

# The French Prophets

## Prelude to a *Myths of the Voice* Festival

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Spring Journal readers might be familiar with Pantheatre's *Myth and Theatre Festival* from lectures and articles published in the journal over the last twenty years by James Hillman, Charles Boer, Jay Livernois, Stephen Karcher, Ginette Paris, Nor Hall, Noah Pikes, among others. A three-part festival is being planned for 2005 / 2006 on "Myths of the Voice", to which this article is a prelude pamphlet (provocation contains *pro-voce*, after all...) The three main events of the Festival are due to take place in three locations, starting at Château de Malérargues, the *Roy Hart International Centre*, in Southern France, early July 2005; moving to Aberystwyth, Wales, in April 2006, in collaboration with *Centre for Performance Research* and the University of Aberystwyth; and finishing in Naples (or at least Italy, possibly Milan, if Naples proves too unruly a host!) in September 2006. Why Naples? Because it is the capital of *bel canto*, the capital of Mediterranean catholic paganism, and the home of the Sybil of Cumae.

To start, a brief lexicon of the persons and events mentioned in this article.

- The *Myth and Theatre Festival* – a forum for speculation and dialogue between artistic practice and mythological thinking. Themes have ranged from *Aphrodite*, *The Greed of Dionysus*, to *Jealousy*, or *Fury*. From France it travelled to New Orleans, Ireland, Umbria (Italy) and Granada (Spain.) The Classics are discussed, certainly, but also contemporary performances whose images aspire to mythological dimensions.
- *Pantheatre* – A Paris-based company with links to the *Roy Hart Centre* (Southern France). It runs a *Voice and Theatre Research and Training Programme* and *Pantheatre Impensemble*, an improvisation performance ensemble.
- Alfred Wolfsohn (1896-1962) – a voice pioneer presented in this journal by Noah Pikes in conjunction with Orpheus. All three, Wolfsohn, Pikes, and Orpheus should figure strongly at the *Myths of the Voice* Festival.
- Roy Hart (1927-1975) – (from the 1997 brochure of the *Myth and Theatre Festival* dedicated to "The Enemy"): "His work with the vision of the eight octave voice led him to very different frontiers than those of other charismatic theatre directors of the 60s. He concentrated on the psychological 'inner' transformation of the actor within an intense communitarian setting, and, sharing the time's redemptionist zeal, claimed the dismantling of the barriers between theatre and therapy... An extraordinary vocalist and performer, he inspired (and often quarrelled with) composers like Stockhausen, Henze and Maxwell-Davies."
- *Roy Hart Theatre* was Roy Hart's "intense communitarian setting." Its members (up to 40 at one point) acquired Malérargues in 1974. Roy Hart died in 1975. *Pantheatre* was created in 1981, the first independent company to emerge. Its founding performance was on the *God Pan*, inspired by Rafael Lopez-Pedraza, James Hillman, Charles Boer and Jay Livernois, who were all invited to Malérargues in the early 80's.
- Château de Malérargues: the word "château" conjures up fantasies of the Loire valley, Renaissance turrets and Italianate gardens. The actual 'Château de Malérargues' is something else: an austere, sturdy, protestant manor house, surrounded by massive trees and the underbrush of the Cevennes foothills. The outbuildings have been converted into voice and theatre studios.
- The Cevennes: a craggy, mountainous region on the Languedoc side of the Rhone valley (the other side is Provence.) It saw the last stand of the French Protestants against Louis the 14th's imposition of Catholicism. The king revoked the Edit de Nantes in 1685: Protestants had to convert or leave the kingdom. Most converted, many left - migrating to the "Refuge" (mainly Geneva, Amsterdam, London, and some German principalities.) An irreducible handful, known as the Camisards, resisted to the end.
- The Camisards (from the large white "camisole" shirts they wore) took to the Cevennol hills to resist Louis' ferocious 'Dragon' troops. All-out war exploded in 1704. Within two years the Camisards were crushed – by then the French generals had built the necessary grid of roads to control the area. Those who escaped took to preaching throughout Europe, especially in London, where their vociferous cult gatherings and inspired performances became a real media sensation - even a national scandal! They were known as "The French Prophets".<sup>1</sup>
- The return of the *Myth and Theatre Festival* to Malérargues coincides with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Roy Hart Centre* and with the Camisards' uprising 300 years ago. The ironies of this historical coincidence are worth underlining, as you will see.

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<sup>1</sup> For an outstanding introduction to the Camisards, see the late Jean-Paul Chabrol's (himself a Cevennol): *Elie Marion – le vagabond de Dieu, 1678-1713. Prophétisme et millénarisme protestants en Europe à l'aube des Lumières*. Edisud, France, 1999.

What happened during the Protestant cults of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Cevennes, during the Camisards uprisings, (probably even in Malérargues itself!), had a significant impact on the perception, use and status of the voice and singing in Protestant Europe, in the United States, and, later in large parts of the world thanks to the Protestant missionary zeal. Cult assemblies were held in cellars, mountain caves and remote forest clearings, in a spirit of intense fervor and fear. The area (and to some extent the whole period) was called *The Desert*, a weighty biblical reference. Some of the younger members in those assemblies, mainly young women, went into forms of vocal-singing trance, with quite extraordinary body manifestations – according to the reports that survived. Like most trance phenomena, these began with inarticulate pre-verbal sounds, screams, convulsions, quivering, shakings – in their case, interpreted as the catharsis of sin and guilt. As this “theological therapy” proceeded, the ‘chosen ones’ lapsed into miraculous speech, forms of glossolalia and recitations of the Bible, voiced by girls too young to know such passages, or even toddlers who recited the Bible in French - the Camisards spoke almost exclusively Provencal and Langue d’Oc. The Holy Spirit often transmitted very specific military instructions, especially to the leaders (who became known as the “prophets”). The most famous, Abraham Mazel, raided and massacred the Catholic town of Pont de Montvert with the claim that he had received direct orders from the Spirit.

This “performance” model, called “Sacred Theatre” by the Camisards themselves at the time<sup>2</sup>, is a model that became prevalent in certain sections and sects of Protestantism: inspired singing as a direct form of communication with God - the voice as the inspired (*in spiritus*) channel for the advent of the Pentecostal spirit. Historically, the rise of the importance of inspired singing (all the way ‘up’ to Bach and Haendel) is linked to the Reform’s rejection of the Catholic iconic and liturgical mediation: the instituted theatre of the mass. (The Camisards’ insults against the mass are worth a detour!) The main artistic and therapeutic medium was the voice, and singing became the “divine road to God”, superior and sublime. Like in all iconoclastic movements, image was banned and the imagination replaced by more abstract and direct forms of spirituality – in this case, singing. It is interesting that the more physical, bodily ‘lower’ cathartic cult manifestations (the voice and body trances) were repressed and reneged by the official protestant hierarchies of the time. Officially, only the proper, up-rising, pure, clear, sublime singing was considered divine; the Camisards were often considered to be diabolical. This was a generalized phenomenon throughout Europe, and it was probably because this debate was raging in England (with the Shakers, the Quakers, etc) that the Camisard French Prophets created such a stir when performing their extreme forms of cathartic cults. I shall return to this point specifically with regard to the French and to Calvinism.

When the *Roy Hart Theatre* moved from London to Malérargues (the reverse migration route of the French Prophets) in 1974, there were vague references by locals to “the return of the voice and singing” to Les Cevennes. The *Roy Hart Theatre* was then at its most fanatically intense theatre-proselytizing period; the impact and aura of its performances carried a sense of extreme ‘inspired’ conviction, especially as regarding the “theology” of the voice and of singing – and what was referred to by its members as “the spirit”. As a form of local public relations the troupe offered and was accepted invitations to sing hymns in local protestant temples. In fact the members of the *Roy Hart Theatre* could have been called “The English Prophets” (and maybe were, behind the scenes...) Its ethos and 90% of its members were Anglo-Saxon protestants. Certainly, Roy Hart, and Alfred Wolfsohn were Jewish, and the Jewish cantor model was very important in their philosophies, especially in the way they spoke and dealt with the notion of shadow in their approach to the voice, but a certain Britishness was also of the essence, certainly with Roy Hart (born Ruben Hartstein). For someone whose background and sympathies are predominantly Catholic / Pagan / Mediterranean, there were aspects of the Roy Hart Theatre’s understanding of singing and theatre which I found not only alien but which raised strong artistic and philosophical disagreements.

Given this background and preoccupations, *The Voice* should have been an obvious theme for the *Myth and Theatre Festival*; yet it has taken over 20 years to arrive at the idea. I would venture to say that this is because the voice calls for theologies and neo-religious forms of theatre, and resists the cultural relativization of mythologies - the “fundamentalist” problem of all religions, that is, their refusal to see themselves as mythologies or to allow themselves to be fictionalized. All the religious god terms follow: “the true voice”, “the voice of self”, “the original voice”, etc. This is not only specific to what was the *Roy Hart Theatre*, or to those who have followed in its wake; it is a feature of many voice teachers and “inspired” voice theoreticians.

Furthermore there is a modernist assumption that the voice, like the unconscious (and hence consciousness), or like the notion of “avant garde” in art, was a discovery of the late 19th early 20th centuries. For me the catalyst that served to put these assumptions (theological and modernistic) into a historical and mythological perspective is a remarkable book, published in 2000, by Professor Steven Connor, with the unlikely title - something of an ironical anticlimax in this context – of: “Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism”<sup>3</sup> - after all, and Connor of course slips in the famous quote: “ventriloquism is for dummies”!

Connor reviews and analyses the mythical conceptions of the voice's ownership and inspiration in Western history. He does this through the notion of ventriloquism, or *engastrimyth* (its Greek name), asking the fundamental questions of “who is speaking?” and “where does the voice come from?”... The voice, like the notion of personal identity (*persona* – *personare* implies the mask through which the voice sounds) has been imagined and mythologized in very different ways

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<sup>2</sup> Le Théâtre sacré des Cévennes, by Maximilien Misson, London, 1707. Presented and annotated by J-P Richardot, Presses du Languedoc 1985-1993, and Editions de Paris 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford University Press, 2000. Connor devotes a few pages to the Camisards in his chapter on “Miracles and Mutilations”. See also: Clarke Garret, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers* – Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

through the centuries. To give an example, there is ventriloquism in democracy: think of “the voice of the people of the United States” in the American constitution – a concept that is not unlinked to the mythologies and technologies of the voice in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The mythological tack on the voice through ventriloquism is brilliant, and one is in fact reading a parallel or diagonal cultural history of the voice, even though Connor sidesteps such a claim with his mercurial and eloquent humour.

In the analysis of Connor the crucial mutation in the mythologies of the voice is caused by the impact and impositions of the voice of Judeo-Christianity on Paganism. “Shut down the oracular voices” was possibly the first priority the Fathers of the Church gave themselves, and the emblematic enemy in this crusade was the Sybil of Cumae with the legendary echoes of her vocal ‘performances’. After all, here was the voice of a woman claiming major divine-inspired prophecy!<sup>4</sup>

Connor analyses in his book and in parallel essays what he considers to be the fascination of contemporary music composers with the model of the Sybil of Cumae, especially with her multiphonic oracular voice. To name some of the most renowned: Stockhausen (his famous *Stimme* series), Luciano Berio, Luigi Nono, Peter Maxwell Davies. Connor did not come across Wolfsohn’s nor Roy Hart’s work (is it a matter of divorce between something like an “academic avant-garde” and a non-academic somewhat sectarian group like Roy Hart’s?) And this, even though Roy Hart worked with some of these composers who were probably fascinated precisely by Hart’s way of producing multiphonic sounds (also called “chorded sounds”)! The attraction to the Sybil’s model and its mostly suppressed legends, triggers fantasies of very complex forms of vocal counterpoint composition and of an inspirational polysemic use of language. A basic utterance (the question to the oracle) is demultiplied into multiphonic disjointed utterances by a seemingly very mobile Sybil and then by an acoustic environment which, in ‘post-fantasy’ at least, must have created the most astonishing all-round sound system of echoes and distortions along the Sybil’s cave (Latin languages describe it as an *antro*, which translates best as “haunt”.) Such an acoustic space is the dream of a ventriloquist poetics of the voice, dispersed and reassembled by the Sybil’s improvisations and the cave wind spirits.

The mantic multiphonic model is also central to current Pantheatre research, particularly in terms of text interpretation – or hermeneutics: how voices interpret texts, i.e. which voices to call upon for the richest and most complex interpretations. Here a voice is a point of view (a “who” and a “where”.) Choreographic theatre gives this a working formulation in terms of “placing the voice” (“if you find your place, you will find your voice”). Therefore one must “make a move”, take position, make a stand, commit. This involves cultural studies, the study and if necessary the subversion of the official voices that texts bring along with them. Authoritarian ghosts pop out of books, especially ‘plays’, the moment you open them, and they want to rule ‘their’ performances - the most tricky authority being of course the author. One way of dealing with these voices is by “setting them up”, including, in recent performances, relatively baroque set-ups (with ‘charged’ stage objects and what we are calling “the poetics of shrines”), so that the actor is not left alone to deal with these authorities in heroic solo confrontations, but can call on the place’s spirits for cultural help and for alternative voices. “Set ups” are practical devices conceived as poetical traps that can catch, identify, unsettle, dismantle, sometimes dislocate the authoritarian ghosts of texts (shift their literary locations, time frames and rhetorical articulations) so that they might become advisors, partners, contributors (or interferences) in the theatre act. These procedures and the language used to describe them are very akin to mantics, to divination systems, and even to the poetics of spiritism, i.e. to the multiple ways of invoking, provoking, revoking, etc. voices. Not by chance two of Pantheatre’s main advisors and intellectual partners (and must-be contributors to the *Myths of the Voice* Festival) are Sonu Shamdasani, historian of psychology with an extraordinary knowledge of the culture of “spiritism”, and Stephen Karcher, specialist in divination. Karcher speaks of divination as a “performative linguistic act.”

Obviously one has to hear the word “voice” in a very wide sense and not only as an acoustic-physiological ‘self’ phenomenon. Similarly, we often use the notion of “tone” as in: “don’t speak to me in that tone!” (It’s a quality of ‘animus’ and animosity...) To hear the voice as a ventriloquist phenomenon opens its mythological dimension – it leads to a “figuring out” of the characters that speak through us<sup>5</sup>. Here again, it is not just a question of speaking with or from the guts i.e. a truth and theology of the stomach and of “gut feelings” – that would be taking the “ventrum” or “gastro” literally, which quite a few schools of voice tend to do (placing the “true self” in the guts!)

But let us return to the ventriloquism of our French Prophets. Two of today’s most quoted philosophers - certainly in performance studies circles - are the French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. The former has written one of postmodernism’s milestones: “La Voix et le Phénomène”, interestingly translated into English not as “Voice and Phenomena” but as “Speech and Phenomena.”<sup>6</sup> “Translation”, etymologically, implies a side shift or slide. The shift from “voice” to “speech” reveals, in my view, the fact that Derrida uses the voice as a logical category within a linguistically based philosophical system, a metaphor for the phenomenological transition (translation) from ideation to the articulation of communication. Deleuze could be seen as more sibylline. And yet, here is a statement revealing his entrenched ethical

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<sup>4</sup> The main horror personification of paganism for the early Church was the Pythia of Delphi: woman, prophet, physical, even sexual! Relations are complex between the Pythia and the Sybil (like between Greece and Rome.) The Pythia’s fantasy model belongs more to a Grotowsky-style physical trance-theatre. The Sybil is more musical. Both are awesome, and linked mainly to Apollonian poetics, a fact that needs underlining for the sake of the many Dionysus-obsessed contemporary theatre makers.

<sup>5</sup> Enrique Pardo: Figuring out the voice: object, subject, project. Performing strategies in the use of extended voice range techniques in relation to language and texts. In, *Performance Research Journal*, 8.1: Voices, UK, March 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida: *La voix et le phénomène*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1971.

logic: in a homage booklet to fellow French philosopher, François Châtelet, titled “Périclès et Verdi”, he writes: “music is the most reasonable of all human activities...” because it proceeds “without soul and without transcendence, material and relational.” If that is the case, I would paraphrase Deleuze and propose that “theatre is the most un-reasonable of human activities!”

The episode of the Camisard Prophets opens a very interesting vista on French Protestantism, and on a claim I would make, again polemically, that French “reason” is fundamentally a Protestant-derived attitude (and certitude) of mind, developed from a specific intellectual brand of Calvinism that originally affirmed the individual’s “freedom of conscience”. One tends to forget that Calvin was French, exiled in Geneva, where later Voltaire and Rousseau also found refuge – both ambivalent defenders of the Camisards (their contemporaries!) By the time of Henri the 1st of Navarre (1553-1610), leader of the Huguenots (as the Calvinist Protestants were known), who was to become Henri the 4<sup>th</sup> of France by converting to Catholicism in 1572 (his was the famous phrase “Paris vaut bien une messe” – “Paris is well worth attending a mass”...), the French intellectual elite was fundamentally Calvinist, and, like the king, very condescending towards Catholicism. The great Protestant pogroms and especially the Saint-Barthelemy massacre in 1572 (something of a 9/11 at the time) were to a large extent backlash revolts against protestant progressive thinking in the high bourgeoisie and enlightened aristocracy. Descartes and cartesianism, Pascale, Racine, the enormous influence of the Port Royal and Jansenist movements, what is considered to be the French Enlightenment, the Encyclopaedic movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were all to a great extent inheritors and developers of the basic tenets of French Calvinism. Louis the 14<sup>th</sup> was no fool and even though he was under the bigot influence of Madame de Maintenon, he clearly saw what was breeding. The Camisards were the scapegoats of the momentous power struggle between protestant freethinking and a monarchic, centralized appropriation of Enlightenment. One of the main outcomes of this struggle was the French Revolution, which fused the parallel rebellions against dogmatic monarchic systems, Pope and King. Not only can “Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité” be seen as a Calvinist-derived motto but the legacy of French socialism right up to our days carries this central streak of rational Calvinistic humanism, especially apparent in the ideology of the French *laïc* (lay) national education system.

The Camisards’ forms of inspired voice cults, although originally derived from the Reform (non-mediated communication with the Spirit) were rejected, reneged and banished by the French Calvinist establishment that was later to take over power intermittently in France, through the more ‘reasonable’ periods of the French Revolution (the gory, fanatic periods have been linked by historians to the millenarist aspect of Camisard-like uprisings in France), and then throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the form of an utopic/reasonable socialism. This last statement is obviously a historical simplification, but the Calvinist streak in French social thinking especially, needs to be pointed out. One of the results is the amazingly tedious theatre of French Catholic cults (which I consider to be covert Calvinist compromises, certainly when compared to the fervour and colourfulness – the catholic ‘paganism’ - of Spain and Italy.) French Catholics are the worst singers in Europe! Lourdes is a nightmare, among other things, of musicality, as is also and lamentably the great gipsy gathering at Les Saintes Maries de la Mer where the official procession in honour of Sara, the Black Madonna, has been forcefully taken over by the Catholic clergy’s flat singing through megaphones: a deplorable pastiche! The gipsies gather and sing elsewhere.

The Camisards influence “spread to Britain in the early years of the eighteenth century and, via Annie Lee’s Shakers, to America.”<sup>7</sup> Here, inspired Protestantism met the African slaves’ culture and produced what came to be called Gospel singing and Negro Spirituals, with all that that syncretism has given back to the world of music, voice and singing. African-Americans actually reversed the direction from spiritual singing back to the body, and in a sense rebelled against the spiritualism of Protestantism by switching over in the 50s and 60s to the word “soul”. The notion of soul had all but disappeared in its deeper cultural meanings from most Christian movements (including Catholicism, where it had become an edulcorated euphemism for spirit.) What had come to rule was associated with “The Spirit” as the sublime master of “The Body”.<sup>8</sup>

Soul returned with a bang in the voices of Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, James Brown - all brought up in Protestant singing and outcast by religious piety as diabolical “crossovers.” In the immense repercussions their music and performances have had throughout the world there is a distant contribution from the Camisards, maybe a revenge against ‘reasonable’ Calvinism.

One last point to underline the historical ironies in the synchronicities between the two anniversaries, the 300 years of the “French Prophets”, and the 30 years of the “English Prophets”. Voice work can be a form of exorcism, and exorcism is an extremely theatrical form of therapy; both form part of Connor’s extended understanding of ventriloquism (exorcism is dislodging a voice.)<sup>9</sup> Put in more reasonable terms, there is ventriloquism and therefore fiction and mythology (I would of course call it “theatre”), in the idea of “finding one’s voice”, in the considering the act of singing as a means of personal transformation. Did the Camisards give us (or renew) the model of “born-again” therapies like primal screaming or rebirthing, or even Wolfsohn’s or Roy Hart’s singing prophecies –all of which considered themselves as forms of “sacred theatre”?

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Connor, see above.

<sup>8</sup> The landmark reference in the history and differentiation between soul and spirit is James Hillman’s article “Peaks and Vales”.

<sup>9</sup> On the Camisards type of performances, Connor writes: “The enactment here is of a travail, an almost conscious borrowing of the pseudo-parturition of hysteria.”

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