JACEK LUDWIG SCARSO

Imagined Cities
(Voicescapes)

Project details

Output author	**Jacek Ludwig Scarso**
Collaborators	**Alexander Campkin (Composer), Dominic Peckham (Conductor), The Fourth Choir (Performers), Elastic Theatre (for Voicescapes Workshops)**
Project title	***Imagined Cities (Voicescapes)***
Output type	**Performance**
Location	**Colourscape Festival, Clapham Common, London.**
	Additional locations utilized for Scarso's Voicescapes workshops, in collaboration with Royal Opera House Thurrock Trailblazer, British Council in Hong Kong and Elastic Theatre.
Dates	**September 2015**
Budget	**Approximately £12,500.**
Funders	**Eye Music Trust, London Metropolitan University, British Council (for Voicescapes workshops), Royal Opera House (for Voicescapes workshops)**

Figure 2. Imagined Cities (Voicescapes)
Image from Performance, 2015. Image:
Gerard Puigmal.

Research content and significance

DESCRIPTION

This output is centred on the performance Imagined Cities, commissioned by Colourscape with composer Alexander Campkin RAM, in which an original staging approach devised by Scarso was utilised, building on Scarso's methodology of vocal performance (Voicescapes) developed through workshops in both professional and community/education contexts, including Royal Opera House's Thurrock Trailblazer.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While the field of vocal studies has progressively emphasised the interdisciplinary potential of vocal performance (Novak, 2015; Thomaidis and Macpherson, 2015), the idea of durational/installational live singing is still a little explored subject.

- How may live singing be used to create a durational, post-dramatic exhibit?
- How may such exhibit interplay with an environment site-responsively?
- What are the creative opportunities and challenges in its inherent relationship between singer, listener and site?

PROCESS

Methodologically, the project began by experimenting with the relationship between singer, listener and site, through exploratory tasks including singing in darkness and improvising in increasingly complex vocal ensemble configurations within a given location. Progressively, this approach was geared to the specific needs of Campkin's score and the staging in the Colourscape structures . Such an approach was thus articulated into three phases: Phase 1 Voicescapes, that is Scarso's original approach to integrated, site-responsive voicework, applicable both as a devising and staging tool, as well as a pedagogical practice;

Phase 2 Devising vocal narratives, in which Scarso worked with Campkin on the dramaturgy of his composition, applying devising methodologies developed in Scarso's doctoral research with his company Elastic Theatre. 3) Voice-site-response, in which the work, also developing from Elastic Theatre's methodologies, takes shape as a non-linear staged piece, directly responding to the site in question.

DISSEMINATION

Alongside the performance of Imagined Cities as part of Colourscape Festival 2015, the piece was re-commissioned at Waddesdon Manor in May 2016. Scarso's Voicescapes workshops have been presented internationally, in contexts such as Royal Opera House's Thurrock Trailblazer, Istituto Teatrale Europeo in Rome, London Metropolitan University and Spark Festival with the British Council in Hong Kong (2014-2019). The conceptual findings of this work were presented by Scarso in two papers, for Tate Exchange (2017), ACLA Annual Conference at Utrecht University (2017) and TaPRA 2019, University of Exeter.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Through both staging technique and devising/pedagogical tool, the resulting work evidences its originality in the integration of polyphonic singing with the layering of durational, immersive and site-responsive formats, transcending stylistic categories.
Imagined Cities, commissioned by Colourscape, was attended by an audience of over 2500. Scarso's voicework laboratories continue to be hosted internationally as example of innovative voice-work, in association with high profile institutions. His University Teaching Fellowship, awarded to him in June 2018, was also in recognition of the impact and originality of such approach, which, building on his doctoral research with Elastic Theatre, has continued to build its international profile as a unique performance aesthetics and public engagement tool.

Introduction

This research output is centred on a performance created with composer Alexander Campkin, commissioned for Colourscape by the Eye Music Trust. "Colourscapes are walk-in structures of colour and light, originally created by artist Peter Jones in the early 70s. Over 35 have been made, in many different sizes and shapes offering different experiences. In 1994 Eye Music Trust commissioned the largest ever Colourscape (Festival One) with funds from the National Lottery. Since then, Eye Music Trust has commissioned two further Colourscapes – "Festival Two" and "Moonorooni". All three are presented by Eye Music throughout the UK and abroad for events and workshops linking music and colour" (http://www.eyemusic.org.uk/colourscape/colourscape.html).

This commission involved Campkin creating a new score, loosely inspired by Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities (1972), and Scarso applying his research as director of theatrical vocal performances to develop an original staging of the score for the unique environment of Colourscape. The performance was scheduled as the grand finale of the Colourscape 2015 Festival, with a record audience attendance of over 1600 people. Applied to Campkin's music score, Scarso's performance staging approach is the result of an ongoing research on interdisciplinary performance practices, in which the live voice is central to installational exhibits, often durational and always site-responsive. This approach, named by Scarso as "Voicescapes", is thus the vehicle through which new vocal performance ideas are explored in workshops within both professional and community/education contexts, then specifically tailored to a finished production, in this case Imagined Cities. Hence, the title of this output includes both aspects, seen as inextricably linked.

Figure 3. Imagined Cities (Voicescapes)
Image from Performance, 2015. Image:
Gerard Puigmal.

Research context

Scarso's approach to staging vocal performance is the result of an ongoing practice-based research, building on his doctoral studies in conjunction with his award-winning company Elastic Theatre (www.elastictheatre.com). This research is contextualised in Lehmann's concept of the post-dramatic (2006), exploring such concept's extension into theatrical elasticity (Scarso, 2014), as a framing of a liminal exploration of drama/post-drama (or as Jürs-Munby defines it as the "secret hyphen between post and dramatic"), effectuated through an original interplay between multidisciplinary devising, dramaturgical approaches and site responses. Specifically in the case of sung performance, a key feature in Scarso's practice, this approach can be located "where the notion of post-dramatic performance overlaps with the forms of 'new music theatre' and 'composed theatre', respectively discussed by Salzman and Desi (2008), and by Rebstock and Roesner (2012). Many practices cited by both sets of authors are also used in Lehmann's discussion, as specific strands within the post-dramatic. The phrases composed and new music theatre are not necessarily synonymous, with Rebstock and Roesner arguing for new music theatre to be "on the more musical wing of composed theatre" (ibid.; loc. 819), hence implying

a more open definition of the latter. Indeed, Salzman and Desi insist on the importance of differentiating between "theatre that sings and theatre that is driven by music" (2008; p.338), the latter being a true representation of music theatre" (Scarso, 2014).

Within the above contexts, Imagined Cities (Voicescapes) can be seen as an exploration of post-dramatic music theatre taking the form of live installation, whereby the polyphonic voice acts as a durational "exhibit", here reprising Georgina Guy's emphasis (2016) on the relationship between theatre and exhibition experiences as "displayed and performed". The research stems from the questions:

- How may live singing be used to respond to create a durational, post-dramatic exhibit?
- How may such exhibit interplay with an environment site-responsively?
- What are the creative opportunities and challenges in its inherent relationship between singer, listener and site?

In order to respond to these questions, the research can be framed in three respective sub-contexts. Firstly, the one of vocal practice with an emphasis on the notion of voice as an interdisciplinary tool and object of research (Novak, 2015;

Thomaidis and Macpherson, 2015). This sub-context is directly related to voice pedagogy, linked to Scarso's Voicescape approach, highlighting the communal experience of voice through polyphonic sound and the role of generative listening (Voegelin 2016-17) as a process explored with the performers and implicitly encouraged with the spectator.

Secondly, there is the sub-context of performance staging and devising. This draws on Govan, Nicholson and Normington in their emphasis on the blurring of binary oppositions specifically looking at devised theatre, arguing that "contemporary devisers construct theatrical narratives that are explicitly intended to challenge neat distinctions between the fictional and the real, between secrets and lies, and between imagination and authenticity" (2007; p.58). The post-dramatic concept of 'states' as opposed to scenes, is relevant here, in relation to Lehmann's idea of states denoting a 'scenic dynamic', the somewhat pictorial approach to creating the content in contrast to the linear conception of dramatic action (2006, p.68). It could be said that this concept is applicable not only to the visual configuration of the staged work, but also to a broader understanding of the sung performance, destabilising the idea of a linear, dramatically-informed concert and

opting instead for a music experience that is intentionally post-structural and non-causal.

Thirdly, with regards to the relationship with site, the project builds on Scarso's existing experimentation. "This process reprises Sven-Olov Wallenstein's observations on the relationship between a work of art and the site in which it is experienced. Wallenstein points out that the High Modernist ethos of neutralising the framing conditions for the aesthetic experience (Wallenstein, 1994; p.478), an ethos exemplified by the white cube gallery space, has been questioned in much contemporary art, which highlights a "reconsideration of subjectivity as a changing, historically produced phenomenon" (ibid.), thus inextricably linked to its context. In this sense, the endeavour of many performance practices to explore the potential of site in the creation of their work, thus moving out of a "neutral" black box space or traditional venue and conceiving their work specifically for non-theatrical spaces, reflects an interest in exposing the contextual implications, both physical and symbolic, of a place and in directly exploiting the performative potential of these". This often termed site-specific approach represents another sub-context within the notion of the post-dramatic.

Lehmann identifies it as theatre exploring non-conventional locations "not so much, as the term 'site-specific' might suggest, because the site corresponds well to a certain text but because it is made to 'speak' and is cast in a new light through theatre" (2006; p.152). The phrase "site-specific" has undoubtedly generated much debate and encouraged a range of alternative terminology. Lyn Gardner influentially criticised the dilution of the term to any theatrical event that involves a non-theatrical venue, whether or not it implies a direct exploration of site: in fact, Gardner argues that much site-specific work should in fact be considered "site-generic", in that, rather than creatively engaging with one location, it effectively caters for many (The Guardian, February 2008). It appears that the "specificity" of this encounter is thus part of the terminological problem. Ilya Noé argues against the fixedness in the connotations of this phrase and proposes "site-particular" as a term that, in contrast, "is open to changing geographies and based on the understanding that all strategies are context-contingent" (Riley and Hunter, 2009; pp. 149-150). Conversely, the increasingly popular phrase "site-responsive" and the even broader "site-related" (used by Govan, Nicholson and Normington, 2007: p.104) both suggest a widening of the concept of interaction with site." (see Scarso, 2014, chap.3).

The above contextual issues have informed this project, providing a conceptual frame to the experimentation in non-linear vocal performance and its relationship to site.

Figure 4. Imagined Cities (Voicescapes)
Image from Performance, 2015. Image:
Gerard Puigmal.

Research process

According to the previously mentioned contexts, the methodological approach utilised in this project can be seen as articulated in three phases.

PHASE 1
VOICESCAPES

Voicescapes is the name adopted by Scarso in identifying his original approach to voice workshop facilitation, developed in conjunction with his company Elastic Theatre. Such an approach has been used in a variety of contexts, ranging from educational ones (respectively adapted to primary, secondary and higher education settings), to community outreach initiatives, as well as in the context of professional performance practice, both within and outside of Elastic Theatre, such as in the case of the present output. This approach stems from the desire to question established categorisations of the singing voice, particularly those originating in classical choral practice, looking instead at a polyphonic ensemble in an inclusive and anti-hierarchical way. The work with participants, carefully tailored to the aforementioned applications, is structured in ensemble performance tasks, including:

Vocal motions explorations: here the participant is guided through a series of tasks in the exploration of the relationship between voice and body. Starting from kinaesthetic visualisations of breath, building to the coordination of physical movement with breath and vocal sound, the work is based on a somatic awareness, whereby the participant explores voice holistically and with no aesthetic judgment. This process is progressively tailored to ensemble exercises, through which improvisational interactions are created amongst participants.

Sensory singing: here, participants work on a given polyphonic piece, either as a result of improvisation or, as in the case of Imagined Cities, to a given score, the performance of which is increasingly tested in tasks of sensory awareness. A crucial aspect of this work is singing "in the dark" (either with eyes closed or in a darkened space). By encouraging the participant not to rely on top-down guidance (i.e. the choral director), the work emphasises the notion of generative listening (Voegelin 2016), according to which the act of listening is heightened to the point that it becomes the only tool through which the blending of voices is attainable. Of course, the complexity of the score determines the applicability to a particular context of work. The combination of this process and the ensemble tasks in the Vocal motions aspect of the work are designed to build

Figures 5-6. Images from Voicescape workshops, 2015. Images: Courtesy of Elastic Theatre.

trust amongst participants, as well as the ability to tune in to each other.

Exploration in space: Once the participants have gained confidence in the above work, they begin to explore a given space. Depending on the complexity of the sung material and the performer's experience, exploratory tasks may include slowly evolving ensemble configurations, actual choreographed sequences, the exploration of acoustic properties in different parts of a space and the creation of choreographic tableaux in response to the setting. This work becomes essential in the further development of a piece into a staged production.

Figure 7. Image from Voicescape
workshops, 2015. Image: Courtesy of Elastic
Theatre.

PHASE 2

DEVISING VOCAL NARRATIVES

Building on the practice effectuated in the above phase, the polyphonic work is then progressively imagined as a theatrical journey, typically for durational/installational delivery (thus narratives are kept intentionally non-linear, often with the possibility for the public to access the work at any point in time and space). The work here builds on Scarso's existing methodologies, through the respective principles of 'juxtaposition of sources', 'structuring' and 'cohesive detailing' (Scarso, 2014, chap.2). In the case of Imagined Cities, an exploration of Calvino's Invisible Cities was pursued with Campkin, gradually abstracting Calvino's themes based on the travels of Marco Polo, in order to create a meditation on the idea of undiscovered territories. Calvino's novel explores the relationship between voyage and imagination in an exploration of fifty-five fictitious 'cities'. Campkin approached Scarso to realise a staging of his score inspired by a selection of extracts from the novel, in order to condense them into a meaningful narrative journey for the audience, maintaining nonetheless a degree of flexibility, so that such a journey could be experienced from different locations in the complex labyrinth-like structure of Colourscape. The devising developed as an

envisionining of simultaneous 'chapters', each one with Calvino's fictitious cities in mind, condensing this in one music/visual tableau (e.g. the magic of the City of Bascià, the rain of the City of Shandu, the chanting monks of the City of Kesmur, the old man of the mountain in the City of Mulehet). Such chapters were devised in a way intended for the public to roam freely between these, eventually guided by the performers to the "battle of the cities", that would represent the climax and conclusion of the journey, leading back to the simultaneous tableaux, thus structured in a circular logic. The tension between the non-linearity of the simultaneous chapter and the circular sequentiality is indeed a deliberate aspect in the methodological approach to the devising of this piece and key to the staging approach articulated below.
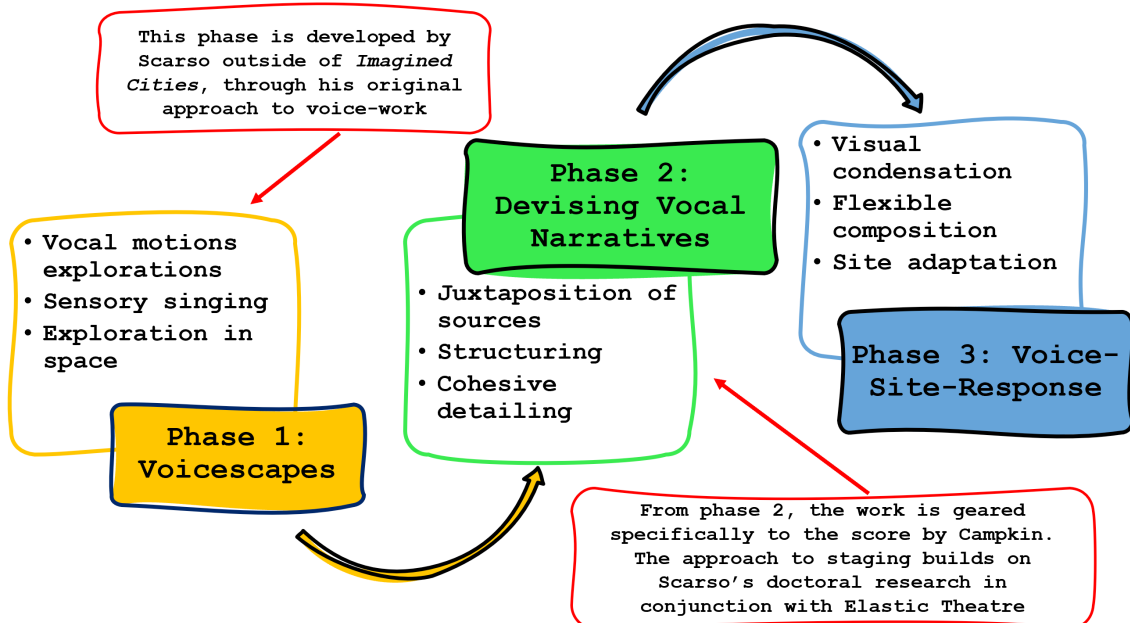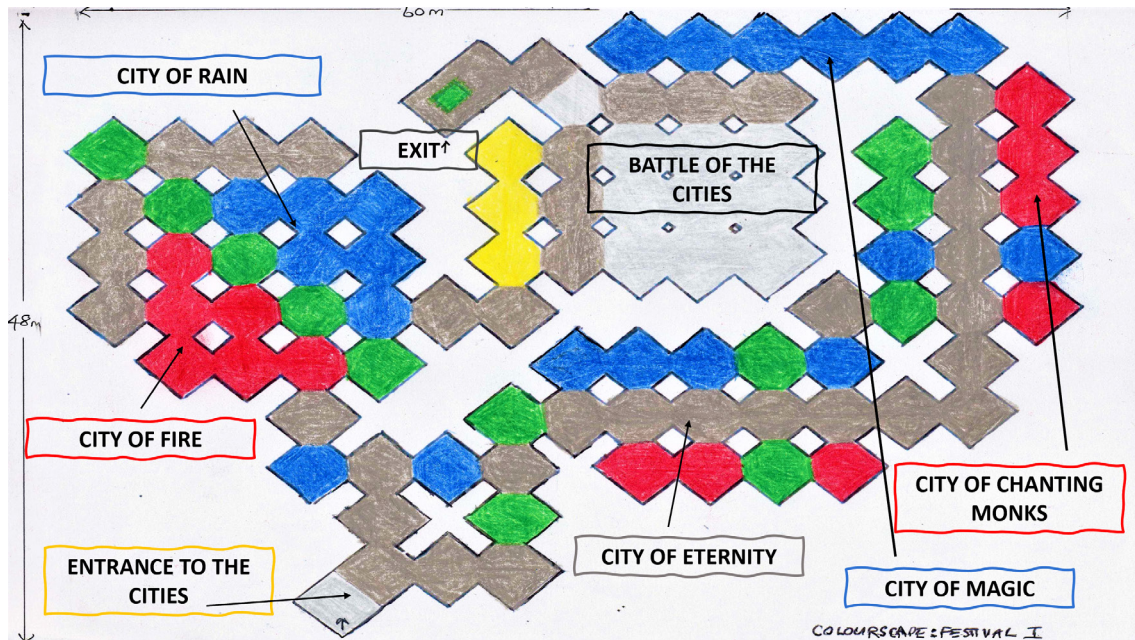
CITY OF RAIN

EXIT↑

BATTLE OF THE CITIES

60 m

48m

CITY OF FIRE

ENTRANCE TO THE CITIES

CITY OF ETERNITY

CITY OF MAGIC

CITY OF CHANTING MONKS

COLOURSCAPE: FESTIVAL I

This phase is developed by Scarso outside of *Imagined Cities*, through his original approach to voice-work

Phase 2: Devising Vocal Narratives

• Visual condensation
• Flexible composition
• Site adaptation

• Vocal motions explorations
• Sensory singing
• Exploration in space

• Juxtaposition of sources
• Structuring
• Cohesive detailing

Phase 1: Voicescapes

Phase 3: Voice-Site-Response

From phase 2, the work is geared specifically to the score by Campkin. The approach to staging builds on Scarso's doctoral research in conjunction with Elastic Theatre

Figure 8 & 9. *Top:* Narrative journey for Imagined Cities mapped out in the Colourscape structure, 2015. *Bottom:* Diagram illustrating the process, articulated in three phases, 2015. Images: Jacek Scarso.

PHASE 3
VOICE-SITE-RESPONSE

Whilst articulated in separate methodological phases, the devising and the staging of the work are not so much chronologically causal, but intrinsically related to one another. Also building on Scarso's existent methodologies of 'visual condensation', 'flexible composition' and 'site (re)adaptation' (Scarso 2014, chap.3), the staging of the work is organically informed by the site, so that the narrative devising is directly inspired by the aesthetics and logistics of this. At the same time, drawing on Scarso's notion of 'theatrical elasticity' (ibid.), the work is developed in such a way that it is not restricted to one location, but always has the potential to be re-invented for others (thus the notion of site-particularity and elasticity, as opposed to specificity). For Imagined Cities, the Colourscape structure imposes a logistical challenge to performance, in that the public spreads out through different small chambers in a labyrinthine mode; a central area, close to the public exit, determines the journey's conclusion, ensuring a safe and manageable route for hundreds of spectators at any one point. Scarso responded to this and to Campkin's score, by proposing a one-hour cycle to each musical/narrative journey, of which half would be itinerant and fully immersive, giving spectators the experience of finding their way in the fictional landscape of the piece; guided by the performers, the second half would convene the roaming public in the central chamber. This also responded to the nature of Campkin's musical requirements: in the first half, binaural technology, with powerful speakers located just outside the Colourscape structure, created an immersive soundtrack unifying the simultaneous chapters and accompanying the live singing taking place in each of these; the second half would instead be solely live, with live singing of over forty voices accompanied by a single accordion. The colours of the chambers, reprised by the colours of the performers' costumes were specifically assigned to the micro-narratives of the journey. Drawing back to Phase 1 of this work, the performers were guided by Scarso in a series of durational actions, each one inspired by the specific aspect of the narrative. Such actions were conceived not only to allow for live singing to be sustained for a long period of time, but also to explore the relationship between live voice and the environment surrounding it, aiding the aforementioned process of 'generative listening' for the public too.

Figure 10. Voicescapes workshops at Spark
Festival , Hong Kong. In collaboration
with the British Council, 2019. Image: Sol
Angelucci

Research insights

The insights of this research can be seen as twofold.

CONCEPTUAL INSIGHTS
The work contributes to the understanding of the potential of live singing when approached as durational, site-responsive exhibit. In so doing, it extends the notion of performance elasticity (Scarso, 2014) within the post-dramatic spectrum, looking at this specifically through the lens of the voice. With Imagined Cities, by refusing the framing of a music concert and instead thinking of the live experience as immersive installation, theatrically informed but not subject to the conventions of a self-contained theatrical show, the singing voice can be considered in an intermedial way. Singing is not only an acoustic experience: it is kinaesthetic, visual and sculptural. The word exhibit here denotes the idea of the live voice as material object, sculpting and transforming the space surrounding it and itself sculpted and transformed by the location hosting it. Paradoxically, the sung voice retains both the ephemerality of its liveness and the implication of permanence in its durational delivery – like a gallery exhibit, it exists before and after the visitor has entered the space. The juxtaposition of the full immersion and simultaneity of signs (Lehmann, 2006) in one aspect of the work, and

the relative formality of other parts where the public is more directly guided by the performers, suggests a further possibility in the post-dramatic spectrum, where the conventions of drama and the destabilisation of the latter exist side by side, embodied in the different perceptions of the live voice.

PRACTICAL INSIGHTS
Alongside the conceptual findings of this research, insights from this should also be seen as embodied in the practice itself. This reprises contemporary concerns over the relationship between artistic practice as methodology and as finding (Arlander in Biggs & Karlsson, 2011; p.328). Rather than limiting the understanding of artistic research's outcome as exclusively the conceptual insight gained through making art, the act of artistic creation is understood here as both methodological vehicle and the findings of research (Kjørup, ibid.; p54). 'As Barone and Kjørup would agree, such findings should not be viewed as "claims in propositional form" (Barone 2012; p.3) 'to enhance certainty' (ibid.; p.47), but rather as interrogative 'unfinished thinking ... through and with art" (Kjørup in Biggs & Karlsson, 2011; p.44)' (cited in Scarso, 2014). The combination of the creative methodologies devised by Scarso is in itself an original contribution resulting in an approach that can be

further utilised in the development of
new innovative projects (see impact),
beyond Scarso's own work. Conversely,
the continuing development of the
Voicescapes methodology through the
re-application and refinement of this in
a wide range of contexts (educational,
community and professional) can be seen
as a contribution to pedagogical and
directorial understanding of the potential
of live singing as participatory practice
and instrument for performance creation.

Dissemination

Alongside the Imagined Cities performance at Colourscape Festival (Sep 2015), which was freely accessible to a wide audience, this output has been further disseminated in the following ways:

LIVE PERFORMANCES:

Imagined Cities. By Jacek Scarso & Alexander Campkin (2015) Colourscape Festival, Clapham Common. 12 - 20 September.

Imagined Cities. By Jacek Scarso & Alexander Campkin (2016) Colourscape Music Festival, Waddesdon Manor. 4 June.

WORKSHOPS:

Voicescapes workshops, led by Scarso, have been presented in a variety of contexts;

Scarso, J (2013-2015) *Voicescapes Workshops*. Royal Opera House's Thurrock Trailblazer programme, London.

Scarso, J (2014) *Voicescapes Workshops*. Fused Festival, High House Production Park, London. 5 July.

Scarso, J (2017) *Voicescapes Workshops*. Istituto Teatrale Europeo Festival, Rome.

Scarso, J (2019) *Voicescapes Workshops*. Spark Festival with the British Council, Hong Kong, 19 January.

TALKS:

The findings of this output have been communicated in a range of conference presentations internationally, including:

Scarso, J (2017) '*The Vocal Exhibit*'. Curating and Collecting Sound, TaPRA conference. June, Tate Modern, London.

Scarso, J (2017) '*The Vocal Exhibit*'. Vocal Embodiment and Remediation, ACLA International Conference. July 7, Utrecht University.

Scarso's approach to voice and his Voicescapes methodology were also presented in the papers/workshops;

Scarso, J (2018) '*Interdisciplinary Voice*'. March, Anglia Ruskin University.

Scarso, J (2019) '*Singing in the Dark*'. Sound, Voice and Music, TaPRA Conference. September, University of Exeter.

PRESS:

The project was widely disseminated online, through both music-interest channels, regional press and the respective channels of Campkin's, Scarso's, Elastic Theatre, The Fourth Choir, Eye Music Trust and Colourscape.

Figure 11. Aerial view of Colourscape in Clapham Common, London, 2015. Image: Courtesy of Elastic Theatre.

Figure 12. Voicescapes workshops at Spark
Festival , Hong Kong. In collaboration
with the British Council, 2019. Image: Sol
Angelucci

Impact

The impact of this output can be measured in the following ways:

Public reach and success of Imagined Cities. Through its performances at Colourscape Festivals (Clapham Common in 2015 and Waddesdon Manor in 2016), Imagined Cities reached an estimated audience of over 2500 people. The diversity of such audience, in terms of age range and background, testifies the potential of this work to transcend cultural barriers and generate interest amongst both specialised audiences and the general public. Public feedback, shared with the project's creators and the Colourscape Festival Team, was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, praising the innovative nature of this work and emotional and aesthetic journey promoted by this, This in turn reflects the ethos of accessibility and inclusivity that is key to the work of all partners included: Scarso, Campkin, The Fourth Choir and Colourscape.

Scarso's Voicescapes workshops continue to be widely presented and adapted to a variety of contexts, nationally and internationally. Following the success of this approach in conjunction with Royal Opera House, Istituto Teatrale Europeo in Rome and Spark Festival in Hong Kong, Scarso continues to be in high demand as workshop facilitator, making his Voicescapes approach a regular contribution in international performance programmes. Voicescapes has been successfully adapted to a wide range of contexts, including primary, secondary and higher education, community outreach and professional settings. Across all these, it is estimated that this approach has been shared with more than a thousand participants internationally.

Scarso's interdisciplinary approach to voice has also been an integral feature in the development of the BA Theatre Arts programme at London Metropolitan University, shared both with students as well as peer CPD initiatives, organised as part of the Learning & Teaching Conferences 2016-2019. The uniqueness of this approach was instrumental in Scarso being awarded the honorary title of University Teaching Fellow.

The artistic approach to vocal performance as exhibit explored in this output has subsequently been adapted to a variety of other projects created by Scarso internationally, including performances for Science Museum with The Old Telephone Exchange vocal quartet (2016) and with soprano Maya Sapone at Tate Modern with Tate Exchange (2018, 2019), Museo del

Figure 13-14. Performances developed as a result of the methodology used in the project. Swinging Swimmers at The Science Museum. Image: Courtesy of Elastic

Barocco al Palazzo Chigi di Ariccia in Rome (2019) and to be commissioned for Museo Ca' Pesaro in Venice (2020-21, pending Covid restrictions).

Scarso continues to be regarded as an international authority in the field of vocal performance, regularly invited to symposia and festivals and currently working on a new publication on voice and gender co-edited with Dr Patrick Campbell, provisionally accepted by Routledge for publication in 2023.

Figure 15. Voicescapes workshops at Spark Festival , Hong Kong. In collaboration with the British Council, 2019. Image: Sol Angelucci

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