

How can singing voice practice change the spoken voice for actors - A case study

Marcos SANTOS¹

Abstract: *Acting is a skill that demands the correct use of the voice. The voice of an actor should be clear, resonant and full so that the audience can understand the interpretation. A well projected voice for actors is what this study is about. As it is known, the singing voice has many common aspects with the spoken voice. This article describes a study performed with a group of students from the Drama department of the University of Évora to understand if the practice of singing voice would help the projection of spoken voice and consequently the interpretation of young actors.*

Key-words: *voice, actors, singing, projection, theater.*

1. Introduction

This article studies the contributions of the singing voice for the spoken voice of the actor. The actors' voice is one of the main tools for their interpretation, therefore it is important to analyze the technical aspects that contribute for the development of the acting voice. This is the basis of this study. By mentioning acting voice, I am referring to the spoken voice for actors that is performed in the acoustics of a theater with the pillars of projection, diction, articulation and chant. The actors' goal is to clearly communicate their interpretation to the audience using both their body and their voice. For the audience to fully discern and understand the actors' words and – ultimately – their lines, it is essential that actors are able to deliver their words with intelligible and well projected diction.

The eminent vocal coach Kristin Linklater says,
The voice of the actor should be the most potent theatrical element by which the light of a cathartic event illuminates the dark places (...) (Linklater 1976, 8)

¹ Author's affiliation: PhD, Universidade de Évora, mafs@uevora.pt

Intelligible diction capable of expressive communication is the result of the existence of an optimal synergy between the respiratory system and the musculature of the laryngeal tract which, in turn, directly affects and impacts vocal projection. Everyone's voice is distinct, just as each body is distinct, whether in terms of timbre, range, projection, articulation or diction. It is through the study and practice of the correct functioning of the voice that one progresses through the various technical stages. During the course of voice at the Drama degree of the Department of Theatre at the University of Évora, I applying technical knowledge of the singing voice to the spoken voice could be a valuable too, although the spoken voice does not require tuning or knowledge of theory musical. I identified that after singing practice their voices changed when they performed their texts. So I decided to study the effects of singing in the spoken voice with these students, given any of them had never had any singing practice. Both forms are interconnected and have many aspects in common and that is why the application of terms such as vocal projection, articulation and breathing are used both in the actor's work while declaiming a text or a monologue, as well as being addressed in the singer's song or melody referring to the text that is sung. It's common when singing classical genre to apply the concept of singing consonants, which refers to developing the *legato* line of the musical phrase.

The importance of the singing voice for an actor is a concept that has been studied for many years by authors such as Stanislavski (1863- 1938), a well-known theatre actor who was trained as an opera singer, mentioned in his manuals:

What must be concluded from all this is that even a naturally good voice must be developed not only for singing, but also for speaking. How great it would be if singing teachers taught diction at the same time and if diction teachers taught singing at the same time! (Stanislavsky 2001, 140)

I believe that practice of singing voice for an actor is essential to develop resonance, chant, tone, range, timbre and power. This is how you can achieve a full tone with resonance and harmonics and therefore a very useful tool for an actor.

What you require is as open and full a tone as possible, yet which is completely your own. You want to increase range and power, and to be able to call on it as you need. (Berry 1973, 18)

All these mechanisms that I referred should be developed and studied in college or drama classes as early as possible, because the musculature of the mechanisms of the throat will develop more easily when the human body is younger.

2. Objectives

The goals of this study are to:

- a) analyze the impact that singing voice can have in the young actors' performance;
- b) understand if the methodology used was well recognized by the students;
- c) identify if the performance was more convincing;
- d) investigate if their voices were well balanced in the acoustics of the performance place.

3. Material and Methods

At the University of Évora, Portugal I teach the classes of voice for the college degree Drama Department. For this study I took a group of 18 students from the 1st year and gave them weekly classes of 3 hours each for a whole year. The 18 students were divided in two halves and each half had a 3 hours class per week. They were 16 female and 2 male, age range from 18 to 24 years old. The year was divided into 2 semesters. On the first semester the work done was only composed by breathing and vocal technique for spoken voice.

The methodology used for the spoken voice was a normal warm up for the body and then more specific techniques exercises for voice:

- lip trills,
- humming exercises,
- chest and head resonance exercises like gliding in the same vowel from up to low,
- work on consonants to make them energetic and
- elongating vowels and diphthongs.

It's important to mention that I work according to five pillars which I believe are essential to achieve optimal vocal projection for an actor: breathing, resonance, articulation, diction and tone, all intimately interconnected with each other. All of these pillars are critical in the achievement of an optimal level of projection of the spoken voice and without the use and/or involvement of even one of these pillars, the projection of the actor's voice will be negatively affected and his interpretation and characterization adversely impacted.

In the classes, students were instructed utilizing vocal exercises specifically involving these five pillars and it was critical that these specific vocal exercises were

used during vocal warm up prior to each rehearsal and each performance. It was important to control the level of projection since some students misunderstood it with yelling. There is a very noticeable difference between the volume levels achieved through projection and those achieved by yelling or shouting (Oppelt, 2015, 63). Yelling is achieved by and associated with effort of the vocal cords but without the proper support of breath, whereas projecting is related to the correct use of the diaphragmatic breathing technique which utilizes air in the resonators to produce clear resonance thereby increasing volume, a goal of every actor; additionally, correct body posture is also a contributing factor in achieving a greater level of projection (Maccalioni 1988, 88).

After the warmup, I worked individually with each student to see and analyze their performance on a monologue of 20 lines maximum. The work had a purpose of getting the best whole sound out of each student within the required interpretation. The results were slowly appearing but there was always a permanent invariant of tone in the performance of each student. This is when I decided to give them some singing tools. Singing would be helpful since it required a different use of the voice mechanism that should help the throat muscles to develop, therefore getting a richer sound.

On the second semester I gave them a homework of memorizing a monologue of 15- 20 lines by Shakespeare (Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, Otello, Romeo and Juliet, etc.), of their choice. I began classes with the same kind of warm up for body and spoken voice (approx. 20m) and then added a warm up for singing voice, with scales of 5 notes with humming, developing the chest voice and resonance. I started on the low notes of the key board and then I gently went up till I could feel the students were comfortable and not straining their voices. The next step was to work with them to correct posture of the head, jaw and lips to make the transition from chest voice to head voice as gently as possible, and also to help to have a free sung voice. The exercises were all with small scales with a 5th with the use of vowels and consonants and then with Italian words, since it was easier for the group who was mainly from Mediterranean ancestry. I also used exercises in the form of arpeggios.

After 20 minutes of scales and arpeggios working on chest and then head voice and breathing, the voices started to get a full sound and be resonant. For the chest register I wanted to bring a forward resonant sound within a connection of the mask to get more brilliancy. For the head voice, I worked towards getting round lips, an openness of the jaw in all vowels and yawning sensation in the back of the throat. Both of the registers were obviously well connected with correct posture, breathing support and air spinning.

When the sound of both registers was getting out I decided to apply all of this sound to the study of a choral piece. So I gave them 2 choral pieces: one for developing the head voice from a Portuguese Folklore with classical arrangements; and a second one for developing the chest and belting voice from the musical Mamma Mia. Both pieces were easy to learn by listening and did not required musical theory knowledge.

This work was done every week for one full semester: warm up of spoken voice and then add a warm up for singing voice and choral practice of these 2 pieces.

4. Results and Discussion

At the end of the semester there is usually a performance class opened to the public. So I decided to do it in an open air event, exploring also different kinds of acoustics. The performance class took place at the entrance of Igreja de São Francisco in Évora from XV century. This entrance has 5 arches in the front and one on each side, reminding of a cloister style and therefore creating an acoustic for a performance with a good sound balance.

On the performance day students had to sing both choral pieces prior to their performance of the Shakespeare monologues. So the performance started with the folklore Portuguese song followed by Mamma Mia song and then each one of them had to perform his or her monologue. The amazement on their faces when they started to sing the folklore choral piece of how their voices were filling the acoustic with resonance and projected sound was noticeable and then gained confidence for the following belting chest voice song with the same outcome. For the following monologues, each line and word was more free and with fuller tone.

The results of the singing practice prior to the performance of each student monologue was of the utmost importance, since the students and I could see the development of each sound in the spoken voice in this term of:

- resonance,
- less monochromatic tone,
- more spontaneous and free sound,
- energetic consonants,
- clear diction,
- fluent articulation,
- breathing support,
- richer timbre.

Their performances became more understandable, reliable on terms of interpretation, with projected sound, fuller tone and easiness in reaching the audience.

5. Conclusion

The voice is not only a part of the personality of actors, it is also one of the most critically important instruments available for their characterization; it is, therefore, essential for the actor to possess the technical knowledge of both how to achieve and how to master projection. Because of their size, configuration of space and the surfaces used, theatre halls often present acoustic challenges for the most seasoned actors - and even more so for young actors - all of whom must be able to be heard and must do so effortlessly. That's why their voice remains one of the most important tools for interpretation; it is, therefore, of the utmost importance that the young actors, during their training, both learn and master this vocal technique and therefore should develop their singing voice.

The influence that both singing and speaking voices have on each other is revealing in these results. Singing helps the speaking voice and the speaking voice helps the singing voice. Singing has musical and tuning components, which in themselves are technically complex and therefore require more specific musical and technical study. The spoken voice will benefit from singing practice not only because the muscles are exercised in a different direction but also because the sound and tone gets richer and fuller and this can be shown in the articulation of words and lines, with the control of breathing and sound projection, and will develop: range of the voice, power, fuller tone and the elasticity of words. By achieving this, young actors will find an easiness in the characterization of their roles and in the connection of voice to the body which will be shown in the fluidity of their interpretation.

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