

Afroscenology for British actors? Making performance pregnant with culture

Posted on February 2, 2024 by Claire French
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text]If we are ‘pregnant with culture’, one of the powerful metaphors of Samuel Ravengai’s Afroscenology, then how can we select from and navigate between the inhibiting and transformational aspects of culture when training performers?

In a British context, how does the performance trainer tap into actors’ differences when the dominant prestige culture asks them to be noiseless, reserved and physically hidden behind their proclamations? Ravengai joined me as a Visiting Scholar at the University of Birmingham (UoB) between 27 January to 5 February 2024 to explore these questions with third-year and postgraduate performance students.

Our research questions for the session were developed in a remote exchange on a Postdramatic Theatre UoB undergraduate module, where we combined Afroscenology as a decolonising frame (Ravengai 2018) and

disinhibition for harnessing embodied and linguistic resources (French 2022). We observed inhibition that impacts student engagement and participation and sees them wanting to complete tasks in only prescribed and 'correct' ways, preventing opportunities for advancing their artistry. The institutionalisation of these 'correct' ways was accumulating with British middle-class ideals which align quiet reservedness with prestige, seeing us ask, more specifically:

How can we harness British performers' cultural (embodied and linguistic) resources in performance with Afroscenology as a conceptual starting point?

For this question, we draw from both postcolonial philosophy and linguistic anthropology for our definition of culture, legitimising culture as systems of knowledge and mental dispositions (Jourdan and Tuite 2009), which of course steps away from culture being defined as merely behaviour or artefacts. We also see culture as practices that narrate or block other narratives from forming and emerging (Said 1994).

Our questions and observations were certainly not new, articulated previously by the wider performance training discourse and various members of the department (detailed in a forthcoming article); however, some common experiences saw us pursuing it further. These included:

- Working in South African performance settings where the socio-political contexts of post-apartheid English-dominant Higher Education see it necessary to question the damaging influences on performance training from institutional and dominant cultures;
- Teaching in various other cultural settings whereby there is less inhibition and more opportunity for difference; and
- Having located (and continually locating) our bodies in relationship to the British dominant culture in our colonies of birth (Australia and Zimbabwe, respectively) and of course, in my place of living.

Our workshop ran for three hours on Tuesday 30 January and was structured with intensely physical group processes of disinhibition led by Ravengai, followed by individual interrogations of the self, led by me. Students explored Afrosonic mime, chanting, physical trust games, perspective-building in improvisation, and individual storytelling using

songs as framing devices and catalysts for the analysis of self. They presented pieces covering varied performance forms including spoken word, movement pieces, poems and letters, advising their younger selves, using the prompt ‘what you didn’t understand was…’[/vc_column_text][vc_video link=”https://youtu.be/78UlutXlWIw”][vc_column_text]Our *Reading Decoloniality* session wasn’t its typical format in that it placed initial observations of practice, pedagogies more specifically, as central to the discussion and invited points of view that would challenge these inferences. These discussions are included in full in the minutes below.

Highlights included the wildly different facilitation of Afroscenology by Ravengai remotely (in the previous teaching exchange) and in-person for the workshop. I reflected on how I hadn’t previously seen our selection of exercises and facilitation as all that different; however, in person Ravengai’s facilitation style was an essential part of the concept of Afroscenology.

For example, Ravengai’s call-and-response chanting game saw him make sounds in a made-up language and ask students to copy him before also inviting their consent to be pushed bigger, bolder and braver. This was the second time they had given their consent covering their participation, with the first at the beginning of the workshop where he asked if they would be okay with him sometimes behaving like a football coach. In addition to the repetitive consent-seeking-and-giving, Ravengai walked around within the circle and faced each performer individually, gazing into their eyes and using his hands to gesture towards pitch, dynamic and timbre.

As he created a large physicality and loud vocality, he also embodied aspects of his Zimbabwean culture. Students became less inhibited by his embodiment of culture, one-on-one consent-seeking and individual attention. We saw previously giggling performers transform their bodies into resonant instruments.

This quick-fire observation puts into question how much I am embodying my culture. Which parts of my Irish-Australian having lived in Germany and the UK are embodied in my facilitation of performance training? It sets in motion an interrogation of which aspects of my culture are inhibiting and transformational for my facilitation of performance training and

devising. It seems obvious to critically start with the self.[/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true"]**Date:** 31st January 2024
Title: Afroscenology for British actors?
Speakers: Claire French and Samuel Ravengai
Minuted by: Giulia Champion[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes"]**French opened the reading group:**

> This session isn't a typical format for Reading Decoloniality which usually takes a text as the central source for discussion whereas today we're focusing on several sessions that we've [Ravengai and French] run together, particularly an in-person session that we ran just yesterday. So, it's very fresh and we're opening up that practice and some initial observations as the main topic for discussion to be able to get your points of view. We'll accumulate knowledge in that way and look for multiple readings.
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> Samuel is at the Department of Drama and Theatre for the next 10 days and he's a director and a pedagogue who is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Theatre and Performance at the University of Witwatersrand. His next major contribution is a monograph entitled Decolonizing African Theatre published by the Cambridge Elements Series later in this year, so do look out for it we'll be buying it for our local library. I'm a dramaturg and writer with communities and an academic. I'm an Assistant Professor at the University of Birmingham and while here I've been convening and developing the new MA in Performance Practices: Applied Artists. I've also published on multilingual performance with minority Languages in South African (hence the connection) and Australian contexts. My monograph is called Making Multilingual Performance with Routledge and it's also forthcoming.
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> We will provide some background on our research and for that, I will share this structure with you [gesturing to slide]. Our connection really came about as a result of a postdoc that I did in 2021, which was called 'Decolonizing language ideologies in

the body', and Samuel was my mentor at that time. We then began a teaching exchange in 2022 with a mutual interest in students drawing more widely from their linguistic and embodied, and largely cultural, resources within performance training, and this is in line with Samuel's concept of Afroscenology, which conceptualises the body as pregnant with culture. This is one of the many powerful metaphors that Samuel uses in describing this concept and its connection to performance training. It also connected with my research on compositional approaches to dis-inhibiting actors, which you'll hear a few times throughout this presentation. This invites actors to draw more widely on their linguistic resources to code switch or translanguage, basically to use language more creatively – more as they do in their everyday rather than institutional contexts.

Samuel presented this concept of Afroscenology online to our department, in December 2022 and remotely co-taught parts of a second-year post-dramatic theatre studio session in March 2023. And, in this session, we largely developed a hypothesis for the workshop that we did yesterday.

Mostly amongst students, we saw that there was some type of inhibition that impacted student engagement and participation and saw them wanting to complete tasks in only prescribed and correct ways, and this prevented opportunities for advancing their individual artistry. This observation is, of course, not new and articulated by many members of our drama department. However, in conversation with Samuel, our common experiences of working in South African performance saw us look further at this example of how culture, especially in its institutionalisation in higher education, is embodied in ways that have both inhibitive and translate transformational influences on storytelling. So, culture, particularly when it's institutionalised, can be both inhibitive and transformational within storytelling. I suppose our outsiderness also allows us to take that location because we're constantly looking at many cultures and locating ourselves within and in reference to them.

We agreed that pedagogy must acclimatise to this, and this is what our research is largely looking to do, individually and together, and we draw from both linguistic anthropology and philosophy in our understanding of what culture is. We see culture as systems of knowledge and mental dispositions. We draw from Christine Jordan and Kevin Tuite, linguistic anthropologists, in building a definition that steps away from culture being merely defined as behaviour or artefacts, which is a much older perspective of culture and a limiting one. We also see culture as practices that narrate or block other narratives from forming, drawing on Edward Said.

The workshop that happened yesterday aimed at harnessing performers' non-institutionally legitimised cultures, their differences, and their previous and current selves, even more specifically that are not necessarily nurtured within their degrees. This workshop was made up of Applied Theatre students, largely from the BA Drama and Theatre Arts doing an Applied Performance module, as well as some Masters in Applied Artists students, who joined as well – and there were 8 participants.

Now Samuel is going to discuss a little bit more about Afroscenology, so we can all get our heads around that before we jump into some initial observations of this workshop and identify our key methodologies within that.

Samuel defined Afroscenology:

I'm going to speak a little bit more about Afroscenology: this concept is defined and expounded on in the forthcoming book in April, so I will explain it for you now and just talk about the few things that are important to understand what we're trying to do in this project. Essentially, Afroscenology is a term that I coined and derived from 2 words: 'Afro' which means an interest in an African performance and 'scenology' which comes from the term 'scene', so conjoined together the theory of the African image of

culture.

Now I want to discuss it from three vantage points, but only one is relevant to what we are going to look at today. So, the three structures of Afroscenology are first of all what I call the the performatic – this is to do with the structure of African plays after looking at quite a number of African plays that formed the African great tradition, or African canon, I observed that there is a type of writing that is specific to that tradition, which I called theatric theory. I break down the structure of an African play into what I call ‘compressions’ and a compression is the largest body or the largest structure of a play. These are a series of episodes, compression being the largest episode, I used the term compression, some scholars use ‘phase’, in the sense that the the compression does not lead to the other, it is self-contained. Within that compression, depending on the playwright or the director, there will be a series of smaller compressions, that I’ve called in English ‘canto’ or ‘dariro’ in my language, Shona.

At the end of each compression, there is some kind of dislocation or discontinuity, in the sense that the story does not build from the last episode, something else related to the theme begins. So there is a syntagmatic gap that is created between the first compression and the second, and the second one obviously reproduces the same structure and, depending on the playwright or the director, it may have a structure in between. So, the beginning is just like any Aristotelian play; it begins with an exposition, and I think this type of beginning is the same, and then, instead of the resolution, most African plays don’t end with the resolution, they end with what I’ve called a ‘deformation’. I am using the metaphor of engineering here, but when you compress, when you put things together under compression, it does not lead to something that can be called a resolution, but the forces that contend with one another produce a deformation, which does not necessarily resolve the complications that arise within the story. So, from that panoramic view of theatrical theory, I want to contrast with dramatic theory, wherein plays end with a resolution, denouement, or whatever you want to call

it. I offer this a contrast that explains its structure majorly differently from what we know, which is the dramatic theory.

The next structure of Afroscenology, which I call ‘focalisation’ – again this is not the main point I just want to introduce you to the theory of focalisation. Focalisation is the kind of choices of the perspective that the African writer, or Africanist writer, adopts, and when that perspective has been adopted, they try, as much as possible, to paint, or create, characters that are responsible, particularly those that identify as Africans. It is in the other place that, particularly during the colonial period, the representation of the African body or the African character is not always in the best interest of those who come from the continent, so focalisation takes an African perspective. It includes, or grapples with, African politics, whatever that politics could be, it protects the characters, particularly the subaltern characters, women, children, black people, workers and so on.

Some scholars call these epistemic, ideological or psychological codes. I call that ‘focalisation’, so in general, I tend to see the politics that is projected on African characters creating positive heroes, visualising African characters, and giving them subject place. as opposed to where in some instances they might end up being cleaners, sweepers, shopkeepers, people who support the main characters. In this approach, they are focalised and given subject position, subject or agency, within the story. It fits within narratology.

Now I want to focus on what brings us together here, with Claire, which is the performative theory, which we use for actor or performer training. Again, this is a book-length discussion, so I’m just going to go through its several tenets, which are mainly composed of

1. Imagistic imagination;

2. Afrosonic mime;

3. Bifurcation. I explained this concept to our students yesterday

where you will have a character, but the character does not maintain the same identity from the beginning to the end, they will transform themselves when they sing or dance. They will transform into non-character, inanimate or animate objects, whatever the case may be. Those who have watched Sarafina, or some such play from South Africa, will understand that there is constant shifting from one state of being to the other – you become air, you become smoke, you become the wind, you become a god, you become whatever you want to be.

There's an individual for us all, but as you can see on the slide [Woza Albert], the image of a band is playing simultaneously – all things that can be done in a real band, and that's the picture that you can see, which leads me to the next concept that I call;

4. Organicity. We play different parts of the band, the drum, the flute, whatever the case may be so that you become a machine that produces the sound of a band. No one can put this kind of performance into writing or words, and therefore, the performance relies more on improvisation, or what I call the tools.

Études involve the director beginning to facilitate that process of improvisation, although the performance will be realised through sound. This cannot be reduced to writing, or, the logos that go on paper, it is all performative or embodied, which is realised in the moment of improvisation.

Finally, I'm going to talk about physical action and vectorisation. I think physical action, which we are all familiar with, comes from Stanislavski and is about having a series of actionable, or, if you like, aims and objectives that you strive to achieve until you come to the end of the process. So, that's where the theory, or the technique, or the method of the formal training that I'm trying to develop comes from. Not from my ingenuity, but from observing what different artists have been doing since the time of the liberation struggle in the 1960s. When they were deviating from the norm, and by the norm I mean realism that was passed down through colonial education to many Africans,

so that they could use the performance skills and techniques that were coming from their culture.

Okay, so, having looked at these three, in brief, I think I'd like to jump into the workshop here. Let's move into the discovery, the setup and how this workshop ran, and then get into some observations.

Claire continued with:

We structured the session with a series of very intensely physical group processes of disinhibition, or aiming at disinhibition, led by Samuel, followed by more of an interrogation of the self, individually, which was mostly facilitated by me, and then, they came together at the end in a large-group exercise. I ran a physical group exercise on mats, introduced the bodies to the room, I worked on an adaptation of a Vinyasa Flow, and allowed them to become focused and ready. Then Samuel jumped into three games; the first was 'no one is allowed to break a bond', and then we had a quick discussion, and then he went into a chanting exercise, that focused on improvisation. Then they all together created a physicalisation of a steam engine, and following each of the games, we had quick discussions about what that required. Samuel introduced the term 'organicity' within the final exercise, and then I brought them into another room, and we did some individual memory work. This was something new that I was playing with where they took their earphones, we had some spares and their own devices, and I asked them to find two songs over some time.

The first one was a song that was important to them before they started their degree, so their pre-university self, and to listen to some thinking music while they were doing that. They all went into their own space, and they found that song. Then I asked them to write down the lyrics that were important to them, so they could start to develop some text, and this is usually the safe zone for these students: To find some text that can then

inspire storytelling. Then I asked them to do the same for a song now, and then I also asked them to layer their understanding of how they physicalised their selves, or how they drew from embodied, gesture, proximity, etc. And I asked them to analyse the physicalisation of the self and they were layering these ideas, or observations, into the lyrics of the songs. They were developing several accumulations of text and observations and so then they jumped back into the storytelling session with Samuel in the other room where he was very much focusing on exploring perspective in storytelling.

Then we came back over here, into individual memory work, to put the thinking music on and ask them to create either short stories, rap, spoken word, poetry, songs, physical performance, or movement pieces, asking them to give advice from the current self to the younger self.

It was only about 15 minutes and then they presented these as performances to us, and finally we put them into two groups and asked them to embed performances into an Afrosonic mime, which is a visual and sound landscape. Then we sat down and talked about it all, and since it was only yesterday, we are going to introduce two examples each and provide some reflections on what we thought from the day. Samuel's going to begin. I think I'd love to get a sense of any general impressions of the students and how you saw them working, some of the feedback that you gave them before jumping into the examples. Before you start, I will show this quick example from one of the students, Rebecca Kibuuka, they've all given consent for this to be used. It is her performance with advice from the current self to the younger self.

[Plays video]

Samuel began with his observations:

First, I figured out that the course was multicultural and I think all of them identified as British. In many ways, apart from one

student, there's a certain level of Britishness that they all subscribed to. There is a way in which they performed being British. I think all of us perform who we are in one way or the other, and that for me was very exciting and interesting as a theatremaker.

Secondly, there was a lot of enthusiasm from the students – they were keen to do anything. I need to say that I was asking for a lot of permission because certain inhibitions were displayed by the students. There's a certain level of loudness, exuberance and bigness that I requested and when I wanted them to be bigger to be louder there was the kind of resistance or inhibition to say that's outside the norm. I asked for permission: we would like you to be a little bigger. …

I pushed and asked for permission to do more, they accepted and took the risks, and in one of the reflection moments, they said that they went over and above, but they were willing to take the risks, in fact, the word that they said something along the lines of 'we took risks and by the time we ended the workshop we enjoyed what we were doing'.

Where I come from, I think, this is supported by linguists, most of the people who come from the continent of Africa are very loud, very loud, and the loudness increases as one moves from Southern Africa to West Africa. I am sure if all of you have heard West African brothers in Nigeria, you would think that they are fighting when they are talking to each other in a very social, friendly gathering…

… after independence in Zimbabwe in 1980, when the students were joining those schools, the principal and teachers would say to turn it down it was punishable to be loud and the same was the case in South Africa. I want to talk about the loudness that they use as a resource in South Africa, or Africa, in that case where they will play this kind of work it comes to them, arguably, naturally because that is how they are coaching.

… Wherever they go, they are trained, or they are socialised to

be loud, and to be big, and this they bring to the academy, and we use that as a resource. Now, bringing the same technique to the eight students who came to this workshop, we succeeded, but we succeeded, in a way that the workshop made them do what they were able to do. I asked for permission and said 'louder'…

… Linguistically vowels are the same but the shape of the mouth and the position of the tongue, from a phonetic point of view, are different as you move from one language to the other, so again they performed their vowels in English/British words, and I wanted them to be louder, which means they needed to change the position of the tongue and the size of the mouth to produce the phonetic sounds that I wanted.

They were able to do that, and from the vowels voice exercises, we moved to the steam engine, where I produced the steam engine sound… now everybody was going to play a steam engine and again the resistance was there, I said I wanted a bigger steam engine, and by the time we finished the exercise, they were all in it, one of them was playing breaks, the other was playing steam, the other was playing, you know, all of them combining their efforts into the term that I called organicity. They were only for my evaluation, we succeeded by my probing and pushing to get the results, and they admitted, at the end of the session, that that was the case and they would like to take more risks in the future.

The second one related to loudness is customs and culture – something that I already touched on, which is something that we also indicated initially when we introduced in the seminar, that our bodies absorb the things that we grow up with, so let me go back to the Township in South Africa. In Africa, children play in the streets, they play games, they play …, they sing music, they sing …, they sing all the things that you see in the beautiful songs that they do not learn at school, they learn these things as they socialise in the community halls, industries, whatever the case may be. This, in principle, sets a principle in their bodies, which when they bring the body to the academy will exude

those skills, and we try in our decolonisation endeavour not to neutralise the bodies, as is the case in voice training, but we use these embodiments as resources and build on what they can see, what they can politicise and use the material for the sake of producing theatre.

When we came to the workshop, I discovered a different embodiment among the students that we were dealing with. There was a reluctance to do so, so that, by the end of the exercise, they could do the organicity of the steam engine – they could do the stories in an intensely embodied way. It wasn't just a reliance on the text, but the story was also physicalised…

Claire:

What we are trying to do is not superimpose cultural attributes of the South onto British students but understand how Afroscenology can help us question what cultures are protected and hegemonic – used in the institution. So, it's not so much that Samuel is questioning whether British students should be acting in this particular culture, but how one culture of being inward fits the embodied and linguistic characteristics of what it means to be proper and what it means to be middle class, often standard language speaking performers.

Samuel:

What we ended up getting was the combination of what I was talking about. I just wanted to keep doing it, we should be performing the research that we're engaging with, right?

Claire:

When you simply import a technique into a different cultural

setting, the reflection on the product that you get does not reflect where the technique comes from. I think there is a way in which it is moderated and mediated by the body, by new bodies, that you find in the new space to produce something even more exciting. That is what I observed and something which celebrates difference. That is the point.

So, my general perspectives on observations of yesterday, were that I was quite taken aback by how much the students threw themselves into the individual work, and showed some vulnerability, which I rarely see in them, and many of them, most of them, except one, I have taught before. Their poems, their movement, and spoken word letters to themselves navigated these two chapters of their lives and their personal physical and sociocultural changes: They did show physical differences between the older self and the newer self, and that type of nuance, or specificity, I don't often get to see, when it has a relationship to the self, so that was exciting.

But highlighting this so-called transformation is, of course, easy in this case, and my first question to Samuel last night was how much of them throwing themselves into this, how much their deep attachment to the material that created a possibility for sharing, was because of this being an event: There were cameras, they signed a consent form, which they do not do in any other teaching session, Samuel was here from South Africa, only here for a short period, and this sense of an occasion meant that, of course, they were going to rise to it. I mean they could have gone the other way and started to challenge it if they felt like it was too silly, but they were either third-years or masters students, so they are used to being silly with us.

So, anything that would take from this workshop, can't be divorced from any of these factors, so further research needs to be done, and that models these types of methodologies.

To be quite honest in March 2023, during our remote co-taught session, I left thinking 'Oh, actually that's not that different from what I do, I do these exercises'. The physical body is at the

centre and I draw from techniques that are influenced by South Africa, but, of course, in Europe, we have psychophysical techniques, which are very much centred on the body. All of his [Samuel's] descriptions and ways of facilitating, while he was online, it felt like it was not that new. I realised yesterday that I was quite wrong, the reason why was that Samuel was not here in person to facilitate – we all understand the differences between facilitating online versus in person, but in a way, he embodies Afroscenology, which made me start to think about the facilitator's embodiment of their culture.

So, an example of him facilitating embodying his culture or embodying the concept of Afroscenology is his request for students to repeat after him in the chanting game. He was walking around the centre of the circle, and the students and I were outside, and he was looking at each of the students in their eyes, and so forth, but what was different, which I hadn't seen before, was that he was checking in with them, and getting them to repeat after him. He was going around to every student, then he was constantly saying 'You consented to this, right? you said yes, that you will do this' and he asked them for consent at least twice at the beginning. He said I sometimes 'Take on my role as facilitator in the style of a sports' coach'.

The students were consenting and then he had this opportunity to keep pushing them and that was quite extraordinary, and it was because he was so big and bold and loud and happy to use so many parts of his mouth, which I don't often use in vocal exercises, it was like there were tonalities there and nasals and gutturals, and it was quite different to how I would facilitate. So, my egotistical view a year ago, 'Yeah I can do that, that's fine', was challenged. I think Samuel himself, embracing his embodied and linguistic and, of course, cultural resources in these processes of consent seeking and one-on-one interactions, meant that they couldn't hide, so they just had to become bolder…

That was interesting, and so in a final evaluation with the students after the Afrosonic mime, one of the students said that

they often hide behind their words, which I found such an interesting British sensibility, and it says a lot about the history of text in this country, and the theatre, and many other students echoed this point of view. But what's important here is not to have the whole group of students echo our hypothesis, but the essential embodiment of this culture was real and tangible and personal, the same exploration, that I might have delivered, might not have seen the students share on such an individual, deep and reflective and vulnerable level. So, I started to think that maybe I'm not as disinhibited as Samuel has been, teaching for much longer so I should have expected that, but it made me think about my embodiment of culture.

This has been an ongoing conversation with friends since I've been coming and going from Australia, and looking for ways of embedding my Australian culture into my teaching practice as well, and that's come all very naturally without it being a conscious effort, but also looking at other aspects of my family and friends that might be more fully embedded within my teaching practice and how that is also a starting point. It's obvious, but it's very easy otherwise to focus on performance training, without really thinking about how the facilitator or the trainer is embodying what they are speaking about. I think that's also influenced by British culture within Australia, and, of course, you know, Zimbabweans and Irish-Australians, we are from colonies. Our location within this is largely because we have navigated British culture our whole lives, and often in very conscious ways of taking things on for prestige, avoiding them, being activists, and being contradictions in so many ways, which means that we are motivated to do this research, not always as activists, but because it is something we do anyway.

That's my first observation. The second observation is this individual headphone methodology. I asked students to bring their headphones and devices because I wanted them to have a close relationship to that device, and to be where they usually go for their music. I wanted them to find some thinking music, as I mentioned, and this was to be able to, once they found artistic

clarity in what they wanted to say, to hold them there in that space and that personal space…

I have started playing music in previous pedagogies and I'll go through lots of different music that might bring something up in them, something that their grandparents used to listen to when they were young, or all of these things. I'm just going for what is going to be a stimulus for people, to connect to and think about their multiple cultures in physical work. The other day I had a student who was like 'Can you put something on' and I was like 'What would you like' and she gave me a musician. I put it on and that student is a little usually harder to engage in physical work than some of the others, not hard but just harder in comparison, and she started to go for it and I thought that was interesting…

The methodology also came from discussions with personal tutees. I was speaking with a tutee a little while ago and told them that putting my earphones on in public space, really helps me disconnect and be in my zone, and she replied 'My generation knew that a long time ago!'. I thought, 'Yeah I'm a bit slow to the ball game, here because otherwise, I like to participate in public life and be present and have those chats with people on the buses and so forth', so I made me think about how much people that we teach rely on the their headphones in their lives and maybe how we can bring that into our pedagogy a little bit more when thinking through catalysts for culture. It is not innovative, but I just thought maybe we could then throw it as there's a silent disco, and maybe there are other creative potential stuff for thinking about accessing cultures in this country, in the UK and, for performance work.

One other thing about the next stages of this research, these are some very expansive observations that we would love your points of view on, you know, challenges to some of these inferences made and things that we have thought about because it has been in the past 24 hours, but also, we might not even think about. In the next stages, we will be looking at the physicalisation of students, we will be going through a

methodology, which I have explored before, which sees me transcribe these interactions from the workshop. We have three cameras set up, so there is a lot of data there to look at, and to understand the gestural and linguistic sensibilities of students, to go a little bit deeper, and to get away from the rhetoric around transformation and success.

Finally, I just want to say one thing about decolonisation. The actual workshop was called ‘Decolonising Performance Training’, and the reason we framed it as such is that by drawing on, more widely, from one’s cultural and linguistic resources, and bringing them into the higher education institution, and their artistic processes, we see that as a challenge to the coloniality of language and embodiment.

That is how we have been framing decolonisation within our work, very broadly. Coloniality affects everyone and that’s how we are participating with the concept in this context.

I would like to open up the discussion and we’ll finish with just some general future contribution stuff.

Reader 1:

I teach voice sometimes and I have had problems trying to get them to go beyond a minimum vocal level of sounds, so I understand you and I don’t think it is just a cultural thing, I think it’s a class thing as well. I come from a working-class background, and it is not the same to be so quiet, I find that not only are the students feeling inhibited by the British, but by this kind of value of: ‘You have to be polite and to shout is very rude, and all’. At some point you said ‘middle class’, and I think the class thing is a really big issue in terms of vocal, not only the level of volume, but it is rude to say what you think, it is rude to be forthright, it is very judged if you say what you think, so I think students adapt to that. I think for them being able to look into a culture that has very different vocal habits and values, is

useful to interrogate their own, which is stopping them from using their full potential. In the voice class that I used to run, that was always the problem: To get any kind of volume or to get in touch, use their bodies to produce sound was a real barrier for them and the kinds of permission that they got from actually being loud or using the whole body to produce the sounds was transformative. I think that's the thing in vocal studies that we may be struggling with here.

I wonder if you would say something about that about whether you feel that in the theatre that you are more familiar with in Africa, there is more connection between the voice and the body, than in the UK because I feel there is a total disconnection between the voice and the body.

Samuel:

Yes. I was reading a PhD thesis today, and the student was claiming that when they speak in an African language, they speak their heart and when they speak in English, they speak from their head. They liked the evenings because they got to speak their language and got to engage with rationality and intellectualising. I think we are actively discouraged from using emotion and the voice, even in the way that we express ourselves, but also in the actual sounds. I think that is a real cultural thing. I think have felt particularly in this institution, yes. By class do you mean, working class or?

Reader 1:

Class, yes, there is a very big division that we see between, the local students, which we are getting more of since the fees because a lot of students have to stay at home, so there is a bigger presence of students from Black Country, which has very different culture. I have run an EDI workshop on accents, and regional accents, and how not only students but staff as well,

how they feel they must adapt to the standard accent as soon as they arrive in Birmingham. A lot of them have received a lot of prejudice against having a local accent, so they are constantly being silenced.

Samuel:

I think the article I wrote about the dilemma of the African body raises those fundamental issues. It is so interesting how cultural sensibilities can be so inhibiting to performance training…

When I first came to Europe in 2002, at a festival or encounter in the Czechia, I think, most drama schools were represented, maybe, they still do it and, what I discovered about the festival was that theatre was getting less and less text-based, at least the shows that I saw, except a few countries from Eastern Europe at the time. When I went back to South Africa, where I was doing my postgraduate studies, I started yearly to attend what they call the Grahamstown Arts Festival, and the situation was the same as we moved more into 2007, 2009, and 2010, at the current moment, realism in South Africa, in terms of practice. The academy was no longer as highly profiled as it was in the 90s, and probably in the early 2000s…

Let me say when I read the literature and discovered a new language all over the world was being developed to speak about the work that combines text and embodied work.

A typical example of developing that language in that theory is to talk about the things that students and many practitioners are now doing, why Afroscenology, it seems to me here that there has been a lot of South African work, since the 1990s going to festivals and going to theatres in the US, including the UK.

For me it has been a challenge in the academy, working in a southern University, to begin to think through this work and say what language, and concepts can I develop, that I can share not

only with South Africans but with people who may have an interest in this kind of theatre. The connection with Claire, I think there is cultural sharing there, in terms of the things that I have seen, as well, and what I have seen at festivals.

Reader 2:

I would like to know more about how we can decolonise embodiment. As a music educator, I feel that my students benefit from an embodied understanding of music. Therefore, I feel that decolonising my notion of embodiment might be useful.

Samuel:

You are asking the question of how we decolonise the embodiment of music some practitioners do it the other way around instead of beginning with notation, they begin with singing or stomping, beating the drum, or humming and based on the combination of stomping humming. Or whatever the case may be the music may come from there, I don't know if it makes sense, so it is almost what we are doing in this methodology as well.

Claire:

What we've been describing from yesterday, is bringing aspects of this into the space the students usually wouldn't be allowed to or wouldn't be requested of them. You [Samuel] provided some musical examples. In South Africa, when you come into the space, people offer a welcome song, it is a way of all having solidarity and a sense of comfort and trust in the space. A way to sing a song together, and usually a few people will start that up and everyone can join in, in an improvised way, and so that also allows for people to bring something into the space. That is a

little invitation that could create a new trend for that person bringing more of that physicalisation or embodiment into the space, for example, they could start swinging their arms and clicking, which is what they used to do with their grandmother at home. And their grandmother also might speak Hungarian with them, and so all of a sudden you notice that because they are doing this, in the beginning, because you are invited, something else into the room, then they also start to do it more, in other practices.

Reader 3:

I noticed that the students in the workshop you ran were majority white. And I assume that there was a minimal amount of international representation from other countries as international students? Do you think the practice might shift in its reception/potential for acting 'freedom' if the students were from global majority backgrounds in the UK?

Claire:

Yes, more international students might mean less alignment with prestige varieties but global north background British students have, in my experience, shifted to the standard as much as white students.

Samuel:

In SA, when I joined Wits in 2014, 60% of students were classified as black and the other 40 were white. Fast forward to 10 years later, which is 2024, now the ratio has significantly changed from 60 to nearly 85-90% are black and the remaining 10-15% is white. Now when the Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall movements, which I'm sure you're aware of, came into place

from 2015-2016, parts of 2017, they were calling for the decolonisation of the curriculum. What it did mean, in the context of South Africa, from the issue of language and voice, that you were talking about; they wanted to see themselves represented linguistically.

South Africa stopped teaching received pronunciation/RP in 1976, although the majority of universities were white at that particular time, so they taught what they called 'white South African accent', which is very different from RP, that's a fact, so that in itself is a way to decolonise English, they still speak English, but they speak English differently, and what the students were calling for, from a voice point of view, was to include ethnic voice in the training. So, rather than being colonised by white South African English, and a white South African accent, they wanted ethnic voices to be incorporated into the training.

By the way, within the university that I'm working for, we no longer have acting as a discipline, with performance, which allows for a broader conversation with all performance cultures and I'm sure at this university you incorporated drama and theatre arts, which I think the last is much broader than what drama used to be. So, decolonisation means incorporating performance techniques and methods from the majority, in the case of South Africa, and that's what we've been doing since I initiated the process of decolonisation that we talked about at the beginning of the session.

Claire concludes:

Going further I'd like to test these methodologies without Samuel. I'd also like to explore what embodying my culture(s) looks like a little further and understand their effect on interaction with students. Our research at some point will be published. It was to understand how much of a comparison we are going to be setting up really between South African culture

> and the British one, because obviously that's a pretty massive article, and so we are still understanding the framing.
>
> This research particularly thinks around Afroscenology in a British context.

Samuel finishes:

> I'll say, we intersect on that one, our interests are intersecting, on that one I think, that from the way I was interacting with students, and the way I was being questioned by students in the last session, including this one, there is a greater appetite to understand different ways of knowing that are both intellectual and embodied. I think that twenty-first-century students don't want to be limited. That is my impression. They don't want to be pigeonholed into particular ways of doing. I think the internet has opened them to many ways of knowing, the click of a button takes you to different parts of the planet, and I think that by getting involved in productions, I'm getting to understand different ways of knowing in performance.

[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Final thoughts" open="true"]The final performances and evaluations saw new observations of expressive and vulnerable potential among students whom I have taught for almost two years. Of course, the special nature of Ravengai visiting from southern Africa and the workshop being filmed both need to be discerned as part of our analysis of these findings with repeated practice without these elements needed. Several of the performers noted that being British means they often hide behind their words and that the workshop awakened a consciousness around this. What is clear, for now, is the need for a raised consciousness around the impact of the British prestige culture on performers and facilitators navigating British colonies and living in England, including me.

We look forward to the next stages of the research, where I hope to return to South Africa to further unpick access routes to the embodiment of

culture.

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Video: Rebecca Kibuuka giving advice to her younger self

Video and photo: Erin Duncan, Haleemah Farooki, Isabella Ashley,Lana Donovan, Louise Bartram, Rebecca Kibuuka, Orla Deacon and Nameun Kim.[/vc_column_text][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_separator align=”align_left” el_width=”50″ css_animation=”fadeIn” css=””]

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