

Rethinking theatre voices

Konstantinos Thomaidis

I was born [tongue-tied](#) and grew up with a speech impediment called [rhotacism](#). Simply put: I couldn't roll my 'r's, a consonant featuring prominently in my native language, Greek. As a teenager attending a Francophone school in Northern Greece, my teachers were proud of my 'naturally' French-sounding accent. During breaks, however, classmates would engage in friendly banter about it. At Drama Club, I was always given comedic roles, my word-formation considered well-suited to inducing laughter on stage.

I guess this is when I became aware—in a mostly intuitively but markedly embodied way—of three key points around voice.

First: that internal voice, language, speech and sounded voice are not the unified whole we may take them to be. They are different from each other and not necessarily conjoined in a seamless fashion. Traditional ways of thinking about voice have subordinated it to speech, language and internal voicing (the [voice of ideas](#)) and expect it to be used in everyday interlocution without announcing its presence. [Voice serves the exchange of ideas through speech and, in the process, disappears](#). By contrast, the materiality of my voice, the body engaged in making it, interfered. Nobody ever complained about my linguistic aptitude or avoided exchanging ideas with me, but they did feel urged to comment on how the sounds produced by my mouth deviated from an ideal version of speech—or to capitalise on it for theatrical effect.

Second, voice is not a given but a never-ending work-in-progress. Apart from the resounding examples of early childhood [phonological development](#) and [language acquisition](#), voices are constantly educated in formal and informal ways. Culture-bound perspectives on loudness, pitch, pace or regulation of silence and profession-specific trainings (from acting to politics and therapeutic contexts) constantly affect and reconfigure our vocal emissions. Because not all trainings are immediately discernible, voices might be thought of as fixed objects, gifts or burdens allocated by sheer luck rather than as fluctuant, flexible and evolving processes. In some cases, circumstance highlights the makings of the voice and renders them immediately identifiable, because they involve significant labour. Two years before applying to drama school, my family and I agreed that my impediment was not acceptable for a trainee actor. Oral surgery (preceded by an earlier operation on my glands and followed by surgical treatment of my deviated septum), a few months of speech therapy and my first couple of years of singing lessons at the conservatoire were prescribed. By the time adolescence was over and I got into acting, my voice was perceived as ‘naturally suited’ to performing.

This brings me to my third early realisation: that voice is not solely defined by its production but, crucially, its reception too. The same utterance was deemed a sign of linguistic inclination, a marker of comedic typecasting or an occasion for badinage depending on the listening ears interpreting and assigning value to it. Voices are in-betweens and the vocal space they occupy co-resonates with the preferences and habits of the listeners. Both in on- and off-stage vocal theatres, voices are proactively shaped not only by their makers but also by their receivers according to embedded [gendered](#) and [racialized](#) ‘ear-training’. In many cases, voicers may even [loose the right to decide how their voice is circulated](#) or, conversely, may be told that they only own one—immovable or unchanging—mode of voicing (an

assumption on which the creation of [biometrically objective voice recognition data banks](#) is based).

Performance not only plays out and magnifies these fundamental presuppositions about voice. It is also an ideal tool for challenging and reassessing them. [Theatre & Voice](#) is built around certain tactics of destabilising acquired ways of thinking and practising voice, and asks: how can we expand our engagement with theatre vocality by listening together to live, lost, mediated and artificial voices? How can listen across to voice in classical and contemporary theatre, opera, musical theatre, [intermedia installations](#), [sound art](#), [extended vocalization](#), [headphone theatre](#) and [live art](#)? Which new understandings are generated when interweaving theatre studies, musicology, ethnography, cinema and sound studies, politics and psychology, linguistics and philosophy, to think about the design and effect of voices? And how can the encounter between voicing and listening become more nuanced, plural and inclusive by amplifying the ways race, ethnicity, ability, gender and class intersect in vocal interchange?

Because if voice is not predestined to language and text, if it's not a rigid or stable essence of our identity and if it's continuously co-devised by the voicer and the listener, performance can do much in unsettling what we take for granted about voice—and rehearse alternatives spaces for different ways of voicing, inside and outside the confines of theatre.

[Konstantinos Thomaidis](#) is the author of [Theatre & Voice](#) and founding co-editor of the [Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies](#). He lectures at the University of [Exeter](#).

