

SECTION VII: ACTING TECHNIQUES

Voice and Text
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Celebrating The Text Rather Than Cerebrating It

(Various Exercises Adapted from Cecily Berry,
Kristen Linklater, Mary Corrigan and others.)

Vocal Exercises and Warm-ups to Get The Group Started. Some Possibilities.
Select one or two of the following as warmups.

Seated exercises: Relaxation and breathing exercises to reduce self
consciousness, stress and stage fright.

1: Students seated quietly. Breathe in nostrils to count of 6. Release that
air out quietly and completely to the count of 7-8. Once again breathe in, this
time to the count of 7. Breathe out to the count of 9. Continue this pattern
of quietly breathing in and out for a short time.

2: Place hands on upper chest. (near clavicle). Quietly observe breathing for
approx. 2-3 minutes. Move arms to sides for approx. 1 minute. Place hands on
middle of body, slightly above the waist. Observe breathing (approx. 2-3
minutes). Return hands to sides. Rest hands on lowest abdomen. Again observe
breathing for approx. 2-3 minutes. Return hands to sides.

Note: This exercise can be done seated, lying on floor or standing. It is very
good for stress reduction.

3: Seated in chair with arms. Rest arms on chair arms, allowing hands to be
unsupported from wrist and quietly observe breathing.

Standing Exercises:

1: Yawn-stretch entire body, vocalize the yawn. Repeat the big yawn-stretch.

2: Have class stand and vigorously run in place while counting to 50. Place
hands at waist to experience incoming breath.

3: Stretch arms overhead, drinking in air, hum arms down to sides.

4: Drink in air and gently lift shoulders to ears. Release breath and drop
shoulders simultaneously. Repeat several times. Drop head on to chest. Let
weight of head pull you over until you are gently hanging over, released from
the waist.

Mouth closed, breathe deeply through nostrils several times while in that
released position.

Enjoy the feeling of your breath dropping deep into your back. Hum. Umm-hmmm.
Continue to breathe through in your nostrils and begin to build up your back,
vertebra by vertebra. Pause to breathe deeply into your back and then continue
to stack up one vertebra at a time until *only* your head rests on your chest.
Relax your neck and gently roll your head from side to side before slowly
allowing your head to float up like a helium balloon on the end of a string.
Repeat your hum. Enjoy those hummed vibrations on your lips.

5: Loosen your head again with a gentle head roll. Include a hum if it feels

comfortable to do so.

6: Squeeze face together. Stretch it out. Scrub facial "masque " with hand. Hum. It's easy to have a well placed hum by preceding the sound with "umm-hmmm," as in agreement. Continue to hum with lips closed. Encourage students to feel hummed vibrations on face and heads.

Lips and Tongue Limberings to Improve Articulation

1: Stretch out and purse lips. Blow air out on bbbbbb.

2: Stretch out tongue like a cat lapping milk.

3: Hum and siren down from top of voice. (mmmm or nnnn or lip roll on bbbbbb).

4: *Loosen lips*:

bee bay bah boh boo.
mee may mah moh moo
pee pay pah poh poo
wee way wah woh woo
vee vay vah hoh voo
zhee zhay zhah zhoh zhoo
chee chay chah choh choo

5: *Loosen tongue*:

dee day dah doh doo.
tee tay tah toh too
gee gay gah goh goo
kee kay kah koh koo
zee zay zah zoh zoo
see say sah soh soo.
etc.

6. Pip Pap Pop etc. or peachy-weachy etc or
Did You ? Would You? Could You? Should You?. (repeated)
or Peter Piper picked a pickled peppers, etc.

TEXT WORK

1: Have student quietly speak text (script still may be in hand) to another actor, while standing, seated or lying on floor. (Note: It is very helpful to have the actor place a hand on his/her own mid waistline to increase awareness of the importance of the breath dropping down. (This increased flow of breath will improve vocal delivery, increase self confidence and encourage greater creativity.)

Comfortable non-clavicular breathing is important because it will assist the actor in making the text his own. Deeper breathing helps to allay anxiety and reduces self consciousness. Additionally, it helps to memorize the text, if the thought is linked to the breath. Linking the breath to the thought also helps to make the acting infinitely more believable!

Freeing Exercises

1: Have student sing text to the class or to one another. Can sing the text as a ballad, high opera, Gilbert and Sullivan, country western. After singing the text, ask the student to speak the text simply, and request that he /she continues to place his/her hand on mid waist or stomach to center the breath.

2: Sitting: Rocking forward and back: Allow rhythm to establish itself.

Hints

To Make the text their OWN

1: Paraphrase text. Put text in writing in their own words. It is important that they are quite specific in this assignment, Replacing each phrase of the text with their own words and meanings.

2: Ask them to liken aspects of the text to specific experiences in their own lives.

3. After punctuation is established with text, it is important to speak the text thought (Breath) by thought (breath), in order to connect the text in a deeper way.

4. Scene partners seated back to back on the floor speaking the text, phrase by phrase or quatrain by quatrain: talking as though one friend to another.

5: It sometimes helps to ask the student questions such as: *To whom are you speaking?* *Why do you think that you are saying that?* *You went where?* *when?* *why?*

(Questions of this type, even though seemingly very obvious, will be of great assistance in encouraging a student's "ownership "of a given text).

BEGINNING STUDENTS OFTEN TREAT SHAKESPEARE AS AN ALIEN FOREIGN LANGUAGE.

Encourage them to make their speech as unaffected as possible by asking them to speak in their natural voices rather than with any British accent. (On the other hand, interestingly, it sometimes helps students, as an early rehearsal technique, to speak the text with some sort of pseudo American dialect e.g.. Brooklynese, American Southern, Texan, etc.)

This frequently reduces any over-reverent sense of caution with the language and introduces a sense of fun.

Note: It sometimes helps students to direct their speech(s) to a specific person or persons, or in a soliloquy, to direct their speech as if in collusion, to an audience and letting them in on their secret and/or sharing their innermost thoughts.

Once the Lines are Learned:

Both Cicely Berry's book *The Actor and his Text* and Kristen Linklater's *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice* are treasure troves in providing numerous exercises which are helpful in making the text more personal for the student.

A few suggestions from Berry, Linklater and Corrigan

1: Encourage the student to explore the spaces in the room while speaking the text. Might play hide and seek, peek through key hole, play tag, hide behind others in class, etc.

2: Speak the speech while "writing" a letter or in journal.

3. Speak the speech while holding another class member's hand and speaking directly to that person.

4. Student attempts to break out of a circle (composed of class members) while speaking the text. (Student must remember to breath deeply while doing this exercise. If the speaker starts to shout he/she will lose all inner connection with the deeper reality of the text.)

5. *Other action possibilities*: Set up an activity: put on makeup, eat, knead dough, wash face, sweeping floor, sculpting , slouching, walk as though ten feet tall, creeping or crouching, stalking, shrinking, tearing up an old telephone directory, etc. Have student engage in one of these activities or adopt one of these states of being while speaking the text. Then have student stand quietly and speak the text.

Note: Waving good-by from a train station while recalling other personal good-bys), or punching an object or wringing a towel are sometimes quite helpful to a student.

6. Draw (or mime drawing) an immense picture while speaking the text.

7. Jog while speaking the text.

8. Select words from the text that reinforce the meaning. The class can respond by stamping, clapping, singing those words or images that continually recur.

Note: All of the above suggestions are designed to reduce self consciousness and to help mobilize the students so that they are free to truly "discover" the text for themselves.

Technical Problems:

It is important that students stress only the most important words in a line. It is generally a waste of time to stress personal pronouns and/or highly charged adjectives.

Student actors may need frequent reminders that adjectives generally speak for themselves without receiving any additional punch. That restraint frequently frees actors to dig a little deeper in order to find out the true meaning of the line.

Urge students not to drop the ends of lines, particularly in long speeches when there is clearly more to come. It usually helps , at first, to have students "throw out their arm" (as if pitching) as they deliver the line.

This latter technique helps them open up their voices. If they continue to drop their pitch or to mumble the last word of the line, simply have them "pitch the ball" as they speak, so that the last word of the thought or line, is tossed up and out to a class member or an actor a distance away.

Sight reading: A few techniques

Seating; It is best to have all participants seated in a circle, particularly at first. Encourage students to face specifically across the room when speaking each line. It helps at first to go phrase by phrase, from one person to the next.

Eye contact is crucial and is easily obtainable even with sight reading. Encourage the students to "lift the text off the page".

Go around the circle and have students read phrase to phrase or sentence to sentence or even paragraph to paragraph. Repeat this process several times,

Experiment: Sing the phrase, or whisper, or hum the phrase and then sing it. OR throw the phrase across the room to another student, or call out the phrase, or run across the room calling out the phrase. or ..

Add a physical action while speaking several phrases, i.e., chopping wood, rowing a boat, etc.

After requesting the student to speak the line in an extravagant way, then ask the student to speak the simply but with sincerity. The reading or acting usually will be vastly improved.

Other Reference Books:

Freeing the Natural Voice, Kristen Linklater, Applause Books *Voice and The Actor*, Cicely Berry, Applause Books

SHURTLEFF MEETS SHAKESPEARE

Summarized by Kate Pogue Houston Community College Central College for Shakespeare and the Language of Performance Seminar Folger Shakespeare Institute 1992-1993

An application of the principles presented and developed by Micheal Shurtleff in his book AUDITION published by Bantam Books 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10103 Copyright 1978

INTRODUCTION:

The twelve Guideposts Michael Shurtleff codifies in his groundbreaking book AUDITION give students first a series of principles and a vocabulary for analyzing acting performances, and second, a ready way to enliven their performances in class.

The Guideposts are summarized below along with a monologue from Shakespeare marked showing how each guidepost might be applied.

This introduction should encourage teachers and students to obtain a copy of AUDITION as the guideposts are discussed there in much greater detail.

Traditional Shakespearean study is given over to the vocal interpretation of the words, sounds, rhythms of the text. The Shurtleff Guideposts enable students to express the rich motivational, relational and emotional subtext in non-verbal actions that set the words in meaningful context. Shakespeare was preeminently a man of the theatre where the non-verbal is a crucial part of the text.

So, let's look at

THE GUIDEPOSTS:

Relationship; Conflict; The Moment Before; Humor; Opposites; Discoveries; Communication and Competition; Importance; Events; Place; Game Playing and Role Playing; Mystery and Secret -- and a final addition Mr. Shurtleff made after the book was published: Mischievousness.

1. RELATIONSHIP All good drama is about changing relationships. In defining the

relationships, first identify the facts: Lady Capulet is Juliet's mother; Baptista is Bianca's father. Then, and much more importantly, identify the emotional state of the relationship at each given moment in the play: Katherine is Bianca's sister and she hates her; Celia is Rosalind's cousin and would do anything for her. The fact of the relationship often stays the same -- the emotional component of the relationship changes throughout the play.

Most important to note is that plays are successful when characters are frustrated in their attempts to find or sustain love. Ask 'where is the love in the relationship?' One of Shylock's tragedies is that love, for him, is invested in his money. Shakespeare is brilliant always in setting up complex loving needs, desires and frustrations for his characters. We're not interested in characters that are just angry or who just express hatred. Immediately we want to follow the stories of characters seeking love - even when the search for love is twisted, frustrated or thwarted.

2. CONFLICT

Stanislavski taught actors to analyze a character's super-objective, that is to ask what a character wants that drives him to action throughout the play. Michael Shurtleff has rephrased this expression of motivation to the more dynamic: 'what is my character fighting for?' Once you answer that question it's readily apparent that characters in Shakespeare plays are fighting (often literally) for opposite goals. Out of this comes the conflict.

Once the primary goal has been identified, then identify what each person is fighting for in each scene. Make it the strongest most positive choice you can to vitalize the scene. Don't let yourself say 'Oh, Iago kind of wants to make trouble.' Instead say 'Iago feels betrayed. He's fighting for vengeance. He's determined to destroy Othello.'

Shakespeare builds such powerful conflicts into his work - delight in finding them all.

3. THE MOMENT BEFORE

Something has happened to each character the moment before he or she appears on the scene. The more specific and important you make your choice of what this 'something' is the more dynamic and interesting will be your attack on the scene. Often Shakespeare gives you the general 'moment before' as when Casca enters from the Colliseum where he's just seen Caesar being offered the crown. If Casca adds to the general idea a specific image --if just as he enters the actor imagines some doltish Roman citizen cheering for Caesar breathing garlic into Casca's face, for instance, -- Casca will enter with increased and specific outrage. If Katherine waits for her entrance into the wooing scene and just as she hears her cue she imagines seeing Bianca looking around a doorway and mocking her by sticking her tongue out at her, Katherine will enter with genuine wrath at being mocked or manipulated to encounter Petruchio.

Though the playwright may (or may not) suggest the general moment before, the actor must always create a strong, specific moment before out of his own imagination to give himself a real impetus to enter the scene.

4. HUMOR

Humor is not just telling jokes (luckily, since much of the content of Shakespeare's jokes are lost to modern readers). Humor is a way human beings have of dealing with the most difficult moments of life, and with the most

difficult relationships. Find and highlight humorous moments: Hamlet with Yorick's skull; Mercutio, mortally wounded, telling his friends if they ask for him tomorrow they will find him a 'grave man'; the Porter and the witches in MACBETH; the fool in LEAR. Don't be afraid to clown with the comedic material Shakespeare has provided - it's there to be imaginatively incorporated into character and relationship. It's often the unusual, unexpected, non-verbal expression, action or characterization that sets off tragedy and that lights up comedy.

5. OPPOSITES

A difficult concept to understand, the playing of opposites can be the actor's most useful tool. Looking back at CONFLICT, above, realize that a character has an incredibly powerful basic drive (Hamlet's to avenge his father's death) -- but an almost equally powerful opposite drive that keeps him from doing what he most wants to do. In the simplest terms Hamlet is fighting to avenge his father's death and fighting to avoid the actions he must take to avenge his father's death. To avoid doing something is negative. So long as the opposite is expressed negatively it's not useful for an actor. Turn the opposite drive to a positive expression: instead of 'fighting to avoid action' say Hamlet's opposite drive is fighting to prove to himself without a doubt that the ghost is right -- he doesn't want to kill Claudius if the ghost is a minister of Satan. Making sure the ghost is right keeps Hamlet from achieving his primary goal until the very end of the play.

Petruchio is fighting to tame a shrew, in order to have a happy married state and to prove he can do it; but he's also fighting to have an equal partner, one he can be proud to show off and to share his life with. Viola is fighting to maintain her disguise and fighting to win Orsino's love.

HUMOR, above, is another way of expressing the opposites in a text. The wittiest and saddest lines in Shakespeare are often close to each other -- play each with its full emotional quality and you will feel the power of opposites. Each quality makes the other stronger.

6. DISCOVERIES

In each scene a character will make an important discovery - about the situation, about another character, about himself. Registering these discoveries is one of the actor's most important tasks because nothing gives an audience more pleasure, nothing draws an audience into the action, more than witnessing a character making a discovery.

How does an actor do this? Discoveries are exhibited non-verbally. We know from cartoons what human beings do when faced with a surprise, making a discovery: the jaw drops, the eyes open wide, there's an intake of breath, the eyes light up or show horror, the head moves back and forth, the body freezes, the hands rise in a gesture, etcetera. In a cartoon, a light bulb often appears above the head of the character making the discovery -- it's that moment the actor wants to capture. The more you play out the moment of discovery with nonverbal facial expression and physical movement before you speak, the more interesting the verbal reaction will be when the words are finally uttered.

In every scene you analyze or attempt to perform make as many discoveries as you possibly can. A great actor makes big discoveries, small discoveries, every second he is on stage. Discoveries are the primary means of staying 'in the moment'. They give immediacy and vitality to any scene. In finely detailed acting very thought, every phrase, every line is the result of a discovery.

7. COMMUNICATION AND COMPETITION

When two characters are together in a situation, if a play is well written (and we know Shakespeare's are!), each one has something important to contribute. When the other character is talking, realize that you are interacting with him/her so intently that you always want to get a word in, too. The listening character must constantly be trying to communicate thoughts, reactions, inner dialogue - ready, eager to interrupt the speaker, dying to make a vital point. When the audience feels this communication and competition their interest in the scene is heightened from the urgency communicated by the actors - and especially by the non-speaking character.

8. IMPORTANCE

Everything onstage is of life or death importance. The life of the soul or the spirit, the happiness of an individual, is as crucial as physical life. Make the stakes high. Nothing is unimportant. The answer to 'What's at stake?' is always 'My happiness, my future, my whole life.' Every move, every decision a character in a Shakespeare play makes is vital to the outcome -- stress and overstress the importance of what each character is doing and see how it lifts the energy and the vitality of the scene.

9. EVENTS

Look for the many many moments in a Shakespearean play where a physical action (sometimes in the very middle of a speech) is the turning point in a relationship. Events are physical actions that change relationship. They are tied to momentous discoveries. The moment you determine what the main event of a scene is, you are free to stop the dialogue entirely and act out the event, for it's the event that gives impact and meaning to the text. A primary example is the moment Hermione comes to life at the end of A WINTER'S TALE. How ineffective this scene would be if the actors just raced through the words. How crucial it is to build the moment with silences and pauses of anticipation. Isabella's reaction to the Duke proposing marriage in MEASURE FOR MEASURE is an event of like importance -- only here no indication is made whether she accepts him or not and consequently the playing out of this event has become a crucial point of interest for any production of that play. The entrance of Rosalind and Celia and Touchstone into the Forest of Arden can be a major event.

In every Shakespeare play, in every scene, there is an event that is the climax of the scene. Find these events and see what it's like to play them out fully, extensively, intensely on a non-verbal level before the lines are said. For the lines only represent the character's reaction to the event. The more imaginatively and fully the event is acted, the more interesting and rewarding the words will be.

10. PLACE

Always identify and know where a scene takes place. But more importantly, identify next what the emotional relationship is between the characters and the place. How does each one of them feel about where they are? How does this change during the course of the scene? Enjoy revealing physically your character's reaction to place -- palace, dungeon, tavern, throne room, courtyard, bedroom, forest, seashore. Include in this guidepost TIME and WEATHER also. The more characters react to where they are the richer and more believable the scene becomes.

11. GAME PLAYING AND ROLE PLAYING

Richard II is the 'player king' and he loves playing the role. Petruchio plays games with Katherine so skillfully that she finally agrees to play, learns the rules, and plays the game he sets up as well as he does. Know not only who your character is, but what role and what game they have chosen to play from moment to moment: are you playing the role of leader? father? good son? rebellious subject? servant? master? king? subject? good wife? bad wife? What game-playing will get you what you need and want? How well or how badly do you play the game? All of these are strategies human beings use to get what they're fighting for. The more you recognize what you're doing the better you will be at doing it, and the richer a human portrait you will create in playing your character

12. MYSTERY AND SECRET

The creation of mystery is a powerful theatrical device. As Shakespeare is a master of it, the actor must recognize it and fulfill this demand of the text. Look, for instance, at the choosing of the caskets in *MERCHANT OF VENICE*, at the masque scene in *THE TEMPEST*, at the opening scene of *HAMLET*. Characters can create or carry with them a sense of mystery - the Fool in *KING LEAR*, the Soothsayer in *JULIUS CAESAR*, the witches in *MACBETH*. Whole plays can be permeated by mystery - *MACBETH*, *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*. Mystery is often created by characters who have a secret from other characters in the play. Shakespeare uses the soliloquy to share character secrets with the audience: Richard III loves sharing his secret plots; Petruchio shares the secret of how he will approach Kate; Viola shares her anguish and confusion. The audience then wants to see what happens to these people when they carry their secrets into scenes with other characters. A consciousness of the secret - playing it, revealing it, concealing it - is an important part of the actor's work.

13. MISCHIEVOUSNESS

Surely this additional guidepost was triggered by a character like Puck - or Oberon - in *MIDSUMMERNIGHT'S DREAM* - whose joy is in creating mischief. Shakespearean comedic characters delight in stirring things up. Revealing the joy of mischief-making (even mischief as evil as Iago's, Richard III's, or Edmond's) is a key to Shakespearean performance in many roles.

APPLICATION OF THE GUIDEPOSTS TO SHAKESPEAREAN TEXT:

PHEBE from *AS YOU LIKE IT*, Act III Scene 5

CONFLICT: Phebe is fighting for the fulfillment of her romantic vision, her dream of love, and her self-image.

RELATIONSHIP: Phebe has just fallen desperately in love with Ganymede; she despises Sylvius, but also loves him for the power she has over him.

MOMENT BEFORE: Phebe feels the blood rush to her cheeks as Ganymede exits; she turns and sees Sylvius, staring at her with his jaw dropping open.

ROLE PLAYING: Phebe starts to play the role of the woman unaffected by a handsome man.

PHEBE: Think not I love him, though I ask for him. 'Tis but a peevish boy; (DISCOVERY!) Yet he talks well. (DISCOVERY) But what care I for words. (DISCOVERY) Yet words do well. When he that speaks them pleases those that hear. (MYSTERY) It is a pretty youth. (DISCOVERY) Not very pretty. (DISCOVERY) But sure he's proud. (DISCOVERY) and yet his pride becomes him. (DISCOVERY) He'll make a proper man. (DISCOVERY) The best thing in him (HUMOR) Is his complexion.

(RELATIONSHIP - LOVE) And faster than his tongue did make offence, his eye did heal it up. (DISCOVERY) He is not very tall. (DISCOVERY) Yet for his years he's tall. His leg is but so. And yet, 'tis well. (HUMOR, OPPOSITE). There was a pretty redness in his lip, (DISCOVERY) A little riper and more lusty red than that mixed in his cheek. (MYSTERY, SECRET) 'Twas just the difference betwixt the constant red and mingled damask. (ROLE PLAYING) There be some women, Sylvius, had they marked him (PLACE - Phebe could pluck petals from flower, then let it drop). In parcels as I did, would have gone near fall in love with him; but, for my part I love him not nor hate him not. (DISCOVERY) And yet I have more cause to hate him than to love him. (IMPORTANCE) For what had he to do to chide at me? (DISCOVERY, EVENT) He said my eyes were black and my hair black and, now I am rememb'ed, scorned at me. I marvel why I answered not again. But that's all one: omittance is no quittance. (DISCOVERY, EVENT) I'll write to him a very taunting letter, (DISCOVERY, ROLE-PLAYING, GAME-PLAYING) And thou shalt bear it. (OPPOSITE) (GAME PLAYING) Wilt thou, Silvius?

IMPORTANCE: Phebe feels if she doesn't get Ganymede she'll die. The letter will insure Ganymede will pay attention to her.

COMMUNICATION AND COMPETITION: If Sylvius keeps trying to interrupt Phebe's comments, Phebe can ruthlessly cut him off and override him in her desperation to make her discoveries known.