

## **BROOK HOUGLUM / “grace or fervour”: a conversation with a.rawlings**

*The following exchange takes as its point of departure rawlings’ questions: how can a text stage language and what methods (improvisatory, sounded, gestural) help facilitate “movement” between text and stage? What emerges is a dynamic, sustained exploration, a poetics of “near-constant workshop.”*

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*Your book *Wide slumber for lepidopterists* was staged by Theatre Commutiny at Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre in 2006, but this is only one example of the wide range of performance projects you’ve been involved with. Could you say a bit about what you find vital about these projects that investigate relationships between text, sound, and movement: what has drawn you to them, or what have you drawn from them?*

Thank you for identifying right away the three categories or interior geographies that I currently visit/inhabit: sound, text, movement. Why these three categories? When I sense that my interests, passions, endeavours, tangents, and fixations cohere and coalesce, then I feel purposeful within a pursuit. These particular categories (sound, text, movement) stretch to childhood obsessions for me. My primary language I learned as a youngster was English; my secondary language was dance (specifically ballet prescribed to treat an in-toe gait, tap, and jazz). As a youngster, my parents’ sensitivity to early-body “dysfunction” (I was diagnosed 80% deaf and with the aforementioned in-toe gait) taught me a heightened appreciation of body-oriented activities that were dance and music-based. Raised in an arts-supportive environment, I gravitated towards activities that continued to challenge my body. As a high-school student, I was deeply committed to extracurricular activities that combined sound, text, and movement (theatre, choir, cheerleading). It was my intention to major in theatre with a focus on directing as an undergrad student, though that shifted when I fell in love with my first-year electives of creative writing (a course taught by Chris Dewdney and Bruce Powe) and dance (where

I was first exposed to modern techniques and contact improv). I went on to major in creative writing, with a minor in fine arts cultural studies and nearly enough credits for a second minor in theatre.

During and after my undergraduate stint at York University, I was involved in organizing numerous public readings (Writers at York, Lexiconjury Reading Series, The Scream Literary Festival, and events for The Mercury Press and Sumach Press), where I witnessed a plethora of reading styles and experiments. At readings, I am often drawn to a performer's cadence and I tend to "dance" with the syllables as they wave rapid-fire within the soundscape. I'm also fascinated by extraliterary position and movement of a reader—the stance, flip of a page, adjustment of the mic or sip of a beverage, paper tremble, the grace or fervour of hand gestures, weight shifted from leg to leg, the lunge or lurch or nod or lean—and how these often subconscious acts and postures punctuate or enhance the vocalized text. These cumulative experiences have surely shaped my interest in exploring the visual, sonic, and kinetic materiality and performance of languages, as well as the creative projects in which I've been involved the last decade.

As my first long-term page-based poetic project, *Wide slumber for lepidopterists* gave me the opportunity to pose the questions, "How can the page of a book act as a stage for words?" and, later, "How can a live performance of this page-based text translate the visual, aural, and kinetic qualities of the poetry?" Theatre Commutiny was an ad-hoc group co-organized by director Conor Green and me to explore poetic material in embodied performance. In 2006, we staged *Wide slumber* as a way to consider the page-based long poem's physical manifestation in a three-dimensional environment. The group was organized in a traditionally theatrical sense, including performers Amanda Brugel and Mika Collins, light designer Geoff Bouckley, sound designer Richard Windeyer, prop/set consultant Matt Ceolin, and choreographic consultant Susanna Hood. Earlier performances of *Wide slumber* in a non-theatre environment included actors, musicians, dancers, poets, and pedagogues (Ciara Adams, Jason Christie, Conor Green, Lori Nancy Kalamanski, Alexis Milligan, Katherine Parrish). This move from page to stage was a formative marker of my interest in a holistic exploration of language for its sensual materiality (sound-play, visual impact, and kinaesthesia), and the input and generosity of my many friends and collaborators facilitated the directions in which I've now headed.

After *Wide slumber*, I sought to both deepen and focus my experiences with sound, text, and movement via study with practitioners and experimenters interested in these fields.

From 2006 to present, I've taken workshops in breath, extended vocal technique, non-traditional conduction, Bel canto, authentic movement, contact improvisation, action theatre, open-source forms, and more, taught by a range of interdisciplinaryists, musicians, dancers, and theatre practitioners including Burnt Sugar, Katherine Duncanson, Misha Glouberman, Susanna Hood, Sarah Janssens, Karen and Allen Kaeja, Fides Krucker, Phil Minton, and Tena Palmer. Exposure to structured improvisation and body-awareness practices resonates strongly with my creative impulses, and I feel constantly renewed and awed as I wind my way through interconnection between sound, text, and movement.

I'm fortunate that opportunities cross my path that I may try out, and that like-minded people seek me out to workshop ideas they have. In some respects, I feel at this moment very much on a learning journey, as though I'm in a near-constant workshop.

*In thinking about relationships between textual performance and movement or gesture, it seems that there is a continuum between one reader voicing a set of poems in front of a microphone and a collaborative and choreographed staging of/with text. Would you agree? How would you describe the work of gesture in poetic performance?*

I am intrigued by your posit that choreographed staging of a text offers a continuum of the solo reading. It is possible; I'd like to know more how you come to this suggestion.

*I'm thinking of gestures that accompany voicing and choreographed gestures both functioning as physically-enacted elements in performance, as time-based iterations of a text by a body. I guess I think of gesture as movement that could potentially be spontaneous or marked and repeated (intentionally or by habit).*

Personally, gesture strikes me as a largely intuited or subconscious embellishment of verbal speech. Gesture accompanies, emphasizes, visualizes, moves. Gesture alludes, suggests, points. Gesture energizes, enervates. Gesture is improvised. Choreography



houses intentionality and conscious decision in my experience, whereas gesture is less planned, plotted, explicitly crafted. Choreography is a base line; choreography is set. Text on a page is set. And yet these set forms enliven through the experience of each witness. Gesture is more in alignment with that moment of enlivening for me; gesture is the immediacy of the witness. Gesture erupts from engagement with the set and improvises its immediate reaction as a performative manifestation.

This is, perhaps, a narrow way to define gesture. And so, another offer . . . . Lately, structured sonic improvisation prompted through gestural conduction cues piques my interest; there is opportunity to communicate through gesture and to incite sonic response in participants. In 2007, I took a renegade vocal workshop series in John Zorn's "Cobra" conduction method, facilitated in Toronto by Misha Glouberman. Later, New York City's Burnt Sugar led a workshop and performance in Lawrence "Butch" Morris' conduction techniques. And then I've been involved with The Element Choir for a few years, an all vocal, a *capella*, improvising choir of seventy-plus performers conducted by Christine Duncan in Toronto; Duncan draws on conduction methods from a variety of sources as well as creates her own in order to structure choral mayhem. Here, gesture is intrinsic to communication; it directs, demands, prompts, compels. The breathing, seething expectant mass howls after the wrist flicks. And so it is with the physical act of writing, too, yes?

*It strikes me that part of the work of articulating text via movement or vice versa might be coming up with a lexicon to account for the intersections. The term "phrase," for example, could be both a group of words and a segment of a dance. What terms, methods, manoeuvres, manipulations have been useful to your thinking and practices of (textual / performed) choreography?*

Body.

How does a reader engage physiologically with a text when she reads? How does reading enact a choreography on the body?

Phrase. Figure. Mark.

What encourages a body to move? How does my vocal apparatus enact a dance in how it moves as it pronounces? How do I engage my diaphragm and breathing apparatus in order to facilitate speaking? Is this not movement, and is it not structured physical improvisation? Is a poem written, edited, rehearsed, repeated not an act of verbal choreography, the body learning how to engage physically to produce a series of movements that result in sound?

Block. Notate. Set.

How can a poem act as choreographic notation? How can a page become a stage for words?

Isolate. Pattern. Compose.

What parts of the body do I use when I write? How is my entire body engaged as I write?

Repeat. Shape. Transition.

What is my path through the text? What do I first notice on a page? How does what I notice first influence or impact how I read a text? How conscious am I of my path through a text and how my path informs my interpretation of a text? How could a choreographer enact the reading and interpretation process in physical, 3D space?

Vocabulary. Musicality. Rhythm.

*Building on these questions and vocabularies, how do you sense your current work unfolding; or, what are you interested in exploring further in the future?*

I hope that my many projects, most of which include some combination of sound, text, movement, collaboration, and/or improvisation, have an opportunity to develop, since I sense they aid my understanding of body and the interconnection between sound, text, and movement. The projects:

- Develop in-progress manuscripts (*EFHILMNORSTUVWY*, *Rule of Three*, *Cochlea*, *Vessel*), choreographing each page with care. *EFHILMNORSTUVWY* explores

English-language pronoun usage, the book object as a closed ecosystem where letters are species inhabiting the page as field, and the constraint that limited resources and habitat loss imposes on alphabetic species. *Rule of Three* is a two-sided Tarot deck that blends rhapsodomancy, visual poetry, and valves. *Cochlea* combines snails with acoustic ecology and sustainable energy production. *Vessel* deals with acoustic ecology, travel, truth in the guise of fiction, human anatomy, motility and mobility, intimacy, and Iceland.

- “drift” with Toronto musician and composer Nilan Perera, a reading-for-performance strategy developed by Nilan where he and I improvise syntax via repetition of a pre-determined, borrowed paragraph, embellished by full-body gesture of dancer. We’ve had the good fortune to experiment with Sarah Janssens and Julie Lassonde so far.
- “Rule of Three” (working title), a structured improvisation with Belgian interdisciplinarian Maja Jantar, founded on divinatory practices, the sibyls, Tarot reading, sound poetry, and extended vocal technique.



a.rawlings and Maja Jantar  
Videographer: TVF, Belgium



- Vocal and movement improvisation performed with Belgian composer and instrument creator Godfried-Willem Raes' robotic orchestra and motion-sensor system through the Logos Foundation.
- Continue instrument-voice improv collaborations, specifically with musician-composers with a special interest in language/text/poetry such as Toronto percussionist Joe Sorbara, Vancouver saxophonist and poet Jonathon Wilcke, composers Valgeir Sigurðsson (Iceland) and Sebastian Bradt (Belgium), Christine Duncan's Element Choir, and post-punk/indie rock band Reykjavík!.

*Improvisation seems crucial to many of these projects; could you say more about how improv or spontaneous interaction factor into your practices?*

Sound and movement improvisations have given me peculiar notions of late. How would it be to shrug off and replace our social greeting scripts of "Hello; how are you?" and accepted contact of hug, handshake, kiss with non-semantic vocal improvisation and/or contact improv as an alternative way to greet and depart?

In my conscious brain, I forget what I know. But it is somewhere inside me, buried, this memory of learning about dance and sound poetry and extended vocal technique and improvisation and theatre performance. And when I find myself in moments of conversation and/or creation, somehow my subconscious brain calls up these past experiences to inform what I do.

I don't yet know how all of this interconnects. I haven't yet developed steadfast theories. There's so much more to read, to experience, to witness—always. But I feel blessed to attempt and encounter and learn and transform in the now and now and now.

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