

## Helena, Hitler and the Heartland

### Teaching Voice and Shakespeare in Germany



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#### Introduction

I have worked with actors in my capacity as a theatre voice specialist for over twenty-one years, dealing with classical and new writing alike. I have been a Lecturer in Voice at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama for all that time, teaching on undergraduate and post-graduate courses in acting and performance, as well as being a professional voice and dialect specialist for theatre, both in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. In recent years, I have been Guest Lecturer in Voice at the Athanor Akademie in Germany where I have undertaken intensive workshops that have helped to develop my work further. While my own training at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama was in that mainstream British tradition best exemplified by Cicely Berry, my work has subsequently been influenced by Nadine George, one of the founding members of the Roy Hart Theatre, who now teaches independently. Although Berry's work strongly influenced my approach to helping actors connect with the text in practical ways, George's was crucial to a profound understanding of the nature of the voice and its direct channel into the heart of the acting process. The voice research in which I am currently engaged lies at the meeting point of these two traditions and explores the application of George's particular voice work both to the training of actors and to professional rehearsal practice. The essence of George's work is the development of four different qualities of voice, two male and two female, which are in every human voice. These are first explored as sung notes, using the fixed intervals of the piano for guidance, and then as speech, the process being detailed below. My work, at the Academy and in theatre, focuses on enabling actors to enter the text and embody it, literally; that is, the whole text is vibrated through the body and voice of the actor in order for it to be transmitted to the body of the listener in the moment of speaking. This vibration of the text in the body means that the text, rather than simply being understood intellectually or felt emotionally and then "acted," is connected deeply to where the voice actually comes from: to the physical source of the creative energies and impulses of the actor.

The work that I do in rehearsal connecting the actor to the source of the voice and the impulse to express allows the thoughts and feelings of the text to be contacted physically, worked with consciously, and then embodied or channelled by the voice and body. Matters such as the intellectual discussion of the text, what characters are feeling or experiencing and so on, happen internally through the body connection, rather than externally as ideas which are then acted out. It puts the body and voice, rather than the head, at the centre of the acting process and rehearsal period, redresses any imbalance between them and re-connects both in the act of speaking itself. It is important to stress that the work that I teach is the result of over fourteen years of personal work with George on my own voice, combined with extensive experience in teaching it. It must be very clear that this is not work that can be taught unless the teacher has, over an extended period of time, undergone the processes s/he seeks to work with in others.<sup>1</sup>

1. For those who may be interested in experiencing the work for themselves, contact can be made with Nadine George of *The Voice Studio* via the journal or with me on [r.steen@rsamd.ac.uk](mailto:r.steen@rsamd.ac.uk)

Nevertheless I hope my account of teaching the work and the questions it has raised for me will be of interest and form part of a conversation with voice colleagues whose practice may be very different from my own.

For I do not have all the answers as to why and how this all works. What I have discovered is that teaching the work in Germany has put me at a distance, geographically and metaphorically, from what I otherwise take for granted and enabled me to consider what I am doing instead of simply doing it. More important, working with actors who do not have English as a first language has meant I need to find language freshly in order to talk about the work. I have to reach for an unambiguously simple English that can yet convey complexity if I am to explain the nature of the work and answer the actors' extremely direct questions regarding the purpose of everything they are being asked to do. (A cultural difference has to be taken into account here as, to a British person, this manner of asking questions can be perceived as rude where no rudeness is intended.) In different ways, these physical journeys abroad take me further into the journey I am on towards answering my questions about this voice work, and, like any good traveller, I have kept journal notes to accompany me on the way. The article will draw on these, as well as my analytical reflections to date.

Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2002. My flight to Munich is delayed and I am caught in Birmingham's transit hub, waiting for three hours. Time to reflect on the difference between my feelings last year about going to work in Germany for the first time, and those of today. Then I was apprehensive, wondering how my voice and Shakespeare work would fare with speakers of another language; today I am excited and energised at the thought of return and an opportunity to undertake work in two languages.<sup>2</sup>

2. Ros Steen; Journal 2: 2002

### The Context of the Workshops

Athantor Akademie is a small, independent drama school established in 1995 by Dr. David Esrig, its charismatic Romanian Director, in the Bavarian town of Burghausen on the German-Austrian border. The four-year, state-recognised actor training course is intensely physical with a clear acting philosophy and movement curriculum based on Vsevolod Meyerhold's bio-mechanics but despite a number of good voice teachers who have provided useful input, the School has yet to establish a similarly clear vocal curriculum.<sup>3</sup> An exchange programme was established in December 1998 with Scotland's National Conservatoire, the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and in June the following year acting students came to Glasgow to work alongside their Scottish counterparts observed by accompanying German staff members. After my classes I was invited to give some workshops at the Akademie and I was able to take up the invitation in the spring of 2001. The Akademie was keen to give as many students as possible some experience of the work so I taught three out of their four year groups. When I returned in June 2002, I worked exclusively with the fourth year actors and in October 2003, the third year actors. On these last two occasions the fact that I was allocated the same group of students for the entire time meant that I could build on my first year's experience and take the work further. I returned in April 2004 to connect the voice work to a theatrical production.

Since I neither speak nor understand German, I knew the actors would have to work in my language (their English is generally excellent) but I was concerned not to be working in their own tongue. On the one hand I was unsure how to work with the voice if the actors spoke German and on the other, I felt uneasy about not relating the work to their primary and instinctive mode of expression. I was also, as my journal extract suggests, anxious as to how my

3. German voice work, like that of many European countries, tends to come from a linguistic and/or a speech therapy base. Prior to my arrival at the Akademie, students were taught a mixture of voice theory, speech work consisting of the correct pronunciations of the standard speech, *Hochdeutsch*, and a physical approach to voice that, coming from a speech therapy root, had a tendency to emphasise voice problems and difficulties. One of my German students, now a teacher at the school, commented on what seemed to be missing in their voice training before I began to work in the school: "...the focus was only on the sound of the vocals. So we could speak it well and with resonance but on stage, in combination with emotion and for creating a character it wasn't enough. I personally appreciate so much the effectivity (sic) of this work, not only to improve your voice but to find possibilities for the characters I want to play, in a state of high awareness of your body and the transport of energy through me, and through space. So it's body (incl. voice) soul and spirit that work together and get worked on at the same time." Uli Zeitz former student and now teacher at Athantor Akademie in correspondence with Ros Steen 23/10/2004

kind of voice work would be received. The first workshops, therefore, were principally devoted to introducing the voice work and my working process and methodology. Most of the text work was undertaken in English with an exploratory foray only into German. Once those workshops had been well received, I gained the confidence to allow the German text more dominance and by the third workshop, the text content was equally divided between the two languages. The focus in every case was on Shakespearian text because of the heightened and extended demands it places on the voice, as much as its intrinsic interest for a classically orientated European Academy.

### **The Working Process**

The methodology of my voice workshops follows the same pattern, with any changes, additions or amendments to each workshop schedule a result of previous, practical experience. It comprises preparation, foundation work in the four qualities, individual vocal exploration and voice into text work.

#### **Preparation**

The workshop day always begins with physical work on the breath and energy because,

the exploration and extension of the voice's range is linked to the body's tensions, strengths and weaknesses.<sup>4</sup>

4. Roy Hart Theatre monograph, undated, ed. Ivan Midderigh

The two breathing sequences I use, alternated daily, are both designed to allow one actor, facilitated by another actor's gentle physical touch, to contact the deep sources of breath and energy in the body and release them easily and fluently. In sequence 1, one actor lies on his/her back, breathing out on a gentle sigh to release the breath as deeply from the body as possible. To encourage this deeper release the second actor, working on the outbreath only, goes through a series of movements designed to ease off any tension in the head, neck, shoulders and chest, before supporting the legs in different positions as the actor continues to breathe out. In the second sequence, the actor lies on his/her front and breathes out in the same way, while the second actor works on the outbreath by means of various sweeping and stroking movements made over the whole body. Both sequences connect the actor to his/her own deeper breathing in a gentle but active way. The actors then exchange places and once both have been through the sequence, they take the now re-connected breath and energy out from themselves. They stand in a circle and first, focus the breath and energy directly forward from themselves and second, continue to breathe out while turning the head and making eye contact round the circle with their fellow actors. After that, they move off into the work space, breathing out and releasing their breath and energy into the space. These exchanges, between actor and actor and between actors and work space, mirror the energy exchanges that take place among the cast and between cast and audience in performance.

#### **Foundation Work in the Four Qualities of Voice**

Work is then done, as a group, on four qualities of voice. These are: the deep male quality connected to the stomach, higher male quality connected to the chest, the deep female quality, also connected to the chest and the higher female quality, connected to the head. It is important to point out that these qualities are not gender specific despite the terminology—the essence of the work is that each human voice encompasses all four. The four qualities of

sound have their roots in the research work of Alfred Wolfsohn who explored the connection between voice and the psychology of the individual. He found that:

there exists in the human voice a common structure which makes it possible that that which is called soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, or bass exists in everybody, whether child, male or female.<sup>5</sup>

In his work, the voice was resonated through “energy centres in the stomach, chest and head”<sup>6</sup> and the range of the human voice widened over several octaves. His pupil Roy Hart continued the research when Wolfsohn died in 1962, and George learned the work through studying many years with Hart. After Hart’s death in 1975, George began to develop the work in her own way by evolving her particular method and approach, taking it forward from its original root in other directions.<sup>7</sup> While Hart had used singing terminology for the vocal qualities, it was George who made the change into calling them Low (or Deep) Male, High Male, Low or (Deep) Female and High Female as “I could see immediately in practice that this worked much better.”<sup>8</sup> George understood that, for actors, it was more beneficial to move away from singing terminology towards a direct acknowledgment of the male and female aspects of character and self.

In each quality, notes are voiced not as conventional musical sounds but expressive ones connected to inner states, imagination and identity. George developed the voice work for actors by linking each vocal quality to a line of Shakespearian text.<sup>9</sup> She explained her choice thus:

The lines of Macbeth linking directly into the deep male sound and the depth of voice necessary for Macbeth

The lines of Lady Macbeth linking directly into the high male energy necessary for playing Lady Macbeth

The lines of Romeo linking directly to the lower female energy and poetry necessary to play Romeo

The lines of Juliet linking with the higher female energy and linking this with the depth which is necessary for playing Juliet.

The lines of Shakespeare I have chosen help the actor to get directly into the energy of the character and work from there. Eventually, after at least five years work on the voice, all the qualities become integrated into the voice and the actor has an instrument which s/he can use as s/he wants to.<sup>10</sup>

Two things are important to stress. While George based her choice on her own view of the energies required to play these characters, she is not telling the actor how these parts should be played. Rather she is using these lines as entry points into qualities of sound; for example, she found that a contact with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s dark forces expressed in these lines, was a way of beginning to contact deep and cutting energies in the voice. The lines were selected largely on the basis of their dramatic content and connection to character, as well as their ability to trigger a connection with the particular male or female energy being explored. However, as these lines are ways into the qualities, it could certainly be possible to choose other appropriate lines, though I haven’t done so myself. These work so well for the purpose that I only move on to other lines from other texts (e.g. production text) once they

5. *Experimental Theatre* by James Roose-Evans. Chapter 18, Pg 182. Routledge 1996

6. *ibid*

7. “What I use of Roy’s work in my work today is the work with the sound— not in such an extreme way, but in a more simple and direct way, and I have created my own technique from this. I....wanted to see if I could find a way of linking the voice work that I had done with Roy with the work on Shakespearean Text that I had done before I met him.” Article by Nadine George in preparation.

8. *ibid*

9. The lines are:

i) Is this a dagger which I see before me/the handle toward my hand?  
*Ist das ein Dolch, den ich vor mir sehe, der griff mir zugekehrt?*  
(deep male)

ii) The raven himself is hoarse/that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan/under my battlements  
*Selbst der Rabe ist heiser der Duncan’s schicksalsvollen eingang krechtst unter mein dach.*  
(high male)

iii) But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?  
*Doch still! Was schimmert durch das Fenster dort?*  
(deep female)

iv) Gallop apace you fiery-footed steeds!  
*Hinab! Du flammenhuffiges Gespann.*  
(high female)

10. Correspondence with Ros Steen dated 7/8/2004

have been mastered. The physical vibration of the energy in a particular part of the body is thus clearly connected to a line of spoken text. The Shakespearian lines act as bridges between body, voice and text and once in place the embodiment process of the text has begun.

### Individual Vocal Exploration

I found that the sound of the human voice, gained its fullest expression exactly at the point, when the singing person, having found the right balance of concentration and attention, could express it bodily<sup>11</sup>.

11. Alfred Wolfsohn, quoted by Marita Günther in a paper entitled *Marita Günther*. The Roy Hart Theatre Archives.

Next comes the individual work that allows each person to encounter and explore his/her unique voice. Every day, actors explore at least one quality of the voice in an extended way; sometimes more, time permitting. As each actor is different, as each voice is different, and as what is going on in the actor and voice each day is different, one can provide only a guideline as to what happens in each individual encounter.

Actors are asked to stand and sing the notes of major c scales with a sustained vocal energy that sets off physically felt vibrations and resonances. Through a range of notes sung on the appropriate vowel (each quality is explored on a particular vowel sound)<sup>12</sup> the following are worked with:

12. The four vowel sounds are /aw/, /ah/, /oo/, and /ah/.

- the ability to channel vocal energy on two dimensions, vertically and horizontally, opened through a balanced, alert body
- the ability to “hold fast with whole body in vocal production”<sup>13</sup> or to hold oneself in sound, demanding strong reserves of concentration, focus and engagement in the moment
- the ability to allow or permit this channelled, free flowing physical energy to cause vibrations in the body which have the potential to touch physical, psychological, imaginative and emotional areas
- the ability to willingly experience, explore and open the complex vibrations of different parts of the vocal range in order to extend it beyond habitual and/or perceived limitations

13. *How Voice Gave Me A Conscience* by Roy Hart. A paper written for the Seventh International Congress of Psychotherapy, August 1967. Roy Hart Theatre Archives.

This last takes us into another important area that the work can address—how actors actually approach work: what it is that facilitates or limits what they permit themselves to accomplish. The desire to be creative and exciting is often tempered by the fear of exposure that these things imply and the balance of risk to comfort is one that has to be negotiated all the time, but a willingness to take a step out of oneself into the unknown is a prerequisite for tapping or accessing the untouched or deeper aspects of ourselves. The process “may not always take you where you think you are going but you are taken where you need to be.”<sup>14</sup>

14. Nadine George. Verbatim, recorded in Ros Steen’s journal notes for George’s 3<sup>rd</sup> International Workshop for Voice Teachers, 2001.

The work leads actors to be aware of the presence of any habitual defences that may inhibit giving voice fully. Once acknowledged, they can be worked with over a period of time and, little by little, overcome. In this way, the work connects to the psyche of the actor, though it must be stressed this is *not* focused on or even discussed in the workshop but left as one of the “silent” discoveries of the process. Similarly, it must be noted that, as in any artistic activity, there may be both spiritual and therapeutic aspects to the work, but these, where they exist and are encountered, remain completely in the silent realm unless invited into the light of day by the actor *him/herself* and volunteered for consideration. Even then, because the importance of

these areas belongs to the actor, professional sensitivity and judgement will be exercised to re-focus any insights thus afforded back on to their connection with the business of acting. Thus, in my application of the work, I have moved away from the overtly therapeutic and psychological aspects of Wolfsohn's and Hart's own approaches<sup>15</sup> while retaining an awareness of the larger scope of their researches into voice.

'When I speak of singing,' wrote Wolfsohn, 'I do not consider this to be an artistic exercise, but the possibility, and the means to recognise oneself and to transform this recognition into conscious life.'<sup>16</sup>

In the singing work, I am initially listening for what I call "the note behind the note." This starts to emerge once the actor has been gently encouraged to hold the basic note for longer than s/he is often inclined to do. It is extremely common for our heads to tell us we "can't" sing any further on a note or to decide simply to stop the note as it may be trailing off and losing momentum and texture. This is often a judgment made by the individual according to conventional singing criteria: the note is "poor," "weak," "breathy" or even "bad" and therefore must be silenced. But by holding fast in the body and staying with the sound longer than usual (but still within the capacity of the individual), energy can be slowly extended and deepened which in turn sets up a new level of vibration that can lead to an "opening" in the voice. It is for this opening, this possibility of what could exist in the voice, and what might be about to come into being in the next sound, that I am listening. Each opening has the potential to take the actor into another level in the voice and, once encountered, is never forgotten—the actor feels a physical sensation in the body as the released energy surges through to support an enhanced resonance of sound. At the same time the actor may experience an opening into imagination and feeling. The listener can see the physical change and hear the vocal opening sometimes even more clearly than the actor who is singing and thereby caught up in the effort and concentration required to produce the sound. For that reason an essential component of the process is that the individual works not just watched by the group, but attended to by them, in both senses of that word. First by giving their complete close attention and focus to their fellow-actor and second by listening to the sounds produced while watching the nuances of body movements and facial expressions, they are able to learn from the *way* in which the actor is working, something of the nature of the process that will engage them in their turn. Listening like this encourages respect for one another, for disciplined work and for themselves as artists. If open to what is going on, they will experience the reverberation of the actor's sung vibrations in their own bodies. Coupled with their outside observations of the actor at work, the group is then in a position to feed back to the actor what they receive in the moment of exploration, that is, what that actor has transmitted to them as audience members. The working actor can then combine this feedback with experiential learning to reflect on what has been achieved.

It is always interesting to see how the work of the first actor can go into the work of the second actor as soon as the second actor starts to work.

Consciously or unconsciously, s/he may have absorbed a way of working with the voice, a measure of courage to step beyond the known, movements and shapes of the vocal apparatus and so on. That this can repeat itself throughout a group leads them to understand how one actor's work does not simply

15. See, for example Wolfsohn's *Orpheus, oder der weg zu einer Maske (Orpheus or the Way to a Mask)* unpublished manuscript written around 1938. English translation Marita Günther. Quoted by Noah Pikes in his chapter on Wolfsohn in *Dark Voices* published by Spring Journal Books 1999. Also *How Voice Gave Me A Conscience* by Roy Hart, as above.

16. *Marita Günther*. The Roy Hart Theatre Archives.

17. Juliet's speech was divided as follows:  
Farewell! God knows when we shall meet again. {1}  
I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins  
That almost freezes up the heat of life.  
I'll call them back again to comfort me.  
Nurse!—What should she do here?  
My dismal scene I needs must act alone.  
Come, vial.  
What if this mixture do not work at all? {2}  
Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?  
No, no! This shall forbid it. Lie thou there.  
What if it be a poison which the Friar  
Subtly hath minister'd to have me dead,  
Lest in this marriage he should be dishonoured  
Because he married me before to Romeo?  
I fear it is. And yet methinks it should not,  
For he hath still been tried a holy man.  
How if, when I am laid into the tomb, {3}  
I wake before the time that Romeo  
Come to redeem me? There's a fearful point!  
Shall I not then be stifled in the vault,  
To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in,  
And there die strangled ere my Romeo comes?  
Or, if I live, is it not very like  
The horrible conceit of death and night  
Together with the terror of the place—  
As in a vault, an ancient receptacle  
Where for this many hundred years the bones  
Of all my buried ancestors are packed;  
Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,  
Lies festering in his shroud; where, as they say,  
At some hours in the night spirits resort—  
Alack, alack, is it not like that I, {4}  
So early waking—what with loathsome smells,  
And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth,  
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad—  
Or, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,  
Environèd with all these hideous fears,  
And madly play with my forefathers' joints,  
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud,  
And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone  
As with a club dash out my desperate brains?  
O, look! Methinks I see my cousin's ghost  
Seeking out Romeo, that did spit his body  
Upon a rapier's point. Stay, Tybalt, stay!  
Romeo, Romeo, Romeo.  
Here's drink. I drink to thee.  
(Penguin Shakespeare)

18. Cicely Berry Reference for an AHRB grant for voicework research investigation by Ros Steen "An Enhanced Role for the Voice Specialist in Production." 2000

19. In 2000, Philip Howard, Artistic Director of the Traverse Theatre and I co-directed a production of Michel Tremblay's *Solemn Mass for a Full Moon in Summer* (Traverse Theatre and Barbican Centre (BITE 2000) using the voice work as the primary vehicle of rehearsal.

directly affect their own work, it *is* their own work as well as their fellow actor's. It is therefore important for me to make sure that the order in which the actors take their turn is changed each day so that no one person always finds themselves at the start of the proceedings.

### The Voice into Text

Text work follows the exploratory work on the voice, benefiting from what has been tapped, released and made available to the acting impulse.

To begin with vocal energy is "broken through" the text, that is, the text is spoken on full voice with highly physically vibrated energy giving an embodied, sustained, clearly articulated sound. (Matters such as rhythm, stress, pronunciations and so on are also dealt with in this first vibrated speaking so that a confident familiarity with what the text holds is confirmed.) Next, the text is divided into sections and spoken incrementally: section {1}, then section {1} repeated with section {2} added, then sections {1} and {2} with {3} added and so on, until the speech is completed.<sup>17</sup> All this is done from a sitting position on chairs, focusing forward in the space. Then the actor stands and faces the audience, opening the focus to them, transmitting the energies and vibrations of the speech while receiving energy from the listeners. It is at this point that the underlying, even subconscious creative impulses and connections to the thoughts and feelings of the text start to flow forward, having been tapped previously through the sung notes. The actor begins consciously to experience the currents of the text, that is, the embodied voice physically and imaginatively opens out a piece of writing through "the underlying form, rhythm, and physicality of sound which takes us into a deeper understanding, and informs the meaning."<sup>18</sup>

All this leads directly to physical and vocal entry points into character, cutting through the brain's analysis of character and what it should or should not be.

The actor then engages the full performance space, exploring when and where to move as suggested by these internal physical and psychological impulses for the words. At this point in the process, the feeling of "riding" the waves of the text can be noted, that is the actor is almost visually buoyed up by the text as s/he begins to physically experience its inherent possibilities and try them out. Each time the text is spoken, further choices become apparent in the act of voicing them until a pool of acting choices emerges, each one of which will start to lay down a layer of complexity in the final performance. (Everything that has been tapped has the possibility of being accessed in performance; even eliminating certain choices in favour of others may still result in a "ghost" influence of something explored which may leave its echo in the final version.) The embodied voice's encounters with the possibilities of the text can, I argue, not simply furnish the stuff of rehearsals but when taken further provide the crucible for rehearsal itself, thus offering a radically new model for the rehearsal process<sup>19</sup> but that is a substantial topic and merits an article in its own right. For now, I would like to explore the evolution of the work as it developed over a period of three years, to its present form.

### The First Workshops, March 2001

The first set of workshops focused on the second years. They were a small group of six and, as it happens, all women. The text I had chosen for them, bearing in mind their average age and gender, was Helena's monologue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "How happy some o'er other some can be" (Act I scene i).

The workshop largely followed the working process above, though the amount of time for individual work was much less owing to the fact that we had a reduced number of hours together. Each actor worked on one quality of the voice only, each day.

The text work was different, however, as I had not made the full connection between piano work and text I was later to make. I had assumed that if you opened up the voice, the actor would automatically use this opened voice when they began to speak text but in fact, as I discovered, this was not so. As I became more experienced in what I was doing, I came to realise that I had to guide the actors more accurately into the moment of speech, directly from the physical body place registered in the sung notes, rather than allowing them to drift back towards the habitual speaking posture they assumed for text. I will describe how this was done in conjunction with the third set of workshops, below. The bridge between sung note and speech could not just be assumed but needed to be built with careful practice over time, as I was to learn. For now I contented myself by exploring the text more conventionally after the initial work in the belief the voice would take care of itself. I followed some of Cicely Berry's well established principles; for example, her "Inner v Outer Landscape" exercise<sup>20</sup> was slightly adapted to give each Helena a "public" spot where she talked something out to understand it and a "private" one where she experienced something because she was speaking. By going through the energy and voice work to the text the actor was able to realise some more acting choices. It was after this last session that one of the actors said that Helena might speak a different language from hers but she knew absolutely how she felt.<sup>21</sup>

20. *Text in Action* by Cicely Berry. Pg 220-221 Virgin Publishing Ltd. 2001

21. Ros Steen: Journal 1, 2001.

It was only at the end of the week, when the foregoing work had been accomplished, that I felt ready to start making connections with the students' own language.

The first small move was to have the "placing" lines spoken in German, rather than English. One of the actors, whose normal speaking voice tended towards the high female place, spoke "the raven himself is hoarse" in German in the male chest spot and then stopped abruptly. "I don't like that sound" she said, emphatically. "I sound like Hitler." In his pioneering work, Wolfsohn realised that the human voice had to be capable of expressing all human emotions in order to achieve its full potential. The actor had uncannily echoed Wolfsohn's own statement that a person's voice had to be open to "all voices, that he must find those of the Jew *and* Hitler within himself."<sup>22</sup>

22. Roy Hart Theatre monograph, undated, ed. Ivan Miederigh

By giving voice to the dark as well as the light, in the right context, an actor can find the black aspects of a character like Lady Macbeth in a safe way that can be channelled into performance. The "right context" implies the following are in place:



- an atmosphere of openness, trust and respect between voice person and actors
- an understanding from all concerned that disciplined work, demanding full concentration and focus, is the pre-requisite for creative activity
- the establishment of structured, repeated and recognised ways of working which open the physical, vocal and psychological channels that are central to the success of the creative endeavour
- an acknowledgement that, given a supportive atmosphere, the actor's willingness to explore, to try something new, to venture beyond what is already known and to be generally curious is what will facilitate development
- a recognition of the reciprocal nature of acting and the true nature of the ensemble—one actor's work does not simply affect another actor's work; it actually forms an indissoluble part of that other actor's work, and vice versa
- the time allotted is properly adequate for the task in hand and managed efficiently and well (i.e. neither rushed nor wasted)

The second connection was to ask the actors, who had been working on German text in their acting class, to extend their voice in one of the vocal qualities of their choice before performing their acting piece again. According to the Akademie's acting tutor who watched them work more depth of insight was afforded into the role in each case.

This insight was the result of George's adage to "follow what the voice is telling you, not what your brain is telling you about the voice."<sup>23</sup> In going directly into the role through the vocal energy the actors could counter any undue emphasis on intellectualising how a part should be played with their body's own knowledge of how it could be played, as explained earlier.

23. Nadine George. Verbatim, recorded in Ros Steen's journal notes for George's 3<sup>rd</sup> International Workshop for Voice Teachers 2001.

### **Reflections on The First Workshop**

The acceptance that my work received at the Akademie was very encouraging. Actors and teachers from a different cultural background and tradition of training clearly understood the nature of what I was doing and welcomed it as a positive contribution to the work of the School. For me, three important lessons were learned.

First, when working with actors I didn't know at all, the importance of creating the right context for exploration assumed even more importance than hitherto, as confidence in the process and my ability to lead it had to be more quickly built up than with a group I knew well. Second, I discovered that the voice/body connection to the German language was as clear for me to hear and work with as it was in English so that I could work with speakers in a language different from my own. Last, it had been fascinating to hear the music of Shakespeare released so precisely by actors whose first language was other than English. This happened because body, voice and psyche, in open connection with the words, leapt the "language barrier" and Scotland spoke to Germany across it.

What I felt had not been achieved was the connection between the voice work and the actors acting in their own language, largely due to my earlier apprehensions.

It was this connection that I resolved to explore more boldly in my second visit.

### **The Second Workshops June 2002**

On my return to Burghausen in June 2002, I began work with the final year students, three male and three female. They were not completely new to the voice work having had an introduction to the breathing sequences and the basic four qualities the year before, but had not had any individual work on the voice, which was the focus now. The text was *Romeo and Juliet* and there were three selections: Juliet's speech in the tomb (Act IV, scene iii) for the women, Romeo's speech on banishment (Act III, scene iii) for the men and the balcony scene for pair work.

I started by re-establishing the groundwork, using English text and then, mindful of the desire to establish deeper connections between the voice work and the students' own tongue, in German immediately afterwards. In the afternoon, we began the focused work on the individual voice with each actor working on two qualities every day, followed by the text section by section and we continued to work on text as described earlier, only this time we worked on a section of text first in English and then immediately in German. The scene work was done in the following way. Each pair of actors, one Romeo and one Juliet, sat on chairs opposite each other but with some space between them, perhaps eight or nine feet, and spoke the text to each other in an embodied way. This speaking had to hit the body of their partner. Eye contact in the energy transmission was paramount, so one actor received the text from another actor by listening, only then picking up their text and responding. It took time for the actors not to "act" love or interest but simply to voice the text with energy, vibration and clarity and to open themselves up to listening receptively. In this way they discovered how to tap into the energies of love stored in the fabric of the text rather than manufacture feeling; this is what I mean by embodying the heartland of a text, its soundscape, in order to hold it in balance with the work of the intellect. It was interesting that the actors found this difficult to do at first. They avoided eye contact and, embarrassed by the passion in the text, began to "pull off" their bodies in the moment of speech; that is, they came away from an embodied speaking connection and displaced the energy into unnecessary and restless small movements of the head and body, while the voice lifted towards the head. One actor described feeling "naked" in the exchange of energy with his fellow actor and we discussed the balance between the desire to engage and the fear of engagement which actors work with at all levels of the profession. Yet the openness of the actor, the willingness to engage and to commit his or her physical being, heart and soul, is what the audience is paying to see. Simply to look as if an exchange is taking place by the usual means of turn and turn about is not the same as the organic exchange of the text through the body's living impulse and by the end of the day, the same actor acknowledged that working in this way had opened him to a level where he could embody his intellectual understanding of the text's demands.

### **Case Study**

It might be useful to follow one actor through the course of the week. Let us call her Actor A.

At the beginning of the workshop, she presented a rather erratic vocal quality with unsteady vibrato. The perception of A's voice from herself and her colleagues was that she had a "weak" voice. Energy was not channelled through the body and this was reflected in a lack of focus in the eyes when she worked. When she began to work individually (in the deep male quality), she found it difficult at first to hold the energy from the body into this sound and closed her eyes as if shutting out both me and the work. She fussed when asked to accomplish notes she felt outside "her range" and wanted to talk about what she had been asked to do rather than do it, that is she preferred to intellectualise what was going on, thereby defraying fear and deferring the moment of commitment. She was encouraged to stop all discussion, tap into her vocal energy and open her eyes. It was remarkably hard work to get her to do the latter and take her focus out. When she did so, her body, of course, accomplished the sounds perfectly well. They become steadier and stronger. To avoid facing what had happened (because the power of the energy can be shocking), she complained of "soreness" in the voice when she was finished. What had happened was therefore my "fault," absolving her from responsibility for her voice or connection to it.

This "soreness" is simply muscular intensity and is often the result of the slight stretch which comes from using muscles more fully. In my experience the voice, if fully supported on breath, is never accompanied by pain or discomfort.<sup>24</sup> When we progressed to working on the two female energies on the second day, A began by pushing too much male energy into the female spot and had to be guided towards a sound that was, initially, deeper and more sensual in energy. It took some time but she concentrated harder on where her body's energy was taking her and found a real opening in the voice that finally put to rest any further concerns about soreness. At one point in the work she coughed slightly which she took to be a problem but in fact was a prelude, as it often is, to an opening in the voice when it is just poised to move past fear and embody sound. By encouraging her to go into the cough rather than stop, to go through that moment of fear and anticipation, the energy opened a new vibration in the sound. In this case the lips began to "flute" or to move rapidly and be freely blown by the energy of the sound. All the time the work went on I encouraged A to keep her eyes open and not turn the energy inward, to balance the body and stay calm.

Despite some physically nervous tremors in the body, there was more co-operation today and no negative comments. It was becoming clear that the voice was not "weak," even if the actor could not "control" the lips as she would have liked. The lack of control of the lips was, of course, a strength. The actor was beginning to release in a safe and directed way the considerable voice she had that lay below the surface.

The next two days found a development in the ability to channel energy through the body. A could keep the eyes open for much more of the session, so focusing and directing her voice forward from herself. When we re-visited the deep male energy it proved steadier in the sung note, though she was still inclined to come off the body when she spoke, that is the energy rose from her towards the head.

24. Wolfsohn's work was accused of damaging his students' voices. In 1956, Jenny Johnson's voice was thoroughly examined by Zurich Otolaryngological Clinic and found to be functioning completely healthily. *The Psychology of Voice and the Founding of the Roy Hart Theatre*, Paul Newham. Pg 63.

There was a slight crack in the voice as she tried to speak from the new, more embodied sung sound body spot but this relaxed as she went on. It was observable that she had a tendency to cut short the vowel in words when she spoke (an indication of avoiding the depth of Juliet's feeling in the monologue) but the speaking was much more "comfortable" than it had been (her word). Finally, on the last day she moved through each quality, each placing line and Juliet in a calmer, more centred way—more connected to herself and to her text. It was becoming clearer to her that an opening in one area of the voice in the morning's piano work had a direct correspondence with the opening up of a layer in her acting.

When she began the pair work of the balcony scene she had found it almost impossible to eye contact her partner. She would giggle and become distracted by the thought of "being in love" with her fellow actor. By the end of the week her approach had undergone much change. Her attention was more open throughout, the "weak" sound embodied and a more truthful impulse for the love of Romeo and Juliet expressed. If there was still an odd moment of loss of focus, well, fear of commitment is not easily swept away in a week, but the notable and declared confidence in what she could achieve was her impetus for further work. It was instructive that when I next returned to the Akademie to work with a different year group, A made time to join the lessons where possible to augment what she had learned. She had moved in the intervening time right into the centre of herself rather than being on the periphery of her own abilities.

### **Reflections on The Second Workshop**

In the beginning, the work often seems strange and can be regarded with some suspicion. The nature of the work and the demanding task of opening spaces in oneself—one's voice, body and acting—is very different from what actors may normally have experienced, leading to a degree of wariness. Physical sensations can be felt strongly as energy is re-directed. One actor, for example, was very aware of the energy being vibrated and released deep into her back. The intense sensation of the physical nature of the voice, its connection to body and imagination and the strength of the sound produced, often surprising and sometimes disturbing in intensity, generates a sense of achievement and a feeling of being touched profoundly. It is this latter desire which leads many actors into acting in the first place; it is what they are hoping to feel, for example, when they choose "strong" speeches, or what they mean by having a passion for what they do. However, a lack of confidence in the reception of their work or simply plain fear means actors may not always be able to touch that deeper place within themselves, in class or rehearsal. Part of what this voice work does, I believe, is to go straight to the heart of the body *and* the fear and work on both in a climate that allows the actor to go into them step by step, as they are able. The atmosphere in which the work is undertaken and received is, as we have seen, crucial, hence the responsibility of all members of the group to each other. I firmly believe that in that responsibility lies the basis for a true ensemble.

With regard to the deep female quality, I observed that the German men found this area less difficult than the women (though they could initially balk at going into the higher female spot). The women tended to take the darker, more sensual of the two female sounds and attack it more with male

chest energy and can even persist in this attacked approach in the high female quality. Even when the actors found the correct body spot and spoke the placing line correctly in English, in German they tended to go back to a hard, male quality for a while. To keep the embodiment the sound requires while softening and warming the breath in that place is difficult and it takes time to establish the precise energy demanded in this spot.

Today, [after three days work] D, working from the deeper female energy to the higher one, begins to find a real correspondence with it which allows the harder edged, male quality to relax its grip while retaining a presence, so her speaking voice has softness and beauty as well as strength of support. Consequently her connection to text is better when she comes to speak as she has more means to express her intentions.<sup>25</sup>

25. Ros Steen; Journal 2, 2002.

This is a clear difference between the German actors and British ones, who seem to understand more instinctively where to place the voice in the deep female energy. The reasons for the initial difficulty are to do with language and culture, and what reads to the Germans as strength or power; and, while I cannot be sure of the exact nature of the phenomenon, I have observed it with each German group with whom I have worked.

While it was now clear to me that the voice work was useful to the student actors, I had little idea of the place of the work in the Akademie's scheme of things. How did it connect to these students' overall training and to the theatre world they were planning to enter? These were questions that I wanted to find some answers to when next in Burghausen.

### **The Third Workshop October 2003**

This time I was scheduled to work with ten third year students, four women and six men. I chose two speeches from *Twelfth Night*, Orsino's Egyptian thief speech from Act V sc i and Viola's Ring speech from Act II scene ii. While the first two workshops had been videoed as well as physically observed by various members of the Akademie staff, this time I had a permanent observer. Alison Stebbins was a voice teacher trained on the MA in Voice Studies course run by Central School of Speech and Drama and had recently joined the Akademie staff on a full-time basis. She knew something of the work and was keen to find connections between it and her daily teaching of the students. I benefited greatly from her informed observation, especially her ability to place the work within the context of the school. In addition, I was able to speak to one of the Akademie's senior Acting teachers on the same subject and to take advice on German theatre training generally from another colleague working at the renowned Ernst Busch Hochschule in Berlin.

The workshop followed the established pattern elaborated earlier, so I will give no more details except to add a comment about how the bridge was built between the sung note and the spoken word. Once the actor had tapped the particular energy of a quality through the sung note, and felt its physical vibration in the body, he or she was encouraged to contact consciously the same physical place of vibration and speak the text from there. Normally all the work that led to this moment, as described above, meant that the bridge was not difficult to put in place, but in one or two cases the actor needed more help to connect his/her speaking with vibration in the body. In these cases I found that if the actor sung one note fully, then spoke a word or two

of text, then repeated the same note and spoke another word or two and so on half a dozen times, this was usually sufficient to construct the bridge. Once the bridge was in place, I then worked with the actor very slowly to keep the connections through all the lines of the text ensuring that released breath-flow, energy and vocal vibration were all completely observed in every moment of speaking. Nothing was allowed to go by if it was not fully embodied. By being particularly painstaking about the voice/text connection the feeling impulses were soon flowing up through the speech so powerfully the actors no longer felt they were just releasing pure energy “as if in a church.”<sup>26</sup>

26. Sebastian Rickert in Ros Steen; Journal 3, 2003

### Reflections on The Third Workshop

Lunchtime. Very good conversation with Alison who asks intelligent questions about the work and links it to both her own knowledge of voice and her experience of a workshop Nadine gave when she was training at Central. She has been interested to see her students in this other context and nothing I have done has either gone against the grain of her work or her observations about them to date. Indeed, she finds my assessment of their strengths and weaknesses and my observations about them as actors to be highly accurate. She values the work and the directness of my approach, but proffers an observation that makes me stop and think. She points out that she feels at least part of the success of the work is due to my particular personality and authority and the relationship I create with each individual—to something intrinsically in me. It is the aspect of the work that I dismiss as incidental but does it truly make a difference? If so, how does one go about investigating that aspect of this work oneself?<sup>27</sup>

27. Ros Steen; Journal 3, 2003

I am interested in the differences I have seen between the British and American student actors at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and the German acting students at the Akademie.

The Germans are very fit and flexible in their physical expression and appear physically stronger and outwardly more confident than their British counterparts. They have a certain vocal strength from the outset but this strength is often pushed or forced, with the breath held, tense and effortful. They also have a tendency to be preoccupied with “damaging their throats”<sup>28</sup> and that can become the focus of anxiety when, in fact, the anxieties lie in other directions. Relaxing the body and releasing inappropriate tension in order to contact a deeper breath feels strange to them—they are not used to letting go a somewhat rigid control of their bodies. The voice work with its emphasis on breathing out in order to find a true balance between energy and relaxation, is perceived by Akademie staff as extremely important and they often comment on the openness, freedom and release they find in their students when they come from my work to theirs. As one Acting teacher commented “they come to work with me, buzzing.”<sup>29</sup>

28. See note [ 1 ] above. I have observed this tendency in a number of students over my time at the Akademie, too many to put it down simply to individual worry.

29. Margo Rettberg in Ros Steen; Journal 3, 2003

As previously noted, the difficulty both men and women tend to have with the female qualities of the voice is striking. By taking them into these new areas and thus allowing them to express both male and female energies the degree of psychological release engendered extends their abilities and capabilities as actors. It is hard to tell if this need to be “strong” is generally

characteristic of German actors or particularly true of the Akademie students, as the Akademie has a very distinctive type of training rooted in Biomechanics.

In a sense, the voice work is almost completely opposite in its thrust to this specific approach to actor-training as well as to the wider view in Germany of the role of the actor in theatre.

The origins of the German theatre system as we know it today have led audiences to expect ideas and debate, and the psychology of individuals is “of subordinate interest to social and historical contexts.”<sup>30</sup> Characters are often seen as positions in an argument which the director orchestrates and, to an extent, they function as abstractions rather than as complex human beings. In British theatre, however, characters tend to be grounded in human reality and see the world from their own perspective; human psychology is important and the private narrative often has precedence over argument. In a recent article contrasting Scottish and German theatre, Sarah Jones quoted Schauspielhaus visiting director Michael Simon:

The big thing in Germany is to take a famous play between Goethe, Shakespeare and Chekhov, and cut it into pieces and have a big scandal about it—it’s what everyone talks about. You will have a famous *Hamlet* and no one recognises it because the concept is more important than what’s left. German actors, he adds, long for the kind of realism of Scottish work like *The People Next Door*.<sup>31</sup>

Biomechanics, Vsevolod Meyerhold’s system of actor-training goes even further in minimizing the role of the unconscious and the “inner” in human behaviour in favour of the idea

that certain patterns of muscular activity elicited certain emotional states<sup>32</sup>

and that behaviour was explained by a pattern of reflexes produced by the environment rather than as a result of psychology:

to trigger the sensation of fear, a person would only have to run—with his eyebrows raised and pupils dilated. Regardless of what the person was stimulated by or thinking, an automatic reflex signifying fear would be felt throughout his body.<sup>33</sup>

The view these actors can have then is of the actor as a precise machine whose movement and behaviour creates a desired state of mind in the spectator. This emphasis in the German actors’ training, both in terms of how they are directed and the particular Biomechanic emphasis on the outside in, seems a world away from voice work which takes as its starting point the integration of the mind, body, and voice of the actor as a human soul, and works, thus, from the inside out. Voice sourced in the deep energies of the body’s impulse and the psyche, allowing the actors to embody acting choices in the living moment, provides another way to consider character alongside that created by means of external movement. However, there is an important point of similarity between the two approaches which may bring them closer together than might at first appear:

...the beginning is to work the qualities separated, clean and focused, it is the same with the etudes (routines) in biomec.<sup>34</sup>

30. E-mail conversation with Rosee Riggs, director at the Ernst Busch Hochschule, Berlin. May 2003

31. *We have got the originality and the talent, but they have got the money.* Sarah Jones. Scotland on Sunday May 30, 2004.

32. *Meyerhold’s Biomechanics*, Mel Gordon. Pg 110. In *Acting Re(Considered)* ed. Phillip B. Zarrilli. Routledge 2002.

33. *ibid* Pg 110.

34. Uli Zeitz former student and now teacher at Athanor Akademie in correspondence with Ros Steen 18/11/2004

Just as each movement that makes up a biomechanical etude must be distinct, clearly focused and precisely executed, so the qualities, initially at least, must also be as individually and distinctly placed and undertaken as each body movement. The physical confidence and ability displayed in biomechanic training can thus find an inner resonance with the source of the voice and the inner impulse, resulting in a rich acting approach.

One last reflection. The relationship foreign actors have to Shakespeare is refreshingly different from British and American actors. Shakespeare is something the German actors work hard to understand without either the stifling reverence or arrogant familiarity that can be found in Britain. It makes for a freshness and openness about their entry into text which is accorded particular time and space in speech. They speak Shakespearian text free of any perceived demand to declaim it in a received classical way or to be throwaway, as with a television script, in order to be more “real.” For me the voice and text work undertaken in a different cultural context, while releasing something specific to that context, paradoxically yields universal truth in the music, energy and humanity of the spoken text.

Ultimately, the staff feel that, although my work is unlike any other work that has gone on in the Akademie, it puts its finger unerringly on the fundamental problems each individual is encountering and what it is they needs must work with to become good actors. Thus we have a meeting of minds between the Akademie and myself at the heartland of the training. From our different journeys we arrive at a common humanity of the spirit which enables us to undertake

    this crazy work we all do who believe in theatre and in those young people...the next generation.<sup>35</sup>

35. Letter from Dr Esrig, Principal of Athenor Akademie to Ros Steen 3/4/2001

Regardless of styles of training, cultural or national differences, all actors seek the self knowledge that enables them to be truthful in the moment of performance and the need to find the place where the words come from (which links directly to the place where words come from within the playwright)—the physical source of the energies that make them speak (or write) these words. This voice work, for me, is the clearest path to that goal, simple in design but profound in its outcome and the journey continues:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>36</sup>

36. Little Gidding : *The 4 Quartets* by T.S.Eliot

