

Review Article

Voice and the human system, the canary in the coal mine: examining the benefits of holistic performance practice

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Abstract

Through the voice pedagogy of practitioners such as Kristin Linklater, Patsy Rodenburg, and Catherine Fitzmaurice, the role of voice as a barometer for the health of the human system emerges. In working on voice with people from varied cultural and linguistic origins, the undeniable truth of Kristen Linklater's assertion that to free the voice is to free the person, becomes subjectively apparent. As a third-culture person, I'm curious about the impact of people's cultural/environmental context on their ability not only to perform well, but also to experience the joy of performance. Each person has common and unique challenges. I've discovered that the most direct way for me to help business professionals and artists to excel in presenting, performing and sharing their message, is to start with the voice itself and work outwards from there. Shine a light on the voice and you discover what has been blocked and oppressed. Unlock your voice and you unlock your full potential to achieve your highest goals. Voice is not only physical, voice is agency, integrity, confidence and empowerment. This article attempts to concretely address subjectively perceived truths which give rise to such hyperbole: an examination of the 'how' and the 'what' and even, the 'why'. Firstly, by defining holistic and highlighting the importance of the holistic and somatic (the study of how our bodies, thoughts and actions interact) in interdisciplinary performance training, concluding with a phenomenological framing of voice as the canary in the coal mine. It will be noted that significant research in the field of psychology identifies particular vocal habits as expressions of trauma, reflective of certain psychological mindsets, or otherwise signifying dis-ease within the human system. The observable connection between the autonomic and sympathetic nervous systems, and the physiological and psychological underpinnings of the voice, will be explored.

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Introduction

Defining Holistic

It is a great paradox that while science explains the connective workings of life systems on our planet (for example biosystems and ecosystems), the human system as a whole, comprising all named aspects of the self, and the individual's interaction with its environment, is decentralized in many disciplines. "The super specialization of scientific disciplines

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has created a silos mentality-leading to a myopic understanding of knowledge, and compromising our ability to deal with the most obstinate problems.” (Patwardhan, Mutalik & Tillu, 2015: pg 67)

Thankfully, how we as human beings perceive and manage our problems is in a constant state of flux. The importance of holistic approaches to problem solving and positive transformation is a topic which currently receives significant investigation. That the word ‘holistic’ has emerged as both necessary to, and distinct from mainstream approaches to medicine and education, underlines how many of our established systems have long failed to accommodate an entire picture of interrelated elements.

The word holistic is rooted in the Greek word *holos* which means ‘whole’. Holistic is an adjective which means to view with an entire perspective the thing being described. The Oxford dictionary describes the word as a philosophy “characterized by comprehension of the parts of something as intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole.” (Oxford Languages Online, 2022) This is acknowledged when we say that a thing is “the sum of its parts”.

Silos vs Holistic: A Case Study

Zooming out in an attempt to see the entire picture is a useful lens through which to view one’s own experience. Admittedly, it is impossible to be impartial. However, when we research phenomena that we perceive as being outside of ourselves, we can bring bias to bear even more insidiously. Standing apparently outside of the subject matter, our biases may not be obvious to us. On the other hand, when we engage in personal practices for research purposes, the bias is clear to all.

Holistic approaches can reframe bias as a tool for further discovery. Holism is uniquely positioned to declaw the insidious effects of subjectivity and embrace its potential: the personal perspective as a source of useful information for understanding the human system. It is difficult to undertake a study on performance processes without acknowledging and embracing the phenomenological: the perception and felt experience of participants.

From within this practice-as-research framework, here is a case study in which I myself am the subject: hereafter referred to as ‘she’, ‘her’, ‘the woman’ or ‘the patient’. This personal study is included to exemplify the importance of holism in addressing chronic problems, as well as the implications of holistic understanding for the performer.

Myself as ‘The Patient’

The subject in question is a woman who seeks help from her doctor for repeated ankle sprains. She is referred to an orthopedist by her GP. The orthopedist x-rays the ankle, palpates the ankle and does a thorough examination of the ankle. No other part of the body is addressed (silos mentality). The orthopedist diagnoses lax ligaments, which have led to repeated ankle sprains. This is both a plausible and a circular diagnosis: the ligaments are primarily weak due to the repeated sprains. Ankle exercises are prescribed and undertaken by the patient quite diligently. However, the woman continues to sprain her ankle with increasing frequency.

The woman seeks assistance from a number of holistic health professionals:

- a former dancer and PT, who is also certified in Aston-Patterning
- a Rolfing practitioner
- an expert in the Hendrickson Method

Through these holistic approaches the woman comes to understand that her ankle is weak because of postural habits and habitual gait patterns. These approaches yield answers, which subsequently provoke further investigation. For example, why is the woman’s habitual posture and gait patterning dysfunctional? The answer emerges that her pelvis is out of alignment.

The patient is a performer and highly active. Taking her exercise habits into account as well as the woman’s entire medical history, it is surmised that the pelvis is consistently out of alignment due to natural injuries resulting from the birth of her first and then second child. Further, that muscles in the pelvis have been compensating for damaged

ligaments. Likewise compensating for these shortened muscles in the pelvis, muscles in the lower leg have become overtaxed.

When parts of the body are injured, neural pathways can become disrupted. In simple terms, the connection between the brain and the affected limb is weakened, in this case contributing to misplacement of the foot and spraining the joint. Psychologically, the woman has developed trauma around this repeated event. When she lies down at night, the experience of spraining her ankle replays over and over in her mind. We can say that her entire system has been conditioned to continue to sprain her ankle.

“The salvation, then, is to be found in the body. Most people, Levine notes, think of trauma as a ‘mental problem’, even as a brain disorder. However, trauma is something that also happens in the body. In fact, he shows, it happens first and foremost in the body.... The body initiates, he says, and the mind follows.” (Levine & Maté, 2010 pg xii)

The woman begins to work with a Pelvic Physical Therapist (Pelvic PT). Early on in the treatment process, she experiences strong emotion when her pelvis is being worked on, leading to tears. Subjectively, it appears to her that deep emotion which has been trapped in the pelvis, is being released. Her practitioner informs her that in her practical experience, this is a common response to Pelvic PT. The pelvic imbalance is the physical source of the ankle sprains, but strong emotions are part of this situation.

The primary origins of her ankle sprains started with birth trauma. Though it is a natural event, giving birth is traumatic. On every level we are unprepared for birth: “If we can use effective and personalized exercise/therapeutic programs to prepare people for more positive outcomes prior to a total knee replacement, we can do the same in birth spaces. Having a good understanding of how to breathe properly during birth, how to lengthen your pelvic floor muscles, appropriate hip flexibility and strength, can all help to reduce musculoskeletal injury.” (Bachman, 2020) Musculoskeletal injury as typical to the birthing process, is not only known but expected by expert medical professionals. Yet patient education in this arena is clearly in its infancy.

From a psychological standpoint, what did it mean to this woman to be a mother for the first time? How did her husband respond to this event? How did her life change after the birth? Did she suddenly find herself in situations where she had to repress difficult emotion? Everything is connected. The woman concludes that separation is an illusion.

“This research has shown that different ankle positions can influence PFM [Pelvic Floor Muscle] contraction by changes made in pelvic positioning and surrounding muscle co-activation, which means the ankle bone is indirectly connected to the pelvic floor!” (Bachman, 2020) The pelvis and the ankles are interrelated parts of the Human System and they “speak to” and affect each other.

Outcomes

Before working with the Pelvic PT, I was spraining my ankle every 2-3 months. Working within holistic frameworks was key for proper diagnosis. The practices themselves were relieving and continued to develop my own body awareness, but it wasn't until working with a Pelvic PT that I was able to transform this particular situation. Pelvic PT accesses pelvic floor muscles deep in the pelvis. None of the other practices I encountered addressed these muscles. For the last two years I have had no further ankle sprains. I have continued with the Hendrickson Method, an entire body approach, as well as the Pelvic PT.

The Pelvic-Throat Connection

Relating to voice practice, there is a physiological connection between the pelvis and the throat. Pushing down emotion can cause us to tighten the muscles in the pelvis and also the throat. If we tense our throat muscles, the pelvic floor tends to tighten in sympathetic response, and vice versa.

Voice work at RADA² under the tutelage of Sue Cowan often included deep squats (Linklater, 2006) in which we were instructed to breathe through our vaginas, or if the group was mixed gender, “breathe through your bums”. At UC Davis³, Linklater voice teacher Lisa Anne Porter, would likewise guide us into this pose and suggest that we had “huge butt lungs” through which to concentrate our breathing. There was a general sense of amusement. No one appeared shocked by these instructions. We were learning that imagination can be a powerful aid to guide the body into correct placement.

“In the vocal education process, analogy (simulation-inference), imagination and metaphors are used very creatively in vocal education lessons by many vocal educators.... Simulation and imagery are often used to reach the goal from the simple to the difficult, from the known to the unknown, that is.... The main purpose is to make use of the known in order to understand the unknown and to start from familiar events while explaining difficult concepts.” (Kar, 2020pg 10).

It was not until I worked with a Pelvic PT that I received scientifically verifiable information relating to the connection between throat and pelvis.

“Countless times while working with my pelvic dysfunction patients, I have witnessed that while releasing their fascial restrictions vaginally, the patient’s jaw will be moving ever so slightly from side to side, presumably shifting to find its new home and mirror its counterpart.... Despite their being on opposite ends of the body, a few studies done by dentists and physiotherapists show evidence that improvement in mobility of the jaw can somehow unleash tension in the pelvis and vice versa.... Fascia is the connective tissue that supports and connects every cell, muscle fiber, nerve, blood vessel, and organ. It provides support and mobility for our entire body. A fascial line can be traced from the jaw down into the pelvis.” (Forsberg, 2018).

Our entire breathing system resides between the throat and the pelvis. Voice is created when we bring our vocal folds together and exhale air across the folds, causing vibration. This vibration manifests as the physical voice. We cannot vibrate the vocal folds without air. Without breath, there is no voice. Breath is the engine of the voice.

The Holistic Performer

In this story/case history, the role of suppressed psychological voice is merely hinted at: its impact on the nervous system and the physical voice. Before framing the voice as the proverbial canary in the coalmine, it is helpful to contextualize performance training practices. Due to the complex nature of the voice (in that vocal production engages many interrelated systems within the human system), most voice trainers naturally inhabit holistic spaces, centrally of their own making (techniques, ethos and methods).

It is notable that many languages use the word voice in multiple ways. For example: “My voice is hoarse” (physical voice); “give voice to” (express an idea); “I felt shut down; my voice was not welcome” (the speaker indicates that their opinions were disregarded or ignored; expressing a perception of being treated as a subordinate or second-class citizen); “All voices are welcome here!” (the input, ideas, desires, thoughts of all as expressed aloud or in written form). The word voice innately expresses aspects of mind, body, and emotion. Voice is not one thing. Voice is a sum of complex parts.

The Holistic Performer’s Skillset Can Be Likened to a Toolbox

“...when I first started working in America, I felt that the focus was on the feelings of the characters and not on how the language itself physically and muscularly expresses the feelings. Using Method acting, actors were giving the audience emotions rather than the reasoning behind the emotions.” - Cicely Berry (Ellis, 2010).

² The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London where I was a 3-year diploma student from 1991-1994

³ I earned my MFA here from 2011-2013

Whilst teaching at Berkeley Repertory School of Theater in Berkeley CA, I discovered that many of my American students were missing the following tools: movement, voice and somatic spoken text analysis.⁴ All of these modalities are important to embodied theatrical performance: that which engages the thoughts, bodies and emotions of the performer (and thus the audience) in equal measure. People who take classes at this school come from a range of backgrounds and circumstances. Some are starting their acting training a little late in life, while working in other professions during the day. For some of these students, acting is a serious second career.

Those who took my classes on embodied performance did so because they knew that they were physically limited onstage. They would say to me, “I don’t know what to do with my hands”. Or, “I studied Shakespeare with a teacher who told me I should stand still while I spoke the text.” Or, “I don’t feel the emotion right now. How can I perform?” Acting studios teaching the acting pedagogy of one practitioner abound in the U.S., and are doing their level best to fill a noticeable training gap. These students had taken acting or improv classes but had no experience of embodied training methods.

Actors aim to express the human condition; from this point of view, the benefits of multiplicity are evident. The pedagogy at RADA in London, where I trained as an actor, drew from the idea that each actor should be exposed to many tools and, most in depth. Our training served as a primer inciting numerous methods of working, designed to instill in us the attitudes of the lifelong learner. I have yet to come across a silos mentality when it comes to the following modalities: movement, voice or somatic text analysis. No one expects any of these in isolation to be the be all and end all of acting training, and it must be noted that these three categories contain a multiplicity of methods.

Linklater, Rodenburg, Fitzmaurice®, Laban Movement, and Alexander Technique all promote “being in the body” or kinesthetic body awareness. Studying these techniques at RADA impacted my approach to life, as well as to performance. Through the Alexander Technique, I became aware not only of my own posture but also the movement habits of other people. This opened up an entire world for me, allowing me not only to notice traits, states, dis-ease, and mood shifts in others, but also to observe my own physiological experience.

To this day, this awareness empowers me to change what isn’t working for me in terms of my movement habits. As ‘the patient’ with the ankle sprains, I was truly fortunate to have had training in body awareness, via comprehensive performance training. The multiplicity of movement and voice practices at RADA, ultimately empowered me to recover from injury and change negative postural habits that come about through habitual use or trauma. I entered college leading with my mind. Through the training process, I learned to “sink my mind into my body”⁵.

Living in the body includes pain and dis-ease. There is no avoiding it. When the body is in pain, the brain reacts by ‘distancing’ from the affected part, so as to mediate the pain. This distancing from the injured area can lead to further injury. The more ease we can have in our bodies, the easier it is to be present in our bodies. Being present in our bodies is key to moment to moment experiencing, which is an important component of virtuosic performance.

“The voice is the physical, emotional and psychological articulation of the moment, and likewise, when all parts of the actor come together through breath, sound and movement, the impact on the audience is palpable.” (Mellian, 2015 pg iv).

The Body Responds to Our Emotions

In practical terms, being present in the body means becoming highly aware of sensation in the body, which can be quite uncomfortable at first. Most of us do not commonly reside in our bodies, and most of us carry unconscious muscle tension. Invariably, when we first “sink our minds into our bodies”, we become aware of physical discomfort.

⁴ Somatic spoken text analysis is a phrase used in this paper to describe methods pioneered by Cicely Berry

⁵ A phrase attributed to Ilan Riechel, head of movement at RADA, whose career there spanned at least 30 years

“[Since] the industrial...revolution... The function of the body is merely to transport the ‘I think, therefore I am’ person from one place to another and to organize its fuel input and output. The body has become a vehicle for a ‘self’ that lives above it.” (Linklater, 1992 pg 4)

Though a good deal of physical tension is created by habitual physical activity, the muscles of our bodies are also highly responsive to emotions, both our own and that of others. “The voice is incredibly sensitive to any feelings of unease,” said Cicely Berry. “In everyday life, if you are slightly nervous or not quite on top of the situation, this condition reacts on the voice. The basic feeling of fear puts all the defense mechanisms into action, and the result is tension, particularly in the upper part of the body, the neck, and the shoulders.” (Mellian, 2015 pg ix).

Clenching the jaw, raising the shoulders, and clenching our bottoms, are all reactive muscle responses originating in feeling states. None of these responses produce virtuous outcomes in terms of the human system. Psychologically, these responses can be identified with an attempt to make the body (‘the self’ in the world) smaller. Unlike insects, we wear our bones on the inside. Lacking a protective physical shield, we use muscle tension to defend. Making the external self smaller and tighter, represents a psychophysical attempt to avoid being penetrated, by unpleasant external phenomena.

Our breathing apparatus, powered by muscular movement, is a key player in both the sympathetic and the autonomic nervous systems. The magic of the breathing apparatus is that it functions both autonomously and responsively. We breathe without thinking about it, and our breathing responds to emotion and physical exertion without the command of conscious thought.

Yet we can also instruct our breath. We can change our breathing rhythms by practicing conscious breathing techniques. With practice, we can instigate fuller rib expansion as we breathe in. We can breathe out with high pressure, or time the release of our breath. We can speak louder by taking a deep breath, opening the throat and placing the voice in a particular way. We can choose to gasp, sigh or yawn (and these things can also happen reflexively). We can pretend to laugh or cry, by changing our breathing patterns and adding vocalization. There is no voice without breath.

“Till you realize that the whole basis of your life - respiration – is not only the basis of your physical existence, but that respiration plus rhythm forms the foundations of all your creative work, your work on rhythm and breathing will never be carried out in full consciousness, that is to say, as it should be carried out, in a state of such complete concentration as to turn your creative work into ‘inspiration’.” (Stanislavsky, 1973 pg 168).

The Inhabiting Technique

When I taught and studied at the University of California at Davis, my cohort and I focused on practice-based research for performance arts. Performance practice always began with getting up on our feet, moving, speaking, improvising. As actors we practiced Stanislavski’s system of Active Analysis, which also begins with physical exploration. As dancers we wrote movement scores based on Laban’s effort actions, starting with improvisation. As speakers, we spent hours doing Linklater voice exercises. These were framed by our colleagues and advisors as lab experiments in performance technique.

At Berkeley Rep School of Theatre, I aimed to recreate this lab experiment atmosphere. Being afraid of getting things wrong, kills creativity. Saying to my students, this is a lab experiment, freed them from being too focused on getting everything right. In order to help my students to become open and curious, I focused on getting them out of their heads and into their bodies.

Out of this process, The Inhabiting Technique was created. Inhabit is another way of saying to live somewhere. We inhabit our house, we inhabit a room, we inhabit our bodies. The basic idea is that through fully inhabiting our bodies, we can gently begin to inhabit the world of emotion, moment to moment.

Rather than thinking that we must pull the emotion out of ourselves, each emotion becomes a place we can visit on a map. This concept helps people to be less afraid of emotion and helps them to move from one emotion to another. Flexibility of emotion is important for actors, particularly those who are performing Shakespeare. Becoming an

“athlete of emotion”⁶ is a goal of the Inhabiting Technique. The best performers display a mercurial ability to visit each emotion deeply, and to move from one emotion to another, very quickly.⁷

The central premise of the Inhabiting Technique is that just as emotion can be triggered by thought and subsequently expressed in the body (the basis for method acting approaches), we can reverse this feedback loop and use the body (in collaboration with the breathing apparatus) to instigate emotion, and spark spontaneous, imaginative expression. The body acts, the mind and emotions receive and respond.

The Inhabiting Technique aims to assist performers to deliver fully engaged, embodied performances, in which all aspects of self work together, rather than the body being “a vehicle for the self that lives above it.” (Linklater, 1992 pg 4) Once the performer knows what to do in order to activate themselves kinesthetically, they are empowered to enter an elliptical world in which body, intellect and emotion work in turn to trigger each other.

It is noticeably difficult for people to live in the moment whilst we are conscious and awake. Our minds frequently travel away from our present into the future, the past, the many worlds of thought and the mind. Whilst asleep however, our dreams can give us the experience of being present to each event as it happens in the dream landscape. When asleep it is as if the consciousness differentiates and distances from the body, whilst the body quietly carries on its own autonomous functioning.

It is paradoxical to note that heightened physical experiences involving pain and pleasure also have the effect of putting us soundly in the present moment. More peacefully, we can also come into a sense of presence through the breath. I have seen hundreds of students do this, and hundreds of students verbally identify this experience, whilst engaging in Linklater’s breath into voice exercises.

The Inhabiting Technique: ‘Nuts & Bolts’

Inhabiting is based on techniques I learned while I was an acting student at RADA in London (and beyond), including Laban Movement, the work of Cicely Berry, Richard Schechner, Linklater Voice and Text Work, Grotowski and Stanislavski’s Active Analysis.

In the Inhabiting Technique, a landscape of emotion is represented by nine distinct places positioned adjacent to each other in the playing space/rehearsal room. These places are called Habitations, and are designated and labeled by participants to represent nine iconic emotions. Habitation means the place where we live. Exploring the Habitations occurs in steps.

In the first stage, students stand in the Habitations and create expressionistic statues with their bodies to represent the emotion belonging to the landscape (Habitation) they are currently residing in. In the next phase, students focus on breath, recreating the breathing pattern of each emotion. In the next step, movement is added, then vocalization without words and then finally words are added. Movement, breath, voice, and words all come together in the final stages. Students can practice scenes and monologues within the Habitation framework.

This is just one of many exercises students engage in.⁸ Inhabiting is most accurately described as a mindset or an attitude, fostered by an instructor who initiates a wide variety of exercises which emphasize moment to moment experiencing via the body, through breath, vocal exercises and physical action. The technique itself can encompass anything that positions the body as a starting place for exploring emotion, whilst engaging the receptive (rather than the active) power of intellect. In this framework, the thinking mind becomes the observer, listener and facilitator, rather than the executive directing instigator. Any exercise which begins with somatic exploration can potentially foster this learning mindset.

⁶ A phrase coined by Antonin Artaud

⁷ This is a crucial skill for performing Shakespeare, and an antidote to a particular plague of generalization that exists when it comes to performing these texts

⁸ Habitations are based on Rasaboxes as described/created by Richard Schechner

Inhabiting is also based on the premise that emotion is literally held within the body, and that this emotion can flow outwards and be released.

For example, one person may identify that grief is held in their chest and fear in their pelvis. Certain movements can allow feelings like joy to flow, and so on. Engaging the breath in specific ways, will allow us to release, express or lightly touch on specific emotions. What this looks like and how this is accessed varies from person to person.

Voice is a Barometer: the Psychophysical Voice

In a holistic framework, every part of the human system is connected to itself and its circumstances. Similarly, just as dis-ease in one part of the body (the ankle) may have its origins in another part of the body (pelvic dysfunction), so can vocal manifestation serve as an indicator of physical and psychological states. When viewed through the lens of holism, voice can serve as an entry point for disentangling hidden vicious cycles occurring within the human system.

“There is considerable evidence that childhood trauma can affect the whole brain. ...studies on brain and voice suggest that it takes a whole brain to produce a voice. Indeed, phonation is highly interconnected with activity at all cerebral levels, from brainstem to cortex, and within all cerebral systems, including limbic, motor, sensorial and cognitive.” (Monta & Van Lanker Sidtis, 2018 pg 45).

Survivors of child abuse sometimes develop vocal habits as adults wherein the voice pitch is notably high and the tones childlike. These vocal tendencies can be constant or fluctuating, depending on individual manifestation. Have you heard the expression ‘his voice gave him away’? This refers to the illuminatory quality of tonal, emotional inflection. Voice can also reveal a conscious attempt on the part of the speaker to mask emotion/intent: artificial tones articulating words that fail to ‘ring true’. Frequently, it is the way in which the breath supports, or fails to support the voice that illuminates the inner state of the speaker – in this way the voice is a physical embodiment of the self. “...use of the voice entails a mutual sharing of self and being in its entirety.... The notion of physical embodiment of the person made possible by voice...” (Monta & Van Lanker Sidtis, 2018 pg 59).

Illustrating this point, the fairly recent phenomena of vocal fry is worth considering⁹. From a pathological standpoint, there is as yet no clear evidence to suggest that vocal fry in the spoken voice is directly damaging to the vocal cords. Tension in the voice producing system is a key player when it comes to vocal fatigue and damage; generally vocal fry is created by moving down the register below the natural pitch of the voice and vibrating the vocal cords close together in an open, relaxed throat.

The hidden problem of vocal fry (for speakers) is loss of vocal range. The phrase ‘use it or lose it’ is most frequently applied to muscle activity, and with good reason. Muscle activity forges and maintains brain connections. A feedback loop exists in which muscle activity stimulates the brain | the brain instructs the activity; nothing in the human system occurs in a vacuum. Warnings regarding the dangers of vocal fry are mainly concerned with a) vocal fry in the spoken voice yields monotonous delivery, because the speaker has to speak on one, or at most two notes to create this effect, and b) ‘use it or lose it’: vocal range and vocal color can become limited through lack of use.

Analysis abounds as to what vocal fry may signify and suggest: the psychological posture of the speaker, and the psychological impressions of the receptive listener. Sociologically speaking, the theory that vocal fry has relevance to tribal belonging has emerged: a way for younger people to differentiate from older generations and connect with their age group. There is much talk about how women are regarded using it, why they use it, the prejudices people have in listening to women (and men) using it, as well as generational differences in how this vocal style is received. Elizabeth Holmes, former CEO of Theranos, came under public scrutiny due to her high-profile conviction for criminal fraud. Holmes’ use of vocal fry, apparently consciously assumed, has been attributed to an attempt to fit in with the “bro culture” of the environment she was working within.

⁹ As found in spoken voice; vocal fry as an intentional singing style is not referred to in this discussion.

From the perspective of Linklater voice training, the most authentic voice (fullest expression of the self through sound) is the voice that inhabits its natural pitch most frequently and is flexible enough to travel up and down from that point so as to access the widest emotional and intellectual expression. Voice conveys both feeling and meaning.¹⁰ Technically, vocal power (volume and reach) in the spoken voice is limited by vocal fry. To create the fry effect, one must use breath and pitch in a way that does not allow for loud, carrying sound.

Very good dissemblers and actors can speak convincingly. The best liars are often those who, on the conscious level, believe their own lies. In such instances, breath, voice and tone will ring true to word and intent. Similarly, but less nefariously, actors utilizing dual-consciousness (Carnicke, 2009) can work on two levels, aware of themselves as actors standing in front of an audience attending to important technical considerations (such as making sure they are heard and not falling off of the stage), while still being truly immersed in the emotional life of character and situation.

In her book *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit*, Dr. Bella Merlin quotes Stanislavsky: “I divided myself, as it were, into two personalities. One continued as an actor, the other was an observer. Strangely enough, this duality not only did not impede, it actually promoted my creative work.” (Merlin, 2007 pg 254).

Phenomenological Experiences in Voice Practice

“As a barometer of life’s pressures, the voice is unfailingly accurate.” (Rodenburg, 2015 pg 92). Voice is not only a barometer for psychological alignment and well-being, but also a barometer of physical imbalance. I wake up with a croaky voice every morning. Why? After a night’s sleep the body’s tissues are dry. I am dehydrated. I have to remind myself to drink a sufficient amount of water every morning, to counteract this inescapable fact. Upper respiratory illness is commonly experienced by our species. This too affects the voice. How do we know that someone is ill when they answer the phone? Vocal tone and vocal quality.

Vocal manifestation of psychological states should never be generalized; each person develops their own individual habits. There are as many nuances as there are people. In terms of hiding, defending, and playing it safe, here are a number of key habits I have seen

- Monotone
- Mumbling/lack of articulation
- Inaudible voice
- Childlike voices in adults
- Consistently bright and cheerful, constantly smiling
- Loud and ‘aggressive’, or declamatory voice
- Talking overly fast
- Singsong tones in an attempt to keep others calm (and oneself, because one is fearful of the impact of one’s words)
- Vocal fry caused by lowering the voice (so as to mask emotion or to appear non-threatening: pitch variety is expressive of emotion)

These bullet points skim the surface. From an ethical standpoint, careful, open-minded investigation must be undertaken to uncover the causes of such habits in each individual case. Such habits may, but not necessarily, indicate an important psychological wound. Such wounds may be deeply rooted, or suddenly manifest, after a difficult experience. The most important thing to note is that vocal coping mechanisms are a challenge to natural vocal expression and a fully empowered sense of self. While most speakers don’t do these things all the time, traits can become

¹⁰ It must also be acknowledged that feeling, thought and meaning are conveyed by a multiplicity of expressive modalities and language forms, such as those used by people whose vocal cords are significantly damaged or unusable.

habitual, regardless of how the speaker is actually feeling in the moment. Once this happens, the voice becomes a cage of the speaker's making.

People who take courageous steps to work on their voices, usually do so because they realize that some aspect of voice is holding them back professionally. During the learning process, clients not only report improved professional outcomes, but also improved relationships and positive feedback from loved ones. In the human system nothing and no one functions in isolation.

A high percentage of my clients report coming from families where emotional intensity was often expressed by one or both parents. In my voice practice, clients with such histories often describe their voice as having been "shut down". A psychologist who worked with me on voice for presentation, told me that her children always commented on how nothing made her angry. After months of working together, the psychologist told me that she was exhausted, but very excited, because she had spent the previous night in conversation with her husband (also a psychologist) vocalizing her volatile feelings. Despite finding it intense, her husband told her that he was very happy that she was expressing anger. He said, "Please continue with voice work." Reportedly, she and her husband both felt a sense of deeper closeness to each other because she was "fully showing up".

As a psychologist, this client understood the cognitive-behavioral factors operating in her life. Yet it wasn't until she worked with the physical voice that she was able to fully activate her own psychological voice with those she loved most. Her performance goal was to speak on voice, with animation, supported by full breaths (diaphragmatic, rather than shallow breathing). She also learned to breathe at specific moments during speaking so as to support the full thought being expressed. In this way, her breathing pattern started to naturally follow her thought. (Berry, 1987) Being on voice is difficult to explain and more easily understood by aural example and the interior physical experience of speaking. Being on voice usually occurs when we place the voice at the natural midpoint in our range using facial resonators. The vocal cords are activated with precisely the amount of air for volume output. Aiming to be on voice is not concerned with manufacturing a beautiful voice, but rather it is concerned with manifesting a natural voice. (Linklater, 2006).

"...in effort to attain vocal perfection, I had purposely left myself out of the equation. I feared that if I allowed myself (my thoughts, feelings, emotions, and physical being) into my voice, my sound would become as flawed and imperfect as I was," writes Kirsten Mellian¹¹ (Mellian, 2015 pgs 2-3) describing herself as a singer, foregrounding her subsequent realizations regarding the power of authentic voice.

When people aren't used to speaking with correct (i.e. natural) voice placement (being 'on voice'), the experience of trying to do so is like working to isolate a muscle in weight training for the first time. It takes many attempts to orchestrate and activate the muscles with precision. Although the brain is unfamiliar with the process, new acts of physical effort start building neural pathways for future success. The good news is, we learn by doing.

Physical Actions Impact Thought & Emotion

Some of the most interesting scientific research in the last 20 years has occurred in the field of neurology (neuroplasticity; neuroreceptors; mirror neurons). These studies illuminate the holistic function of the brain within the human system. The understanding that life experience, physical actions and patterns of thought shape and activate our brain is a relatively new concept.

The brain is not merely an executive activator via the nervous system, but also a receiver of moment to moment stimulus from the entire physical apparatus. This mutual relationship underpins embodied performance modalities, (like the Inhabiting Technique) in which practitioners are encouraged to act with their bodies towards emotive experience, rather than starting with thought as the prime initiator of feeling.

¹¹ a student of Fitzmaurice ®

Understanding the relationship between what we do with the body and how it can affect our nervous system, is hugely helpful for people who suffer from performance anxiety. Feelings don't tend to respond well to instruction, and so it's no good trying not to be nervous. The nervous system however, will respond positively to physical action. Breath techniques for public speaking (such as diaphragmatic breathing) are not only energizing but also calming. Physical techniques can be framed as technical solutions to emotional problems.

"Happiness is what makes us smile; how can the reverse also be true?... 'What's crazy is that just the physical act of smiling can make a difference in building your immunity,' says Dr. Grossan. 'When you smile, the brain sees the muscle [activity] and assumes that humor is happening.'" (Spector, 2018). The act of smiling itself cues the brain to release serotonin and dopamine.

A small-scale psychological study at the University of Cardiff in Wales found that people who were unable to frown due to Botox injections which paralyzed the space between their eyes, were significantly less anxious and irritable than the control group who had not had Botox, but had received other cosmetic interventions. "Ten depressed patients who were on medication [for depression] had Botox in their [frown lines] and nine of them stopped using the medication [for depression], the research found" (Wales Online, 2013). These are merely a few examples of studies that conclude that 'acting as if' changes how you feel.

Perhaps this is how good liars begin to believe their own lies: primarily by doing all the physical and vocal motions towards a personal sense of veracity.

Conclusion

As a voice coach, I have learned that not only do voices express or seek to hide a great deal about the speaker, but we can change how we feel and think by changing what we do with our voices, using breathing, placement and articulation. Voice is not only a barometer, but a remedy. Our breathing apparatus is a key actor in the functioning of the nervous system. The wonder of breath in the human system is that it functions both autonomously and consciously.

Intentional breathing techniques underpinning powerful speech, can also help to calm the nervous system of the anxious speaker. The technical act of supporting vocal power with breath, placement and mouth articulation, helps practitioners to feel more confident, empowering them to speak more honestly. Clients who work hard to bring about their stated goal of developing a more powerful voice have experienced the following:

- A measured tempo of speech cues the mind that we have a right to be listened to (rather than rushing to get our words out so we don't take up someone's time)
- Articulating through the vowels and consonants physically affirms that "I have something relevant to say"
- Pitching the voice so as to maximize its natural power is an embodied statement of the right to speak and be heard
- Not only do our thoughts and feelings respond to these physical messages, so do our listeners
- Breath, the engine of the voice, not only reacts to the nervous system, but also acts upon it

Embodied performance techniques can be utilized to support people in speaking powerfully, honestly and impactfully. The positive effects of doing so will be felt by the speaker on a multiplicity of levels. Voice is the canary in the coalmine; but the canary can be revived by intelligent action. By viewing the human system through the lens of holism, we are empowered to change our experience.

Biodata of Author



Susan-Jane Harrison, MFA (who practices as a Voice & Performance Coach under the name of SJ Harrison) was born in London, England in 1971 to an American father and a British mother. Her father Dr. Roger Harrison, a pioneer in the field of Organizational Psychology, instilled in her an interest in the psychology of human systems and the individuals within them. She trained as an actor at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London (1991-1994) and earned an MFA from the University of California at Davis in 2013. She is an awarded playwright for her first play “Alaska”, produced by BBC Radio 4 in 1997, starring (the now Sir) Michael Sheen. She has been an actor/playwright in the USA (Berkeley Repertory Theatre, American Conservatory Theater, The Aurora Theatre Company, A Travelling Jewish Theatre, Woman’s Will, California Shakespeare Theatre Company etc); in the UK (A&BC Theatre Company, Royal National Theatre, ReCreation Theatre Co, etc) and in NZ (The Pop-Up Globe, Auckland Fringe Festival). She is a Brady Fellow in the 2021-2023 cohort at 3 Girls Theatre Company in San Francisco, CA for further development of her stage play, “Today I Live”, which was produced at the RADA Festival in London in 2016. Her work has also been funded by the Consortium for Women & Research at the University of California at Davis, PAL (Performing Arts Lab in Kent, UK), The RADA Alumni Program, and the Mondavi Fellowship. She won a Shelly Award for the role of Eliza in Pygmalion, and narrated “Nanga Parbat (Naked Mountain)” – 2001, which won a Columbia International Film Festival Award for best Documentary. She has taught acting, voice, text, dialect and movement in the USA at UC Davis, The Actor’s Centre, Berkeley Repertory School of Theatre, ACT, Theaterworks, for Woman’s Will, Center Repertory’s Summer Conservatory, and California Shakespeare Company’s Summer Conservatory. She coaches actors and business professionals online internationally, and in person, and is a member of VASTA (Voice and Speech Trainers Association) and Actor’s Equity Association. Email: sjharrison@sjharrisoncoach.com: ORCID: 0000-0002-6720-1048, Websites: <https://sjharrisoncoach.com>: <https://susanjaneharrison.com>: Instagram: <https://instagram.com/sjharrisoncoach> Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SJHarrisonCoach> LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sjharrisoncoach/> YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/c/SJHarrisonVoicePerformance>

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