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Deep Song—A Personal Journey into Ecstatic Voice and the Art of Vocal Lamentation **Marya Lowry**

The Journey

Twenty years down the road of my life as an actor and theatre voice trainer, I found myself, Persephone-like, standing at the edge of a precipice searching the darkness for mysteries obscured by the bright lights of structured progressions and methodologies that had supported me for so long. My experience with voice and singing was governed by solid, well-organized systems designed to promote healthy, focused, resonant, conventionally acceptable sounds. Anything “other” was strictly outcast. Whether acting in classic or contemporary plays in regional theatre or teaching in professional actor training programs, I had begun to feel caged in, held hostage by the culturally accepted uses of the voice and thwarted by the limits and restrictions of theatre voice training as I understood it. Something was missing. Words—inspiring, forceful, magical words—called me and enticed me into the theatre along with soaring passions, aching truths and stories that careened from the heights of rapture to the depths of despair. But where was the howl beneath Medea’s rage-filled curses? The scream of Juliet’s horrified “Stay Tybalt, stay!” The groans of Hamlet’s existential tirades, or the barely concealed hysteria of Amanda Wingfield’s desperate effort to force her dreams upon her disaffected offspring?

Like the poet and feminist, Adrienne Rich, I hungered for “...more crazy mourning, more howl, more keening”. I yearned to hear sounds that would reveal the rough truths beneath the word, and was frustrated by a culture that seemed satisfied with a logos divorced from the naked hunger that impelled it. If I felt that our voices were shackled and marginalized expressing conventional truths, even when words and situations were explosive, I was not alone, as I recognized this same desire for full-throttle vocal expression in some of the actors that I trained. I wanted to tear open forms and expose the primal impulses, the underbelly beneath carefully crafted words; I wanted sounds that cut to the bone.

I occasionally heard sounds that expressed this longing—in uninhibited, raucous laughter or in unleashed fury in street brawls, sometimes from animals, occasionally in open-throated singing, but seldom on stage. If the words existed to describe these sounds—words like shrieking, howling, crazed, guttural, raspy and earsplitting—then the sounds must also be somewhere out there. Hiding under a rock or at the bottom of the abyss, perhaps? I needed to hear those sounds, sing and celebrate those sounds and invite others to the party. Where was Hades when I needed him? Well, if he wasn’t going to come and abduct me, introduce me to the mysteries of the vocal underworld, I would have to make the journey on my own.

The voice is like a mountain with many caves; go into all the different caves there are.
– Peter Brook

The first stage of my quest led me to the mountains of North Carolina in 1990 for a 6-day immersion into the Alfred Wolfsohn/Roy Hart Theatre approach to the voice. What I experienced there exasperated and confused me, and cracked open the ground of all I held sacred about the voice, inviting me into the hidden mysteries. Time-honored “truths”, my sanctuary of assurances, in short, nothing less than my hard-earned pedagogy, was now suspect. For example, the Wolfsohn/Hart “singing lesson” was not prescriptive, nor limited to gender-specific modalities of the singer’s range. Instead, the whole voice became an arena for excavation. Body, sound and psyche were a trinity through which sound was accessed, often resulting in the willing abandonment of our commonly held principles of “healthy” vocal production. Participants vocalized every conceivable sound (including some that were inconceivable to us at the time). Both sounder and witnesses were engaged in the surrender and struggle either to audibly express or consciously

internalize the heights, depths, beauty, beast, agony and ecstasy of their inner world. In this setting, I discovered and freely revealed in sounds that could genuinely reveal the darkness of Medea's rage, such as those "broken" and "corded" utterances hiding in the silent cavern, the "break", between my head and chest voice. Or her shattered mother's love expressed in the sublime simplicity of the angelic soprano released on the descent from peeps and squeaks exhumed from soundings explored in the uppermost octave of the piano.

Another epiphany came when, in an attempt to connect to my low "masculine" pitches and timbres, I unwittingly began to vocalize the unsounded groans of silent labors and birth events of my children many years earlier. Emerging from these experiences, I knew that I would never be satisfied with less than the essence of my whole Self revealed through my voice. The well-acted, but polite, sounds uttered in the theatre would no longer suffice.

I questioned my ability to integrate this new experience into my known world. Would these sounds have meaning for other actors and audiences? Do they, too, secretly long for the precarious edges of vocal expression? Could I eventually utter sounds that I heard from others but that my own body refused to access? How would I pursue this principle of the 8-octave voice in a world of the uninitiated? Did I have the stamina and will to pursue further training and incorporate it in my teaching? These were some of the questions that followed me down the mountain from this transformative week. To say I understood little about this approach to voice would be exceedingly generous; understanding and integration would be long process. I had arrived hoping for a bit of inspiration and unwittingly found myself an initiate. It seemed that I now had a choice—savor the memory of this experience and move on, or forge a new relationship with my voice and teaching methodology that would be neither easily satisfied nor augmented. I chose the latter.

In addition to continued study with Roy Hart teachers in the US and France, I immediately sought ways to expand the boundaries of my personal performance work. This included singing with a small group of classically trained, Boston musicians who were exploring a variety of musical languages, including microtonal sound art compositions. The instruments included steel cello, bowed cymbals and other metal objects, flute, violin and a glass organ tuned to a symmetrical twenty-three tone octave. Over a period of four years, we performed these sound art pieces in experimental theatre venues, offering me the opportunity to break out of constricting forms as I explored "extended" voice merged with microtonal singing. Singing microtones proved a challenge for me, since my western ear faithfully guided me to familiar harmonic modes such as thirds and fifths. But the leader of this group, an innovative and determined musician, helped me learn to hear and sing "between the notes". I found the exploratory tone of this unconventional work to be both personally and artistically liberating. Our inquiries evolved to include texts that would invite extreme vocal use while telling recognizable stories; the works of Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, and classical arias (deconstructed) were among them.

During this time, I was also incorporating Roy Hart-style training into my MFA theatre voice classes. To provide them with a forum to apply their extreme voice training, as well as challenge my own ideas about its practical use, I directed a non-traditional production of Garcia Lorca's, *Yerma*. We searched for ways to audibly reveal the chaos smoldering just below the surface of the rational syntax of language, and to express it within the context of a full-length play. The evocative artistic use of extended voice by the actors in this production confirmed for me the primacy of voice, in all its colors, as an undervalued, creative element in theatre.

Reach your hand deep into life and what comes up is your subject matter.
—Goethe

The theme of the suppression of the human voice in our culture, mirrored in the theatre, continued to feed my shifting pedagogy as I pursued new inspirations and directions for performance opportunities. In 1999, while researching a new theatre project based upon the earliest mythology surrounding Medea, I uncovered a link (of which I had been unaware) between the ancient, legalized silencing of women and what I

perceived as the deeply entrenched and ongoing silencing of women across cultures—in homes, churches and synagogues, the street and the work place.

This link connects us back to the 6th century BC when the physical and vocal presence of women was being systematically outlawed from the public arena for the “good” of the burgeoning democracy. The final gag was securely in place when the Athenian lawmaker, Solon, silenced the last legal expression of women’s voice allowed in public—her free participation in public funerary events—her vocal rites of lamentation.

What was so powerful, so threatening about this form of female vocal expression that it had to be silenced? Could it be that feminine sound was detrimental to emerging ideas of democracy? More urgently, what exactly was this fear-inducing sound produced by grieving mothers, daughters and wives? What was ritual lamentation and why was it so dangerous to organized society? The concepts and multi-cultural expressions of misogyny were not unfamiliar to me, but I had understood it primarily in relationship to the personhood of woman. Now I wondered how much it also related to her unique vocal timbres and ways of expressing herself: to her mystery, her ungovernable, unquenchable lust for life and her uniquely un-masculine contribution to it? What was it about her voice—literally and metaphorically—that was so dangerous?

Detailed examination of these questions lies beyond the scope of this essay and can be found in numerous resources (some, suggested at the end of this piece). However, three things called me into this new crack in the earth: the possibility of discovering and liberating the censored voices of ancient lamentation, its creative potential in actor training and theatre performance, and its relevance to the principle of Roy Hart’s “8-octave ideal” for voice and life. The preceding years of vocal exploration would be the candle to light my descent into the underworld of taboo vocal lamentation.

This journey has taken me from ancient Greece and Israel where both men and women once practiced public expressions of lament freely and unashamedly (called *moirologia* and *quinah* respectively), to pre-Christian Celtic Isles where the sharp cries of female mourners (*caoineadah* or *keening*) announced and accompanied the death-watch among friends and neighbors, to its eventual silencing in these lands. Embedded deep within cultures around the globe—from the Balkans to Scotland, from the Tamil women of Southern India to South America and Africa—mourning practices survive in public gatherings of women (and men) who continue to sing, chant, weep, protest, rage, blame and bargain while their physical acts of breast-beating, hair-tearing, rhythmic swaying, and knocking on graves, bravely sound the cries of human bereavement. The loss of this oral tradition is felt most keenly in areas where the *logos* word, defined by reason and persuasion, reigns supreme and the *Mother Tongue*, the primary voice of women, has been supplanted. This is evident in most of Western Europe, the US and the many countries where imperialistic influence dominated throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

The suppression of public women mourners exists more vehemently in countries where religion and politics joined hands to curb the influence of women, the Middle East and Ireland, among them. Purposeful, active and assertive, public lamentation was indeed dangerous to the established order within some communities. For example, for centuries, Greek women used the passionate vocal sounds joined to highly structured, poetic laments to claim their right to the body, story, and property of dead males and to stir the family to revenge, releasing violence upon violence, as seen in the *Mani* clans of the Peloponnese. Although frowned upon by the religious and political structures of recent history, in many rural parts of Greece and the world, the age-old lament songs still resound at funerals, and women continue to assert their birthright to live out loud. When placed in the context of duty, tradition and disempowerment, is it any wonder that women still cling to this ancient tradition, holding sacred the public, aural expression of their deep song in its richness and glory?

I was provoked and fascinated by the craft required and artistry inherent in these varied traditions of lamentation ceremonies. They offered uncharted territories for investigation and a way to broaden my venture to vocal boundary breaking; not least of all, it offered significant potential for theatrical impact. That this genre requires a certain audacity, galvanizes and unleashes strong energies and provokes powerful

responses in the listener—in a way no rational argument can hope to accomplish—all became stellar reasons to pursue its voice, unearth it, and return it to the vocabulary of modern life and theatre.

The artist never really knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark.
–Agnes de Mille

The early stages of my research were governed by the written word, including an array of academic writers, ancient Greek plays and poetry, the Old and New Testaments, modern fiction, films, ethnic stories, indigenous musical styles, and interviews with foreign-born friends and students from lamenting cultures. I quickly learned that, despite the range of resources available about lamentation, aural models of it are scarce; its beauty and terrors lie submerged beneath mountains of the written word. My search would demand a deeper descent into the intuitive muck of creation if I was going to unearth the particular sounds, melodies, timbres, rhythms and structural forms of lamentation across cultures, physically embody them, and give them voice.

To that end, I initiated a formal time of study with a game and gifted group of MFA actors (Brandeis class of 2002), with two years of extended voice work to undergird our venture. Their third year of voice training provided an opportunity to branch out from my established pedagogy; and ritual lament seemed like a solid training opportunity for all of us.

In this familiar environment, I led the graduate actors (and they led me) through explorations of the physical life, sounds, images and stories I had culled from a wide variety of descriptions and snippets of samples. We worked with personal, metaphorical and theatrical scenarios. They sang, wailed, howled, barked and sobbed out original responses to my novice offerings. Guided by ancient Greek structures, we explored group aspects of lament, working with antiphony, drones, soloist with choral support and free improvisation. We played with vocal ornamentations and timbres and musical elements found in ethnic and non-western vocal traditions, many of them familiar from my previous forays into ethnic music. All found new application when incorporated into lament. For example, we practiced singing slightly up from the note, a method used in Russian peasant singing, or singing in the high, light head voice, familiar in Japanese female singing. To find the “cacophonous” quality of lament, we practiced singing off-key, using a known melody to contain us. We explored the provocative sounds available in the cracks, peeps and register breaks of the voice. In doing so, we developed new listening skills, expanded individual vocal expressiveness, and exploded formerly held beliefs about what constitutes “beautiful” music making. For my part, I found a bridge to the ancient sisterhood of the female voice and secured my commitment to wander further from established assumptions about acceptable theatre voice work.

The occasional stumble defined new learning opportunities. As an example, it quickly became apparent that the emotionally available, highly sensitive actor needed stronger structures than I provided in the early stages. Emotional reactions would, of course, arise in response to the evocative music that we were making, but they were never “manufactured” or encouraged for their own sake. Avoiding personal histories, or theatrical events that mirrored them, was important for the willing lamenter and led to establishing metaphor as the foundation for the work. Additionally, an ethic of self-care became fundamental to protect the over-eager. The work was exhilarating and, I believe, deepened the intimacy among the group as we explored this terra incognita together. Fumbling about together deepened our trust for each other and respect for the value of our mutual pilgrimage.

These were baby steps, but from this work I developed a template that could be used to invite interested parties to accompany my own odyssey into the world of lamentation. In my experience, the absence of effective vocal lamentation expressed in theatre productions was evidence that many actors and directors were uninitiated in the process and possibilities of this style of communication and were, more than likely, even a bit intimidated by its power and force. As an actress in mainstream theatre, I had always been unsure how far I dared go in a given rehearsal or performance and without a structure, form and permission to support me, I seldom dared to push the limits. I have often heard this dilemma recounted by other actors.

So, offering my investigation to colleagues in the theatre to assess their appetite for lamentation seemed like a natural next stage in the journey.

The theme of the 2002 Giving Voice Festival in Wales, UK was the 'voice politic'. This international festival provided an appropriate setting in which to introduce my approach to lamentation to theatre practitioners. This inaugural 3-day workshop, and those that followed, validated the importance of this work within the profession and confirmed my conviction that others would find the realms of lamentation personally invigorating, vocally challenging and applicable to theatre training and production. Equally true was the larger belief that by exploring lamentation practices and sharing our deep songs in community, we could awaken a visceral connection to our ancient stories and stir a desire to enlarge the too-small images we often hold of ourselves. Dangerous voices...indeed!

Wisdom comes to us in fragments. –Aeschylus

Early in my process, I discovered an invaluable lesson: the array of lamentation languages is only one side of the coin, since heightened vocal expression takes many shapes. Flip the coin and along with the sobs and howls of rage and desolation, blame and bargaining, live the cries and shrieks of euphoria, exultation, and blessing. These, too, open the voice, body and imagination of the would-be lamenter, giving a needed balance to the darker world of lamentation. And so I broadened the scope of the work to more actively embrace the joyous side of ecstatic voice.

This understanding of the two-sided coin was reinforced by the Hebrew expression of complaint and lament viewed through the Biblical Psalms, which also suggested valuable insights into structure. Unlike the capricious gods and goddesses of the neighboring Greeks, the Hebrews believed they followed a personal God who, upon hearing their voices, would ultimately deliver justice and mercy. This invited a no-holds barred verbal exchange with their God. The passion and vehemence of their lament songs were considered an act of worship. The form of these complaint psalms, however, is not one of unboundaried rage and anger. As evidenced in Euripides, Medea, and through the ages to the cyclical blood feuds recorded among the Mani clans of the Peloponnese, a limited focus on vengeance and retribution isolates the aggrieved and unleashes powerfully destructive forces.

Lament psalms characteristically move from a vigorous expression of outrage or complaint, to petitions, and then to an expression of personal pain. This progression eventually resolves into rejoicing and thanksgiving for God's past faithfulness and, even while in the throws of anguish, hope for the future. This structure provided an emotional evolution for the grieving process, thus preventing them from getting "stuck" in an endless cycle of anger or self-pity. In conditions of anguish, this process may have been repeated time and time again, but the initial vocal, emotional dissonance always found harmony in the hope of awaited rescue.

As we navigate the territories of lamentation today and apply it to actor training and production, this ancient structure, developed by these nomadic people of the Middle East, reminds us of the need for balance. Like most explorers, we search the mysteries and chaos of the darkness in order to serve a larger goal—that is, to ascend and give form to the truths we discovered there.

In the next section I will suggest components of lament and a few guiding principles for developmental exploration. With regard to the voice, I will offer an overview and a palate of vocal sounds without attempting to describe them in detail. Trained voice users will have their own methodologies for accessing the voice and I will leave this to each one's particular understanding of the voice. I will use the terms exercise and inquiry interchangeably to describe exploratory approaches. I do not intend to suggest that what I offer is the right way, it is an evolving approach that emerged from ten years of studio work with theatre practitioners and curious participants from a wide range of nationalities, ages and experience. And while I believe it has elements that will serve interested parties from many backgrounds and sensibilities, the primary guidepost for me continues to be its application to actor training and theatre production. My approach to practice and training remains an investigative process; there is no formula.

Part 2: Guiding Principles for Exploring Ecstatic Voice and Lamentation The soul's joy lies in doing. –Elenora Dusa

Primary Sources

I have chosen not to introduce available primary samples of lamentation early in a workshop setting, as I want to avoid limiting the participants' unique vocal and imaginative responses. We work from a blueprint consisting of basic principles including: a wide variety of timbres, placements and ornamentation; traditional and imaginative metaphors and visual pictures; social norms and commonly used musical structures. Guided by this template, the novice lamenter will discover his particular path to lament. Without fail, each working situation results in stunning and original improvised compositions. Starting from the standpoint of asking questions rather than providing answers, I save listening to primary source examples for the end of the workshop.

Journey in Myth and Metaphor

Due to the heightened nature of ecstatic voice and its application to lamentation, I have found that placing the work solidly within a theatrical setting serves a very important purpose. For the participant who has some trepidation about the personal nature of the work and concerns about the potential for invasive psychological tampering, framing our explorations as a mythological and metaphorical journey offers reassurance because imagination becomes the resource material rather than excavating personal misfortunes. In much the same way that the center circle of the ancient Greek stage was a sacred space to be tread upon carefully, so the work of lament invites special treatment. Giving voice to deep wellsprings within may be therapeutic at times, but it is not therapy. Establishing a "sacred" space within a framework of storytelling plants our feet on solid ground while, at the same time, freeing us to soar upward.

Like Odysseus, we, too, have encountered hardships on our journeys "home" to the deep song of lament. Our starting point becomes an active, private reflection upon this odyssey. For example: What mountains, waters or plains did you cross (e.g. literal: the Appalachian mountains, or metaphorical: mountains of fear, the waters of self doubt)? Whom did you leave behind (loved ones, responsibilities, unresolved conflicts, or the "critic" that prevents personal growth process)? What sacrifices did you make (emotional, personal, financial, logistical)? What "siren" called you to this place (new adventure, a retreat for self-care, a need to howl, laugh and shriek in a "held" environment, or the mystery of unknown yearnings)?

I agree with Frankie Armstrong's compelling assertion that singing is the birthright of all. To that, I would add howling, sobbing, raucous laughter, screeching with ecstasy and moaning our sorrows. Many of us have lost touch with these harmless sounds so integral to our health and wellbeing. Like La Loba, the wise old woman who wanders the earth collecting bones, the lamenter also has "bones" to sing over and breathe back to life. According to the myth of La Loba, when she had gathered enough bones, she revived them with singing and witnessing until, transformed, they were able to move back out into the world alive and whole again. Developing a working relationship to the components of lament, within a controlled environment, offers men and women the opportunity to sing over the bones of their lives—the hopes deferred, the abandoned dreams, the disappointments—and, in the process, renew their vitality (See Suggestions for Exploration). Because it is deep, personal, and occasionally precarious work, our approach requires a healthy dose of humility and self-awareness, the permission to work at our own pace, and a theatrical scaffolding to support us.

Components Of Lament

Free Air: Breathiness

One problem I needed to address before I could successfully share the lamentation work with others was how to facilitate a safe, but expeditious, journey to the vocal edges inherent in lamentation for those participants inexperienced in the practice of extended voice. Many elements of Roy Hart extended voice work have been valuable.

The use of free air, or breathiness, is one example. In the lament workshops, I have found that it serves two essential purposes. First, vocalizing with an abundance of breathiness stimulates and connects the vocalist

to her breath by inviting its generous release and replenishment. Second, singing with free air helps melt tensions, whether they result from anxiety or an established pattern of vocal push or strain. An attribute seldom encouraged by traditional Anglo-American theatre or musical voice training, breathiness invites access to the soft, vulnerable qualities of the voice and subtly invites the singer into both physical and emotional states of release. Combine the warming, releasing and healing qualities of free air and it is easy to imagine its value as a stepping-stone to ecstatic voice.

Additionally, I apply this free breath to vocalized images of cooing, sighing, mountain winds, the child-like timbre of a disembodied head resonance (think Marilyn Monroe without the sex) and the airy quality of the flute. These sounds prepare the singer to play with the flutter-like, unstable pitch fluctuations evident in mourning practices. Taken a step further, when connected to rhythmic breath inhalations and images of sobbing, these breathy sounds open a gateway to the high pitches of anguished weeping, eruptions of wailing, and the “Greek screams” written into ancient tragedies (such as the familiar, “aiee”). Connected, unforced, free breath is a starting point for the limitless range of colors invited by lamentation.

Sound Stands Alone

In actual fact, the soundscape used to create expressions of mourning is emotionally neutral, and can be explored purely for pleasure and discovery. Freed from expectations to emote, each student is able to gauge her own readiness to enter the risky territory of full imaginative engagement when intentions, actions, and strong points of view are added later in the process. Further, the actor is encouraged to side step those hazards caused by forced emotionality, namely squeezing or pressing the vocal mechanism.

...laughing and crying / you know its the same release

–Joni Mitchell

Laughter

Laughing is a cornerstone of my personal approach to all voice work. It engages the breathing muscles and warms the voice. Laughter calls us into play, fosters a genial, sharing atmosphere, softens our over-achieving inclinations, and helps create the empathetic, communal space so crucial for “holding” the work of lament.

We all know how to laugh; there is no right or wrong way. And its anarchic quality makes it a good partner for lamenting. From the beginning, I have used it as a way into sobbing. Early in the process the actors learn that, with little more than a change of point of view, the same sounds associated with laughter and joy become sounds of anguish, grief and rage—the reverse being equally true. Listening with eyes closed establishes that, without visual clues, it is often impossible to distinguish sounds of sorrow from sounds of hilarity, further reinforcing the assurance that it is not necessary to experience extreme emotions in order to practice lamenting.

Shifting Points of View

The voice is only one element in the story-telling process; context and physical gestures will greatly assist the lamenter’s intended purpose. For this reason, I invite the actor to explore point of view shifts in the earliest inquiries, one of the first being laughing/crying. We will continue to shift points of view as we explore all other vocal components. It does not matter whether the actor is moaning low in the chest resonance, ululating high in the head resonance, or exploring broken sounds, I continue to reinforce the power of the point of view as the primary source of communication, not emotion.

Group Work and the Issue of Vocal Fatigue

Another challenge is that many colors of lament are placed in and around the *passaggio*, the transition area (“gear shift” or “break”) between the chest and head voice. This area offers a rich palate of sound possibilities, but because it is a part of the voice frequently avoided (even by trained professionals), the vocalist may tire quickly. Additionally, bright, high-pitched “feminine” sounds—in both women and men—are a prominent vocal feature of lamentation. These, too, can be tiring, but because they are also exhilarating, many participants would work in this area for prolonged periods, if allowed. It is important to limit the amount of time devoted to any given area of vocal exploration to avoid preventable stress.

I remind participants that it is natural to tire when exploring a new or different kind of vocal/physical expression. Experiencing fatigue at the end of a session is neither a sign of damage nor a signal that the participant has worked improperly. When extending the usual mode of voice work, the student may, indeed, not always work in a “clean”, perfectly healthy manner. I believe that it is possible to be too careful and that, in order to embrace the boundaries of any work, we have to be willing to falter and flail a bit. Vocal damage results from repeated misuse and a few miss-starts will not produce lasting effects. I also reinforce to the participants that they are the custodians of their process; they are working for their own personal interests and growth and are free to limit participation in whatever ways they feel necessary.

When the participants enter into small group work, I suggest that they work with the vocabulary of sound that they are able to produce fairly easily on a given day and save the less accessible sounds for another time. This helps avoid potential problems for the over-eager who may be inclined to force the voice to generate sounds before the body and psyche are able to support them.

It is also important to note that since most of my workshops range in number from ten to twenty (or more) participants, they must be cautioned not to “compete” to be heard in the large group; this is a subtle and often, unconscious impulse. It is best to avoid a prolonged interval of large group work. I prefer to introduce elements of lament vocabulary, allowing the group to explore them as a whole, and then break into small groups for further experimentation, incorporating the established vocabulary in relationship to others. Consistently placing the various vocal aspects of lament into a structure, with communication at its center, reinforces the active and communal characteristics of lament while providing short resting times when the group is listening and witnessing the explorations of others.

Whole Voice Playground–Warming Up and Preparation

The Fundamentals

Playful warming up body and voice in preparation for lamentation include:

- loosening and softening the body; grounding legs and feet; opening ribs; releasing the pelvis and engaging the abdominal muscles
- integrating sound and breath: panting, light and dark breath; toning, sighing, warming, glides and glissandos; easy exploration of range and timbres of the voice, i.e., what’s readily available?
- chuckling, laughing, guffawing
- warming up different resonating chambers

Registers, Resonance and Timbre

For simplicity, when referencing vocal registers, I will use the familiar terms head voice (including soprano or feminine sounds in both women and men), and chest voice to describe the area of the voice used primarily for speaking by both men and women. Despite their subjectivity, I will rely upon commonly used words for qualities of resonance and timbre—light, soft, dark, warm, bright, nasal, and so on.

Breath

Beyond our dependency upon the breath to carry vibrations of the voice, the sound of breath itself can be exploited for aesthetic and dramatic effect. It serves as a rhythmic component or, as mentioned above, as a source of aural color (dark breath or light breath).

Spoken, Sung, Chanted and Declaimed Voice

Used in combination and in a continuum, the lamenter blurs the boundaries of these vocal alternatives, leaping or gliding from one to another, exploiting one element or blending them, as he is inspired. For example, in heightened moments, spoken text expands to declamation or sung sounds. The ecstatic eruptions of the ancient Greek scream flow more organically from the vocal energy behind declaimed text than from conventional delivery.

Babble

Before the lamenter works with scripted language, we explore moving through the elements of lament vocabulary by employing our own invented “babble” language and combining it with intentions and points

of view. I use the term babble to describe any variation of spoken, chanted, or sung sound released on a stream of changing vowel shapes with consonants added to imitate language. Often referred to as “gibberish”, the babble stream takes on a resemblance to language when it is influenced by the speech rhythms that flow naturally from intentionality and points of view. Unhindered by literal, logos words and their contextual meaning, the actor is freed to bypass the intellect and express from a more primal state.

Imagery

The use of animal imagery is common in traditional laments. The wide variety of sounds emitted by birds are wonderfully provocative—from high, light cooing to dark, screeching soprano qualities—so I include this imagery in the vocal explorations. Poetically, wolves represent those on the outer margins of society, the outlaws, and are frequent images found in Greek poetry depicting this status. Archetypically, the howling wolf calls to the disenfranchised loner in our psyche. For men and women, howling like wolves offers inspiration and open throated access to strong, free colors in the voice. Additionally, access to resonance colors through the imagery of dogs barking and bears growling holds a central place in my approach to the work.

Singing Off Key

For most of my workshop participants, the notion of singing “off key” is an easily recognized departure from the norms of western musical standards, including our cultural assumptions about tuning, melody and harmony. However, because it is difficult to communicate the emotional dislocation of grief or outrage on the beautifully sung harmonies to which our ears are accustomed, I exploit singing off key as an effective means of embracing the dissonances involved in certain aspects of lament. By establishing a melodic line, the singers can explore bending it musically and blending dissonances with others. This simple inquiry forms the basis for a number of vocal inquiries that follow.

Call, Cries and Clamors

Calls are generally full-voiced expressions directed to animals, humans and divinities. Herding peoples create individual calls “understood” and followed by their flocks. In the human realm, we recognize them from the stentorian quality of the train conductor’s “all-aboard” to rural calls summoning men to their labor. The heart-stopping beauty of the Muslim call to prayer echoing across city streets is another example. Cries express the full range of ecstatic sounds emitted by an individual. They include a range of whoops and yips of both joy and anguish. Wavering, high-pitched cries called ululations are commonly heard throughout Africa, the Middle East and parts of India. These utterances, emitted in worship and secular celebrations, are also used in war cries. Clamor describes multiple cries of a group. The power of three or more wailing women crying out in pulsing, high pitched, dissonant sounds affirms the potential of this “weaker vessel” to ignite revenge and violent reprisals within her community. Equally powerful is the danger suggested by the clamor of male voices rising in war cries or public gatherings of protest.

Open Hearted Chest Resonance

This timbre of this sound is most often found in the ethnic singing styles of Eastern Europe, Slavic people, and the Middle East. It is a strong, open, free sound. The quality was developed, in part, from calling across mountains and fields, as it carries well. The singing group Kitka and a wide ranges of traditional Balkan music magnificently render this particular resonance. It requires an open throat, full body connection, strong breath support and deep physical relaxation. When applied to this vocal quality, ornamentations broaden the lamenter’s vocabulary.

Strong Feminine / Soft Feminine Sounds

Working with strong feminine sounds in all accessible parts of the actor’s head range is both empowering and energizing. It is also an important element in our vocabulary. Once the actor has warmed up her voice, the possibilities in this register are limitless. Hooting and howling in the higher pitches (the OO sound helps locate it firmly on the hard palate) opens easy access for many women and men. With the hoot/howl, explore adding strong pulses and sob qualities; alternate these with light, soft soprano sounds for variations.

Within the strong feminine placement lie a plethora of heart-rending, evocative and sometime terrifying sounds. Vocalizing in these tones gives meaning to the term “dangerous voices”, exposing the potential power within the women (or men) releasing them. It is an anarchic, unruly place, and harbors cries, shrieks, whoops, calls and ululations. It also generates energy in the room like no other vocal quality!

The counterpart to the strong feminine is the soft feminine; it encompasses the same placement and same notes as the strong feminine, with less volume, and more free air. By adding cooing, soft sobs (pulses), a wavering pitch, or babble language, the lament takes on a vulnerable quality oppositional to the power displayed above. Adding small, broken sounds to the soft feminine is effective and, for some, easier to sustain. For both men and women, this color is often the denouement of a full-throttle lament, the calm after the storm.

Ornamentations

Vibrato is an ornamental aspect of the sung voice, although not considered so in western or bel canto style singing, and therefore, I invite the vocalists to exchange vibrato for straight tones as we explore sung sounds. When the many varieties of vibrato are added as ornamentation, our vocal vocabulary is immediately enlarged. The high-pitched, forced vibrato is one example. Often heard in cries and clamors, it heralds an array of ecstatic noises and can be expanded further by adding vowels and changing registers from chest to head while keeping the strong pulse of the vibrato. (This sound is heard in Native American ceremonies and a range of Asian cultures, among others.) It can be both hauntingly beautiful and deeply disquieting. Combinations of vibratos (also referred to as “pulses”), trills and melismas offer the lamenter colorful choices to express her desired intentions.

Ornamentations common in the ethnic singing and lament traditions of the Balkans, Greece and neighboring countries include variations on the release of the final note in a phrase; they enhance the richness of the melodic line and include:

- releasing the final voiced note in a phrase into a forced pressure of breath;
- releasing the final voiced note in a phrase on sustained, pulsed tone, flicked up in pitch to head resonance, then allowed to fall back to chest range;
- releasing the final sustained note in a phrase into high pitched yips or short screams, quickly cut off at the end.

The Mysterious Break

Metaphorically, the register shifts in the voice are the locus between worlds, a region where imagination, inspiration and memory live. In this place, both the singer and the song are open to new, often unfamiliar vocal possibilities, as she releases familiar controls of vocal placement. The yodel, used for a variety of effects across cultures, occurs by allowing the voice to move rapidly between chest and head registers without attempting to smooth the transition. It can be sounded powerfully or softly utilized for its own effect or as a passageway for exploration of the break. Variations of the yodel, cracks and broken sounds are highly evocative and effective for expressing pain and rage.

Polyphonic Possibilities

I use the term polyphony freely to describe distinctly different parts sung in a small group lament. In modern day mourning practices variations within groups reflect different musical traditions, ranging from highly organized to a seeming cacophony of multiple voices. Some consist of a structured, if uncomplicated, melodic line sung by all the participants. Others display a musical line that serves as the hub from which the lamenters improvise and elaborate. Some incorporate an instrumentalist who provides a melody while the voices add varieties of sung words, cries and clamors. In other traditions, one hears a continuum of sung, declaimed and spoken lines, punctuated by sobs, cries, pulses of breath and audible inhalations. To my ear, however, even the cacophonous sounds of raw, unstructured grief carry a unique melodious quality—however loosely one understands that word.

When organizing small group lamentation inquiries, I suggest that each participant choose one element of our vocal and physical vocabulary. For example:

- lamenter A, sustains a drone while rocking and swaying
- lamenter B, works with a continuum of soft inhalations released in high, light sob-like sounds while gently striking her chest
- lamenter C, is the “soloist” using declaimed babble erupting at irregular intervals into sobs, cries or ululations, combined with hair tearing.

Within this structure, they improvise a 3-part lament song.

Drone

With the drone, one voice holds a sustained pitch. At the end of a breath phrase, she may add a subtle ornament, such as a sharp exhalation of dark breath or a high-pitched yip. In a lament, the drone may be used to provide continuous vocal support throughout.

Some Thoughts on E-Motions

Emotions on stage are a tricky business. The pitfalls are well known. Either the actor can't connect to them or falls in love with his own emotionality and indulges them, making the scene more about his emotional life than about telling the story.

For the actor-lamenter it is critical to trust that, unless he is holding on to them, emotions have a life of their own—they move. The Latin root of the word “emotion” is *emovere* and means, “to set in motion”. When emotions arise, and they will, given the sounds and images with which we are working, we must remember that the lamenter need neither encourage nor discourage them; emotions are neither good or bad, right nor wrong, they simply exist. If emotion is allowed to “ride” the sound and affect its color and quality, it will move through; it will either intensify or shift to something else, but it will not get stuck.

As an example, this scenario was borrowed from a recent exploration: The actor begins with a specific intention, for example, “to challenge God about the loss of a missed opportunity”. He chooses deep inhalations, breath pulses with high, light sound and babble language as his vocabulary. After a brief time exploring this action, he finds that the inner emotional experience or his intention begins to shift. He follows the shift. The sound begins to reveal outrage; he allows it to grow louder, more guttural, finally building to high pitched shrieking. Again, he follows this path, exploring it freely. Soon another shift begins to move through the actor towards self-comfort (a legitimate action); he explores this action state until it has found fulfillment and suddenly he is, for the first time, weeping freely, grieving the loss while staying on voice. The first part of the journey was necessary for him to contact the sadness under the anger. Regardless of the emotions arising, he kept the “text” moving on the broken sounds and stayed connected to his intention to communicate this sorrow to his partner in the scene, in this case, his God. For some, the lament may cycle back to the start place, led either by the actor's inner life, or side coached by me as a means of helping the actor close the lamentation. Or the lament may find its own organic end point. Throughout the explorations, I do not hesitate to side coach if it seems appropriate to offer suggestions, affirmations, or to question the lamenter's comfort or unease at a given moment.

Listening to and following the internal experience of sound helps the actor avoid forced emoting and keeps him actively present to the journey. He is both act-or and act-ed upon, initiator and receiver. He is never a passive recipient of the experience.

For the actor called upon to express heightened emotions on stage, this ability to “follow the voice” by allowing it to shift and change without controlling it, prevents him from one-note acting, a concern expressed frequently by actors working with heightened text. When using a script, the playwright has verbally organized this forward movement for the actor. In improvised lament, the actor's ability to balance the both forward movement and emotional expression is enhanced by practice with non-literal, babble explorations.

Physical Life

Across cultures, specific physical manifestation of grief and protest are easily recognizable. Introducing

these elements to our vocal and imaginative inquiries offers the third facet of the trinity of elements: voice, imagination and body. It gives the actor-lamenter something to do and connects him bodily to his story.

Beginning an exercise with a physical gesture before releasing sound (e.g., gentle, rhythmic breast-beating, hair tearing, swaying, a gentle rhythmic fist-pounding upon the ground), helps establish the corporeal world, but more importantly, by engaging the actor's body, it promotes the free flow of energy fundamental to healthy vocal production. Like the voice, movement patterns will change as the lament story develops, but it is important to establish a physical life at the outset. With regard to theatrical productions, we should not underestimate the extent to which the actor's physical gestures heighten and support the imaginary connection of the audience to the story.

In much the same way that the communal aspects of actual mourning rites draw the grieving one into a supportive and empathetic community where she can find solace, escape isolation, and provide structure for her grief, the same is equally vital in theatrical explorations of this work.

I would like to offer a picture of how this plays out in a theatrical setting. Even working with imaginative circumstances, the lamenting actor may find her emotions swelling to the edge of her capacity to contain them. Through previous instruction, careful side coaching and guided practice, the choral group or witnesses learn to use their voices to draw the lamenter back into the safety of the group by gathering around her physically and over powering her vocally. The lamenter allows others to carry the lament while she regains her balance still remaining inside of and present to the story. Thus words intended to deny or suppress emotions never need be spoken since the lament is constructively shaped by the give and take of the group in their role of supportive witness and guide. Within the workshop setting, it is awe-inspiring to see women and men, relatively new to each other, use this structure to improvise with sensitivity, and to observe the beauty of this age-old tradition alive in the contemporary theatre.

Suggestions for Exploration

Over time, I encourage participants to work freely with imaginary circumstances or bits of their own stories, invested with metaphor. I do caution lamenters to avoid emotionally explosive and unprocessed situations and events. Some possibilities include:

- lament of the throat (what I didn't say)
- lament of the feet (places I have never traveled)
- lament to raise the dead (a part of your psyche)
- lament of the sirens or lament of the furies (both were marginalized communities of women, feared for the sound of their voices)
- Cassandra's lament (Electra's lament, David's lament (2 Samuel), etc. Use bits of texts and the circumstance of the story.)

Choose an active, intentional reason to explore your lament, for example, to challenge (Self or Other), to chastise (Self or Other), to expose an injustice, to comfort. Even as you set out to pursue an action, your emotions and intentions are likely to shift, evolve and change. Let it be fluid.

Re-centering, Toning

Re-centering and warming-down is a crucial element in the process; it encourages the actor to shift out of one state and into another. It is done at frequent intervals during a workshop or rehearsal, when finishing one exploration before beginning another, or at the end of a session. Warm-down techniques include toning of all kinds: yawning, sighing, moaning, purring, small glides and humming. These gentle soundings beckon the vocalist back from the edges, emotionally, physically and vocally. In *The Way of Woman: Awakening the Perennial Feminine*, Jungian practitioner, Helen M. Luke, reminds us that primitive societies understood the importance of creating rites designed to aid transitions from one life activity to another. To the same end, we use toning and re-centering moments as we shift in and out of strong inquiries.

Tribal Communion and the Land of Memory

As already alluded to, the imperatives within the "tribe" governing rites of lament are varied. Some are

bound by a sacred duty to honor the dead in song; others lament to assist the deceased's journey into the next world, while others must sing over the physical remains until the soul has fully departed from the body. But it is also an acknowledged time of passage for the living who must continue on in this life without the beloved. The physical gathering together of the tribe is an essential aspect of both authentic lamentation practices and theatrical explorations.

Written accounts of mourning rites across the globe stress both the active and communal aspects of it. Photographs of men and women engaged in mourning practices reveal them gathered in groups, connected physically and relationally. Field recordings, interviews I have conducted and both literal and fictional accounts, underscore the significance of multiple voices sounded in a mutually supportive communal gathering. And while I am not suggesting variations do not exist, to a large degree, gender pairing are globally represented. Two memorable images are contemporary Greek men singing a two-part, antiphonal lament swaying together with arms around each other's shoulders, and the "crying clusters" of the Tamil women. In this tradition the women gather together, squatting in a circle with arms embracing each other, weeping together for the deceased. For each newly arriving woman, the circle is opened to literally embrace her into the cluster.

Lamentation invites her followers into a liminal space where time slows, listening deepens and memory opens out. In this slowed down space, the lamenter is able to re-visit and perhaps integrate experiences previously glossed over, rushed past or avoided through the act of acknowledging and voicing them within a welcoming community.

Ecstatic Voice and Actor Training and Beyond

With twenty years devoted to personal study, performances and the teaching of ecstatic voice and ten years devoted to its relationship to ritual lamentation, I am fully persuaded of its value for actor training. If we desire to train actors willing to risk, eager to venture into unfamiliar territories, we must incorporate into their preparation a space to experience the thrills and terrors of this enormous "yes", a space where they can explore the undiscovered country within their own essential beings and express it creatively.

For all of us, regardless of our reason for study or intended use, the doing and the witnessing aspects of ecstatic voice and lamentation are generous and generative acts. We come along side each other in our search for ways to connect with and make audible our inner experience. I believe that by opening our voices to the outer limits of the human experience, we grow, we heal, we become more empathetic, more available to others, and thus, more essentially human.

I would like to close with a few words from Anna Akhmatova.

...And the power that propels the enchanted
Voice displays such hidden might,
It's as if the grave were not ahead,
But mysterious stairs beginning their flight.

Suggested Reading

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