"Life in the Voice Lane"

by
Nancy Houfek
Head of Voice & Speech
American Repertory Theater
Harvard University

Copyright 2010 Nancy Houfek
This article first appeared in the *New England Theatre Journal* Vol. 21 2010
and is reprinted here with their permission.

Introduction

The role of "the voice person" is gaining more and more importance in the world of the theater. Contemporary productions are expanding both in perspective and in technological possibilities, requiring a specialist to assist in the voice area. Actors are crossing boundaries, not only culturally, but also between various performance disciplines, needing help with dialect or vocal production to be convincing (or sometimes just audible) in their new arena. Theater departments throughout the country consistently include a voice specialist on the faculty, asking for certification in a number of specific disciplines.

There has been a concurrent rise in interest in the people who have chosen this singular avenue. Recent interviews in *American Theater*[i] with several of the leading forces in voice training prompted Stuart Hecht, Editor of The New England Theatre Journal, to ask me to write about how I came to do what I do, what I do, and how the world of voice in the theater has changed over the three and a half decades that I have been involved.

I never imagined this profession when I was starting out, but it has become the essence of who I am. As Head of Voice & Speech at the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University, I have the opportunity to work with undergraduates, M.F.A. candidates, professional actors, world renowned directors, and designers, composers, musicians, and choreographers of all kinds. It is the culmination of a lifetime of experience: gathering ideas and information, studying pedagogical tools and teaching styles, paying attention to the changing world both inside and outside the theater. The writing of this article helped me to honor the influences that brought me to this place and to investigate the movements that are changing me now. Perhaps I may also inspire a new voice specialist to eagerly embrace this unique profession.

Part I: Affinities and Influences

Childhood treasures

My father passed away last year at the age of ninety-eight. I just received a box of his books in the mail from my sister. I was delighted to find *Voice and Diction* by Victor A. Fields and James F. Bender (The MacMillan Company: New York, 1947.) It made me think about how important clarity and neutrality of speech were to those who wished to sound educated and influential in the past century. Both of my parents studied speech (I also have copies of my mother's typed drill sheets from her early classes.)

They were rejecting their respective local (Wisconsin farm) and cultural (Swedish immigrant) roots. Their study was not only correction of grammar, but also detailed correction of speech patterns, exactly the same kind of training that I received later in my life when I studied under Edith Skinner at the American Conservatory Theater. But this training had already started as I was growing up and my parents impressed on me their beliefs about "proper" speech.

I was also fortunate enough to learn to read music almost as soon as I could read written words. The part of my brain that can recognize a written symbol as a representation of a sound developed rapidly; I first plunked out notes on a miniature xylophone, then I learned to play the B flat clarinet, then the piano. This training was invaluable for my learning the International Phonetic Alphabet during my actor training, as well as for understanding the rhythmic patterns of Shakespeare text. I continue to find that the students or actors who can read music also have a greater ease in learning speech sounds, dialect variations and Shakespeare's poetic forms.

Not only was I learning how to recognize sound symbols as a child, I was also learning how to hear. My favorite LP was a recording of the British monologist, Joyce Grenfell. Ms. Grenfell was famous for her poignant character studies, which she performed in a variety of dialects: British variations, New York, Australian, German. I transcribed the text of every monologue from this recording and memorized each one. I may not have understood completely the depth of Ms. Grenfell's stories, but I did take great pleasure in the formation of the dialect sounds and the worlds that they created.

What I learned in school

My grade school and high school education also contributed enormous amounts to my capabilities in the world of voice and speech. I know from my current students how the study of grammar has fallen out of favor in many contemporary educational institutions. I was lucky to have an eighth grade English teacher who made "parsing and diagramming" an exciting exploration of language form. I loved taking language apart and then putting it back together in a visual format. This is exactly what the actor needs to do to get under the skin of Shakespeare text: see it not as a linear sequence of words, but as a pattern of images held together by rhythm and sound.

This same teacher, Ms. Mary Olson, also created a game called "vocabulary baseball." In order to get to first base we had to define the word given to us; to second base, spell it; to third, use it in a sentence; for a home run, do all of this for another more difficult word. I have used this same format for "IPA baseball" and, in Shakespeare class, for "rhetorical forms" baseball.

Ms. Olson also required us to perform in English class. Whenever we studied a new form of writing (short story, narrative poem, essay, etc.), we had to memorize a piece of text in this form, which we then performed. (What a way to deepen an understanding the author's intent!) To complement our verbal experience, we were tested on the various rhetorical principles that we were embodying in our performance. I still use the content from her purple mimeographed handouts when I teach Shakespeare text. What's interesting to me is that the information that I learned at the eighth grade level is rarely taught anymore. Much of what I bring to the contemporary classroom in a graduate actor training program is new to many of my students.

I'm sure that by this point it would be obvious to any parent or educator that I was interested in patterns of sound. I eagerly studied French and Latin: their concepts of grammar were fascinating structures to me. In college, I added German to this list, loving both the formality and complexity of its form. My ear training made it easy to mimic the sounds of these languages as well. I continued to play music and perform.

I want to be an actor, I think...

When I arrived at the American Conservatory Theater in the mid-seventies, a young actor hungry to be trained, I was a sponge for everything offered to me. I loved going to speech class, considered by many of my cohorts to be a difficult, perhaps onerous, experience. I was fortunate to study with Timothy Monich, now the leading dialectician in American film, Edith Skinner, the grand dame of American speech training, and Deb Sussell, a warm and compelling teacher who helped us put sound into action in Shakespeare text. I had many great acting teachers: Larry Hecht, Ed Hastings, and Allen Fletcher, among others. And I had the great good fortune to study with David Hammond, currently one of the leading Shakespeare teachers in the United States.

But the most influential in the direction that my career has taken was Catherine Fitzmaurice. Catherine taught voice, in what is now known as Fitzmaurice Voicework. I had been an intellectual student of sound; now I was being asked to be a physical and emotional one. Her work focused on a deep physical release of the breath through a sequence of exercises called "tremors." The work in class was difficult, sometimes frustrating, sometimes boring, and sometimes anger-inducing. Catherine was trying to get us to experience and express ourselves fully: heart, mind, body, and soul. This was a revelation for me, an area of myself that I had never approached.

Catherine's teaching philosophy is unique. She was then, and still is, interested in the intersection of various movement and vocal disciplines with her own life work. During the fall of 1977, my second year at A.C.T., Catherine began an informal teacher-training program. Those of us who were interested met with her once a week on an extracurricular basis. Each participant brought in an aspect of his or her actor training that was most appealing; we explored the interface between this area and the tremor and breath sequences. I clearly remember how fascinating this was: we examined yoga, dance, stage combat and shiatsu massage, among others, all in the context of breath and support.

Many other teachers at A.C.T. augmented my understanding of the body and voice: Bonita Bradley's yoga class, John Pasqualetti's dance course, Sabin Epstein's movement work, and Frank Ottiwell's Alexander Training. I was learning first of all to change myself. I was experiencing what it meant to connect a deep breath to the release of physical tension through yoga. I was learning about extension of one's personal energy to the audience through dance. I was learning how easily an actor could shift through a change in movement quality though Laban Movement Analysis. I was learning how subtle changes of body image could dramatically alter not only breath and voice, but also presence and being present, through Alexander Training.

The spring of my second year of actor training, Catherine was unable to teach the A.C.T. Evening Extension School (now called the Academy) voice class. She offered it

to me. I was thrilled. I now had a chance to pass on in my own words the work that I had been assimilating in my training.

My "waitressing" job

After graduating from A.C.T. in 1978, I started looking for the next step. I wanted to live in a city with a myriad of performing opportunities for a beginning actor. Seattle was the perfect spot: the cost of living was extremely low (it was the late seventies, after all) and the number of theaters quite high. I auditioned for everything I could and was able to perform constantly.

Of course, a steady acting income wasn't necessarily a livable one. I thought, "Why not teach? I have no idea how to be a waitress, but I do have a tiny bit of experience as a teacher." I proposed a "Voice & Speech for the Stage" course to every acting studio in town. Within months, I had lots of work. After two and a half years, I was invited to teach for the graduate actor training program at the University of Washington.

What an opportunity this was: a chance to train second year acting students of a major M.F.A. program in stage dialects. The head of this program, Robert Hobbes, wanted his students to be able to work both quickly and accurately. He asked me to teach them one dialect a week, starting with Standard British, traversing Cockney and various Irish dialects, ending with Scottish and Midlands, a duo of particularly challenging ways of speaking. In addition, these students had not been trained in the International Phonetic Alphabet, the sound symbol recognition system that I knew and that most dialect materials were written in, but in the Lessac System, a way of numbering sounds based on their placement and production. I said, "Yes. Absolutely, I can do this."

An intense period of research began. At that time, there were no Internet resources for dialect acquisition. There was no Internet! I spent hours in the library looking up linguistic analyses of the required dialects. I learned the Lessac system of notation. I created charts for the students that compared the Lessac numerical symbol with the International Phonetic Alphabet symbol for every sound shift necessary for each dialect.

On Mondays, I taught the sound variations for each dialect, on Wednesdays, we drilled the sound shifts, on Fridays, each student presented a piece of dramatic text in the dialect of the week. For their final, each student was to be prepared with a monologue in every dialect, which they would be randomly asked to perform. They were also to have the capability of improvising in a dialect chosen at the moment by Professor Hobbes. I was terrified for them, and for myself, and infinitely proud of their successes, and of mine.

Learning never ends

In addition my growing classroom experience, I gained a new physical language while I was in Seattle. I wanted to continue my dance training, so I enrolled in classes at Dance Theatre Seattle/Bill Evans Dance Company School. I had been introduced to Laban Movement Analysis at A.C.T. through Sabin Epstein's classes. But I had never had the opportunity to study with professional dancers who used this system to examine

how the human body moves in relation weight, time and space. I took as many classes as I could, challenging myself physically every day for three years.

I studied Bartenieff Movement Fundamentals through this studio as well, with leading practitioners in the field, Peggy Hackney and Janice Reel. Irmgard Bartenieff had created a system of movement exploration to help rehabilitate wounded bodies. By experiencing the ilio psoas as the center of the body around which axes of movement occur, the dancer can bring spine and limbs into an integrated whole. I was thinking like Catherine at the time: how does this experience interface with what I know about breathing and voice? This study both changed and deepened my understanding of how the body functions and has become the basis for my teaching of physical awareness in relation to vocal production.

My performance career was as fertile. I was in a sequence of long running shows, all with singing and dancing. One day, I walked on stage, opened my mouth, and nothing came out. I had been religious in my vocal warm-ups and assiduous in my technique, but repetition and stress had done its damage. I received the terrifying news that is the dread of every performer: I had started to develop vocal nodes. Fortunately, the doctor I worked with was quite progressive. He recommended a radical change in diet, eliminating all milk and wheat products as well as alcohol. It worked. In addition, rather than traditional vocal therapy, he suggested I study with one particular singing teacher, Colleen Carpenter-Simmons.

With Colleen's help, I restructured my breath pattern again. I found that I had been using a vocal support located too high in my body. Once I lowered my center to the ilio psoas, totally in congruence with Bartenieff Movement Fundamentals, I could feel how free and open the muscles of the neck and throat could be. She also used a sequence of vocalese to blend the upper register with the lower register, effectively massaging my damaged cords to phonate clearly again throughout my whole pitch range. This sequence, adapted to the speaking voice, has become a core part of my teaching.

At this point, I decided that being a teacher of voice was what I really wanted to do. I felt that I was gaining a full complement of knowledge to help actors speak well. I also felt the compelling need to offer what I knew about vocal health. I never wanted any young actor to go through what I had endured in the loss of my voice and near permanent damage.

Part II: Passing the Torch

Living in the corpus collosum

The artist, whether an actor, singer, dancer, musician, or visual artist of any kind, has the peculiar challenge of needing to live balanced delicately between the right brain and the left brain. The holistic, intuitive sensitivity of the right brain allows for spontaneity and creativity, the surprises, being in the "zone." The linear organized activity of the left brain offers analysis and language and choice. When an artist exists completely in the right brain, the elegance of craft may be missing from his or her work. If the artist has landed in the left brain, the craft may be exquisite, but the magic may be missing. Actor training seems to me fundamentally to be about negotiating the flow

between the two. Ideally the artist can learn to feel comfortable in the corpus collosum, the connecting point between the warring hemispheres of the brain.

Many actors feel that technique is a limitation to spontaneous experience. One of my goals as a teacher is to instill the idea that craft is an ally. The actor who understands this can use technique as a solid framework for limitless variations of expression. When helping actors learn about their vocal and physical choices, I often find myself saying, “This is technique. Learning this is like an artist doing studies in perspective or value pattern or color theory. It’s like a musician practicing arpeggios. It’s the dancer at the barre or an athlete drilling a jump shot. You are not meant to be focusing solely on technique when you are in the moment of performance.” Training is a repetition of various activities designed to habituate an expanded repertoire of informed possibilities.

I believe that it is necessary to identify the already ingrained habitual physical and vocal behaviors that may be keeping the young actor from a full experience of self in the moment. These behaviors may be evidenced in the way an individual holds herself, the muscular patterning of alignment or breath or movement. They may reveal themselves in the muscular tensions of the neck and throat or jaw and tongue. They may be lodged in a self-concept of how one should engage vocally into the world. They may be based in familial or environmental or cultural mores. What the actor could strive for is an open balanced instrument, both present to the world and eager to express into the world.

And a lively mind is essential as well. I had the profound experience of listening to André Serban, currently Professor in the Theater Arts Division of the School of the Arts at Columbia University, speak about what he expects from his actors when approaching Shakespeare text. He said that the actor must not bring Shakespeare down to his or her own level of experience. Actors must bring their minds UP to Shakespeare’s mind, must challenge themselves to think as Shakespeare thought, must make Shakespeare’s language their own language, not a foreign one that they can barely understand. I loved hearing this. He threw down the gauntlet to the actors. And the kind of thinking that he was asking for was not to be “intellectual” in their approach, but live in the interface between right and left brain: understand the language AND experience it simultaneously.

I also believe that every dramatic text has its own dialect, its own manner of speech. If the actor can experience the “code switch” (a term from linguistic study that means the shift we make when we change our vocal patterns to fit the person with whom we are speaking) as a form of “outside/in” transformation, he or she can use dialect change as a profound method of creating character. This shift brings together both the left brain analysis of the language patterns (sound shifts, rhythm changes, differences in melody and vocal placement) and the right brain function of spontaneous communication. However, it is only through analysis that the actor can begin to assimilate a new vocal pattern. Once the changes have been named, the actor can then drill the new sounds until the dialect has been completely assimilated as an organic manner of speech. Only at this point can the actor can begin to communicate freely in the new vocal pattern. What begins to happen, then, is a subtle yet complete alternation of the manner in which the human being interacts with the world. And it is only found through the balance between right and left brain activity.

What’s in the way?

The public education system in the United States has changed radically since the mid to late twentieth century. I have experienced this change through my three decades of teaching. Today's students, unless they have attended a private or college preparatory academy, or gone to school in a British Commonwealth system, seem to have been deprived of the in-depth attention to language that was so prevalent in earlier decades.

I have some ideas as to why this is. Of course, it is difficult to teach English grammar. English is a complex language whose many linguistic sources make every rule have an exception. There are many more subjects to teach now and many more disciplines to learn, and as a result, the teaching of other languages is diminishing. Class size has increased as funding has decreased. Educators are now pressured to focus on test score numbers at the expense of teaching analysis and critical thought. What this translates to for the actor is a lack of the ability to comfortably comprehend the structure of English.

Electronic media are also affecting the actor's language abilities. Verbal storytelling is being replaced by Internet or text message communication. The interchanges are becoming shorter with text messaging; complete words and thoughts are shortened to minimalist symbols. Television advertising is losing language as well. Long phrases that at one point became sound bites have now been replaced completely by images. Short clips of short phrases are the politician's stock in trade in the electronic news as well (our current President being a throwback to the days of rhetorical elegance.) The ability to keep a long complex thought aloft is becoming more and more challenging to young speakers who are surrounded by a barrage of quick hits.

Internet use has also precipitated a shift in learning skills. Since all information is literally at our fingertips in an instant, the ability to use our minds to acquire knowledge permanently is losing favor. Students can look up a Shakespeare paraphrase, and still not really comprehend the language. Students can find a site that has all the details on how to speak a dialect, yet they may not be able to communicate in that dialect.

There is also a shift in the expectation of learning time. The speed at which one can access information electronically is solely determined by the bandwidth of the internet connection. Some students get extremely impatient with the slow process of habit change. They expect to be able to change themselves at the same speed that they can download a document. I often find myself saying, "Changing physical or vocal habit is like burning a CD with a feather. One must go round and round and round an infinite number of times to begin to make a groove."

Certain contemporary vocal habits are also problematic, some generational, some gendered. One current common style of speaking is to use the repetition of upward inflections (also called the continuing rise) at the ends of sentences. This habit makes it difficult to end or land a thought, so the notion of playing a definite action with one's scene partner can be lost. Also, young speakers commonly use a strong glottal attack at the beginnings of words that start with a vowel, effectively cutting off both breath and resonance. Glottal stops many also substitute for consonants at the ends of words, which also cuts off sound and shortens the word. And final sounds may be dropped altogether, leaving many words incomplete. Words that are lengthened often remain stuck in the throat creating the rattle of glottal fry, another breath limitation. With many young actors

who speak with these popular habits, it becomes a challenge to bring the voice forward, to make space for the vowels, to relish the consonants, to finish words and land thoughts.

Some contemporary physical vocabularies also might also hinder the study of voice. Many young women and men have taken on a characteristic slump or slouch that is considered appropriate for their peer group. This body habit is detrimental to full breathing and resonance. Conversely, many young women and men have assimilated the need to hold the abdominal muscles very tightly, often overdeveloping them with no attention to flexibility or release. This holding pattern is in response to the body imagery that we are bombarded with in contemporary advertising: the fit, held, muscular body that we see on billboards and fashion or fitness magazines. The inability to release the muscles necessary for breath inhibits the ability to develop a free and resonant voice.

Another aspect of our contemporary culture that may be in the way of the young actor's vocal development is the concept of "identity politics." I understand how important it is to retain cultural markers. Sometimes these markers are embedded in how one holds the body, how one moves, how one gestures. And language use is also an essential marker: various combinations of accent, dialect, grammatical structure, vocabulary, melody, rhythm, pitch, volume, rate, and inner attitudes of speaking identify the speaker with their original or chosen group. As important as this is for an individual, it may be a limitation for an actor. The theater artist who is a chameleon, willing to explore the physical and vocal choices of a variety of cultures, can increase his or her working repertoire tremendously. The actor who is determined to retain strong physical and vocal cultural markers may remain true to self, yet lose opportunities to work on texts, productions and roles that are outside of the band width of self concept.

What's helping?

As much as electronic media can be a detriment to verbal use and learning skills, it has the great positive capability of opening up a world of sound to the actor. Until very recently, anyone wishing to learn a dialect went to the library to study the linguistic analysis of the sounds, and perhaps listen to a tape recording of a linguist speaking those sounds. If one was lucky, the recording had a native speaker on it. Now, one can find sound samples on line for any dialect in the world. On many dialect sites, there is an analysis of the sounds as well.

YouTube has also become a tremendous resource. Not only can the actor listen to new sound patterns, but also see the speaker's physical habits. And if an actor wishes to research a famous contemporary speaker, chances are there is a recording of their words on You Tube. For example, recently I needed to find out how the voices of baseball players Babe Ruth and Willie Mays sound for the A.R.T. production of the new musical *Johnny Baseball*[ii]. Babe Ruth's farewell speech to the Yankees was available for listening, which revealed not only his speech patterns, but also how his voice sounded near the end of his life when it had been damaged by cancer. Willie Mays' interview with Bob Costas was on YouTube, as were excerpts from his autobiography spoken by him. The actors now have instant access to these sources.

The iPhone now has a Shakespeare "app." I thought that one of my top students was checking e-mail in Shakespeare class one day. Boy, was I delighted to find that she was simply looking up the act, scene and line of the material we were discussing. There

is also a glossary "app." Any question that an actor has about a word meaning or pronunciation can be answered immediately, no longer having to rely on finding the right word in the right book.

The "identity politics" that can be a limitation for some actors are a great resource for others. Many physical and vocal variations of distinct cultural groups are no longer hidden or secret, but readily available through film, news, interviews, documentaries, YouTube, and direct observation. The exploration of cultural variation is no longer frowned upon, as in my parents' world, but celebrated in an expanding variety of dramatic texts and forms. The transformative actor can learn to "code switch" from culture to culture, to more sensitively and accurately enter into each distinct world.

We can see this happening as well on film. As movie content becomes more global, actors seem more willing to risk a new physical or vocal form. Just playing one persona no longer seems to be the fashion. I credit Timothy Monich as a major force in this change. His exceptionally detailed, specific, and accurate dialect coaching on hundreds of movies has lifted many performers to Oscar winning status. As more A-list actors (Don Cheadle, Leo DeCaprio, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, and, of course, Meryl Streep) explore the idea of transformation through speech and voice changes, more young actors are embracing vocal technique as a prerequisite for stardom.

How do I teach vocal production?

The main ingredient to successful voice teaching seems to me to be a negotiation between patience and activity. If I go too quickly, I'm not sure the new habits will stick. If I progress too slowly, I may lose the students' interest.

I start with what I call "pure voice." By this I mean physical use, organized breathing patterns, resonance, pitch, placement, and vocal health, all in the service of free, open, spontaneous communication. First, I spend quite a lot of time helping students to experience themselves physically, both to understand their current habits and to discover what it feels like to be in new one. I use many images: the body floating on the ocean, the body like an empty vessel, the body's six lines of energy as a star burst. We practice crawling to feel how organized the body is when we are on all fours. We alternate between crawling and walking to feel how inefficient the upright mode may be, an exercise that I learned from Frank Ottiwell in my own training at A.C.T. We try various archetypes of body patterns to comprehend how our physical habits affect how we see the world and are seen in the world. We practice some new habits to feel how freely the breath and voice flow when we are balanced and aligned.

I also teach the basic tremor positions from Fitzmaurice Voicework. In learning these positions, the students are experiencing a variety of new modes. The tremors themselves, by allowing the muscles to live right between flexion and extension, increase the heart rate, and therefore the breath rate. The body begins to return to a breath pattern that is more open and free. The positions, since they are based on simple basic yoga postures, are beneficial in themselves, even if a practitioner is not finding the tremor. Each position helps the student with specific areas of flexibility and release, whether in the hips, hamstrings, lower back, long muscles of the back, ribs, pectorals, stomach muscles, etc. When the student has held a position for a particular length of time, upon release of that position, he or she may feel a rush of energetic flow throughout the whole

body. That energetic flow may also be associated with an emotional release; sometimes tremorers find themselves laughing or weeping or shouting with rage. I liken this to a volcanic activity; the steady flow of emotion, making the inner life more accessible, keeps the lava from erupting in a damaging explosion.

We then start in on exploring breath in a more specific way. Again, using variations of yoga positions, I help the student to stretch the intercostal muscles as well as the muscles of the chest and back. Many of these exercises are partnered. I think it's important for the students to feel how a change in muscle holding patterns can radically alter the ability to take a full breath. Bartenieff Movement Fundamentals are an important source for the next are of study: how to release the belly and isolate upper from lower abdominals. Once the student experiences the varieties of muscular use of the abdominals, it's time to start engaging vocal support. This is not "diaphragmatic" breath, but a support coming from the lower belly that allows the ribs to float down in an easy controlled release of air. I liken the inhalation to a beach ball, expanding the front, back, bottom and top of the torso. The exhalation is like a little "cat flap" that pushes up and back from the pelvic floor, creating a foundation from which the breath can pass smoothly through the vocal folds.

We then start to work on resonance. The air passing the vocal cords is much like the string on a cello. It is the initiation of the vibration. If we have only the bow and string, however, we never can feel the full resonance of the instrument. As we play with body resonance, we are augmenting the vibration that has started in the cords by sending it to various bones of the skeleton. The tremoring has already started the student on a path of this experience. I augment this work with exercises to awaken the sensation of vibration in a number of powerful body areas. The sternum is a very important source of vibration, like the "woofer" in a great stereo system. As we progress, the students can feel their resonance in the ribs, back, bones of the legs and feet, and even into the smaller bones of the hands.

The bones of the face and skull function like the "tweeter" on that stereo system. Using a light, high, forward hum, we can activate the head resonances. After I have students massage the jaw, teeth, cheekbones, forehead, and skull, while humming, I invite them to pull the resonance out of their faces as if it were salt-water taffy. I also get them to experience the power of vibration. We stand in front of an open piano as a group humming. If all voices stop at once, the vibration continues on the piano strings, accurately replicating the pitch of each human voice. This is revelatory. Our voices do extend from self as a tangible physical sound wave.

Once we have activated our various resonances, we begin to play with placement and pitch variation. The series of exercises that I use here is based on the rehabilitative work that I did with Colleen Carpenter-Simmons. Starting in the body resonances, the student slides through the voice all the way to the highest pure head resonance. We explore how to make this slide completely smooth, avoiding any glitch or catch in the voice that many singing teachers call a "break." I forbid this word to my students. By naming it as a break, it will remain a break. I prefer to call it a "bridge" or the Italian "passagio." We spend quite a bit of time smoothing out the passagio, learning how to lift the soft palate and drop the back of the tongue as one slides from body to mid to head resonance and back.

Once the vocal arc has started to smooth out, we add in very simple text: numbers. This helps the student to identify exactly where his or her passagio exists. Then we start to play around in the passagios. Each student, once he or she has explored a balance between head and mid-range, and body and mid-range, must find a piece of text that could reasonably be spoken in that part of the voice. Discoveries are abundant at this point. Students experience a new sense of presence and vulnerability when the voice is forward and free. Their expression of the text becomes more honest and connected to self.

At this point, vocal health becomes an important part of the discussion. Alignment, support and placement are the first steps toward maintaining a healthy undamaged voice. Diet is also critical. I encourage students to limit their intake of milk products when performing to avoid excess mucus on the vocal cords. I talk about possible wheat allergies that also produce mucus. Timing of eating is also critical for a healthy voice. When actors eat after performances, particularly spicy foods, acid reflux can become a problem that is particularly distressing to the vocal cords. I discuss the potential deleterious effects of alcohol consumption. And, of course, we talk about how smoking damages the lungs, limiting breath intake, as well as the vocal folds, effectively "smoking" them like beef jerky.

Trippingly on the tongue

As these areas of "pure voice" are developing for the student, they are also beginning their study of speech. Many people think of speaking as a mental exercise. We start with a series of facial releases that I call "The Five Floodgates," to bring an awareness of how the muscles of the face and head are involved in speech production. Each area (lips, jaw, tongue, soft palate, and the muscles of the neck and throat) can be relaxed, stretched, and strengthened just as any other part of the body can. The final step is to start working each area for precision of action, exactly as if we were training for a sport. This allows for clarity and dexterity in articulation of text.

The International Phonetic Alphabet is the next challenge. As students become more aware of how their facial muscles work, I help them comprehend how each combination of lips, jaw, tongue, etc. used to produce sound can be named by a specific symbol. Many students are confused by the plethora of spelling variations in the English language. Once they can unhook from the idea of a word being represented by the inconsistent vowels and consonants of our commonly used alphabet, a whole world of experience opens up. Words become physical rather than mental. We go though both consonants and vowels to determine how they are made, where they are made, and what kind of resonance they have and exactly what symbol represents which combination.

I need to teach a "baseline" dialect at this point. I have named this dialect "non-regional American dialect" or NRAD. I approach it as a dialect, a possibility of a way of speaking, not as the only correct way to speak. Having studied with Edith Skinner, I have experienced what it is like to have my home dialect drilled out of me. I appreciate and admire the rigor of her teaching, but disagree with the notion that there is only one acceptable mode of speech for the stage. In addition, the sounds of Edith Skinner's "Standard Speech" have become somewhat dated for contemporary actors, and no longer

create a neutral dialect. By shifting a few details to more current usage, I can keep the bulk of Edith's precise work intact, yet allow actors to sound less forced or formal.

Once actors become conversant with the muscles of articulation, the International Phonetic Alphabet, and a non-regional American dialect, it's time to expand the repertoire. We start with some basic dialects: American southern, British Received Pronunciation and Cockney. However, in our study of American southern sounds, we look at regional and class variations within that dialect group. Our study of British incorporates the newly made Estuary sound of England's younger generation on the spectrum moving toward Cockney. We examine not only how the sounds shift, but how the melody, rhythm, placement, and physical habits of the speaker alter the communication. Each student learns a piece of text for each dialect that we study; the experience of acting in a dialect, with spontaneity and tactical variety becomes the goal.

The final unit of speech study is focused on what I call "home dialect." I ask each student to identify a personal source or influence on their own personal original speech pattern, how they spoke before ever starting any theater training. This could be regional: where are you from? It could be cultural: what group does your speech pattern represent? It could be generational: how does this speech pattern identify your age? Or it could be an ancestral: what area or country or part of the world is your family from?

Each student must then analyze her or his own speech pattern. They may record an individual that they know or an individual who speaks this way. They may use film as a source or on-line research. Their presentation to the class must include analysis of sounds as well as all the other aspects of dialect or accent production. They prepare a piece of text in the dialect or accent. This text may be from a dramatic text written in the dialect. It may be from a novel or a film. It may a personal account or an original piece of writing. Each student must also find a catch phrase or kinesthetic trigger sentence to teach to the group. By the end of this unit, everyone is able to speak at least one phrase in every home dialect of the group.

This is a powerful experience for the participants. It honors the sources of their speech. It brings out stories of countries and immigration and family life. It taps into a deep well of pride. It gets everyone listening to the great and joyful variety of sounds surrounding us.

Text messages

Many young actors approach Shakespeare with trepidation. My goal is to help them decode these complex texts one step at a time. I also want them to physically experience the language, turning the study of Shakespeare from an academic endeavor into a physical one. After developing the habits of reading of the play, understanding how a scene or monologue fits into the play, and looking up all unusual words, we begin to study the rhythm of the language. We then examine the poetic sound clusters, followed by a look at the language structure. We next move into the rhetorical conventions that Shakespeare uses. Only when the language and its forms are fully explored do we begin to approach the acting of the text: the given circumstances, the inner life, the action or purpose of speaking.

I believe that Shakespeare's rhythmic choices are a visceral access into the experience of the text. Whether the text is quite regular in its iambic pentameter

structure, or there are variations within the rhythm (trochee, anapest, phyrric or spondee, epic caesura or feminine ending) or line length (trimeter, tetrameter, hexameter, for example) much can be mined from how the pulse of the line changes the actor's tempo. To get students to experience how rhythm can affect the body, we go through a sequence of simple locomotive movements for each variation: a skip for an iamb, a canter for a trochee, step step leap for anapest, stomp stomp for a spondee, etc. We experiment with line length as well: five skips for an iambic pentameter line, four for tetrameter, three for trimeter, etc. Gradually we increase the complexity of the combinations. The question is always, "How does that make you feel?"

The next step for is for each student to create a movement piece using the rhythm of their chosen monologue. The first rule is that there be no literal gestures, no telling of the story of the monologue. The text must be correctly scanned for rhythm. Then the student must learn the rhythm, since the text will not be spoken. Every movement must accurately reflect the scansion with a short and long variation so that the pulse of the language is experienced fully. Ideally, the movement will change direction at the end of every line of poetry. These pieces are then performed for the whole group. By the end of this unit, the students understand several fundamental ideas: how to scan a text accurately, how the relationship of short and long beats creates what Stanislavsky calls inner tempo-rhythm, how Shakespeare's texts vary rhythmically, how understanding the rhythm opens up understanding the action.

We then examine the sound clusters of the text: assonance, alliteration, consonance, onomatopoeia, and rhyme. I also approach these poetic conventions physically using Laban Movement Analysis[iii]. We examine what movement quality relates to which vowel or consonant. Then the students create a piece that is a movement exploration of a line of text using the Laban vocabulary. The next step is to speak the text, keep the vowels and consonants dynamic, yet sounding like normal speech. The written analysis comes last; the students at last get to identify the clusters of sound on paper and name which kind of poetic form they are.

Once the rhythm and sound have been viewed through a physical filter, we then begin an examination of the language structure. I use many kinds of exercises to help students experience the complexity of Shakespeare's sentences. I may have them walk the text, literally turning the corner at each piece of punctuation (a wonderful exercise handed down from Cicely Berry). They may stand up or sit down at each piece of punctuation. Or perhaps take a different physical shape as they progress through the text from image to image. We also go through a piece of text looking at how the grammar actually works.

I continue to explore various conventions of language structure (parallel construction, antithesis, et. al.) as well as other poetic forms (simile, metaphor, irony, etc.) switching from physical to mental approaches. By the time we get to actually acting the text, the students are solidly grounded in the form. As we move into monologues and scenes, the work becomes no longer about how to get the text off the page into the body, but how to connect to oneself and to one's scene partner with honesty and spontaneity.

X-treme Voice

The last piece of vocal training I offer is a unit on how to safely and convincingly use the voice in an extreme manner. Students sometimes are asked to laugh, cry, or keen, to scream, cough, or vomit, or make various animal sounds. My belief is that if one can safely mimic the physical form of extreme vocal use, one's inner life will flow into that form and the audience will believe you. Ideally, the experience of the play itself will support both your inner truth and the audience's experience of that truth.

I only approach this material after students are comfortable with their vocal support. It is also essential that they have a well-placed voice and critical their upper resonances are freely accessible. They must also be familiar with their personal soft palate and back of tongue habits. We go through a slow progression, gradually increasing the extremity of vocal use. I make it clear these are not typical usages, and that they must fully protect themselves when a director asks for too much repetition.

Voice Trek: The Next Generation

When I arrived at the American Repertory Theater in 1997, a voice internship program was already in place. My predecessor, the wonderful Dr. Bonnie Raphael, had created a system where interested voice and speech practitioners could come to work in the voice department for six to eight weeks. This was an unpaid internship. I continued this program for two years. What I began to find, though, was that it took about six weeks for an intern to begin to feel comfortable with all the various constituencies that I interface with daily. One of these interns, Patricia Delorey, now an Associate Professor at Florida State and Head of Voice for the Asolo Theater Company, suggested that we create an M.F.A. in Voice Pedagogy because she wanted to continue to develop and train and felt that her internship was too short. Together we created what has now become a full two and half year training program.

I believe that the only way to learn to teach and coach is to do it! Our program is fundamentally experiential. All students get an introduction to the Stanislavsky system as taught by our Russian colleagues from the Moscow Art Theater School during their first summer. The voice students then take class with me, attend acting classes as a voice coach, and assist faculty teaching either an undergraduate course or a Harvard Extension School course. They also have a number of coaching assignments of increasing complexity. During their second year, voice students also teach a course called "Voice Lab" which is designed to augment the speech classes that the actors take with me. This course continues during their spring residency in Moscow.

My hope is that every graduate of this voice program will take the content that the Institute has offered and give it their own stamp. I see teaching as an art form in itself, one that needs to be fluid and flexible as well as highly creative and intuitive. I'd like this new generation of voice and speech teachers to have a generous global perspective, being sensitive to the cultural sources of their students. I'd like them to open their hearts to the huge responsibility it is to enter into the special space between student and teacher, between actor and coach.

Part III: Notes from the Back of the House

In olden days...

I first began coaching productions at the American Conservatory Theater in the early 1980's. The job seemed quite simple then. I was often in the back of the cavernous Geary Theater taking notes on what I could and could not hear. Sometimes I would give an actor a word pronunciation. The directors that I worked with (Bill Ball, Allen Fletcher, Ed Hastings) were excellent storytellers. They focused on suiting the action to the word, realistic or understandable sets, and consideration of theater acoustics in production design. They all loved language and plumbed the depths of the text. The actors I worked with were either long time company members or conservatory-trained students whose voices were trained to fill a large house with clarity.

Contemporary coaching challenges

Through the years, I have gained in sophistication as theater has radically changed. The biggest shift is that many contemporary directors are interested in new forms of story telling. By this I mean they may want a kind of movement or speaking style that works subliminally on the audience, not directly addressing the story line or action. They may view the text as a vehicle for a larger vision, which may or may not coincide with the author's intent. The challenge for me, then, is to help find a balance between the goal of the director and the needs of the audience.

Many directors are now interested in new ways of using existing stages or using totally new spaces. Often the acoustics of the theater are not taken into consideration when creating the production design. My job then becomes helping the actors to fill the space. This could mean working with resonance or volume, with precision of consonant action, or with clarified text use. Often, the last resort for the director is to ask the theater to provide electronic amplification for the voices, which can open up another set of challenges for me. I then need to help the actors to connect their personal energy into the space, be delicate in their speech, and find the right balance in their placement. Sometimes the amplification brings other ambient sounds to the forefront: shoe heels, rustling, stage surface. Ideally, the sound, set, and costume design team works together to solve these issues.

With all the wonderful technology available in the theater, many directors are interested in giving the audience a multimedia experience. Video projections are showing up in more and more theater productions, sometimes as part of the set, sometimes to view action that is not on stage, sometimes as part of the storytelling itself. The images can be powerful, and can also inhibit the audience's ability to understand the words of the live actor in relation to the video image. My job then becomes to help the actor vocally draw focus when needed.

Crossing the divide

The most exciting coaching experiences for me have been with directors who are interested in the cross-cultural experience. When I first started coaching, productions were typically directed by white men, written by white men (unless it was a play by Lillian Hellman), and were stories about white experiences. My first foray into a cross-cultural theater production was a crash course. I was to be the vocal coach for *Dream on*

Monkey Mountain by Derek Walcott at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis directed by pre-eminent choreographer, Bill T. Jones. It was the winter of 1994. There were two sets of dueling cultures at play. First of all, obviously, the predominantly white Guthrie Theater in the predominantly white city of Minneapolis (including me) was producing a play about the black experience in the Caribbean island of St. Lucia with a company of black actors. Secondly, Bill was bringing not only his sensibilities as a choreographer to the text, but his company of dancers as well.

My first task was to research the specific dialect required for Walcott's text. The play takes place on St. Lucia, an island whose English speech is filtered through the Creole of earlier generations. I was able to locate a Creole specialist in the French Department of the University of Minnesota. Through her I was able to tape a Haitian speaker, study the origins of Creole on St. Lucia, develop a "cheat sheet" for the actors, and create a tape comparing the more common Jamaican dialect with that of St. Lucia. I also researched the translation of Creole phrases, meanings of poetic references, and definitions cultural references in Walcott's text.

Second, I worked closely with Bill to establish the progression of dialect of a character who crosses from the white world of authority to his African-American roots. After establishing this progression, I worked in detail with the actor to develop both dialects.

The company of dancers who came with Bill T. Jones for this production was expected to sing, speak, and chant as well as dance. I needed to give most of them simple exercises to increase their vocal power: breath, articulation, vocal relish, and volume. Singers were hired to record the sound score. Most of them were not in the show, so I taught them the dialect as well as assisted in making the lyrics clear and articulate in the recording studio. I also directed the choral chants, coordinating the actors' voices with each other by use of breath, internal rhythm, listening. We then worked to incorporate the chanting into the drum score.

Once in the theatre during technical rehearsals, I assisted in balancing the voices of the actors with the ever-expanding sound score. As microphones were added for audibility above the drums, dancers feet, and other strong ambient sound effects, I helped to balance resonance, lending an ear for the actors and helping them to find the most effective use of their voices. During the rehearsal process, my constant mandate to myself was to advocate for the text. Whenever possible, I tried to make the poetry of Derek Walcott come alive in dialect, text use, use of vocal technique, use of the space, vocal health, and above all, balance.

Another extraordinary cross-cultural coaching experience was at the A.R.T. The production was called *Snow in June*[iv], the retelling of an ancient Chinese story. Chen Shi-Zheng, a renowned Chinese director who had gained a following after his production *The Peony Pavilion*[v] had been produced in the Unites States, was at the helm. Paul Drescher was the composer. The star of the piece was Xian Yi, a stunning performer whose training and performance at Shanghai Opera had brought her widespread fame in China.

At first, it seemed like my task was to simply help Xian Yi gain a more American sounding accent. She had started learning English quite late. She had great difficulty pronouncing many sounds and we spent hours drilling. But it wasn't only the sounds that were causing her problems. The structure of the contemporary American language in the

text was also confusing to her. She often did not know what word would be important in a sentence, or what syllable should be stressed. We slowly and carefully built the meaning sound by sound, syllable by syllable, word by word.

Xian Yi had begun her Chinese opera training as a very young child. She had been drilled for years and years in the particular vocal production necessary to sing the classical operas that she would be performing in China. This production, however, required a different style of singing. Xian Yi's songs had a slightly pop flavor to them. I was able to help her find a different vocal placement to create the contemporary sound in her songs.

What was most interesting, though, was assisting her with a new approach to acting. Her opera training was completely proscriptive. When one learns the movement and music of a Chinese opera, there is no room for the individual to bring one's own perspective to the work. Every syllable, every turn of the ankle, every note, every glance, is in a finite form with a standard of perfection that the performer strives through years of study to achieve. What was being asked of her now was to act in a spontaneous, individual way, so that the text could be freer. She was not given an exacting form to fill, but needed to learn how to create each moment herself. We had many wonderful discussions of what it meant to be a contemporary American actor. She began to understand that she needed to access her inner life on stage and let that be the impetus for action. She learned how to relate the situations in the play to moments in her own life, so that she could more freely exist and respond to her fellow actors.

During the final twenty minutes of the production, she was allowed to return to her native theatrical form. She performed an achingly beautiful traditional Chinese opera aria and dance that was that culmination of the action of the piece. The subtlety, precision and detail of her performance was breathtaking. And it made me question how we approach performance. Our curiously American celebration of individuality and spontaneity that often derides form might actually suffer in comparison to the crystalline exactness of a virtuoso Asian artist.

Part IV: Conclusion

The essence of the theater, to me, is the vocal expression of the text. Without voice, we have a visual experience, but not the vibration, the sound wave that connects a performance to the heart of the audience. Changes in theater production over the past decades have both celebrated and diminished the power of the voice. When a production works now, it's not because of innovative technological pyrotechnics, it's because the actors can transcend the conceptual challenges and touch us with their personal imprint.

As a voice professional navigating the fluid movement of theater styles, cultural modes, educational tools, and learning patterns, I think often about all the details and methods that are possible inroads into accessing this connective energy. It's quite easy to get lost in the minutia and lose the core meaning of vocal use. But by stepping back to see the progression of my own pathway, I can see how the new challenges posed by new forms only bring me back to the center: a deep desire to help each actor open self to audience and a strong passion for the audience to experience the power of the theater itself.

[i] *American Theater Magazine*, January 2010.

[ii] *Johnny Baseball*, music by Robert Reale, lyrics & story by Willie Real, book & story by Richard Dresser, directed by Diane Paulus for the American Repertory Theater, June/August 2010.

[iii] This approach to movement explores how people use weight (from a spectrum of heavy to light), time (from quick to sustained), and space (direct to indirect). Once familiar with the fundamental vocabulary, combinations of these three elements resulting in eight archetypal physical actions: punch, press, wring, slash, flick, dab, float and glide.

[iv] *Snow in June*, book and lyrics by Charles Mee, music by Paul Drescher, directed by Chen Shi-Zheng at the American Repertory Theater, October/December 2003.

[v] *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu, music by Ye Tang, directed by Chen Shi-Zheng, Lincoln Center Festival, 1999.