The Collective Tongue:
An Exploration of Chorus Theatre

By Sinead Moloney

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Introduction

My first involvement in theatre was as a seventeen-year-old aspiring actress in the chorus of Euripides play, 'Electra' in 1988. It was a wonderful introduction to working within a co-creative group, and from this humble foundation I've been lucky enough to work in many diverse fields of group endeavour, ranging from HIV/AIDS support, residential children’s homes, homelessness and organizing networking conferences for specialist arts workers. However, my basic appreciation of group dynamics was as a result of being a member of that chorus many years ago. In 1992, I became a founder member of Essential Theatre Company, whose primary ethos was to push each individual member beyond the vanity of self involved performance, thereby sublimating their own ambition for the greater development of the entire group and its audience. Members discovered within themselves a surprising humility, without loss of individual personality. I found myself becoming less interested in, as I deemed it, the fictional world of theatre and the artifice of performance, and more compelled by the idea of applying a similar ethos to the less artificial world of reality. From this was born my commitment to Playback Theatre.

From personal experience of facilitating groups, like Playback itself, chorus is an invaluable technique used to create a sense of group unity and cohesion. Through a number of rituals and activities a group of individuals “engage in an exercise of re-discovery” (1.) This requires a great degree of trust, risk taking and sensibility within a group, to enable them to dive deep into the unknown and cede their individualism. Thus, becoming part of one large living, breathing amoeba that does exactly what it means - constantly changes shape. In a Playback performance, stories reveal themselves to audiences through the whole language of the theatre. A language in which words are often less telling than sound, and in which the stage picture often says more in a single pause than through a whole page of dialogue. The cathartic impact upon an audience, seen through protagonist’s eyes, enables them to acquire wisdom, understanding, and revelation, without having to go through the consequences of actuality. Let us perhaps appreciate the relevance of Easterlings view that “The chorus constitutes not only a collective character standing in a defined relation to the other characters of the drama, but also as an intermediary between the world of the play and the audience, whose perspective it helps to shape”.(2.) I will take this opportunity to delve into the essence of chorus, focusing on what I consider to be key aspects. Exploring where the idea first came to fruition in the history of drama and performance, and it’s artistic and cathartic effect on the audience.

(1.) See Acts of Service - Jonathan Fox
Facilitators
A brief History

Originally the chorus seems to have arisen from the singing of the dithyramb at chorus festivals in honour of Dionysus, God of Wine. The chorus consisted of a group of dancers who performed in an orchestra, not a place for musicians, as we know it, but a dancing place. The earliest presentations of a chorus were men dancing in a ring, reciting a Greek myth while individual performers would stand on a platform or cart. As a rule, the chorus and the principal actors were all men. Men and women danced separately and rarely together because women were considered to be of low social status at that time in Greek society. Women danced among themselves, and sexual elements and movements of the pelvis characterized dances involving people of low culture. Initially these festivals were of a satiric nature, humorous and mocking. It became a true dramatic chorus when Thespis introduced the actor in the 6th century B.C. The chorus commented on the feelings and emotions of this actor. As time passed the myths developed a more serious form. Instead of satire, the plays dealt with the relationship of man and the Gods, illustrating particular life lessons, becoming an expression of reality rather than just satirical. The reason for this sudden interest in man and his position in the order of the universe has been widely discussed among scholars. Some speak of the fifth century B.C. as the ‘Greek Age of Enlightenment’. Civilization had developed independence of thought, a new way of thinking and looking at the world. A growing independence from the traditional gods was developing, and it was from this climate that Greek tragedy emerged.

The employment of chorus does not lie exclusively in Greek culture. 'Noh' is a classical Japanese performance form, which combines elements of dance, drama, music and poetry. Kannami and Zeami, a father and son partnership developed it during the 14th and 15th Centuries. Both were also distinguished performers and playwrights of their time. Chorus featured greatly in Noh plays, usually consisting of eight people who sat at the side of a stage and whose primary function was to narrate the background of the stories. These choruses know as ‘Jiutai’, similar to Greek choruses, expressed the character's thoughts and emotions, and alternated between words and song. Arnott poetically describes Noh Theatre as “a void beyond the laws of space and time in which past may merge with present, dead history turned into living reality, visions become actual, and actuality turn into dreams.”(3.) It is interesting to note that chorus was developing in isolation across the globe. Greece and Japan, culturally and geographically worlds apart, yet both controlled by powerful Gods and Warlords, provoking a deep need in both societies to develop independence and create a vehicle to express social and political changes. During 1868-1912 due to social political changes, Noh lost its governmental patronage and were left to fend for itself. Although it nearly died out, enough performers regrouped, found private sponsors, and began teaching the art to amateurs. Today, like many classical performance forms throughout the world, Noh has a small yet enthusiastic following, that can boast 1,500 professional performers who make there living largely through performing and teaching Noh.
(3.) See *A Look at the Theatres of Japan* - P.D. Arnott

**Built In Witnesses**

The Importance of Chorus

In the open-air, day-lit Greek theatre, the chorus was a practical necessity, making transitions between scenes, giving actors the chance to enter and leave the playing area, and announce what characters these actors portrayed. However, the role of the chorus goes beyond this. One of the major functions was to act as a group of built-in witnesses for the suffering protagonist. In this suffering, and in the entire destruction of his outer and inner self, the tragic hero attained certain greatness and empathy from his audience. Travelling on the same journey with the protagonist, and in the imaginative life of the mind the audience were that character. Thus, the protagonist’s realisations were the audiences and they benefited from experiencing tragedy in an almost real situation. The chorus both commented on the events in the play and participated in them, so that it was both involved in the action and detached from it. A fine example of this chorus use can be seen in Aeschylus’ play ‘The Seven Against Thebes’. The chorus is made up entirely of young women. The reason behind this choice of chorus is to heighten awareness of the likely effects of war. If war breaks out, these young women would be taken as slaves and end up as victims of rape, not to mention the loss of fathers, brothers and future husbands. The regular voicing of these women's desperation, fear and pleading within the drama keeps us in close touch with what is at stake in this battle. Thereby, keeping you in touch with the feelings and emotional content of the drama - the realities of war. Greek audiences enjoyed surrendering themselves to grief, much like the contemporary equivalent in today’s culture of crying during a sad movie, or the emotional excitement experienced during a pop concert or football match. Greek chorus retained the emotive elements that our theatres have lost.

**The Death of the Chorus and the Birth of the Lone Central Character**

Playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides varied in their exploration of the dramatic possibilities afforded by the chorus responding to a single actor playing a number of roles. Firstly, the chorus as a participating actor tied the histrionic interludes together. Later, as a narrator, it commented on the action and divided it, thus creating acts. As tragedy developed, the chorus shrunk in size and actors increased in number. Aeschylus began with a chorus of fifty, but the numbers soon decreased to twelve. Sophocles used a chorus of fifteen. In the second century B.C. the comic chorus contained only seven people and in the third century B.C. only four. In the early years of the fourth century we cannot detect any important developments. In the fifth century there was a trend towards composing plays with smaller proportion of choral song and a higher proportion of spoken dialogue. By the end of this century some dramatists used what Aristotle calls embolima, ‘things thrown in’- songs that could be performed in different plays and were not designed to fit one particular drama. This has often been taken to mean that the chorus was in decline and beginning to be perceived as unimportant or even as an embarrassment. No longer an organic part of the action and easily reducible to the status of incidental entertainment. Yet, choral performances went on being in demand, even if their style and function altered significantly. What we should imagine is a rather complex process of change and development, spanning several centuries. Drama in Athens was an outstandingly popular and successful medium. As its prestige grew so did the scope for professionalism, and this must have been one of the factors that contributed to change. The actors were becoming more skilled so therefore the sheer volume of dramatic activity was increasing. And choral groups, ceasing to play a vital part
in the drama, allowed for the chorus leader to emerge as an independent actor.

**Chorus Today**

Inspired and guided by Francis Batten, Playback companies in Australia and New Zealand first developed chorus by combining the ‘lineal’ form, which was a simplified version used in the original company, with the traditional form of ancient Greek chorus. In Playback chorus, a group of actors stand practically shoulder-to-shoulder, one begins the action through movement or sound, automatically, the other actors echo this offer, and there begins the “voyage into this collective energy” (4.) Similarly to Greek chorus the actors may detach themselves from the group to take on the role of protagonist, whilst the others repeat key words or sounds to deepen the tellers experience. Expressing the unspoken voices within and highlighting the emotional journey of the protagonist enables the audience to experience collective catharsis. Let us perhaps appreciate the relevance of Easterlings view that “The chorus constitutes not only a collective character standing in a defined relation to the other characters of the drama, but also as an intermediary between the world of the play and the audience, whose perspective it helps to shape”.(5.)

Using a variety of exercises and rituals Playback actors can explore the various depths of chorus allowing them to operate as a co-creative group. For example, the mirror exercise helps the actors experience what it is like to journey into a world of harmony and synchronization. Standing face to face, two actors alternate leading and reflecting each others actions, striving to find a space where neither is leading, this space has come to be known as 'orange'. Individuals are red and yellow, but when in a chorus they merge together to create an 'orange' ball of creative energy. The fact that the chorus is a group rather than a single figure, allows it more scope to fluctuate with the movements of the story and it does not have to be as consistent as a single individual. The employment of chorus in contemporary work can still inspire group unity and cohesiveness, allowing the group to journey into the realm of risk-taking. Thereby, offering a challenge to each group member to cede control, and place one's trust in, the group as a whole. Effectively employed, chorus harnesses individual creativity to create a collective energy that knows no boundaries.
(4.) See essay on *The Chorus in Playback Theatre*, Salas/Batten
(5.) See *Greek Tragedy* - P.E.Easterling

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