

Material Strategies

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A text about how this work affects my teaching

The 1-year Material Strategies project has been an inspiring and consolidating experience, which has laid the groundwork for further practical research in this field. Its main effect on my own work has been in the area of how it has further developed my thoughts, theory and practice as a pedagogue. Most specifically, it has helped me deepen the relationship between theory and practice in my work. I will name here 3 specific examples.

A presentation

In January, 2019, Camilla and I presented at the International Platform for Performer Training Conference with the presentation: “What the Body Says: how a materialist approach to physical and vocal actions can open for new dramaturgical strategies to performing personal stories.” (The transcript of this presentation is available on this site). This Conference was personally significant. Attending, were several practitioners with whom I had worked 10 years ago. In this context we were all able to share some part of our practice and participate in each others. In my part of the presentation, I discussed how I work with text, both Shakespeare and original devised text, together with students in a multicultural context. My argument was that in meeting both ‘classical’ and original texts, it is important to approach the text as a material with both physical elements (vowels, consonants and words which are signifiers) but also to consider the immaterial material (the historical background of the text as well as the specific cultural, social and personal background of the person performing the text). I suggest that approaching the work from this point of view allows one to make compositions with the text which are technically ‘well done’ as well as empowering to the performer and intelligent dramaturgically. As Heidi Fast and Milla Tiainen write:

When considered through a new materialist lens, the interconnected workings of body and voice are not only about the mediation of culturally recognizable markers of identity or about how the flesh and bones of particular bodies shape the sounds and multi-sensory

experiences of a voice...they are understood as consisting of incessant physiological processes and corporeal practices in which biology and culture dynamically intermingle. (2018)

I come from training traditions which emphasise a “just do it” attitude, suggesting that too much critical thought hinders the performer’s access to their own instincts. In my own practice, the aim has been to take the ‘best’ elements of these psychophysical trainings and to adapt them for a changing world, in which performers are more often also devisers, who need to train themselves both as instinctive doers but also as dramaturgs and directors. As a voice teacher, my pedagogical approach aims to help students bridge these two areas and facilitate their agency in creating their own pieces. The New Materialist philosophy we worked with during this project has allowed me to link my ongoing practice to a supportive field of theory. Presenting at this conference, I was able to see some methods which are similar to my own, but which are presented/taught without the theoretical context, which I bring to my work. This experience confirmed for me how successful is this connection between practice and critical thought in terms of working with the voice (an area which has long resisted theoretical input) and that actually this criticality and theoretical base is necessary in helping students deepen their practice: the integrated theory actually perceivably lifts the ‘level’ of the practical vocal work.

A performative lecture

In March 2019, Øystein Elle and I presented at the seminar connected to this research project, at Vega Scene in Oslo. Our performance (the score can be found on this site), was called: YOU AND ME – AS VOCAL MATERIAL – WHERE AND HOW DO WE MEET?. It was structured around 5 questions which we explored first through performative provocations followed by theoretical reflections. These questions centred around understanding what we mean when we consider the voice as material. As Coleman, Page and Palmer remark: ‘[u]ntil recently, the new materialisms have mainly constituted a conceptual field, viewed as ‘high’ theory’ (2019). Our aim through this project, has been to investigate how these theories can be applied to practical work. Thus our questions aimed to be direct and go to the core. They were: Who am I (the performer) as material, who is the audience as material, what is song as material, what is text as material and how can we understand the idea of materials ‘co-mingling’, in terms of the performative moment? Through our practical examples, which looked to push the material to its

edges in order provoke reflection about its nature, we aimed to uncover some of the inherent assumptions about how voice is understood and to open the discussion as to how New Materialist thought might allow us to reconsider the voice's materiality.

Theoretically, the research conducted to make this performative presentation, resulted in drawing connections between New Materialism and Aurality studies, an area of sound studies which offers some compelling arguments regarding how materialism directly relates to the field of sound and voice. This work also connected me with the strand of research called Object Oriented Feminism (OOF) – a complimentary yet critical strand of OOO, which opens up the discussion of what it means to 'be an object' for groups such as women and non-whites, for whom there is a long history of objectification to reckon with. The vocabularies of New Materialism are characterized as being very wide and far-reaching, as they offer ideas about how we might consider the world as a whole. The theories identified above, allowed Øystein and I to further translate and connect these theories to the specific context of Voice Studies, as well as to make ourselves aware of the body of scholarship already existing in these overlapping fields. The OOF theory offers an alternative 'take' on OOO concepts which provide very useful terminologies and ideas for talking to students with a variety of cultural, sexual, racial and political backgrounds. Planning courses for the incoming BA class, I find my thinking and terminology has been greatly informed by this research project. In terms of exercises, the questions Øystein and I identified offer an accessible starting point for introducing BA students to this area of thought as a tool of performance making. In terms of co-teaching with colleagues from the Scenography department who have also been part of the project, our shared vocabulary and experience, facilitate effective communication and the development of new exercises in which different materialities meet.

An article about pedagogy

Most significantly of all, has been how this project has informed and deepened my own ongoing research focused around working in the dark as a materialist method for voice training. I have written about this in the forthcoming article to be published in *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* (Routledge) in their special issue on Voice due out in September 2019. The article is titled: "Devisers in the dark: reconfiguring a material voice practice". It contains a consolidation and matured version of much of the research conducted over this year as well as giving an in-

depth account of some of my own pedagogical practice. When released, this article will be available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2019.1637372> .

This article proposes that there is a growing need for non-anthropocentric compositional voice practices. It proposes a voice training which draws on new materialism, OOF, and aurality studies, and employs strategies from theatre in the dark. Theorists such as Eidsheim and Kendrick argue that ocularcentrism, the privilege of sight in Western culture, is so normalised that radical strategies are needed to return to the potentiality of sound.

it was the emergence of vision in ancient philosophy that forged an inextricable link between sight and object, as our eyes were established as the chief means by which we cognate the difference between ourselves and the world... This primacy of sight has produced the notion that the world is only fully known when it is visually evident, therefore sight... became something of a meta-sense. (Kendrick 2017, p. 3).¹

Could it be that this normalised primacy of sight and the subject/object distinction it offers, is a subconscious hinder in terms of how we perceive/work with voice? What might working in darkness offer as a site where the materiality of the voice might be able to be explored ‘on its own terms’? The article describes a case study at the Norwegian Theatre Academy, in which training the voice in darkness was explored. It outlines two exercises and discusses an alternative theoretical/practical base for the human sounder in relation to dynamic worlds. Key areas discussed are how darkness facilitates: voicing self/selves; voicing together – (de)composition; plasticity as a way to talk about sound objects/actions; and applying Home-Cook’s ‘tending to’, Jarvis’s performing (im)materiality of darkness and Machon’s discussions of the haptic and (syn)aesthetic as training principles. This article aims to contribute to the intersection of the fields of new materialism, aurality, theatre in the dark and deviser training.

Citations:

Coleman, R., Page, T., and Palmer, H. 2019. Feminist New Materialist Practice: The

¹ None of these authors, nor I, argue for an exclusion of one sense in favour of another. They offer rather historical context from which to consider what have become normalised relations to the senses today.

Mattering of Methods [online]. *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture* 4. Available at: <https://maifeminism.com/feminist-new-materialisms-the-mattering-of-methods-editors-note/> [Accessed 17 June 2019]

Fast, H. and Tiainen, M., 2018. Voice. *New Materialism: how matter comes to matter*. Available at: <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/v/voice.html> [Accessed 17 June 2019].

Kendrick, L., 2017. *Theatre Aurality*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.