

Jeannette Nelson

The Voice Exercise Book

A Guide to Healthy
and Effective Voice Use

**National
Theatre**

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Foreword

Everyone knows that actors need to be comprehensible, and everyone knows that they need to be truthful. All actors know how much of a challenge it is to be both.

Jeannette Nelson is at the heart of the National Theatre's rehearsal process. She gives actors the confidence to embrace the vast auditorium of the Olivier Theatre, and she knows how to make them believe that through the exercise of their imaginations and the relentless exercise of their craft they can hit the back wall at the same time as they exchange the most delicate intimacies with their fellow actors.

Jeannette seems to me to be absolutely devoted to the idea that you can't be real on stage without letting the audience in. If you aren't skilled enough to communicate what you're saying, thinking and feeling, you are by definition untruthful, because truth in the theatre doesn't exist in a vacuum. If the audience doesn't know what's going on, nothing's going on. And nothing is neither truthful nor untruthful – it's nothing.

Through Jeannette's work, and through the craft that she teaches, actors learn that technique and truth are bedfellows, and that vocal projection isn't just a matter of speaking loud enough; it's the consequence of a fully engaged imagination.

She and I have worked together countless times on Shakespeare's plays, and I've learned an enormous amount from her. We agree that it's possible to speak Shakespeare's lines as if they are the spontaneous consequence of a real thought process, and that you can do this without compromising how extraordinary they are.

Every year, actors at the National become better actors because they've worked with Jeannette. This book shows why.

Nicholas Hytner
London 2015

Introduction

This book is designed for anyone who wants to use their voice more effectively. It is designed to be a simple and straightforward guide to good voice production, beginning with an explanation of how the voice works and followed by exercises to establish a reliable vocal technique.

I have developed this work over the many years I have been working as a theatre voice coach at Britain's National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and at Shakespeare's Globe. I have used, and continue to use, these exercises to train and keep in shape the voices of all types of actors. I take the same approach with experienced and well-known actors as I do with those at the beginning of their careers.

I also use the work with people who are not in the theatre. We can all improve the performance of our voice with knowledge of how it works and by practising simple exercises.

In Chapter 9 you can find out more about how I apply the work at the National Theatre.

Who is this book for?

This book is for actors, teachers and anyone else who uses their voice professionally. That might be all day or just at meetings and presentations, or in the theatre. Its content is based on the work I do every day with professional actors and is therefore suitable for anyone who has to 'perform' with their voice, whether on stage, in school, in a place of worship, in the boardroom, on the sales floor or on the end of a telephone. Being heard and understood, clearly and easily, is of course the desire of all who use their voice to communicate professionally.

You may already have a strong reason for choosing this book. Perhaps you have experienced some difficulties when using your voice professionally or have been advised that improving your verbal communication skills will advance your career. Maybe you have to speak for extended periods or have to use enough volume to fill a

big space and command an audience. Or you may need your voice to show confidence and authority when speaking at meetings, selling your products or dealing with the public.

You may be an actor who wants to keep their voice in shape, or who wants an effective warm-up routine.

You may be a teacher whose voice gets tired after a day in the classroom, or who wants to help your students develop their voices for theatre performances. You could have a physical condition that affects your voice, or maybe you just have a sense that you are not getting the best out of it.

Whatever your reason, the exercises in this book teach you the techniques required for good, healthy voice use and clear speaking in all circumstances. Whatever your starting point, you have the ability to enhance your voice and use it well.

How to use the book

An authentic voice

Before beginning to work with the exercises, it is important to spend a little time thinking about your voice: what it means to you and what it says about you.

The principles of using your voice well are the same for everyone and they are very simple. You have to breathe freely and deeply, and then allow the resonant voice out of your body through clearly articulated speech. This book will teach you how to do that.

However, it is not enough if the sound of your voice doesn't ring true. Whatever your reason for wanting to work on your voice, your aim should be authenticity. Believe me, you will not engage your listeners fully or feel truly satisfied with your voice unless it sounds authentic – honestly yours. A healthy, expressive voice is not achieved by affecting a way of speaking or copying someone else. It is achieved by developing the voice you have.

So in Chapter 1 I ask you to consider your voice as unique; coming from your body and your personality, and being influenced, like the

rest of you, by your personal experiences. This is where I begin with actors and with non-actors. You first have to get to know your voice and how it works before you can develop its potential.

I also ask you to consider how you use your voice and the way you speak in order to present yourself to the world. I don't ask you to judge this but to recognise that it says a great deal about you – who you are and how you think. Through this process you might come to understand why your verbal communication isn't always as good as it could be. Then you can begin to make changes.

How your voice works

The next stage is to learn how your voice works physically, so there follows a short explanation of the anatomy and physiology of the voice. There's nothing too complex here; just a hands-on exploration of all the parts of the body that work together to produce your voice. Understanding how breath and voice work is the key to getting to know your voice.

Once you understand how your voice works you need to know how to look after it. I therefore end this chapter with some information and advice on continued voice care.

So you begin by getting to know the voice you have, and then go on to learn how it works and how to look after it. All of this is designed to heighten your self-awareness in preparation for the vocal technique exercises.

Voice exercises

Chapters 2 and 3 contain the voice exercises. The first group in Chapter 2 teach you, or remind you, of the basics of voice training: breath, resonance, opening the voice and articulation. This is the foundation for all your work.

You can also see these exercises demonstrated in a series of free online videos from the National Theatre. These videos are available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/ntdiscovertheatre) and iTunes U

WE CAN ALL IMPROVE THE
PERFORMANCE OF OUR VOICE BY
KNOWING HOW IT WORKS AND BY
PRACTISING SIMPLE EXERCISES.

(<https://itun.es/i6Bv9gt#iTunes>). Each short film has a different area of focus: a vocal warm-up; a demonstration of how an actor engages the voice to fill different theatrical spaces (using the three stages in the National Theatre); and a series of exercises that I would typically use in rehearsals, with a particular emphasis on Shakespeare.

When you are comfortable and familiar with the exercises in Chapter 2 and feel that your voice is developing, you can go on to the exercises in Chapter 3, which build on this foundation. These will deepen your knowledge and expand your technique, leading to more freedom, control and variety of expression. There are also exercises to help you speak loudly or shout without tiring your voice.

Working with the exercises is intended to be progressive. Regular repetition will develop control of the breath; enhance the quality, clarity and power of the sound; and increase your sense of ownership of your voice. You will see that the exercises encourage you to feel your voice more than listen to it. People often get frustrated when their voice doesn't work the way they want it to, and this is partly because they can't see it or touch it. Understanding how it works and developing a kinaesthetic awareness is vital. Then you can self-monitor and self-correct.

Chapter 4 helps you with the demands of performance, whether or not that is on stage, teaching you how to warm up and warm down. In Chapter 5 I look at particular voice problems that might affect you, and suggest which exercises you should focus on to help you overcome them.

Beyond the basics

If you are an actor or other type of performer, you may wish to continue working with this book to develop a lifelong practice. If you work in other professions, you may find that once you have explored how your voice works and learned to breathe and speak effectively, you will use the techniques naturally in everyday life. You could then return to the book from time to time to refresh your work or if a particular need arises.

Communicating well with your voice is essential to getting your message across. So in Chapter 6 I have included some exercises for those of you who wish to make your accent clearer. Then in Chapter 7 I point out some common communication problems, and advise on how to overcome them in order to keep your audience listening and interested.

For those of you who teach drama in schools and colleges or youth theatre groups, I have also included a chapter on working with young people's voices. Young people gain many life skills from experiencing the creative force of making theatre. Finding confidence in their voices and communicating with them well are among the most important of these skills. However, working with young adults whose voices, bodies and minds are still developing needs a particular focus and care. When I work with this group I tailor the exercises to meet their needs and abilities, and in Chapter 8 I share some of these with you.

Falling in love with your voice

An important part of working with these exercises is that you will build a relationship with your voice. As you practise the exercises, you will get to know your voice and body well. You will think about your posture, and touch your body to feel the movement of breathing and the vibration of your voice. You will listen to your voice and breath to hear how they change, and you will feel them inside your body. This relationship will be for life. You will gradually find that good breathing and the effective release of voice and speech become a habit. You will learn to recognise the things that hinder the voice and have ways to remove or overcome them.

I often think that we should fall in love with our voice. We should get to know it well, and then nurture and support it, and help it to grow. This is what these exercises are designed to do.

So don't be intimidated; dive in and try them. It's your voice and you can learn to use it well.

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VOICE. WE SHOULD GET TO KNOW
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1.

Getting to know your voice

THERE IS NO VOICE
WITHOUT BREATH.

What your voice says about you

There is no mystery about the mechanics of the human voice. It is a physical activity, and, like all physical activities, if you want to perform well you have to practise and develop your technique. However, the voice is an expression of self like no other, and as such is subject to inner feelings and outward pressures.

Who you are

Our voice is part of our identity and it carries our history. It tells where we are from through our accent or language, tying us to place and community. That might be very important to us, and we may take pride in the accent and dialect that identifies us with the history of a particular place and group of people.

Our voice is also one of the ways we choose to engage with the world. We may use volume, speaking loudly to show that we are confident and in control, or quietly, making people listen closely. We may use tone to project a particular image of ourselves: maybe caring or careless, firm or ironic. We may use our voice to protect ourselves and hide behind, perhaps by changing our native accent, or pushing or withholding its natural energy. We may also enhance the expression of our gender by using a rather high or low pitch.

Authenticity

If you are unhappy with the way you sound and have tried to change it on your own, you may be surprised to know that people usually realise that something is not quite right. We recognise authenticity when we hear it and mistrust those whose voices don't quite fit them. I'm sure you have listened to people in public life who you feel are not using their voices honestly or authentically, and you don't trust them.

The work in this book is not about forcing the voice to sound different. It is about getting to know the voice you have and working with it. Actors need to know themselves well, and be comfortable and honest

Exercise 11: A short cut to low breathing

The position taken in the first part of this exercise, with your knees to the side, can be a shortcut to low abdominal breathing. You don't need to force your breath down as the position of your knees and hips sends the breath there. You will see that it is almost impossible to breathe too high in your chest.



Lie on your back, lift your knees on to your chest and hug them. Breathe down into your abdomen, feeling the movement against your thighs.

Gently lower both knees down to one side of your body (both knees on the same side) and let your arms spread out wide. Stay there as long as you like and enjoy the stretch in your back as your breath is sent down into your abdomen.

Lift your knees up and over to the other side. Try to do this with your abdominal muscles, not using your neck or shoulders. Stay there as long as you like before moving on.

Lift your knees up again on to your abdomen, and then place your feet flat on the floor with your knees pointing up and your feet hip-width apart.

GOOD VOICE TECHNIQUE LETS
YOUR AUDIENCE LISTEN TO
WHAT IS BEING SAID, NOT TO
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