

Institution: Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Unit of Assessment: 35 Music, Dance, Drama and Performing Arts
Title of case study: <i>Finding a Voice: The Impact of Ros Steen's Vocal Practice on Scottish Theatre</i>
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Cummings's grasp of the poetry [of <i>Macbeth</i>] is so complete, and his raw emotional immersion in it is so total, that the audience remains absolutely gripped by the narrative; and unable to resist the sense of being pulled by the story towards the very brink of hell... (The Scotsman 16/6/13, Joyce McMillan)</p> <p>If the whole thing was disbanded tomorrow, [<i>Black Watch</i>] would ensure the National Theatre of Scotland's place not just in the history of Scottish theatre but theatre everywhere. (The Times, 2010).</p> <p><i>Black Watch</i> and <i>Macbeth</i> are productions that are infused with the insights of Ros Steen's practice-based research on the voice in theatre. Steen's research takes as its starting point the voice work of Alfred Wolfsohn, Roy Hart and Nadine George, placing the unique connection of the individual's voice to the self at the centre of the creative process in production. Her research, which has been developed since 1997 and is unique in theatre, ensures a visceral and transformative experience for performers and audiences alike.</p> <p>The impact of her work is felt within individual productions; in their critical reception; and in the development in Scotland of an integrated community of practice embracing writers, actors and directors – a positive creative ecology that has helped to radicalise views of what is possible in the theatre.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The underpinning research appears as an array of practice-based and textual outputs, funded over the past two decades both by traditional research and professional theatre sources. The objective of the research is to explore the application of a distinctive vocal technique to professional acting, directing and rehearsal performance practice.</p> <p>Steen's research explores the process of embedding voice work as a structural component of the rehearsal process, moving away from its traditional role as a technical support for a separately conceived vision. Steen's research is concerned with extending the expressive capacities and potential of each individual voice, and her approach therefore prioritizes the unique vocal qualities of each actor's voice in a given production. This method may impact on key interpretative decisions (as <i>Macbeth</i>) or on the building of an ensemble (as in <i>Black Watch</i>); and it results in a radical realignment of rehearsal room hierarchies.</p> <p>Building on the work of Nadine George, Steen uses the notion of four qualities in the voice (conventionally described as the high and low 'male' and 'female' qualities) to realise the maximal exploration of an individual's vocal potential. By reaching the outer limits of expressivity, a deep emotional connection is formed between the voice, text and actor, and this, in turn, illuminates new insights and interpretative turns in the development of a performance.</p> <p>Steen's initial innovation came in 1997, when she worked as voice director (then, an unusual role) with Philip Howard on <i>Knives in Hens</i> by David Harrower, using the Nadine George voice technique on a daily basis as the main rehearsal strategy. An AHRB award in 2000 ('New Directions for the Voice Specialist in Theatre') allowed her to systematize this innovative professional practice in a research context. As part of that process, she co-directed a new Scots translation of <i>Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer</i> with Howard (2000, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh and Barbican Centre, London), which led to further insights into how the expressive capacities of the individual and ensemble voice could extend directorial and vocal practice.</p> <p>Steen further pursued her research in a practice-led project for directors, funded by the National Theatre of Scotland: in <i>Earthing the Electric</i> (phase one, 2008), she worked with the participants to explore the connection between their own voice and their creativity. Those taking part were all key members of the theatrical profession in Scotland: John Tiffany (<i>Black Watch</i>, <i>Once</i>, <i>Macbeth</i>), Dominic Hill, Jemima Levick and Lorne Campbell. The initial research question was: how could vocal techniques developed from the Wolfsohn-Hart-George tradition resource the directors' own voices and vocabulary as individuals and collaborative artists, thereby enriching their physical and emotional understanding of acting, text and performance? Crucially, directors would <i>feel</i> the expressive connection between their own embodied voice and the audience. As Steen explains:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">By repositioning the director as speaker, an embodied understanding of this vibration between actor and audience can complete what might otherwise remain only partially comprehended. (Steen, R., 2012. <i>Earthing the Electric: Voice Directing the Directors</i>. In: <i>Theatre, Dance and Performance Training</i> 3/3 (2012), 382.</p> <p>In phase two of <i>Earthing the Electric</i> (2011), the directors were brought together with actors who were experienced exponents of Steen's approach to vocal work. Actors and directors worked together through the</p>

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whole of the physical and vocal process, jointly exploring their voices and developing a shared embodied vocabulary, while also disrupting the traditional hierarchies of the production process.

Steen's work blurs the boundaries between practice-based research and professional practice: her research insights are often developed through her collaboration in top-flight professional productions, and some of these productions communicate her insights so comprehensively in-and-through the production that they may legitimately be regarded as Steen's research 'outputs': two such examples are included in this REF submission. On the other hand, she has also interrogated her practice in a series of text publications that set out her findings for a wider audience, both professional specialist and academic. The integration of embodied understanding and critical reflection that Steen fosters in the rehearsal room is modelled in her holistic approach to the research.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Steen's research has resulted in practice-based outcomes alongside more traditionally-conceived research outputs. The following is a selection:

- 1) 'New Directions for the Voice Specialist in Theatre' AHRB research grant, 2000, incorporating co-direction with Philip Howard of *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer* (Traverse Theatre Edinburgh; Barbican BiTE Festival, London).
- 2) *Black Watch* (National Theatre of Scotland, dir. John Tiffany). Steen acted as voice specialist for the first and subsequent productions.
- 3) *Macbeth*, starring Alan Cumming (National Theatre of Scotland, dir. John Tiffany and Andrew Goldberg). Performances in Glasgow and New York, June/July 2012 and April – July 2013 (Broadway). Steen acted as voice practitioner with Cumming and Tiffany. See Steen 3 in this submission.
- 4) Magnetic North's *Rough Mix* project and subsequent production of *Sex and God* by Linda McLean, curated, developed and directed by Artistic Director Nick Bone. March – September 2012. See Steen 4 in this submission.
- 5) Steen, R., 2007. Seein Oursels As lthers See Us. In: M. Rees, ed. *Voice and Speech Review: Voice and Gender*. Cincinnati, OH: Voice and Speech Trainers Assoc., Inc., 281–290.
- 6) Steen, R. and Deans, J., 2009. What We May Be: The Integration of Lecoq Movement and George Voice Work at the RSAMD. In: R. Cook, ed. *The Moving Voice: The Integration of Voice and Movement Studies presented by the Voice and Speech Review*. Cincinnati, OH: Voice and Speech Trainers Assoc., Inc., 286–302.
- 7) Steen, R., 2012. Earthing the Electric: Voice Directing the Directors. In: *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 3/3 (2012), 375–388 .

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Impact on directors and writers

Steen's research project *Earthing the Electric* was specifically conceived to transform the working practices of the participating directors, but there is evidence of the impact of her work over a longer time-frame, dating back at least to 2000. In the assessment period, however, John Tiffany and Lorne Campbell have specifically commented on the impact that Steen's work has had on them as directors. Tiffany focuses on the communicative power of a fully embodied voice:

I came to work at the National Theatre of Scotland and the second show I did was *Black Watch*, which Ros and I worked on, and because I met those boys very, very soon after they had come back from Iraq and we interviewed a lot of them, I felt it a real duty to get their voice right because this was their story.

It is during the time of the National Theatre of Scotland that I have been privileged to work with Ros [...] and have started to do all the voice work that Ros has been doing from Roy Hart through to Nadine George. Ros started to get us directors to work with that technique and that opened a whole new thing which has been amazing – the voice, the communication, the vibration and resonance. (JT, keynote at *Shifting Landscapes* conference, RCS, June 2012).

Tiffany's deep engagement with Steen's work infuses all his work since *Black Watch*, including *The Missing*, *Let the Right One In*, *The Bacchae* and *Macbeth*, and is demonstrated by his inviting her to give a workshop for fellows of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University during his fellowship there.

Lorne Campbell, in contrast, has focussed on the way Steen's research foregrounds the uniqueness of each voice in the production, taking this into his own professional development. Following his work with Steen, Campbell received a bursary from the Scottish Arts Council to further explore 'how, within the structures and

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practice of British Theatre, a director can develop a non-intellectual language for directing actors and creating performance . . . based around precepts of variation rather than rehearsed repetition’.

Moving beyond *Earthing the Electric*, Steen’s collaborators have included Nicholas Bone (Magnetic North), who has commented on the heightened integration of text and actor that Steen’s approach facilitates, noting its transformative impact on him:

I was intrigued by the way [Steen’s approach] seemed to connect the actors to the text so well and I asked Ros to work on a production of a Linda McLean play called *Word for Word* with my own company, Magnetic North. Again, I was conscious of the connection the work seemed to build between the actor and the text. I was also astonished by the extraordinary sounds the actors produced: several times I literally felt the resonances of an actor standing next to me as they worked up and down the octaves with Ros . . . once you have uncovered the possibilities of the voice it is impossible to step back from that knowledge. (ed. Steen, R. *Growing Voices* (Glasgow: Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, 2013), 40.)

Likewise, playwright Linda McLean has reflected on the impact of Steen’s approach to her own development and, in particular, the development of the first production of her play *Sex and God*.

The voice work that we did before rehearsals was so much more than a vocal warm-up. It’s quite hard to describe what happens in the room . . . Some power and energy that hides in the crevices of the body is liberated and the air in the room literally trammels with it. When they speak the lines of dialogue they are enlivened, and not by some actorly technique but by a focus and breath you equate with a fine instrument. (*ibid.*, 53.)

Nicola McCartney - playwright, director, dramaturg and Lecturer in Writing for Performance at the University of Edinburgh explains how participation in Steen’s research has changed her practice:

Ros’s unique approach . . . has had a profound impact on my own writing . . . It has deepened my understanding of the necessity of dialogue having a physical impulse in the body of the writer, an energy; of the written script being almost like a type of musical notation which the actor then plays through the instrument of their own energy, voice and body . . . I have come to view the creative process of the playwright and the actor as the same but in reverse: the dramatist finds the words to express the impulse; the actors work back from the words to find the impulse which originally was born in the body of the playwright. (*ibid.*, 42.)

The impact of Steen’s research on the writer A. L. Kennedy is specifically reflected in the latter’s essay ‘Proof of Life’ in her collection *On Writing* (A.L. Kennedy, *On Writing* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), 311-338).

Impact on audiences

Black Watch is the single most important production of the National Theatre of Scotland, playing to over 200,000 people worldwide and garnering multiple awards and commendations; it has been in continuous production throughout the assessment period (AP). The reviews that have accompanied other work, such as John Tiffany’s *Macbeth* (with Alan Cumming) and Nicholas Bone’s production of *Sex and God* by Linda MacLean (both of which have been substantially shaped in development by Steen’s approach), give a strong indication of the mediated impact of Steen’s research on audiences through work that has been first mounted in since 2008. In reviews of these pieces, the voice work and its impact is a prominent theme:

Macbeth

As he shifts between the major (and some minor) characters of the play, Cumming is as compelling in crazed dialogue as in soliloquy . . . It is a performance of extraordinary vocal dexterity and physical energy . . . Deserving of its standing ovation on opening night, this *Macbeth* is, surely, guaranteed success when it transfers to New York next month. (Mark Brown, The Telegraph <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9334599/Macbeth-National-Theatre-Scotland-Tramway-Glasgow-review.html>)

You can savor Cumming’s bravura physical and vocal performance, the way his burr strokes the language to release its incantatory power. <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/macbeth-17>

Cumming has a masterful command of the language, making it clear and comfortable on the ear as he subtly shifts register from character to character . . . What elevates Cumming’s performance (or should we say performances?) above an actorly display of virtuosity is that it is also sad and moving. <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jun/17/macbeth-glasgow-tramway-alan-cumming?guni=Article:in%20body%20link>

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Sex and God

Imagine a string quartet, but with actors instead of musicians. In place of a score, a set of overlapping monologues. As they riff on similar themes, they could be from a family of musical instruments, each with her own timbre and pitch, but each part of the ensemble.

<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/16/sex-and-god-theatre-review>

Impact on Scottish theatre and identity

Steen's research has contributed strongly to a specifically Scottish theatrical community, while having an impact that far extends beyond this context.

Her influence in Scotland owes its reach to the development, beginning in 1995 and extending right up to the present, of an integrated community of practice imbued with Steen's particular approach to vocal practice. Actors familiar with the technique (often trained at the Royal Conservatoire) work with directors who have physically experienced its creative power for themselves through Steen's professional practice and research projects; together, they make work with writers who have also felt the deep connection between the self and the voice that Steen's approach forges. Lorne Campbell, Artistic Director of Northern Stage and participant in *Earthing the Electric*, writes:

Ros's impact on the Scottish Theatre community is immense. For three generations of Scottish performers and two generations of Directors who now have a lingua franca having encountered Ros's work, they bring this common thread with them to rehearsal. (Correspondence with Anna Birch, 22 November 2013.)

Notions of uniqueness, of identity, and of finding an authentic voice, are key themes of Scottish theatre and writing, but Steen's work reaches far beyond the Scottish context. Partnerships with the Athanor Akademie (Germany), Malmö Theatre Academy (Sweden), the University of Luleå (Sweden), the National Academy of Dramatic Arts (Croatia) and others ensure the international reach of this research.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 1) Contact: Philip Howard (Artistic Director, Dundee Repertory Theatre)
- 2) Contact: Lorne Campbell (Artistic Director, Northern Stage, Newcastle Upon Tyne)
- 3) Kennedy, A.L. 2013. Proof of Life. In: *On Writing* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), 311-338. PDF available on request.
- 4) *Black Watch* production website:
http://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/content/default.asp?page=home_BlackWatchEdinburgh2006
- 5) *Macbeth* production website:
<http://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/content/default.asp?page=s957>
- 6) *Sex and God* production website:
<http://www.magneticnorth.org.uk/productions/past-productions/sex-and-god.html>
- 7) John Tiffany: keynote speech at 2012 *Shifting Landscapes Voice* conference hosted by Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Transcript available on request.
- 8) Interview with Linda Mclean – Transcript available on request.
- 9) Interview with Philip Howard – Transcript available on request.
- 10) Documentation of *Rough Mix* 2012 project by Louise Stephens Alexander (hand written comments, sketches, photographs, printed text and end of project report) – available on request.