

Voice and Speech: a craft

Approached by Alex Boon, speech pathologist and voice teacher

- **Voice**
- **Physical/mental consciousness**
- **Speech**
- **Voice and speech in relation to speaking, presentation and acting (regardless of the language)**

Voice

The basis for all our work is the **voice**: pure sound.

Every sound emitted from the body is the result of a configuration of factors that exists at any given moment. This configuration must be able to be identified, perceived, felt, recognized, maintained, adapted and/or reproduced.

This sound is approached within **three contexts**:

1. **Body** - the role, position, characteristics and influence exerted by the physical material: muscles, ligaments, bones, nerves, cavities, organs and joints.
2. **Dynamics** - Power, posture, breath, motor skills (speed, direction, co-ordination, tempo, rhythm).
3. **Personality** - personal history, experience, needs, ambitions, adaptations, emotion, motivation.

1. Body

Bodily or physical perception (global or sense-specific) is intensely and directly stimulated via sound or the renewed (i.e. simultaneous with the sound) and continuous application of touch, hearing and sight.

Physical manipulation directly and concretely influences the way in which sound is produced. The body can be approached and used sitting, walking or prone; it can be flexed, constrained or freed, lifted, set into motion, stretched, pushed or pulled. Manipulation - whether it is applied subtly or with force, anywhere on the body - can affect the voice. In this way the body is placed in the context of space and time.

Each and every sound that is produced must be listened to and recognized anew. In this way new material emerges, and with it a new perception. In doing so one relies heavily on dynamic and personality principles as well.

Working with the body always results in new material. Experiment itself is more important than the goal.

2. Dynamics

Sounds are elaborated further, whereby the range of sounds continually expands. Additionally the resulting breath movement is more consciously recognized and applied. The voice is confronted with space, material (objects, walls, persons) and continues to take on more context.

The context in turn influences the configuration and calls for a new set-up - the actor's dynamic changes. The work and/or the sound compels the actor to change his habits pertaining to applying or releasing force; accelerating or slowing down; intervening or 'letting go'; observing, perceiving or participating; concrete action or association, fantasizing, intuitively choosing; approval or disapproval, lingering or choosing a new path. It is not simply about one side of a contradistinction, but the degree to which the person tends toward one side or the other.

Dynamic work always results in new combinations and movements, new knowledge and potential. Exploration is more important than rules.

3. Personality

“How can my breath be so sustained and powerful, and my voice so loud or strange, pleasant or ugly, clear or breathy” “How is it that I feel so at ease or so energetic, clear, new, sensitive, aggressive, abandoned or supported?”

The actor is confronted with bygone, silent, censored sounds and learns to rehear and use them, regardless of the norm or judgement that holds for these sounds. ‘Good’ or ‘bad’ makes way for a subjective valuation. Personal traits become visible and usable, and emotions become tangible and manageable. Everything that restrains a sound and everything that develops the voice becomes a relevant and conscious choice.

Personality work does not pass judgement on whether someone is good or bad, sympathetic or not; rather, it shows whether the person is capable of making use of his individual characteristics and producing new strategies.

Physical/mental consciousness

Physical work with the voice results in an experimenting, searching, creative and multi-faceted actor with depth and presence.

The actor, in regard to his sound, must be physically able to:

- explore
- discover
- recall
- reproduce
- apply

The actor’s mental skills allow him to register, observe and monitor the process, and to adequately apply his knowledge and make relevant choices - in short, he is in a position to take responsibility.

Practice

Because the actor’s body, knowledge and experience change over the years, working on the voice is an inherently progressive process that is applied daily to the actor’s total existence and in principle never ends.

Speech

Building upon the enormous potential of the **voice**, with its colour, emotion and carrying power, we can define **speech** as the meaningful end product of the voice.

In a physical sense, this function can be observed in the vocal tract. The extremely complex movements involved in producing speech and the relation between perception and speech make working on speech a long-term project demanding the utmost precision. In a personal and emotional sense, the use of language (choice of language, word choice, word order, sentence structure, argument) as well as the use of speech (pronunciation, prosody, dialect and speech distortions) determines the connotation of the text and is recognizable as such.

In order to stimulate sensitivity to the technical side as well as to the personal/emotional aspects of speech in the actor, the following approach applies:

1. Sound production
2. Prosody

1. Sound production

Every actor should begin with his individual speech and, through exercises, be able to identify all the existing sounds in his own language. One will experiment with the greatest possible deviations or distortions in physical pronunciation without rendering the speech-sound incomprehensible.

Variations in pronunciation of vowels, consonants and diphthongs will thus be covered in depth and eventually mapped out in a neutral fashion. In this way, every actor can achieve a correct

pronunciation while maintaining his individual variations or deviations in pronunciation. The actor will thus be able to apply any and all variations in his speech necessary to master a certain language or dialect.

The knowledge concerning the formation of sounds gleaned from experiment and observation will then be applied to combinations of sounds. The mutual influence of sounds between words and in the context of a sentence will be further worked out.

The combination of physical pronunciation acrobatics and listening to minimal variations in pronunciation will lead to complete control of speech.

2. Prosody

Tempo, rhythm and melody (intonation) are the prosodic elements that must be under the actor's control in order to give speech meaning and expression. Employing these elements is of primary importance in interpreting a text.

Here too, it is important to recognize the contribution of the physical approach to the actor's intellectual development. By investigating the prosodic elements, the actor will find that they can drastically alter the meaning of a text, and that expressivity can make or break a text. It is essential to 'experience' language in this way, because it offers the possibility of bringing a text to life - while mental prejudices, premature interpretation or monotonous repetition of a text can kill it outright.

The actor should be able to play with a text on the spot, reacting to events and surroundings, making use of the knowledge he has developed and of the possibilities in the area of prosody.

Voice and speech in relation to speaking, presentation and acting (regardless of the language)

During the process in which the actor is involved in **voice and speech**, his knowledge and potential will be confronted with presentation and acting.

The actor will be repeatedly asked to adapt and adjust his voice and speech to the demands of the text, the director, the theatre and/or the audience.

Working with voice and speech is thus an interactive, reciprocal task: questions that arise, comments from others, personal discoveries and experiences should always be further examined as they pertain to voice and speech. The degree to which the actor is capable of doing so will reflect his level of skill and his dedication to extending these skills in this area.

During this stage the lessons will continue concurrently with rehearsals and staged performances.

Stage presence, clarity of execution and credibility must never be left to chance. Nor should they be subject to the mood of the actor at any given moment. They must be realised through technical skills and genuine insight into one's own potential.

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