



Jane Boston & Matthew Mills: To Sound Ourselves

[00:00:23] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello welcome to the Salon!

Our guests today are Jane Boston and Matthew Mills.

Jane Boston is a Principal Lecturer at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, where she leads the MA/MFA in Voice Studies: Teaching and Coaching, and heads up the International Network in Voice. She has extensive experience of embodied voice, communication skills and leadership training with business leaders, civil servants in the Foreign Office and within community groups. In 1980 she co-founded Brighton's Siren Theatre, which re-formed in 2014 to perform and develop new compositions in relation to changes in feminist performance practice.

Matthew Mills is a Consultant Speech and Language Therapist in voice and communication, voice coach, supervisor, musician and writer. He has worked at the 'Charing Cross' Gender Identity Clinic in London since 2009, and facilitates individuals in discovering their authentic voice and communication in therapy and performance contexts. The author of a number of studies on voice and gender, Matthew originally trained at an as actor, singer and pianist at Guildhall School of Music & Drama and Trinity College London, and worked in television, theatre, radio and film for 20 years.

In this exchange, Jane and Matthew think out loud about voice and identity, asking questions about how we come to sound ourselves: how we vocally switch between the public and the private, what physical and cultural choices we make to sonically express out interiority, the consequences of not being heard, and the bridging of vocal space and temporalities needed to build resonant communities.

This conversation was recorded on Zoom between London and Brighton, on 19th June 2020.

[00:02:26] SALON

Matthew Mills: Jane, here we are.

Jane Boston: Here we are. It's funny, sort of having a conversation in this way that kind of nerves build up when it is so – I so welcome our conversations over the times that we've met, over – in different places, often in the Hampstead Theatre, you know, grabbing a moment, grabbing an hour. And then the thought of this – this is our hour, and it becomes kind of highly charged, doesn't it?

MM: Exactly! It's the whole waiting and being accepted into sort of a sonic space, if you like, you know, which is being listened to, recorded. Interesting – kind of really just reflecting on some hesitation moments, the sort of pauses, the uhs, the ums – the sort of bread and butter which is a sort of flow of interaction. I think, for me, we're looking at something about interiority and the sonic expression of interiority. I was straight in there thinking about these incredibly important moments before the moment.

JB: Yeah.

MM: If you like, you know, this sort of – our waiting moments before we decide to be recorded, et cetera, you know, press the button and it happens in this digital sonic space. It's an interesting transaction, isn't it?

JB: Fully! I've had a couple of these over the last few days – just that moment of being asked to have a ten-minute slot about what is voice online. And then compression in my head about how will I say enough in ten minutes to reflect this world that I've been in for so long, my whole professional life. The kind of stakes – and yet the whole idea of just being grounded and still and allowing something simple to emerge against the weight of expectation. And I suppose I find myself in that kind of conundrum. In a way, an hour is much more leisurely than a ten-minute 'what is going on in the world today', but it's nevertheless that sense of the thought behind arriving here, and so many feelings, so much history, so many moments that you and I have had. Let alone, the moments we have in our working week.

MM: Yes, yes, yes.



JB: All to this point. Yeah.

MM: Yes, exactly. And sort of an hour is a sound bite – we're not nibbling, are we?

JB: No, no nibbling, definitely not.

MM: Yeah.

JB: I was eagerly awaiting, in a sense, your sound – your sonic cue, and it came as I was in the middle of my late afternoon admin. And I just read the words first. You know, that's so interesting, because words are one of my great loves – on a good day – and I was very emotional, just suddenly – just suddenly, before I listened to the song.

MM: Yes. This is the song 'Home' from – you know, from *The Wiz* by Charlie Smalls, 1975. And what I'm particularly – what's been so very, very deeply moving for me in this, particularly in this period which we're calling 'lockdown' and I'm calling 'locked up', you know, this sort of space, if you like, where I am in my home but I have been struggling to find that sense of home quality, I think, in my wanderings through myself, I think, really. I think what is – what has particularly moved me – as you know, my background – one of my backgrounds, you know, is I work with people who are trans and non-binary, and that sort of search for the expression if you like, that interior sense of self, you know, being expressed through voice. And here is a programme, it comes from *Pose*, and MJ Rodriguez is a trans actor and a wonderful musician – and she gives in the programme, her rendition of a music, 'Home', which is from *The Wiz*. And that in itself is a reworking of a very sort of, if you like, mainstream sense of kind of Technicolor in a sort of all-white brilliance – and this already is a sort of reworking. It's an interesting remodelling. And I think that what it speaks to is that backdrop of a different – disenfranchised communities, disenfranchised voices, if you like. And I think that sort of is very, very, very deep.

JB: I was struck by the melancholic. I suppose, I always veer towards the – people say why do I never sing happy songs, but there's something of the key, the gospel quality, but also the notion in the lyric that the world's gone and changed. That, quoting the lyrics: 'Suddenly my world's [gone and] changed its face / But I still know where I'm going / I have had my mind spun around in space.' And there's something of the disorientation of having lost a place or perhaps never even had a place, which in a way goes – there is a link, and I often try to make links, and some people say: 'Well, don't make a bridge, just say these are different.' But the song I sent you about the whales losing their navigation systems. There is an interesting sort of connection there, isn't there, between how we found our way and what it is to lose it, and the consequences of losing it, you know, the deep consequences of not – of being dispossessed, of being outside our place of security, you know.

MM: Yes, it is deeply disorientating, and from us – we wail about it, don't we? That remembering, I think, or re-gathering of the self, of the vocal self, that cuts through the sort of expectation is highly potent. For me, I think in all this work, you know, these sort of moments of discovering the song, and just discovering my identity, working with people and their identity – there's a kind of richness of liminality, you know, these places of threshold I find that are deeply potent to me: the threshold, the place of consciousness, the place of arrival. And you know, as facilitators of voice, both for ourselves and for others, we have to be extremely sensitive to these moments. And here we are, you know, sort of in this very sped-up world, where you and I are now – we've entered into a sort of digital threshold, we stepped into a threshold very quickly. And these things can be very 'moved across', very swiftly, and they can be quite disturbing. And I think the observation of the way that we transition, literally, through vocal time and space is extremely potent to me. I think the losing of our way, and the re-sensing of who we are, and what we are, and how we reach out to people.

JB: Well, I just sometimes I wonder whether there's a sort of retro-mournfulness in my approach. It's not as if I know there is a place of home that is an ideal – you know, there isn't that ideal place, but there's a longing in there for knowingness. So I guess, knowing oneself or being at home, being comfortable, being heard, being loved, if you like. And perhaps those are all the ingredients of that desire. I know that there's no place to go, but there's a place to be thought about and imagined, and these pieces that you sent, the piece that you sent takes me straight to that – that really got a lump in my throat about the if only, what can I use in my dream life to bring me solace, to bring me richness, to bring me back to myself, I guess. I felt separated.



MM: Yes. Perhaps in all of us there's a sense of not being well-knitted together with our voice, perhaps. You know, because we experience it internally, and yet the perception of others in the social space – we are sending out that sort of internal sense of ourselves, which is then being interpreted. And so we get sort of feedback, really. And then we start to perhaps engage with or embody those external influences, and then perhaps we might hear back our voices, if you like, you know. You know, that sense of it coming back to us. You know, that kind of longing for that comfort, and that sense of home, that sense of our own resonance somehow, that, you know, is that warmth that we know somewhere there perhaps is this – it's a very human thing, it's a sort of vanishing point, isn't it? As the sun goes down, it's down across the hills, and up the lane, and there it is, we are drawn to it so much.

JB: Yeah. But I'm very aware that in our different occupations – you know, you as a therapist and me in the studio with training voice teachers – and when we did the work, we've done some work together over the last few years, I was so interested by that 'fixing the signal' idea, you know. That voice teachers come into the work to do something about the voice, to do something.

MM: Yes, yes.

JB: Historically, that's been the process, you do something, because the voice isn't conforming, or it's not working, or it's not right. And then we come to hear your work in the clinic, of the voices in the clinic, and that – I was so interested by that idea of self-choice: the voice that each of us decides we need, the voice inside, the voice that we construct, that is not so relational to the world outside, but because we will accept it. The aesthetics of voice in voice training has been very dominant for a certain kind of sound, and it certainly gave me something to think about with my students. When we had to think: 'Well, these voices that you brought to us, the recordings.' Voices that had been – they'd arrived at their own satisfaction with the voice they reflected.

MM: And that's the process. You know, I think like in the studio, the training of actors, singers, vocal practitioners, anybody who wishes to use voice to express in some way – we all do, don't we? We all move through thresholds and platforms of performing ourselves. Gender, sexuality – you know, our selves as teachers and voice practitioners. And I absolutely believe we must start from ourselves, and we must have our understanding of what we bring to the process, certainly as a speech and language therapist specialising in voice, and having been an actor and singer, and having been a music teacher – I've never really felt like I fitted completely, in one – you know, I'm not a scientist, I'm not – but I think that it's not narcissistic, it's existential, really. It's that thing of: 'I have to start with me', and make sense of the world in order for me to know where I begin and end, and know where my thresholds are, and know where my vulnerabilities are so that I can therapeutically, in my case, use that knowledge to scaffold, and to create opportunities, exploration and discovery for people who are desperately struggling with the idea that there is this sense of conformity, which is going to get me to live, which is going to get me not murdered, which is going to get me to be gendered in a way that I want to be, et cetera. And so there's huge, huge cost to being authentic, absolutely huge cost. And I love the – certainly as a therapist, but I think it speaks beyond my own personal therapeutic explorations into myself. And I know in a way that my voice has changed over the years since I trained with Patsy [Rodenburg] a million years ago at Guildhall in the early '90s and with Jeannette [Nelson] and Annie Morrison – that those spaces in myself have opened up because I have been brave enough to allow occupancy, myself to occupy them, to open those doors and that threshold. So yeah, the work of Michael White and David Epston, narrative therapists. They're family therapists, but White developed this sort of rites of passage metaphor from [Arnold] van Gennep, and he talked about sort of the migration of identity. He did this in context particularly to people who are suffering with addiction. We've worked with a number of narrative therapists so we've developed this – we're taking a little bit further, really, to think about: 'Well, what is this migration in vocal identity that we might do in terms of going on a journey which starts with this place of contacting ourselves?' Contacting that moment of the interior and separating from the thing which has sustained us and no longer is useful. So that moment of contact of self, of interiority, is the spark that takes us on this new journey. And when we set off, we don't know where we're going, and then this opens up: this idea of where we move through the landscapes betwixt and between, the inbreath and the outbreath, the vocal landscape, the highs and the lows, the textures. We embody those and then we find our vocal, resonant community: we find our political community, we find our emotional community, our vocal community, really. And on the way,



we hope – certainly as therapists – we hope that people are disorientated, because you have to sort of be shaken up. And I think this lockdown is, I wouldn't say great example of it, but I think it's a very traumatic example of it. We are absolutely shaken up by this liminality which we are in, where we don't know where we're going. And this business about talking about new normality – well, of course we will never go back! You can't existentially go back to a place that has been. But at some point you arrive, you really find that, I suppose, what I could hear in MJ Rodriguez's rendition of 'Home', was this longing for home, but vocally, in that vocal performance, there was this wonderfully secure sense of home.

[00:18:41 to 00:19:00] MJ Rodriguez's rendition of 'Home' from *The Wiz*

MM: In terms of – there's a set of vocal folds that – as a certain length and certain size, that may have occupied a certain habitual pitch and certain, you know, kind of resonance if you like, that may have been typically evoked in a certain gendered performance, if you like. And yet, this woman is able to produce many, many colours and textures and sing in this extraordinarily beautiful way.

JB: Yeah, really!

MM: She really draws us in, and is also not afraid of the strength and the – yeah, really opening the voice up. Yeah.

JB: It's interesting that it's a solo performance that has glamour attached to it. And you know, I remember when you said you'd been watching *Pose* and – in the lockdown, the kind of solace in a way – I really wanted to kind of get some of the back catalogue and see it, but I haven't, but I will do. I'm very aware that my sonic intervention is very much about – in a way, it's a coming out for me in the voice world, because I think I've split the kind of political-radical place that I came into this world with, the world of voice – was as a lesbian feminist activist, and it really didn't have any place in the conservatoire that I later joined. I found it quite problematic to join that experience, that will, the transformational will that I had for the world. And when I met the sort of training environment – you were at Guildhall, I taught at Central, and I trained at Central in the voice, was a long period of a feeling quite outside. Outside the traditions, the norms, the aesthetics, and the heterosexual norms of actor training, which is still – you know, we're dealing with them at the moment. Not just the heterosexual, but the kind of white racial norm.

MM: Cisnormative.

JB: The cisnormative. So I took it as not a singular journey, really. But the reason I had to bring the song as a Siren Collective effect, is that I found my voice in the collective.

[00:21:26 to 00:25:12] 'Sounding Different' by Siren

JB: I'm always in awe of the kind of soloist, and the position taken to be able to fully express the emotion – as MJ Rodriguez does – the beautiful solo, torch song. For me, performance was about finding a voice in a communal, political ensemble. And a slow burn about trying to find a lyrical voice, a writing voice, in the company of others, but I know that without a doubt I wouldn't have got this far had I not had the courage of the group: the group gave me courage. And I was reading your book [Mills and Stoneham, 2020] and used some of the commentary that you had documented about the importance of the group formation in your work, and in aiding and supporting the voice that each individual decides on, or needs, you know. I was just really struck by the comparisons in my own journey with that.

MM: And also actually, in context of the programme, I mean, I know that obviously MJ Rodriguez has that ability and the technique to be able to get up and do that.

JB: Yeah, really!

MM: Really, really! I think that is also a wonderful moment for the trans and non-binary community, where people are not having to apologise in any way for their place to express so beautifully – that piece, I think that in itself, for me, is a huge vocal-political act, which does actually speak to the community. Because I think that there have been times where – you know, there's a big debate, isn't there, about sort of the authenticity of using the Northern Irish accent, Northern Irish artists to do the Northern Irish accent, et cetera – all those debates around, you know –

JB: The drama school.

MM: Yes, exactly, cultural misappropriation – all that kind of stuff, really. And here we have, really, for



the first time, trans or non-binary, queer, queer-political people writing about queer-political issues in the '80s and '90s at the backdrop of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. And here we are in another epidemic. I think that it's really caught people and it's about kind of people being disenfranchised, and probably never really feeling like they had a home. And I think there's such a huge debate about what safe spaces are at the moment, and you know, it got me thinking about safe vocal spaces, what we do to facilitate people to find safety in their own sense of vocal self. I think the sense of community, and being held by a community and a community acquiring voice is absolutely essential in that creation.

JB: One of my students on Zoom just said that what she was missing most was the courage of the vibration of the others. There's just no replacing that online. So I've been thinking about that practice quite a lot, and trying to find not an answer, but part of the journey is to self-verify, to keep reminding us that we are there, we can give ourselves the contact. If no one else can contact us, we can actually feel something of our place in the room, in the space, the gravity. It was a real cry from the heart that she missed the courage, the presence of the vibration of others around her to then step forward, to feel confident, to reach other pitches and do other things, you know! It's quite a mournful place, isn't it, that we don't have that.

MM: Yes, absolutely. I think so; and I think where we are topping and tailing, say, between this point in time and this point in time, there will be this much sound and it will be able to be recorded, et cetera. I suppose why I like things are recorded in the theatre now – and we benefit from watching performances, you know, that we might have missed – and that's a different experience, an interesting experience, actually. I was watching Gillian Anderson's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, you know, online. I hadn't seen it at the Young Vic when it was on. So it was kind of an interesting thing. Here I am, a digital consumer of this live entity, you know? And it was filmed well, that one actually felt kind of – one could feel the audience, as well, it wasn't very flat. I was glad of that, but I think absolutely, yeah, this sort of – the way that we step into risk in a way, that we watch others, and hear others, and feel others stepping into risk in digital spaces. It's all up for more exploration!

JB: Oh god, much more exploration! So have you been running groups at this time?

MM: We've done some. We're in mourning – we talk about mournful, but we are in mourning, because I think that we realise that we can't translate some of the spontaneity of the work that we have been doing. We're trying to find those moments where, you know, when you press 'happy to continue, go, admit' into all those things that are the digital moments of stepping in, how we occupy those, we observe those thresholds and we know them to be the thresholds in ourselves, really. Suddenly being seen, suddenly being heard, and suddenly making the choice. And I also think that silence is very, very important in a digital world as well. I think that the digital world has to get used to pauses. I'm quite a dysfluent speaker – I had a stammer when I was a kid, I don't have stammering as part of my core speaking pattern, but I do have a certain sort of wandering, or a certain – a kind of, you know, gathering, if you like. You know, I always had that. And so some repetitions et cetera, and the uhs, and the ums, I'm chewing and processing my words almost as I'm speaking. [Laughter.] So the moments of arrival, if you like, the consonants or the vowels, is taking a little bit of an indirect route sometimes. And I think those things need to be –

JB: Ah! I mean, I really miss those signals that give me courage to go on! I'm thinking as I open my mouth in relation to all the thresholds of boredom in the group, the tiredness, the willingness to go on, the different things that occur as we are in the moment together, that I gauge by other things, the physical signals. The unconscious signals that we're picking up, the atmosphere in the room, the vibe. The renegotiations online are really, really a steep learning curve, I think. To cope with the silence and to trust that you are there still.

MM: That's right, exactly! There is a protocol, there is an etiquette, I think in kind of how we do set these things up, and you have to, you know – it's a little bit like walking into a physical space, where there are chairs and people sit, and then you know, there's a gathering time, and then the work begins, really. And I think that probably in a digital space, it does have to be perhaps a little bit more directed, certainly initially. And those kind of moments of breakout, or those moments of quietness, or reflection, have to be – yeah, everything has to be much more, yeah, named, I think, whilst it's new. Because it's new, and I think the naming of it makes it – there's your home, really, isn't it? That there's your sense of it being home, because you've gone: 'That's what it is.' So take a moment now to – one thing I



particularly, actually started to feel enjoyment of in the work is I have been able to you know, do some really detailed voice work with people in terms of voice quality, and pitch, and resonance. And I think it's worked because I've been literally honouring the ears and the vocal cords, et cetera, of the person I'm working with: 'Can you hear this in me?' or: 'I think I can hear this in you.' So we're reaching that sort of collaborative place. We do it in the room, in the physical space, but I think –

JB: Is that something that's added to that journey, in some way?

MM: Yeah, I think. Yeah, being brave on the part of the vocal facilitator, the vocal practitioner, perhaps – it's not teacherish or didactic, but I think one has to perhaps put that initiation out there in terms of being transparent. And I think that's the thing which will probably invite those people who are coming to explore with us – gives them the signal that we are working it out and then minting it together; we are minting it for ourselves as much as for them, if you like.

JB: I've certainly noticed that leading with courage, not being afraid of the silence of the little boxes, but that – I really recognise that sense of the invitation, and the invitation to reflect, to be quiet, to examine. It's different than the in-present situation, and I think the setting of the frame, as you say: 'We are all here', 'We're on the gallery', you know – that setting the rules of being on the gallery. It still seems so new. It really does.

MM: And the language that we have, you know, 'gallery', it's a place of perhaps looking and being curious to witness, it's more of a visual space than–

JB: –than an auditory one.

MM: Yes, maybe. I don't know though, maybe it needs to be–

JB: I think we're doing a lot of working out about: 'Are we looking?', 'Do we need to look?' A lot of women – I don't know, this is just two women – but women say they get very disturbed by seeing themselves at the same time as you're conducting something, that the idea of being preoccupied because you see yourself on the gallery. And that's going to have some impact. It does. I feel it.

MM: Yes. I mean, it was the thing that I certainly, when I started to Zoom in lots of meetings, that I don't want to be seeing myself here. It's like looking in the mirror, isn't it, it's distracting. And yes, you can turn your self-view off, sort of – and I would do that in a one-to-one therapy session. But I think when it is a group, I don't know, somehow it becomes slightly helpful to see what one's doing. Well, maybe what other people are looking at in me. It's not looking at me, but, you know, it is a phenomenon.

JB: It is a phenomenon, and we have to face things in ourselves, I suppose, that we haven't had to face. I don't see myself in the group when I'm normally in the studio, and I can evade the gaze if I wish to, I can get up and move around in a certain kind of way. It's something Kristin Linklater often said to me: 'Just stand still in front of the group! Just stop! Why are you wandering around?' And I think there's a sort of – there was an incipient sort of sense of escaping the role in some ways. That I could escape the role of the pedagogue at times, which in Zoom, I can't escape the role! I have to be in that position: it is where I am.

MM: I think it's the same with the therapist that sort of – there's this phrase, therapeutically, that all that is within me is in the room, and all that is within the client is in the room, because it's present. And so there's that sense or feeling, picking up on the sort of congruence of what's being said, and has to do with the body language, and often a lot of these signals that we've lost in terms of, you know, physicality and smell, and body language – and eye contact obviously. Because when I'm looking at you, you know, I'm looking at you now, but that might not look like I'm quite looking at you, because I'm not looking at my camera, and you're looking at the camera, and that might now, you know. It's a little bit one removed, isn't it, you know, overall. And also I have to wear glasses to do screen work, and I don't do that in the room with people. So that's a new adjustment for me, but when I'm in the room with somebody, it's like I am aware of the things that are stirring in me, but my energy is very much flowing towards the one who's come for the consultation, if you like. And it is a little disturbing to remember myself within that context. But I think useful if one's doing it kindly.

JB: Yeah. Kindness – we need a lot of that.

MM: We do, we do!

JB: Definitely, we do.



MM: I keep coming back to the business of – we talked a bit about liminality, this process of betwixt and between, stepping into different spaces: digital spaces, spaces of us, spaces of being with people in community spaces where one is seen and heard, one goes on a journey, and one is disorientated. And one might come to a place of thinking: ‘Wow, gosh, something settled in me before I then move onto the next part, or phase, and I’m at another threshold!’ And the point of threshold is the point of arrival and departure: it’s the point of knowing what one is bringing to that moment, but also what one is sacrificing, what one is leaving behind. If I’m going on a journey, I need to know what I’m taking with me and what I’m leaving behind. And I think that’s also vocally, certainly what I’m getting people to explore really is that sort of sense of working out the losses and the gains, I suppose.

JB: Yeah.

MM: Something also about temporality as well within this very, very strange time; and your beautiful words, and the sea, the eternal nature of the sea, the community of the sea, and the community of your voices, and the political community that I hear in your words speaks across time. So the elders – the vocal elders that are in another place, if you like. Linklater and [Cicely] Berry and people – that their work is vibrationally with us, if you like. And so we can make the ‘then’ now, can’t we, by locating that within ourselves somehow. So it takes vocal temporality, and it’s not linear. It really isn’t.

JB: It’s not linear, no. I do feel keenly the loss of Kristin, as we’ve spoken about, and the voice community does. But I was just reading about the idea that we’re all – it’s a small place this globe, really, and the time we have to honour each other. There’s something about – I go to images about nature and the whales, if you like, and that the idea of my home, I suppose, is that we have something we can work out together, all of us, in terms of our journeys. This long evocation that you gave us about the journeying, and the myriad encounters, and the thresholds that we cross. And so it’s a philosopher that I was reading about, saying that we have just a critical, small space in this globe, and everything counts. You know, every signal going every which way has some impact on us, you know? I feel I find solace in that idea that there is something bigger, as well as this deep, individual voice-seeking we do. But that we have some impact beyond that which we can really manage at any given time; but that we had a responsibility somehow, whales, us, you know – us as inhabitants, crisscrossing our journeys together. And the richness of that, the responsibility of that, the gift of that. You know, the idea that we – certain people want to just get the hell out and get to Mars. [*Laughter.*] Yeah, the kind of absence, getting away, when in fact, we are responsible for what we’ve got: the sounds we make.

MM: Yeah, that’s right. Exactly, exactly! And I know that speech therapy has had a history of maybe perhaps fixing voice as you know, rehabilitating voice – certainly, the parts that I work in. In voice coaching, if you like, within the NHS – in what ‘healing’ means or ‘state of health’ means – there’s never a place to return to what was, it’s always a new place, a new understanding, new consciousness, a new sense of... And that comes from really occupying where you’re at right now, and not denying where you’re at right now, and saying, you know: ‘This is my voice and these are its possibilities, and these are the things that are within me, and these are the things that I can send out and meet other people.’

JB: And they’re in us in a relational capacity: how we are colliding, or meeting, or chancing off each other; the beauty of that, in a sense, the beauty to stay richly involved with. Yvon Bonenfant talked about that in his work about queering.

MM: Yes, I love that paper!

JB: Yeah, it’s good! And talks about the vocalic body that we touch. We’re touching each other’s worlds with our sound; with the meaning of us and the shaping-meaning of us, and the meaning that’s changed because I’m encountering your sonic world.

MM: Yes, yes.

JB: Those are the things that give me great – I don’t know – heart, somehow. That we’ve got a responsibility to stay alive to that, to be nuanced for those voices, particularly in the discussions that we’re having at the moment, which are so divided, we can get so deeply – and we have to expose the divisions. But also there’s a notion of moving in recognition of... embracing, really, listening, really listening. How enriching that is!

MM: Yes, yes, taking time.



JB: Yeah.

MM: And I think that the speed of the digital space, you know, it's all accountable, isn't it, literally, it's a countable entity, you know. I suppose our market economy is such that, you know, we give teaching time the number of hours, and study time, et cetera, and all those things are potentially countable. But it's the quality of the exploration, the quality of the therapeutic conversation. It's the quality of the boundary that is set up and explored together that enables the fertility, if you like, of the exploration to echo out.

JB: Echo out. Yeah.

MM: I love that work of Bonenfant's. I mean, this is the queerness which is the world of *Pose* and the whole business of walking those balls – you know, that tradition that's Latino and African American tradition. That tradition of having fantastic sense of dress – exploring and expressing oneself; sexuality, gender, and being the arbiters, if you like. Being the judges of that community, validating themselves. And then the voguing, which people think Madonna – they attribute to Madonna, but it's actually much, much, much older than that. It's part of that community, but it's a dance of resilience, and it's a dance of being seen, and there is a vocal component to it, you know. And that sort of queer sense of voice that for me is definitely a political thing.

JB: Yeah.

MM: But it's very personal, very personal, because it's – it takes diversity. Which is often used very quickly – yeah, but it's that sense of: 'It's okay to be what we are!', I think.

JB: Yeah, it's interesting that coming back to the risk-taking, because more and more – we've spoken about this a lot – as a pedagogue in voice training in the Conservatoire, the position I don't want to take is one of pronouncement, but it's about setting the guidelines for exploration for the voice that ultimately the individual wishes to choose. But set in a context that – also I have to change the context sometimes, of the perception. Because perception is a cruel one at times – that's the external expectation, the stereotypes. You know, working on those multiple fronts, ensuring that there's activation to challenge or resist the perceptions that would squash you, or denounce you, or place you somewhere else. And I find that quite complex. It is complex, obviously, but actually trying to fold it into a pedagogical stance which is saying: 'Be aware of the perception! Shape the perception, but also be true to your own journey!'

MM: Yes, exactly.

JB: The simultaneous journeying there.

MM: Yes. I suppose about getting a very conscious sort of sense of what is being asked of you vocally in a particular context, and knowing really, very clearly what that is. And then you can choose with your instruments that you've explored, you can choose to code-switch and occupy that sort of moment of Noël Coward, you know, heightened pitch note, all those things. You can do that. You can serve – you can have a vocal performance, which meets that moment. And I think that's the same with gender perception, really. Certainly, in a binary sense. A kind of 'non-binary vocal sense', as I might call it, is that liminality, it is that sort of sense where all things are possible. And it's not actually defined by the polarity. It's something queer and beyond, really. It's both within and without, and betwixt and between, and not defined by it. I think if the vocal person – if that brave soul can speak their sense and understand what's being asked of them, I think that's our role as facilitators of voice, that we enable people to understand what might be expected of them.

JB: Exactly, I think the answer is to make them safe in the instability of the inquiry.

MM: I love it! Yes, absolutely. Yeah, because it is quicksilver, isn't it? It is immaterial. It is both forward and retrograde. [*Laughter.*]

JB: Yeah. I know. [*Laughter.*] Oh, dear, what a journey! I mean, it's a privilege. It's a privileged job. It's a privilege to be able to speak with you, to have the time to do this, to think about these things. It's what I always wanted to do, really. With so much time in the studio of doing over the years, I've also – what I've really welcomed is being able to have these kinds of conversations, to think about the doing, the knowledge that is the doing, you know? I've always had such a strong connection to that: making sense of the doing.



MM: Yes. I love that the symbols that we've discussed together and how they relate to our vocal journeys, and how they relate to our students' journeys, our patients' journeys, our clients' journeys, our services of journeys, whatever. You know, all that – how those things are so interrelated. Yeah.

JB: Fabulous! Wonderful! Thank you, Matthew! Thank you!

MM: Thank you very much.

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

Clips Summary

[00:18:41 to 00:19:00] MJ Rodriguez's rendition of 'Home' from *The Wiz*

[00:21:26 to 00:25:12] 'Sounding Different' (2020) by Siren

Works Cited

Bonenfant, Yvon (2010) 'Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres', *Performance Research*, 15 (3), 74–80, <https://doi/abs/10.1080/13528165.2010.527210>.

Mills, Matthew & Stoneham, Gillie (2020) *Voice and Communication Therapy with Trans and Non-Binary People: Sharing the Clinical Space*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Audio available at www.auralia.space/salon3-janeboston-and-matthewmills/.

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