

ARDENT RESOURCES

Voice Workout

Produced by Ardent Theatre Company
Written by Jessica Higgs



Jessica Higgs is a highly experienced and skilled voice coach and teacher. Her theatre work includes the Royal Court, Salisbury Playhouse, Bolton Octagon, Mercury Studio Colchester, Barbican Pit, Arcola, Old Red Lion, Soho Theatre and on Mamma Mia! in the West End.

Actor training: CSSD, Rose Bruford College, Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts, Poor School, City Lit, Northampton University, British-American Drama Academy (BADA), Syracuse University London Centre and the Actors Centre. She has worked extensively in Disability Arts with Graeae, Ramps on the Moon, Extant and Deafinitely Theatre.

Jessica is also a director and producer.

ABOUT

ARDENT RESOURCES is a collection of workshop notes, interviews, guidance and tips about working in Theatre. It is not intended as comprehensive advice or formal educational resource on which reliance should be placed; rather it collates various insights from people working in the industry that you can choose to incorporate into your own toolkit. Nothing should be taken as a representation or warranty as the correctness or fitness for purpose of any of the content.

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WARMING UP THE VOICE

The aim of a vocal warm up is to make the voice available to accurately and freely serve the demands of the text and your acting choices. Like any kind of warm up it needs to be done in a relaxed, easy, light manner and include all the elements involved in speaking. These are: the body, facial mask and breathing, the voice sound and articulators.

Below, are some suggestions on how to warm up each element but you may have some favourites of your own you'd like to add, to mix and match. I have drawn together a set of exercises you can follow, adapted from a website I sourced and/or you can join in with some of the excellent National Theatre tutorial You Tube links given.

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Adapted from
www.dramaclases.biz

BODY

- Stand with your feet slightly apart and be aware of the floor beneath, supporting the whole body.
- Stretch your arms right above your head and then slowly try to stretch each arm slightly higher than the other, alternating. Do this for eight counts.
- Slowly relax the arms down and slowly relax the top half of your body and bend over at the waist. Make sure you relax totally.
- Slowly come back up to standing.
- Taking your right arm stretch up and gently bend over to the left from the waist and hold for a moment.
- Come back to an upright position and repeat with the other side.
- Shake your right leg then your left leg.
- Shake your right arm then your left arm.
- Finish by shrugging your shoulders up and down gently.

FACE

- Chew with your mouth open developing into a yawn with a body stretch, repeat twice.
- Blow your lips adding sound, moving up and down the range.
- Raise your eyebrows up and down four times.
- Close and open your eyes slowly four times.
- Wrinkle your nose four times relaxing in between.
- Scrunch your whole face up, hold for a moment and then relax back to normal. Repeat four times.

BREATH AND VOICE

- Breathe in through your nose, feel your lungs fill up and your rib cage expand.
- Hold for four counts then exhale through your mouth.
- Repeat the above to music if you prefer.
- Breathe in and hold and pant like a dog, then top up your breath through your nose and repeat. Relax.
- Now take a big breath in through your nose, keeping your shoulders down, and hum on a comfortable note. Feel the sound resonating through the resonating chambers – facial mask, top of the head, chest. Repeat four times, selecting a different pitch each time.
- Repeat but this time open your mouth and relax the jaw to the sound of MAHH, then gently close the mouth and return to the humming sound.

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MORE VOICE

Repeat each exercise three times:

- Mee May Mah.
- Mee May Mah
- Mee May Mah
- Too Tah Tay
- Too Tah Tay
- Too Tah Tay
- Continue the above vowel sequences with different consonants as you would like.
- bbbbbbbbbb - ball
- cccccccc - cat
- dddddddd ...etc continue through the alphabet consonants.

JOINED UP SPEAKING

Recite a nursery rhyme or some favourite song lyrics:

- Speak them interpretatively in your normal voice quality; whisper them; intone; back to normal voice quality.
- Speak them 5 times – quietly; medium volume; loudly; medium volume; quietly. Make sure the breath is engaged at all times and the voice remains relaxed throughout the exercise, especially when increasing the volume.

You can play similarly on the following:

Whether the weather be cold
Or whether the weather be hot
We'll be together whatever the weather
Whether we like it or not.

Whether the weather be,
whether the weather be, whether the weather be cold

Or whether the weather be,
whether the weather be, whether the weather be hot

We'll be together,
we'll be together, we'll be together whatever the weather

Whether we like it or,
whether we like it or, whether we like it or not

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NATIONAL THEATRE WARM UP TUTORIALS

The National Theatre has a series of videos on YouTube which you can join in with to warm up the voice. They are led by Jeanette Nelson, NT Head of Voice, working with two actors. NB The two actors are Standard English/RP speakers so make sure when you join in you work on your own vowel and consonant sounds if you have a different accent to theirs.

BREATHING

tinyurl.com/NTbreathing

RESONANCE

tinyurl.com/NTresonance

OPENING UP THE VOICE

tinyurl.com/NTopening

ARTICULATION

tinyurl.com/NTarticulation

BEING HEARD / SHARING YOUR WORK IN LIVE PERFORMANCE

The key to understanding how to be heard and understood by the audience (and other actors on stage) in live performance is by understanding how we communicate vocally in everyday situations.

To explain -

Imagine you are standing in a circle of 10 people. If one person addressed the whole group they would speak quite naturally in a way that engaged everyone, clearly and equally all at once. If the group were made up of 3 people the same principle would apply with the speaking adapted to embrace the 3 people. (You can imagine how silly it would appear talking to 3 people as if they were 10 people present and vice versa).

What is being demonstrated here is how we talk to each other:

- We breathe in when we have something to say
- As we breathe out we convert the breath into words
- The words are then transported on the breath to the ears of those we wish to pay attention to what it is we're saying (it is that specific)
- Their ears receive the sound vibrations which says, 'Hey listen to me and what it is I want to tell you'

Returning to the group of 10: if one person had something specific to say to another, they would naturally focus their voice in a manner that indicated to the others present that this was a personal exchange between the two.

However, this would be done in way that everyone else felt included as we are polite beings and if the two spoke exclusively, cutting out everyone else this would be deemed strange and basically rude.

And this is what happens in live performance. You need to talk directly to the character (s) you are speaking with on stage but, at the same time, be open to your audience and the space you are working in to ensure the voice work includes them too. The audience is live and present. If you wish them to be moved by and part of the drama you are creating you need to include them in your work process.

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TRY THIS

- Stand in a circle with those you are working with (either in the rehearsal space and/or performance space).
- Act some lines a) as if addressing everyone b) as if addressing just one other but keeping open to the rest c) as if addressing two different people, keeping open to the rest.
- Take two steps back to make the circle bigger and repeat. Resist the temptation to increase the volume - if you remain relaxed as you address growing numbers of people, the volume will not necessarily get louder, although the voice will naturally grow in dimension, stature and firmness of delivery. If you just 'speak louder' to be heard you will be in danger of tightening the voice and lose its natural inflection.
- Make the circle larger again and repeat. Resist the temptation to speak louder.
- Decrease the circle size to its smallest possible, repeat the exercise without changing the volume.

This exercise can be done again experimenting with choosing to speak quietly and choosing to speak loudly. When speaking quietly or whispering you need to remember to keep the breath engaged (often actors reduce volume by removing the breath and then the voice drops to the floor and can't be heard by anyone). When speaking loudly you need to remember to land the voice accurately with those you are addressing (often actors increase volume by shouting generally into the space or at the audience which is a complete turn off).

AND THIS

Try performing some scene extracts on stage with the other actors placed around the space giving feedback. How can you be heard by everyone in the auditorium with least onstage effort?

The more relaxed you are on stage the more the voice will resonate in the body and space and carry.

Clarity and inclusion is possible whether you are facing the audience, sideways on or have your back to them if you apply the above principles.

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AND THIS

Move around the stage taking up the various positions you inhabit during the performance. From there, visualise how you will need to use your voice to reach the other actors and include the audience.

Sit at different points in the auditorium and visualise how the actors will need to use their voices for you to hear them and feel included in the performance.

RECOMMENDED READING

Voice and the Actor	Cicely Berry
The Actor and the Text	Cicely Berry
Finding Your Voice	Barbara Houseman
Tackling Text	Barbara Houseman
The Voice Book	Michael McCallion
The Right to Speak	Patsy Rodenburg

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