Chapter 22

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AND OTHER STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH VOCAL TENSION

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As a young acting student, studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, in London, England, I was fortunate enough to witness two performances of actor Michael Pennington at the Royal Shakespeare Company. He played the role of Berowne in Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* and the Duke in *Measure for Measure*. In the first instance, I was seated in the uppermost balcony and in the other, the middle orchestra. In each case, I experienced this actor's voice as if he were sitting next to me, speaking in my ear despite the fact the theater seated over a thousand people. His voice effortlessly revealed the nuances of the character. Several years later, I attended the New York City Broadway production of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* at the Plymouth Theater. Vanessa Redgrave played Mary Tyrone. Ms. Redgrave's voice emitted from her whole being and exposed the character's innermost thoughts and emotions. She connected the thought with the breath and her intention in her portrayal in a seemingly effortless and translucent manner, in the same way a dancer makes the *jeté* look easy. This ease of speaking takes huge talent and years of practice.

HEALTHY, EXPRESSIVE, AND EFFECTIVE VOICE USAGE

An important premise frequently overlooked by actors and directors is that healthy voice usage is expressive voice usage. People often mistake phony emotion for a genuine relationship to the text, or what Patsy Rodenburg, author of many outstanding books on acting voice refers to as "bluff acting." (Author participated in a Voice and Shakespeare Workshop led by Ms. Rodenburg at Equity Showcase in Toronto.)

The voice mechanism should be free enough to reflect the needs of the character. The actor's psychophysical awareness should be such that the actor's voice and body respond to the thought with spontaneous changes in the pitch, rhythm, dynamic, and tonal variety, rather than following a prescribed approach. Tension impedes this possibility, creating a multitude of vocal tension issues.

As part of the curriculum at Carnegie Mellon's School of Drama, students learn to identify healthy, effective, and expressive voice usage and unhealthy,

ineffective, and inexpressive voice usage. This is done through discussion and examples of film and stage acting. To identify healthy voice usage, all the following characteristics should be evident:

- Physical ease
- Clear, unobstructed tone
- Resonant sound; that is, the sense that the actor fully embodies the voice and one has the sense as stated earlier that the voice emits from the whole body, not just the mouth
- A sense of release as the person expresses heightened emotions rather than a sense of constriction and pulling down in the body
- A precise relationship with the thoughts and intentions that the actor wishes to communicate, resulting in clear, crisp articulation that does not sound affected but yet is vigorous. The actor uses the language to fully carve out the ideas to impact another human being.
- The person is "in his or her back," which means the person is supporting the voice with the use of the back part of the rib case and, hence, utilizing the full capacity of the diaphragm as opposed to squeezing and pulling down on the release of breath and thought.

The rib swing is a useful way for performers to think about the breath support. Too often the actor squeezes from the diaphragm, pushing the ribs together, which actually causes constriction in the shoulder, neck, jaw, and larynx areas, hence weakening support rather than aiding it. This habit also tends to produce a forced sound rather than a free sound, because the actor is attempting to find power through pushing rather than release. It is also important to remember that the diaphragm is not a pouch below the sternum but extends across the whole torso, like a flexible parachute-like drum. The intercostal muscles swing the ribs slightly up to open wider, which allows for more physical freedom and hence more vocal freedom.

To identify unhealthy voice usage, some or all of these characteristics will be evident:

- Tension around the neck, face, and shoulder muscles
- Poor alignment; that is, the neck pushing out or the chin pulling too far to the chest
- Unbalanced breath support, which is either a too breathy and "off voice" vocal quality or not enough breath support for the effort of the sound, causing a hoarse, forced, and/or crackling sound
- A tendency to pull down and tighten when speaking, pushing the words and ideas out, with extra tension at the ends of lines "squeezing the meaning out" rather than letting them release effortlessly
- At times, an overemphasis on articulation rules, with the actor "playing the voice" rather than playing the scene, thereby obscuring the meaning rather than integrating clear articulation to communicate ideas with clarity

TRAINING

The physical aspects of voice training follow a progression much like the training of an athlete, with exercises to develop vocal flexibility, stamina, and strength similar to exercises used in singing training. Voice training also involves aspects of movement and alignment or postural awareness (such as the Alexander technique), because muscular tension constricts sound vibration and full expression in the actor.[1] As a trainer of the speaking voice for actors, I strive to teach students to achieve the same vocal freedom and expression Michael Pennington and Vanessa Redgrave demonstrated.

Voice training differs from the training of the athlete in an important aspect. The actor needs to coordinate the physical aspects of the training with the impulse of the thought, the imagination, the intention of the character as written, and the need to communicate to affect another on stage. All the aspects of speaking voice training must therefore be connected to the speaking of text, as the actor needs to incorporate the principles of voice into his acting, finding the "ladder of the thought."[2]

This delicate interplay of goals challenges voice/speech trainer and student alike: making these connections becomes a unique process in many respects. The vocal mechanism involves all facets of the individual: psychological, physiological, spiritual, as well as anatomical. The study of the speaking voice becomes intensely personal in many respects, even more than other aspects of actor training such as movement and facial expressions. The teacher provides a map but the actor takes the internal journey. The physical voice in its ease, dynamic, and flexibility reflects the inner workings of the individual, what Cicely Berry refers to as "That Secret Voice."[3] This personal aspect of voice makes it important to create a positive, supportive atmosphere while still maintaining a sense of purpose and discipline in both teaching and coaching situations. Training of the voice may, therefore, incorporate personal writing and therapeutic techniques as tools to open up the full range of the actor's vocal experience both in the practical and in the metaphorical sense. Addressing vocal tension requires a solid understanding of vocal mechanics and sensitivity to acting concerns as well as the emotional makeup of the actor.

CHANGING HABITS: ALIGNMENT AND THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Voice development involves changing habits. Tensions in the voice often stem from habits established in early life so that the elimination of such tensions is not something that happens overnight. Often students have breakthroughs and can deliver a whole speech with considerable freedom, but the real challenge is the ability to sustain that freedom over the course of a month of performances. However, habits persist and the unconscious resists change. Often, when change in the voice occurs, the habit seems to rear its head even more stubbornly than before. So the old adage "three steps forward, two steps behind" definitely applies to the learning curve in voice training. It takes hours of practice and acceptance of the emotional self to allow full vocal freedom precisely because the voice reflects our emotional landscape. This is where the application of the principles of the Alexander technique proves useful because the principles address habitual response.

Alignment refers to the way an actor stands and moves, allowing for maximum ease and appropriate breath support. On a deeper level, alignment refers to the delicate interplay of the actor's thought, breath, and movement impulses. The actor needs to move with ease, finding the most flexibility without excess tension. If an actor plays Richard III, requiring uneven carriage, he or she must still find an inner kinesthetic freedom within the posture that allows the actor the vocal relaxation necessary to deliver heightened text for 3 hours. If the actor does not achieve this balance, the posture itself can create the potential for vocal tension and possible vocal damage. The incorporation of proper alignment, as part of training the voice, provides a challenging task for the actor.

The Alexander technique, developed by Frederick Mathias Alexander, born in Australia in 1869, deals specifically with the alignment principles. He specialized in recitations of Shakespeare. When he began performing, he continually lost his voice. When he was unable to find a medical remedy, he studied his movement patterns in front of a mirror for a decade. Alexander analyzed the habits that were causing the vocal misuse. He noticed the following as he began to recite:

- He tightened his neck muscles.
- This caused his chin to lower.
- This resulted in his larynx tightening and pulling down.
- His breath support became shallow.

He discovered that he was not able to stop these habits at will. What he was able to do, however, was prevent pulling back his head, which resulted in the disappearance of the other 2 habits. As he began to master this new approach, his hoarseness discontinued.

He began to understand that patterns of use were not just physical but involved mental conceptions as well. He coined the idea of "inhibition" from these observations. Before he started a habitual movement, he stopped and "inhibited" the tense

habit before it began. He then gave himself new thought directions related to the movement:

- Let the neck be free
- Allow the head to go forward and up
- Allow the back (torso) to lengthen and widen (expand)

He named these the "means whereby."[4] The idea is that one thinks these directions almost simultaneously, "one after the other, all at the same time," as one gains experience.

Voice training involves changing habits. The Alexander technique helps enormously to effect that change. Most respected acting schools include the Alexander technique in the core curriculum. Sessions are individual and/or group classes. The student is taken through a series of procedures exploring positions of maximum mechanical advantage. These involve getting in and out of a chair, using the movement as a way to discover and apply the principle of inhibition. Teachers of the Alexander technique also teach "constructive rest" done on the floor or on a massage table. (See the end of the chapter for a description of constructive rest and other resource material on the Alexander technique.) The student can often make more sense of the principles when lying down then apply these principles in standing activity. The teacher guides with gentle touch, directing the student to become more aware of her or his habitual tensions and how "inhibiting" (or "stopping to observe") the habitual response can help the student bypass these tensions. The important component here involves the fact that the teacher must also utilize and incorporate the principles of the directions in her or his own "use" in order that the teacher's touch can guide the student.

Voice and speech trainers have the ability to diagnose what is not working effectively. It is much more challenging to actually give the student constructive ways to improve his or her voice. One of the challenges of voice work involves guiding the student to consciousness about one's habits while eschewing self-consciousness, which is the enemy of all good acting. Voice training involves awareness of habits and looking for ways to release tension to allow the organic freedom of the voice to emerge. To achieve this, effective voice training takes about 3 to 4 years to build a foundation and as much as 10 years to master. Any good actor, worth his or her salt, will continue voice work throughout his or her career.

THE PSYCHOPHYSICAL CONNECTION: VOICE IS MORE THAN JUST A SOUND

The overall psychology of the individual is extremely important in tackling any vocal tension issue, as voice tension is generally a symptom of the individual's tension. If at all possible, it is generally more effective to address each issue by guiding the actor to a deeper understanding and kinesthetic relationship to language. Once this is addressed at least to some extent, dealing with more specific manifestations of tension, such as soft palate tightness, jaw tightness, tension in the shoulder and neck muscles, poor articulation, and so forth, will prove easier. That said, every individual is different and one needs not only good diagnostic skills but also many approaches at one's fingertips as well as flexibility. Each person responds differently and even the same person responds differently at different times. The process involves exploration, and the journey is not necessarily logical. This is why the interdisciplinary approach to dealing with vocal issues proves so effective. Sometimes one must start where one observes the problem and then attempt, with the collaboration of the actor, to unravel what the source of the issue is. When a massage therapist finds a tension spot, sometimes it is harmful to massage that spot immediately. It is more effective to tend to the muscles around the knotted muscle first. The same is true in voice work. Sometimes tackling the issue head-on only causes self-consciousness in the actor and compounds the problem. It can prove useful to take a different tack all together and then this can lead to an indirect solution to the immediate problem.

Some tension issues may only involve a minor technical adjustment or change of perception. For example, the actor's first response to moving into a bigger space often is to shout when, in fact, shouting creates the exact opposite to the desired effect. The text becomes less clear and the actor more difficult to understand. The adjustment that does have

to happen, however, is that the actor must perceptually *include* the entire audience and speak more clearly. Then the voice will carry. The ability of the voice to carry stems from the actor's thought, rather than the actor consciously pushing for volume. The paradox is that when the actor listens to himself or herself, attempting to modify the sound, volume, or pitch in some way, he or she may create a disconnect between the actor's natural impulse to the language and the actor's role. The results are less volume and a less convincing performance.

For several years, I served as a voice and dialect coach at the Canadian Stage Company's Dream in High Park, in Toronto, Canada. The Canadian Stage Company in Toronto produces an outdoor Shakespeare program every summer. When the company moved to the outdoor space, the actors became nervous and began shouting the text, which made it unintelligible. The vocal coach asked the actors to work in partners, one actor speaking the text on the stage and the other moving gradually farther and farther toward the back of the audience space. The goal was to let the actor on stage know when he or she was being clear and heard and when not. What invariably happened was that as the partner got farther away, into the audience area, the actor on stage would begin to push vocally and the partner in the audience would communicate that he could not understand what the actor was saying on stage. This would go on until the actor on stage was guided to or discovered the necessary adjustment on his or her own, to speak slightly more slowly, using the consonants more precisely and let "the thought propel the sound," that is, striving to communicate the text as clearly as possible, including the back row of the amphitheater. When the actors regained their composures by putting their attention back onto the thought and clarity of the ideas, speaking slightly more slowly, and using their consonants more crisply, the actors would regain intelligibility and the ability to fill the space. Until each partner experienced this exercise, it was difficult for the actors to believe that the effort was in the clarity of the thought, rather than physically pushing the sound out or going for "volume."

Technique involves a balance of technical freedom, a "clear channel" and the psycho-kinesthetic mechanism's ability to respond spontaneously to the thought and to the requirement of the space. Therefore, if the space is larger, and the actor includes this fact into his or her awareness, the voice will naturally fill the space, as an extension of the thought. Pushing for volume, on the other hand, will not have the desired effect but result in garbled text.

One cannot separate the person from the voice; the voice reflects the person's intention, need, and thought. Tension in the voice, unless caused by some malfunction, generally reflects tension in the person or at least a lack of thorough understanding of the text. Unless one fully takes into account the specifics of each thought, one cannot realize his or her vocal potential. It is not enough to free the sound, but the actor must sculpt the ideas with precision, commitment, and a full kinesthetic relationship to the language. This is one of the most important issues in tackling voice tension.

GETTING THE WHOLE PICTURE AS A COACH

The vocal coach works with the performer to discern the vocal mechanics that interfere with the ease of delivery. Effectively addressing these issues involves awareness of the psychology of the actor and the interplay between the director's vision and the actor's execution of that vision or at least how the actor perceives the director's vision. Managing the actor's voice is an extremely individual process; therefore, no one exercise works identically in each instance. One has to identify the difficulty based on the sound, the physical manifestation of tension, and then determine how this impacts the acting process. The process can prove quite complex.

When actors develop voice problems, there is loss to the theaters in terms of time and money as well as the inconvenience of rescheduling performances or rehearsing an understudy. Unfortunately, some directors communicate in a way that can inadvertently create vocal tension as well. Certain psychological limitations at times do not allow an actor to admit to the director that a voice problem exists. Rather, the actor tries to deal with his or her voice issue even though these issues are clearly causing the actor professional difficulty.

In the context of a production, vocal problems emerge in a variety of ways:

- The audience may complain of not "hearing the actor." In reality, this usually means not "understanding" the actor rather than the actor not being loud enough, as described in the previous section. Sometimes actors are too low in volume, often because the scene requires delicacy and an intimate sentiment, but the actor still needs to share that with the audience. In such an instance, it's helpful for the actor to utilize the mask resonators, which helps the voice carry, while still maintaining the needed intimate quality.
- An actor plays the role with a dialect so strong that the actor cannot be understood because he or she focuses more on the dialect than on the character's intentions.
- The actor speaks with so much force that this causes hoarseness, becomes unpleasant to listen to, and can become distracting to the audience.
- The actor screams without proper support, going for a generalized emotion, rather than a specific intention.

All these situations are recipes for vocal fatigue, misuse or—worst-case scenario—vocal injury, the most common of which being the occurrence of vocal nodules.

As a coach, one has to comprehend the goals of both the director and the actor. Sometimes the director asks for something but due to lack of vocal understanding does not know how to guide the actor to it in a vocally healthy way. Actors are under tremendous pressure to produce results. When a director asks for a particular effect, the actor may attempt to achieve that effect without any regard for the healthiest way to achieve it. Often, in attempting to go for a result requested by the director, the actor forgets to maintain and incorporate the principles of healthy voice use and alignment. The freelance nature of the actor's work creates a tension in itself, and the actor is always on display, frequently wondering where and when the next contract for employment will come. This can create a need to please the director and, therefore, a pressure to perform whatever is requested of the actor, sometimes to his or her detriment. Considering these factors, the coach who works with the actor on vocal issues must understand the pressures the actor is under, the vision of the director, and the needs of the overall production.

APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

The Alexander principles help actors enormously. An actor can learn to "inhibit" or "stop" the tension habit and thereby free his or her performance. Alexander used the word *inhibition*, which in some respects is a little unfortunate in acting training, as it evokes the idea of repression, which does not help the actor. This is not the way in which Alexander meant it, however. He meant that by stopping, we then have the opportunity to make a choice to do something different. This allows us to stop the offending habit long enough to figure out ways to prevent it. The most obvious benefit is that once the actor frees her or his head, neck, and torso relationship, this minimizes tension in the neck muscles, which allows the larynx to function more effectively.

Many of the principles of voice training do include the idea of "inhibition" or "stop" (though the voice teacher may not necessarily refer to the idea in quite the same way). Alexander found if he concentrated on the end result, his habitual tension returned. However, if he focused on the steps to get there, "the means whereby," he was able to perform the given task without the tension returning. In so doing, the Alexander technique trains the mind to bypass its initial response to specific stimuli.

The Alexander technique, taught by individuals who have professional stage experience and understand the organic needs of the actor and director, should be integrated with all aspects of both directing and acting training. The actor should be blocked in ways that allow for proper alignment and easy breath support. If an awkward position is unavoidable, the actor wants to think of the neck lengthen-

ing and the shoulders releasing (not pushing) apart as much as possible. The position itself may look constricted but the job of the artist is to find an inner release in that position. The actor should search for the most efficient movement, using the least amount of tension possible. The beauty of the Alexander technique is that the principles can be applied to any position.

In a production of *Uncle Vanya*, directed by a well-known European director, the final scene was dramatically weakened by the director and actor not understanding the Alexander principles of alignment and body mechanics. The final scene in which Sonya speaks so eloquently about life's purpose was all but lost on the audience because the poor actress was so collapsed on the table, one could barely hear or understand her, due to her lack of breath support and positioning of her neck, causing constriction in the larynx. Had she only moved forward from the hip joints, thereby keeping her back open, which would have allowed her to use the swing of her back ribs and give her the support she needed, we would have experienced the extraordinary moving quality of this monologue and been given the same physical impression. If only both director and actor had consulted with a coach with training in the voice and the Alexander technique and applied this knowledge in that setting!

The idea of not "end gaining," a term referring to pursuing the final result rather than focusing on the process, that Alexander spoke of plays an important part in the development of character within a play. An actress playing Blanche in *Streetcar Named Desire*, for example, has to play her objective strongly to arrive at the end of the play in the appropriate emotional state. If she focuses on achieving the emotional state during the course of the play, her performance appears forced and unbelievable. Through text analysis, she explores her objectives and plays those thoroughly. When the character does not achieve her goals (ie, Mitch does not marry Blanche and she has no route to survival), Blanche finds herself desperately attempting to make her situation more tolerable. She fights against the obstacles presented to her, which creates the appropriate emotional response. This is the equivalent of the "means whereby" in the Alexander technique sense; she does not attempt to create an emotional response, but it stems from her not achieving her goal.

In a workshop with Cicely Berry, O.B.E., Voice Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, England, and Andrew Wade, Voice Coach at the Guthrie Theatre and formerly Head of Voice at the RSC, the following occurred: a woman delivered a piece of text, a performance which might be described as histrionic. It was extremely tight vocally, overemotional, forced, and difficult to listen to. Berry asked the actress to pick up all the shoes (of the participants in the workshop) in the room, sequentially. The actress walked around the room, picking up the shoes, putting them into a pile, as she spoke her text. The actress's vocal delivery suddenly became like quicksilver and her delivery animated, charming, and engaging; all this while she was organizing the shoes. Her voice resonated with ease and full support as she utilized her full range.

What happened? The task of putting the shoes in order took her attention off the end result, that is, "inhibited" her habitual response to the delivery of text, and allowed her to discover the inherent freedom within the energy of the text. One might say she got out of the way of the text, letting it play her. Instead of imposing her own preconceived idea of the way the text should play and manipulating her delivery, she found a more intuitive connection to the language. By taking the attention off the result, ironically, the outcome proved far more interesting to the listener. There exist many similar exercises to take the weight off the text. Cicely Berry sometimes refers to these as "diversionary tactics."

During rehearsals of *Love's Labours Lost,* directed by the gifted Robin Phillips at the Stratford Festival, the following occurred. The scene was going reasonably well, but the actresses involved were becoming overly concerned with the language, which was causing a heaviness and self-consciousness in delivery. Mr. Phillips asked the actresses to repeat the scene and mime pinning their hair up with bobby pins at the same time. The scene became quite lively, more animated but in a relaxed, rather than in a pushed way. The voices became freer and more expressive as the relationships of the characters became more playful. This simple exercise enabled the actresses

to "take the weight off the words" and find a more natural delivery of the lines as well as a lighter approach to the scene. The act of miming pinning up the hair inhibited the habitual tendency to push the meaning out of the text and the voice, rather than allow them to flow naturally.

"YOU'VE GOT TO BELIEVE THEY CAN DO IT"

The Hidden "s"

An excellent bit of guidance is from Cecily Berry, who said, "You've got to believe they can do it." Invariably, this idea relaxes the actor and sometimes literally in the next minute the actor will actually achieve the very thing that overcomes the problem. If the actor does not achieve it immediately, often he or she masters the specific challenge by the next tutorial or class.

While coaching at the Stratford Festival in Canada, the director of one of the productions expressed concern about a particular actor because of his sibilant "s," an "s" that hisses and catches our ear more than one would like. I was searching for a solution that would help this soft-spoken young man. We worked with traditional ways to "fix" the "s," with mild success: working on tongue placement, reading drills, and so on.

The sibilant "s" in the case of this man was the result of faulty support and what seemed to me a kind of vocal mannerism. My instinct told me a clue was missing but I did not know what. Finally, I asked him if English was the mother tongue of his parents. He told me they were Serbian. I asked him to imitate his father. The actor then spoke with a thick Serbian accent and his voice became strong and full and his delivery extremely clear. Then I asked him then to speak his Shakespeare text in that same accent and again, the voice was full, strong and the sibilant "s" was completely gone. Then I asked him to speak the text again, with his father's "voice" but without the Serbian accent. He managed to speak the text clearly, with full voice and the "s" issue was completely nonexistent. Clearly, the "s" issue was a by-product of an overall voice use issue. The man had seemingly cut himself off from his roots in some way, causing a lack of overall support in his speaking. This lack of support impacted him both physically and psychologically, creating a disconnect that resulted in a breathiness and the sibilant "s." The traditional exercises had not effectively solved this actor's sibilant "s" problem, because it was merely a symptom of a more complex issue.

In the training of an actor, some teachers insist that the tongue placement for the "s" be at the alveolar ridge. In point of fact, everyone has a differently shaped mouth and sometimes this tongue placement does not work. Rather, placing the front of the tongue against the back of the lower front teeth is more effective in some cases. It is important to make sure the individual actor knows where he or she should say an "s" or a "z." Voiced sounds (that is, d, n, l, r, ch, g, dg, and so forth) preceding "s" generally require the sound "z," whereas unvoiced sounds (that is, t, st, b, k, and so forth) require an "s" sound. One challenge in dealing with articulation issues such as the production of "s" or "z" is that the poor actor can become so focused on the production of the "s" or "z" that the rest of the vocal process comes to a halt, producing tension in the neck and shoulders, jaw, tongue root, and the rest. The actor must include physical ease and breath support when dealing with articulation issues.

Another example came up at Stratford with an actor of Asian descent. It was assumed that the young actor could never master Shakespeare—that "it just wasn't in him." The young actor came to tutorial quite distraught, as he had been getting negative feedback about his voice use, not to mention the unspoken feedback about his perceived inability with Shakespeare. He was also told that he spoke Shakespeare in a "monotonous way." During the tutorial, this young man explored speaking text, soft palate exercises, and breath support. Although he made minor improvements, nothing really made much of an impact. Finally, he was asked to speak the text in Chinese, his mother tongue. It was fascinating to hear his use of rhythm and language and how much richer the text was, even to the non-Chinese listener. It became apparent that many of the sounds had a rather nasal twang and that many of the Chinese sounds used the palate in the dropped position rather than the lifted position that the majority of

English sounds require. Part of the "monotonous" quality to his speaking of Shakespeare in English had to do with the fact that his soft palate took on a fixed position when he spoke, which did not allow for the normal flexibility and responsiveness. The young man then worked on loosening the soft palate, speaking the text with the yawn, and speaking the text first in Chinese (Mandarin) and then again in English, singing the text in Chinese and then singing the text in English. The switching back and forth from Chinese to English was the key. This enabled him to eventually find the same freedom he had discovered in the exercises and incorporate this freedom into the speaking of the text so that that, over time, having identified the habit of what he was doing, he was able to approach the English text with the appropriate ease and flexibility necessary to allow the natural rhythm of the text. The older habit, completely appropriate for Chinese, had to be halted internally to allow him to develop a new relationship to the language.

What is important in both these examples, however, is the fact that once the coach acknowledged the actor's heritage as part of the vocal process, the actor managed to find a stronger commitment to the text; to use his full self in approaching the text, which enabled him to find his full voice. This is one of the most important issues in tackling voice tension. It is rarely a simple case of addressing the muscle in and of itself, but must be coupled with an understanding of the psychological components to achieve any level of success.

SIMPLE EXPLORATIONS TO HELP ELIMINATE VOCAL TENSION

Here are some simple exercises designed to address particular issues. With all these exercises, the approach should be one of exploration rather than going for an end result. Each individual responds slightly differently, and if one exploration does not work, one should just go on to another. There is no right or wrong, just a chance to look at the vocal experience from another angle, which generally opens up new possibilities. Any sense of judgment creates further tension, so the coach must "believe the actor can do it." This will communicate unconsciously to the actor and create a more positive and productive working environment.

Tension in the Tongue Root

This results when someone is "driving the sound" by tightening the root of the tongue, attempting to find power by pushing with the back of the tongue and the tongue area below the chin. Generally, this habit is compensating for lack of appropriate support and an effort to achieve something within a performance.

Sit in a relaxed, upright position. Release the tongue out so that the outline of the tongue meets the outline of the lower lip. If the tongue won't rest comfortably in this position, gently hold the tongue. One should make sure the tongue is not being pressed down with too much force nor that the jaw is tightening to help out the situation. Then speak the text, slightly slower than usual, making sure to convey meaning clearly. After speaking a section of text in this fashion, which feels ridiculous, slide the tongue back into the mouth and speak the text again. Often the text will become clearer and the vocal tone richer because the exercise gives the tongue root and jaw an opportunity to relax. Because one has to take the text more slowly, the breath support improves, as does the clarity of the thought. (Inspired by the work of Kristin Linklater and Louis Colaianni.)

Tension in the Jaw

Massage the jaw hinge gently. Then, with clean fingers, place forefingers gently between the upper and lower back molars, as one speaks the text. Then remove the fingers, but continue to keep the same space between the teeth as one speaks. Generally, one finds a fuller, easy sound by simply opening the jaw in a more relaxed fashion.

Another approach to alleviate jaw tension is to rub the hands together, place them on the jaw hinges, and then tilt the head over to one side, resting the head in one hand and then massaging the opposite jaw hinge. Then come back to center, with

both hands on the jaw hinges and tilt over to the other side and massage the hinge of the other jaw. Come back to center and notice if the jaw muscles have relaxed.

Tight Soft Palate and Nasality

If the text sounds pinched and with an overbalance of nasal resonance, the problem is usually a dropped or tense soft palate. There are a number of soft palate exercises but the simplest one is to count from 1 to 10 on a wide yawn then start the text on a yawn, so the actor can get the sense of the space inside the mouth. Then the actor speaks the text again, without actually yawning but allowing the sensation of yawning to inform the delivery. The actor generally discovers more sense of space in the mouth and a better balance of the nasal and mask resonators because of the lift of the soft palate.

Dealing With a Raspy Sound

If the actor tends to use too much force in speaking, resulting in a raspy, forced sound, then having the actor imagining the sound out the back of the neck is useful. In groups, partners can work together, putting a hand gently on the back of the neck and having the actor sigh a "huh" into the hand. This generally takes the pressure off the larynx by putting the attention elsewhere. One can also successfully apply the same idea to text. Moving down the body, an actor can put his or her hand at the back of the neck and sigh "huh" into the hand. The hand should pick up sound vibrations. If the actor is pushing the voice, the vibrations will be less. So, the more the actor releases with ease, the greater the sound. This is useful when actors are experiencing pushing and tightening of the muscles in and around the larynx. Similarly, the actor can "kinesense" (sense kinesthetically) the sound moving out the skull. The hand can be placed on the skull and the actor can become aware of sound vibrations in the head. These can also be done as partner exercises.

If the actor tends to vocally push, it can be quite useful to a performer to conduct an activity while speaking the text. For example, if the actor puts away books, or wipes the blackboard, this can often take the pressure off the words and allow the actor more vocal ease.

Improving Support

In dealing with support, the most important thing is the movement of the intercostal muscles. This is the only effort required in breathing, while other efforts interfere with effective breath support. Attempting to suck in a big breath generally tightens the upper chest muscles, impedes free flow of sound, and is counterproductive. It is important for actors to understand the anatomy of the diaphragm because too many people have an inaccurate picture of exactly what it is and what it does. One must remember the diaphragm extends around the full circumference of the lower ribs and expands and drops like a drum, causing a vacuum, which draws in the breath and releases up as the ribs contract on the release of breath. The main focus of the actor should always be on allowing the ribs to swing out, rather than contracting in. Putting emphasis on contracting the ribs in toward the body on the release of breath and sound creates a tendency to pull down and constrict the shoulder and neck muscles, resulting in tension around the larynx.

Lie on the floor, in fetal position, with the upper arm over the head and the lower arm under the head, so the neck is not crunched. Have a partner start at the top of the ribs closest to the ceiling, up beyond the collarbone and say, "These are your ribs." The partner moves all the way down, piece by piece saying, "These are your ribs" all the way down to the lower ribs. Then the first person sits up and compares the rib freedom of each side. In most cases, the individual will experience much more awareness of the full extent of the rib case and the movement of the ribs on the side just worked with. Then one can repeat the same thing on the other side. This exercise also helps to sense the differentiation between the ribs and the shoulder girdle. Many actors squeeze the upper arms to the upper ribs and this constricts support. The elbows and ribs are enemies and like a little space between them. (Thanks to Susan Sinclair, Alexander Technique Teacher, for inspiration for this exploration.)

It is important to remind actors that the spine lengthens on the release of the breath, which in a way seems counterintuitive. However, if the actor can work with that image, some wonderful things can happen. Instead of the typical pull down, tighten, and squeeze for "power" ("bluff acting"), the actor can find the length and width in the release of the thought, thereby eschewing the typical squeeze actors often resort to, which does nothing but create vocal tension and unbelievable acting "moments." The squeeze obstructs free expression because it tightens the breathing mechanism and pulls everything inside, rather than sharing it out. Actors can explore finding the ease of full expression if they really let it release and sense the length as they release the text. The bigger the stakes, the more release the actor needs.

An actor can move one arm pointing toward the ceiling and the other to the side as she or he speaks the text, so as to remind her or himself of length and width. Then repeat this, imagining one is moving the arms and notice if one has more sense of ease.

If the actor is having difficulty finding appropriate support, ask the actor to lift the arms out to the side, with each intake of breath and then, while speaking the text, take the arms back down to the sides of the body. This usually helps the actor to engage the back area of the ribs and opens up the support. Sometimes the actor, if open to something playful, can imagine angel wings and move the arms in this manner while speaking the text.

If an actor does not seem to be embodying the text, then here are a few ideas to help the actor "get into his or her back." The actor can imagine one is wearing a sound cape and that the sound and ideas of the voice are moving through the cape. The actor can speak to someone, picturing the person behind him or her, imagining a mouth in the back, as if one is speaking from one's back. If the actor doesn't click with the mouth image, then even just speaking to someone behind can help the actor use his or her full breath support and gain a fuller kinesthetic awareness.

Tension in the Neck and Shoulder Areas

A simple Alexander idea is to practice text, pretending one has a second head on top of one's real head. One immediately finds length and width and more ease in the speaking of the text. A guided body check can prove useful as well:

- Sense softening in the neck muscles
- Sense the head gently balanced on the top of the spine
- Be aware of the occipital joint, noticing the head micro moving slightly forward, and then up and away from the body
- The distance between the eyebrows and the back skull
- Sense the width and length of the torso
- Sense the distance between the shoulder blades
- The back of the arms
- Sense the weight of the pelvis and sitting bones
- Notice the backs of the legs
- Be aware of the soles of the feet on the floor
- Take note of the distance between the ankles and the toes

This helps ground the actor, reminding him or her of the full body connection, which in turn aids the release of tension around the neck, jaw, and shoulders. Addressing the overall psychophysical use generally makes addressing any specific tension areas, such as jaw tension, neck tension, soft palate inflexibility, and so forth, much easier.

Constructive Rest

Lie on the floor or a table, with the knees up toward the ceiling, feet flat on the ground, with a book under the head. The book should allow the neck to lengthen so that the neck is not overly arched or the head so high that the chin is pressing down on the larynx. One then thinks in a number of directions—out through the top of the head away from the torso, in the direction up through the knees, feet solidly on the ground and the thought of the back lengthening and widening. If one does this for several 5-minute sessions a few times a day, one notices positive changes quite quickly: more ease in the shoulders and neck, thereby more freedom

in the voice, more sense of ease in movement, and more of a sense of ease of height. Often, an added benefit is an improved sense of well-being.

Ways to Deal With Monotone Delivery

An actor speaks in monotone when he or she has not fully comprehended the "geography" of the text; that is, how one phrase and thought builds into the next. The actor needs to allow the voice to reflect the rhythm and pitch of the text to appropriately reveal the meaning, using the sounds of the words to convey the message. Here are some ways to help the actor discover the connection of the meaning to pitch and rhythm in an intuitive manner. The actor can sing and dance the text and then go back to speaking it. This exercise achieves two things. One, the actor becomes more physically relaxed, allowing the natural breath support to take over and, two, the movement and singing help the actor find the inherent rhythm and musicality of the text, which allows the actor to connect to the language in a deeper and more released way. Often it is useful to ask the actor what kind of music he or she likes. Then one says to the actor, "Here are the lyrics (the actor's text) and you are the composer. You need to find the right music for these lyrics that fit the meaning." With verse speaking, actors have achieved great success with country and western delivery, rap, jazz, and opera singing. This gives the actor the opportunity to experience the words in a new way. In general, when the actor returns to speaking the text after this exercise, the actor speaks it with much more variety and vocal build of ideas.

Another exercise involves the coach at the piano. The coach gives the actor a lower pitch to start with and then gives the actor a new ascending pitch for each new idea, as the thoughts build. Once the thought idea is completed, the coach can then return to a lower pitch and build again. The actor chants the text on the particular pitch, rather than speaking it or fully singing the text. Then the actor goes back to speaking the text without the piano and usually approaches the text with more variety and nuance.

Precision of Language

If the actor is having difficulty finding precision in the language, then have the actor speak the line of text word by word (ie, to . . . to be . . . to be or . . . to be or not . . . to be or not to . . . to be or not to be . . .), then repeat the whole thought. This is an exercise I learned from Patsy Rodenburg and I have nicknamed it "Lego blocks," because the actor begins to sense the shape of each idea and how each word builds on the word before. Actors tend to run words together, which obscures clarity of meaning. Awareness of each word as a string of thoughts, like a string of pearls, is particularly important in classical text, but any text benefits from this exploration.

Exploring Imagery

Often, vocal tension arises out of a lack of clarity about what the character actually is saying. A simple exercise I have developed has proven quite useful. The actor draws each new image on a blackboard as specifically as possible, even abstract ones. This often helps the actor grapple with each new part of the thought, which the actor may have overlooked. The time taken to really delve into each image specifically helps the actor relax into the language, deepen the support, and hence use less tension in the speaking.

Asking the actor to close one's eyes and visualize each image as the actor says it is a tool I have found particularly effective for dealing with tension. Often, tension stems from the physical manifestation of not giving each image and idea its full importance. Picturing the text helps find the specific image behind each thought.

One can also take a similar approach in a group by using sound. This idea came to me when I led a work shop of Buffalo storytellers (Spin-a-Story) in a workshop. One participant was sight impaired and I was quite shocked by the fact that almost my entire repertoire of metaphors involved sight. So when this gentleman performed his story, the group developed appropriate sound effects to support the images in the story. When he spoke the text again, without the group's sound effects, he was able to find many

more levels in the ideas and the voice responded accordingly, expressing the ideas with changes in pitch, rhythm, dynamic, and so forth. I have often since asked students to close their eyes and have the group make sound effects and often this has quite a dramatic impact. Working individually with an actor, one might ask the actor to think through the text and just make sounds appropriate to the ideas. Then the next time the actor speaks the text, the actor should have a more kinesthetic response to the language, with more vivid images and textures to the ideas.

SUMMARY

Unless one fully takes into account the specifics of each thought, one cannot really help an actor fully realize his or her vocal potential. It is not enough to free the sound, but the thought must be carved out with commitment and precision and a full kinesthetic relationship to the *language*. Coaches need to approach the actor with a sense of openness as a guide. This works much better than taking a "corrective" attitude, which usually serves to render the actor self-conscious. Finding vocal ease requires commitment to healthy technique, daily vocal preparation, openness, and a genuine desire to communicate. The actor and coach must delve into the text as deeply as possible to allow the thought to propel the sound, the nuances, and delicate dynamics of thought. Both coach and actor must include the overall personality of the actor in addressing vocal tension.

Dedicated to the author's father, the late William Feindel, OC, GOQ, MDCM, DPhil, and former director of the Montreal Neurological Institute and founder of the McConnell Brain Imaging Center, McGill University.

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