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PATSY RODENBURG

THE RIGHT to SPEAK

WORKING WITH THE VOICE: 2nd EDITION

BLOOMSBURY

THE RIGHT TO SPEAK

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patsy Rodenburg is Head of Voice at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and was formerly at the Royal National Theatre. She trained in Voice Studies at the Central School of Speech and Drama and is recognized as one of the world's leading voice and acting coaches. Previously, Patsy was in residence with the Royal Shakespeare Company for nine years and also work with the Royal Court Theatre, the Donmar Warehouse and the Almeida Theatre, London. She has worked extensively with many of the great world theatres including the Moscow Art Theatre, Complicite, Cheek by Jowl and Comédie-Française. Patsy has worked regularly with some of the best-known actors and biggest names in theatre, film and television including: Nicole Kidman, Rachel Weisz, Emily Watson, Jude Law, Tom Wilkinson, Hugh Jackman, Daniel Day-Lewis, Cate Blanchett, Minnie Driver, Orlando Bloom, Daniel Craig, Kim Cattrall and David Schwimmer. Patsy's extensive experience in examining human interaction on a theatrical level has also given her vast insight into the qualities that are required for success in the corporate world and has led her to coach some of the world's leading business and political figures.

THE RIGHT TO SPEAK

Working with the Voice

2nd edition

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with a Foreword by Ian McKellen

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FOREWORD

Growing up in the North of England in the 1940s, we had no television. Our family enjoyed going out to the theatre but most of our entertainment came along the airwaves, through the bakelite wireless set which dominated the lounge. One of my favourites, although I didn't get the absurdity of it, was the ventriloquist Peter Brough, whose invisible lips never moved on radio. Prime Minister Churchill enthralled the nation with his wartime broadcasts and each year we dutifully tuned in for the monarch's Christmas speech to the nation. King George VI stammered and dreaded the ordeal. Lesser public figures were recognised by their voices rather than by their faces and when we did see them in the flesh, acting, singing or on the hustings at election time, entertainers and politicians rarely used microphones. In musicals, singers projected to the back of the gods, unaided by amplification.

These days, every singer (grand opera excepted) has a mike hidden in his hairline and a transmitter taped to the small of the back. That's because modern audiences expect to hear in the theatre the same balance between soloist and loud orchestrations that they get from their record-players. This has led some performers to the ultimate deception, miming in the theatre to a pre-recorded tape. Others, more robust, like Liza Minnelli and Tony Bennett, now introduce at least one song with the mike turned off. How their audiences love their bravado.

Amplification is everywhere – in churches, lecture theatres, trains, tour buses and in Parliament. The call-boy and page-boy have been made redundant by the Tannoy and the Palm Court Trio sacked by Muzak. In politics, the change has been for the worse. The thrill of the open-air orator and the wit of the hecklers have given way to the television photo opportunity. Rhetoric has been drowned out by the sound bite: public relations instead of public speaking.

It is not all loss. A television close-up, particularly if it contains his nervous fingers, can be wonderfully revealing of a politician's performance. And, even on the box, the voice remains pre-eminent. Think of Ronald Reagan's confiding whisper or Margaret Thatcher's wider range through harangue to smarm. Any impressionist will tell you – get the voice right and the audience will recognise your victim. Isn't it odd how easy it is to be confused by an acquaintance's new hairdo and yet how invariably we can identify even a disguised voice on the telephone.

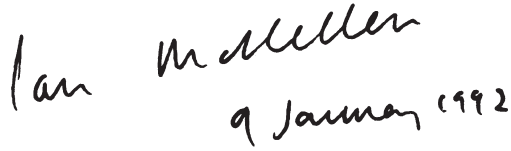
So perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that politicians, clerics, rock singers as well as actors queue up to train their voices under the supervision of Patsy Rodenburg. This book will explain her popularity among her pupils.

I know very little of her practical work because, although we meet often in the National Theatre corridors, only a couple of times have we worked together in the rehearsal room. That's been enough to realise that her expertise as a teacher lies in her unstoppable enthusiasm. As she coaxes the class to lie down, to relax, to feel and to think, she never seems to stop talking: 'There, did you feel the difference? Are you sure? Try it again. Or what about this way.' It's appropriate that her book is written in the rhythms of her urgent speaking voice and that you can detect Patsy's individual intonation in its conversational style. That should make it a great deal easier to use as a teaching aid than books by those theoreticians whose written instructions are impenetrably difficult to follow.

Back in Lancashire as a child, I spoke with a flat northern voice – two voices, actually – a broad, aggressive accent for school and the playground and a milder, more yielding tone at home. My would-be posher schoolmates went to 'Elocution' to have their native sounds taken out like the tonsils. Similar violations were perpetrated in drama schools of the time. At Cambridge, undergraduates from public school mocked my northern vowels and I taught myself to disguise them. But not entirely; and I now belong to that first generation of British actors who have been allowed to bring regional accents back to the classical drama.

In the professional theatre, I have been crucially helped by four voice teachers. Why they should all have been women was a mystery until I read this book. Its title is born of a feminist determination to realise a person's individuality. Instead of lecturing you on how to sound like

everybody else and thereby keep your place, Patsy Rodenburg wants to free your voice so that you can express yourself fully and honestly in public. She'd be the first to agree that in the end what matters is what we say rather than how we say it. Her revelation is that, at best, the sounds, like the sense, can respond to the heart of our inner selves.



Ian McKellen
London 1992

PREFACE

I started writing *The Right to Speak* in 1990. Since then the world and my teaching has changed. Every teacher knows that how and what you teach depends on the time you live in. Society changes as does education and it might be a cliché but pendulums swing and I have had to transform the work with those changes and swings.

I still passionately believe that everyone has the 'right to speak' and in the 1980s I had found many of my students and clients had struggled to take this right – and many still do – but other factors have become extremely critical and need to be addressed and exercised. We are living in a time of sometimes over-entitlement. The simple truth is that you can only exercise your right to speak if you offer and allow others theirs.

So this edition is going to explore empathetic listening as well as speaking.

In the last 20 years technology and social networking has rapidly taken over not only our ways of communicating and socializing but has taken time away from human presence in communication, dialogue, listening and reflection. Many of us have lost huge parts of our voices, speech and presence because we have been hurt.

When we are in the presence of others and speak we see and experience the effects of our words. If we are not listening we can begin to plough through other people's responses. With email and twitter we can communicate without noticing, viscerally in the moment, the effects of our words and how they might hurt. Technology has made casual communication easier and consequently more dangerous. So I will also be discussing how important care and mature gravitas is required when we speak with and listen to each other – in simple terms a more mature and respectful way of being with others.

In the last two decades science has provided evidence of how many of the ancient voice exercises that we teach work. We now know that routines that go back thousands of years do really work not only on our bodies and voices but within our brains. Speaking aloud does exercise the brain. Equally anthropologists have also been unearthing exciting connections between the importance of the human voice and speech on our species' success on earth.

I have been working with scientists and anthropologists and want to include this knowledge in *The Right to Speak*. I have also been teaching all over the world and feel very excited about the cultural issues I have been discovering, particularly amongst the leaders of the world.

It's also becoming apparent to me that some of the basic stories that informed us and taught us ethics are no longer studied and therefore a basic dialogue on human rights is being eroded. Rights have to be understood in order to be offered!

All these new experiences have only reinforced my passion to teach the right to speak. The vast majority of babies are born with amazing voices and are fully present but most people lose parts of their voice and presence before they grow up so understanding your habits that block your magnificent natural voice is critical for your own empowerment. Knowing your level of attention as you listen is also critical for your own survival, place in the world and your moral decency.

INTRODUCTION

Voice work is for everybody

We all breathe and the vast majority of us speak. Most of us would like to improve the sound of our voice and the way we speak. Many do not think this is possible! Doing voice and speech work can be, I think, as energizing and liberating as any other kind of physical exercise. There is no mystique about it. It is powerful and also very simple. Easy exercises done for a few minutes a day can radically improve any speaker's voice within a matter of days and weeks. It is important to realize the voice likes to be used, it is an instrument that can get rusty and dusty when underused. Add to that the real problem that most of us in urban living don't have much chance to use it fully. Even at school vocal release is not a daily adventure – when I went to school we sang every day so the voice was worked. It is very apparent that the people who are good speakers in the workplace went to schools where they regularly spoke to and addressed large groups. Listening is also a muscle that needs constant exercise. There is some compelling evidence that most people are born pitch perfect. If you are born into a musical family you keep that acute hearing, if not, the ear dwindles too. Speaking takes more time and consideration than texting and emailing and we are all tipping into a time-famished world.

The Right to Speak is meant to appeal both to the professional speaker and to anyone who breathes and communicates sound to the world. In it I have tried to simplify a process without being simplistic. I want you to understand the work and enjoy it without being put off it somewhere in the midst of the process. Mostly I want you to read the book from start to finish so you can discover how one thing connects to another.

The process I will be exploring is one that connects through the body into the breath, voice, speech and hearing. The physical iceberg under all our communications.

Throughout this book I refer a great deal to actors and singers because a large portion of my work centres on their needs. My experience is a result of their experiences. As a group they are useful models for all the voice and speech habits, constrictions and troubles that plague each of us. They use their voices so abundantly and regularly that every imaginable problem that any of us is likely to encounter bubbles to the surface in search of a cure. So for the average daily speaker they can be used as admirable models of how to work on your own voice. I am always moved when I work with some of the world's most successful non-actors that, unlike an actor, they have no knowledge as to how to prepare for an important speech or meeting. To the lay person what an actor does with their voice seems amazing but they do know how to physically exercise their voice and prepare. This work is not hard when understood but few understand it.

This book not only gives basic exercises to physically work and improve the voice but explores primarily what I feel are the crucial factors that create problems in the first place. Time and again I have found that the wonders and colours of the natural voice are hidden beneath habits. We settle into habitual voices that can become ours forever. The single task I have set myself here is to release you from those habits.

When our breath, voice, speech and communication skills are effortless and free, we forget all about them and become blissfully liberated as we utter any sound or word. Too many of us speak frozen in fear, consumed by doubt about our vocal abilities and apparatus. We tend to blame and castigate ourselves rather than learn some useful, tested ways of exploring our voices and oiling our vocal mechanisms.

As we open our mouths to let sound and words pour forth, we frequently reveal the deepest parts of ourselves. Not only do we divulge class, background and education but also our perceived status in the world, our fears, our denials and in some crucial instances our very souls. No wonder it can be such a terrifying act to speak. No wonder it is a right attacked and repressed by those who think they are more powerful or articulate or have the right to control how and what we have to say.

'The right to speak' is a right we all have. The vast majority of us already possess superb vocal and speech instruments which we can wield better in order to assert that right. Our fundamental ease and

enjoyment of conversation and making ourselves heard indicate that the right is fundamentally within us. All that remains is for us to release and employ the right fully.

At the outset I thought it might be helpful if you knew my own background and experience with voice and speech. Parts of my journey are similar to other people's.

When I was younger, I always thought of speaking as one of the most frightening and revealing of processes. Speaking never came to me naturally.

As a child I had a speech impediment, mumbled and was sent, most reluctantly, to speech classes in order to 'improve'. When I read out aloud in class I was so hesitant and incoherent that teachers eventually stopped asking me to contribute. And yes I loved reading. I especially loved poetry and language. At the age of 9 I discovered Shakespeare and Coleridge. I fell in love with them both but this passion stayed locked inside me and couldn't find expression in my voice. Until the age of 13 I would never speak to strangers, although my friends say I have made up for it since.

Maybe I felt myself smothering – unable to breathe, speak or commit – and that feeling is what drove me into voice work; an attempt to fathom the fear and anguish that lay behind my own fear of speaking. Sue Lefton, a dear friend and a brilliant movement teacher, talks in a similar way about a childhood fear of her body.

As a child my voice and speech training was traditional. Bone props stretched my mouth open and I lived in continual fear of swallowing these instruments of torture (there was even a string attached to the prop so it could be yanked out if it inadvertently slipped back into the throat). Years later I experimented with one presented to me by a student. As I placed it in my mouth fear instantly gagged me, I travelled back 28 years and broke out into a cold sweat. I instantly spat it out. This fear meant that for years I wouldn't teach with a bone prop but more recently a Chinese student asked me whether he could try one. I found my old prop, he put it in his mouth and within minutes the clarity of his speech improved and I had to face the truth that although a prop didn't work for me it works for some. A very valuable teaching experience. Since then, I encourage students to experiment with corks to prop their mouths open. This works for about half the students!

I learnt 'rib-reserve breathing' in order to extend my child's breath capacity to ridiculous lengths. This is the breathing you get from holding your ribcage up for unnaturally long periods of time. It can be physically deforming. All I remember was aching from my centre through to my shoulders and up to my ears as I strained to keep the ribcage hoisted.

I was encouraged to speak 'beautifully' (though I never achieved this) without understanding a thing I said. I still have vivid recollections of being detained after school when seven because I hadn't been able to memorize Rupert Brooke's poem 'If I Should Die Think Only This of Me'. I whined to the headmistress, 'But what does it mean?' She replied, 'Just speak it well.'

As I entered young adulthood I acquired a passion for theatre as the most interesting means of exploring life and I then trained as a teacher at London's Central School of Speech and Drama. The course was superb and has produced some of Britain's finest drama and voice teachers. I was finally given wonderful, sensitive and humane voice training by people like Joan Washington, Margo Braund and Helen Winter. I also met and developed a friendship with Gwynneth Thurburn, a legend who taught voice to all the great actors from the 1940s to the late 1960s. At Central we learnt how to understand both the voice and a text; how the voice should serve the writing and not smother it with well-resonating, articulated sound. That was a revelation.

As soon as I started my training I realized I wanted to specialize in voice and text work. I wanted finally to face the fear and reclaim what I have since called the right to speak. My first five years of teaching were spent in seven different schools. I dashed across London and throughout Britain – coaching, working, taking anyone for private classes, begging people to allow me to experiment with their voices, doing anything at all to learn my profession. Some weeks I was teaching voice for sixty hours to actors, singers, students, teachers, prisoners … Anyone.

Ironically I was teaching mostly under very traditionally trained people who were asking me to teach exactly in the style of my childhood experiences. What I learned to do was to adapt my Central training by adding to it those 'rediscovered', useful aspects of so-called 'classical' voice training. There are, I learned, many enduring notions embedded in a 200-year-old tradition. Sheila Moriarty was most instrumental in getting me to see this.

Eventually I went to work with Cicely Berry at the Royal Shakespeare Company for nine years. No one in voice work today can deny the immense contribution that Cicely Berry has made. Almost single-handedly she has made the work both respectable and exciting for actors, theatre directors, educationalists and students alike. Her vigour and imagination have moved the voice coach from the periphery of the performance process to a place more central. Now all of us who work in companies, releasing actors' voices into the text, can not only help people transform themselves from production to production but also acquire those vocal rights which will change them forever. I thank Cis with much love and respect.

In May of 1990 Richard Eyre, the Director of Britain's Royal National Theatre, asked me to institute a Voice Department there and become its Head. I remained at the National Theatre of Great Britain as Head of Department for nearly 17 years and now am devoted to the Guildhall School and am an associate of the Michael Howard Studios in New York. This has given me constant contact with actors but since the first edition of *The Right to Speak* I have spent more time with non-actors and leaders all over the world. I have been lucky to work alongside scientists and anthropologists and doctors exploring voice and speech in new and exciting ways. Throughout all this work I still know that the single, most important aspect of this work is that your voice is extraordinary, belongs to you and it is your responsibility to fully use it and fully listen to others. To tell important stories and with those stories inspire.

Finally the new Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Greg Doran, has asked me to 'return to my creative roots' and once again contribute by overseeing the speaking of classical text. The wheel has come full circle!

Thanks to my editor John O'Donovan. Jane Pennyfather for her clarity and focus. Louise Bakker and Jessica Corn for their patience. My dear colleagues Gabrielle Berberich, Christian Burgess, Wyn Jones, Sue Lefton, Kelly Mcevenue, Christina Shewell and Eliot Shrimpton. My students of the Guildhall School, London past and present. Lastly a special and loving thanks to Antonia and Michael Franceschi.

Patsy Rodenburg
Portugal 2015

PART ONE

THE RIGHT TO SPEAK

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

WILLIAM BLAKE
SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

1
DECLARING YOUR VOCAL RIGHTS

The right to breathe, the right to be physically unashamed, to fully vocalize, to need, choose and make contact with a word, to release a word into space – the right to speak. And in taking your rights you can then feel secure and generous enough to offer others their rights and listen attentively and generously to others.

Every day I meet people in desperate need of voice and speech work who cannot adopt all, a few or even just one of these essential rights. Some outer or inner tension blocks their ability to communicate successfully. It is almost as if they have been forcibly gagged even though the muffle is often barely a visible one. The gag is usually one of an assortment of habits that undermine the potential of anyone's voice, speech and uncluttered listening. All these habits contribute to an acute fear that so many of us have in common: the fear of speaking out in public or even in private. And if we do manage to speak can we then stand by what we say?

A recent opinion poll taken in America, asking people what single thing frightens them most, put speaking in public at the top of the list of fears above loneliness, financial worry … even death!

My job, as a voice teacher, is to remove that dreaded fear and to hand back to any speaker the fun, joy and ultimately the liberating power a release that speaking well and forcefully can engender; power sadly taken away from most of us for a variety of reasons that will become abundantly clear as we go on.

So before we can adopt a right to speak – or even begin any practical work on the voice itself – we first have to begin to learn how we lost the right in the first place.

Snap judgements

As soon as we open our mouths and speak we are judged. Instant assumptions are made about us by others; about our intelligence, our background, class, race, our education, abilities and ultimately our power. As listeners we do this to each other all the time.

What does our voice reveal about us? Quite a bit. Do we sound enfranchised or disenfranchised? Educated or uneducated? Hesitant or confident? Do we sound as if we should be in charge or just subordinate? Do we sound as though we should be heard and answered?

To the ears of others we are what we speak. For any new listener immediately tries to 'place us', instantly decides whether or not we are worth listening to, makes snap judgements about whether or not even to answer us. The evidence suggests that all this information is garnered within 90 seconds of listening.

I realize this blunt assertion is made most obviously about British society where we are still saddled by a fairly rigid and sharply attuned class system in which the voice immediately places us as upper, middle, lower, or probably worst of all, blandly suburban. But in all other countries in which I have worked, including the United States, Canada, India, Japan and throughout Europe, I have experienced the same brutally judgemental attitude based solely on the reaction to someone's voice and speech habits. Just like a fingerprint a voice-print is an almost infallible form of identification. Our voice marks us in certain ways. And it can mark us for life.

Whenever I work in the American South, for instance, I get telephone calls from businessmen and women who 'want to sound more northern' and not so rural. They believe they will earn more respect with a quick change of vocal identity. One of my students in Texas, with a particularly heavy and noticeable regional accent, was repeatedly mocked and mimicked by his classmates whenever he spoke. He believed he was stupid and took the role of class clown. When I challenged him about this he said: 'But I come from Birmingham, Alabama, and anyone who talks the way I do has got to be stupid!'

A voice teacher in India I once worked with confided how she had to stop her southern Tamil dialect from seeping into her daily speech when speaking the more acceptable Hindi dialect. 'I won't be respected,'

she said, 'if they hear that sound.' A famous Japanese film actor lamented to me once that his father's voice betrayed a lowly status. I shall never forget the uproar at a Canadian voice conference I attended in French-speaking Montreal when a Parisian voice coach bluntly asserted that 'no Canadian actor could speak the plays of Racine and Molière because they sounded too coarse'. So we are instantly known to others by our voice and dialect, and we are actually censored from having the right to speak certain things. You may not believe it is true but there is such a thing as 'vocal imperialism'.

It seems to me particularly demeaning and criminal, for instance, to tell anyone that their mother sound or accent is not good enough to speak the great texts. I think it is commonly agreed nowadays that Shakespeare's actors spoke in a variety of regional accents, many of them rough and broad and not the least bit elegant. So why is it that so many American actors, for example, in this day and age still mimic a so-called British voice and accent when they speak Shakespearean verse and prose? It only results in alienating both actor and audience further from the marvels of Shakespeare's text. Solid American accents, good British regional ones, are every bit as expressive as the refined ones we try to impose on any classical text. And the former two work extremely well when the text is given the right to return to its accentual roots.

Some older theatre audiences, however, still gasp in horror during intervals when they react to the way 'modern' actors speak the great dramatic texts in certain of these accents. When I worked with the English Shakespeare Company on their production of *The War of the Roses* many people who saw and heard those plays on a tour around Great Britain objected to the fact that the Northumberland lords spoke in heavy Northumberland accents!

If we are lucky enough to come from a socially advantaged and culturally dominant background, then snap judgements of this sort can serve the speaker well. All of the above is still true – to an extent. But the pendulum is swinging away from the appreciation and power connected to a privileged voice.

When I first wrote *Right to Speak* I had to control the more privileged speakers mocking or smirking at regional accents. Now I have to defend the privileged voices from the insults of their fellow students. My point is simple – if your accent is a mother sound, one that you heard in the womb, then it hurts to have it abused.

The other clear change is how some of the better-educated students have adopted an extreme level of inarticulate and sloppy speech. Perhaps texting is being used instead of speech muscles but the outcome is of well-educated students being deliberately incoherent and casual.

Whose right is it anyway?

Older upper class voices can bore into your head. They can sound demanding, belittling and frankly self-important. But listen carefully. They can actually be saying very little, nor are they saying it very well. Only the sound is socially acceptable. Sit in any Mayfair restaurant or have tea in one of the grander London hotels and you can hear the same kind of voices zapping around the space as if all of us ought to be part of the conversation.

To me all these 'cultivated' voices are saying one thing: 'The right to speak is mine and mine alone.' They have overstepped the right and taken it as their prerogative. They were born, educated and live with the right and will not tolerate any voice that is different from theirs. In our society they have hegemony over the sound of us all.

A whole set of negative or positive assumptions are being made as you open your mouth. Assumptions that have to do with factors like race, culture and social mobility. What I would like to add is that we also have to try and listen beyond our prejudices and any dislike of an accent. Be it an accent connected to class or culture. I am sure we have all been shocked by eventually liking someone after a first meeting when we disliked their speech or voice.

What I have noticed as a teacher does support the notion, however unscientifically posited by me, that environment and social background leave us culturally possessed or dispossessed. The voice we have is a by-product of that background and an expression of it in every way. We are judged when we speak and we are also categorized. The voice, I think, can be likened to one of those 'identikits' that sketch artists use to draw an instant profile of someone. We speak and someone quickly takes our measure and has a picture. Through voice and speech we portray ourselves.

Making sound and sense

Many of us blithely will listen to a 'high status' sounding speaker, perhaps an eminent cabinet minister or a head of state, uttering complete nonsense and banal clichés but assume he – or she – must be making sense. You can hear it in the confident measured tones of his or her voice. It does sound awfully proper, after all. My, she sounds so good. We the listeners must be at fault for not understanding the nonsensical bits. This quick assumption on our part is based entirely on how the voice *sounds* and not at all on what *sense* is being made by the speaker.

I have found myself in many political discussions with people who vote for the Conservative Party even though that group's policies do not serve their needs. I have heard convictions expressed that simply boil down to: 'Well the Labour or Liberal candidate doesn't *sound* as though he could govern. The Conservative fellow *sounds* more impressive.' What is usually swaying judgement is sound and fury not sense and issues. We all make choices like this based on something ephemeral. But how many of us are aware of it?

We are still haunted by the idea that upper-class accents are 'better'. Many of these so-called better voices are riddled with their own tensions and sound alarmingly unclear if you actually take the time to listen carefully. These voices, like our own, are riddled with tensions that block effective communication. What is now apparent after the latest recession is the educated speakers who sound powerful and yet say nothing have fallen. The shell of 'good speech' and fine-sounding presentations from leaders that know nothing has been shattered. 'Sizzle without the steak' as one CEO called it. Many in the financial markets have concluded that these 'hollow men and women' led their companies over a cliff and were not fully challenged. Consequently, those who do know their material and have motored companies from the back room are now rushing to learn how to speak effectively as they learn to lead. All leadership has good communicating at its heart and the perfect combination for a good communicator is sound and sense in harmony with an ability to listen and engage in dialogue with all levels of a company or as a parent, a family. Part of what I want to do in this book, along with helping you to work on your own voice, is also

to educate your ear. I want to get you attuned to hearing the habits in your own voice and those of others.

Along the way I also want to emphasize how important caring is. Caring that you are heard and caring they listen. In other words not being careless as you speak but fully attentive. If it matters you should never be casual.

A quick look at the problem

Let's take a quick look at the problem and begin to explore all the forces that can conspire against our right to speak and which prevent us from working on our voices ourselves.

I want to look at how the voice gets blocked, the different kinds of strain and tensions we make our voices suffer and how the voice can be released from all this anxiety and extended in range and colour. Mostly I want you to see for yourself how the conspiracy against your right to speak evolves. How background, gender, injury or illness can all taint the sound we make. Maybe I can explode some of the nagging myths that awe, frighten and sometimes paralyse so many average speakers.

My job, as I see it, is to get you past a problem and to hand back to any speaker the fun, joy and ultimate power that each of us should experience through speaking and communicating easily; power sadly robbed from us for a variety of reasons.

Nothing is quite so freeing and enlarging as a liberated voice. So let's begin in a spirit of trust and see if it leads us to freedom. Let's start with a story.

2
‘GOD DOESN’T MIND A BUM NOTE’

I once met a black American gospel singer on the London leg of a world tour. I imagine she was nearly 80 years old. During her concert I heard the most wonderful and exciting voice: liberated, clear and adventurous. She had the kind of voice any of us would love to possess. Sounds flowed freely from her. How did she do it? After her concert we met and talked.

‘How long have you been singing?’ I asked.

‘Since I was 7,’ she replied.

‘How many times a week do you sing?’

‘Oh, three or four times a day.’

‘You mean one day once a week?’

‘Oh, no, three or four times a day, seven days a week!’

‘Every week?’

‘Yes.’

At this point I begin to be very intrigued and shocked.

‘Haven’t you ever lost your voice or suffered acute strain and fatigue?’

‘No.’

‘That’s amazing. Are you saying,’ I went on, ‘that in all your years of singing you’ve never had trouble with your voice, never had to see a doctor or throat specialist, never had special voice lessons?’

‘Yes.’

‘I am so astonished,’ I continued, ‘because most performers and public speakers, given such a punishing vocal chore, would be in serious trouble by now.’

At this reaction she threw back her head, laughed out loud and

through the hilarity said, 'Oh, my dear, but you see God doesn't mind a bum note!'

Any actor, singer or professional speaker – people who use their voices daily – will immediately see the relevance of this story. Performers particularly have a peculiar – if not downright obsessive – need to sound right all the time, every time. 'Sounding right' haunts most speakers, not just professionals, and consequently freezes our ability and freedom both vocally and imaginatively. We resist taking our God-given right to speak and vocalize fully because all of us are afraid of sounding 'a bum note'. But like the lady says, if God doesn't mind why should we?

The singer knew the power of release but also the balance of care. She did not sing carelessly but she was respectful and not casual.

Self-judgement

My encounter with that black gospel singer (and my incredulous questions to her) stays with me even today because it relates, I have always felt, to any and all speakers: we all harbour a fundamental fear about our voices, we are racked by severe self-judgements. Self-judgement manifests itself in forms of censoring. First we are censored by others, stopping our voices or what we say. Outside censoring then can embed itself into self-censoring. You cannot be free with censorship or joyous. I have worked with Zulus, particularly in Soweto. Anyone who has ever heard Zulus sing will know how thrilling and free their voices sound, how joyous they look as they sing. I was extremely moved when I was told by several Zulus that they never told anyone that they couldn't sing. So they all sing! Fear of not being perfect leads to censoring and the censoring of our voices leads to fear and often the casual and underuse of our voice.

That fear is bound up with the way we think we sound to others. This self-judgement can and does prevent us from communicating fully to the world. This obstruction is so strong it will often create permanent vocal habits that physically and spiritually constrict our voices. It can actually turn some of us into vocal cripples.

Once coaxed into life these habits, or what I earlier called self-imposed gags, become afflictions that most of us are barely even

aware of. They hide and nag us or even become comfortable benign parts of us. They tend to be more subtle and even subliminal than overt and clinging. They become part of every speech transaction we make. The further we move away from our innate vocal freedom and hide behind habitual obstacles, the wider the gap becomes between us and our right to speak.

Each day I confront people who are handicapped with self-judgement of all kinds. My task is to help them break what is usually a lifetime of habits or simply one bothersome tendency. Again and again I find myself saying: 'You have the right to speak. You have the right to breathe. Take your time. You have the right to be yourself.' And I always remember the simple straightforward message of that gospel singer: 'oh, my dear … God doesn't mind a bum note!'

I usually deal with the end results of a chain of events and vocal recriminations that cut most of us off from these three rights: speaking, breathing and taking time to do both. I deal with matters like posture, breath, speech, articulation, use of language, approaches to texts and more. Most of all I deal with voice. And to that end I usually have to confront what the habits of a lifetime have done to any individual's sense of self-esteem. Here is where habits do their most devious damage.

A craving for instant results

Most of us live in such a fast, product-oriented world. We need and demand immediate results, instant gratification, sudden release from all pain. But a fully rounded and confident vocal capacity needs maturing.

Anybody in education or healthcare knows that quick fixes are simply not possible. Lasting work on the self and the body takes time. Vocal work often needs to be done at different stages of life for altogether different reasons. What a young voice student can do at 18 is nowhere near what a great performer of 50 can achieve. But then few mature actors will ever realize the voice power that a vocally gifted actor had in his or her youthful prime. What politician today has the quirky and sly vocal resonances of a Winston Churchill? Vocal flexibility and daring take time to mature. Yet the craving to achieve instant results will often exert appalling pressure on our ability to communicate. In the last

decade this need for a quick fix has accelerated alarmingly. We now find it in education and in performance. Shows on television promise instant celebrity with no work involved – untrue but still believed by many. In the workplace results are expected without any time to reflect or go through clear working processes. Superficial work can be achieved quickly but deep work not. Voice work and great communication requires a deep learning process.

Just think for a moment about how many of us as children were disciplined to 'stand up straight', told to 'stop mumbling' and commanded to 'speak up'. Sound familiar? I am sure it does. And to what lasting effect I wonder? Has it made us better speakers or just speakers filled with habits? More recent observations I have had about the voice are that we also need great vocal role models. Obviously parents and teachers can help here. If the CEO of a company is a poor communicator then others under this leader have nothing to aspire to. A young actor needs to be in the presence of a great theatre actor not the mumbling movie star. Politicians' ability to communicate also sets standards. How long will it take us to chip away at a lifetime of built-up defences and weak role models? It could take a while.

Some immediate vocal improvements are possible in a short space of time. With the right exercises improvements are possible within ten days. Lasting ones, however, do take longer. Maintaining them means starting a whole new lifetime of good habits.

From the start I must be clear about one thing: nothing in voice work happens instantaneously or through force. We should experiment, play and enjoy the work but never push, predict or judge it. You secure the right to speak by earning it. So consistent work is part of the process. Work and preparation will be a crucial part of this journey. In the last 20 years I have worked with some of the greatest speakers, actors and singers in the world. They all have one thing in common. They work very hard on their technique and practise passionately and continually. The easier it looks the more work has gone into the preparation. Winston Churchill practised, practised and practised the speeches that saved Britain. If it matters, you work on it.

Yet before we start on the process and preparation of working with the voice, we first have to take a look at all those nasty habits I have been referring to obliquely without yet identifying. We'll start right off by exploding a few key myths having to do with voice work which in their

own way have locked us into a habitual mindset and may have even convinced us that our own voices are not worth improving. For so many of us hate the sound of our own voices.

The myth of the 'bad voice'

I have never heard a 'bad voice'.

Does that sound strange or unconvincing to you? If it does it is probably because you think you hear them daily. 'His voice is so overbearing.' 'Her voice is so shrill.' ' Why are they mumbling?' It might even be your own voice you are talking about.

Some voices have obviously suffered serious damage and are medically flawed. Others are susceptible to allergies and upper respiratory infection. There are croaky voices and squeaky voices. But if a voice is healthy and not the victim of chronic illness then it cannot be termed 'bad'. It may, of course, be grossly underdeveloped or overdeveloped, nervous or overconfident, untrained or very badly trained. Think of the muscles of the body as an analogy. Without some form of exercise and physical restraint we go either flabby or become muscle-bound. Sounding overbearing or shrill are simply vocal habits that have gone too far in either of two directions. Neither is 'bad' in itself. Both are easy to control. So it is not the voice that is bad but just the bad habits that suppress its freedom.

What I believe is that every human voice has thrilling potential waiting to be discovered and unleashed. And I do mean every human voice. As soon as any of us surrenders to a defeating habit and says, 'I have a bad voice', what happens? Our whole capacity to speak unashamedly and communicate expressively suffers a crisis of confidence. The whole vocal apparatus that physically allows us to speak in the first place shuts down. We begin to second-guess every statement we utter and each sound we make. A negative myth about a bad voice compromises our right to speak. In this new edition acute listening and attention is also critical and this takes self-knowledge. I am increasingly encountering people who have no knowledge that their voice is boring or incoherent. They have not noticed people unable to stay with them. This attitude creates similar habits.