

revelations

Patsy Rodenburg

The Actor Speaks

Voice and
the Performer



BLOOMSBURY

The Actor Speaks

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Praise for Patsy Rodenburg

“Patsy was absolutely invaluable to my beginning to take on the awesome task of playing King Lear. Having been away from the stage for so long, it was vital to have someone who really knew what they were talking about and in whom I could put my trust. She is a great teacher – and I think it absolutely fair to say I could not have played the King without her.”

IAN HOLM, 1997 *Olivier Award for Best Actor*

“Working with Patsy is a unique experience. She gives you a wondrously simple way of releasing the voice and the body – which also becomes a way of life.”

ANNA MASSEY, *Actress*

“Patsy’s work has been a source of inspiration to countless actors. This book shares her years of experience in the theatre in an immediately accessible way.”

JOAN WASHINGTON, *Dialect Coach*

“Like athletes and dancers, actors need to warm-up before appearing in public. Patsy’s classes during a demanding play like *The Madness of King George* were invaluable. And her books are a wonderful top-up.”

NIGEL HAWTHORNE, *Actor*

“Patsy Rodenburg’s work is holistic – a free voice, a free body and a free flow of emotion are intimately connected. She totally reinforces whatever I am trying to achieve and in many cases she is the one who creates breakthroughs for the actors with her perceptive and sympathetic skills.”

MIKE ALFREDS, *Director*

“Patsy Rodenburg’s work is not merely concerned with connecting actors with their voices, but in connecting their heads to their hearts. This is an indispensable handbook for actors who are serious about their craft. . . . When Patsy speaks actors should listen, so that when actors get to speak, we all listen.”

JOHN CAIRD, *Director*

“Patsy doesn’t just ‘teach voice’. She has a very free and open approach in guiding you to find your own voice and not one which is remotely imposed. She has the great gift of making it seem easy.”

GERALDINE MCEWAN, *Actress*

“The great thing about working with Patsy Rodenburg is that she takes the ‘mystery’ out of speaking in the theatre. She makes it simple and that’s her great gift.”

RICHARD WILSON, *Actor*

“Struggling with a rehearsal of a platform on the Olivier stage, a reassuring voice called out from the daunting auditorium. I was soon reminded why Patsy is such a unique, dynamic guide in getting us back to the vocal pathway of instinctive expression – by undoing all the habitual blockages of our daily conditioning. Patsy and the ‘way of the voice’ are inseparable.”

JOSEPH FIENNES, *Actor*

“Patsy Rodenburg’s guidance and the clarity and directness of her approach have been invaluable to me.”

RALPH FIENNES, *Actor*

“What leaves actors tongue-tied for years, Patsy releases in minutes. Not as a result of a mystical process, but through simple, practical actions that can empower anyone – whatever their background or nationality – with the pleasure and ability to possess and communicate through language. And, more importantly, the ability to speak it in their way.”

SIMON MCBURNEY, *Actor and Director, Théâtre de Complicité*

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Patsy Rodenburg

With a Foreword by Judi Dench

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To M. F.
with much love

Contents

Foreword *Judi Dench* x

Introduction: Stories, Theatre, Actors xiii

Acknowledgements xxiv

Stage One

The Actor First Speaks 1

Stage Two

Extending the Voice into Resonance, Range and
Speech 77

Stage Three

Voice and Speech Meet Word and Text 141

Stage Four

Voice and Text Meet the Rehearsal 207

Stage Five

Voice, Text and Rehearsal Meet the Stage 253

Stage Six

The Production Meets an Audience 285

Stage Seven

Re-creating the Work Again and Again 303

Index 337

FOREWORD

When I went to the Central School of Speech and Drama in 1954, I thought I knew the sort of thing I was expecting – lots of work in relaxation, a bit of breathing, some movement, a few voice exercises, and lots and lots of acting. Not many weeks had passed before I realized that the most important thing was first, the relaxation, then the breathing and then the voice. The voice training I received at Central from Cecily Berry and Clifford Turner laid the groundwork for what was to become a way of life.

After many years in this profession, I find that there is a tendency to come to a play thinking, ‘this is one that I will be able to manage with comparatively little trouble’. You don’t foresee any problems and you hurry confidently into rehearsals. This scenario, in fact, has never proved to be the case for me because always, in every play, there is a different kind of problem that you haven’t had to deal with before and, in most instances, it will concern the voice. In Hugh Whitmore’s play, *Pack of Lies*, for instance, I was playing a very ordinary Ruislip housewife. I found it difficult to project not only the character’s voice, but also her emotions, to the back of the theatre. I found I longed to come walking down the stairs and bellow ‘My Lord of Buckingham...!’ The answer lies in Patsy’s book. Back you come each time to your technique and you find that there are ways of projecting your voice in any circumstance.

I have always maintained that the difference between an amateur and a professional is that the amateur only has to sustain a performance for a week during a year. The professionals if he is lucky, has to sustain it for much longer and this relies completely on the voice and the use of the voice.

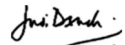
I never met Patsy Rodenburg at Central because we were there at different times, but I met her later at the National Theatre. I can honestly say that it is thanks to Patsy that, when I have been in trouble with my voice, she has been able to reassure me and give me some exercises which have enabled me to go on that night but, more importantly, for the rest of the run.

I am not a natural singer (!), and when I was cast as Desiree Arnfeldt in *A Little Night Music* at the National Theatre, I told Patsy that I was worried about sustaining my voice during the scene where I sang ‘Send In The

Clowns'. The scene was set in my bedroom and all I had by way of a 'set' was a rose-covered bed, on which I had to sit to sing the number. This was all I had to 'hang on to'. Patsy explained that if I pushed down on the bed with my hands, it would raise the diaphragm, which would enable me to breathe properly and the voice would take care of itself. This is exactly what happened and, in fact, Patsy arranged for the bed to be made harder so that it was easier for me to push down on it.

It is essential to warm up your voice before a performance and the best thing you can possibly have is a class with Patsy. This is the way I have felt most confident about going on. By doing exercises, it is one way of getting rid of nerves, or at least utilizing them, so that you have something really positive to think about and concentrate on while getting ready to go on. If you cannot have Patsy in person, then her book is the next best thing.

All the great performances I have seen have nearly always come down to the actor and his voice. All the training in the world will not help if the basic training on the voice has not been done. Patsy Rodenburg's book is a Bible. Having read it, I would now feel insecure without it. Even opening it and reading at random whets your appetite to read further and learn more about the voice. I intend to keep it by me at all times – a 'security blanket' which I know will never let me down.



Judi Dench

INTRODUCTION: STORIES, THEATRE, ACTORS

Storytelling is universal to every society and culture that has ever existed.

The stories repeated and re-told again and again are universal stories. At the heart of a universal story are truths that unite humans not divides them. Some of the surface details might be different – words that might need explaining because of history, geography or custom not universal – but the heart and spirit speaks to all. Power, love, loss, justice. All known by everyone. Stories educate. The journey of a story. The language of the story. They teach us morals and what is sacred and what is obscene. What is destructive, what is creative. A shared debate.

The storyteller is an essential figure in any culture. Held in the stories are the history and ethics of a culture and its quest for light through darkness. The storyteller has to speak well. A strong clear and full voice. Imagination, range and a great memory.

They need to present. Delight, scare, be funny, pause, have rhythm and be humble. The story has been passed down to them. It is not theirs but it belongs to their culture and needs to be served as well as they can do. They need to practice.

Theatre is a huge step forward in storytelling. In Western tradition it started in Greece. A chorus of speakers debating crucial issues. It was a great honour to be chosen to perform in these choruses. You were rehearsed to sing, speak and dance as the great ideas around power, family, grief, belief and justice were investigated. Every side of an issue was explored. These different voices allowed for any ideas and complexity to be excavated. The language and its images and metaphors, the antithesis, the paradoxes made the debates more complex and troubling. Greek society was put under a microscope.

Then something more exciting and complex happened. Actors came out of the chorus as characters in the story and debated with the chorus and each other. This created limitless combinations within the storytelling. Bottomless layers of meaning and nuance as the interactions crisscrossed

Introduction: Stories, Theatre, Actors

and were woven into the play. As Bottom the weaver in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* realized, a good story has no bottom. It reaches each member of the audience at the point they can understand it and that understanding can change as the listener changes and hears the story again.

The Greek and Shakespearean theatres had audiences, not spectators. Both theatres could produce spectacle but chose and knew that complexity of ideas and emotions cannot be fully appreciated with too much cosmetic covering. Language is at the centre of the story enhanced by the visual but not swamped by it. The audience must be attentive listeners not viewers. The outside of a story can be communicated visually in the theatre but the spirit or psyche requires metaphor and exact imagery.

Two sides of a difficult debate have to be heard before being watched. Actors have to be able to speak if these great plays are to live fully and their complexities tackled. When I say speak I don't only mean be heard and clear, but be fully present, connected and engaged with the plays, form and language. They demand the craft and imagination to mean each word and image specifically as they are spoken. The storyteller must discover every idea fully and in the moment. When an actor speaks in these ways there is evidence that their brains are very active. Full engagement with a great text takes physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual athleticism.

Even if the actor can do all the above, if the play is shrouded in a generalized concept of design, sound or costume that doesn't support the play's intentions, then the play's profoundness is reduced. There are great designers who serve the play's story and do not generalize it, but there has been a recent trend to simplify a play through an over-heavy concept. The actor is either fighting the design or – from the mouths of some directors I know – the actors can't speak well enough, so the design gives some overview of the play. This concept-driven play is a catch-22: if the audience sees an over-designed play, they tend to sit back and let the design do the work rather than work themselves and listen attentively to the play. I have worked on very well written modern plays with rich poetic language and have noticed that if there is a production with a sparse design, the audience listens; with an over-designed play the audience loses aural concentration.

The Greeks understood something else about hearing as opposed to watching and modern science supports their view. When we see horror, in whatever form, it invades our imagination without our control. We are prone to being visually raped and unable to filter the experience. When we hear horror, we can go to where it is doable for us to go. We can filter.

The Greek messenger always comes on to describe horror and violence and although disturbing it is in our aural control not thrown at us visually and uncontrollably. The images are not branded into our brains. We don't have to see what we cannot bear to see.

O woe is me to have seen what I have seen, see what I see

Ophelia on seeing Hamlet's distress

The word *obscene* comes from the idea that certain things should not be seen on stage. The Greek actors were honoured and revered. They were priests and healers. When the Roman theatre showed obscenities then actors became rogues and outsiders. The Greeks understood the danger and naivety of the visual overwhelming the word.

But actors need to be able to speak.

Craft, Technique and Repetition

Human beings have great voices.

At some point in our evolution our breath systems and larynx position dropped, unlike other primates, giving our species a greater range and potential in our ability to communicate. Areas of the brain grew and developed to facilitate clear and muscular speech. Using our voice and articulating is in our DNA. The instrument is there for us, although for many a bit rusty and dusty.

The instrument for most is good. It is under threat, as in the last few decades technology has eroded our need to use our voices and education has not encouraged enough clear and formal speaking. Even when education was mostly through speaking and presenting – spoken learning – storytellers, singers and actors knew to be effective and delight the listener their voices needed to be worked on, improved and maintained for the length of their careers.

Actors have always needed craft to do their job. There is evidence that the toll on an actor's voice in Shakespeare's time meant early retirement for many of them. The audiences were potentially hostile if you could not be heard or were dull, and actors were pulled off the stage: very different to the passive audiences today, who sit patiently although seething inwardly when an actor is inaudible. I am old enough to remember audiences calling out 'can't hear you' to actors they couldn't hear. This did improve the actor's vocal concentration. I remind students that the only outcome of not being

Introduction: Stories, Theatre, Actors

heard is the audience dreading your entrance as they have to work harder than they should and eventually disliking you intensely.

In Shakespeare's advice to the actor, Hamlet says, 'he would have a bad communicator whipped'. One student recently said to me, 'Surely Shakespeare wouldn't whip his actors?' No, but as he sat listening and not hearing his play it obviously went through his mind as it has gone through many playwrights' minds and something even expressed to me by writers.

'He mangles the funniest line I've even written,' said one of our greatest writers to me.

'I'm trying, but it's his first theatre job and he thinks mumbling is truthful and clarity inauthentic,' I replied.

As my grandmother used to say, 'You can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink'. This actor had no craft and therefore his options were limited. He painfully learnt the writer's frustration when his line was taken from him and given to another actor who could deliver, and he had to experience the huge laugh the line got every night when it was delivered clearly and audibly.

The Greek actors did voice work and performance was rewarded. Euripides trained as an actor as well as being one of the greatest play writers, but as his voice wasn't strong enough to fill the theatre he stopped performing. All the Greek writers encouraged actors to have a long apprenticeship in the chorus to develop their skills and craft. The directive taught in rhetoric by Cicero and Quintilian started with the notion of delivery.

I believe that delivery is craft for an actor; that means before a story or play is performed you have to practice presence, body work, breath, voice, range, resonance and speech. Without the above nothing else is possible. All of the above were the core craft skills of education. You spoke to learn, not wrote to learn. You spoke and listened. You learnt through active debate. Question, answer. You were taught rhetorical devices – repetition, antithesis, stress and rhythm etc. – by doing, not by studying. Active learning.

Education was spoken until the class sizes in the Industrial Revolution got too large, around 150, for individual speaking. This luxury generally is only for students who attended exclusive schools, a reality that enrages me as every child should have the opportunity to keep their voices alive and fit – but that's another book. I will also posit the notion that good speech is not about accent but about owning your own free and flexible voice and that the fearful notion of rhetoric and form is not alien to the human species but of it. The Iambic is the heart beat. The opposites in antithesis and paradox is not a superimposed intellectual device, but

a part of our left and right brain function that can swing and see two different potentials in every state of events.

In the late 1980s into the 1990s the notion of craft work was attacked across Western Education. It was deemed old-fashioned, unnecessary, and that technology was replacing its use etc. Maybe the argument was genuinely a sense that we did not need craft. We, as a species, had outgrown the way that over 130,000 years of our existence we had excelled at doing anything physical or producing work. Machines could do the job. (I do know some theatre directors who would rather have a robot than an actor: less trouble and more malleable.) Maybe, but in the mix is the hard, cold fact that craft work takes time and repetition and is the costliest part of any training cost cutting. But this is not in the interest of theatre serving the great texts or the students.

Without craft, training is limiting the student and the student's transformation and professional longevity. A training without craft takes a talent, polishes the talent and then pushes the student out into the world as a talented but limited artist. The skills they learn are easy and relatively inexpensive to teach. The training is hollow and relies on cosmetic techniques, not deeply-learned craft. Interesting enough, I say to the West: if you are frightened of the East, look at what they want from us – our craft training.

With craft we can access more of ourselves including the parts that seem, at first, alien. Our imaginations that reach below, above and around us. Not the part that is easily accessible. This ability to dig out, with craft, our imagination that is but is not ourselves, is how an actor identifies with someone not themselves. The actor has infinite potential in casting and to not be only a beautifully polished type casting of themselves. This imaginative journey releases the human's ability to be uniquely creative. That is the quality that the Chinese seek from us and our devotion to craft. By sitting on a solid foundation, we can roam off into other worlds. Picasso studied the craft of drawing in life class and that enabled him to create on the level he did.

Even by knowing the rules of craft we have the joy of then breaking them. Shakespeare had to craft very structured plays at the beginning of his career before smashing and changing forms.

Craft training also offers the student another life offering. Not all our students become actors. Craft is a hard and repetitive process. Once learnt can be applied to anything in life you want to achieve. Learning to use your voice, mind, heart and imagination produces some of the most useful people in society. Those who can communicate connect to others, imagine and create. The hard craft of actors gives anyone that works through it a huge advantage in any later endeavour. Many of the young boy actors in

Introduction: Stories, Theatre, Actors

Shakespeare's company were placed there by their parents who paid the company to train them – not to eventually be actors but to learn all the skills of acting. Speaking well, fencing, dancing, thinking and debating – that would help them pass as gentlemen.

The ruthless attack on craft thirty years ago dismantled some of our best courses, perpetuated by directors of training that had no understanding of craft but only of cost cutting. This attack can be found all over education, medicine, engineering etc. with no understanding of excellence. Un-crafted and mediocre people smugly made themselves look good by saving money by destroying profound education. No great dancer, surgeon, engineer, musician, tailor, chef or actor would be so crass. I was lucky to have the City of London's support for my impassioned plea.

I remember the moment when the message hit home. The puzzle was in a building that trains musicians, singers, composers and actors, but our acting course cost so much more than the other courses. Through some moment of inspiration, I managed to find the argument that turned their minds around and kept the budget for craft intact.

By the time a student musician arrives in the school they have practiced their craft dutifully from the age of six or seven. Hundreds of hours of work have been done. Not so for young actors; they need to catch up, and if we are honest about training a classical actor we have to provide them with the expensive craft training – hours of detailed repetition until they know the works so well that they forget it. The work allows for effortless and organic communication and imaginative responses to the text.

All artists seek to become an open channel that expresses through voice, words, movement and music the infinite and yet same experience we all have as humans. We cannot achieve this if we worry about the body, voice or speech muscles not responding through undesired effort.

This is a critical time. Without craft we lose our great plays. They will be simplified, cut and reduced to cheap devices that try to entertain and keep the spectator engaged – a view I find patronizing. I believe that the vast majority of the planet can understand complex thoughts and emotions if they are clearly delivered.

We are standing on a precipice. Unlike in Shakespeare's time, our natural voices are not being used. Days and weeks can pass without proper and impassioned use of the voice and words. We can go through the whole of our education without ever having to speak out in class or to be present. There has been a largely successful attempt to smash craft training out of the education of people who are paid to communicate.

There is hope, after decades of destruction; I am being contacted by departments to re-introduce craft to their decimated training. Craft work and the real educators are now showing up and speaking out. It is easy to destroy and harder to rebuild but the zeitgeist is there and growing. A diligent and focused student can apply craft and change their voices and careers rapidly.

Craft is ancient wisdom and our culture is returning to its senses and to its human roots.

What Makes a Professional Actor

1 Presence

The first requirement for any actor is to be fully alive, which translates in my mind to being fully present. If the actor is not present then we are not doing live theatre but half-dead or, at worst, fully dead theatre! The actor must be fully present as that shows the audience that they care about the story, that the story matters and all the characters are important and necessary.

Plays are about events that change the characters; they are having to survive tests. They, and therefore we, are in the presence of dangerous, attractive and interesting people who we would not usually come into our presence around. Presence as a state of readiness is called for. If the actor is present, they then have a chance to awaken an audience and transform them. Entertaining, transforming and informing requires the storyteller to be present. I am afraid we leave the theatre in our droves because the actors are not present. Careless, casual and cool mark the death of theatre.

2 Serving the Play

An actor serves the play: the form, the language, the story, the words, the ideas. We tune to the writer – not what we feel the play is about but what is there in the text. It should be learnt accurately and explored exactly and with a deep and specific connection to each word, image and idea.

A great story, as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* says, is bottomless, so no one ever achieves the definitive production or performance. A great play is a living energy that grows differently in each speaker. The paradox is it is the same but different every performance.

William Shakespeare, it seems, made the biggest commercial gamble of his commercial life when he allowed his comic clown and star Will Kemp

Introduction: Stories, Theatre, Actors

to leave his theatre company. Kemp wouldn't serve the play, would make up lines, play for cheap laughs in tragic moments and behave as though he was more important than the play.

On the face of it an actor's contract with the audience is simple, if not obvious.

To be audible: Audibility is only possible if the voice is released from the body and mouth with the right amount of breath for the space, idea and feeling. Audibility is physics. Vibration moving through space.

To be clear: Clarity is diction. The fully articulated word. This requires athletic yet effortless muscularity of the organs of speech. Every syllable pronounced 'trippingly on the tongue'.

Audibility and clarity are crucial yet are only the start of what an actor needs to do. It is quite possible that an actor achieves audibility and clarity, yet the audience still does not understand, care or be excited by what they hear. It is very confusing for an audience to hear but not care about or follow a story.

Understanding: If the tone of the voice doesn't reflect what is being said then you can hear words but misunderstand them. For example, if my words are 'I love you' but my tone is aggressive, the listener's ear is split: word and tone are in a chaotic counterpoint. This might be applicable if 'I love you' has counterpoint in its intention, but if it is an authentic heartfelt utterance then the audience hears but doesn't understand.

The half-voiced, close to a whisper tension in some actors' voices creates a nice or sentimental tone that coats everything that is spoken with a pleasant blur. This is the tone that allows us to say unpleasant things to our enemies with a pleasing vocal quality. We are often halfway down the road before we realise we have been insulted. Again, if the role is one of those passive-aggressive, sweet-voiced insulters, then the audience will understand. However, if this vocal tension is hiding a real insult or unwholesome truth then the listener is unclear as to what is going on. There are countless examples of meaning and tone being misused and therefore impossible for the audience to know what's going on!

This confusion lies in the actor not having a naturally free voice but a voice that is trapped in a tension, often habitual. This tension reduces everything that is said to a tone. Sometimes the actor is typecast for that tone, and if that tone matches the text then all will be well, but if it doesn't then, again, the actor is heard but not fully understood.

The freeing of an actor's voice is one of the most crucial craft activities that has to be achieved and made organic. A free, fluid voice takes time and repetition to enable the voice to move with the meaning of the text. The voice is not in counterpoint with the text but moves freely to reflect the meaning with the appropriate tone.

3 The Boring Voice

A harsh heading. Even with a free voice an actor can bore an audience to the point that they can no longer listen.

The vocal range of a voice is the physical manifestation of passion: passion of feeling, passion of thought. If the cost of the text is high, then the voice should move through the range appropriately. This requires the range to be stretched as elastic.

You can hear an actor's voice go up but never come down – impossible, if not torturous, to listen to; or an actor droning on with few notes in the voice which makes listening for more than a few minutes an endurance test. Then there are actors who, without any connection to meaning, over-embellish the text with range so that we are entertained by their voice but don't understand why it's moving inappropriately with the text. Another audience confusion.

4 Too Fast, Too Slow!

Too fast we might hear, but can't keep up. The actor is ahead of the audience's ability. Too slow we hear, but get tired of waiting for the actor to move forward. The audience is ahead of the actor.

Pace is dictated by the text and requires enormous physical, breath, voice and speech craft to change effortlessly.

5 The Falling or Lullaby Line

Here we hear the first part of a thought, but then it fades away. It is a lullaby, as this pattern is sung to send a baby to sleep. It sends the audience to sleep. More imaginative failings in making a play not fully understood or the importance and depth of story absent in a performance is the importance of form.

6 Form

Form is the structures and scaffolds of a story. It is a container that allows the difficult conversations and ideas to be explored. Form holds the speaker and listener and is therefore safer to both.

- Verse creates a formality and provides rhythm and momentum to the play.
- Rhythm tickles the ear.
- Antithesis is opposing images and paradox opposing ideas, and provokes and supplies the two sides of an emotion or point of view.
- Prose, more everyday speech rhythms, moves differently to verse and therefore adds texture.

The form in great writing equals the content. The form shapes the play, and when the speaker acknowledges the different forms within the play it is immediately more understandable.

7 Words, Images and Ideas

Of course, the audience can only understand a play when the actors fully understands every word, image and idea. This will take enormous study and application from the speaker. If this study is not done sufficiently the actor ends up 'sort of understanding' what they are saying and consequently the audience sort of understands the play. There is no 'sort of' in great speaking, and there is no audience satisfaction if they are delivered 'sort of.' Even if an audience member does not fully understand a word, if the actor does fully understand there will still be a fully satisfactory experience by the audience member.

Some actors believe looking a word up in a dictionary is knowing what the word means. This is only a start!

Some actors think that a rough paraphrase is enough to make a complex idea understandable. This is only a start.

Great speakers exactly know the meaning of every word in its historic and emotional context.

Great acting is specific. You have to experience every word and image specifically as you say it – not before or after, but presently in the moment as

Introduction: Stories, Theatre, Actors

though for the first and only time those words are spoken. Better still, you connect and engage with the form and words from the character's point of view. Every idea and image is experienced as deeply and fully as possible – you never get to the end of this work. Your imagination goes to where the language of the play wants you to be.

You observe the forms.

Your voice reflects meaning.

Your pace is the text's pace as is your rhythm.

You are clear, audible and present.

The actor speaks.

When this all happens, the audience really hears and understands the play. They can relax and cease worrying that they might not understand. They are being reached and the actor can do their job. They are in safe hands. And in the knowledge that the actor has skill and is a professional storyteller, they can become present and fully attentive. They too are in the moment. They are safe with these actors and therefore can listen to unsafe stories.

Those in the audience who know the depths of a story will be comforted. Those who don't will learn.

A joining of our common humanity; a memorable event.

Engaged, human, connected, authentic and honest.

Patsy Rodenburg
London

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STAGE ONE

THE ACTOR FIRST SPEAKS

At the start of their training few young actors realize how fundamentally important their voices will be for them throughout their careers. For them, acting is just about performing roles in plays. They have yet to think of their bodies and their voices as instruments which they must learn to ‘play’ properly and pitch in different ways to accommodate different sorts of characters and texts. For them acting is not yet an art, not yet about acquiring the kinds of techniques that will allow you to *repeat* a performance night after night with truth, connection and authenticity. They have no way yet of knowing the stages to which their journey through the voice will take them.

Proper voice work, or the lack of it, could make or break a performer. It could enable you to act with greater ease or be the source of an endless struggle. After all, if an audience or another actor on-stage can neither hear nor understand you, your work is irrelevant. So the first step in learning to speak, as an actor, should and must involve trust in and commitment to an area of work that ought to form the pattern of your lifetime as a performer.

HOW THE NATURAL VOICE WORKS AS DESIGNED

Efficiency and Economy

Body

We are encased in a body; that is why all the work has to be embodied and recognized in the body.

From the Feet Up

The feet should balance the body not too far apart or too close. This applies in all directions.

The Actor Speaks

Weight forward on the balls of the feet. Toes connected to the floor. Heels on the floor but not jammed into it.

We should feel that through the feet we can move in any direction, if necessary rapidly.

The ankles should be flexible, and they link to the knees which should not be locked or over bent.

Bone is weight-bearing so there should be alignment throughout the feet, ankles and up into the thigh bone.

The pelvic area should stack up onto the legs, not pushed forward or out at the back. The spine is up, not slumped or rigid.

The upper chest open, the sternum not depressed or elevated.

Shoulders hanging freely as we are designed to swing. No lift, rounding of the shoulder sockets.

The head balanced and its weight held up effortlessly on top of the spine. The jaw unclenched, lips together, and teeth not touching.

This is our natural standing position. It signals authority and is found all over the world when the body, through habits, fashion or lack of self-esteem, has not been distorted.

In many disciplines it is called physical centre.

In work it is not a rigidly held position but a re-set, and because the body is so completely and complexly connected any distortion in the body will affect it being centred and will impact to some extent the breath, voice and speech.

In a performer's trained craft, centre is the re-set button. The actor knows it so well that they can leave and return to it at will, either through processes of practise or extreme action. It is a place of alrightness – balance – in the body.

Breath – Energy and Lifeforce

We breathe in our power and then release it. It is the first and last action we do and holds not only life but emotion our thoughts and our full power.

The Natural Breath

We should naturally take the breath we need for any given task, be it speaking, living, surviving, space, thought and feeling. The actor's job but

also the human's right. A right that is diminished if we hold tensions in the body or fail to take the right volume of breath or allow the breath to connect to us and be fully released.

The equation is the bigger the physical activity, space, feeling and thought, the greater requirement of breath. When an actor speaks in a large space with passionate thoughts and feelings their breath has to be athletic.

As we breathe in the required breath we shouldn't control the intake; it should flow in silently if the body is centred and open.

There should be no lift in the shoulders or upper chest.

The ribs should swing open at the sides and around the back of the cage.

A second or so later the muscles of the diaphragm move the abdominal muscles and we should feel the movement into the stomach and groin.

Inspiration.

On the completion of the breath there is a moment of suspension or readiness in the breath: a gathering of our power. Like the moment when a swing hovers between the upward swing and the downward plunge.

This is the moment the muscles are preparing to expel air. The out breath is when we naturally physically move or make sound.

The ribs and abdominal muscles move in to create a column of air that is our physical and vocal power support.

The natural voice is completely supported; we speak on the breath.

As the breath expels it can be controlled like any physical swing by the muscles and by the speaker.

There is a moment when there isn't enough breath to fully support us physically or vocally and that is when the body takes the next breath.

I breathe in, suspension, I breathe out.

The most crucial and natural movement we humans have. It is the function that is most prone to unnatural disturbances and the first sign that something is awry in our voices, thoughts and feelings.

Voice

The breath passes up through the trachea – wind pipe – and through the larynx where it vibrates the vocal folds. The vibration creates sound. The voice.

In order for the voice to be heard clearly the sound – vibration – has to leave the body up through an open throat and out through the mouth.

The Actor Speaks

That sounds obvious: it's physics. Waves of sound leaving us.

However, although it is natural for the voice to freely leave the body most people today hold or block their voice and only part of the sound is released. This is one of the main reasons for inaudibility.

In its freest form you shouldn't feel your voice in you.

No grip, lock or swallowing of sound in the throat or jaw. The free voice is reliant on the breath being there and the body not holding tensions in the shoulders, spine, neck or jaw.

As the free voice moves up into the head and then through the open mouth it picks up power and amplification through resonance.

The whole body is a resonator but the ones that can be easily developed and toned are the chest, throat, mouth, nose and head.

The more resonators you use the richer and stronger your voice.

The stretching of the vocal folds and movement of the larynx in the throat allows the voice to change note.

The adult human voice has the potential of a wide range of notes which gives more meaning to the voice and expresses our emotional and intellectual passion.

Speech

The last link in the chain. The speech muscles create words in the mouth – clarity of expression. The jaw needs to be flexible and the mouth able to open freely. The tongue, lips and soft palate move efficiently.

Above is the instrument most are born with. A glorious powerful and expressively free sound passing on the breath through us and out into the world.

If we lived in a culture that allowed us to maintain this natural wonder, then the struggle most of us have in re-finding our lost voice would not take so much craft and effort.

The habits we gather that impede our voice and speech come from many sources, from the most banal to a very painful abuse, but they can – mostly – be dealt with.

Habits

Habits start with tensions and move throughout the body, breath and voice in a huge variety of ways and directions.

They block our voices and, in some cases, can damage them.

One tension triggers other tensions and it is critical in training and developing a professional voice to identify the primary tension.

This tension might have birthed more obvious blocks and might not seem harmful until the speaker is under pressure, fearful, stressed or lacking control in a moment of high energy.

A debilitating tension might only reveal itself when a performer is tested.

The journeys that move through the body from one tension triggering another can be complex and sometimes unique to an individual.

There seems to be an infinite amount of routes that tensions can take, which can make voice teaching confounding yet always interesting.

- 1 Standing on your heels and not supporting your body on the whole of your feet.

This moves into your knees, which lock. The locked knees tighten the lower breath, which distorts the spine tightening the upper chest and moves to grip the larynx and holds the voice.

- 2 The jaw is clenched. The back of the tongue is blocked as is the throat. It gets harder to breathe. The shoulders lift in an attempt to get breath and the neck and throat block gets worse. You can't articulate clearly as there is no room in the mouth for the tongue to work.
- 3 The spine is slumped which pulls the head, upper chest down and rounds the shoulders. There is no space in the body to breath, so everything is underpowered.
- 4 The stomach is pulled in to improve your look, but this gives the breath space in the abdominal area so the upper chest lifts. This tightens the shoulders and throat. Again, you are underpowered.
- 5 Not taking a full breath, holding the breath and sighing results in no vocal power and the body has to squeeze sound out by collapsing.

Listed are the big and obvious tensions:

- a slight gasp on the inward breath,
- a small hold in the lower abdominal area,
- a tension around the lips.

When you get finer in your craft and awareness you might discover one small tension is creating the whole problem.

The Actor Speaks

A slight gasp, on the inward breath, a small hold in the lower abdominal area, a tension around the lips.

The work never really stops as we are all in the process of gathering tensions and then dispelling them.

After all, life is a tense activity.

The right tensions versus the ones that are useless to us.

When I trained relaxation was the constant mantra.

It was an epiphany when I realized that we need tension to stand upright, to breathe with power and conviction, to vocalize and speak clearly.

It is understanding the right tension for any movement or vocal release. The required energy for any task being performed.

The centred body is aligned and has minimum tension in the feet, the abdomen, breath and spine.

This is why centre is the reference used in many disciplines around the world. It is the start of a training and it is where the performer returns to as a re-set or place of re-gathering and re-starting.

It is a clean place and therefore natural.

From this place the actor can move into a text and allow the text to change them, not their habits changing and probably reducing the text.

It is a simple place that will change and can access energy and power effortlessly with change.

The three foundation stages for your voice and craft:

- 1 Centred, aligned and ready body.
- 2 Full and low breath. Feeling your power in your breath and lower abdominal area. No shoulder tensions.
- 3 A fully supported breath to open, free and place the voice out into space.

This is where we start.

VOICE WORK IS CRAFT WORK

The first stage of work I do requires very little in the way of inspiration, thought or even language. What it does require is perspiration and plenty of physical endeavour. With my students, our whole first year together is about the foundation of proper craft in different parts of the body. Proper

voice work is very physical. It does require an awareness of the body and how it aids you in producing an ever expanding range of sound.

We begin with the craft work required to learn a whole new range of skills. This is the apprenticeship phase in the life of the actor. Concentration, repetition and diligence will be required if results of real consequence are to be achieved. This is also the phase in which the first set of hurdles is thrown in front of the beginner actor; the kinds of tests which let you know if you should proceed or if the actor's life is not for you.

This initial craft work, if skillfully achieved and, moreover, retained, will make the later inspiration work of acting more easily achievable and actually release it. If the craft is deeply learned, the voice will respond to any sudden acting challenge like a reflex. What is self-conscious at the beginning of the process will become second nature later on. Repetition of craft through a pattern of carefully linked exercises will enable the work to become embedded and more organic as the challenges of the voice take you deeper inside yourself to meet the oncoming challenges of the actor's art.

My aim in the first year of training is to make the voice so fundamentally a part of the actor's physical being that it actually becomes an extension of both yourself and your talent. A properly rooted and balanced voice is fundamental to the process of acting, despite whatever method or school of acting your allied training follows. I remain neutral on that point and assume that the work I do will help any actor in any acting situation from the most traditional to experimental, from the Greeks to Grotowski. I have worked with companies like the Royal Shakespeare Company (where the emphasis is heavily on the classical text) and with Theatre de Complicite (where the work is both physical and improvisatory), and I have never found myself altering the basic means by which I teach and work.

Actors who miss out on the initial craft phase of voice work find that consistency in their performances and re-creation of their work from performance to performance is difficult to achieve. In the deepest sense they will never really own their voices but always feel alienated from them.

Tension

There is always tension in the air as actors work. The room is filled with it. Any actor auditioning or attending a first rehearsal knows this feeling. That kind of tension – not a bad thing, as long as you can begin to identify the right tensions – is part of the atmosphere of an acting class. The wrong

The Actor Speaks

tension is locked inside the body and will prevent the voice from doing its proper work. This wrong tension is more fundamentally insidious and damaging. My students will come to learn useless tension is their fundamental foe; it must be brought under control and defeated if the voice is to be liberated.

The natural voice needs the right tension and, free of useless tension, will work happily and healthily on its own and grow to meet the demands of new acting challenges. For an actor the consequences of useless tension can be dire. You find that your voice serves neither your imagination nor the text. Useless tension can also prevent you from getting through a performance. The voice might falter in places, or you might feel that you cannot sustain a long run. So many of the various workouts and exercises in this book are about relieving useless tension and isolating it in various parts of the body.

Habits

I remind my students that you are at your freest when no one knows who you are. Fame is full of useless tension. As soon as the young actor begins to understand the working of the natural voice he begins to isolate where his own individual habits reside. What I do not classify as debilitating habits are native or regional accents or colloquial speech patterns. At this first stage of training, however, the habits can often be extreme and are always visible:

- Shoulder tension.
- Spine either too rigid or slumped.
- Jaw tight and clenched.
- Breath held too high.
- Voice right.
- Speech incoherent.

I cannot tell you the number of times I've worked with an ex-student who is still toiling to break a habit first uncovered fifteen years ago. Maybe it is a posture or breathing problem, or just the simple fear of speaking clearly. It is easy for habits to plague a performer throughout a career. Letting habits go takes courage and can be uncomfortable, largely because you feel vulnerable without them.

Some actors will willingly address these habits immediately; others will resist, perhaps for years, until a habit worsens and creates a crisis. It must be an individual's choice as to what to do about habits. All of us have habits that affect the voice and unless they are harmful and blocking your way in performance no habit can be judged as wrong. In training, I am never aiming to create homogenous voices which all sound alike. Voice work can never be this restrictive. But it may be necessary to break a habit when it becomes inhibiting because it is one's *only* choice. A tight jaw, for instance, could create an interesting vocal or speech effect, but do you have other options besides this one when you need them or has the right-jaw habit taken control every time you speak?

As an actor matures, habits usually settle and become subtler, making it more difficult to root them out. At some future point the actor will either have learned to control them or is being controlled by them. But for a young actor in the earliest stages of training the work required to break habits is usually obvious and clear. All habits can be worked on technically and addressed through training. They can be banished, or laid aside in favour of better habits.

When it comes to habits and their effect on voice work I frequently say to my students: 'You aren't training to reinforce what you can already do but to move into new and dramatic areas of change.' So part of my very first task is to help each student begin to recognize her or his own physical habits, acquired over the years, which block the free passage of the natural voice.* Most of these physical habits (e. g. the pushing forward or pulling back of the head, the bunching up of the shoulders, the locking of the knees, the clenching of the jaw) can instantly be relaxed and banished. But if they are the kinds of habits that have a useful function, vocally, you can learn to use them at will. Many experienced and celebrated actors have made a very good living out of their habits: think of some of your favourite film stars. So, I feel I should reassure you that you don't necessarily have to lose your habit. You can return to it again and again if you want. But by learning to drop habits and neutralize body, breath and voice you ought to discover more vocal possibilities in a text and be able to release more of its hidden riches when you speak it. This is why I am so concerned about habits; they can be an obstacle in your work.

*I go into the problem of vocal habits in detail in *The Right to Speak*.

The Actor Speaks

The text should transform the actor and the actor's habits must never restrict the text. One of the major habits which we all suffer from in the latter part of the twentieth century is a distrust of words and eloquent speech. We are becoming crippled by non-communication. The habits this breeds are then often foisted onto texts with disastrous results. The more vocal choices you can give yourself and the greater your range and transformative skill, the less you will reduce the text to your own limited speaking capacity. I know countless fine actors, each wonderfully committed to his or her art who are transformed and enlarged during a performance to such an extent that after a show, when they have settled back into themselves and leave the theatre, they are hardly recognized when leaving the stage door. That special, expansive skill practiced by great actors through their craft is certainly something that each and every actor ought to be able to grasp. A bad habit, you see, will prevent you from ever getting that far unless brought under control now.

All these habits, however interesting they are at defining your physical identity, will ultimately limit any vocal transformation. They will almost certainly interfere with any attempt to speak different styles of text. If the habit is severe enough and deeply ingrained it may take months or years to break. But minor habits, once an actor is made aware of them and has made a commitment to change or understand them, can often vanish overnight.

THE KEY COMPONENTS OF VOICE WORK

In the first stage of work there are three primary technical areas which the actor must master before any further advanced work on voice (Stage Two) or text (Stage Three) can be achieved. Actors who fail or neglect to do this work are forever wrestling with their voices throughout their careers and have no real solid bedrock on which to build further techniques. They might survive as actors by means of native skill but their struggle and confusion when it comes to their work will be a constant one.

During their first year I ask my student actors to concentrate on three key components:

- THE BODY
- THE BREATH AND SUPPORT
- THE FREE AND PLACED VOICE

Mastery of this technical triumvirate, with which with the bulk of this chapter is concerned, forms the foundation not only of all good vocal habits but also results in good, clear acting, I devote all my attention to these three areas in the actor's first year and return to them again and again over the next two years. In fact, I never stop stressing these components to actors for years to come. In order for text and acting work to grow and remain linked to the voice, work in these three key areas has to be constantly maintained throughout an actor's career.

Generally, this kind of work takes a full year before even the best students begin to feel results, providing, that is, the actor is working continually and *every day*. I can tell you at the outset that the eureka moment in voice work will come when the work we do in the first year suddenly becomes so known and second-nature that the whole body is relaxed and centred; the breath is organic to the thought and space around you; the support remains constant and not faltering; and the freed, placed voice is in perfect pitch and harmony with the vocal task before it. But getting to that point of comfort and control requires an enormous amount of craft work.

I THE BODY

When you speak well every cell of the body should be engaged naturally and without thinking in the act of speaking. Watch a baby cry, a bird sing or a dog bark. In each instance you can see the whole body is fully involved in generating sound. You can see the same sort of involvement of sheer physical energy in speaking whenever great actors perform. Speaking on stage involves full physical commitment. Speaking is never just from the neck up.

Through physical work and special exercises the actor aims:

- to release all useless tensions which trap the breath and the voice;
- to locate the real source of energy in order to support the voice and the word;
- to find the vital 'centre' or the balance of the body which we can define as a state of readiness and a place of maximum physical and vocal freedom;
- to enter into a heightened physical state that will carry and support a heightened dramatic text;