



# Knowledge Transfer

## Voices That Work

EDITED BY CHARLIE CUNNINGHAM

# Module 8

Performance Skills for the Non-Performer

BY EMMA BROWN.



# Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively in all areas of our lives can be dependant upon how confident we are as users of our voice. As individuals we possess a broad array of skills and talents but the inability to get our thoughts, our feelings, our desires and our messages across effectively to our “audiences” can hold us back. The ability to retrain our own voices and the voices of others can be challenging, empowering and creatively very exciting.

In the article that follows, an experienced voice and professional development trainer offers advice on techniques and strategies that will allow you to develop your own style of training to be most effective for the groups you are working with. We hope that by studying and putting into practice the approaches described, you will be able to enable your trainees/learners/clients to benefit from coaching that is integrated into personal and professional development programmes.

There are some important messages and caveats to bear in mind as you approach the material and work practically on your own voice and the voices of others. The following is a bullet point list of things to consider when you begin to integrate elements of voice coaching into your practice.

1. **Accessibility** – An understanding of the voice and the physical and psychological factors that effect how well we communicate is accessible to all trainers and can be incorporated into any training delivery. However, professional voice coaches undergo a significant amount of training. It is recommended that the practitioner undergo specific training before seeking work as a “voice coach”.
2. **Health and Safety** – Voice training is a physical process. As such, you must ensure that the health and safety of your group is supported. Those whose voice is damaged by prolonged misuse should be referred to a medical professional or speech therapist in the first instance.

3. **Making it your Own** – The theory and practice of voice training has been evolving for many years. There are no perfect or ideal exercises for any one group or situation. Take the exercises you think would work for you and make them your own.
4. **Being Patient** – The way we speak and communicate is hard wired by our experience. The muscles of speech and some of our thought processes therefore must be retrained. This process will take time and may happen in small increments or larger steps. Make sure you record progress and keep your trainees moving forward through feedback and encouragement.
5. **Reflecting on your Practice** – As a trainer, it is important that you reflect on your methods of delivery, how you connect with your training groups and what works/what doesn't. Again, take the material presented and use it so it suits your own development as a trainer to the benefit of your learners.

## Approaching the Material

- > All modules contain questions to prompt reflection and discussion of issues raised in the text.
- > Symbols in the margin show where listening (ear) speaking (mouth) and physical (body) exercises are featured.
- > If you wish to obtain other modules in this series of articles about voice training, please refer to other titles shown in the inside front cover and contact [kt@cssd.ac.uk](mailto:kt@cssd.ac.uk) for copies.

If you have any questions or comments about the material or ideas presented, please contact Charlie Cunningham or Paul Nicholl at The Central School of Speech and Drama (CSSD) on 0207 559 3936 or email [kt@cssd.ac.uk](mailto:kt@cssd.ac.uk).



# Module 8

Performance Skills for the  
Non-Performer

BY EMMA BROWN.



**Physical training is a process leading to creative freedom rather than a prescriptive set of techniques. Its purpose is to enable actors to become more transferable and more expressive. It is not body fascism. It does not mean 'gym fever'. Suppleness, flexibility and sensitivity are the key aims for actors. Peter Brook points out that it is easy to be sensitive in the fingers and face, but that the actor needs to be sensitive throughout the body, constantly in contact with every inch of it. Sensitivity begets precision. And stage movement requires definition and clarity. (Callery, 2001: 19)**

## Introduction

When we consider the marketing strategies which underpin the major theatre productions of the world's stages, it is noticeable how much emphasis is placed on the role of the actor in selling the show. Headlines proclaim that he or she is 'outstanding', 'tremendously moving', or 'powerful'. Tickets are sold by word of mouth, critical plaudits offered to the actor who embodies a character or captures their audience. If we consider the historical evolution of the relationship between performer and audience, it is interesting to note the cultural transition in expectations. During the Renaissance for example, Shakespeare's companies of actors took direct responsibility for telling the story. In her recent study of the political allegory underpinning the Shakespearean canon, the writer Clare Asquith suggests that it was in large part due to the writer's sophistry that the audiences of the time – in all their social complexity – joined with the actors in sharing a subtle understanding of metaphor and 'in jokes'.

"Constantly attacking and exposing a regime that he believed had seized illegal control of the country that he loved, Shakespeare's work seen from this perspective, offers a revelatory insight into the politics and personalities of his era. A wide cast of neglected political personalities and vivid allegorical figures hide behind the characters of his plays". (Asquith, 2006: 1)

Subtle criticisms of monarchy and the church were thus encoded in the writer's poetic verse whilst it was clearly the actor's job to ensure that the audience understood the layers. This is despite the limitations of actor training which was confined essentially to skills work (sword fighting and manipulation of self fashioned props).

As women took to the stage during the Restoration period the actor/manager emerged as a new phenomenon. At the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, a succession of actor managers staged productions designed on a grand scale, lavish sets apparently dwarfing the actors, despite the sincere intention of directors such as Garrick to showcase the actor's talents. Contemporary accounts of productions of the great Shakespearean tragedies expose this conflict between spectacle and authenticity.

Against this backdrop of fixed gesture and grand statement, work by the nineteenth century naturalistic writers prompted a new appetite for a more realistic style of acting. The work of the seminal Russian actor – director **Stanislavski** is considered by many academics and practitioners to form the bedrock of contemporary actor training.<sup>29</sup> It is useful to remember however, that the design and implementation of a 'realistic' system for 'truthful' performance was developed in response to the prevailing melodramatic style of the period. What we now know anecdotally as 'method acting' is essentially the legacy of a pervasive frustration amongst actors and writers with an acting style which did not allow the audience to 'suspend their disbelief'.

In the first decade of the twenty first century, the semantics of acting have given way to a new language of 'performance'. The distinction between the systematic search for authentic character portrayal and the multiplicitous skills of the **performer** offers the conceptual framework of this chapter. The exercises, which are outlined, are therefore intended to be used as a means of exploration, an entry point for a performer who might consider themselves in opposition to the celebrated 'actors' of those critical reviews. In this chapter the performer is therefore defined as one who 'carries out a specific command/task'. The spectrum of performance skills is considered to be wide and rapidly shifting in response largely to the range of theatrical genres which have been developed in the contemporary theatre. In this chapter we will therefore consider variously, **voice, body, the ensemble and the contract between the performer and the audience.**

## Voice

The power of speech and sound is clearly one of the primary attributes of the civilised human being. Julian Hilton exemplifies this point further:

One of man's most sophisticated skills is the use of a sound system to convey linguistic meaning, speech. Though there is a performance genre, mime that does without speech, speech is nevertheless the most sophisticated and complex single tool at the performer's disposal. The sophistication lies partly in the complexity of language acquisition...and partly in the psycho – motoric subtlety of articulating sound. ....The extent to which the 'voice' is a measure of the whole person must make all performers especially concerned to master vocal skills. (Hilton, 1987: 111 – 12)

For the self confessed 'non performer', mastery of vocal skills may seem like a tall order. In this context, understanding of the significance of the voice in communicating with the audience will support the development of a **performance language**. Hilton divides the skill of speech into three aspects: the *psychological, the affective and the cognitive*:

On the one hand , we have to learn how to use our breathing, vocal chords, mouths and tongues to make sounds; on the other, we have to learn how to relate sound and tone to meaning....speech is not merely the generation of sounds; it concerns the complex interaction of sound and silence that enables the listener to discern individual words, to mark the ends of phrases and statements, to interpret the tone of the voice and to make up for any syntactical or lexical gaps in the speaker's utterance. It connects with the complementary use of face and body in expression, the success of an utterance being often as dependant as physical as on verbal expression. (Hilton, 1987: 111)

The synergy between voice and body described here might be usefully generated through engagement in exercises which are largely conducted through ensemble work; essentially in group work situations, performers offer a mirror for each other, a means of observing the self and commenting on aspects of behaviour – both performative and normative (i.e socially recognisable, consensual actions).



## Three stages of exercises

### 1. Warm -up

If we accept Hilton's premise that 'all language is rhythmic', a basic beginner's exercise might involve the repetition of well-known nursery rhymes within pairs, asking the observer to comment on articulation of words, with specific attention to the delivery of vowels and consonants. Performers are asked to consider the shape of the mouth during the production of sounds, and to begin to form a physical memory of these shapes, which might assist them in the later speaking of text.

### 2. Breathing and relaxation

In her role as voice coach for the Royal National Theatre, Patsy Rodenburg has written extensively of the difficulties faced by actors who physically 'close up' with tension, losing the diaphragmatic strength, which is the cornerstone of effective voice work. (Rodenburg 1994 and 1997). Amongst the many exercises which Rodenburg suggests for opening the diaphragm are leaning against either a partner or a wall and having released tension into the act of exchange, using the core muscles to support a series of deep breaths or delivery of a piece of text. Much is also made of the use of floor work, with the performer lying fully stretched along the floor focusing on elongating the breath through an invisible windpipe extension. Fledgling performers might consider breathing exercises amongst the most valuable exercises for enhancing vocal confidence, clarity of articulation and projection.

### 3. Language work

In the 1980's and 90's the Cambridge schools Shakespeare project developed some very interesting exercises intended to facilitate young people's handling of complex Shakespearean verse. One of these has proved to be useful when applied to adult learning contexts. Using a piece of heavily punctuated text, the facilitator asks performers to change direction with every new punctuation mark. Not only does this focus the mind on the intention of the writer, it also enhances articulation of syllabic sound. If vowels and consonants can be felt in the body as well as the mouth (i.e. by moving around the space) the synergy between body and voice might become more accessible.

## Body

Dymphna Callery's resistance to 'body fascism' outlined in the opening quote offers us an interesting starting point for discussion of the physical aspect of the performer's skills spectrum. The ability to relate in an emotional intelligent way to one's own shape and size frees the performer both to explore their own capacity and to extend their movement vocabulary. In her practical and theoretical handbook for devising theatre, Alison Oddey suggests that group training should include 'movement and vocal training (with an emphasis on physical fitness, suppleness, and competence in various physical skills), games that encourage group creativity, concentration and trust, improvisation and relaxation....' (Oddey, 1994: 172). In this section, it is the language in parentheses with which we are concerned. As in the previous discussion of voice, three stages of exercises are suggested, the distinction between actor training and performance skills underscoring the approaches described.

## Three stages of exercises

### 1. Warmup/stretching

Oddey's suggestion that 'every group needs to select the most beneficial exercises or games that are pertinent to the growth and progression of individual members relating to, an interacting with each other' (Oddey, 1994: 172), frames a useful section on warm-ups. Practical reminders about the importance of wearing loose clothing to free the body preface a discussion of influences.

The warm – up might take the form of playing games, following a strict routine of aerobic exercises, the yogic 'Salute to the Sun', stretching and breathing exercises, or instituting 'the grid'<sup>30</sup> as a way to start the session. (Oddey, 1994: 173)

Whilst Oddey acknowledges the influence of t'ai chi, contemporary dance techniques, yoga, and aerobics, I would suggest that the novice performer needs to adapt knowledge of techniques with which they are familiar, with the emphasis on physical challenge, muscular stretching and energy release. The more developed, physically strenuous work of practitioners such as Grotowski and Brook, may be inappropriate at an early stage of skills development. Connecting the imagination with the body is the key to physical warm-up. There are two clear illustrations of this borrowed from the work of the Theatre Complicite<sup>31</sup> practitioner Annabel Arden:

1. Imagine that a coin has fallen through a hole in the pocket of a pair of trousers. Trace the passage of the coin through the hole and follow the hand down the outside of the leg, back up the inside of the leg, around the hip and in a circular motion up the opposite shoulder and around the circumference of the head.
2. Trace the search for the lost coin at various speeds, developing and building a rhythm with the movement of the hands.
3. Imagine a small mouse jumping onto the right foot and running up the leg across the body etc. The main objective is to free the mouse from its journey around the body. The body responds as the observer describes the mouse's journey, with varying degrees of tension explored as the mouse travels.

### 2. Improvisation

At the heart of most academic study of performance is the belief in the empowering influence of improvisation. Defined in purist terms as 'composing or constructing', a responsive, imaginative play on language and situations improvisation can give the novice performer the potential to build confidence slowly. An accessible entry point here includes the use of stimulus objects. Exercises based on the interpretation of non – animate objects are found in the work of both Peter Brook and the Brazilian director Augusto Boal. Put simply, a series of ordinary objects (whatever is available in a given space) are placed in relation to one another in the space. The actors then build a spontaneous interaction based on the symbolic association of place, situation and value with the relevant objects. Beyond the use of props, performers might also be given a situation or set of characters and asked to link them using dialogue and mime. The founder of Complicite, Simon McBurney suggests that theatre has a 'particularity of time. The act of collective imagining creates a bond between us which links us to the same society and the same sense of being; it confirms something very particular about the communication between us.' (Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999: 71). Improvisational work can offer performers a strong sense of the audience, helping them to overcome the black hole which Stanislavski describes with fear throughout his semi – autobiographical texts.

### 3. Understanding Proxemics

Working with a director inevitably involves exploration of the dynamics of the theatrical space. Whatever the audience or event, the performer inevitably considers the relationship between himself, his fellow performers (if appropriate) and the audience. In order to investigate the interplay between the three, in rehearsal the performer might explore status exercises. One of the more common approaches is that adopted by Max Stafford Clark in working with his company Out of Joint (previously Joint Stock). Using a pack of playing cards, members of the company are asked to choose a card at random with the number on the card indicating the performer's status, and then adopt appropriate behavioural characteristics without using speech. The actors then create a status line up to establish whether there is clear understanding of status both within the ensemble and within the space. In developing this exercise, performers can also imbue objects with status, taking up a position in the space in relation to the object. Understanding the impact of levels and positions in the space is particularly important when performers are working with text. The most successful attempts at characterisation are arguably those which demonstrate this understanding most clearly.

## Ensemble work

As in any group work situation the ability to engage with and contribute to the varying dynamics of the participants is a valuable attribute. The word *complicite* is often used in theatre parlance to describe a shared belief. Dymphna Callery has described this as a 'complicite between those performing on stage and complicite between the performers on stage and the audience'.

At its most fundamental level, acting is a living exchange between actors. Complicite amongst performers is a crux of ensemble practice, a shared belief which depends upon intense awareness and mutual understanding and produces on –stage rapport. Being fully open to other actors is not simply a matter of creating pleasant working relationships. You must be able to work as an ensemble to tell the story moment by moment. (Callery, 2001: 88)

The novice performer may find ensemble work daunting, with the potential to feel underdeveloped skills exposed. If one foregrounds remembrance of the social aspects of the performance ensemble it may help to build confidence in the physical and vocal work which might be involved. The kinaesthetic aspects of the ensemble might be accessed through a combination of games and trust exercises, three of which are described below:

1. **Stop and Go:** 'A group awareness and concentration exercise which enhances peripheral vision, and builds a satisfying sense of unity....The enjoyment comes from the sense of finding mutual agreement: no individual takes responsibility for leading but a silent consensus emerges.' (Callery, 2001: 89).

The group begin to travel around the space directing their eye contact to the direction of moving, working at a natural pace. Once they have become attuned to the rhythms of the group, they begin to take responsibility for starting and stopping without articulating the directions. Eventually the group should be able to move in unison, using non verbal communication to manipulate pace and rhythm.

2. **Flock of Birds:** An exercise developed by the French physical theatre specialist, Jacque Le Coq. The performers imagine the shape of a flock of birds in flight.<sup>33</sup> Creating a V shape with a nominated leader at the pinnacle of the shape, the

performers begin the move their group around the space, stopping as appropriate. Once the group has stopped, the shape turns and a new leader is immediately identified as the shape shifts direction. The group set off with their new leader and as confidence develops are able to change levels, introducing varying qualities, speeds and textures of movement (e.g – birds preening, resting etc).

Once the group dynamic has been established, performers would consider applying their new physical knowledge to working on text or devising scenarios. The key balance of understanding here is between belief (in the power of the group) whatever the theatrical genre being explored, and challenge (with sufficient trust) to support the group in the development of timing, pace and rhythm.

## Making a contract with the audience

Performance is such a wide-ranging discipline incorporating a broad spectrum of genres (including physical theatre/dance, puppetry, mime, farce). As Julian Hilton reminds us 'the process by which a single, coherent performance is constructed out of the infinite range of possibilities' is complex (Hilton, 1987: 127). The rehearsal process offers the opportunity to explore these possibilities, deconstructing meaning in order to conceive the most appropriate diagnostic solution. Developing his mathematical analysis of the performer's range of pure and applied skills, Hilton goes on to suggest that 'performers enter two types of relationship with their audiences – aesthetic and financial – the two being interdependent.....Performances communicate with their audiences on the sensory premise that what they do and say is seen and heard by the audience.' (Hilton, 1987: 128) The financial transaction, which is entered into by the spectator, suggests a degree of understanding of the demographic of the wider audience. Susan Bennett's (1997) influential analysis of Audiences offers a useful deconstruction of the conventions of spectatorship including the impact of environmental factors. The novice performer would therefore be wise to consider the potential audience for their communication.

The preparation phase which supports (prefaces) the performance will by necessity therefore consider the two levels of dramatic engagement which Hilton differentiate as follows:

There is the on – stage conflict of forces which constitutes the plot of the drama, and there is the engagement with the audience in an imaginative act of constructing a possible world....It is not the presence of the audience which turns a real event into a 'performance'...Performers state by their actions that what they are performing is simultaneously real and not real, is in effect simply 'possible'. (Hilton, 1987: 133)

This hybrid state of presence and absence can arguably be best tackled in rehearsal through the use of forum theatre techniques. Originally developed by Augusto Boal, forum theatre presupposes that the audience and actor share the knowledge of unreality, they accept that the invisible fourth wall is transparent. In this complicity the actor develops the 'art of showing', demonstrating the difference between his actor persona and that of the character(s) which he is embodying. In Boal's democratic theatre, the 'spect-actor' is encouraged to believe that they can step over the threshold of performance to demonstrate/enact alternative scenarios. To the extent that this mode of performance relies on improvisational skill, the novice is directed by the spectator who 'crosses a threshold of awareness from off-stage consciousness into performance consciousness.' With a clear understanding of the vocabulary of voice and body, the novice performer must consider their position both in terms of the theatrical space, and their desire to make a particular impact on the audience.

## Conclusion: Losing the prefix

Interviews conducted with theatre directors over the years have tended to focus on the ideological concerns of the work whilst attempting to trace the rehearsal process and uncover elements of similarity and difference. In recent years Lloyd Newsom's DVD<sup>34</sup> have been at the forefront of innovation and cross genre exploration. Since 1986, DVD have 'consistently won major British and international awards'. Describing his rehearsal approach Newsom identifies the search for 'fresh ways of saying things that resonate with the performers' own truths. The performer's creativity and devising as a process are what excite me....'. Physical risk taking may seem rather a challenge for the 'non – performer', yet it is only when the performer accepts a licence to create that the work can develop in authenticity and range. Newsom again:

There are no physical dictionaries like there are for words, so I struggle to find what I've called 'specific ambiguity' – this can hold the story together and at the same time allow individual audience members to have their own reading of what's happening. (cited in Giannachi, 1999: 109).

The search for an appropriate language for performance prompts the 'artist' to broaden their horizons, to listen to many tongues, and hear and see in diverse situations. Once the apprenticeship state evolves into a state of active learning, the prefix 'non' might be replaced by 'full'.

## Notes

29. In his introduction to *Stanislavski: An Introduction* (1982) Jean Benedetti states, 'The Stanislavski system is not an abstraction; it is an activity and a practice. It is a working method for working actors. It is a system because it is coherent, logical – systematic. Anyone who imagines that the System will yield results through a purely intellectual, detached comprehension of its basic ideas will be disappointed. The System is not a theoretical construct; it is a process.' (1982: xi). In recent years studios devoted to the work of the American director Lee Strasberg, a self-confessed Stanislavski devotee have also emerged. 'Lee Strasberg is recognized throughout the world as having produced three generations of actors, playwrights and directors and due to his phenomenal legacy the influence of his teachings continues to flourish today.' ([www.leestrasberg.com](http://www.leestrasberg.com))
- 30 'The grid involves skills of group awareness and discipline, concentration and trust. An area is marked out for the group to move in, in as simple and neutral a way as possible, changing direction whenever they encounter another person travelling towards them. Someone outside the group claps to indicate that everyone should stop. This is developed so that the group can stop and start without help, producing a performance style of neutrality.' (Oddey, 1994: 173).
- 31 Theatre de Complicite is a critically acclaimed company dedicated to physical exploration of text and image. Their work has been performed across continents and their devised texts published in many languages
- 32 Max Stafford Clark describes these exercises in more detail in his description of the rehearsal process with which he was engaged during the staging of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* in *Letters to George* (1989).
- 33 The flock of birds can also be replaced by a shoal of fish in the narration of the activity.
- 34 See [www.dv8.co.uk](http://www.dv8.co.uk)

## Bibliography and References

- Asquith, Clare (2006): *Shadowplay* (Public Affairs, USA)
- Benedetti, Jean (1982): *Stanislavski: An Introduction* (Methuen)
- Bennet, Susan (1997): *Audiences*, Routledge, UK
- Berkoff, Steven (1996): *Free Association: An Autobiography* (Faber and Faber, UK)
- Boal, Augusto (1992): *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (Routledge, UK)
- Bradby, David and Williams, David (1988): *Director's Theatre* (Methuen, UK)
- Callery, Dymphna (2001): *Through the Body – A Practical Guide to Physical Theatre* (Nick Hearn Books, UK)
- Callow, Simon (2004): *Being an Actor* (Vintage, UK)
- Giannachi, Gabriella and Luckhurst, Mary (1999): *On Directing – Interviews with Directors* Faber and Faber, UK
- Hilton, Julian (1987): *Performance* (Macmillan, UK)
- Johnston, Kieth (1981): *Impro – Improvisation and theatre* (Methuen, UK)
- Manfull, Helen (1981) *Women Directors on Directing* (Methuen, UK)
- Oddey, Alison (1994): *Devising Theatre* (Routledge, UK)
- Rodenberg, Patsy (1994): *The Need for Words: Voice and the Text* (Methuen, UK)
- Rodenberg, Patsy (1994): *The Actor Speaks: Voice and the Performer* (Methuen, UK)
- Sher, Anthony (2004): *Year of the King* (Nick Hearn Books, UK)
- Stafford – Clark, Max (1989): *Letters to George* (Nick Hearn Books, UK)
- Strasberg, Lee (1987): *A Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method* (Little Brown and Co., USA)

## Emma Brown

‘Emma Brown is Senior Lecturer in Drama Education at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Based within a large and thriving postgraduate school, her specific responsibilities include course leadership of both the long established PGCE Drama course and the newly inaugurated MA Theatre Studies in London course. After ten years of teaching Drama across the 11 – 19 age range in a variety of educational settings, Emma made a transition in research and academic scholarship within Higher Education where her research specialisms include Creativity and the Curriculum and Continuing Professional Development in the cultural sector. Most recently Emma has undertaken consultancy work for Creative Partnerships in both the North West and East Midlands considering models of training which bring arts professionals together with teachers.

Publications include articles in National Drama and the International Journal of Cultural Policy Research.

