

Essay

INTEGRATIVE LINKS: Voice and Dance in Performance

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Introduction

I danced as a child—even danced and sang at the same time. My sister and I were a team—with mom at the piano. But as a child, we just perform, without much thought about technical connections.

By 1986, when I went to California, I'd been searching for 15 years for a physical way into teaching singing—something beyond “stand by the piano, do vocalises, then sing songs or arias.” In the 1970s Raleigh newspapers wrote feature stories on the unusual exercises I did with the Peace College Choir and Chamber Singers, and as Chair of the Music Department, I team taught courses with the head of the Physical Education Department.

Later, in New York, I discovered Andrew Jannetti (of Andrew Jannetti & Dancers), who was my aerobics instructor at a fitness club in NJ. Not the ordinary aerobics teacher, Andrew taught my singing students and we taught classes together. Even so, the search continued.

Finally, at LA City College I met Catherine Fitzmaurice. And with the first tremor I knew this was the point of reference I'd consciously sought, as the tremors and arches of “Deconstructing,” facilitated integrative sounding and moving at a deep, even primal level.

Then, at Catherine's suggestion, I went off to London, fall 1989, on a life-changing course at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Though voice and dance techniques were not my focus, voice and movement were so thoroughly integrated on the course that I could hardly imagine separating the trainings—and as Meribeth Bunch Dayme was our singing tutor, a physical/explorative approach became second nature!

Once back in the US, I worked in theatre departments that communicated among disciplines—within theatre, but not between theatre and music. And there was an obvious disconnect between singing training and voice work for the actor. So, thanks to the suggestion of a graduate student, I began to use singing sounds, along with other vocal noises, in my voice/movement classes. Suddenly actors knew they could sing, and in 2003, I wrote *One Voice: Integrating Singing and Theatre Voice Techniques* with my colleague, speech-language pathologist Kenneth Tom (2nd Ed, Waveland 2012).

Following that journey, I wanted to know more about how musical theatre in particular, connected with voice in other contexts, as performers in musical theatre were being expected to function in virtually all styles both as actors and singers. So I interviewed musical theatre experts in three parts of the world, the US, UK and Australia, for *Singing in Musical Theatre: The Training of Singers and Actors* (Allworth 2007).

What I realized rather quickly was that musical theatre performers had to be dancers, as well as singers and actors, which meant developing technique(s) in an integrative way so that dancing, acting, and singing could happen at the same time. Yet teachers of singing frequently noted conflicts, or differences between dance and voice techniques in the area of breathing. For example:

Dr. Jean Callaghan, Master Teacher, researcher, Sydney, Australia, said:

[With dancers] you have to deal with the fact that the kind of breathing, and alignment for that matter, that they need to support some kinds of dance, may not be appropriate to the kind of singing they need to do (2007, 150).

And from Dr. Wendy LeBorgne, speech-language pathologist, singing teacher, Consultant, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music:

In a dancer, I'm going to train breathing a little differently than in an actor or a singer. I know that if dancers have been dancing for 20 years, I am not going to get them to release their abs like I will in singers—not that I don't strive for that, but I am okay with them breathing just a little bit higher (2007, 21).

Meantime, I began a research study in London with physiotherapist Jane Grey, using real-time ultrasound imaging to observe abdominal muscle activity during a range of vocal tasks and in a variety of physical positions (2007 - 08). Although the study was designed to investigate abdominal muscle activation patterns in breath management for speaking, singing, laughing, crying, screaming, and other vocal activities, it also provided valuable information about the individual and multi-tasking capabilities of those same muscles:

The transversus abdominis...can release and engage, even when remaining superficial abdominal muscles (internal and external obliques and rectus abdominis) are involved in maintaining postural stability in the mid-lower torso [e.g., in a Suzuki sitting statue]...Overall, observation suggests that transversus tends to take the lead in any activity, with internal and external obliques, in that order, coming in to assist whenever necessary. In certain extended voice use, e.g., laughing and crying, the rectus abdominis is also involved (2009, 6).

Following that initial study, I spearheaded a major exploratory project at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia (2010), where a wide range of vocal genres—acting, classical singing, musical theatre, jazz, pop, rock, and country—was considered (see Preliminary Report 2010). All subjects were professional performers and, in addition to ultrasound imaging, surface and fine wire electrodes were used to monitor abdominal muscle activation patterns. Respirace bands were used to monitor chest and abdominal wall movement, and a facemask measured airflow (Figure 1).

Attempts were made to simulate performance physicality in individual and exploratory items of the protocol (Figure 2), while all common tasks were performed standing and relatively still. Subjects also performed *multi-task* items that required voice use in twisted and otherwise unusual physical positions, and information collected from these items may relate directly to voice and dance in performance.

Since in pure dance, there is seldom a concern for voicing, breathing may or may not be addressed. Yet observations of professional dancers and of dance-based work in a professional setting reveal fewer conflicts to breath management for voicing than might be expected.

In Zena Rommett's DVD *Floor-Barre for Everyone*, she says repeatedly, "Keep the knees tight together," "Tighten your buttocks," "Hold the pelvis tight," "Tighten your stomach"—instructions most voice teachers would perceive as counter to free and effective voice use in any medium. Yet we observe that *these dancers breathe*, their bellies move, and their abs release *enough*, so that if they were required to speak or sing, they could do so in a *supported* manner.

Having said that, certain *kinds* of voicing may be either limited by, or impossible with tight knees, tight buttocks, tight pelvis and a tight stomach—although the word, "stomach" is often used in teaching to mean something lower than the actual human *stomach*.

As the multi-tasking of muscles is a relatively new pedagogical consideration, we have hardly begun to understand its role in performance. Nevertheless, having that on the table, alongside other technical truths and requirements, tends to soften the boundaries between techniques so that, for example, tightening the pelvis may not preclude releasing part of the abdominal wall for reflexive inhalation; and the very act of *tightening* may enlist the muscles of exhalation needed for voicing.

Conflicts and Solutions

Now free-lancing again, I frequently lead workshops in training programs for musical theatre. And it is in this context that I encounter the apparent conflict and confusion students feel between their training as dancers and their training in voice. What is particularly interesting is that I'd seldom encountered this in 20 years of university teaching—voice/movement for the actor and singing in musical theatre.

While objective studies on integrative approaches are not yet available, I strongly suggest that programs in which voice, speech, and movement are taught together, rather than as separate courses, can make a huge positive difference in the experience of students. In addition, having a common core curriculum for acting and musical theatre majors can be richly rewarding for teachers and students alike.

Even in integrated programs though, there is seldom the opportunity or incentive to really listen to experts outside our own respective field(s). The only people who *must* listen across disciplines are our students, who regularly take classes in dance (e.g., ballet, tap, modern, jazz), voice/movement for the actor, singing (e.g., classical, musical theatre, jazz, pop, rock) and acting. And the potential for conflict in all of that is enormous!

On May 13, 2012, immediately following a workshop on integrative pedagogies in voice and dance, experts from a variety of performance fields met at Pearl Studios in New York to discuss the multi-dimensional performer, integrative techniques, and a range of performance trainings. I served as moderator and the discussants were, left to right (Figure 3):

Jennie Morton, osteopath with classical ballet and musical theatre performance background, UCL Honorary Lecturer of MSc in Performing Arts Medicine, clinic practitioner, British Association for Performing Arts Medicine.

Sara Paar, performer and singing teacher, NYC, Certified Teacher, Somatic Voicework™, the LoVetri Method, voice faculty, Brooklyn Youth Chorus Academy, Lecturer, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY.

Rusty Curcio, professional dancer and performance artist for more than 25 years, Head of Dance, Wagner College, NYC, Certified in Laban Movement Theory and a member of International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association.

Mara Davi, musical theatre triple threat with major Broadway credits—including Maggie in *A Chorus Line* and Janet in *Drowsy Chaperone*—and a new folk rock album, *Mara and the Bitter Suite* (2012).

Tom Burke, speech-language pathologist and singing teacher, New York, Certified Course Instructor of the Estill Voice Training System, and Executive Coach for Google.

Criteria for choosing the panel included their ability and willingness to think outside their own pedagogical/performance *boxes*, and their demonstrated interest in integrative solutions.

Individual descriptions of conflicts in technique included this from Jennie Morton:

Moving from a career as a classical ballet dancer into musical theatre, I found that my ballet posture was interfering with my ability to sing. My center of gravity was too far forwards, knees locked back, and chin raised too high, putting my vocal mechanism out of neutral and into a position of strain. I was also so conditioned to hold my stomach in, that to actually release it outwards for voicing was not only an alien concept, but physically difficult for me to do. My breathing was too high and I struggled to find my upper register.

Thus echoing Jean Callaghan’s observations regarding breathing and alignment in some dance trainings.

Jennie’s solution was a “skill-swap”:

I was working on a show in the West End with an opera singer who was also transitioning into musical theatre. She could see where I was going wrong with my voice and as she was struggling with trying to cope with the dance demands, we decided to do a skill-swap. We hired a studio twice a week where I taught her dance and she taught me voice and we worked on finding a middle ground for both.

Mara Davi described having to sing a high G “while spinning around in a circle,” which at first seemed impossible. Yet, “The solution is in rehearsal. It’s amazing how muscle memory—the rehearsal takes care of it.” Interestingly, in “Putting It All Together” (2011, 9),

Mara's former teacher, Bill Lett, says, "When your body is your instrument, anything is possible with practice."

When asked what they would change, if anything, in the training process of multi-dimensional performers:

- Mara said that if people could be gracious about differences in terminology, that would be really helpful to students;
- Tom added that acknowledging different terms for the same activity would eliminate a lot of confusion;
- Sara said teachers need to be clear about what they are asking students to do, and share the *what* and *why* of their instructions;
- Mara reminded us that the ultimate goal of performance is storytelling, and expressing something human;
- And Rusty spoke of asking, "What can I do to help? What serves the show without being injurious to the performers?"

From the view of performing arts medicine, Jennie suggested:

A better anatomical understanding amongst both performers and teachers can ultimately give them better tools to work with and also give them more options for achieving difficult dance or music phrases.

I would love to see a day when choreographers and directors work with performing arts specialists when creating a show, to avoid pitfalls that may put their performers at risk...[While] choreography is created and taught in one room, musicians write and direct the vocals in another, and then the directors come in and block the shows. But nobody talks to anyone else about the feasibility for the performer of hitting a top belt note at the height of a split leap or whilst upside down in a partnered lift!

To date, very little is known via objective data about the effects of dance on voice and voice on dance, or the integrative links that emerge in performance. As it is easier to work in a small physical area and with subjects that are relatively still, voice scientists have focused almost exclusively on the larynx and vocal tract of classical singers. Meanwhile, the rest of the body and other performance genres have been largely ignored. Yet practical observations suggest distinct relationships between dance and voice in certain performance contexts. For example, William F. Lett (2011) says:

Tap/singing is like a tremor really. It's like you're holding a note while your body is bouncing. The secret is in that plié...you have to absorb that impact, you have to engage your core and stay lifted. The harder you tap, the more obstructive you're going to be to the body as an instrument (4)...

The lower the [vocal] sound, the more reverberation you're going to have from the tap itself, because it happens from bottom up (5)...

If I were to create a production number, I would say, "Please make it bright and

lifted...Don't put it in the bottom range." It's gotta be in the top half. Otherwise, it's going to be obstructed (6).

In April/May of 2013, an experiential study with actors is set to commence at the University of Tasmania, Launceston. Over a period of six weeks, classes and improvised performances will be filmed, in order to document the effects of physical shape and movement on vocal sound and character development.

Additional studies of this type could function to move the voice community from a mindset of separation to one of connection. From the other direction, movement and dance professionals are often unaware of voice as part of the body. Hence collaborative studies open the door to new possibilities and serve an essential need in the development of integrative approaches to training.

New Perspectives

In December 2009, I began to interview dancers and choreographers in an attempt to connect the worlds of voice and dance. Three interviews and an article entitled "Dancers on Breathing" have been published to date (2011, 2012), and contain fascinating information seldom considered by voice professionals, e.g.:

What does placement mean to a dancer?

...Getting your body to match up with itself, so that nothing is over-tucked, nothing is arched, nothing is to the right, to the left; that you find the neutral place for your body...And in the different dance disciplines, there [are] different *proper* placements. With ballet, it comes from a very turned out place and it's a very elongated, pulled up place where you try to think that you're lighter than air...When you get into modern, it's much more grounded and you're parallel; it's not necessarily heavy but it's more into the floor and you get to push and work with the floor instead of always trying to glide above it...And then you work with tap and that's all about being as loose as possible. ... So when you're a dancer trying to do multiple techniques and multiple disciplines, you have to learn how to find the different placements. (Littlefield 2011, 1 - 2)

And from "Dancers on Breathing":

Even in these brief excerpts [from five interviews], a common theme emerges: although student dancers frequently hold their breath or fail to *use* the breath, the opposite is—and may always have been—true with experienced dancers (2012, 8).

Observations from the study in Brisbane led to additional articles, e.g., "Tucking the Pelvis: Actual and Perceived Outcomes," and follow-up studies on a number of topics are underway. Particularly relevant to voice and dance are investigations into contrasting singing techniques that require either "in and up" (pelvic floor/lower abdominal contraction during voicing), or "down and out" (conscious distension of abdominal muscles during voicing) use of the abs on exhalation. Although *down and out* has many advocates among singing pedagogues, it is opposite to what is required in dance and to what seems to be the *natural*

way, according to observations of Control subjects.

At the most basic level, what seems to separate us clearly in the training process is our concept of anatomy and physiology. For example, in a recent book proposal aimed at the singing community, a chapter on the singer's body included detailed descriptions of parts of the head and neck, but little information on anything below the larynx. And in a search of books on dance, one would be hard pressed to find descriptions of the larynx and vocal tract.

Acting curricula probably come nearer to putting it all together than either singing or dance. Yet, even from actor training, students more often than not emerge thinking the diaphragm is something in their belly that they're supposed to use—consciously—somehow.

Jennie Morton said, "A better anatomical understanding amongst both performers and teachers can ultimately give them better tools to work with..."

In addition, it takes getting out of our *own little corner* to see the links from one discipline to another. Long-held views can change—and that's scary—and what is "true" today may be only partly true or transformed tomorrow. So we must be daring. We must actually listen to colleagues, address the information gaps, and follow threads we never before considered—because staying put is simply not an option.

Dance and voice occur together in performance ever more frequently, so we can no longer afford to say, "I teach voice, so I don't need to know about dance," or "dance, so I don't need to know about voice." Compartments are opening, and the connective journey has only begun!

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