

REA DENNIS & MAGDA MIRANDA

Beyond Narrative: Sound design as dramaturgy in contemporary performance

Abstract

Autobiographical performance is often characterised by a linguistic approach to storytelling. This paper presents discoveries from a practice-led research inquiry into the mediated translation of narrative elements within the making of autobiographical performance *Train Tracks and Rooftops*. Specifically, it presents the way sonic texts emerged within the process of translating away from narrative form. The paper sets out the technical aspects of the process and critiques the shift in meaning that comes from an understanding of sound dramaturgy and sound as performance architecture. The experience of the maker/performers' relationship to their live and mediated voice is discussed.

Introduction

Train Tracks and Rooftops is the work of bilingual contemporary performance company Lembrança. Lembrança explores interdisciplinary ways of making live performance inspired by memory and autobiographical fragments. Their work is preoccupied with form as content and seeks to engage audiences beyond linguistic meaning.

Conventionally, the aesthetic of autobiographical performance draws on a linguistic approach to storytelling forms. This paper reports on a research inquiry into the adaptation of the narrative text. Practice-led, the project set out to effect a mediated translation of narrative elements within the making of autobiographical performance *Train Tracks and Rooftops*. Specifically, it presents the way sonic texts were composed and how these new texts emerged within the process of translating away from narrative form. Meaning in mediated performance is most often critiqued in relation to audience perception and experience. This piece considers the perception and experience of the makers within the process.

Documenting stages of what might be called an adaptation from the linguistic storytelling text to the abstracted sonic text, this work explores experiences of meaning within the creative process for the performer/maker. It considers how meanings alter and how the performer relationship to initial meaning is disrupted, and as such, how this makes demands on the artists. Whilst sonic and visual texts were explored within the research, this essay focuses on key moments that were translated into electronic sonic compositions. It considers the dramaturgical function of shifting content from one form (narrative) to another (sound) and documents the making process across three iterations of the autobiographical performance piece. The paper thus sets out the technical aspects of the process

through two specific examples, one related to the 'rooftop' motif of the title, while the other relates to the 'train tracks' motif. We therefore aim to critique the shift in meaning making that comes from an understanding of sound dramaturgy and sound as performance architecture. Drawing on concepts from cognitive science, the experience of the maker/performers' relationship to their live and mediated voice will be discussed.

Brief Background

Undertaken as a practice-as-research project over four years, *Train Tracks and Rooftops* aimed to interrogate the process of translating the conventional, more linguistic practices of autobiographical performance to elements that demand other cognitive strategies. The first iteration adopted a conventional autobiographical storytelling style. The resultant 30-minute performance was presented in Wales, UK (June) and New York, USA (October) in 2008. This iteration of *Train Tracks and Rooftops* was performed with a live musician. The recorded documentation of these performances then formed a template for the adaptation process. The second iteration was developed in a residency in Australia in January 2009.¹ The principle focus of the residency was to translate spoken dialogue – the storytelling element – through choreographed movement sequences, colour and other visual text and sound. This iteration was performed in Queensland, Australia using the sonic composition as a fixed track. The second iteration also featured a live choral component (five voices). The final development toward the third iteration was undertaken in Cardiff, UK in January 2010. Within this developmental stage, additional material was composed and the structure of the performance was further embedded as digitised sonic text. This extended the fixed sound track, including the recording of a live violin solo (Happy Birthday). The third iteration was then performed in two venues in February 2010. For further discussion on the project background see Dennis (2012).

Adaptation and Memory Narratives

Autobiographical performance is most often characterised by a storytelling dimension and a sense of reality where the performers narrate past events directly to the audience (Govan et al., 2007). Given that *Train Tracks and Rooftops* is derived from childhood recollections, spoken anecdotes were frequently performed in studio practice. One or other of the performers would engage in a storytelling style performance, shifting our voices from one character to another, recounting the memory, rendering the performer's live voice as central within the approach to live performance. This inquiry has been guided by our interest in disrupting this dominant place of narrative meaning making in creating performance with autobiographical content. A distinctive focus of our investigation has been the way in which voice and linguistic meaning are tied. When we set the intention to eliminate the live spoken element, we traveled down a pathway in which non-linguistic texts – what might be called post-

dramatic texts – were investigated. Indeed, the post-dramatic theatre project (after Lehmann) celebrated the successful destabilization of linguistic text-centric hierarchical understandings about meaning making in theatre. In post-dramatic terms, linguistic texts have ceased to be ‘the central and superior factor [and] all other elements like space, light, sound, music, movement, and gesture tend to have equal weight in performance process’ (Lehmann and Primavesi, 2009 in Ovdija, 2014: 5).

Within the post-dramatic vocabulary, sound dramaturgy has emerged as a highly accessible language, thanks in large part to the proliferation of small studio hardware and software such as that used in this study. Set on the coast in Noosa Heads, Australia, the studio we attended is owned by musician/producers Mettafor (Angelika Heinrich & Kaeleen Hunter) – our collaborators in the creation of the sonic texts. Our approach in the studio was based on filmed footage of the first iteration. From this we set about tracking the entire show, breaking it down and working it up section by section on Apple’s Logic Pro software.² This involved the musician, Kaeleen constructing beats, sonic riffs, and melody on the spot, as we noted of our embodied responses, moved through the scores physically or mentally, talked about what was gained or lost, extended, reduced or transformed. For the purposes of the discussion here we consider two distinct excerpts from the work: *Adjusting the Antennae* and *The Opening Score*. These two excerpts are selected due to the very different dramaturgical purposes of each. Notably, the intention of *The Opening Score* is to expand space, to open the world of the performance around the audience and to encapsulate them, whereas the *Adjusting the Antennae* piece is about a relationship and the transaction of emotion. It is layered with the essential meaning of the work for the performer; its intent is to contract the space and render the audience ‘as if’ they are one-on-one with the performer.

Adjusting the Antennae refers to a sequence derived from a childhood memory of helping the father improve the television reception from the rooftop. Within the piece, the motif of the rooftop came to represent the urban context. Two competing dynamics ensued: the child on the rooftop helping the father and the child climbing unsupervised onto the roof to escape domestic conflict, where the precariousness of climbing began to represent safety. The idea of scaling a wall, and the climb informed movement sequences, which were represented through choreographed action and gesture and supported by changes in levels within the physical space – floor level, platform level, ladder level; the ladder level being the highest point on the stage. Original narrative content included early memories of the child climbing onto the roof at the urging of her father to rotate the TV antennae back and forward as he watched the TV reception from the ground: an oscillating gaze, peering into the house at the TV and up to the roof at his young daughter. Giving vocal and gestural commands such as ‘*turn it a little to the left... ok, ok, ok... no, a bit to the right ... left ... right ...*’ and so on, accompanying the dance between father and daughter.

When workshopping this for the first iteration, the performer took on the role of the father, through her voice whilst performing the role of herself through her physicality. During this she turned an open but skirtless umbrella while at the same time recounting the story to the audience (see image 1). Listen to the sample entitled: Audio #1, which has been taken from the first iteration.



Image 1: Performer with umbrella frame representing antennae



Audio #1: Mais pra Direita - spoken

Photo by Rea Dennis

The adaptation of the *Adjusting the Antennae* sequence for the second iteration involved the development of sonic composition and the digitisation of the live voice. We established a sonic context blending violin, cello and a beat, which is audible in the sound sample Audio # 2. We then began recording the performer's spoken lines. The voice was digitised in an identical way to how she had been performing the lines live within the storytelling style; the performer performed the lines into the microphone. Some of the narrative detail from the 're-telling' style evident in this sample was also adapted through choreographic movement.



Audio #2: Mais pra Direita - combined

The recorded voice was then embedded into an electronic sound track that had been built up from the sound samples of strings and beats. The resultant sonic text, a mash up of mediated voice and electronic strings, was included in Iteration 2, supporting the movement score and the umbrella frame. This work effected an adaptation of sorts, from the storytelling performer recounting her childhood story, toward a performance of self within the architecture of the sound composition, ideas that we will discuss further in the next section. The presence of the performer's live voice remained in a kind of call and response way. The digital track 'spoke' as the father and the performer responded as the child self, accomplishing a step away from narrative telling.

Despite the texture embedded within the sonic text, the felt presence of the father by the performer that had been intrinsic to the meaning of the sequence was

missing. In the process of eliminating the performer's live voice, the father's voice was also erased. The process of refining the adaptation of the live storytelling voice for the third iteration is discussed later in the paper.

Sound, Aural Architecture and Dramaturgy

In the context of this study, the meaning potential in the sound choices draw in part on some of the meaning potentials within sound that are identified by Theo van Leeuwen (1994), including sound perspective and social distance, time, rhythm, voice quality and timbre. In the first iteration, *The Opening Score* composition takes the form of an orchestral percussive performance. Time and rhythm govern the live work which is created through hand clapping, the slapping together of Havaianas³ foot stamping and the repeated lifting and releasing of an extension ladder, which is positioned prone downstage (see Image 2). The layered effect of the different textures creates a pulsating pattern giving the sensation of a train. This score relied on the physical acuity of performers; on performer effort, timing and kinesthetic communication. The desired effect was to create a kinetic score in the spirit of the noise experiments of the Futurists, for example, in Marinetti's object/noise making composition in which he employed 'a chorus of typewriters, kettledrums, rattles and pot covers to suggest the awakening of the capital' (Ovadija, 2014: 149). In the use of objects and particularly in the sonic orchestration, our intentions were aligned to Marinetti's vision in his poetry whereby the 'materiality of the signs' was both more concrete and more abstract and where the innate beauty of the patterns ('geometric splendor') and effort in the labour ('mechanical sensibility') of composing is foregrounded (Ovadija, 2013: 147).



Image 2: Image of ladder and Havaianas used in opening orchestral percussion
Photo by Magda Miranda

Working in the studio with *The Opening Score* followed a similar pattern to that outlined above for *Adjusting the Antennae*, beginning with the deconstruction of the performances of the first iteration that were captured on tape. Essentially the adaptation of the live sonic percussive performance affected a shift in the labour of the performer from making the sounds, to being present within the sound

environment during performance. The structure inherent in the computer software pre-empted the core requirement for the adaptation of the live percussive orchestration: a sound architecture. The electronic form altered the experience completely – the activity of the performer was then stripped back, so that the performer was made more visible within the environment, rather than charged with creating the environment. Audio Samples #3 (Iteration 1) and #4 (Iteration 2) show the shift in the sound texts of *The Opening Score*.



Audio #3



Audio #4

Designing this within Logic was vastly different to the work of re-creating the human vocal text for *Adjusting the Antennae*. Unlike *Antennae*, the original meaning associated with the (percussive) objects was relevant but not embedded in the artistic intention in the same way as the voice of the father. For example, the Havaianas are symbolic of Brazilian and Australian summers. Thus, there was little intrinsic meaning and little representational relationship between the Havaianas and the outside world. This meant that there was a perceived ease in the shift beyond representation. In the post dramatic sense, 'simultaneous and multi-perspectival modes of perception' easily replaced the 'linear and successive ones.' We could focus on the performance practices 'present' rather than what they might represent (Lehmann in Barnett, 2008: 15). At this point in the paper, we wish to turn our attention to the way meaning was negotiated as we adapted *Adjusting the Antennae*.

Adapting the live vocal narrative telling voice into digitised amplified sonic composition altered meaning for the performer. While Newark (2010) claims that all voices are mediated, both culturally and politically, when the live voice is recorded and then amplified, an altered experience of self occurs. This may be linked to the complexities of memory; where the performer's memory of expressing the story vocally interacts with her experience of listening to the recorded voice. The sensation of a kind of distortion in how meaning is being made is a characteristic of memory. Cognitive scientist Stephen Rose (2003) offers a useful explanation of how memory, meaning and the human brain might be understood:

Brains do not work with information in the computer sense, but with meaning. And meaning is a historically and developmentally shaped process, expressed by individuals in interaction with their

natural and social environment. Indeed, one of the problems in studying memory is precisely that it is a dialectical phenomenon. Because each time we remember, we in some senses do work on and transform our memories; they are not simply being called up from store and, once consulted, replaced unmodified. Our memories are recreated each time we remember (Rose, 2003: 104)

The reality of the dialectic of memory presents intriguing challenges for the autobiographical performer. In the adaptation of *Adjusting the Antennae*, the experience of working with her own externalised voice and of hearing her mediated voice distanced the performer from her sense of familiarity with her processes of making meaning. The mediated voice suggested ambiguity in memory and introduced challenges within the dramaturgical process. What might this sequence now mean? Stripped of the narrative, do the action, gesture, sound and objects still have meaning? Does the performer's body have meaning when perceived within these abstracted texts? This intrinsic and ongoing dramaturgical work is standard for performers during processes of devising:

Dramaturgy ... is concerned with the composing and orchestration of events for and in particular contexts, tracking the implications of and connective relations between materials, and shaping them to find effective forms. In devising ... dramaturgy is uncovered, worked and articulated through the processes of making and rehearsing, rather than being predetermined (Williams, 2010: 197-198).

Coupled with the shift in demands on the performer, who now did not have to speak the lines, or tell the story, the experience of meaning within the process altered. The unfamiliar sensory experience of listening to her mediated voice, of hearing this other voice, acted to obscure the principle intention of the sequence.

An excerpt from the conversation in the studio:⁴

Rea: What's your feeling as you are walking along that wall: is it domestic or urban? Are you in the home environment? Or the city?

Magda: I can hear home. The wall is near the kitchen.

Rea: What will help you the most?

Here Kaeleen is working on creating an architecture, she is improvising with a stringed instrument, a cello; she adds a violin

Kaeleen: I'm trying to create tension (and build in a cue)

Kaeleen plays a sound sample, a lone violin, a long sustained note.

Magda: That's beautiful

Rea: What are you imagining is happening there? (as you listen)

Magda is tearing up.

Rea: is that it?
Magda: nods

Somehow the texture of the sustained violin meets the memory narrative. In his essay, *Wayfaring in everyday life: The unraveling of intimacy*, John Lutterbie (2013) draws on the work of Jerome A Feldman to discuss the way memory is tied to our intention to speak. He makes the point that our intention to speak 'gives rise to memories of experience, previous linguistic expressions, and associations that serve as frames or boundary conditions for emerging expression' (2008, in Lutterbie, 2013: 107). The experience of our own memory constitutes the 'interaction between the impulse, the past (cultural and individual memories) and the current situation' giving rise to a range of options from which we choose: 'the one that provides the "best fit", or that which comes closest to satisfying the intent' (2008, in Lutterbie, 2013:108).. Thus, as we eliminated the linguistic content, the speaker appeared to experience a disconnection from the autobiographical memory, and from this a loss of her intention. Then as we found the sonic text, felt aspects of that self-connection were re-established.⁵ As the adaptation progressed the aesthetic emerged from the interaction of the performer voice, their autobiographical storytelling and digitised sonic file.

Voice: Embodied and Aesthetic

The technologies of devising are, by design, messing with the aesthetics of voice. Devising is a way of writing new performance in action. It occurs in the studio and is most often dialogic, although there is a sense that the thinking is accomplished through action and thus by extension, through the body. Embodied cognition refers to the way our 'motor system shapes not only our actions but also our perceptions and therefore our cognition' (Sofia, 2013: 174). Norie Neumark (2010) maps the relation of voice to embodiment as a question of aesthetics. Citing Terry Eagleton in Susan Buck-Morss' work, Neumark reports that 'Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body.' That is, aesthetics

is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell – the whole corporeal sensorium. The terminae of all of these – nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of the skin – are located at the surface of the body the mediating boundary between inner and outer (Buck-Morss in Neumark, 2010: xvi).

Neumark thus proposes 'we might then hear the voice as aesthetically bearing the marks of the body' (Neumark, 2010: xvi). Thus shifting the voice outside the body could be seen to disembody the voice, or even to dehumanize the voice, which serves to contradict the concept of autobiographical performance. Working on the choreography for the body provided the performer with a link to her remembered self. Gestures and actions were set. There initially felt 'as if' they were signifying the narrative, yet through repetitive embodied performing of the

score, the kinesthetic knowledge began to contribute to the aesthetic architecture for the performer.



Image 3: Iteration 3, performer with choreographic embodiment of antennae. Elimination of the umbrella frame used in Iterations 1 and 2.
Photo by Steve Evans

The integration of the digitised voice within the work was reinforced by the performers' belief in the spatial and temporal structure that the movement vocabulary articulated. For iteration three, we continued the work with the mediated voice focusing on elevating the performer's engagement with the sonic composition as meaningful. This required experimentation with voice distortion.

Adriana Cavarero (in Neumark, 2010) foregrounds our intersubjectivity when considering the experience of listening to voice. 'What it communicates is precisely the true vital and perceptible uniqueness of the one who emits it' (2005, in Neumark, 2010: xix). She claims listening to the voice as sound requires a sensibility to alterity and space.

The amplified and distorted modalities point to complex and varied relations of voice to body and of bodily voice to signification and intersubjectivity: they make sensible the way in which the sonorous and signifying aspects of voice supplement and disturb each other, and they make evident the aesthetic and affection potentials of voice (Adriana Cavarero in Neumark, 2010: xix).

Treating the voice track so that the performer's recorded voice is distorted became the final step in the process. The studio documentation on the day reveals the following process:⁶

K: What I am trying to do is find the texture

A cello sound surges through the sound of traffic

R: [we need] sounds to signify Magda's World [before the antennae part].

Kaeleen continues working on the computer keyboard building the sonic architecture of what we began to call Magda's World, based on the sustained violin. As it begins to take

shape, Magda is quiet, shedding some more tears. It seemed that we had found the sound combinations that, when they meet in her body – vibration, tone, balance, volume, they meet the way the story felt in her body memory.

Kaeleen: Not to layer it, but to have a shift ...

Rea: Could we just work with adjusting the volume?

Kaeleen: [I think we] need the ambient noises to be much lower volume.

Working on the father's voice:

Rea: Almost need a 'Magda'! in there

Kaeleen: Yeah! (To magda) Why don't we just record you!

Magda: It will be in Portuguese...

Kaeleen: Yes, we need some Portuguese in here

Magda: I don't like my Mum angry there

Rea: Ah... you don't want your mum in this

Magda: No ...

Rea: Can we just have the calling? 'Magda'?

Kaeleen: We can change it to a man's voice.

Rea: Yes, so we can just have him calling you – take the rest out.

Rea: Clean enough, the sound?

Magda: No it's not this ... it's him (teary)

Magda: But he's [sounding] angry, and I am happy to be helping him.

Kaeleen: Can it be something else?

Rea: Say something that matters – and think of an audience listening as well, not just you in the world [of the memory].

Sample of the studio session is included in Audio # 5. The live performance sound track in which live voice and object (umbrella frame) are fully eliminated is available in Audio #6.



Audio # 5: Studio Session Sample



Audio #6: Mais pra Direita - final

Made virtually intelligible through the distortion, the effect of the technologised voice within the composition established an architecture that supported the performer to relinquish her hold on the narrative as fixed and singular. In iteration three we eliminated representational devices such as the umbrella frame, and extended the movement text to encompass the idea that the body itself is the antennae (see image 3).⁷ In Audio Sample #6 all sound within the sequence is

abstracted and mediated. The performer does not utter, nor is there tangible traces of those original linguistic texts. As performers, the sensation was one of existing in a new world.

It emerged that in the third iteration of *Train Tracks and Rooftops*, sound was a dominant text. That is not to say that the kinesthetic and visual texts were diminished, but as linguistic meaning was adapted through sound, the kinesthetic and visual elements acted to amplify the scale of the piece as a sound environment. Mladen Ovadija states the performer must 'deal with sound itself ... as an element of new theatricality in which sound interacts independently' with other texts (2013: 9). Tim Ingold (2011) critiques the turn to sound as materiality, suggesting that rather than a mental or material form, sound is environmental, 'that is, of our immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves' (Ingold, 2011: 137). Through the principle aim of shifting the dominant meaning making experience of maker away from linguistic modes, toward embodied cognitive modes we undertook a systematic adaptation of story moments into sonic texts. The aesthetic language changed over the course of the experiment. As the text was further abstracted, moving away from spoken word story form into a more epic style of sensorial storytelling in which sound combines with colour, space, time and shape, the experience of the performer was altered. In this way, performer and audience alike engage in the kind of organic or dynamic dramaturgy that Eugenio Barba states acts on 'the rhythms and dynamisms affecting [us] on a nervous, sensorial and sensual level', the realm of non-linguistic texts (1985 cited in Ovadija, 2013: 4).

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Notes

1 This phase was awarded a development grant for the express purposes of translating the traditional storytelling mode to a non-narrative mode that drew on sonic, kinaesthetic and visual languages (Dennis, 2012).

2 Logic Pro is a comprehensive suite of professional music and audio tools for music, cinema and stage from Apple Corporation. It also contains Mainstage for

concert mixing and Soundtrack for post-production and music design. It houses about 40 sound instruments. It can be run on a Macbook Pro.

3 Havaianas or Flip Flops or thongs, as they are known in Australia featured as a common element in the childhoods of both artists.

4 In this interaction, Rea questions Magda about the source memory and Kaeleen begins to engage with the memory narrative.

5 We do not want to interpret the emotion in this moment other than to say, the violin sound resonated with what Magda knew of her own story. Why a violin? We do not know. However, Magda recalls vividly the many times her mother recounted the story of her father (Magda's grandfather). Magda notes: 'It was one of the family stories – my mother told of my grandfather, Antonio, playing his violin for her when she was small. In some respects my Mum felt that I 'was' connected to him. I was born on the day he died ... 21 years after. He died in 1947. I was born in 1968 on 17 July'.

6 Influenced by her response to Magda's narrative and to the present Magda in the studio, this exchange is suggestive of the studio dynamic: Kaeleen is active on the computer, listening into her headset and improvising with filters and tone selections. Magda is at the microphone providing vocal content and also improvising and listening into her headset, noting her own feelings and sensations as she listens to the content as it is treated/mediated. Rea observes both, noting Magda's responses and body language to the mediated material, prompting Kaeleen and considering the newly created material in the context of the intention of the sequence within the larger artwork. Kaeleen searches for what she calls 'texture' – a sound or vibration that will meet with what has become her own inner knowing of what the sequence needs. All three are simultaneously engaged in creating.

7 In addition to the changes tracked here in which linguistically centric texts were adapted through a sound palette, the research journey across the iterations of *Train Tracks and Rooftops* also engaged with adaptation of video (ocean) in iteration 1, over to kinesthetic and light texts by iteration 3; and a capella lyrical song texts in 1 to digital recording of a violin rendition (Happy Birthday). A full discussion of these outcomes is outside the scope of this paper.

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Biographies

Rea Dennis is an Australian artist and scholar with a particular interest in relational dramaturgy, performed memory and the body in performance. She lectures in Drama and Performance at Deakin University. Previous publications include essays on refugee performance, autobiography and performance writing and playback theatre.

Magda Miranda is a Brazilian performer and visual artist with background in dance, drama and improvisation. An actress with over 20 years of experience, she has a B.A. in cinema. Her current practice is exploring her bi-cultural identities through performance; she is working on a series multimedia self-

portraits.