

Chapter 3

Introduction to the Day

Ros Steen, Keynote Speaker

I am very honoured to have been asked to give the opening address to what should prove a very interesting day's discussion about how we teach voice now. Because how we have taught it in the past, even in the last five years is no longer wholly appropriate – the world in which we teach is changing too rapidly for that – nor can we see how we should be teaching in five years time, for the same reason.

From the outset I should say that I have no special crystal ball that enables me to see any further into the future than any of you. Nor can I provide a complete set of answers to the six discussion topics posed. I don't teach in Higher Education directly, for example, nor am I sure exactly what is meant by a commercial dysfunctional voice so I look forward to being informed by my colleagues about these areas.

I can say something about voice and technology, as I train re-speakers who use voice recognition software to subtitle programmes for the BBC. Re-speakers have to listen to programmes and immediately voice everything they hear as it is being said live, for example, a news broadcast including all the interviews or a sports commentary. The process leads them to talk a little bit as a computer does: the voice is devoid of much of its expression, words are clearly cut up from each other and as they speak, *comma*, they have to insert punctuation, *comma*, in order for the subtitles to make grammatical sense when they are read, *full stop*. As yet the re-speakers are able to keep their job speak and their life speech separate; whether there will be long term changes to the voice it is too early to say!

I have done some work within the wider community with different types of groups – community drama groups, those who are differently-abled, people with business or non-acting backgrounds, those from ethnic communities, teachers and drama tutors – although I tend to operate in two main arenas, a conservatoire for drama training, the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and the theatre profession. So my talk will largely draw on my experience of teaching voice in these last two contexts but the principles that I believe will guide us in teaching voice in the new millennium apply equally to every context in which we teach.

I am fortunate that my work is in constant demand but I know that this would not be

happening if I wasn't offering something of value to people today. In our current theatrical and educational climates money is tight – when was it not? – and nobody, well certainly not the canny Scots, will part with a penny of their precious resources to employ me if what I do does not help them now. The voice work that people want from me has led me to break new ground for myself as a voice teacher, a theatre voice professional and a person, and is beginning to make its contribution to the cultural life of my nation, Scotland.

My path may not be yours but whichever path we take there are four map directions which we must keep consulting if we are to move forwards. However, before I talk about map directions we must know where we want to go. We must start with our vision, whatever that is (and I will say something about mine later on) as this must be our guiding star, the clear end in sight towards which we are journeying. Keeping that in front of us will lead us to take the roads we take, to seek out people who inspire us to go on and to find others to partner us along the way. What is your overall vision in your work, whether for theatre, acting training, teacher training, or the section of the community you are working with? What do you want to see happen in your work context? Because we can make it happen, in time.

The four map directions are:

- Who am I? Because who you are in your work is probably the most significant factor in the whole business of teaching
- Who stands in front of me?
- What is the context in which we are working?
- What is the conversation about?

To explain the last. When I was a young teacher, I thought there were 'things' I had to teach – breathing, resonance, articulation and so on. Teaching was about transferring what I knew to others so they knew it too. Until a fortunate meeting with an education specialist, Bart McKendrick, put me right. He said – and I've never forgotten it – education is not about imparting knowledge. Education is a conversation between two generations, or two parties, about what is important. Hence my fourth question: what is the conversation about?

Who am I? I am Ros Steen and I studied drama at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and Glasgow University. After teaching at the University and in Adult Education I became a Lecturer in Voice at the RSAMD 23 years ago, which is where I currently teach. Since 1988 I have also worked as a voice coach, dialect coach, voice director and latterly co-director, pioneering the use of voice work as a medium of rehearsal in professional theatre. I have now taught a generation of actors and have worked on much new writing over many years, being closely associated with the current generation of writers in Scotland including David Harrower, David Greig, Nicola McCartney, and Linda McLean.

As a student I started my journey in voice with the work of Greta Colson, and A.C.Gimson, if that means anything to some of you! So my own training was in the mainstream British tradition. As a young teacher, I undertook some courses with Cicely Berry and they had a strong impact on me for which I will always be grateful. But I felt there was something missing in my work. I didn't know what it was. I just knew there was something else I needed to know.

Then, nearly 16 years ago now, I met Nadine George, formerly of the Roy Hart theatre but at that point working as an independent practitioner. She had drawn on her past experience to develop her own work and technique which she applied to classical text and the training of young actors, a process she recently described in an article for the latest VASTA journal, *Shakespeare Around the Globe*. [1] I started to work with her on my own voice and have continued to do so to this day. This work was my missing piece of the jigsaw. While Cis's work strongly influenced my approach to helping actors connect with the text in practical ways, George's was crucial to a profound understanding of the nature of the voice and its direct channel into the heart of the acting process. The voice research as practice in which I am currently engaged lies at the meeting point of these two traditions.

In recent years, I have been a Guest Lecturer in Voice at the Athanor Akademie in Germany. Being at a distance geographically and metaphorically from what I otherwise take for granted, and working with actors whose first language is not English, enabled me to consider what I was doing more objectively and I have written about this in the current VASTA journal. [2]

But there is another important part of the answer to who I am.

I micht hae waled anither leid for ma speak the day – I might have chosen another language for my talk today – but gin I had anely blethered tae yis aw in Scots – but if I had only spoken to you all in Scots – ye wid shairly no hae liftit my meanin clearly eneuch – clearly enough. Aiblins I dinna spik lik this the hale time – perhaps I don't speak like this the whole time – but I thoct it meet – fit – tae gar ye hear something in yin o Scotland's three heidmaist leids – to let you hear something in one of Scotland's three foremost languages, Scots, (the ither twa bein English and Gaelic). I jalouse – I suspect – it micht gie a when o ye – some of you – a wee stound – a wee stab, a wee poke – to ken that Scotland is indeed anither kintra – another country – rather than juist the bit at the tap o England but it is, and kenning that – knowing that – is fair essential tae any unnerstanding of British theatre the day.

I want to say more about what's happening in Scotland later but it seems pertinent to consider, in passing, issues of national identity and heritage which have a clear connection to voice today. Scotland on Sunday columnist Magnus Linklater said recently,

In the aftermath of the July 7th bombings and the race riots in France, an urgent debate surrounds the question of national identity [3]

and he asks if multiculturalism has failed. Should being British be addressed more assertively and if so, what does 'being British' stand for? What does a British voice sound like? The Gaelic musician, Donnie Munro, himself a member of a minority culture within Scotland, argues that he is happy to genuinely celebrate other cultures but that we should have more access to our own cultures if we are also to bring something to the table. Shakespeare spoken in RP in Scotland today is practically extinct – our own voices, our own accents have come of age.

I've just recently been in India, and visited the Gandhi museum there. Written on the wall was the following:

I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. [4]

Who stands in front of you? Why are they there, what do they want to know, and where are they in themselves? Two main groups of people stand in front of me, students and actors.

Let's start with students, as these are not just our actors of the future, but the teachers and drama trainers too. Young people today are living in a different world, from when some of you, my younger colleagues, were students and certainly from me. A recent survey carried out by the Priory, which specialises in treating mental health problems and addictions, found one in five girls – one in five – between the ages of 15 – 17 had self harmed, alongside "unacceptably high" levels of mental distress associated with bullying and violence in the home. More teenagers were contemplating suicide than ever before and more were being pressurised into sex at a younger age. [5]

The number of women (but not only women) who have a difficult relationship with their bodies and/or their sexuality means voices are, quite literally, disconnected from bodies. The number of men (but not only men) who are afraid to tap into real feeling for fear of being vulnerable, being exploited or 'uncool' means voices cut off from felt life. Schools are now being asked to teach emotional literacy. Eight different advisory documents have been sent to primary schools from the Department for Education and Skills detailing the emotions that are to be taught and how to teach them. It's a different world.

There is so much to deal with before we can get many of our students to any kind of point of balance from which they can begin to work. This takes us beyond lamenting that much of today's speech is inflected upwards à la California high school, meaning we have to teach the resolved cadences at full stops once taken so for granted. It goes beyond auditioning students for entry to drama schools that are so under-energised in their pieces that communication fails, or bemoaning the lack of voice training in teacher training programmes. Our young people – and our students are often the most *fortunate* of our young people – are not confident, at heart, regardless of the tough exteriors. When I compare them to their German counterparts, I wonder just what our education system is up to. Young people today, the leaders of tomorrow, have a profound need to be taken seriously, to be listened to, to be above all validated and helped to find their self-worth. Fortunately helping people to find their voices literally and metaphorically is our territory and we must celebrate the fact that as a voice community we not only do a crucial job, we do it marvellously. My evidence? I rarely meet anyone teaching voice who does not care deeply about it and is passionate about the difference it can make to people's lives. To a person we approach things whole-heartedly and positively. What we have to give is needed, perhaps now more than ever.

Faced with these changes in people, my voice work had to change. Life is difficult in the 21st century and it's not my job to make it more so. Most of what I do now is provide a space for people to, if not let go, put down their stress for a while in order to re-connect with their energy and creativity; with who they are. I haven't taught breathing for a long time, no holding and counting, days of the week – none of that. Just the hardest thing of all. Breathing out. Other exercises come from another time and must be re-thought to ensure their relevance.

With regard to actors, as voice practitioners we just need to be aware that the acting community is stratified, to quite a large extent, by age and training. I'd be interested to know if you've found the same – in my experience I find there are roughly three main groups of actors.

The first, the relatively older actor – perhaps fifties onwards – had the last access to a Rep system where they learnt their craft. Their voices are generally strong and resonant from speaking in large spaces and they tend to absorb a note by trying it out in their voices right away rather than writing it on their script. They have found their own way of doing things and may be reluctant to relinquish that for more contemporary ways of working. At best they have much to share with other members of the company by example and at worst they can do their own thing with very little real transmission between themselves and others.

Then there are the young actors who are heavily influenced by TV and film, stuck quite often in a prevailing though pedestrian naturalism. Anything energised or heightened 'doesn't feel right', is not 'truthful' or 'not me'. Sound familiar? They have yet to learn stamina and professionalism perhaps but are open as a rule and willing to try what they are being asked to do without the sometimes time-consuming discussion which can hold up rehearsal. They often scrawl copious notes on their scripts which can paralyse them when they come to act.

The middle generation actors – mid twenties to late thirties, early forties are a most interesting group – enough experience and professionalism to work seriously but, in the case of the best of them, still open enough to take on board other ways of working. They know what they can do: what they are interested in is what else is there for them. They generally make good ensemble members who can tune into both the other groups and it is these actors who continue to work on their professional development in the voice workshops I run independently.

It is not unusual to have all three groups of actors within one company and while there is much good work, we do sometimes see productions where the disparate acting styles have failed to cohere into a unified world. Obviously we must address each group in a way that speaks to them, but we also have to find a way to channel these different energies and approaches to run together.

The voice work I do, and I'll say something about it in a minute, can be entered at any level of experience and has the advantage of giving these different groups of actors a shared process and a common energy. However, one must be realistic. It is not always possible to work in this way. Some actors are not open, regardless of age (though I find that directors are beginning to take this into account when casting) and equally, one has to respect that more experienced actors might regard such company work as 'school' and are affronted by being asked to do it, in which case one has to cut one's losses. But this is why I believe we have to build a new way of working from the ground up, from training onwards, and have patience for the long game.

Whoever stands in front of me, and whoever stands in front of you, we have to inspire them to do their best, not to please us, but to be all they can be. We cannot make them more talented than they are, but we can help them to fulfil the talent they have and equip

them to carry on working without us. And one very difficult thing. We to have find a way to work with people who are more talented than we are ourselves, being careful not to reduce them to our level.

What is the context in which we are working?

I mentioned earlier that we cannot simply borrow from the past and use it to meet the future. We have to appraise what we do in the light of what we want to say through our teaching – to test it against our vision. There is nothing new under the sun but we have to be careful that we are not simply recycling other's ideas in an unexamined way. Nadine was the first to say to me 'take the work and use it in your own way', passing it on for development and not simply repetition. I am not Nadine and I am not operating in her context. I am me and can only teach the work refracted through my understanding and sensibility for my context.

A word about the work. The essence of it is the development of four different qualities of voice, two male and two female, which are in every human voice regardless of gender. These qualities are first explored as sung notes, using the fixed intervals of the piano for guidance, and then as speech in a way that enables actors to embody the text, literally; that is, the whole text is vibrated through the body and voice of the actor and transmitted to the body of the listener. Rather than the text remaining at an intellectual level or felt emotionally and then 'acted', it is connected deeply to where the voice actually comes from: the body source of the creative energies and impulses of the actor. The work has been described by one director as *ultrasound for the point of impulse*. It is an approach that puts the body and voice rather than the head back at the centre of the acting process and rehearsal.

For young actors – actually for all actors really – the voice work not only quickly and simply helps them to confront and accept their own particular body and voice it also directly addresses how they work, that is, what it is that facilitates or limits what they permit themselves to accomplish. The desire to be creative and exciting is often tempered by the fear of exposure that these things imply and the balance of risk to comfort is one that has to be negotiated all the time. This voice work holds young actors, at this often-insecure stage in their lives within a clear, safe structure that allows them to go into themselves, bit by bit, in order to explore and embody that exploration securely.

The first context I had to find a place for the work was in a conservatoire within a fairly traditional Voice Department, which, although it played an important part in the life of the School was still seen by some as a 'skills' department (voice as compartmentalised classroom subject) that 'serviced' the acting courses (voice as handmaiden to the production). I wanted voice work to be integral to the rehearsal process (and I didn't mean just a quick warm-up before the real business) or voice staff would never be seen as the full partners in the creative process I believed they could be. The solution for the department came from my second context, my work in the profession.

Over the last decade or so, I have been fortunate in forging partnerships with open-minded directors who have been willing to give their rehearsal room over to me for the sake of what the voice work can offer them creatively. One such partnership has been at the internationally renowned Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh where I have worked with

Artistic Director Philip Howard to develop theatre practice in which voice work became a medium of rehearsal. For twelve years now Philip and I have been collaborating, learning as we have gone along, and in 1990 we co-directed a production for the Traverse in conjunction with the Barbican Theatre.

How we collaborate is probably a talk in its own right but to give you a thumbnail sketch:

We have an initial conversation about which areas he is seeking help with based on the nature of the text, his thoughts about the writing and the actors he has cast. Then, each day before I begin any voice work, I lead a conversation with the actors about their agenda items and concerns with Philip listening. This means I can take the temperature of the rehearsal room but also I try to reconcile what the actors are after, what Philip is after and my own agenda items – what I think is going on in the text musically, say – so we arrive at the most useful things to work on by consensus. Next we do the voice work – breathing, 4 qualities, individual work for each actor on voice leading into text, directed by me, sometimes physically in the space – while Philip observes and listens. We pay particular attention to the actors' reflections on what the work has done. Philip might then talk about the work's connection to what he is interested in developing, or he might take what has happened and immediately stage it, or he might add a further practical suggestion to be tried then and there. Sometimes the actor's discoveries are all that needs to happen and he simply moves on. All the time we are 'checking in' with one another and reading each other to ensure that together what we are doing remains useful to the actors.

Collaborating with directors in this way let me see a way forward for voice in the conservatoire context. At the RSAMD all acting students undergo a rigorous training in every aspect of voice but in the first year technical work is mainly mainstream. However, towards the end of the year, students begin to study George's vocal technique introduced by George herself. Throughout the second year, I continue to teach the work and at the end of the year it is fully integrated into the rehearsal process of the Shakespeare productions which are the core of study of the summer term. Some of these are co-directed by me and an acting colleague, integrating the work of the two departments in the rehearsal room.

Co-direction is not something undertaken without knowing your partner very well – how they jump, as it were, and it requires a shared vision. Potential contradictions are ultimately resolved one way or another out of trust and mutual respect. You have to learn to separate what you want from what you would go to the wall for. And at that point (the wall) if the depth of feeling is strong enough, one of us will cede to the other. So far we have always worked it out so that we can both buy into the resulting production, a production that we both own as well as the actors. Incidentally, we have found that this way of working does not, in fact, confuse the students! Arguably they learn the most valuable lesson of all, that there is not one truth in acting but many.

My third context is Scotland, where I live and work. It has been my choice not to move elsewhere in order to contribute my life's work to the cultural life of my country. Two years ago, the Scottish Executive, Scotland's devolved Parliament, gave funding for the establishment of a National Theatre, a commissioning body with a remit to provide a showcase for the best of Scottish theatre and to create work of international significance which would represent Scottish culture abroad. A Scottish National Theatre Studio has been set up and I have been approached with a view to bringing the voice work there

which would enable me to put my process itself under the microscope. For I am still developing my work, trying to understand it more fully. Can a production be completely rehearsed through the voice work only? I have a conversation to have with myself.

My contexts may not be yours but whatever they are, you have to know how to operate within them while recognising you have the power to create conditions for change. You have the power.

Often what is needed is to find the right people to work with, people who are ready to move forward with you and so we come to the conversation. The conversation between two parties about what is important; the conversations that can move us forward as a profession. Over the many years I have been attending voice conferences and gatherings, up to and including this summer's VASTA conference held in Glasgow, I am aware of one constant: that many voice teachers feel that the work they do is insufficiently understood, recognised and therefore valued as a full contribution to the creative process. We know actors are open to what we have to offer and we can often find affinities with colleagues. In the main we must turn our attention to the conversations we need to have with the authorities, whether our education bosses or directors, to move us forward in the new millennium.

As far as education bosses are concerned, great stress is laid nowadays on 'customer satisfaction', feedback mechanisms and evaluation systems, so the *quality* of our work is often our best advocate there. With regard to directors, in the end the same is true, but there are particular considerations here. We know that relationships between voice people and directors, while being very fruitful in many cases, are not always unproblematic. Difficulties are likely to arise because we share the common territory of the interpretation of the text more closely than any other members of the production team. Certainly the territory of the voice specialist is, as Cicely Berry has articulated, an ability to listen and hear words with a heightened awareness of their underlying sound, rhythm, cadence and form, along with an ability to open this out physically and imaginatively and in this way allow it to inform meaning. [6]

But, if we come clean, this is not all we do and voice work cannot be entirely divorced from interpretation. For that reason there is the potential for a clash of readings of the text and therefore a clash of roles which could prove disastrous. That we as a profession have assiduously avoided such a collision course is a commonplace but I don't think it has been achieved without some risk to our own voice as creative practitioners. In finding new ways of sharing the territory of the text with directors I am not frightened that my work borders on direction. Borders on it, but isn't. By physically opening up the possibilities inherent in the text in rehearsal, my excavation of the text in the voice becomes a creative contribution to the director's excavation of the text, not a challenge to it.

But however we as theatre voice practitioners work – let me nail my colours to the mast now – we have got to get our work out of rooms into where it matters most – the badlands of the rehearsal room. We need to put our work and ourselves on the line if we are to work with directors in new ways. Directors, for their part, must move as well, even if it means calling into question the traditional hierarchies of relationships in theatre. If we want to realign the working relationships in the rehearsal room we are questioning how theatre is made today. And not everybody wants to have that conversation with us. But if it is

allowed that there are two stories told when the audience watches a play – the story of the text and the story of the production process – then the change of relationships within the rehearsal room influences the finished product itself. New theatre for a new millennium. And for that reason, perilous though the voyage might be, it is worth undertaking, and we must find partners willing to sail out with us into uncharted waters. There will always be those who will never want to work with us in these ways but this, I suggest, is a temporary blow to our *amour propre*. Let us dust ourselves down and move on. From my experience, more and more directors are coming onside and one must look to converse with the up-and-coming directing generation as a matter of priority.

To finish. My guiding star for a long time has been my vision for theatre in Scotland: the establishment of a generation of trained actors and directors who not only share a common understanding and language of theatre but a shared *practice*. In this new millennium I have begun to hold workshops for writers and directors who are coming to do the same voice work as the actors in order to understand what it can offer them in their particular roles. I don't know where it will lead but it is happening and I must stay responsible for it and keep on.

And so must you – take responsibility for what is happening and keep on.

Have a vision – know where you are journeying to.

Keep consulting the four map directions.

Take people with you by the excitement and quality of what you do.

All of us, whatever voice journey we are on, must march forward – forward, kenning who we are, who stands afore us and whit the colloque – the conversation – is about, wi the licht of the sterna in our hairts, mynd and een – with the light of the stars in our hearts, minds and eyes, looking oot ontae, as yet, unkent airts – unknown horizons.

- [1] *Shakespeare Around the Globe* ed Mandy Rees. Pub VASTA, Incorporated Cincinnati 2005 pgs 33-42
- [2] *ibid* pgs 43-58
- [3] *Linklater's Scotland*. Article in *Scotland on Sunday*, Nov 27th 2005.
- [4] The Mahatma Gandhi museum, Delhi.
- [5] *Sense of failure: the scale of teenage self harm* by Mark Honingsbaum. *The Guardian*, November 28th 2005
- [6] Reference given by Cicely Berry for Ros Steen's application for an AHRB grant for research into the arts.