



## Vocal Resonances and Sound Memory in *Helen Brown*

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**ABSTRACT – Vocal Resonances and Sound Memory in *Helen Brown*<sup>1</sup>** – The paper focuses on aspects related to the intensification of the uses of the voice and the musical sonority proposed by Trinidad Piriz and Daniel Marabolí on *Helen Brown* (2013). Rendering an account of a theoretical framework that questions the referential dimension in which theatre is often analyzed and proposing a phenomenological approach that accounts for the *performative materiality* encouraged to strengthen the resonance of the voice and the audibility of the sound, the essay analyzes two scenes or *tracks* in which the body undertakes the memory of the viewers involved in the scenic performance.

Keywords: **Voices. Memory. Sound. Helen Brown. Performance Analysis.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Résonances Vocales et Mémoire Sonore chez *Helen Brown*** – Le document met l'accent sur les aspects liés à l'intensification des usages de la voix et la sonorité musicale proposées par Trinidad Piriz et Daniel Marabolí sur *Helen Brown* (2013). Rendant compte d'un cadre théorique qui s'interroge sur la dimension référentielle au sein de laquelle le théâtre est souvent analysée et eu proposant une approche phénoménologique qui tient compte de la matérialité performative qui encouragé à renforcer la résonance de la voix et l'audibilité du son, l'essai analyse deux scènes ou pistes dans lequel la mémoire fait corps engage d'une manière particulière aux spectateurs impliqués dans la performance scénique. Mots-clés: **Voix. Mémoire. Sonorité. Helen Brown. Analyse Scénique.**

**RESUMEN – Resonancias Vocales y Memoria Sonora en *Helen Brown*** – El artículo se concentra en indagar aspectos referidos a la intensificación de los usos de la voz y la sonorización musical que proponen Trinidad Piriz y Daniel Marabolí en *Helen Brown* (2013). Dando cuenta de un marco teórico que cuestiona la dimensión referencial con la que se analiza frecuentemente al teatro y proponiendo una aproximación fenomenológica que dé cuenta de la *materialidad performativa* que insta a intensificar las resonancias de la voz y la capacidad audible del sonido, el escrito analiza dos escenas o *tracks* en los que la memoria hecha cuerpo compromete de un modo particular a los espectadores que participan de la performance escénica.

Palabras-clave: **Voces. Memoria. Sonoridad. Helen Brown. Análisis Escénico.**

A truly magical, enchanting sense will be given to words;  
they will have form, they will be sensible emanations and  
not just meaning.  
(Artaud, Theatre of Cruelty, Second Manifest, 2001).

In the present article, I will focus on the staging proposal of Helen Brown by Trinidad Piriz and Daniel Marabolí, applying methodologies from theatrical studies and performance analysis strategies. In order to do this, I would like to highlight “those moments that shaped” (Roselt, 2008, p. 44) my experiences as a viewer of the staging in different seasons. The first visit in this condition occurred during the premiere in 2013 at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Museum of Contemporary Art) in the Lastarria Neighborhood, in Santiago, Chile. The second time, I had the opportunity of being invited by the group to watch some rehearsals of the staging and all the performances of the play during a season at the GAM (Centre Gabriela Mistral), in Santiago, Chile in 2014. During this last time, I found many answers that complement the effects that Helen Brown caused in me as a viewer.

Throughout this essay, I am interested in exploring the different situations of sound staging and vocal intensity that emerge during the performance. I will focus on the production and staging strategies prepared by the performers (Trinidad Piriz and Daniel Marabolí), as well as in the effects of the voices on the listeners-viewers. Furthermore, I will describe and analyze moments of the performance of *Helen Brown* recorded in video in order to distinguish levels of vocal intensity (in its acoustic dimension) and the sound memory (in its performative dimension) that displaces, at least for a moment, the traditional text of the role (referential dimension) played by the performer-actress.

In this sense, the questions I would like to use to introduce my research interest refer to aspects related to: first, the manner in which the different possibilities of the voice are staged in Helen Brown; second, the role that sound material plays for the voice to acquire its particular stage presence; and third, the vocal treatment and the sound space that Trinidad Piriz and Daniel Marabolí use to generate a particular atmosphere which creates a space of memories. Based on this, this paper will be structured in three sections. The first one, called On Voice, Remembrance and Sonority: Perspective from Theatrical Studies, will introduce the reader to the different

theoretical perspectives that will be used as referential sources for my argument. In the second and third parts, titled *Chanchita or the Emergence of a Memory Space* and *The Nigerian Embassy, Place of Delivery and Loss*, I will make use of the theoretical framework to analyze two moments of intensity in terms of vocal treatment, sonority space, and the memory space proposed by *Helen Brown*.

### **On Voice, Remembrance and Sonority: Perspective from Theatrical Studies**

“Hey Trini! There is a problem?  
Estás ahí Trini?”  
(from the Workbook of Trinidad Piriz)

In this way, and preceded by two notes emitted by a synthesizer which submerge the viewer into a dark, enigmatic and gloomy atmosphere, the narrative and the story in which the actress-performer Trinidad Piriz was involved when trying to rent an apartment in Berlin in 2012 begin. Thus, a real life event is transformed into a constitutive, articulated element of theatrical fiction/creation. However, this play, which contains fictional elements related to a biographical or documentary theatre in which the story of “a police event that happened to the actress herself”<sup>2</sup> is told displays, through sound materialities and uses of the body, a particular type of presence that takes us back “from the communicative force of the words that, when structured, create dramatic sense through the incarnate figure” (Lehmann, 2013, p. 268), towards the performative power of the vocal sonority that emerges as a *Parole soufflée* from and within the body.

It was precisely Jacques Derrida who understood, certainly persuaded by the voice of Antonin Artaud, the deficit in which grammatically ordered language falls when the step that leads us to vocal sonority is perceived. In the words of Derrida:

They rather highlight the issue itself which Artaud pretends to root out, that whose derivation, if not impossibility, he relentlessly denounces, that over which his screams have not ceased to break down furiously. Because what his howls promise us, articulated under the names of existence, of flesh, of life, of theatre, of cruelty, is, before the madness and the play, the sense of an art that gives no place to works of arts, the existence of an artist who is no longer

the path or the experience that gives access to other things but itself, the existence of a word that is a body, of a body that is a theatre, of a theatre that is a living text no longer at the service of a scripture older than itself, of some archi-text or archi-word (Derrida, 1989, p. 240).

This is so because Artaud, in the words of Derrida: “[...] teaches us that unity before dissociation” (Derrida, 1989, p. 240) which is the sensible dimension of the body as form of knowledge<sup>3</sup> and where what is said and done acquires a value from how these two are performed along with the physical force that materializes voice and sound. On the other hand, the intensification of the performative dimension of the voice in *Helen Brown* leads us to pay attention to the *effort*, the *panting*, the *rhythm*, the *sound* and the *scream* which Trinidad Piriz works with throughout most of the performance. From this angle, it is she who insistently and calculatedly emphasizes games with the intonation of her voice, emulating modes of talking, the characters and herself in relation to the language and the country at stake.

In this way, the intensification of the use of the voice in *Helen Brown* is directly related to a strategy that stresses the performative materiality<sup>4</sup> of the voice. This emphasis reveals one of the main staging strategies proposed by Piriz and Marabolí. Now, to put forth a reading of the voice as an eminently performative phenomenon, that is, that occurs as a staging event (the performance), involves a minimal referential framework that accounts for the methodological rule that underlies this treatment. For this, the manner in which Hans-Thies Lehmann has displayed this methodological turn using the notion of the real body becomes useful:

What is real – this means, corporeality – [...] comes into play free from sense through the presence of the body once the physical presence has undermined all order (verbal and non-verbal) and meaning. The corporal reality creates a deficit in sense: whatever appears in the scene in terms of meaning is always taken a step beyond its consistency through the sensoriality of the body; the sense is separated from the pre-conceptual whirlwind of *sensorial certainty* that, starting from each stable positioning (thesis) of a text, highlights its performative side, its carefree attitude towards all truth, its profound inconsistency (Lehmann, 2013, p. 267).

Important parts of the methodological turn that theatrical studies have been incorporating to give account for its *object* of study can be seen in the words of Lehmann, in which the ideas posed by

Artaud resound. That *deficit of the sense* which displays the profound inconsistency that leads us to the sensory certainty of the body in the scene and its particular sonority is what interests me in *Helen Brown*. An example of this is *the dialogue* between the *performer* Piriz and the *character* of Shannon of Western Union: “*Señorita Piriz, le dio usted el número secreto a alguien más*” says the simultaneous interpretation of the voice of Shannon in English (using a loud, high pitch voice executed by Piriz herself). The phrase is vocally intensified by the actress during the performance, stretching the last consonant of the word *más*, whose sonority is confused with the notes that Daniel Marabolí persistently executes, emulating the tones and intensity of film suspense in its dramatic climax and sought to be imprinted in the *track* (this is how the group calls the scenes, exacerbating the musical and sound dimension of the staging experience) that are being staged. Instead, the answer “Yes, to Helen Brown” (executed by Piriz in another microphone) emerges displaced, subdued and slowly, emulating an insurmountable defeat: the loss of the money and the consummation of the fraud she suffers in Berlin, Trinidad Piriz.



Image 1 – Trinidad Piriz, in front of her sound set. Source: Photo: Horacio Pérez Rodríguez.

In his text *Lo Obvio y lo Obtuso*, Roland Barthes (2009, p. 269) stated that “[...] the ‘grain’ of the voice is not – or is not only – its timbre” [...] but also “[...] it is the body in the voice that sings, in the hand that writes, in the member that executes” (Barthes, 2009, p. 270). For Barthes (2009, p. 267), the *grain* of the voice is equal to its “significant weight”. It is because of this that,

[...] if I assign a theoretical value to this grain (the assumption of a text in the play), I cannot do anything else but to redo for myself a new evaluation table, undoubtedly individual, as I am determined to listen to my relationship with the body of he or she who sings or plays, and this relationship is erotic but not subjective (the part that listens in me is not the psychological subject; the pleasure that he expects will not reinforce him – to express it – but on the contrary, he will lose it) (Barthes, 2009, p. 270).

In tune with Barthes' tenets (2009, p. 264), which seek to give an account of the musical (theatrical) object itself in direct connection with the body's materiality "in which a tongue meets a voice", Hans-Thies Lehmann (2013) proposes, in its *Postdramatic Theatre*, the possible transformations of the *physis of the voice* in these new forms of theatre. The *performative materiality* of the voice is highlighted by Lehmann as one of the experimentations proposed by new theatrical forms.

In the case of *Helen Brown*, the union of the "physis of the voice" as well as its dissemination "in electronic or technical form" (Lehmann, 2013, p. 269) is presented through the auditory resources mediated by the use of musical instrumentation and microphones in the stage. Keeping in mind these aspects, I would like to pose my reflections in regards to Helen Brown based on the *performative inconsistency* proposed by Lehmann for the theatre, emphasizing for the analysis the *tearing* and the *vibration* of the voice, as well as its *dissemination* concerning its electronic sonorization. Especially because, as he states in another place of his well quoted *Postdramatic Theatre*: "[...] the movement *from sense to sensoriality* is inherent to the theatrical process, and it is the phenomenon *of the live voice* which, in a more direct way, manifests the presence and the possible sensory dominion in the sense, and, at the same time, is the heart of the theatrical situation" (Lehmann, 2013, p. 268) that [...] blurs the limits between the language as expression of a living presence and the language as pre-made linguistic material" (Lehmann, 2013, p. 269). Complementing the former, Erika Fischer-Lichte (2011, p. 255) argues that

[...] the voice sounds when it leaves the body and vibrates in the space 'manifesting' itself when screaming, sighing, moaning, sobbing, or laughing. All these activities are produced in processes that, undeniably, affect the whole body, which bends, contorts or tenses to the max. Likewise, these

expressions of the voice exempt of words can physically move to the very core those who listen to it.

With these theoretical perspectives, we propose that the voice that emerges from the body of Trinidad comes charged with its own sense, almost as in a narrative parallel to the text, story or situation narrated, as it supports itself in its materiality-body and expands through the space reaching out in form of a vibration to the bodies of each one of the *viewers-listeners* as something prior to *what is said*, thus displacing, at times, the importance of the text content (the narration of the events) because of the channel material or its mere sonority. Thus, our hypothesis states that as the former creates in the recipient a deficit of *sense* in which the importance is no longer centered exclusively in what the story needs to tell us regarding the facts of the fraud suffered by Trinidad in Berlin, but also in the form in which this sound information, in a complementary manner, completely floods the space of the staging experience, as if it was an additional body/actor. Thus, the *loss of sense* is manifested almost as a dynamic that enfolds the whole play, leading its movement and rhythm. But how does it do it? This operation is not linear but rhythmical, that is to say, the loss of logic that a play should traditionally follow does not lead us to less understanding each time, or to be totally unable to connect the facts in a traditional form, that is, linearly and incrementally, but instead it develops *rhythmically* with the development of the play, giving the possibility of never falling into a mere logical understanding of the facts, in order to have access to another dimension away from the content of the text and linked to sound oscillations, vocal timbres and corporal affection. It is a dimension of voices and total sound enfolding that is portrayed or can be understood as a parallel narration that delivers us another type of *information* related to the autobiographical story that is primarily sensorial (performative). Thus, this *loss of sense* as effect in the reception responds to the multiple possibilities of the sonority, which causes that, in the precise moment in which our ear and our mind logically comprehend everything, something vanishes and is left out from that comfortable place of enunciation.

This performative dimension and sound material that enfold the space, or this rhythmical vibration of the voice in the space, gain great relevance in *Helen Brown*, because it is the matrix that guides the work from what I earlier identified as “the physis of the

voice” to its “dissemination” for the purpose of technological use on the stage that boost, even more, the vocal sonority, producing physical connections and effects on the viewer. This is why, from a phenomenological perspective, Fischer-Lichte (2011, p. 255) leads the attention of the performance analysis towards the contagious “physical being-in-the-world” of the voice’s sonority and the effect it leaves on the viewer (*staging feedback loop*).

The formulation of these perspectives, as well as our methodological assumption, is not far from the idea presented by Daniel Marabolí himself (2014, p. 115) in the academic journal *Apuntes de Teatro (Theatre Notes)* when referring to the staging strategies in *Helen Brown*.

The spoken voice reflects [...] all the possibilities alluded to the phoneme, amplifying the cognitive vision of the word and allowing that factors such as timbre, tone, intensity, intonation, language, accent, modulation, speed, and intervals are also considered at the moments of posing the content of the staging and, at the same time, giving the audience alternatives at the moment of forming images: the sound suggests and manifests sensations not necessarily prone to lexicalization.

Posing the auditory and vocal resonance as a performative *principle* in *Helen Brown* implies paying attention as a viewer at the moments in which the performer (Trinidad Piriz) “[...] makes her voice audible in its singular physicality, in the sensibility that is its own” (Fischer-Lichte, 2011, p. 255), as well as the physical effects that this vocal resonance generates in myself as a viewer of the staging experience. What I try to describe is that performative dimension of the voice and the sound that emerges from the experience and that *compromises* the corporality of those of us who participate in the staging event as a true staged resonance box. Such corporal compromise which deploys the voice is described by Fischer-Lichte (2011, p. 242), in reference to the creation of atmospheres in the theatre, wherein:

[...] the body can turn into a resonance box of the sounds it hears, it can resonate with them; [...] When the sounds, the noise or the music convert the body of the viewer/listener in its space of resonance, when they resound in their thoracic box, when they cause physical pain, when they give them goose bumps or turn their stomachs, the viewer/listener ceases to hear them as something external that delves into his or her ears, but feels them as an internal corporeal



process that often triggers a *powerful sensation* (Fischer-Lichte, 2011, p. 242).

The experience of the body as a resonance box is where I wish to pause my analysis of my experience as a viewer of *Helen Brown*. The musicalization and the sounds that emerge resonant from the audio sound managed by Daniel Marabolí and the voice of Trinidad Piriz flood the small and constrained space in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Santiago or the hall A of the GAM in which *Helen Brown* is staged.

### ***Chanchita* or the Emergence of a Memory Space**

*Chanchita* (which means little piggy), although introduced at the beginning of the play, is a track<sup>5</sup> that narrates *what happened* to Trinidad Piriz in Berlin, and states the theme to be discussed for the rest of the play. This time, the speaker, articulated by the voice of the performer Piriz, is her own mother, whom she wakes up in order to unleash upon a series of intense emotions related to the unfortunate event Piriz has just realized to have happened to her. This *track* has a particular relevance for me for two reasons: on the one hand, it allows me to become aware of the intimate exercise of re-construction that the actress-performer executes regarding her mother's character, but with all the intention of fiction being what takes over the scene, shading wardrobe elements in favor of the particular timbre which imitates the voice of the mother, rescuing its own speed and gritty, sleepy intensity that are deposited in the memories of Piriz. Suddenly, we found ourselves enveloped in the *situation* through a space of joint memories; we are transformed into voyeurs of an event without meaning to when we feel the connection with our own mothers. A very good example of this vocal exchange game is this extract of the conversation:

Trini's voice: (1) – La Helen mamá, la Helen desapareció y se fue con toda mi plata, era mentira mamá.

Mother's voice: (2) – Noh te creoh gooordá, que mála páaata cháaancha igual / a mí siempre me tincóoh que esa mujer, era cosa raraa, gorda

(Transcript of the video reviewed for the present essay).

In this text excerpt, we can see two aspects of our proposal:

1. On the one hand, the quality of the voice that Trinidad uses to deploy her *own voice* does not seem to have any type of radical

acoustic or physical modification that, in contrast to the others, tries to redirect us to an external voice, thus making this sound appear natural and harmonious to that body. The only vocal alterations we can perceive when Trinidad's role speaks are changes in mood, expressed in changes of speed or certain sound variations that denote an urgency that we can see, for instance, in this particular fragment: Trinidad continues here with this sort of sobbing, talks in a much higher pitch tone, which is typical when one is in that situation, and her hands move in a determined form: they agitate quickly, open, tense, and the upper half of her arms remains glued to her body. One could say that this is the way she characterizes herself, or maybe that this is the way she is when she cries and resorts to that, but the truth is that all those quick, staccato movements, although they are very physically organic, allow the voice to come out in the same broken and hastened quality, the same way in which we naturally open our mouths and eyes more to sing in a high pitch; she also puts her hands over her stomach, so that it is possible to perceive with greater clarity that her breathing changes when she uses that voice.

2. [...] and, on the other hand, Trinidad resorts to a much more plastic gesture, in the sense that she is much more conscious of the score, which is not directed towards the representation of her mother, but towards her controlling her own descent in tempo, volume, and rhythm that deployed/defined as the voice of her mother. In this phrase, I can attempt to codify the particularities of the sound, such as the stresses, which are not those of the words, and which Trinidad indicates with her hands, raising them or drawing an imaginary stress mark in the air, or lengthened vowels that she also complements moving her hands towards the sides, which makes the words appear more paused, or the *h* in cursive, a quality of the voice by which she seeks to give more air to the word, that is, to let out air and voice at the same time, for which her whole body is positioned downwards when *exhaling* air, and her mouth is closer to the microphone, so it is heard with a different quality.

Here, the space of infinite associations that can occur in our imagination becomes fundamental, with the richness of sounds and the absence of representative images. The actress-performer Trinidad Piriz is producing, crying, or talking with a voice that delivers a broken quality of the sound when, as one more action, she repre-

sents herself, while when she represents her mother, she uses a slow and paused voice, with a grittier and lower volume tint. More than a characterization, in the sense of a role or character, this begins to be presented as a song; the actress-performer, with her movements, works to build those sounds in the placement of the voice, as it appears that there is not much time for psychological internalization of the situation being narrated, as there is time to give form to the musicality. Therefore, this turns into a sort of remix of two musical materials that begin to loop each other live.



Image 2 – Daniel Marabolí performing in front of his set. Source: Photo: Horacio Pérez Rodríguez.

Thus, the acting proposal of Trinidad Piriz focuses on this multi-vocal construction. She takes it upon herself to make this point clear in her essay “Helen Brown: autobiografía sonora” (*Apuntes* 137) when she tells us that “[...] the voices define the staging work in *Helen Brown*” because “each one of them invokes previous experiences, people with whom I interacted and the words I exchanged” (Piriz, 2014, p. 112). The uses and inflections of the voice that emerge from actress-performer Piriz bring a set of autobiographical experiences, interactions lived by her in virtual mode (through Skype, phone or chat) during her stay in Berlin and external or artistically constructed with vocal, motor and dramatic results: the experiences of Helen Brown, of the agents from the different embassies, of the German police, of Trinidad Piriz’s mother and of herself. From this perspective, which crosses the boundary between fiction and reality, who is really the

main character, Piriz or Helen Brown? I think neither. At least my proposal points to the vocal intensity and the sound construction that create the staging universe of the performance of *Helen Brown*.

But also, at the beginning of this *track* we have a succession of sounds, lighting, gestures etc., which creates and reveals the private space of which we are part of as viewers. We are allowed to be part of it *looking through the keyhole*, as innocent spies in a semi-real *event*. The track begins with a simple exchange of texts of two *voices/roles* performed by Trinidad Piriz herself, each with its own vocal particularity, musicalized live by Daniel Marabolí, who coordinates with Trinidad's talking times, who, at the same time, is narrating the beginning of the development of the play. All the former happens on the stage within this new melodic space of the play, generated by both bodies (Trinidad and Daniel) in relation to objects that act as sound mediators, as, for example, the microphones, the speakers, the sounds tables etc. This begins after an abrupt change in rhythm that relates to the idea of understanding this play as a *sound performance*. As the light brightens, we see Trinidad a bit disheveled talking on a microphone set in the voice/role of her mother and changing immediately to another microphone to interpret the listener, who is herself in this specific autobiographical situation. This convention of two different voices on two different microphones appeared before during the whole play, but the tone it takes now is determined by the atmosphere that give us the sensation of a certain intimacy that enfolds us as viewers. This is why, on the one hand, we know that it is an intimate moment, a telephone conversation with no telephone operators who speak English in their respective accents, but with her own mother, in her native language. Second, the light is lower and Trinidad's expressions are not as clear as before; and third, we do not have subtitles, so the attention centers in that small place of conversation, and strangely, it gives us the feeling that the staging space has become smaller. It is as if we turned into the *voyeurs* of this situation, because we also know that, although this is a THEATRE play, that is, although this is *FICTION*, the event we are seeing really happened to the actress. She is Trinidad Piriz, the character to whom all the events narrated in the play happen to, and at the same time the flesh-and-bone actress who interprets these voices in front of us. It is here where we fall into confusion, or rather in this fragile limit of what is real and what is fiction that provokes so much in the

unconscious as well as in the conscious dimension. Trinidad begins the *track* with this small exchange of words:

[...] – Trinidad: Mamá soy yo, la Trini tu hija, la de al medio [ ] –  
(switches microphone)  
– Mother: ¡Chanchita! – [ ]  
(Transcription of the video reviewed for the present essay).

These words are accompanied by a slow and soft melody that could remind us of a musical box. What is interesting is that this reference or image of the musical box we are using to define this melody did not become visible at the moment of watching the play for the first time, but when reviewing the video. In fact, one could say that music cannot be perceived; it is not an element distinguishable by itself, which is also interesting because when one watches the play for the first time, there is no dissociation of elements; this music is never perceived as an isolated element, as a melody to hum after leaving the play; one can only remember and repeat the texts in its respective inflections; the sound memory is perceived and stored as a whole that cannot be dismembered. Thus, for example, the word *chanchita*, which emerges from the voice of the mother and always causes much laughter in the audience, was something that remained in the memory of many of the viewers just as it was pronounced, with its slow quality, low volume, determined tint, and the particular *ch* of actress-performer Piriz.

### Sound Memory: of remembrance turned into body

One of the keys that articulates the staging strategy of *Helen Brown*, as clearly stated by Daniel Marabolí (2014, p. 116), was centered in revealing “[...] the remembrance of Trinidad [...] as sound material: rescuing from the sound impressions of Piriz herself and adapting them according to composing and rhythmic criteria.” That is how the *remembrance*, not as a mere idea, but as *remembrance turned into body* in the sense given by Aleida Assmann<sup>6</sup>, implies the corporality of the performer-actress as a resonant experience in which “[...] it is mainly the body that remembers things and takes responsibility for that remembering” (Schultze, 2010, p. 85). The Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmeaker states the same for dancing. This way, the strategy employed by Piriz and Marabolí focused, in the

words of the latter, in *revisiting* the remembrances of Trinidad Piriz's experience as the "[...] possibility of archiving what we have registered in our brain and evidenced in our body" (Marabolí, 2014, p. 115). Thus, through the *sample* technique, the "[...] spoken testimony" is rescued, "[becoming] the soundtrack from which sounds samples must be extracted" (Marabolí, 2014, p. 117).



Image 3 – Daniel Marabolí mixing sound. Source: Photo: Horacio Pérez Rodríguez.

With respect to this place in which the revision of memory and the idea of remembrance turned into body converge, Hans-Thies Lehmann (2013, p. 333), in *Teatro Posdramático*, says that:

[...] Memory works as Heiner Müller says: <when something not seen turns almost visible, when something not heard turns almost audible, or when something not felt among sensations turns almost palpable>... Through the memory of suffering, of lost possibilities or broken promises that doze off the bodies and its affects, the I looks from the outside over the border wall of one's identity and opens up, even inconsistently, to one's history as a member of a species, to the connection with others, to the dimension of responsibility linked to its own historicity.

This space in which memories, in the form of remembrances, are materialized and found corporally, allows for the emergence of a new place of perception in the viewer: a place of sensations, connec-

tions and associations, wherein images and an internal atmosphere begin to be created solely from the sonority of the voice that portrays this *powerful* sensation which I mentioned in an earlier quote by Erika Fischer-Lichte. In the end, this creates a degree of identification superior to the logical association of similarities between the personal and the fictional story, or between Trinidad Piriz's mother and the mother of each one of the viewers of each performance. The memory here appears, instead, from a deeper and more inexplicable dimension; there is a degree of identification with a particular voice and atmosphere, and thus we do not associate two images according to their similarities, but we are participants in a remembrance that, despite being more distant from the true, *real* event each time, brings to the present an absence, and it does it in the form of sound produced with the mouth. This *person* who is not physically present seizes the power of a body and takes place as a vibration in each one of the viewers-listeners. Therefore, as highlighted in Lehmann's earlier quote, we enter a place that is above identity and related to the recognition of a dimension much more human and invisible of the memory, an indescribable space we can access and that we can inhabit during the time of the performance, a space of existence that remains unexplored in the frantic contemporary world.

### **The Nigerian Embassy, Place of Delivery and Loss**

The next *track*, which expands the *powerful* conception of the voice in *Helen Brown*, appears when language is cancelled by our understanding of a foreign language (or different languages, such as American English, British English, German, or Nigerian), stressing the *voice's resonance* (Lehmann) and the *atmosphere* (Fischer-Lichte) of the musical arrangements and soundtracks. This track begins after a conversation between the main character, that is, the voice of Trinidad interpreting herself, with *Karen Consul*, the secretary of the Chilean consul in Germany, with her particular voice and expression. Both voices are performed in *Chilean* Spanish by Trinidad in two different microphones, but played from two very different places in terms of sound qualities, thus repeating the same dynamic already established in the first part of the staging<sup>7</sup>.

English is a very present language in our context; we can easily recognize it, even if it is just a few words, because in Chile we

also use many anglicisms. Therefore, even if a person does not know any English at all, it is not a distant language: we have some reference, and the exercise one tends to make when seeing the subtitles and listening to the active language is to relate what is being heard with what is being seen, to try to *understand* to establish a logical relationship between the sound and the image to avoid getting *lost* in the referential link. Nevertheless, the particular typography that leads us to the example of the subtitles and the *strange* English used when talking about Helen Brown are so interesting that one tends to let oneself go into the vertigo of those sounds, but with the devious certainty that we still understand what we are *being told*.

The track varies without changes in light or the position of the stage, but it begins exactly when Trinidad turns the page of one of the papers she has on a music stand and which she has been reading this whole time, thus giving way for a change of speaker: *The Embassy of Nigeria*. At this moment, it calls our attention that Trinidad is reading a score set on a music stand, first because it immediately reveals a mechanism not usually *theatrical*, that is, it reveals a musical mechanism and not music as hidden atmosphere that frequently accompanies the staging to highlight some specific aspect of the text to understand it better. Second, because given the fluidity of her pronunciation, it can be seen that the text has clearly been memorized and that what is being performed as an action is not to read the text as such with the goal of not making a mistake and of saying the precise words, but that in it there must be something related to what is being said, but that it seems to me closer to the musical form than to the theatrical form. With this supposed paradox in my perceptions as a viewer, I note that the actress performs concrete and live actions (in a particular present) when looking at the pages on the stand: she reads them, and then immediately performs the information she is decoding; she is also using the computer that, through the reflection of the screen in the glass that contains the exhibition of pre-Colombian objects at the Museum of Contemporary Art, shows her the subtitles, so that she knows exactly when to talk in order to go in parallel with the letters and avoid lagging behind, and knows exactly where to stress and how to maneuver this journey through different phonetics.





Image 4 – Trinidad Piriz executing voice effects. Photo: Horacio Pérez Rodríguez.

The last word of *Frau* to tell Piriz to go to the embassy is *exact*, to what Trinidad responds *ok*, turns over the page in her score and begins talking in some sort of unintelligible dialect. Immediately, the very particular *subtitles* of this track appear: a set of geometric figures that somehow respond to the sound (or the melody, if preferred) of Trinidad's voice talking in this new language; the subtitles are projected over the stage according to the order in which they were appearing and disappearing:

Triangle – square – circle  
 Circle – circle – circle – circle – circle – circle – circle  
 Circle – circle – circle – circle  
 Triangle – square – circle  
 Triangle – square – circle – circle – circle – square – square  
 Triangle – circle  
 (Subtitle Transcription)

In reality, what happens with this *subtitle* is that it is clearer that the written text is another representation of pure sound, another form of enunciation that rhythmically plays with what we are listening. The key is in how the geometrical text moves, without meaning that it can be put into clearly structures words/phrases/sentences; neither do we understand the words being said, but we understand that words are not trying to being replaced by symbols, as for example, when a

square corresponds to a certain word, but that the movement of the sound is prioritized, as figures appear and disappear according to the exclusively acoustic impulse of intensity, or pitch, or sound speed of Trinidad Piriz's voice and the notes played by Daniel Marabolí with his midi controller in the stage. As viewers, we perceive how the movement of these symbols is altered when sound parameters change. As the track moves forwards, this dynamic becomes more extreme, because what Trinidad says is no longer *strange words*, but clearly sounds that are a bit guttural and stressed, that no longer give us the feeling of being a language we do not know, and become a structure like a song, a melody, accompanied with Piriz's extreme gesturing, who raises her hand to go into high pitch, moves her head forward and backwards, and swings her hands from side to side. The array of all these elements invites us to abandon the idea of *understanding the story* logically and rationally, that idea we are prone to of understanding to avoid getting lost, that we are used to when we go to see theatre.

Those who have the opportunity of reviewing the text written by the group of artists after experiencing the live performance might find a great surprise:

Nigerian Ambassador: Mafia? No mafia here in Nigeria. Good people, nice country, nice food, we have magic but no mafias. No, no, no. Go back to the police and tell them to come to Nigeria and then we talk. And tell them to stop blaming us for everything. African people: good people. Poor people. But good! No mob. What is the name of this woman?

Trinidad: Helen Brown.

Nigerian Ambassador: That is not an African name...that is English name. No African...no. Go back to the police and tell them. Good luck my friend.

The story written by the artists shows that the emphasis and the intention are not centered in the fact that there is nothing to be said; it is not to use empty material, but to seek to displace, through the *performative materiality* (Fischer-Lichte, 2011) posed in the stage by Piriz/Marabolí, the hierarchy of meaning; under those textures there is information, but this information emerges as an experience from the body, the remembrances turned into body which expand the sonority and vocabulary of the performers as well as in the viewer.

Throughout this article, I have challenged myself to tackle an exercise in *performance analysis* that raises some aspects of the methodological frame in reference to two *tracks* (and some isolated samples) of the staging of *Helen Brown*. It is a hybrid staging of the new generation of Chilean theatre creators that put into question the theatrical referential cannon, exacerbating, through different staging strategies, the vocal resonances and the sound memories of a real event. For this, it is interesting to realize how the vocal resource of the actress-performer, as well as the composition strategies of the music-performer, tense the evident world of fiction, adding layers of performativity which acquire sense in the viewers who have the opportunity to visit them. In the end, and as a metaphor of the staging hybrid that complements the de-hierarchization of the meaning in the staging of *Helen Brown*, we listen to the performer Trinidad Piriz reaching her own conclusions in her lonely agony in Berlin: “Helen, you were a hybrid between Tracy Chapman, the super of my building in Chile, and me”. From thereon, we hear laughter from the audience.

### Notes

1 The drafting of the present essay is part of a Fondecyt de Iniciación (Nr. 11130532) research in charge of Professor Andrés Grumann Sölter. The student Belén Fajardo, who took part of the *intensive seminar in performance analysis* held during the first semester of 2015 in the facilities of the School of Theatre of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, contributed decisively in the discussion and elaboration of this research.

2 See: <[http://sangria.cl/2013/04/critica-Helen Brown](http://sangria.cl/2013/04/critica-Helen%20Brown)>.

3 In his text *Posiciones sobre la carne*, Artaud is eloquent regarding this: “[...] and he who says feeling says thought, that is, direct knowledge, communication turned upon itself and that illuminates from the inside... And he who says flesh also says sensitivity. Sensitivity, that is, appropriation, but intimate appropriation, secret, profound, absolute of my pain in myself; therefore solitary and unique in this pain” (Artaud, 2005, p. 79).

4 In contrast to the treatment of material objects that theatre semiotics applied to theatrical signs or components, the rescuing of the performative materiality is understood and presented by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her *Estética de lo performativo* (2004; 2011, p. 155) in comparison to the traditional conception of the work of art as a “fixed material artefact”, because “the staging realizations [...] are fleeting, transitory, and they burnout in their own present, that is, in their continuous evolution and vanishing, in the autopoiesis of the feedback loop”. The ways in which the performative materiality emerges from the staging realization (performance, function) are the *corporality*, the *spatiality*, the *sonority* and the *temporality*.

5 This is the name with whom the performers of *Helen Brown* define the scenes.

6 Aleida Assmann distinguishes between *Gedächtnis* (memory) and *Erinnerung* (remembrance). From the point of view of Assmann, remembrance recalls the action of looking backwards invoking a past event, while memory is responsible for making those activities in the remembrance operative; it is anchored in the biological organ of the brain and the neurological network. This means that without memory nobody could really remember, while remembrance refers to the array of concrete and discontinued acts that come to my memory. Assmann also calls the attention to the English word *memory* every time its uses refer to a much more comprehensive and ample spectrum. *Memory* refers to “[...] remembrance, recall, recollection, reminiscence, souvenir, commemoration, memorization”, so the two words that the German language distinguishes tend to be transformed into synonyms in English. According to Assmann, they must never be confused. See Assmann (2011, p. 184).

7 It is important to highlight that, in this scene, we had heard Spanish, German and *different types* of English with phonetic modifications and stress according to the speaker and his or her origin in the autobiographical fiction interpreted by Trinidad (who is a native speaker of *Chilean Spanish*); besides, these languages come with subtitles, each one with its particular typography, that fulfill their function: to make us understand what is being said and what the play is about.

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This unpublished text, translated by Pablo Saavedra and proofread by Ananyr Porto Fajardo, is also published in Spanish in this issue.

*Received in April 24, 2016*  
*Accepted in May 21, 2016*