Using Theatrical Intimacy Practices to Create Vocal Health Boundaries

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INTRODUCTION

A recent situation in London's West End has captured the attention of singers and voice teachers as well as the mainstream press: An actor is suing the Walt Disney Company for vocal injuries she sustained while performing in one of its productions.

As reported in the *Evening Standard*, singer Jade Ewen claims her voice was "damaged" due to the taxing vocal demands that came about while performing in the West End production of *Aladdin*.[1] Specifically, she states that she "was forced, repeatedly during the eight performances per week, over a period of about 18 months, to sing at a louder volume and with greater strength than was comfortable and/or safe for her."[2] Ewen says she was warned of potential vocal trouble by a vocal coach, and yet, as she claims, management ignored her complaints. She has accused the company of failing to protect her health and safety by not providing in-ear monitors or vocal training to help fix the problem. As a result, she suffered "symptoms of recurrent hoarseness, discomfort, and imbalance in her singing voice" due to vocal fold lesions and a vascular polyp,[3] which eventually necessitated surgery "to rescue her singing voice."[4]

The case brings up several intriguing questions pertinent to singers and voice teachers: What are the proper steps singers should take if they are asked by directors to vocally overextend themselves? How can singers speak up without being labeled by management as "difficult to work with" or "high maintenance"? And what is the role of voice teachers in these situations?

The scenario playing out between Ewen and Disney highlights the lack of well known procedures when circumstances of vocal health arise. In searching for amicable solutions, we may consider borrowing techniques from a relatively new process in theatre that is becoming increasingly popular: theatrical intimacy practices.

As described by Theatrical Intimacy Education faculty members Susanne Shawyer and Kim Shively,

> [t]he development of theatrical intimacy practices in the past decade offers one possible response to the need for ethical actor training in boundary management. Practitioners like Kate Buesselle, Adam Noble, Chelsea Pace, Laura Rikard, Alicia Rodis, and Tonia Sina have developed a variety of theatrical intimacy techniques aimed at staging scenes portraying sexual and emotional intimacy or sexual violence in a safe and effective manner. These practices include methods for establishing clear communication around consent, boundaries, and intimacy

choreography, which are widely applicable in the acting classroom and rehearsal hall.[5]

In this article, we posit that one of the applications of theatrical intimacy techniques is to help actors establish boundaries when it comes to preserving their vocal health. Further, the practices can help outline steps actors can take when asked to engage in potentially risky vocal behaviors in order to advocate for themselves during theater productions.

CONSENT-BASED REHEARSAL SPACES

One of the foundations of theatrical intimacy techniques is to follow consent-based practices. Borrowing the FRIES acronym established by Planned Parenthood, consent must be Freely given, Reversible, Informed, Enthusiastic/Engaged/Embodied, and Specific.[6] In a consent-based environment, actors are encouraged to come to rehearsals with a clear understanding of their boundaries—physically, personally, professionally, culturally, and, we would argue, vocally. A consent-based approach then requires that directors respect and honor actors' boundaries throughout the creative process. An oft repeated phrase in theatrical intimacy training is, "Your boundaries are perfect exactly as they are."[7]

Requests made of actors during consent-based rehearsals involve the use of openended questions, like, "Does that work for you?," "What are your thoughts on that?," or "How do you feel about that?"[8] Significantly, this allows actors to express when they are experiencing discomfort and then articulate what it is they need in order to move forward with the rehearsal process.

In these settings, if actors receive vocal direction from a director or musical director that they feel crosses their vocal boundaries and could possibly cause harm, or if it is not something they can readily or easily deliver, they should not feel pressured to jump right in and immediately try what is being asked. Instead, they can pause the moment. In consent-based rehearsal rooms, actors employ established tools to pause the rehearsal by using non-loaded words like "button," or something similar, as determined by the company. As Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard, the founders of Theatrical Intimacy Education, describe, "The Button is a word that indicates that the action needs to pause for a moment . . . Calling 'hold' or 'stop' or even 'wait' can feel like too much of a fuss if someone just needs a moment."[9] For example, if actors are asked to add vocal growls to their singing at high intensity levels, and those actors are not confident they can make those sounds comfortably, they can say "button," which denotes that a pause is needed before proceeding. In consent-based practice, the appropriate response of the director or musical director would be to ask, "What do you need?" This allows the actor to articulate that a boundary has been reached, to ask a clarifying question, or simply take a moment to process what is occurring. Once again, as Pace and Rikard state, "The Button normalizes needing to pause for a second and ask a question or adjust a boundary. Performers need that permission, and having a tool in place to support them will help your process and give them an established way to ask for what they need."[10]

If such language or practices have not been established, actors can simply pause the moment by asking, "May I take some time to process that request?" Better still, actors can pause the moment by asking clarifying questions such as, "Can you help me understand what effect we are trying to achieve here?," or "Could you possibly rephrase that so I'm clear about what you'd like for me to do?"

These are collaborative questions that are intended to elicit collaborative responses from directors, giving them opportunities to provide more detailed perspectives about the storytelling of the scene or song that has inspired their requests. Once actors further understand the impacts that directors are trying to achieve, actors may then be able to offer alternate solutions that they already know they can confidently and safely deliver that may produce the same or similar results without the potential of vocal harm.

SELF-ASSIGNED HOMEWORK

If no such alternative solutions come to mind in the moment, or if none of the alternatives offered satisfy the directors, the next course of action we suggest is for actors to ask that they be allowed to take time to work on the request with their voice teacher. This indicates a willingness to do what is being asked, but also expresses the need to explore how best to accomplish the task while under the guidance of more specialized professionals. Actors in this situation who use the opportunity to work on the request as homework can solicit the advice of their full "voice team," which may include a voice teacher, a

vocal coach, and even health professionals at a voice clinic, like speech-language pathologists and/or laryngologists. When actors have a preassembled team that knows their vocal capabilities and vocal health history, they are better equipped to explore options together to find a way to deliver on directors' requests in healthy and sustainable ways.

This is similar to the theatrical intimacy protocol of using closed rehearsals when first staging scenes with physical intimacy. Shawyer and Shively describe a process used at Elon University in which actors, directors, and dramaturgs first talked through the scenes of a production that contained physical intimacy before then choreographing the intimacy in a closed rehearsal without understudies, assistant stage managers, student dramaturgs, or other cast members present. There the actors could test the choreography "without the pressure of peers or other onlookers in the room."[11]

There is a general understanding in theater that much of the work of building characters and putting on a show is not done in the rehearsal room, but on actors' own time. For instance, music may first be introduced in rehearsals, but actors are then expected to take the music home to solidify notes and rhythms and to memorize the material. Similarly, in scene work, directors may block an entire scene without much explanation as to the reasoning behind the blocking. It then becomes part of actors' homework to "fill in the blanks" by justifying for themselves or providing their own motivations for why their characters execute specific blocking.

In the same vein, dance choreography is almost entirely incorporated as homework. Actors are shown choreography in rehearsals, then spend what may amount to hours of their own time outside of company rehearsals practicing the sequences in order to get them into their minds and bodies.

Therefore, there is precedent for actors requiring outside time or designated closed rehearsals to work out particular challenges of the performance material. Asking to work on difficult vocal moments outside formal rehearsals should be similarly acceptable.

DEALING WITH A CONTINUED IMPASSE

If the avenues described above have been explored and difficult vocal moments still cannot be sustainably and safely realized to the satisfaction of the vocal team and the directors, our next suggestion is for the vocal team to come up with alternative options that may produce similar results or effects as what the directors initially requested. Actors can then bring those options back to directors as suggestions. By asking, "Could we try this?," actors can offer alternate paths for how they can use their individual skills to find ways of achieving directors' desired effects. Once again, this demonstrates a collaborative attitude and shows that the actors honestly considered the initial requests. Directors who can clearly articulate the desired effect they are looking for can then rely on actors to deliver a product that works with, rather than counter to, their individual skill sets.

If none of the suggested options satisfies the directors, the actors and directors could work together on finding a solution for the moment, or the actors can return to their team to work out additional options that can be presented at a later time.

If all of these options have been explored and an impasse continues to exist, one additional consideration can be entertained. Directors may be encouraged to let go of, or adjust, their original desired effects. It is expected that all directors will come to a production with an established vision for each scene and for the entirety of the show. But directors must also see how that vision can (or cannot) be implemented by the actors who have been chosen, which sometimes necessitates an artistic shift. When directors allow for these shifts, they both honor actors' boundaries and welcome their creativity in working toward mutually satisfying, consent-based solutions.

Naturally, actors may fear that their self-identified boundaries, though designed to protect their vocal health, may put their employment status in jeopardy if they are unable or unwilling to produce certain sounds the directors request. However, in the experience of co-author Eggers, every rehearsal environment he has been part of in more than 20 years working in Broadway productions and in the development of Broadway-bound shows has allowed for actors to say, "I understand what you're asking and I think I can get there, but I want to work with my voice teacher to figure out how to deliver that consistently and sustainably." This has occurred without any threat to an actor's employment status and before the language of theatrical intimacy practices was widely known.

As a director, Eggers will often ask for volunteers if there is a potentially vocally taxing moment that must be assigned. For instance, if a scene calls for a scream of excitement from someone in the ensemble, he will ask who feels they can make such a sound in a sustainable way without unnecessary vocal wear and tear. In this way, he places trust in the actors to know their own vocal capabilities as well as limitations.

THE VOICE TEACHER'S ROLE

As voice teachers, we have to vocally prepare our professional students and clients in a way that increases their opportunities for employment. As we help them develop vocal efficiency and expressivity, we cannot ignore their marketability. Understandably, if we feel our singers are being asked by a director to engage in what we believe to be vocally risky behavior, we may have an immediate negative reaction. But, starting from the perspective of "Let's see how we might make that work," or even, "I have some concerns about that, but let's see how close we can get to that sound in a way that works for your voice," allows for the possibility of finding workable solutions and increases the likelihood that actors will successfully deliver the desired effects.

That said, stage directors sometimes ask for sounds without knowing how accomplishable or vocally taxing those sounds may be for individual singers. To be fair, singers as a whole have such varied skills that directors cannot realistically be expected to know the capabilities of each and every actor in their casts (especially if the directors are not professional level singers themselves). However, no one is served if actors simply trudge forward with what they know to be vocally compromising singing in an attempt to be agreeable employees. Eventually, the proverbial piper must be paid and vocal injury could result. If actors advocate for themselves early in the process, with honesty and good will, and with awareness of their own vocal boundaries, they can hopefully avoid production threatening situations due to vocal distress.

Should the Voice Teacher Get Involved?

In a professional setting, Eggers believes that voice teachers and directors do not likely need to be in direct contact with each other. It should be the actors' responsibility to gather the needed details regarding what their directors are requesting, then to work with their teachers on how best to execute those requests, and then to bring the results back to rehearsals.

In an educational setting, however, younger or less experienced performers may need assistance when advocating for themselves and developing the necessary communication skills to navigate the power dynamics of an actor-director relationship (especially if consent-based practices have not been implemented). It may be helpful in these cases for voice teachers and directors to communicate directly with each other. One reason for this is that young actors may not accurately translate directors' requests back to their voice teachers. Without a clear understanding of what is being asked of singers, voice teachers can waste time and effort working toward a solution to a problem that does not exist. This can be avoided if a collaborative line of communication is established between the students' voice teachers and production directors.

CONCLUSION

Given that theatrical intimacy practices are relatively new in the field, and given the theater industry's tendency to default to traditional models, not every director or company is going to engage in consent-based practices. Even if such practices have not been established in a rehearsal, however, actors should still feel comfortable asking clarifying questions of directors or requesting time and space to figure out how to deliver what is being asked of them in a way that is safe and sustainable.

As details continue to be made public in the Ewen case with the production of *Aladdin*, we may learn about positive steps that were taken in this specific instance and we may learn about missed opportunities to allow actors to be clear about their vocal boundaries. Regardless, actors have the right to protect themselves from vocal harm and to avoid situations in which they feel pressured to make unhealthy vocal choices. The more singers understand their vocal capabilities and define their vocal boundaries, the better equipped they will be in production settings. As Jeremy Sortore, associate faculty member of Theatrical Intimacy Education, states, "Developing clear boundaries for yourself is a healthy practice. Letting others dictate your boundaries is not."[12]

NOTES

1. Tristan Kirk, "Sugababes' Jade Ewen suing West End boss over claims her vocal cords were damaged," *Evening Standard* (March 4, 2022); https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/sugababes-jade-ewen-west-end-musical-vocal-cords-damaged-b985914.html?fbclid=IwAR0jZzQPgzPmLr7xu-Tdsc-BF7rOaph0ZtytxRkyNETY_w3h9NIxylHlU_0 (accessed April 29, 2022).
2. Ibid.
3. Matthew Lodge, "Ex-Sugababe Jade Ewen sues Walt Disney for £200,000 claiming she damaged her vocal cords playing Princess Jasmine in West End musical Aladdin while trying to be heard over her 'very loud' co-star," *Daily Mail* (March 5, 2022); https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10576977/Ex-Sugababe-Jade-Ewen-sues-Disney-claiming-hurt-vocal-cords-heard-Aladdin-star.html (accessed April 29, 2022).
4. Kirk.
5. Susanne Shawyer and Kim Shively, "Education in Theatrical Intimacy as Ethical Practice for University Theatre," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 34, no. 1 (2019): 88.
6. For examples of how FRIES principles may be applied in theatre settings, see: Robbie Taylor Hunt, *Intimacy Direction Guidelines: A guide produced specifically for theatre in Cambridge*; https://www.adctheatre.com/media/4545/intimacy-direction-guidelines.pdf (accessed April 29, 2022).
7. Chelsea Pace, *Staging Sex*: *Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020), 15.
8. Ibid., 16.
9. Ibid., 17.
10. Ibid., 19.
11. Shawyer and Shively, 97.
12. Jeremy Sortore, "Principles of Self-Care for Student Performers," *Journal of Singing* 77, no. 3 (January/February 2021): 404.

Brian Manternach is on the voice faculty of the University of Utah Department of Theatre and maintains an in-person and online private voice studio. He is also a research associate for the Utah Center for Vocology, where he is on the faculty of the Summer Vocology Institute. His current and former students have been cast in film, TV, national and international Broadway tours, Off-Broadway and regional theatres, and cruise lines.

He earned the 2021 Faculty Excellence in Research Award from the University of Utah College of Fine Arts and the 2016 NATS Voice Pedagogy Award. He has given presentations for the Voice Foundation, Pan American Vocology Association, Voice and Speech Trainers Association, International Physiology and Acoustics of Singing Conference, Fall Voice Conference, TEDxSaltLakeCity, and for NATS at chapter, region, and national conferences.

An associate editor for the *Journal of Singing*, he is also a regular contributor to *Classical Singer* magazine, which has published more than 100 of his reviews, interviews, and essays. Additionally, he has written articles for the *Journal of Voice*, *Voice and Speech Review*, *VOICEPrints*, *College Music Symposium*, *NATS Inter Nos*, and the *Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance Journal*. He also contributed a chapter to *The Voice Teacher's Cookbook* (Meredith Music, 2018).

Manternach has made solo appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and Sinfonia Salt Lake, among others, and his stage credits range from Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* to Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus* to Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

Originally from Iowa, his degrees in voice performance include a BA from Saint John's University/College of Saint Benedict of Minnesota, an MM from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and a DM from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.

David Eggers is a director, choreographer, and former Broadway actor. He currently serves as Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre in the University of Utah Department of Theatre, where he teaches acting and studio classes and has directed productions of *And the World Goes 'Round* and *Nine*. His research interests include intimacy and consent in theatre, thriving (not just surviving) as a theatre artist, and musical theatre monologues.

Eggers has performed in ten Broadway musicals, including *Billy Elliott, Thoroughly Modern Millie, Chicago, Annie Get Your Gun, Saturday Night Fever, The Wedding Singer, Curtains, Wonderful Town, The Pajama Game,* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. He has also served as assistant director and/or assistant choreographer for Broadway productions of *Anything Goes, Nice Work If You Can Get It, Living on Love,* and *In Transit,* as well as for Off-Broadway and regional productions of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* for the Public Theatre's Shakespeare in the Park (NYC), *My One and Only* and *Damn Yankees* for the annual Roundabout Theatre gala (NYC), *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Bernstein on Broadway* for the Kennedy Center, *On the Town* for the Boston Pops and Tanglewood, *Mamma Mia!* for the Hollywood Bowl, and *Lady Be Good*, *The Band Wagon*, and *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It On the Road* for City Center Encores (NYC), among others.

A graduate of Northwestern University, he now happily resides closer to mountains than skyscrapers with his husband, two children, and one dog.