

Voice Training and the Royal National Theatre

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I stepped off the double-decker bus at Waterloo Station with my map in hand, walked several blocks and found the Old Vic quite easily. But the Royal National Theatre Studio, where the orientation was to take place, was nowhere in sight. "Next to the Old Vic," I had been told. With address and directions in my pocket, I surveyed the area as my internal compass spun out of control. After a brief moment of panic, I went to the box office and asked for help. "Out this door, two steps to your left and through the iron gate."

I had traveled to London to participate in a course entitled "International Voice Intensive" with Patsy Rodenburg. As I walked up the steps of the studio on that chilly Sunday afternoon, with jet lag hanging heavily on my limbs, I had little idea that in my two weeks study I was about to experience a zeitgeist of contemporary London theatre, training and practice.

The focus was, of course, the voice work under the tutelage of master teacher Patsy Rodenburg, who currently heads the voice departments at the Royal National Theatre and Guildhall School of Music and Drama. In addition, the course participants were exposed to and interacted with some of the finest artists working in Western theatre today, including Trevor Nunn, Richard Eyre, and Judi Dench. Following each exhaustive day of study, workshop, and discussion, we attended theatre, viewing five of the six productions currently in repertory at the National. In addition to the voice work and some profound personal vocal breakthroughs, I found that as a result of the immersion into the world of the Royal National Theatre, I gained an understanding of how vocal work and attention to text feeds strongly into the London theatre aesthetic. In part, then, this essay attempts to understand production in terms of the training on which it is based.

In addition to the voice work with Patsy, savoring the productions at the Royal National Theatre was part of our package. I attended *Amy's View* by David Hare; *King Lear*; *Lady in the Dark*, a musical by Kurt Weill, Ira Gershwin, and Moss Hart; *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, a new play by Martin McDonagh; and *Guys*

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and Dolls. As diverse as these titles are, I observed several commonalities in performance: first, a standard of clear, articulate, confident delivery of dialogue and accurate, non-self-conscious use of dialects (due no doubt to Patsy and her staff of coaches and dialect teachers), a commitment to the moment-to-moment development *Guys and Dolls* for example was a three hour show, not because it was slow; but because acting moments were fully realized. Even through the songs in which tempos were often slower than we are used to hearing them, the performers were creating subtext and rich inner life that sustained the audience's interest.

We were fortunate enough to have a brief discussion with Richard Eyre, director of *Lear*, *Amy's View*, and *Guys and Dolls*, prior to viewing his shows. He was a relaxed, humble man. In response to Patsy's statement that he has a reputation for treating actors with a tremendous respect, he elaborated on the importance of collaborating with actors to discover the play. He spoke reverently about trusting the text, and when questioned about his working relationship with Patsy as voice coach, he answered that their work often overlaps in a comfortable way.

As a follow-up to trusting the text, Eyre spoke of "concept" in dark tones, eschewing the director who loses the play in search of a concept. He went on to elaborate on what he views as a dual role of directors. First, he said, the job of the director is to communicate the text as the playwright intended. Second, to create what he called the "social environment" where the actors feel free to do their best work.

The conversation moved from a general discussion to the more specific topic of the *King Lear*. When asked why he chose the smallest of the National's three spaces, the Cottesloe, to do what is normally perceived as a play of epic proportions, he responded that *Lear* is about families, families in conflict, deadly conflict. He wanted an intimate space in which to explore Lear's struggle with his daughters. He added that Ian Holm, who performed the title role, would not have been interested in the show had it been done in one of the larger spaces. (Seeing Holm's performance makes it clear why Eyre was insistent that Holm come out of his sixteen year absence from the stage to play this role.)

Eyre shared with us how he and the actors together discovered and clarified key moments in the text. Again the stress was placed on the text; Eyre and his cast were intent on digging into the words of Shakespeare for his intention. It was apparent that every moment had been taken apart to uncover clear and richer meanings.

Later that evening we were privileged to view Eyre's critically acclaimed production of *King Lear*. The flexible Cottesloe space had been turned into a long, narrow, monochromatic alley with entrances on either end. The audience was seated on two sides, three tiers high. We had a sense of looking down on the action as it happened directly below us. The floor of the performance space was a burnt orange as were the door units at either end. A large table was center stage around which were placed six chairs all with burnt orange covers. Such an intimate space "where the actors are so close you can reach out and touch them, makes it clear that the play is about the intimate violence of family life. It is about the anger held in check even in families which call themselves happy."¹ Then as the play progresses, as civilization is stripped away from Lear, as he becomes more and more a part of the natural world, as the storm rails at his aged and frail body, the burnt orange set pieces are replaced, nay, blown apart by the wind. The scenic environment takes on an earthen patina, a barren landscape void of color. Scenic sparseness continues to throw focus on the two families, to "create an antithesis between home and heath and stresses the razor-thin line, in our own lives, between safety and danger, between having it all and having nothing."²

From the moment the action begins, we are struck with the clarity of text, by the heightened need with which the characters deliver it, by the fierceness and commitment of their feelings for each another which delineate the details of relationship. During the three hours and thirty minutes of the play's action, we are held transfixed by rich imagery: of Lear literally stripped naked by the storm and the rising tide of his own madness; by Kent's dogged devotion and the raspy pain we hear in his throat as he tries to communicate with his neck clamped in the stocks, by the heart-breaking whisper into his dead master's ear; by the contrast between brothers Edmund and Edgar, devil and angel; the final image of Lear's three dead daughters and himself, in death, lying side by side on a cart pulled slowly away by the loyal Kent, the destruction of the family complete.

Though I have taught *Lear* and seen several performances and videos, this was the first time I had really *heard* it. Bits of text, whole speeches were clarified and brought to life for the first time. During the interval, I reflected on an exercise we had done with Patsy that she called "Owning Words." As she explained, "Watching rehearsals over the years, I've often noticed that with great actors the word drops low into the body until it nestles in this lower position When the word burrows down from the head to the groin, a genuine kind of ownership and truer experience of the word is experienced."³ That may well be what made this production of *Lear* so riveting; the language lived deep in the bodies of the actors. From Lear's first moments in the play as he says: "Meantime we shall express our

darker purpose,” which he delivers with cunning urgency, to the tragic touching moment when he holds Cordelia’s lifeless body in his arms, “This feather stirs! she lives! if it be so,/ It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows/ That ever I felt,” Holm’s voice filled the space with emotion, vitality, and clarity. He is an actor who takes maximum advantages of pitch and resonance variety as he creates his scrappy Lear.

Two evenings later we saw Eyre’s production of *Amy’s View*, written by David Hare. With Eyre’s words still fresh in my mind and images of *Lear* running through my brain, I could see clearly in this work the supremacy of text and playwright. Given the context of our voice training with Patsy, the highlight of this performance was the strong vocal work done by the two leading actresses, Judi Dench and Samantha Bond.

In this play, as is often the case in Hare’s plays, two characters are placed together “whose relationship is stunted by the intrusion of a third.”⁴ Judi Dench plays Esme, a mother and aging actress fighting to hold on to her daughter and her fading stage career. Ms. Bond portrays the daughter who, against her mother’s wishes, chooses to marry and subsequently stand beside a self-centered and adulterous husband.

The play takes its title from the daughter Amy’s opinion or “view” that love is all that should matter, and that a family, in spite of its often selfish mistakes, should love and accept each other unconditionally. Of course with the insertion of an egocentric, opinionated, handsome young man, the unconditional love between mother and daughter is sorely tested. Son-in-law and mother-in-law continue the struggle even after the daughter’s death. Both are redeemed in the final moments as he comes to make peace with the grief-stricken Esme. The final image of the play, as is true in many of David Hare’s scripts, moves onto a metaphorical plane, where we see Esme claim the stage, by a form of baptism, in a way she was never able to do prior to the loss of her daughter. In essence, her life was transformed from a posing, eccentric, fading actress, to an authentic artist of outer simplicity and inner depth.

On the Lyttelton stage (which we discovered for ourselves was the most difficult of the National’s spaces in which to project), both actresses cut through the proscenium arch with heart-breaking clarity. In her final moments, Dame Judi’s character explains her newly found command of her art following the death of her daughter by saying, “It comes with the passage of time . . . you go deeper, right down to the core.” Beyond the context of the play, I was aware of two consummate performers who have spent years mastering their craft and who go deep with each performance, “right down to the core,” to find not only the vocal

strength and surety but an organic connection with this mother/ daughter struggle that finds every note, every nuance, and elicits bravos nightly from a reserved and often jaded London theatre-going audience.

The afternoon following *Amy's View*, Judi Dench, along with co-star Ronald Pickup, paid us a visit. I was at first surprised by Dame Judi's diminutive stature—she can't be over 5 feet 2 inches tall. Her voice and her presence on stage make her seem a giant of a woman. Self-effacing and a little shy, she answered our questions. Reluctant to talk about herself, her posture straight, her husky voice strong, she said that in spite of its obvious vocal demands, her performance in *Amy's View* was not a strain. The fact that her character smokes on stage, however, was taxing and she shared that she inhales steam in order to relieve the effects of the hot smoke. She jokingly explained that she was born with a voice that sounded "strained from birth." But it is that distinctive quality and continuous work on technique that helps define her as a fine actor.

The third of Richard Eyre's productions was *Guys and Dolls*. A hot ticket difficult to obtain, I checked at the box office three times before a single became available the day of the performance. Eyre had shared with us in our discussion that he had been intrigued with black and white movies of the 1950s and that provided him with initial visual image of this production. He also wanted all the set pieces to be on stage so that scenes flowed seamlessly as they do in the movies. He studied pictures of New York in the 50s and found that neon figured heavily in this imagery. Consequently, this production of *Guys and Dolls* was made up of black and white images of 1950s New York, with brilliantly colored neon adorning the upper reaches of the set. A multi-set show, all its various pieces flowed in place by flying out simple drops and floating in wagons. Various neon pieces lit from scene to scene as well, lending variety, interest, contrast and flow to the design elements of the production. The orchestra was visible stage left and a descending subway entrance provided counter-point stage right.

A sense of play and precise bits of well-timed comic business provide the trademark for *Guys and Dolls* and the National's production did not disappoint. The aspect, however, that distinguished this production from the many American versions I have seen were the clarity of story-telling, the richness of dialogue and the unpredictable depth of characterization that was sustained from dialogue into song. In addition, the dialect work (remember this is an all British cast playing some very colorful Damon Runyon New York characters) was subtle, consistent, and believable.

The audience was thoroughly delighted with this production. "Sit Down You're Rocking the Boat," the show's unforgettable 11 o'clock song received three

encores, each more elaborate and exciting than the last. Finally, cheers from the audience stopped the show as sweating and exhilarated actors regrouped to continue their performance.

This version of *Guys and Dolls* had a running time of three hours, including a twenty minute interval—longer by half an hour than many American productions. Yet it held, never seeming to drag. Thought was so rich and moments so clear, it was apparent that the director had encouraged the actors to take their time to do their work, to “own the language,” own the songs and experience them deeply. This was not done, however, at the expense of sparkle; this musical jazzed along with a gathering momentum.

Another new play at the National, again in the Lyttelton, was an Irish script by 26-year-old playwright Martin McDonagh, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. Inishmaan is one of three islands off the west Irish coast. The desolate landscape, spartan homes, and shops were depicted by pieces of scenery that literally turned inside out to form different structures and locations. In this production, play writing and acting come together in a fresh, funny, and heartbreaking look at a crippled young orphan, raised by his aunts, who has aspirations beyond what his physical, geographic, social and family limitations would indicate possible. Clear characterizations resonate as the strength of this production. Deliberate pacing coupled with delicate comic timing and heightened emotional responses to all situations, large or small give this production a unique and fresh style.

The final production we witnessed at the National was *Lady in the Dark*, music by Kurt Weil, lyrics by Ira Gershwin, book by Moss Hart, and directed by Francesca Zambello. It is the story of a depressed young career woman who enters psychoanalysis to understand the source of debilitating nightmares. The piece is seldom performed, perhaps because the psychoanalysis as depicted seems dated to contemporary audiences. But it is perhaps a musical whose time has come as women attempt to balance careers with personal life.

In this production, the Lyttelton apron is dropped away to accommodate an orchestra. Geometric designs, triangles and circles, provide the environment for the protagonist to work through her disturbed emotional life in therapy sessions. Vivid, hyper-real dream sequences that take on a Brechtian motif complete with masks intersperse the narrative. Characterizations that are often campy lend a comic backdrop for the very clear transition made by the female protagonist who journeys from neurosis to mental health, from the dark of depression to the light of self-awareness.

Again, as with the four previously discussed productions, *Lady in the Dark* shared clarity of language, of storytelling, of heightened style of language

delivery that begins to show a pattern. Certainly at the Royal National and perhaps throughout the London theatre—it is a theatre of language, of actors trained in the use of text and language, and it is through language that a sense of organic, vitality is derived.

While exploring the theatrical work currently being produced at the National, it is difficult to ignore the building where all this takes place. Along the Thames, just across Waterloo Bridge, on the South bank with a view of Somerset House and St. Paul's Cathedral is a multi-leveled, gray concrete building that houses the Royal National Theatre. Designed by Sir Denys Lasdun, officially opened in March 1977, the front of the building which faces the river features a series of terraces, foyers, and places to eat or drink creating a welcoming facade. At the back of the building are the National's three performance spaces. The Olivier is the largest and most radical in design, intended to be flexible enough to serve dramatists of any period. Though it seats 1,160 people, it has a concentrated intimacy. The Lyttelton, seating 890, is a more conventional proscenium stage. The hydraulic apron can be lowered to form an orchestra pit, and the main acting area can be raked. Lastly, the Cottesloe, the smallest of the three theatres, holds up to 400 audience members. It is a simple rectangular room with two tiers of galleries on three sides and a floor space that can be re-arranged for actor and audience.⁵

“The Royal National Theatre is open all day, six days a week, fifty two weeks of the year—and not only to those who hold tickets for the performance. It is a social centre, a building that has been designed to look incomplete when it is not full of people.”⁶ Incorporated are two restaurants, an Espresso Bar, three buffets, seven bars, book shops, an educational program, varied art exhibits and live musicians performing in the foyers.

The National has a full-time staff of 750 and a company of about 120 actors. A repertoire of seven or eight shows is featured at all times to provide the kind of diversity that the National is committed to: “classics, new and neglected plays from the whole world of drama”⁷ As a testament to its standard of excellence, the National has been awarded 221 major drama awards since its move to the south bank in 1976.

Granted, 43 % of the National income comes from subsidies, but the remainder is self-earned income from box office, publications, patronage, and sponsorships.⁸ But something quite remarkable is going on there—quality theatrical work of many different forms is thriving; talented artists, both established and young, are finding work; and the public is proud of and supports their theatre with attendance. An air of vitality permeates the stage, the lobbies, the restaurants,

and the bookstore. Though the highly commercialized West End remains the center of “show biz” in London, the Royal National Theatre is a hub of authentic and dynamic artistic work. And as I discovered through the voice training from Patsy Rodenburg, the celebrated artists and coaches we came in contact with, the productions we attended, the London theatre is alive and vital in part because, like William Shakespeare, its artists place the stress and focus of their work and training on language.

The supremacy of language was made even more clear as we visited with Trevor Nunn, who has throughout his career directed such acclaimed productions as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Les Misérables*, *Cats*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *Arcadia*. (He assumed artistic directorship of the National in October, 1997). He informed us that he and his casts can spend up to two and half weeks at the table exploring text (particularly when doing a text with heightened language). This work goes beyond simply paraphrasing, rather delves into all the possibilities that the language has to offer, including verse, scansion, rhyming, and imagery. Even *Cats*, he said, required text exploration to glean all that T.S. Elliott gave the performer in the way of narrative and imagery.

At Patsy’s urging, Nunn admitted that he was the first artistic director (then of the Royal Shakespeare Company) to form a voice department and staff it with professionals whose primary job was the vocal training and coaching of actors in the company. This tradition has continued at the RSC and the National as well; speaking to the importance still placed on language in the London theatre.

It was also the importance of language that gave life to our days which began at 9:30 a.m. and ended between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m. in the evening. Each day we did voice work with Patsy and Alexander training with Kelly McEvenue.⁹ Throughout the course various other theatre artists came to work with us: Joan Washington, British dialect; Jeannette Nelson, singing and British RP dialect; Toby Jones, director and actor; Celina Cadell, actress and teacher; Judi Dench, actress; Richard Eyre, Artistic Director of the Royal National Theatre and director of three of the shows in Rep at the National; Trevor Nunn, former Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company and Artistic Director Designate for the National; Dr. Garfield Davies, Otolaryngologist; Nicholas Wright, playwright, David Carey, Coordinator at The Central School of Speech and Drama. In addition, each of us had three private tutorials: one with Patsy, another on the Alexander Method with Kelly, and singing with Jeannette. Patsy had also arranged a rare opportunity for us to try our hand, or rather our voices, at projecting on all three of the National stages.

In the midst of all these experiences and personalities, voice work provided the unifying thread. Patsy Rodenburg is well known throughout the voice world as a master teacher and highly gifted vocal coach. She has coached such notable British performers as Judi Dench, Sir Ian McKellen, Anthony Sher, Fiona Shaw, Nigel Hawthorne, Ralph Fiennes, and Daniel Day Lewis. She is distinguished first by her gentle nature and second by the passion with which she conveys her views about voice, actor training, and her love of Shakespeare. She is an advocate of intense and specific technique training for actors. In her most recent book, *The Actor Speaks*, she writes:

To rehearse a part all day and perform on-stage each evening is, vocally, an athletic feat To speak a heightened text clearly to hundreds of people requires a huge vocal extension. To express passion and charged ideas takes enormous vocal range and energy whatever the size of the playing space. And to sustain this kind of work takes a combination of consummate craft and dedication.¹⁰

Her method is simple and straightforward, divided into seven parts: body, breath, support, placement, resonance and range of the voice, speech, and text. The various exercises she took us through each day are accessible and yield results for both the novice and the seasoned professional.

Most [actors] have no idea about how the voice functions and usually confuse voice work with speech work. Few realize the importance of the body, the breath and the powerful acting impulses that can be released by a free and open voice.¹¹

Rodenburg's explanation and exercises that teach the concept and the kinesthetic awareness of breath and support are immediately clear. Through a series of simple warm-ups, the often intangible centering and sense of support are readily found: 1) a general loosening and freeing of various body parts (with its base in the Alexander work), 2) opening the ribs through side stretches, 3) dropping forward through the spine with arms wrapped around shoulders, 4) assuming a wide stance, with hands on the lower abdomen and breathing into the floor of the pelvis. To further enhance a sense of support, she encourages actors to press against a wall as they speak, lift a chair over the head, or throw an imaginary ball.

“Support,” Rodenburg clarifies, “is the natural, muscular means of controlling breath and powering the voice.”¹²

Rather than a sense of relaxation found in imagistic floor work, Rodenburg encourages the actor to find a state of open readiness, engagement—a sense that the body, breath, and voice are coming up and out of the body and are directed toward a specific point. The actor is alive with breath and a passion to speak.

For the free and well placed voice we were encouraged to use intoning (speaking on pitch). It turned out to be a very effective method for getting the voice open and placed forward. In addition, it brought the resonance of the mouth, nasal passages, and head into play—placement that is especially necessary for projecting in larger spaces.

The class participated daily in exercises for expanding the ability to sustain breath support. “Voice work for the stage operates from a simple equation: the bigger the feeling, the longer the thought, the larger the acting space, the more breath you will need to fill all three.”¹³ As Patsy’s focus is always on heightened text, the need to sustain lengthy passages and large emotions is crucial. By the end of the two week session, each of us had almost doubled our capacity to sustain breath support.

As our two week’s adventure drew to a close, I reflected on the stylistic difference between theatre generated in London and theatrical productions generated in the United States, as well as the difference in the training of actors. It is evident that the importance placed on voice, text, and language feed into a London theatre aesthetic marked by clarity, vitality, richness of storytelling, and the confidence and stature that underlies the work. This tradition has, as we are aware, been handed down in the London theatre since the time of William Shakespeare and his place in the ongoing tradition is undisputed. Patsy Rodenburg, Richard Eyre, and Trevor Nunn speak of Shakespeare and his plays ceaselessly and always with reverence. The tradition of vocal training that I experienced for all too brief a period may well have grown out of the theatre’s need to pay homage to the greatest English playwright by finding ever more clarity, variety, meaning, and substance in the legacy of plays he left behind.

Notes

1. Michael Ignatieff, “From Blindness to Sight,” *King Lear Program Notes*, Royal National Theatre (London 1997) 4.

2. 3.

3. Patsy Rodenburg, *The Actor Speaks* (London: Methuen, 1997) ix.

4. Judy Lee Oliva, "Directing David Hare's *The Secret Rapture*: Issues Toward a New Aesthetic Praxis," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 2 (Spring 1997) 107.

5. This information appeared in a press brochure published by the Royal National Theatre.

6. 4.

7. 7.

8. 9.

9. Kelly McEvenue is presently on the faculty at Ryerson Theatre School. She has taught at the University of Toronto Opera School, The Shaw Festival, the Citadel Theatre, and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She has taught movement in Equity Showcase Theatre workshops and at VASTA workshops with Patsy Rodenburg. She was movement consultant for the CBC series *Degrassi High*, *Street Legal*, and *Kids in the Hall*, and has presented the Alexander technique on *The Nature of Things* and *The Health Show*.

10. Rodenburg ix.

11. 5.

12. 39.

13. 38.

