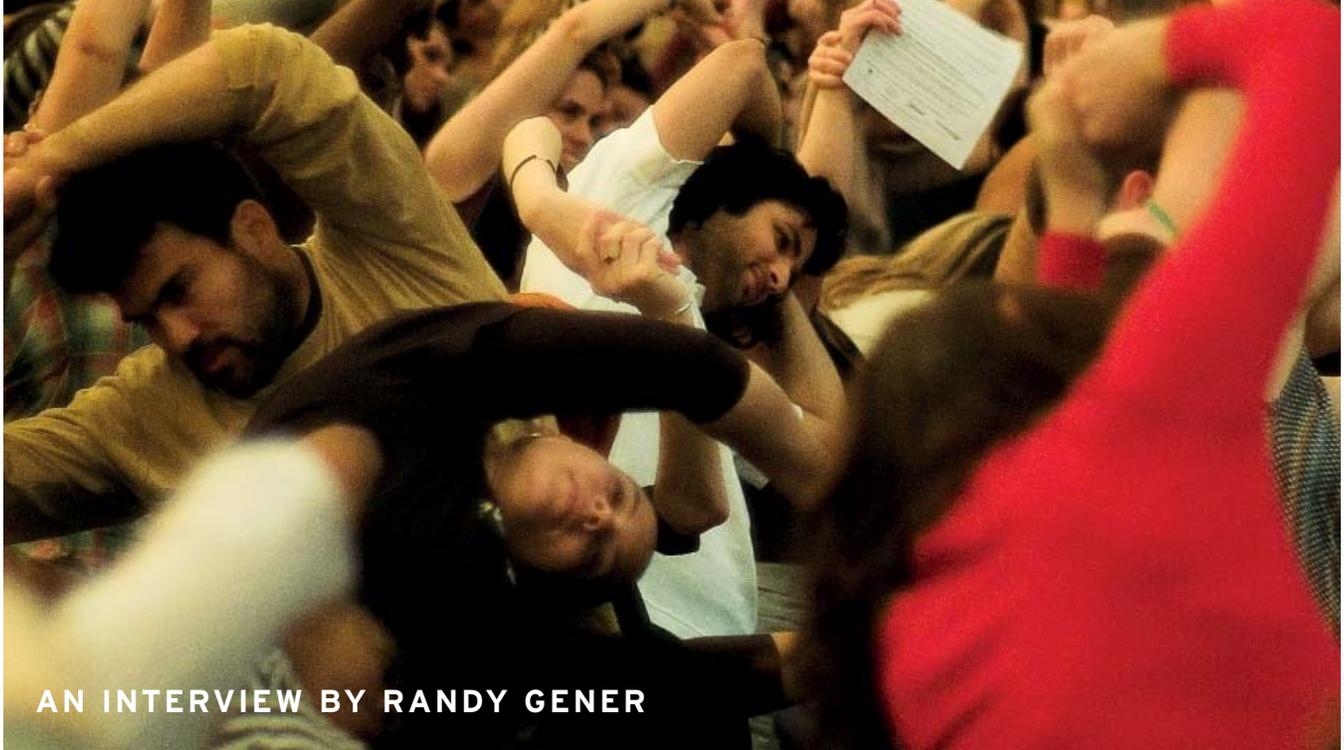


THE NAKED VOICE



STUART ALLEN

AN INTERVIEW BY RANDY GENER

FREE THE VOICE AND RELEASE THE BODY, PATSY RODENBURG SAYS,

ON A CRISP NOVEMBER DAY, PATSY RODENBURG greets me in a rehearsal room at the Michael Howard Studios in Manhattan's Chelsea with a charming Third Circle attentiveness that masks an acute Second Circle energy.

Well-applied technique liberates actors, singers and performers—and the same principle holds true even for Rodenburg, Britain's most esteemed voice and acting coach. Proper voice work (or the lack of it), she believes, can make or break a performer. "There are three circles of concentration," Rodenburg states in her seminal 2000 book *The Actor Speaks: Voice and the Performer* (Palgrave Macmillan), "but the variants are infinite and by no means rigid. As speakers, we exist in one of these circles every moment of our lives. We can shift rapidly between them."

Rodenburg asks actors to be aware of these shifts in concentration from moment to moment—to use them as tools to "focus and energize their voices and place their imagination directly in service to the characters' words" as well as to create "some powerful and canny moments on stage." On this autumn afternoon in New York City, it seems evident that her relationship with the stranger who comes in to interview her is reflected by the shifting circles in which she moves, the awareness of which she teaches as formal exercises in her books and classes.

As I enter the studio, Rodenburg flashes a big warm Third Circle smile that lights up like a bulb. She holds out a hand to shake mine with sound enthusiasm and establishes control of our encounter using

polite, friendly and responsive language. Unlike the First Circle—the realm of introspection, withdrawal and reflection—the Third attracts attention through bluff, charm or force. Habitual Third Circle persons can come off as arrogant, aloof, uncaring or overbearing, because their "speaking imagination" is unfocused and effusive. But Rodenburg makes a favorable first impression in a Third Circle manner that would not be foreign to a star performer; she also knows that no one will hear what she means in the moment she speaks unless she delivers the words in Second Circle—and unless the person she wants to communicate with is also in Second Circle.

"In Second Circle, your energy is focused. It moves out toward the object of your attention, touches it and then receives energy back from it," Rodenburg specifies in her 2008 book, *The Second Circle: How to Use Positive Energy for Success in Every Situation* (W.W. Norton). "You are living in a two-way street—you give to and are responsive with that energy, reacting and communicating freely. You are in the moment—in the so-called 'zone'—and moment to moment you give and take. In Second Circle, you touch and influence another person rather than impress or impose your will on them. Second Circle energy, when positive, is generous. It begets intimacy."

In person, with her mellifluous voice and her feet solidly planted on the ground, Rodenburg's easy power becomes palpable; she creates a feeling of closeness. She speaks, quite frankly and humbly, about her long career as Britain's most dynamic voice maven, and listens to even my most elementary questions not in the preoccupied manner of the

Above, a master class at Theatre Royal Haymarket in London, conducted by British voice coach Patsy Rodenburg, opposite page.



STUART ALLEN

SO YOU CAN EXPRESS YOURSELF FULLY WITH TRUTH AND AUTHENTICITY

First or the obtuse pose of the Third but in the connected energy of the Second Circle—the natural zone of presence that she has, in fact, been inhabiting and embodying all along.

Presence, of course, is the bread-and-butter of the trained actor. Otherwise called “charisma” or “star quality,” presence is that elusive “it” factor that producers and directors look for in every performer they are considering signing to a contract or hiring for a part. Rodenburg’s business is to identify and harness “it.” Name a famous actor in the British theatre or in Hollywood films and television—Judi Dench, Ian McKellen, Antony Sher, Daniel Day-Lewis, Simon Russell Beale, Ralph and Joseph Fiennes, Wallace Shawn, Hugh Jackman, Daniel Craig, Jude Law, Orlando Bloom, Ewan McGregor, Nicole Kidman—and you can be assured that Rodenburg has helped them not just to free their expressive voices but also to work in this Second Circle zone. “If you remember a performance days after experiencing it, it means the performers were present, and you were present receiving their work,” Rodenburg offers. She argues that all the finest actors she has worked with on Shakespeare are naturally in the Second Circle and that the great plays, “because they deal with the moments that change and refocus us,” are written with the same energy.

As starry as her clientele roster might be, however, Rodenburg insists that “it” is not the exclusive domain of actors. “It” is not a metaphysical element or an artsy idea. Nonprofessionals—businesspersons, politicians, newcomers to acting who come to her for voice work—can build their own presence, Rodenburg contends, through practical exercises, breathing techniques and hard work. She believes we’re all born with this quality of presence, but it gets lost as we struggle to

cope with 21st-century urban living; with painful human, physical and spiritual experiences; and with the abuse of drugs and drink. And it’s well worth the effort to get presence back. “To live life to its fully Second Circle potential, you really need to allow yourself to return to the positive presence you were born with,” Rodenburg believes. For actors, however, that process requires hours, weeks, even years of concentrated training and experience, because their job is to re-create the work of imaginative transformation night after night.

Rodenburg is the head of voice at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, and was until recently the voice coach at the Royal National Theatre, whose voice department she founded and ran for 16 years. Prior to that, she was a voice trainer for nine years at the Royal Shakespeare Company and taught voice for such U.K. companies as the Royal Court Theatre, the Donmar Warehouse and the Almeida Theatre. She’s also played adviser to some of the world’s leading ensembles—the Moscow Art Theatre, Complicite, Cheek by Jowl and the Comédie-Française. Whether the emphasis is on classical or contemporary text, whether the work is physical, improvisatory or scene-based, Rodenburg says that she has never found herself altering the basic means by which she teaches and works. “Actors who miss out on the initial craft phase of voice work usually find that consistency in their performances and re-creation of their work from performance to performance is difficult to achieve,” she states. “They always feel detached from their craft. In the deepest sense they will never really own their voices but always feel alienated from them.”

Because her voice work hews closely to the practical and the essential (rather than indulging in theoretical, academic or overly

intellectual trains of thought), Rodenburg has become a publishing phenomenon. In her five books, the best-sellers of which have been *The Right to Speak*, *The Actor Speaks* and *Speaking Shakespeare*, she touches on every aspect of performance work that involves voice—dramatic resonance, breath and relaxation, vocal range and power, placement, the actor's preparation, communication with other actors, singing and acting simultaneously, even working on different-sized stages and in both large and small auditoriums.

Rodenburg's is also a restless intelligence. In the past couple of years, she has taken the risk of branching out from the closed world of the British theatre establishment (where she has been known to work on 200 to 300 productions a year) to try her hand at directing productions in Britain and the United States. In the process, Rodenburg has found a way of repurposing some of the techniques she's learned in voice work—such as the tool of “the circles of concentration”—and spinning them off into self-help book territory. The first sentences of her new book suggest an almost frightening Third Circle certainty: “This book will transform your life. This book will invigorate every aspect of your life. It will awaken your full human potential.”

It would be wrong, though, to imply that Rodenburg has restyled her personal brand to become some sort of Oprah of voice work—in fact, she continues to clock in an awesome numbers of hours doing basic voice work, often with amateurs and newcomers. Several days after our interview, I return to the Michael Howard Studios to observe her classroom work, and it comes as something of a shock to find her holed up in a cold rehearsal studio going over and over scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with 17 young students, some of them disciples of her training technique. Arranged in a circle of chairs, the actors lunged at their parts with fervor and gusto, while Rodenburg barked out such comments as “Start it again. I must hear the words,” “Nothing soggy, no soggy spines,” “Don't put coating on. Trust what you're saying,” “Don't push it. Trust the argument,” and, “You don't need to whine. Let's get it together again.”

The core intent of Rodenburg's voice work is the illumination of the nature of language and how it works on stage—especially Shakespeare's texts. She will be the first to tell you that what she imparts is not anything new or radical or revolutionary. “If anything, I think what I have to say is quite traditional,” she avows. Yet she continues to passionately devote herself to work with beginners and ordinary people (she's had experience with prisoners and the criminally insane), and she doggedly persists in repeating the same physical patterns and vocal exercises over and over.

“Craft is taught through repetition,” she emphasizes. “You have to repeat. I don't find it boring, but you have to do a lot of basic work before you can fly. As a teacher you have to persuade people that they have to do extremely hard work to get athleticism in their voices. Perhaps they wouldn't have needed a voice coach during Shakespeare's time, because actors during the Elizabethan era used their voices more. Given the general reduction in the way we use our voices today, these great plays by Shakespeare might never be done—if we don't actually help train voice.”

There are other reasons: “Speech is political,” she says. “Sound is political. Craft training is very political.” The paradox, says Rodenburg, is that actors must work on their voices for thousands of hours and submit to a regimen of repetitive application so that all of that very work will ultimately be forgotten on stage, as the imaginative life of their characters takes over. The ideal to strive for is a naked voice, powered by breath and free of tension, so that when the actor speaks, we all can listen.

RANDY GENER: I'd like to trace the evolution of your vision through the prism of your books. Your first two, *The Right to Speak* and *The Need for Words*, were more or less manifestos, workbooks aimed at everybody, although the exercises were rooted in your professional voice work. I find it quite fascinating that it was not until your third book, *The Actor Speaks*, that you carried over your approach to specifically address acting. Then in your fourth book, *Speaking Shakespeare*, you finally tackle Shakespeare. Why did you not start by writing a voice book for actors on Shakespeare first?

PATSY RODENBURG: I've always been very moved by people's inability to communicate. As a child I had problems communicating; I was sent to destructive teachers. When I left the Central School of Speech and Drama, I was told very clearly that I should work only with actors. But when I eventually taught voice at Central School, I started to teach in prisons. I had a strong epiphany, while teaching in Holloway, a prison for women in London, that these women I was working with had such bad ability to communicate—but, my goodness, they had in no way lost their voices. I suddenly realized that it was, to a certain extent, their lack of language that had put them in that place. It never occurred to me that people could end up in jail because of their inability to speak! Most young people, at some point in their lives, have been stopped by the police but were able to talk their way out of the situation. That sounds simplistic, and it is, yet it was a powerful realization.

I've always worked with actors, but I also work with non-actors. As a young teacher, I had moving experiences with people who did not have the right to speak and who came to me for help. I've found that many very talented people are overlooked because they cannot access their voice and access their language. Of course, this is a political view. It still breaks my heart, in a way, when you watch somebody struggle. I've spent a lot of my life figuring out how to release the body, the breath and the voice—I think that's all a voice teacher does.

It's a bigger challenge to work with non-actors. In a sweet way, actors will do anything for you. If you say to an actor, “Lie on the floor,” they will lie on the floor. Now, when you lie on the floor you can release your shoulders, your upper chest, and you can get the breath in at a different position. But if you're working with a non-actor, you cannot ask them to do that—they come bound with tensions and insecurities, and you have to think of other approaches.

What compelled you then to write *The Actor Speaks*?

The conscious decision to write it happened when I started to notice that the education system in Britain, and probably here in the U.S., wasn't releasing actors' voices. When I first started to teach actors in the U.S., I discovered that most of them had done a bit of voice work by the time they got to grammar school; they had been exposed to iambic pentameter. But that manner of education started to erode. There was no given that these actors would have ever learned a text aloud. When I was at school, at least three or four times a week you had to learn a new poem, or you had to learn sections from the Bible. And grounding in language is particularly important for Shakespeare.

Cicely Berry did something very important in voice work. She understood that there's been a lot of training of actors in very formal and traditional ways which actually disconnected them from their emotions—in the way that Americans think of British actors, standing and speaking beautifully without knowing what they're saying. Berry understood that you had to abandon that very formal way of learning in order for those actors to find organic freedom.

But what occurred to me by the end of the 1980s is that we were

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actually throwing out the entire system. Not only were the schools *not* teaching formally but actors were coming into the business without any craft ability. There was a big moment at the National Theatre that made me think of writing about actors: A very famous director was doing a workshop with about 70 actors in the room, and he was talking about vocal issues in terms of the text. I noticed that actors under the age of 40 did not know what he was talking about. The other actors, who had gone through a certain discipline, were nodding in agreement when “antithesis” was mentioned, but the younger actors had no idea. I realized the pendulum had swung too far away from the study of very basic craft skills, toward just being very free. That was the moment I started to think I had something to say. Actually, I’m a pragmatist; the voice will work for you if you have used your voice all your life. But most actors haven’t, and they have to re-find their voices.

Speaking Shakespeare was, therefore, both a refinement of what you taught

and a deeper exploration of classical language.

I started to read Shakespeare at age eight. I’ve always taught Shakespeare. Yet I now get people from the university—people with degrees in English—asking, “What is iambic pentameter?” Students are not being taught literary forms, or how to analyze what Shakespeare wants to say. I’m not saying that looking at a poem by Samuel Coleridge and discussing what it makes you *feel* is wrong—that can be a valid exploration. But the most important thing to stress is this: The knowledge of form is not just an intellectual awareness but one that must be fully incorporated in the body and voice of an actor.

Your latest book, *The Second Circle*, marks a return to everybody.

Yes, it is for everybody. It’s a book about presence—analyzing the nature of presence. I start with a true story. I was teaching voice, speech and language skills at six or seven drama schools in the late 1970s. I used to sit in the staff room, and the experienced teachers

“If a nation loses its storytellers, it loses its childhood.” —Peter Handke



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would say, “Oh, he’s got ‘it.’ She just hasn’t got ‘it.’” I found the remarks very unfair. I started to wonder: Is it charisma? I started to look at the energy in the body, the voice and the breath. Once in a while, a student in one of my classes who didn’t seem to have “it” would suddenly *get* “it.” Was this a miracle? No, it’s actually the acquisition of presence. When I started to take my voice work into the non-actor world, people reported to me that it changed their life completely. I started to get phone calls from therapists and people who did my energy work, and they said, “I need to know about this, because whatever you taught these people has made them become more available.” The vice president of a major company told me that understanding Second Circle changed his career overnight.

In the U.S., many voice teachers create certification programs so others can teach what they do. Is that something you wish to do with your own work?

I’m only now beginning to see my work in those terms. I’ve set up in the Guildhall an M.A. in voice coaching, but I only take in one or two people a year, and it is a two-year training program. I think there is a value to it. It’s not a money-spinner, but it started to occur to me that such an education might resonate about 10 or 15 years down the line. Unfortunately, we live in quick-fix times. As I say to students, if I could teach a shortcut, I would teach it. I don’t know the shortcut. Every teacher has his or her own strengths, but students deserve access to a longer training period in which they can consolidate their voice work. It takes a long time to train a voice, and you have to have a trained voice before you can train others.

I teach craft in order to free the actor’s body, the voice and the breath. At the Guildhall, the drama students come to voice work from a completely different angle than the music students. A lot of opera and music training teaches singers to be free and creative and passionate. Actors come from the other way around. You audition students and you look for people who have authenticity and passion—but most of them have no craft. It is very humbling being a teacher. You cannot force anyone to learn anything profoundly. What you can be is an enabler. I develop somebody’s voice. I hope the knowledge will become second nature. I hope that what I offer will inspire actors in their work. 



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