

*for Pauline
for whom, in fact,
it was conceived
Ben*

VIGIL

Ben Johnston

I

The preparation for this piece begins with the formation of an improvising speaking group, optimally six people with contrasting natural voice qualities and ranges. Meetings are arranged to provide three consecutive hours once a week at a regular time. Exercises are learned or devised to improve and develop (1) awareness and clear and agile articulation of phonemes; (2) development and control of a wide variety and clear differentiation of spoken, chanted, sung, hummed, whispered, shouted, screamed timbres (and many others, as needed and discovered); (3) gradual and sensible development of extreme, moderate, and very subtle ranges of loudness and range in vocal projection; (4) exploration of vocal and percussive body noises; (5) gradual but ultimately bold overcoming of voice and performing inhibitions and ingrained habits, trained or unconsciously acquired, not so as to abrogate all individual idiosyncrasies, but so as to render these both conscious and unselfconscious, and so as to open the mind and the body to new and unfamiliar ones; and (6) willingness and ultimately affirmative group determination to diversify and rearrange continually as growth indicates, the leadership, critical, arbitrate, serving and other roles in the working group.

The group will be well advised at first to develop short themes with a view to (1) clarity of intention; (2) awareness of and reaction to each other; (3) timing (especially: "How long is too long?", "When is an idea squelched rather than put aside?", "Is a sequence of events goal-directed or simply a fabric? And what duration of it is optimal?", "In counterpoint, what constitutes a difference in texture and when should such changes happen?", "How much and what kind of musical metered time is appropriate?", etc., etc.); (4) roles and masks and the dropping and changing of these as an integral part of group performance, (5) solos, and the group reaction to these; and (6) balance between accepting spontaneous inspirations and adhering to the theme. Themes are abstract, very concrete, representational, obvious, secret, or in many other discoverable categories.

With practice and confidence, longer themes and patterns of themes will grow, and eventually entire compositions.*

II

The second stage of preparation occurs when one member of the group privately, or by request, or by group agreement, prepares to lead this piece.

*The procedures herein described are drawn principally though not entirely from experiences of the New Verbal Workshop of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, in its early developmental stages. Cf. especially, "Speech music: Notes from an Island," by Herbert Marder, in preparation for publication (1976).

The first step in preparation is when the leader undertakes, entirely alone, an all-night vigil on behalf of an oppressed group of people, preferably one with which he is not identified except voluntarily. The vigil should last about eight hours and must involve mild to definite (but not extreme) discomfort: quite sufficient to avoid sleep and drowsiness and to serve as a constant reminder that this time is dedicated. A mental (possibly also a physical) task, which may be arbitrary, symbolic, or even practical in nature must be undertaken rhythmically and unceasingly. Thoughts, and as it happens to be possible, feelings should be brought back to the people for whom the vigil is being undertaken, with gentle insistence, as often as they are found wandering. It will help to select several particular representatives (say, three) of the oppressed group who are openly or privately associated with it, as focal to the dedication of this time and effort. Interruptions, no matter how insistent, must be ignored. Upon the degree and intensity of the concentration of thought, feeling, and physical effort will depend the outcome of the vigil, which is intended to generate solidarity with the group chosen, and a fund of energy from which the piece can take shape.

On the day after, the vigil should be followed if possible by a private and pleasant day of complete rest and inactivity. If interferences, inconveniences or even crises occur they should deliberately be taken on as sacrifices on behalf of the oppressed, not as personal nuisances or disasters. This prolonged and dedicated effort may have a religious aspect if appropriate, but this is a matter for individual decision and should not be shared with the group unless this sharing happens of itself. This vigil is a private matter, and must not be discussed or described to the group.*

III

After allowing this experience to lie dormant in the mind for an indefinite period of time, the group leader may undertake the third step of preparation. This consists of selecting or collecting writings or sayings of totally identified and dedicated members of the oppressed group which express their life experience. Themes to be covered must include (1) conception and birth; (2) finding one's identity in relation to others; (3) group energy and high spirits at play and recreation; (4) initiation into one's life task, both externally, by one's group and internally, through dying to one's former life role; (5) encountering hatred, violence, fear, anger, jealousy, and death; (6) confronting, accepting and transcending death itself; (7) rebirth, resurgence, a new start: with recognition of strength against odds, of pride without self-inflation; (8) confidence in one's essential place in the ongoing process of life and in the exorcism of inner and outer environment by this life affirmation.

IV

When these words are selected (and some, at least, should remain if practicable in the language of those who uttered them), they become the basis

*Possible alternatives to the vigil can be devised: for example, to live and work for a time among the group selected. In any case, involvement must be more than simply intellectual, valuable as this kind of study may be.

for realizing the piece in performance, with the improvising speaking group. Each member of the group must study and meditate the themes and the words, or make an analogous effort to the leaders, deepening and broadening his own understanding in all aspects of himself as best he can. Except for agreement upon what to undertake in any given section at any particular time of improvising, the themes and texts should have minimal group discussion; rather the improvisation itself should become and replace such discussion, transforming it into modes which are only partly discursive, being also, and even more, communicative on other levels of human interchange.

The leader should lead only so much as is necessary to keep things going and to guarantee each person's authentic input. It is not "his piece", but the group's. His task is only to remind them of the commitment (enacted and symbolized for him by his vigil, which is not to be discussed at all). The piece is continually and ultimately dedicated to those who contributed to its texts, whether they know it or not. Texts are pretexts: the springboards to improvisation, but they must never be violated in spirit. The improvisation must deepen and enhance, not merely comment upon or distort the texts, which may be performed in whole or in part, in order, or rearranged, but without extra verbal content except that spontaneously obtainable by direct unconscious connotative and linguistic association and variation which is always true in spirit to the text meaning as understood by the performing improvisors.

If possible the piece should be allowed several months to grow before being performed for outsiders. It is helpful but not necessary to record and listen to improvising sessions, as a method for improving the results: but it is far more valuable for each participant to develop his continual awareness and memory of what goes on, so that his evaluation and criticism will be immediate and direct.

Ben Johnston

Guest member of the New Verbal Workshop and leader of its improvisation-composition Visions and Spells, the texts of which, all North American Indian and Eskimo, came from the Anthology "Technicians of the Sacred", A Range of Poetries from Africa, America and Oceania, collected and edited by Jerome Rothenberg, 1968 Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York. *The exception, the second poem used, came from American Indian Poetry, an ~~anthology~~ Anthology of Songs and Chants, edited by George W. Cronyn, Liveright, New York.*

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