

AN ACTOR'S SPEECH TOOLS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

In the 21st century, it is hard to imagine actors' speech tools without technical aids. Society's rapid adoption of life on the Internet furnished by modern technologies is creating a fast progressing explosion of knowledge. These new standards undoubtedly influence and determine the development of theatrical language, and thus actors' speech.

Keywords: *actor, voice, speech, microphone.*

In none of the periods of history to date has it been possible to separate understanding of an actor's speech from the prevailing scientific opinions. "As scientific paradigms change, so too do paradigms of acting",¹ argues director and theatre historian Joseph R. Roach (1947). Once they are perceived through the looking-glass of contemporary media, the meaning of terms like *the real, the natural, the imitative, and the truthful*, which thus far served as landmarks within actors' speech, changes. Autobiographical solo performances on social media, reality television, various shows and mass consumption entertainment products, which integrate live and digitalised components, change their existing forms in the present and influence the course of the future.

To quote theatre historian Rhonda Blair (1951), "It is impossible to predict what other forms of performance will arise in the next decade. (..) My goal here is to direct us to the deeper poetry and mystery of what it means to act, and thus what it means to be human."²

What are the speech tools that provide the actor with the ability to control his body and achieve what the theatre anthropologist Nicola Savarese (1945) calls

¹ Blair, R. *The Actor, Image and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience*. London and New York: 2008, p. 23.

² *Ibid.*

physical intelligence?¹ What is the synergy of these tools within an actor's working process? The lecture "An Actor's Speech Tools in the 21st Century" will seek answers to these questions. Initially, the simple focus on the basic elements: voice, breathing, gestures and a late 20th century addition – microphones is confronted by countless logical impasses. Can inhalation be described as an actor's speech tool? Maybe the tool is not inhalation, but rather the vocal base provided by inhalation or, to be more exact, the volume of the lungs? And maybe not the volume of the lungs, but rather specific organs: the trachea, lungs and the diaphragm? Psychic processes including memory, feelings, imagination, attention and will that are both absolutely necessary as well as irreplaceable within an actor's work can also be considered to be speech tools. However, perhaps it is not these processes that are tools, but rather specific regions of brain in the left hemisphere of the brain or, more precisely, certain neurons that respond to physical and psychic impulses, and can be considered to be speech tools?

In developing a train of thought started thus, not only difficulties of not only a terminological but also a conceptual nature invariably arise. Both because actors, directors and speech educators often use approximate and personally coined terms, understanding of which rarely coincides with the definitions of these terms as given in dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and also because, depending on the educator's language and working methodology, there exist in any study group processes and body place terms that can only be understood within the group. Theatre actors, directors, critics as well as viewers have often been intrigued by the mystical secret of the appeal of an actor's voice that is beyond definition. What are the speech tools whose presence or, on the contrary, absence determines the impact and power of the spoken word, as well as the depth and fascination of the thought behind it?

For example, the heir to Anna Petrova's (1929) method, Dzintra Mendziņa² often talked about creating a voice "in a lake", other directors refer to it as talking "through one's liver", Dž. Dž. Džilindžers³ encourages actors to talk "with full energy", and Alvis Hermanis⁴ sometimes uses the phrase, "Talk with power!", which most

¹ Barba, E., Savarese, N. *The Secret Art of the Performer. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. P. 250.

² Dzintra Mendziņa (1937–2015) – voice and speech teacher and author of the book *A Word, A Thought, Speech (Vārds, doma, runa*. Riga: Sol Vita, 2004), who trained at least a hundred notable actors, directors and journalists, etc.

³ Dž. Dž. Džilindžers (1966) – started out as a member of a group of young directors "The Unbearable Theatre Artel" in the 1990s. He later joined the Daile Theatre, where for over a decade he created visually impressive and commercially successful productions in his role as Director of the Daile.

⁴ Alvis Hermanis (1965), globally renowned opera and theatre director. He was the first proponent of postmodern theatre aesthetics in Latvia in the 1990s. Influenced by the aesthetics of contemporary Western theatre and cinema, Hermanis initiated aestheticized, intellectual and ironically estranged games with the bodies of actors, texts and visual codes, as well as lighting codes, signs and metaphors from different cultures.

likely in all instances means activating the stomach's resonators. Even if resonators are merely considered to be "empty spaces" in the human body (like nasal cavities, the forehead zone within the skull, the end of the throat, thorax or intervertebral stages of the spine), if this case too, theatrical theory is not united in its understanding. "Using Grotowski's (1933–1999) terminology, we called the different voice tones 'resonators'", says Eugenio Barba (1936) in the chapter of his theatre anthropology devoted to training.¹ However, it is better to start by setting everything in order.

The term "speech tool" has been borrowed from a theoretical guide to acting, which arrived in Latvia at the start of the 1990s with the kind assistance of director and acting teacher Pēteris Krilovs². Published in 1986, this thin brochure, "A Practical Handbook for the Actor"³ provided its readers with a schematic, and at the same time, clear and structured understanding of how the creative theatrical process takes place. Back then (before she commenced acting studies at the Latvian Academy of Culture), chapter 7 of this publication "The Tools of the Craft" prompted the reader to consider theatre not just as art, but also as a specific craft skill, which entails learning to use certain instruments. Studying "Britannica Academic", the database of the academic version of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which is available to a wide audience of readers, it is evident that an actor's speech tools such as the voice are considered in synergetic conjunction with body language, i.e. movements and gestures respectively:

"The basic means of the actor, which have traditionally served as the primary area of his training, are voice and body gesture. The actor's voice must be flexible and of all situations and experiences. It must be able to deliver a "poor" voice or a vulgar, rough, angry, or harsh voice. It must vary as much as the events to be created,"⁴ say Lee Strasberg and Ned Chaillet in describing an actor's basic tasks in its chapter "Acting".

"The methods used to train these tools of the actor derive from other fields, such as from the training of the singer's voice and of some forms of dance and pantomime. These contain many useful exercises for strengthening of the respective muscles of

¹ Barba, E. From "Learning" to "Learning to Learn". Barba, E., Savarese, N. *The Secret Art of the Performer. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 244.

² Pēteris Krilovs (1949) – theatre and cinema director and educator, who trained his own actors, "developing their skills in expressing psychological and physical impulses without constraint in order to create their own psychoanalytical language."

³ Bruder, M., Cohn, L. M., Olnek, M., Pollack, N., Previto, R., Zigler, S. *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*. New York: Vintage Books, 1986, p. 67.

⁴ Strasberg L., Chaillet N. Acting. *Britannica Academic*. Available: <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/acting/110170> (viewed 1.04.2017.)

the voice and body. But while the technical accomplishment in the singer and in the dancer may represent a large part of what is appreciated in their performances, in the actor the very fact of the accomplishment must remain hidden. Technical accomplishment should go unnoticed by the audience.”¹

What then are the summarily listed, absolutely essential and irreplaceable tools referred to in this book, which are the foundation for an actor's craft?

- A clear, resonant voice with good articulation,
- a powerful physique,
- the ability to analyse the scene correctly,
- the ability to use words to achieve a specific effect,
- a retentive memory,
- the ability to influence other people,
- the ability to act without thinking, based on unconscious impulses,
- the ability to concentrate,
- confidence,
- will,
- common sense.²

One third of the 12 tools of the craft listed here directly apply to actor's speech. Voice, speech, text analysis and work with words are undoubtedly elements of actor's speech.

Here and henceforth, the actor's speech tools are referred to as the processes, movements and attributes, within the human body and in close conjunction with it, whose mutual interaction during a theatrical performance creates the act of speech that can be heard and seen by the theatre audience. How can one categorise them in more detail? The Polish director and theatre reformer Jerzy Grotowski defined theatre as what takes place between spectator and actor.³ In regard to actors' speech, one can contend that in a live, non-conserved manner, it can only exist in the present; moreover, only and solely in the moment when the connection with the viewer occurs. Without the presence of the viewer, an actor's verbal manifestation is justifiably comparable to the conceptual range of sounds created by any other person. The theatre historian and cognitive scientist John Lutterbie contends that the tools of acting craft: movement, language, gestures, memory, perception and the ability to concentrate are shared by most people: “To insist that artists are different from other people is to undervalue what makes them special. What makes actors unique is the way they are able to use the tools they have in common with everyone else to create performances that have

¹ Strasberg L., Chaillet N. Acting. *Britannica Academic*. Available: <http://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/acting/110170> (viewed 1.04.2017.)

² Ibid.

³ Grotowski, J. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. London: Methuen, 1991, p. 32.

the potential to enthrall an audience.”¹ If one considers actors’ speech detached from other elements in the overall context of theatrical art, one can identify the nuances that characterise the immutable aspect of an actor’s instrument of speech. Human biological development takes place comparatively slowly, and it is widely accepted that “we do not differ much from the Ancient Greeks or representatives of the Elizabethan age”². Accordingly, it is unlikely that the actor’s instrument of speech and its inherent traits have changed significantly. The physiological part of the actor’s speech process (like that of any human being) is facilitated by three sub-systems:

- 1) the respiratory, i.e. the breathing system,
- 2) the phonatory or sound formation system,
- 3) the articulation system, which ensures variability of sounds and coordinates the quality of diction.

The respiratory system ensures that the breathing process consists of three stages:

- a) external (pulmonary) breathing,
- b) oxygen transportation within the body,
- c) internal (cellular) breathing.

The quality of the sound of speech is determined by correct and deep breathing. In a calm state, a person takes 18–20 breaths a minute, i.e. inhalations in relation to exhalations are 1:1 or 1:1.5. During a performance, exhalation lengthens by 10–20 times. Words are spoken breathing out, but, the longer the exhalation, the smoother and the more balanced speech is in terms of power. The way in which an actor learns to regulate his breathing is dependent on the ease and power of the spoken voice, the richness and beauty of his dynamic tones, and the musicality and melodiousness of his speech. Mastery of correct breathing skills negates overload and strain, ensures vocal clarity, and breadth of range, etc. A human being breathes with:

- the upper part of the chest,
- the lower part of the chest, and
- the diaphragm.

The main role in the process of correct breathing is played by developed inter-rib muscles and a powerful diaphragm. It should be noted that full breathing manifests itself the same way in men and women of all age groups. The involvement of the lower rib muscles in breathing helps “bodily” (or so-called “corporeal”) sound, ensures consistent registers, softens the vocal timbre, and gives the voice a special select undertone. Breathing thus, the speaker senses that his whole body is participating in the speech process and not just his throat and vocal cords.

¹ Lutterbie, J. *Toward a General Theory of Acting. Cognitive Science and Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 103.

² *Ibid*, p. 23.

The phonatory system functions as follows:

Inhaled air rises up from the lungs through the vocal cords. Two long muscles – vocal cords come into contact hundreds of times a second. For women this occurs a maximum of 200 times a second and approximately 100 times for men. This contact between vocal cords generates sound. It fills the neck, nasal cavity and palate. To create individual sounds, vocal cords remain apart, but in the majority of instances involving sound, they come into contact. When the upper of the vocal cords come into contact, the lower part opens forms, creating a gap and vice versa. Vocal cords are always moving towards one another. These sounds are regulated and transformed into words with the help of the tongue, teeth, jaws and lips.¹ Talking and singing are the most complex motor actions that the body can perform. In order to generate a higher timbral tone, vocal cords touch one another up to 100 times a second, whereas they touch one another less often to generate lower sounds.² The greater the length to which vocal cords stretch out, the higher the vocal tone, whereas the shorter they contract, the lower the sound.

The articulation system envisages that:

An actor's speech apparatus contains approximately 40 different muscles that facilitate the process of speech. As Peter MacNeilage points out in the study, *The Origin of Speech* (2008), "not all 40 muscles work for sound, of course, but even assuming that just fifteen have to change what they are doing for each successive sound, this would mean that about 225 different muscle activations would occur *in each second of speech*. That averages about one event every 5 milliseconds!"³

Examining an actor's speech tools in the 21st century in more detail, one is compelled to conclude that these can be divided into two separate categories: organic and technical. Among the organic are: firstly – the voice, secondly – breathing (which, in turn, incorporates inhalation as both the base for the voice, and sometimes as an accompanying special effect; likewise, exhalation, which similar to inhalation facilitates the sound function of the voice, and as and when necessary functions as a complementary element to speech). Thirdly, the arsenal of organic speech tools includes body language: mimicry, gestures and general physical manifestations (like posture and movements, etc.). Similarly, technical tools of speech are considered to include microphones, without which productions in today's large theatre

¹ Meister, E. The beauty of the Human Voice. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pO66fEZvkY> (viewed 30.10.2018.)

² Whittaker, N. J. The Amazing Instrument that is the Human Voice. An Exploration into the Amazing Instrument that is the Human Voice. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErZhsV2Hyvc> (viewed 30.10.2018.)

³ MacNeilage, P. F. *The Origin of Speech*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2008, p. 4.

auditoriums would be practically unimaginable. Microphones and sound amplifiers are now used in the theatre to an unprecedented extent. It should be added that the amplification of the sounds generated by an actor is not something completely new and unheard of in theatre history. In ancient tragedies, masks served not only as a descriptive element for a character, but also as a kind of resonator system. The mask had the function of a megaphone – to transmit the sound of the voice to those sitting in the last row.¹ It was not only able to amplify the sound of the voice, but also to transform it, changing it timbrally. In ancient theatre, it seemed as if the actor's voice erupted from unfathomable depths.

Nowadays, the microphone serves as a kind of extension of the invisible part of the body. "Also, the microphone functions like a camera, in making the small large and turning the detail into the whole,"² Eric Salzman points out in his study. The spoken, whispered and unprojected singing voice – normally not audible beyond the confines of a small room or intimate public gathering – can be transmitted over large distances in a performance space through recording. The idiosyncrasies of highly individual voices are emphasized and brought into focus.³ "Microphones and loudspeakers allow not only projection, but also processing. It is now possible, quickly and easily and with relatively simple means, to alter vocal sound and manipulated fragments of vocal sound to create electronic or electro-acoustic extensions in performance and to use these, to further enhance, distort, amplify, or accompany the live voice,"⁴ concludes composer, music historian and critic Eric Salzman (1933–2017). According to him, the best known of these techniques is looping. This permits changes of speed without affecting pitch.⁵ Originally created using records and tapes, but now transformed and improved, this musical culture with microphones, loudspeakers, sound amplification and recordings is now over a century old and is increasingly usurping control of the world of theatre sound.

Actors on the stage must live with microphones that are hung in the air, fastened to the stage floor, pinned to clothing, concealed in their hair, hooked behind their ears, stuck to their cheek, installed in stand or handheld. Therefore, special thought has to be given to the trajectory of movement, amplitude of gestures and vocal intensity. Using a microphone as a voice amplification tool, the actor's possibilities

¹ Why did ancient Greeks wear acting masks? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDRnk-rhCg> (Viewed 30.10.2018.)

² Salzman, E. & Desi, T. *The New Music Theatre. Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 73.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴ Salzman, E. & Desi, T. *The New Music Theatre. Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

to concentrate on the character's thought process in sustained and target manner are significantly reduced, because before walking on stage, for safety's sake, the microphone's technical connection and battery life are checked several times. Instead of connecting to his character's thought process and thinking about his actions on stage, he is compelled to repeatedly focus his attention on the technical equipment for the performance. If something technically malfunctions, such fragmentation of thoughts continues on stage. However, with technical progress, it is likely that in a few decades' time, the aforementioned sound shortcomings will have been resolved. Tiny wireless microphones and tiny transmitters sewn under skin will conceivably deliver more flawless effects. However, it is hard to predict how this will influence health and psyche of actors. Technologically modified vocal power is already producing different articulation and rhythm of speech. Influenced by audio voice recordings, in which countless manipulations and natural human abilities exaggerated by special effects are possible due to technological innovations, actors try to imitate recorded sounds. As a result, there are far fewer reasons for original new works. More than ever before, conditions are prompting imitation, transforming that which already exists, quoting and reproducing works created by others.

Accordingly, it is not the actor who determines events, but rather the director, choosing the intensity of sound and paradoxically not even the director, but working on a day-to-day basis – it is the sound engineer, who depending on his tastes, know-how and competence, who regulates the volume and acuity of sound.

“In the theatre, we desire as natural a timbre as possible,” states sound editor and engineer Mārtiņš Strelēvics. “Therefore, both hung and floor microphones are used to achieve as much sound coverage as possible. One can achieve a much more natural effect with such equipment – seemingly placing the viewer closer to the action. But they don't reveal details. If the microphone is attached next to the mouth, then you can hear every nuance.”¹ In the theatre, it is the sound engineer's duty to help to take the viewer into the necessary environment. It is playing with fantasy.

In performance, vocal expressions have mostly become indivisibly linked to language. The voice must transmit the spoken word. Actors of the day have to employ their voices as parasyntactic, parasemantic, and parapragmatic tools. (..) For one, the voice would clarify the syntactic structure of what is spoken; second, it would accentuate and emphasize the intended meaning; and third, it could reinforce its desired effect on the listener.²

¹ Daudziņa, Z. Let's just be friends! A conversation with theatre sound engineers about actors' tools of speech in the 21st century. *Teātra Vēstnesis* 2018/III, p. 87.

² Fisher-Lihte, E. *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 125.

Looking back at the distant past, one can see that the actor had the function of transferring communication. The actor's voice as a used as a communicative bridge from the text to the listener's consciousness. In ancient culture, a tool of the ritual craft was the word. In the 21st century theatrical performances too, having escaped the power of rationality, the voice becomes dangerous and seductive.¹

The subject of the tool of speech is conducive to broad possibilities for interpretation. It can also be considered in the following categories:

- body parts involved in breathing (diaphragm, lungs, throat, etc.),
- organs intended for articulation (tongue, lips, palate, etc.),
- processing facilitating thoughts (concentration, imagination, memory, interpretation of facts, etc.).

You see it is these – the latter, of course, that are furthest removed from the physiological nature of human beings and lead to, if not artistic, then most certainly individually interpreted speech.

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