THE UTTERANCE OF OUR NAMES: THE PRACTICE AND THE PERSON IN VOCAL WORK

by

Alison Jane Matthews

B.F.A., The University of Victoria, 1991

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Theatre)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

January 2010

© Alison Jane Matthews, 2010
Abstract

The author's intention in undertaking a Master of Fine Arts degree in Theatre was to gain a deeper understanding of vocal training for actors and to investigate the methodologies of a number of master voice teachers. Her program of study undertaken within the Department of Theatre and Film had a voice specialization. The learning framework included graduate courses in directing, assisting Gayle Murphy in voice classes and Neil Freeman in Shakespeare text classes in the Bachelor of Fine Arts Acting program at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and vocal coaching on theatre productions at UBC. The author was a participant and then an associate instructor at Canada's National Voice Intensive led by David Smukler and Judith Koltai. As well as observing Dale Genge's voice class at Langara College's professional theatre training program, Studio 58, she participated in Richard Armstrong's International Voice Workshop at the Banff Centre for the Arts.

From this multi-layered learning experience, the author examined a variety of approaches to vocal and physical practices which increased her understanding of the evolution of voice work. She also reviewed her own early vocal development as well as her experience as a voice teacher and coach, and reflected on her pedagogical practice.

In this thesis the author describes a greater awareness of the critical role the body plays in vocal work and outlines her discovery of the importance of examining the language used by teachers. She found that asking students to articulate their direct, lived experience aided in student development. As well, she reviewed her previous assumption that teachers choose either a prescriptive teaching model or an exploratory one
exclusively, and concluded that there is value in both. Her investigations into the connections between voice and body provide a clearer sense of the breadth of possibility within this work. For the author, this course of study has reinforced the universality of the work: to begin an inquiry into the mysteries of the human voice is to begin to ask ourselves, at the deepest level, who we are.
# Table of Contents

Abstract..................................................................................................................ii
Table of Contents.............................................................................................iv
Acknowledgements...............................................................................................v
Dedication.............................................................................................................vi
Introduction.........................................................................................................1
Vocal Beginnings.................................................................................................2
Approaches to Voice...........................................................................................6
Learning..............................................................................................................23
Voice and the Person..........................................................................................31
Bibliography.......................................................................................................35
Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge and thank Dale Genge, for starting me on this path.

My deep thanks go to Gayle Murphy for pushing me to think harder, keep working, and write to the best of my abilities.

As well, I thank Stephen Heatley Stephen Malloy, and everyone in the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of British Columbia, for taking on this experiment.

Special thanks are owed to my family, for their endless patience and support.
**Dedication**

To my mother and father, for their endless support and love, and for always reminding me: “I’ve got ten little fingers, and ten little toes...”
The Utterance of Our Names: the Practice and the Person in Vocal Work

Introduction

My intention in undertaking a Master of Fine Arts degree in Theatre was to gain a deeper understanding of vocal training for actors and to investigate the methodologies of a number of master voice teachers. My program of study within the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of British Columbia (UBC) had a voice specialization. The learning framework included graduate courses in directing, assisting teachers in voice and text classes, vocal coaching on theatre productions at UBC, and taking part in the five-week National Voice Intensive first as a participant and later as an associate instructor. As well as observing voice instruction at Langara College's professional theatre training program, Studio 58, and in the BFA Acting program at UBC, I participated in Richard Armstrong’s International Voice Workshop at the Banff Centre for the Arts.

From this multi-layered learning experience, I have had the opportunity to learn about a variety of teaching approaches and to increase my understanding of the lineage of voice work. As part of my studies, I reviewed my early vocal development as well as my experience as a voice teacher and coach, and reflected on my pedagogical practice. I have gained a greater awareness of the connections between voice, body and mind, as well as a clearer sense of the breadth of possibility within this work.
**Vocal Beginnings**

According to my mother, my career in voice work was predicted by her music teacher and family friend, Nancy Paisley Benn, who, when I was presented to her as a howling infant, pronounced, “She has a good strong voice. She may become a singer. Get her some vocal training.”

Unfortunately, I have no memories of this legendary teacher, Nancy Benn, but I do have plenty of stories. My mother and her brothers, like all of Mrs. Benn’s pupils, were made to sing with their mouths full of marbles, or sing with a lit candle close to their mouths. The trick was to enunciate clearly, even with the mouth full of marbles, and to have such breath control that the candle flame would not flicker. If they did not perform well at these tasks, Mrs. Benn would threaten to “flush you down the tillie,” or “chop off your head and put a cabbage on in its place.” I have not used any of these techniques in my own voice classes, yet I have been impressed with stories about how Mrs. Benn inspired her students with a love of music and a belief in the power of the human voice.

Growing up, I did indeed take singing lessons -- from a Scottish woman who was a classically trained, professional opera singer in Edinburgh. She, too, was a larger-than-life figure, four feet ten inches tall and as wide as she was high, with a huge soprano

---

1 Nancy Paisley Benn (1894 – 1972) was a teacher and conductor...She studied and taught piano and voice in England before coming to Canada ca 1920...In Vancouver...it was chiefly in the vocal field that she made her name...She was an adjudicator (vocal and instrumental) at competitions throughout British Columbia and was a founding member of the BCRMTA... *Canadian Encyclopedia: Encyclopedia of Music in Canada.* 10 June 2009. [http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=HomePage&Params=A1](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=HomePage&Params=A1)
voice. She was a wonderful teacher, and the first to convey to me the idea that breath and sound come from, and are supported by, the centre of the body; she would put her fist against my stomach as I sang high notes.

Though I come from a family of talkers, I was mostly quite quiet as a child, and was happy to play by myself. I enjoyed word play and creating rhymes. When I was about four or five years old, I had little chants like, “Alla-reeta, alla-reeta, alla-reeta, alla — reeeeeeetaaaaaaaaa” and “a unicorn horn, a unicorn horn...” that I would repeat over and over again, laughing and laughing. A few years later, I started making up my own languages. It is, of course, quite common for children to enjoy rhyming sounds and rhythmic patterns — we have only to look at the success of Dr. Seuss or the prevalence of alphabet rhyming songs for evidence. However, there may be more to it than simple enjoyment. The poet P.K. Page says, “I suspect that metre is a brain-altering drug – one we ignore at our peril. Just consider what we know, but take for granted: that iambic is the lub-dub of the heart, and iambic pentameter that lub-dub repeated five times – roughly the number of heartbeats to a breath. It is difficult for me to believe this is accidental.”² If metre is so ingrained in us, if poetry is, in fact, the heartbeat and the pulse of the human body, then the study of sound, rhythm, and sense must be the most natural and vital pursuit in the world. It has been so for me, and I am certain it will remain my ongoing investigation.

Even when I was quite young, I was intrigued by the sound of the human voice. I sensed that my voice was lower-pitched than the voices of other girls my age, and was very concerned about being mistaken for a boy. To avoid such a humiliation, I wore dresses most of the time. As I got older, I tried to use the higher end of my range to sound

girlish – a trademark of the feminine ideal, as I perceived it. Whether my influences were
cultural or media-driven, I'm not sure; but they were pervasive and irrational. I certainly
had no rational reason to want to change the way I sounded; my voice is very similar to
my mother's, and for me, the sound of her voice is the sound of wisdom, honesty and
experience. "Her voice was ever soft and low, an excellent thing in a woman," King Lear
says about Cordelia in Shakespeare's *Tragedy of King Lear*, and the audience
understands that he has recognized the authenticity of his daughter's voice.

Years later, when I was getting to know my first serious boyfriend, he asked me
to say something to his friends because he wanted them to hear my voice, which he
thought was beautiful. I felt nervous because I liked him so much and was eager to be
accepted by his friends, so I spoke in a small, high, "cute" voice -- hoping to sound more
feminine and appealing; not believing that it was actually my naturally low voice that he
was hoping to hear.

Gradually I grew more confident in my speaking abilities through four years of
actor training in the theatre program at the University of Victoria, and I felt the
effectiveness of my voice on stage. I attended voice classes three times a week, and my
instructor, Linda Hardy, introduced me to the techniques of prominent voice teachers
such as Kristin Linklater, Arthur Lessac, and Cicely Berry. One particular assignment
has stayed with me as a vital learning experience. I was assigned Juliet's famous speech

---

4 Linda Hardy, B.A. (Brock) M.A. (University of Toronto) teaches acting and directing in the theatre
department at the University of Victoria. She received her professional training at The Goodman School of
Drama and The Art Institute of Chicago. She specializes in acting, voice, speech, and directing...
from *Romeo & Juliet* to perform: “Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds...”

I struggled with it, unable to speak the text honestly, until finally I imagined myself in the world of a young woman who is waiting for the arrival of the young man she is in love with -- the man with whom she has chosen to lose her virginity. This revealed the character’s emotional state to me in a way which I could express through my body; and by committing to physical actions, my speaking of the text was enlivened. Activating my body and imagination with the text was the key. My teacher was thrilled, and I began to trust the clear, natural sound that I had found.

After graduating from university and beginning my professional career, I found my voice was an asset in my acting and voice-over work. I didn’t have to struggle to be heard in theatres or other large performance spaces including school gymnasiums, the usual venue for youth theatre tours. In film and television, I have frequently been cast in authoritative roles such as doctors, lawyers and scientists, thanks in part to the sound of my voice. Through the experience of performing, I developed an ear for the subtle vocal shifts that occur in response to the varying demands of the space, the context, and the audience relationship.

---

Approaches to Voice

Toronto Royal Conservatory of Music, Speech Arts & Drama

About ten years ago I began teaching the curriculum of Toronto’s Royal Conservatory of Music’s (RCM) Speech Arts and Drama discipline. Students in these programs learn about posture and alignment of the body, breath awareness, articulation, vocal expressiveness, and voice “projection” (how to speak loudly and clearly enough to be heard in a large performance space). Analysis and presentation of poetry, prose and dramatic texts are supported by private lessons and mentoring from trained teachers. The program is, first and foremost, performance-oriented; students take a series of graded examinations in which they perform a repertoire of dramatic monologues, poetry and prose selections, extemporaneous studies (such as mime, storytelling, and improvisation), and technical tests (sight reading, and ear tests to recognize rhythms and phonetic sounds). RCM vocal production training includes such elements as a specific prescription for appropriate posture for performance, a technical description of the role of the diaphragm in breathing, and a concrete definition of articulation. There is also a strong academic and theoretical base to these studies: co-requisite written exams are conducted in Speech Arts Theory (speech production, prosody, phonetics, oral interpretation and presentation skills) and Speech Arts History and Literature. Texts such as Laurence Perrine’s *Sound and Sense: an Introduction to Poetry* introduce metaphor, figurative language, rhythm, and meter.

---

The Royal Conservatory of Music\textsuperscript{10} is an independent educational institution, originally offering training and examinations in several music disciplines, and later adding speech arts & drama instruction and assessment. Founded in 1886, the RCM was affiliated with the University of Toronto in 1896. In the beginning, instruction was offered in elocution, foreign languages, and vocal anatomy and hygiene along with the music disciplines. Over the following century, the conservatory established its national prominence through the reputation of its faculty.

This curriculum is designed to build the confidence of and support the artistic development of the students. Tremendous focus is placed on the appreciation of literature, words, and ideas, and students gain experience in public speaking and performance through participation in recitals and at speech and drama festivals.

When I studied and taught this curriculum, I would have described the training as prescriptive in its approach. There were set standards for performing exercises correctly, and assessment by teachers and examiners was usually based on external evidence. It was my perception that, in my graduate studies, I would move to an exploration-based approach to voice training.

Gayle Murphy

During my time assisting in Gayle Murphy’s\textsuperscript{11} Beginning Year voice class in the BFA in Acting program at UBC, I was reminded of how much training takes place before ...


\textsuperscript{11} Gayle Murphy, B.F.A. (Calgary), M.F.A. (York) teaches voice and speech in the BFA Acting Program. She has acted professionally in Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto and Edinburgh and has taught voice and speech at the Vancouver Playhouse Acting School, Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary
arriving at words or speech. The voice is part of the body, so attending to the body and the physical processes connected to the voice and to speaking is an essential first step.

Gayle initially trained with David Smukler and Lloy Coutts at York University and then later studied with Richard Armstrong, Andrew Wade, Dale Genge, Neil Freeman, and David MacMurray Smith. Her teaching is greatly influenced by Judith Arts, Studio 58 and the Canadian National Voice Intensive...Theatre at UBC. 15 January 2010. 
http://www.theatre.ubc.ca/faculty.shtml

David Smukler is the Director of the Voice Intensive. He is on the faculty of the Department of Theatre at York University where he supervises the MFA Voice Teacher Diploma...One of the country's most outstanding teachers of voice and text...he was Director of Voice at the Stratford Festival for many years. After his actor training with Edith Skinner & Kathleen Stafford, he was one of the first teachers trained by Kristin Linklater.


Lloy Coutts (1941 - 2008)...was a teacher, coach and director. Accepted to the premier class (1963) of the National Theater School, Lloy went on to finish her studies at New York University. She was a founding member of the Playhouse Acting School...Lloy worked at the Stratford Festival from 1970-81 as the voice coach...Lloy was considered one of the premier voice coaches in Canada for many decades.


Richard Armstrong...has been the extended vocal specialist for music theatre and opera programs at The Banff Centre since 1985...He is associate professor of drama for New York University's Experimental Theater Wing at the Tisch School of the Arts and its international summer school in Amsterdam.


Andrew Wade was Head of Voice at the Royal Shakespeare Company from 1990 to 2003. He joined the Company in 1987 as Assistant Voice Director to Cicely Berry...Andrew trained at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama from 1973 to 1976...From 1993 to 1997 he was External Examiner for the Postgraduate Diploma in Voice Studies and MA in Voice Studies at the Central School of Speech and Drama.


Dale Genge is Head of Voice at Studio 58, where she has taught since 1982...She is a founding faculty member of the Canadian National Voice Intensive...Dale studied Linklater voice work and received her certification as a Laban Movement Analyst in New York City. She spent two seasons as a vocal coach at the Stratford Festival under David Smukler and Patsy Rodenberg...In 2007 she completed the Leadership Training Program with Jungian Analyst, Marion Woodman, and now teaches with Ms. Woodman internationally.


Neil Freeman, M.A. (Nottingham), was trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. His awards include the John Gielgud Scholarship and USA National Endowment of the Arts Major Artist's Fellowship...He worked with the Will Geer Theatre, British American Drama Academy, The National Theatre School, The Centre for Actors Study, the National Voice Intensive and the Stratford Festival.


David MacMurray Smith, B.A., is an independent educator who has developed his own body-centered approach to the creative development of human performance and communication. He was Head Instructor at the Vancouver Playhouse Theater School, Movement Director for the Music Theater and Opera Programs at the Banff Center for the Arts, has taught at several universities and private training institutions,
Koltai’s Embodied Practice; the principles and practices of the physical disciplines of Embodied Practice are integral to her approach to voice.

In Gayle’s classes, students performed subtle movements to find mobility in the spine, pelvis and skull hinge. In some classes they moved through space with a fluid quality to develop a sense of physical ease and to discover a sense of interrelatedness between all parts of the body. In another class, a thorough investigation of the feet offered the opportunity to realize that the feet have an effect on the alignment of the entire body.

Based on practices developed by David MacMurray Smith, Gayle began breath and body awareness with the use of an exercise ball; the group stood in a circle and the ball was thrown from one person to another in a specific way. Gayle asked the students to receive the weight of the ball, and to let the weight of the ball drop through the pelvis and into the feet. The ball became a metaphor for breath, and the students were asked to notice their breath response in relationship to the passing of the ball and to each other. Afterwards, she asked them to articulate what they discovered.

Gayle’s foundational work with students encourages them to look for the potential of mobility and ease in the body, and responsiveness of the breath and the voice. The

---


19 Judith Koltai grew up in Hungary during the years of war and occupation. She has lived in Canada since 1964 and is a citizen of Canada, Sweden and the European Union. She holds a Master's Degree in Counselling Psychology and the "Diplome Techniques Corporelles Thérèse Bertherat". She is a member of the Academy of Registered Dance/Movement Therapists. For over 30 years, she has pioneered her unique approach to body movement practices in psychotherapy, physical rehabilitation, education and the performing arts...She is the founder of "Master classes in Embodied Practice" a training program for professionals and advanced students...


20 Embodied Practice, the trade-marked name for Judith Koltai’s work, recognizes all aspects of the human organism as a conscious unified whole. The practice is comprised of the physical disciplines of Syntonics and Authentic Movement.

Murphy, Gayle. “Re: Embodied Practice”. Email to Alison Matthews. 19 January 2010.
physical investigations develop through to sounding, and to the speaking of a word or a phrase; students learn that the body and the voice are not separate from each other.

Students sometimes have preconceived ideas about desirable behaviour for voice classes, and may suppress their physical impulses in an attempt to “be grounded”. Gayle encourages her students to recognize and guide their kinesthetic impulses and rhythms into vocal and physical form. She believes that the key to liberating one’s voice is to become conscious of habitual patterns and unnecessary tensions, and then to recover the responsiveness of one’s whole being. Her guiding principle is succinctly articulated by her teacher and colleague Judith Koltai: "The purpose of physical/vocal practice is not correction or the achievement of a static ideal state but rather the recovery of the dynamic ability of the organism to appropriately and continually respond, adapt and re-create itself under ever-changing circumstances and conditions.”

Dale Genge

I witnessed Dale Genge’s voice classes at Studio 58, Langara College. Dale has trained with several different teachers, including David Smukler, Richard Armstrong, Patsy Rodenburg, Ann Skinner, and her work is also deeply influenced by the work of Kristin Linklater, Andrew Wade, Judith Koltai, and Neil Freeman. Dale is on the faculty of the Marion Woodman Foundation; she is particularly interested in how actors understand metaphor, and she brings this aspect of Woodman’s work (which has its roots in

---

23 Ann Skinner is a former Head of Voice at Canada's Stratford Shakespearean Festival and the National Theatre School of Canada...
in Carl Jung’s study of the psyche) into the study of Shakespearean text. Along with metaphor, Dale works with poetry and imagination, and focuses on both linguistic and non-linguistic learning and experience. In recent years, she has explored anatomy through imagination and sound. “I have always been fascinated with the place between breath and voice, the un-manifest into the manifest. It has always been a curiosity to me, where sound is born,” she says.

I was struck by the vibrant images Dale uses in her classes to help the students visualize the work. In sessions where the focus was body awareness, Dale sometimes referred to the sensation of the wood floor beneath the students’ bodies; or she might encourage students to imagine hydrating their joints.

On one occasion, students improvised an exploration of sounds through a group “gossiping” scenario. The improvisation was conducted only with sounds, but the students drew the connection to text work: one student said excitedly that she heard how she could speak her text with greater range.

Dale engages the imaginations of her students, encouraging them to respond physically and vocally to different scenarios, and to allow their responses to become instinctual, or even primal. In a class I witnessed, she guided students in their warm-up by encouraging them to release sounds on groans, whines, squeaks and squeals. As they lay on the floor, she offered them the idea of breaking up the density in their bodies; then she invited them to move as if their bodies were water.

James Hillman would agree with this idea of a vocal connection to the primal. As he says in “Culture and the Animal Soul”:

---

25 Genge, Dale. “Re: Your work”. Email to Alison Matthews. 4 October 2009.
By means of speech we enact what animals do in behaviour. With speech we warn, claim territory, challenge and destroy. With speech we court and seduce a mate, and by means of speech we instruct our offspring and organize our group disciplines...Like tigers losing their stripes, like beached whales and blind eagles are we without our rhetoric...  

Richard Armstrong

Both Gayle Murphy and Dale Genge have studied with Richard Armstrong, a voice teacher and founding member of the Roy Hart Theatre. This company, founded in Europe in the 1960's, and led by the actor Roy Hart, developed an approach to vocal performance (sometimes called “the extended voice” or “the whole voice”) which had its origins in the work of German voice teacher, Alfred Wolfsohn. Wolfsohn had been a soldier in Germany in World War I, and his experiences in the trenches traumatized him deeply. Rehabilitation from this trauma involved a deep and intricate psychological exploration of the human voice, all of it self-directed. Wolfsohn was interested in the theories Carl Jung was developing at the time, and he felt that the unconscious was linked to the conscious voice. With his private singing students in a small music studio in London in the 1940's and '50's, he pioneered a new kind of singing – one which involved exploring Jung's “animus” and “anima” concepts through voice.  

I participated in one of Richard Armstrong’s workshops at the Banff Centre for the Arts. In my brief introduction to Richard’s approach to working with the “whole

---


voice,” I rediscovered the vital elements of passion and imagination in acting and singing. Richard invited us to have a secret smile as we sang, and to sing while imagining mouths on our eyelids. As I turned my attention to my eyes, I felt my face change and heard a brighter sound in my voice. Our work throughout the course was strongly based in the body; as Richard says, "Voice is body. Body is voice. It's as simple and as complicated as that." Richard encouraged a group state of being; when one person was singing or sounding, everyone else mirrored the movements silently, working with the breath. My body was fully engaged; I never felt a separation between my body and voice. Explorations were usually performed in partners or groups; we were always in relationship with each other. In discussions Richard often urged us to move in closer; with less distance between us, I felt freer and more comfortable in the discussions and the work.

Richard talked about the importance of giving the voice a lot of breath; he described the breath as being like oil, helping the voice to slide right down through the body. We were taught a breathing sequence which encouraged the body and breath to coordinate organically. The breath “moves” the body, and the body physically reflects the flow of the breath. Later, there were other breathing explorations, such as the ‘point d’inspiration’, in which we began by standing on a small ‘x’ mark on the floor, then used the inspiration of our breath to launch ourselves on a journey through the space as we released the breath. We returned ‘home’ to the mark to receive another breath.

Playing a note on the piano, Richard invited us to sing “violin”, and as I sang I felt a buzzing through my head. On the same note we then sang “viola” and I felt the

buzzing move into another part of my body. I realized that the note was finding a
different resonance. We were then invited to explore different characters. First Richard
offered the image of an elf with pointed ears, pointed hats and shoes, who also has a
pointed sound. I felt a strong buzzing in my nose as I sang the note; the sound was sharp,
and I had a strong urge to point my fingers. The next character was a female opera singer,
a diva, and Richard offered the word “poitrine” and suggested that she loved her
audience. This time I felt the vibrations lower, through my throat and collarbone, and the
quality of my sound changed from the pointy elf into something warmer and rounder.
Richard described another character, an English Duchess who was indignant and
commanding, and the sound buzzed lower in my torso. I felt my attention shift to the
bottom of my ribcage. Lower still, we explored the vibrations through a thuggish ‘sumo
wrestler’ character, and I bent my knees and felt the weight of my abdomen and pelvis.
While singing on one note, my voice moved through my body. It was a revelation for me
to experience this: the fact that there is a range of resonance as well as a range of notes
from low to high, and one note can move through many resonators.

In Richard Armstrong’s workshop I experienced a culture of generosity. In such
an atmosphere of trust, I developed close ties with the other participants. This came from
the shared experience, from Richard’s generosity as a teacher, and, I believe, from the
bond of shared sound itself.

Neil Freeman

Eventually actors take sounds and shape them into words. But with the wide range
of possible human sound, one wonders what kinds of words or texts will have the potency
to provide an exciting match. Through brilliant rhetorical speeches, passionate
soliloquies, and heightened poetic language, the sophisticated wordplay of Shakespeare
stretches modern speakers beyond their usual modes of communication.

Neil Freeman is a renowned Shakespeare scholar and acting teacher, and his
actor-friendly approach to text analysis is used by theatre companies around the
continent. He began the work for which he is now famous after completing a rhythmic
analysis of all of Shakespeare’s plays. A colleague, Norman Welsh, then suggested that
he look at the First Folio. “From there”, Neil says, “it all stemmed from my own research
and amazement at what the First Folio was offering theatrically, coupled with a growing
dissatisfaction (theatrically, not intellectually) with what any modern text, no matter how
well edited, was offering in well-intentioned revamped versions.” He took his ideas to
Shakespeare & Co. in Lenox, Massachusetts where he applied them to the rehearsal
process and, as a result of his work, was appointed one of their master teachers.

Neil is also a trained voice teacher, and while assisting in his Acting Shakespeare
class at UBC, I learned that physical awareness is an important foundation for working
with these rich, intricate texts. His class included “table work”, examining folio and
modern editions of Shakespeare’s texts for changes in punctuation, spellings, line
structure, etc. However, time was predominantly spent “on your feet” in group and
individual exercises, speaking the text and discovering the motivations of the characters.
Students explored the possibilities offered by different text editions to find the most
intriguing interpretation.

29 Norman Welsh is a RADA trained actor; member of the pre-curser to the National Theatre of Great
Britain, the Old Vic Theatre (London); Associate Professor of Voice and Acting, York University (Toronto,
Canada) and UCLA (Los Angeles, USA).
30 Freeman, Neil. “Re: Question about your work.” Email to Alison Matthews. 23 September 2009.
Neil dedicated time at the start of each class for the students to warm up. As they prepared their voices and bodies for text work, he moved around the room, guiding and assisting them as they worked, reminding them to allow the breath to drop into their bodies. He talked to the students about the body brain and the brain brain; his work emphasizes physical awareness and a sense of how the body “speaks.” One of his integral exercises, called “the four centres,” began with an exploration of the feet. He asked the students to walk around the room and imagine the audience being at the level of their feet. He encouraged them to show off their feet, to feel the power of their feet. Next was the pelvis; to help move the focus from the feet into the pelvis, he described a “circle breath” – as though the breath was flowing down one leg, into the floor, and up through the other leg. Neil suggested that this centre is the seat of power, and that it holds the sexual drive. Students made internal shifts as they felt the differences in their bodies and in their relationship to the audience. With the next centre, the heart, the goal was to keep alive a sense of awareness of the feet and the pelvis while focusing on the heart and continuing to sense the audience. With eyes closed, students imagined holding their hearts in their hands and offering them to the audience. Finally, they moved to the head centre, which Neil described as the mischief centre. This was an opportunity to explore a playful, “knowingness” in relation to the audience.

Neil encouraged students to integrate the “four centres’” work into their text work – to try speaking a few lines of text with one of these centres activated. One of the students experimented with a speech of Proteus from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: “To love fair Sylvia, shall I be forsworn”\(^\text{31}\). By having his feet “talk” out the argument, the pros and cons of the character’s dilemma were immediately brought into broad relief and

---

the revelation of Proteus’ struggle with his conscience became clear. It was remarkable
to see how his performance of the speech was enlivened.

The idea of the senses and the intellect working together was reinforced
throughout Neil’s classes. It began with his insistence on a warm-up at the start of each
class, and underscored all of the work that followed. He gave the students the image of an
emotional volcano building up inside them, and then encouraged them to physically
contain the emotions through the speaking of the words. As well, he asked students to
picture themselves as their own scene partners – to keep the text active by imagining that
they are talking to another self, like a twin. Throughout, they were urged to share their
character’s thoughts, feelings and words with the audience, as opposed to talking “at”
them.

What was clear from Neil’s class is that body and breath awareness and physical
vitality are crucial to the text work. Vitality of the senses combined with discipline of the
mind is necessary to embody the vibrancy of Shakespeare’s language.

**Canada’s National Voice Intensive**

My recent studies have culminated in my training, both as a participant and an
associate instructor, at Canada’s National Voice Intensive -- a five-week course which
takes place once a year at UBC. It offers the opportunity for professional and student
actors, singers and teachers to immerse themselves in the study, training, and
development of their voices and the practical study of Shakespearean text. Led by David
Smukler, Judith Koltai, and an assembly of prominent voice and speech teachers and
theatre practitioners from around North America (including Gayle Murphy and Dale
Genge), the Intensive spans the basics of a three-year curriculum in five weeks. Participants embark on a physical, intellectual, imaginative, and, often, emotional exploration which I believe resonates through every aspect of their lives. This unique immersion in voice training offers performers a physical and vocal practice as well as an opportunity to be mentored by a number of teachers who work as a pedagogical team.

In David Smukler’s vocal practice sessions, participants are offered a progression of exercises for preparing the body and the voice for performance. David was one of the first voice teachers to be trained by Kristin Linklater in the 1970’s. Linklater came to North America after assisting Iris Warren at the London Academy of Dramatic Arts in England. “Linklater’s work begins with the proposition that each of us has a beautifully functioning, natural voice with which many of us interfere (because of insidious tension and habitual inhibition) as we attempt to communicate our thoughts and feelings. Her approach, as best described in her book, Freeing the Natural Voice, involves a process of freeing the vocal channel from habitual physical and psychological impediments which may prevent the voice from emerging in its most expressive, unadulterated form.”

David Smukler has, in turn, adapted this work through the years as his own philosophy has developed. On one level David’s approach is a profound investigation of one’s body and mind; it is also a rigorous actor preparation series which he insists must be practiced regularly.

The warm-up begins with physical grounding, and the image of a brightly coloured dot at the back of the heels; students then imagine drawing a line from the dot around the outside of the feet. The next steps focus on opening the rib cage, sensitizing

---

the spine and the sacrum; attention is given to the awareness of breath and sound, to vibrations and resonance in the body, and then to articulation. I wanted to know the rationale for the progression, the reason for practicing the elements in a particular order. Why do we turn our attention to the back ribs before turning our attention to the articulators? After experiencing the work, I now believe that the progression is both logical and intuitive; we practice the warm-up progression in this way because it supports the manner in which breath and sound move through the body. If our concern is the healthy functioning of the voice, then it is productive to reflect and reinforce the body’s natural process of breathing, of creating and amplifying the vibrations of sound, and of shaping these sounds into speech. There is little logic in preparing the articulators for words before we have allowed ourselves breath to speak.

Breath release is vital in David’s work. In his vocal practice sessions, I again experienced the value of working with images. David asked us, in one instance, to lie on our backs on the floor and imagine our breath dropping down into the pelvis and the groin. In anatomical terms, of course, the breath goes into the lungs and not the pelvis. However, seeing an image of my breath falling deeper into my body helped me to undo tension in the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles I sometimes contract while breathing. With this greater relaxation, my diaphragm moved more freely and fully, and my breathing felt deeper and easier.

The rigor of David’s sessions is matched by Judith Koltai’s physical practice sessions. Judith’s Embodied Practice is learned through the physical disciplines of Authentic Movement and Syntonics.

The specific aim of Syntonics is the elimination of unconscious and dysfunctional muscular and movement
habits, so a harmonious balance between tonus and action in the skeletal muscle is rediscovered. The purpose is not the correction or achievement of a static ideal state. It is rather the recovery of the dynamic ability to respond and adapt in a functional way. The practical tools of Syntonics are the preliminaries – small, precise, repeated actions that invite a new vocabulary and rigorous attentiveness to sensory and kinaesthetic sensation. These movements invite normalization of the tone, function and interaction between the skeletomuscular ‘chains” as discovered by French physiotherapist Francoise Mezieres... One underlying practical methodology...of Syntonics is Anti-Gymnastique as developed by... Therese Bertherat. Judith has also studied Sensory Awareness with the late Charlotte Selver. Syntonics, anatomically and technically based on the work of Mezieres, synthesizes the two methodologies of Anti-Gymnastique and Sensory Awareness.33

While participating in Judith's classes, and in reading The Body Has Its Reasons34 by Bertherat who was a student of Mezieres, I was struck by the information about ‘skeletomuscular chains’. As Bertherat says, “By making any one posterior muscle longer, you provoke the shortening of the ensemble of the posterior muscles, which behave as though they were a single muscle stretching from the skull to the bottom of the feet.”35 Muscular contraction has a critical effect on breathing; Bertherat explains that the breath will be “...blocked by the shortening of the posterior muscles. The only way to treat a breathing inadequacy is, therefore, to make these muscles supple.”36 After Syntonics sessions, I experienced more ease in the muscles of my back and in my breath.

For her work with participants at the Voice Intensive, Judith has developed a physical practice called “proprioceptive practice” from the discipline of Authentic Movement.

The practice now called Authentic Movement was originated in the 1950's by dancer and choreographer Mary Starks Whitehouse from her studies in modern dance as well as the psychology of creativity as proposed by Carl Jung. Authentic Movement invites and teaches the ability to listen to and to follow internal cues from the body into vocal and physical gesture.\textsuperscript{37}

In the proprioceptive practice sessions, I was invited to close my eyes and follow my physical and vocal impulses. Physical sensation is the source for images in this practice; my imagination was activated by what I did and how I moved. In one session, I crouched low, and as I turned my head slowly from side to side, I began to imagine I was an animal. The action came first, and it evoked an image. I moved as if I was hiding in a den, prowling through a forest, and watching and waiting for other animals. The physical sensation continued to be the source; I returned to the impulses in my body to find the next image.

The practice demands that students speak directly of their lived physical experiences, in the first person, and in the present tense: “I jump” or “I move my arm”, for example. When we spoke our experiences, I recalled the images and thought of words to describe them; but as I listened to Judith’s responses to other participants, I realized that I had to find different words to describe my experience. Judith guides the speaker to

speak specifically of his or her physical actions and to distinguish between direct
experience and projection, interpretation, or judgment. I particularly appreciated the way
in which she strongly discouraged participants from using unnecessary words that have
no meaning, such as “kind of,” “like,” or “sort of.” Rather than saying, “I felt like an
animal pacing through the forest,” I said “I crouch down...I crawl on all fours...I turn my
head from side to side.” I found it challenging and also enlightening; simply stating what
I had done in the present tense brought back the sensation of the moving with a precision
that was new for me. Recalling my experience in this way enlivened my speaking; by
using the first person present tense, the sensory experience was reactivated in my body.
The nerves and the senses house the memory, so the experience is repeatable.

The faculty of the Voice Intensive has been refining its curriculum for the past
twenty-four years in order to create conditions in which artists can flourish. In attempting
to describe what I have learned from David Smukler, I recently used the phrase “moving
from the core outward.” Eric Partridge proposes that the etymology of the word "core" is
probably from the Latin cor, meaning "heart," and that it is also connected with the word
"courage.” The Voice Intensive sets the stage for artists to begin to get to the heart of
things and also to find the courage to explore further. Like the seeds for future growth at
the core of a fruit, the exploration which begins at the Voice Intensive continues and
develops after the course has finished.

---

Learning

While I have learned a great deal throughout my graduate studies, it is my study of the body and its relationship to the voice which has had the most profound effect on my approach to teaching. Before I began these studies, I knew that the diaphragm was the large muscle that bisects the torso, and that it had an important function in breathing and speaking. In my previous training, I studied the human skeleton primarily from a static standing position, with the emphasis on symmetry and balance. I understood that unnecessary tension was to be avoided since it was unproductive for speech, and that the standing posture of a performer should be balanced and the body ready to respond to the demands of his or her text. However, I was focusing mainly on the front of the body. I now have a much greater appreciation for the back of the body and the essential role of the spine and back ribs in breathing and speaking. I have known for some time that part of the process of breathing is the expansion of the thoracic cavity in front and from side to side, but I had not realized that as the diaphragm contracts downwards and as the ribcage expands, there is also considerable movement in the back ribs. Mobility in the joints of the back ribs and spine is vital to breathing. As Mabel Todd says in The Thinking Body:

To maintain the symmetry of the thoracic wall in the deepening of its cavity, incident to breathing, the spaces between the ribs in the back must increase to equal the increase of the spaces between the ribs in front of the thoracic cage. As by far the greater number of lung sacs lie behind the plane of the front border of the spine, a free action of skeletal parts in this region is necessary for balanced breathing.39

When the back ribs and the diaphragm move without restriction, breathing and speaking are supported by the body’s physiology.

In my own performance experiences I have felt the effects of restricted breath from contraction in the muscles of my back. When I participated in the Voice Intensive, I was assigned a highly emotional speech from King Lear. In my efforts to convey the depth of the character’s passion, I leaned my upper body forward, lifted my chin and extended my neck in an attempt to send my voice out to my scene partner. The result was strain rather than passion, and I did not feel I had communicated the character’s need. In fact, by bending forward and taking my body out of alignment, I was inhibiting the movement of my back ribs and diaphragm, and consequently preventing my breath from fully dropping into my body. As Todd explains:

> When we are holding our chests up with the back of the neck the whole body suffers. The shoulders are held back so that their free movements are checked, as are those of the arms. The function of the respiratory system is interfered with by limitation of the diaphragm; and because the lumbar spine, in an effort to compensate for the unbalanced load at the top, is curved more deeply forward and the sacrum inclined more acutely, the balanced action of the deep body-wall muscles of the back, abdomen and pelvis is greatly hampered.40

I was limiting my breath capacity and vocal range, and David Smukler pointed out that I appeared to be working only from the chest and above. Under his guidance, I moved into a more balanced alignment; I then found that I had more vocal range and a deeper emotional connection to the speech as well.

---

This experience has been valuable for my teaching and coaching work with student and professional actors. In my coaching work on a production at UBC, I noticed that one of the student actors, who was playing a powerful character, appeared to be lifting his heels off the ground as he delivered his speech. I noticed that he was pushing his upper body forward, which seemed to be causing his heels to lift. I pointed out to him that if he stood firmly on his feet and aligned his shoulders over his hips, as opposed to reaching his upper body forward, he would appear more confident. With this suggestion, he found a physical ease for the character and flexibility in his voice.

I worked with a professional actor confronting the same issue in performance; he was struggling with vocal strain, especially at the climax of the play. His intention was to convey defiance. He was pitching his body forward from the waist and lifting his chin, creating contraction in the muscles of his neck and back, thereby immobilizing his back ribs and limiting his breath. To help him find the physicality of defiance, I offered him the image of wearing cowboy boots with heavy metal spurs and he brought his weight back over his heels. I then suggested that the character demands that people come to him – he does not reach out to them; with this suggestion, he eased his upper body back over his lower body, his spine became more aligned and his breath response occurred more freely.

I now recognize that all voice practice must start with the body; this has greatly changed my perspective and my approach. I have gained a better understanding of the principles of physical work, and this has strengthened my teaching and my coaching.

In coaching student productions of The Trojan Women, Electra, and Medea at UBC, I combined approaches from my conservatory training with my graduate studies.
I believe in working with actors on the literal meaning of the words, and identifying key words to make the meaning clear in the speaking of the text; the importance of this work was underscored for me in my coaching sessions. Young actors often find the language styles of Shakespeare or Greek dramas unfamiliar, unnatural and difficult to speak. I see a continuing need to focus on techniques which help actors be clearly heard and understood by audiences. It is essential that the actor clearly communicate what he or she is saying with a sense of spontaneity. In my work on Medea, I helped the cast members clarify the meaning of specific words in their texts and discover how the characters’ thoughts progress. Neil Freeman emphasizes the importance of finding the character’s argument or debate, and from this idea, I suggested that the cast members create dialogues for their monologues. I began by asking the actor to start a conversation by speaking the first phrase of his text, then I spoke an extemporaneous response to him; he then responded with the next phrase of his text, and so on. The responses did not always occur the way the actor had planned so there was a greater sense of immediacy. This enlivened his relationship to the text and made his speaking more dynamic.

In another coaching session, I encouraged an actor to explore speaking one short, simple line of text in many different ways (quietly, loudly, slowly, quickly, singing, etc.) while moving, in order for her to experience more choice in her vocal range. I asked another cast member to imagine each thought bubbling up from her belly. I offered her the image of her body as a tuning fork, and asked her to intone her text to feel the vibrations of her voice resonating in her body.

In my current work as a theatre instructor at Capilano University, I notice ways in which my approach is shifting as a result of my studies. In particular, the language I use
for teaching is changing. Since I work in a tutorial situation with students, I am immediately challenged to respond to their individual needs, and I am aware of how my language affects them. I now ask them more questions and encourage their own explorations.

I am now working with the principle that articulating direct lived experience will result in development. This has directly affected my teaching; I ask my students to keep journals in which to write their observations about their voices, their experiences in voice class, and their vocal life outside of class. I ask them to state what they do in class as well as describing their experience. Later I ask questions based on their writing to guide them towards speaking more specifically about their learning.

In Stephen Heatley's graduate directing classes at UBC there were discussions about the many parallels between the language of the director and the language of the voice teacher. Voice coaching often crosses over into acting coaching, since the actor's voice must be connected to the character's intention. Now in my coaching, I try not to assume that the words I choose have the same meaning for a student as they have for me. For example, when I ask a student to "commit" to what she is saying, I question how she will receive that word and I ask myself what I want her to change in her performance. Do I want her to increase her volume, or take more time with the words? I may suggest that she allow the words to affect her as she speaks; I might help her to clarify her actor intention so there is a stronger need to speak the words.

---

41 Stephen Heatley, B.A. (Brock), MFA (Alberta)...teaches acting and directing. He spent twelve seasons as Artistic Director of Edmonton's Theatre Network where he directed over thirty world premieres. Most recently he was Associate Artistic Director of the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton and has directed for other companies in Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Toronto, Blyth, and Victoria. He has taught courses at Brock University and the University of Alberta. 
It was early in my studies with Gayle Murphy that I described my RCM teaching as a prescriptive approach to voice training, and identified her work as exploratory. I used these terms generally, to identify and contrast two styles of voice training, and it was my assumption that teachers choose one model or another exclusively. With a new appreciation for the importance of language, I am now compelled to investigate more carefully these two terms.

The Webster’s Dictionary defines the word ‘prescribe’ as follows: “...v.t. to order with the force of authority || to order the use of (a medicine or treatment) || (law) to state (a prescriptive right or title) || v.i. to lay down a rule ||...”42. The definition given for the word ‘explore’ is: “...v.t. to travel in or voyage through (an unknown or little known region) in order to add to man’s knowledge || to conduct a search into, investigate || to consider carefully (a possible course of action) || (med) to probe or examine (a wound etc.) || v.i. to make a voyage of exploration...”43

With these definitions in mind, I would now say that the training style offered through the Toronto Royal Conservatory is in many ways prescriptive; however, some of the instruction does take a more exploratory approach. Students are taught to seek a physical state in which they are responsive to the needs of the text they will interpret; the embodiment of this state will be different for each student. I have heard senior RCM teachers asking students to sense their breath and then observe how it seems to be cool when it goes into the body and warm when it comes back out – language that bears a

striking resemblance to David Smukler's directives to allow cool breath to drop in, turn warm inside, and then release back up warm.

I have rediscovered the introduction of the RCM Speech Arts & Drama Syllabus\textsuperscript{44} which begins with a quotation from Ben Jonson: “Language most shows a man; speak that I may see thee” and states that “Speech is intrinsic to the human condition...”.

Reading this again, in light of my recent studies, I am reminded of what Richard Armstrong says at the end of \textit{A Vocal Journey: Conversations with Richard Armstrong}:

“The universe of sound is inside, and if you have the courage to go there, you’ll find everything.”\textsuperscript{45}

There are still many questions for me; however, I am more comfortable now with my state of unknowing and continued questioning. In the past I wanted definitive answers to questions. Now I am more ready to live with complexity and uncertainty. I realize that the learning that takes place after an experience -- either a performance or an academic pursuit -- is ongoing. My explorations and my studies will continue. I want to continue to be involved with the National Voice Intensive and to study again with Richard Armstrong; I am also drawn to further investigations into vocal health, and into the role of breath in vocal work; I feel a renewed passion for words – their sounds, their roots and their meaning. The seeds that have been planted in these last two years of study are just now coming into fruition and will ripen in my future years of teaching. My learning is only beginning. As T.S. Eliot says in ‘Little Gidding’ from \textit{Four Quartets},

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.⁴⁶

Dale Genge spoke of a spiral in her work: “the integration is spiral. Not linear.
My work builds on my students’ needs and on finding new ways to say old things. My
work is never separate -- how can it be? We are all interconnected. I forget more than I
remember, and re-discover things all the time. I move away and toward the teachings I
have learned, as I move along the spiral.”⁴⁷ Again I am reminded of Eliot’s words:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Genge, Dale. “Re: Your work”. Email to Alison Matthews. 4 October 2009.
Voice and the Person

I believe that voice work can benefit all individuals. Through the courage and generosity of the students and teachers, I have witnessed personal growth as well as artistic development. The time I’ve spent in graduate studies has reinforced for me the universality of the work: to begin an inquiry into the mysteries of the human voice is to begin to ask ourselves, at the deepest level, who we are.

A voice has the uniqueness of a fingerprint. It is personal and intimate. I am reminded of what a young aboriginal woman from Haida Gwaii said in a workshop I was teaching. When I asked her how she felt about her speaking voice, she said that it was becoming problematic to communicate in English rather than her own language. She was doing a lot of public speaking as an advocate for her people through a non-profit organization, and felt increasingly conflicted about conducting such important work in a language which was not her native one. She told me that every time she spoke English words, it felt like she was speaking a lie.

Some time ago I heard a radio interview with Canadian soldier Trevor Greene, who suffered severe injuries and nearly died after being struck in the head with an axe by a Taliban fighter near Kandahar in 2006. His wife Debbie described the effects of his physical trauma, including loss of speech, to the CBC’s Anna Maria Tremonti. She spoke about what it was like to hear her husband’s voice again after many months of hearing only a faint whisper -- to hear him say her name in his old voice again. That, she said, was the moment she knew his body was getting stronger.

49 CBC Radio One: The Current. 1 August 2009.
http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/2008/200812/20081209.html
In *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels reports the discovery of ancient religious texts which appear to be gospels, myths, and poems. She translates ‘gnosis’ as “insight, for ‘gnosis’ involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself.” One poem reads:

For I am the first and the last.  
I am the honoured one and the scorned one...  
I am the silence that is incomprehensible...  
I am the utterance of my name.

In this passage, there is an acceptance of seeming opposites coexisting within one being: silence and utterance, mystery and self-knowledge spring from the same source. The reference to the ‘incomprehensible’ reminds me of something Dale Genge said, “At the heart is creation. It doesn't get any more mysterious than that.”

In another text of the gnostic gospels, called Trimorphic Protennoia, or “Triple-formed Primal Thought,” a female divine figure speaks: “[I] am the real Voice. I cry out in everyone, and they know that a seed dwells within.” It seems to me that Kristin Linklater would appreciate this idea of a “real” or “genuine” voice, since her approach to vocal practice is built on the belief that each of us has an authentic voice within us. This gospel speaks of a collective voice, a voice that connects all of humanity: “I cry out in everyone”; it binds us together through universal experience.

“I sing the Body electric,” Walt Whitman says at the beginning of his famous poem; and he ends by saying that the parts of the body, including “the voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud”, are the soul. In his book, *The Soundscape: Our
Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World, R. Murray Schafer tells us that in early history, God was not thought of visually, but rather as sound or vibration. The Roy Hart Theatre tells us that “the voice is the muscle of the soul.” Through vibrations and sound our spirits are made manifest: our bodies sing our own divinity.

---

Bibliography


http://finearts.uvic.ca/theatre/faculty/bios/linda_hardy.html


Studio 58 Langara College. 15 January 2010.
http://www.langara.bc.ca/studio58/faculty.html


VASTA. 15 January 2010.