

Voice and the Actor

Actor training programmes have long featured vocal training. At classical conservatories like the one I attended, this included instruction in “received pronunciation” as well as singing. Diction is more prominent in European training than in North American schools, where breath and vocal production are the main focuses of voice training. British conservatories, as a function of a nation with dozens of dialects and literally hundreds of accents, also teach dialect and accent. This bestows a huge advantage on actors trained in this system, as the muscles needed to speak in various dialects and accents are the equivalent to those needed in speaking different languages—or the voices of distinctive characters. North American actors tend to be deficient in both of these skills. Their voices lack plasticity as a result, and a feature of the North American approach to characterisation is that actors sound like themselves regardless of what character they play, from whatever background, irrespective of the era.

This is not to place European conservatory vocal training on a pedestal. It is more complete than North American training, but far from complete. While virtually all actor training programmes teach the actor how to warm-up, and perhaps how to neutralise their own dialect or improve its clarity, there is little if any emphasis on voice as a tool of expression beyond text.

As I write this I’m listening to songs sung by Frank Sinatra. Sinatra was a master of interpretation. His voice used techniques well-known in singing training to enchant, deepen meaning and surprise his audiences: the use of *staccato* or *legato*, *crescendo* or *diminuendo*, elongation of vowels, percussive use of plosive sounds, alteration of tempo, stress-hitting off the beat, and many others. Classical actors learn some of these techniques when they confront verse and meter, but actors trained in contemporary theatre practice do not¹. They remain blissfully unaware of the potential of the human voice.

Worse, voice is tethered to text. This is strange, as we use our voices in any number of ways, on a daily basis, that have only a tenuous connection to words. In *BoxWhatBox* I call these kinds of communication *non-verbal*, that is, vocal communication without the use of words. Our daily lives are full of it. While there is a blurred line between what constitutes an actual word and a sound that has acquired a spelling over time (such as “uh”), there are sounds that defy orthography that communicate, in some instances, far more efficiently and effectively than words may do. The elongated “mmmmm” may indicate the sound a person makes to indicate positive anticipation (for a freshly baked cookie, say), hesitant acquiescence (for a dubious proposition) or disapproval (for actions deserving of opprobrium), depending on the inflection, tempo and musicality of the utterance.

There are dozens of other non-verbal units of communication, too many to list. Amongst them, and amongst the most important and useful for the actor, is the *absence* of sound where it would normally be expected. The absence of sound changes the music of speech generation and response; imagine

¹ Perhaps they take a single “Shakespeare” or “Style” class, in which instructors who themselves are not well-trained vocally ignore the vocal dimensions of classical performance.

waiting four seconds for your lover's response after you've just said "I love you"². It can indicate reluctance, outright refusal, or the cornered feeling of someone who feels they cannot respond in the manner they wish. This is powerful stuff. The work of Harold Pinter, famous for his use of absence, makes for a compelling challenge for even the most technically skilled actors, and a defeat, usually unacknowledged, for those who are unaware of the power of non-verbal sound, including absence.

But actors seldom make use of non-verbal expression, because they are taught, without nuance, to push out text as rapidly and efficiently as they can. Perhaps the goal of such teaching is to avoid actor indulgence that deviates from a pure focus on the text. Indulgence is the curse of acting at every level, but the addition of non-verbal sounds in acting to add or deepen meaning is far from indulgent. It's the equivalent of adding an extra language of communication to a performance text, one that any audience, from any culture, might reasonably be expected to comprehend. I have seen hundreds of performances in languages I don't speak. I follow the other expressive vocabularies in order to glean meaning: gestural expression, postural expression, and non-verbal expression. Elements of vocal expression, the fourth expressive vocabulary, can be comprehended across cultures too, of course. I may not understand a word from a speech in a Russian production, but if the actor uses some of the tools singers use that I referred to earlier, I'll get something: a sudden, sharp series of percussive stresses indicating that a character is taking extra energy to make a point, a series of elongated sounds indicating reluctance, avoidance or loss of focus. These are a few simple examples from a list that would be, if translated to spelled units, as long as a dictionary.

In the Mike Leigh film *Mr. Turner* the great British character actor Timothy Spall grunts and snorts his way through his performance as the title character. He plays the great British painter J.M.W. Turner, who consorted with the aristocracy throughout his career, as a kind of well-mannered hedgehog. There are entire scenes in which he speaks few identifiable words, and fewer sentences, and yet his use of non-verbal communication is so forceful and clear the viewer is left in little doubt as to either the character of Turner or his intentions. There is a particularly charming scene in which the bachelor Turner has come to the south coast in search of lodging in which to paint, and meets the mistress of the house he has chosen, played by the veteran British actor Marion Bailey. Leigh's career is marked by his willingness to trust a small group of actors with the performance of a scene once it has been rehearsed for movement and meaning. In this scene, with two actors old enough to know the power of non-verbal sound, a curious and utterly charming hint of future courtship is added to a scene whose text is otherwise opaque. The mistress uses a little halting laugh before she speaks (a sign of a modest person), a tiny "oooh" to indicate her approval of speech she has heard, little aspirations of breath to buy time to think and yet not give offence or to add emphasis to a statement, a small musical "hoo" to indicate something she has just recalled (and to indicate that she believes it to be a positive addition to the conversation), a sharp ingressive breath to indicate surprise or to deal with strongly welling emotion. Spall's Turner, a taciturn and deeply sensitive man, responds initially with grunts of agreement or understanding, graduating to a kind of strangled deep-in-throat chuckle when she asks him if he is still "making your nice little pictures"³.

² In some understandings of Shakespearian text, notably in the work of the Royal Shakespeare Company, it is understood that rather than writing "pause", "beat" or "silence" into his texts, as contemporary playwrights do, Shakespeare played with abbreviated meter to indicate moments where an actor could choose to say...nothing.

³ The scene runs from 1:06:46 to 1:09:05 in the digital version of the film, released by Sony Pictures in 2014.

The scene is a symphony of non-verbal sounds, used by two talented and well-trained actors with the experience and skill to depart from a written text in order to make it more, not less, true to life; more, not less authentic. We watch two shy people approaching each other carefully dancing with each other sound by sound. It is a scene in which the text, as with so much dramatic work, is important, but secondary to the other expressive vocabularies being used. An actor who utilises all four expressive vocabularies is a total actor. Most actors understand the power of gestural or postural movement, and all of them think that the spoken word is pre-eminent. If they could bring themselves to think like musicians, to understand that humans respond primarily to *sound* (and its absence), their interpretation of text and, more usefully, their use of non-verbal sound would add texture and richness to every performance.