

"I am just playing the notes" [Nadine George]

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by Henning Silberg, voice teacher at The Danish National School of Performing Arts

One day, in 1988, Nadine George came to the School for Acting at Odense Theatre in Denmark. I had just begun my job as a voice teacher that summer. At the beginning of a new career and curious, I was looking for anything that could help me in my work. Nadine came to teach the third year students in voice and I asked if I could attend a lesson with her and watch her teaching.

It turned out to be a revolution in my life, my teaching, my way of looking at others and myself. All she did was to play a note on the piano, and a student - Henrik Prip - then sang. One note at a time up and down with a certain vowel, and suddenly something happened that I had never experienced a voice could do. It/he sang in a kind of falsetto with a strength and intensity that got everything in me to listen. Later I recognized it as the deep female sound. It was contrary to everything I had been taught and had done myself as a singer and voice teacher for many years; I thought that it would ruin his voice because it was against all known voice work. For me it was revolutionary and the following years I sat in Nadine's classes whenever she came back to teach at the school, listening and learning something new. I was in constant dialogue with her during those periods, and after almost four years, I simply had to work her way but at my own pace. Nadine gave me the green light to do it and I started to change the whole of my teaching - everything I had done for many years - guided and supported by Nadine who came back to the school several months each year. I slowly understood her teaching and her technique and thus I was able to confidently teach this new technique in time. So, from text teaching inspired by rhetoric I was able to move to dramatic teaching where text, voice and body were worked with simultaneously in the student.

In 1996 I had attended for the first time a weekend workshop with Nadine held at the National Theatre School in Copenhagen. There we worked with monologues from *Macbeth*. I was subsequently employed at the National Theatre School in 1997 where Nadine, through Ulla Gotlieb the Head of the Acting department, came to teach. In the summer of 1996, Nadine made a two-week international workshop in London which I also participated in. It was the first workshop of many for voice teachers and these continued to be held every two years or so from 1999 onwards.

This is how the work developed. During the first years in Odense, Nadine's voice work was limited to the individual voicework; no text. When, in 1990, Lane Lind became Principal of the Odense school, Nadine began working with Shakespeare monologues in Danish and English and gradually introduced dialogues by other playwrights such as Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* which Lane translated into Danish. Over the next years, Nadine directed three performances. With the first year students she would work on monologues by Shakespeare and with the fourth year she made productions of *Richard III*, *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*. She taught the same structure: breathing on the floor, singing qualities and text work. I do not remember her doing walking work in the space at that time!

In 1993 first year students and three teachers including myself had visited Nadine in Birmingham, where we saw her new workshop model with breathing, singing qualities and text work in its first form. At the same time we visited the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) in Glasgow where we saw Ros Steen and Jean Sangster work with their students. So, from 1993 until 1999, Nadine developed the workshop structure that we experience now and have continued to experience for many years : breathing, walking in the space, singing qualities and working with text. Texts selected have included *Twelfth Night*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *Macbeth*, *The Oresteia*, Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, *Platonov* and *Uncle Vanya*, and Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*. I have attended all the International Teachers' workshops but two. Additionally, every year Nadine has run workshops for professional actors using the same basic structure.

My own work using Nadine's technique has evolved over the years. In Odense, I worked individually with the students for 50 minutes, once a week. I had all four year groups as I was the only voice teacher and I could achieve a lot in co-operation with Nadine. First I would do some breathing with the students and then used an exercise Nadine had done at the beginning of her work – working the breathing with the back against a wall. Then they would sing a quality each time and finally we worked with dramatic texts. So it was very much Nadine's own form but within an individual lesson. I would also use other genres than dramatic texts; poetry and writing with metrical structures and novels. So when Nadine came the students were already prepared for her work and when she left we could continue her work.

At The Danish National School of Performing Arts in Copenhagen the possibilities have been different. There are three voice teachers and I have only two year group classes per year for limited periods of time. That means when I have the first year then I also have the fourth year and the following year I will have only the second and third year student groups. When I start with a first year class they have both an individual lesson for 50 minutes every week and a two-hour class. In the first year I do not teach the voice qualities. It is my experience that there is a possibility to get confused as the other teachers do not use the same work. But in working with text I use Nadine's technique. Later, in the spring, I choose the students that I can see will benefit from singing the qualities and those I work with the sung sounds. In the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year, I work with singing the qualities and the text work of Nadine's technique, adapted to our school and my teaching. But we also have many productions where the work will be to assist students in text and voice work in the space and in relation to their parts/characters in the productions and then it becomes more coaching work.

When I work with either actors or singers in my own company I will run a week-long course, using Nadine's division of a day's work. If I have a weekend workshop of two to three days I can only manage to work with the four qualities work and then text and singing work. In lectures and talks I will tell about Wolfsohn's, Roy Hart's and Nadine's work, and either everyone will sing the four qualities together or I may select four people to sing one quality each. Every demonstration holds the possibility that it is a basis for a conversation about the technique.

This is just a little bit about the work as I have experienced it throughout these years but I cannot fully describe what this work has meant to me both personally and professionally.