



Point of View: America needs a revolution in listening

BY JAKE JOHNSON

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In my work with aspiring Broadway performers, I hear a lot of belting. People who love musicals love the feeling of singing strongly and of watching people — particularly women — sing with strength. Research has even suggested that audiences believe that such guttural singing is one of the most honest sounds a woman can make.

When women belt, audiences respond in kind with cheers. No matter the context, no matter the words uttered or where it falls in the musical phrase, ovations pierce the belt as if skewering the truth before it slips away into the wild. It's a condition of the genre that the sound of a woman belting has come to represent the sound of truth.

This line of thinking resonates with broader observations about sound and partisan echo chambers today — that listeners predictably are eager to celebrate the sounds they have been conditioned to hear as true while, conversely, hearing all other sounds with suspicion. The #MeToo and #BelieveSurvivors campaigns express the dangers of such a pernicious listening habit, asking tough questions of our selective deafness to victims of sexual assault. Under what conditions can what a victim says be heard and believed? Would listeners conditioned to hear truth only in terms of muscle be tone deaf to sounds that come softly? In what ways does the perception of how truth sounds discipline our ears to perceive those sounds as truth?

Musical theater is more understanding than political theater. Women in musicals belt and are heard. When she is heard, more often than not she is believed. Cheered not jeered, her shouted truth resonates with listeners who have been primed to hear her sound and believe it. It's an amazing thing to witness.

Musicals may represent (to some) a better version of our world but in themselves they are fake, notoriously unreal in their song and dance routines. Women who aren't playing a role on stage shout into a void. They are mocked for even mouthing the words. In the fake world of musicals, the sound of the belt predicts honesty. By now we know that in this world, the sound of a woman speaking — of her body, her issues, her assault — elicits disbelief or angry shouts intent on silencing her. The real world has no blunt tool like a belt to frame when and how women can be heard and trusted. Here, women grow mute. Society grows deaf. Rape culture is real. Musicals are not.

But I'm not willing to stop there. A character in a fake world sings with strength only because a woman in the real world learns how and decides she likes the feeling of being heard and trusted. Yet giving voice to her truth is only half of the equation. Performers on stage make sounds believable because listeners in the audience have come to the theater prepared to believe. The ultimate conviction of such moments relies not just on the sounds the woman makes, but the way the listener hears.

There is an important lesson here. If America is truly invested in hearing the truth from women, then what we need badly is a revolution in listening, not a lesson in how and when it's proper to make a fuss.

Johnson teaches music at Oklahoma City University.

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