as if my voice was bigger than my body. Within that state, in these moments, my singing voice would touch people deeply, and move something within them, as they would often come to me afterwards to share their experience. When I sang in theatre, I would often experience physical reactions, including numbness in my hands and arms. All my body would be trembling. When I was singing Vodou songs during workshops at Grotowski Institute, the spiritual experience of becoming a vessel would reappear to an extent I would almost faint out of its intensity⁹. However, during the Judaica session and while singing *Ave Maria*, my *dreamvoice* breaking between the registers brought me to another dimension of a vessel. This time, my voice became a vessel of more physical aspect.

It would return the Holy Mary to her body, to her humanity. It would express the pain of the oppressed, restrained voices and bodies of women but not – as in Grotowski's framework – of my ancestors. My voice would connect with women's experiences of tamed physiology, the taboo of menstruation, voices not permitted to express affective sounds, and 'seeing them in relation to their social context (Wehr 1989: 124). Engaging with the archetypal figure allowed my voice to become the vessel of collective experience across times, cultures and spaces. It inspired both – Ben and me to seek ways of fulfilling our desire to recover our bodies in our respective areas of wrestling. Concerning all the above manifestations, the voice as a vessel escapes a static, singular definition. With the shifting and multiple identities, it has the potential to bridge different aspects of the collective unconscious, whether spiritual, social or psychological.

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Further Reading

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¹ This article combines poetic, performative, reflective and analytical writing supplemented with audiovisual material. Due to the nature of the topic, I implemented a less linear structure. Except for the introduction and conclusions, the main body of the publication consists of an annotated video. Through such a structure, I intend to give the reader space for their interpretation of performative and vocal work. Reflective, phenomenological writing has been marked by italics to help the reader gain clarity about the different modes of text. I also use italics to highlight the keywords and terms significant to the piece of work discussed in this article.

² Lowercasing nationalities and religions is a conscious choice of the author and the practitioner mentioned here to highlight our shifting relationship with the identities we were brought up with.

³ In this preface, I refer in a performative way to a theatre laboratory session that became a foundation for the reflection and analysis in this article. The session took place on the 31st of July 2017 and was a part of the Judaica project, founded and led by Ben Spatz. The following performers-researchers were involved in the session: Nazlıhan Eda Erçin (witness), Agnieszka Mendel (videographer), Ben Spatz (performer), and Ilona Krawczyk (performer). The whole footage from the session can be found in the Songwork Catalogue, Part II: Identity at <https://urbanresearchtheater.com/songwork/>. Based on this session, an earlier video article has been published (Spatz 2022).

⁴ The reflections and commentaries were made retrospectively in 2019, that is two years after the session took place.

⁵ In this article, I discuss both *dreamvoice* (marked throughout the article by italics) as a concept discussed further in the introduction, as well as 'Dreamvoice' (marked by quotation marks) referring to the title of a

performance-installation devised in the final performance practice of my PaR Ph.D. on embodied voice (Krawczyk 2021).

⁶ I support this analysis with the reference to semi-structured interviews and the ‘Dreamvoice’ performance-sound installation – both conducted as part of my Ph.D. Between 2016-2017, I interviewed twelve performers of different nationalities about their experience of ‘catharsis’ (Staniewski and Hodge 2004: 67) while singing. I devised and performed ‘Dreamvoice’ with Brice Catherin, Cristina Fuentes Antoniazzi, and David Velez between January and March 2019, consulting with Ben Spatz, my supervisor at the time and Martyna Majewska, associate director.

⁷ The definition of the *dreamvoice* presented in this article derives from my Ph.D (Krawczyk 2021). It has been published in Krawczyk & Spatz (2021) and will be included in the forthcoming book chapter for *Creak: Theories and Practices of Pulse Phonation*, edited by Francesco Venturi.

⁸ The dogmas, settled by the Roman Catholic Church, are Mother of God (431), Perpetual Virginity (649) Immaculate Conception (1854), and Assumption (1950).

⁹ The workshops with Marie-Suze Jean-Baptiste (Mambo Nini) took place in Grotowski Institute (Wroclaw, Poland) between 4-7th of April 2023.