



Lynne Kendrick
***Theatre Aurality* (2017)**

What is theatre's aural dimension, and what exactly is meant when we speak of theatre's aurality? What theoretical and aesthetic dimensions does it open up vis-à-vis the idea of theatre's visuality? How should we frame theatre that privileges the aural, and what should we understand from this progressive move towards sound?

In this oral introduction, Lynne Kendrick returns to her *Theatre Aurality* (London: Palgrave, 2017) and talks us through the process of writing it: from a desire to map out the philosophical field of the aural, to explorations of recent performative practices that foreground the sonic and vocal, to her conceptualisation of how the craft of sound-making is intrinsically related to the act of theatre-making: 'you cannot untie that knot'.

Lynne Kendrick is Reader in New Theatre Practices at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Her publications include 'Aural Visions: Sonic Spectatorship in the Dark' in *Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre* (2017), 'Auralité et performance de l'inaudible' in *Le Son du Théâtre* (2016); 'Aurality, Gestus and the Performance of Noise' in *Sound und Performance: Positionen, Methoden, Analysen* (2015), and *Theatre Noise: The Sound of Performance*, co-edited with David Roesner (2011).

[00:00:15] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

The title of this book is *Theatre Aurality*. It was going to be *Theatre and Aurality*, but every time I said the title it got confused with the shorter series, edited by Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato, so I cut the 'and'. After much deliberation it's *Theatre Aurality*.

[00:00:40] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

I think the journey towards this book was a slow one, but something I'd been reflecting on for a while. And that is the term 'theatre aurality'. Because it was a term that was readily around, kind of in circulation really, particularly amongst sound scholars, scholars of listening, and of the aesthetics of audience as well. And it was a term that was being used quite a lot – I was seeing it a lot in the work by Ross Brown, for instance, Pieter Verstraete, George Home-Cook – and I actually thought: 'What do we mean by this, what do we mean by "theatre aurality"?' I think it's a term that more described a field of research, an attempt to kind of ringfence certain types of research about sound in theatre or listening in theatre. But I felt that it should really be more – it's a term that refers to more than the thematic. So it's more than just describing a trend or a collection of research endeavours. If we put it up against its partner term, 'theatre visuality', you know, we've seen for decades that visuality, theatre visuality – Maaïke Bleeker's work for instance, has been really upheld as a critical endeavour, and something which has huge amounts of different voices speaking to that in our field, in our discipline. So I felt that there was a need to really explore theatre aurality beyond the thematic. Trying to represent a discipline of practice's work, the development in theatre sound practices – of course that's very important – but I felt it was doing something more than that. So that's the reason why I wrote the book and wanted to focus on theatre aurality as a critical field and, as Frances Dyson says, 'a phenomenal discursive field of enquiry'.

I think it sits in some obvious ways. I was thinking about this. It's the development, certainly, of the work that myself and David Roesner collated/curated for the *Theatre Noise* book. Actually I do have sort of personal obsessions with the weirdness and the oddness of sound, and our constant relations to it. So actually I think, in terms of my previous work with my PhD, with my writing in acting and performance and my own training with Philippe Gaulier, is much more influential in a way, because there, sound and vocality in all that practice and all those European traditions, they never cohere –



they never cohere with each other and they never cohere the present body, whether that's a performing body, an acting body, a musician's body. There's always that latitude, that looseness which more often than not, in the training that I did, was for comic effect but often is for critical effect. So the whole relationship, for instance, between clown and vocality and the fact that, you know, the white face clown is a persona, if you like, that emerged because they were censored, they were not allowed to speak. There is a fundamental, political, quite urgent historical relationship there between the sound of that performing body and then the reconfiguring of that performing body into this idea of the auguste clown or the white-faced clown, or the pierrot in other traditions. So there's such nuanced histories between the relationship and the censorship and the politics of voicing, making sound, sounding, being able to make sound, and performing practice. So this is something else I wanted to really uncover in the book which I think I only touched on, I think there's more scope to explore this: the histories of sound practice, not just as the development of the discipline or development of the craft, but also as something which could really reveal the different histories of theatre-making per se. So my route to the book really is about trying to represent or connect what we think about as the craft of sound to the theatre-making, to the artform that we make. Because we cannot undo that knot. So that's the other reason – my other route rather – towards writing this book, I realised on reflection.

I think also the other route towards it is the fact that I'm a bit of a nerd. And I'm of that generation that – I've got earbuds in now – I cannot do Zoom without earbuds, I'm too easily distracted. I have to be soundtracked in everything I do, whether it's in a meeting about my course budget or it's a Zoom with my students or it's a conversation like this. So I'm of that generation that is always in-ear, and that's because I had a Walkman. In 1983 I think I got my first Walkman, and I haven't been able to travel or leave the house without music since then. So there's a kind of a particular cultural sonic sensibility as well that I think has driven a number of us towards this field.

[00:06:58] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

This is a really good question! And it's interesting how it sort of makes you think: 'What is the book about?' Well the book, the subject of the book, is theatre aurality; and the focus, first and foremost, is on the theatre-making by artists who choose to place sound and vocality in a foregrounded way within the work. And there's been quite a significant kind of small-scale, but also large-scale movement of sonic-led theatre. The smaller scale work of course is headphone theatre, theatre in the dark, but also we've seen a movement towards sonic-led practices within larger scale work as well. So when I was finishing up the book and writing the introduction and trying to draw together all the work, that was when I first heard about Complicité's *The Encounter*, and I got some tickets for the press night and went along to see it. And I thought it was really significant that Simon McBurney in particular, as an artist who has worked for decades through the body – again there's a lineage there to the Lecoq training – but to move from the gestural work and the embodied work that he's done to move towards the ear, to move towards the other embodiments of theatre practice, I thought was significant. And I kept banging on about it at the time. And people, some people were quite frustrated with that production: they thought it was a gimmick, you know, they didn't quite understand why Simon McBurney was working in this way.

You know, maybe, was this a budget crisis? Actually not, because it's hugely expensive to put an audience of that size in the Barbican theatre in a whole load of Sennheiser headphones. But nevertheless for me – that was the moment I realised that this was more of a movement of theatre practice. The book is primarily about trying to get under the skin of why theatre-makers are working in this way: why turn the lights off? Why try to make theatre just through sound? And this is the other interesting thing about the field of theatre aurality, because a lot of the theories that are associated particularly with sound are often very phenomenologically-oriented. And often phenomenologists talk to me and say: 'Lynne, you can't separate off the senses in this way!' And I say: 'It's nothing to do with theoretical separation, it is about making and distinction and the precision of theatre-making.'

And that's the route in to the theory of the book as well. It's that I wanted to really go on a journey with some of these practices and think through: 'What does it mean to work in the dark, put headphones



on and have somebody walking around the back of your head, coughing in one ear, leaning on your shoulder in the other ear?' So it's an attempt to really to explore this movement of practice, but it's also an attempt to kind of represent some of those choices as well. Not that I – I don't mean I was some kind of weird ambassador for theatre-makers, I don't mean that at all. But to really say: 'This is not gimmick, this isn't just because we've got better technology in sound, this is because there's a crucial slippage between presence of bodies and presence of voices, presence of bodies and presence of sound.' Theatre is always about the world that we live in. At the moment we're in so many massive crises, and one of the ways in which that's expressed is by once again pulling apart what is said from what appears: embodied, visually, and so on and so forth.

[00:11:17] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

This is another interesting one to talk about, partly because I feel a bit bashful and not able to really say! But in terms of a few reviews that I've had, often the contribution is thought to be that scholars in Theatre and Performance who are interested in sound will find this interesting. I find this interesting because sound is all over the place, really, and I think my attempt was really to write it for the field of Theatre and Performance, and not just to speak to the nerds like me who are massively short-sighted and like to listen to music. But more I wanted to draw attention to things I feel are apparent throughout all our research and all our scholarly activity, and all making as well. But I'm aware, I think, that there's a new shift towards visuality – which certainly the 'Zoomiverse' has brought us kicking and screaming into – but actually I also think there's a repositioning of listening in this particular interface, no matter what platform that we use. And I think there's been a revelation of different disciplines, a revelation of what we valorise in the space, what we valorise in rooms. And a shifting of the visual and the sonic into being the crucial things you need to be able to communicate these moments. They can't just happen to me while I'm half asleep in the stalls, you know? I've got to be plugged in, I've got to unmute myself, I've got to be present at the camera. So I think the field of Theatre and Performance per se is going to have to shift its siloed approach to what is valorised in our field, because already theatre practice is doing that in some really exciting and fundamental ways – I'm hoping to tune into Darkfield's audio persona-swap next week [Darkfield's immersive radio broadcast *Double*]. So the industry has responded very well, and I think it'd be really interesting to see how our research and scholarship responds. And I think, I'm hopeful, that we'll see an attitude to theatre sound that isn't about placing it still on the periphery. So I hope it will contribute to the field, but I think I'm still in the warm up.

[00:14:14] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?

The structure of the book. The book commences – I've actually got a copy here, blows metaphorical dust off – the book actually begins with a quote from Michel Serres where, buried in one of his many wonderful works, there are some really interesting fundamental statements about the ontology of theatre. And he talks about theatre as a circular movement, almost as if voicing is both mouth and ear, and that the act of voice returns to the mouth. It's very interesting, it seems to be quite anti-acousmatic in that sense: the voice that is circular, always moving and returns back, 'like mouth and ear for a single body. And the cyclical return is what produces theatre itself, its form and its structure' [Serres 2008: 87]. And that was one of those quotes that stayed, you know that you read and that kind of hang around in the dusty parts of your mind for a while. And I thought this was something else that I really wanted to try and capture in *Theatre Aurality*, which is this movement from listening and movement outwards, and then back to listening again. So I begin with headphone theatre, move through vocalities, voice, sound as a performance, then into the kind of rambunctious activity of the stage, of sound design and noise because it's rude not to – and I can't seem to write about anything without writing about noise – and then back to listening again.

But the arc takes us from the headphones to headphone-less activity. So we begin with headphone theatre in the dark and then I end with a case study of a piece of work where the only bit of the body that wasn't covered were the ears. So actually our auditory sphere, our listening is kind of let loose in



a way, but every other part of the body – eyes, hands, the whole body, the suit, GPS trackers everything. Please read the book if you do not understand what I'm talking about.

But I found it very interesting that in the field of theatre aurality, you've got everything from people just sitting in their cans to people moving in the dark with their ears completely open, but everything else produced in that work. So there's a sort of movement through what I think is the extent currently – I'm sure it's changed actually recently, but at the time of writing the book there was this extent of sonic engagement and listening. So I wanted to trace that up but also kind of trace that kind of Michel Serres arc of the strange circularness, and that being the ontology of theatre. Not its expression, not its effect, not our listening to it, not its productivity, but its ontology: we do not have theatre without this.

[00:17:29] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

I think like all researchers, you know – it's massively enjoyable and there are times when you do want to gnaw your left arm off. It's one of those books, interestingly, that came initially as a sidebar of my practice and my main research. And it also was something that was written under periods of enforced inertia: I became a parent, exhaustion, huge discipline of thought to spend 12 hours with a small person, put them to bed, not be able to see properly, but get the laptop open and continue writing. So interestingly, I think there's a certain amount of discipline exerted in putting this book together because of the other things that happen in people's lives, as we were talking about, as we often talk about now as writers and as parents and as carers. But I think what's interesting about writing a book like this is it tends to happen in staged ways because it isn't – I'm not a sound designer, I'm not a teacher of sound, it was almost something I was doing on the quiet, at the side.

And talking about it with a very small company of fellow researchers in the field – and on that note, just huge thanks to those who read chapters and fed back on the practice and probably knew more about the technologies than perhaps I did and were able to correct me at certain points. So I did draw on a lot of expertise of a very small, niche group of theatre sound researchers. But the writing of it felt like I was kind of a teenage kid listening to a really good track on a Walkman at the back of the class and trying to look as if I'm really concentrating on what I'm doing in my everyday job. So it was an interesting covert practice, and maybe because sound of course is a very covert entity, covert thing in our world. So I enjoyed the kind of sneakiness of writing about sound.

[00:19:50] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

Ah, I have to tell you I don't know how to answer this question. But I think that my favourite chapter is probably the one which is most densely theoretical – and this has been pointed out to me by a few people – but I make no apology for that, because the theory itself is something which is in and of itself densely articulated. And it is the chapter which is titled 'Voice: A Performance of Sound', because it's about Elevator Repair Service's production *Gatz*. Which I dragged Gareth White to at the time – I dragged him to several lengthy productions and he didn't nod off during this one – and it was the kind of show you went to see punctuated by lunch and dinner, and it was such a wonderful marathon of theatre-making. It was sheer indulgence in listening to voice. The whole production was led by Scott Shepherd – Scott Shepherd reading *Gatsby*, *The Great Gatsby* throughout. And that performance, that virtuoso performance and how he learned the latter chapters of the book and spoke them as if a monologue – it was the most extraordinary performance I think I've ever seen. But also it was the first time that I really not only paid attention to, but was completely bowled over by the extent of voice, and the extent and excessiveness of voice, that if it's listened to over six or seven hours or however long it was, does change what you're seeing in that space. And it really made me think about the voice-as-object, and the call, and the relationship between how voices operate in the space and how we understand the subjectivities that are being called upon in that space. And the great theatricality as well that that invited into it, which perhaps I didn't pay enough attention to in that chapter. There are so many brilliant in-jokes enabled by the incessantness of this voice calling, and sometimes some really impossible things that need to happen in the space.



There's a moment when a character says: 'I want a dog!', and suddenly the whole cast are set by the problem of how to find a dog. So the sound operator who's on stage throughout – and that's a real kind of John Collins marker of his work – just grabs a calendar, you know, off the 'little wall' next to his sound desk, and thankfully it's a calendar of dogs, different types of dogs per month. So he gets the calendar and flicks through it, and the book is saying: 'No, I don't want that kind of dog, I want that kind of dog!' And it's the sound guy just flicking through his calendar: 'Here we go, I've got to keep this going, I have to do, I have to bring to this moment anything I can in this space, to not cohere the voice, but to respond to the voice in this little world that we've set up.' So the theatricality and the constant unexpectedness, the pleasures of watching that and of listening to that were so significant. So I like that chapter best because that's one of my favourite pieces of theatre of all time. And I think I liked it because, as a piece of work, it made me think more than any other piece of work that I've ever seen.

Transcription by Saskia Craft-Stanley & Flora Pitrolo

Works Cited

Serres, Michel (2008) *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey & Peter Cowley, London: Continuum.

Video available at www.auralia.space/library1-lynnekendrick/.

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Salazar Cardona, Juan Felipe; Kendrick, Lynne (2020) LMYE Library #1: Lynne Kendrick - Theatre Aurality (2017), *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.13034768.v6>.

