



voice work

ART AND SCIENCE IN CHANGING VOICES

CHRISTINA SHEWELL

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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*To Mark and to Jack, and to my dear first family, Harry,
Hilary and Susie,
with love*

Voice Work

Art and Science in Changing Voices

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Voice teacher and speech and language therapist

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2009

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Registered office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shewell, Christina.

Voice work : art and science in changing voices / Christina Shewell.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-470-01992-4 (paper)

1. Voice culture. 2. Voice. I. Title.

PN4162.S48 2009

808.5-dc22

2008019022

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

1 2009

Forewords

Dawn French, Comedian

When I was an undergraduate of English, speech and drama, we had extensive voice training with an excellent teacher, but, as young students, the voice exercises just seemed silly. Jennifer and I would make each other laugh as a way to release the embarrassment of all those funny sounds. When we left, some of our friends actually worked as voice teachers. I didn't, as I really had no confidence that I knew the difference between a uvula, a vulva and a Volvo.

...

As an actor I now realise that voice is one of the greatest tools and we cannot take it for granted. It's the vehicle that connects the script and the audience; your mind operates your mouth and throat and the words come physically through you. It's a real art to keep your own voice finely tuned between your own personality and the character you are playing. There has to be good control of the 'natural' breath, tone and phrasing in order to alter it for a character. It's like clowning - you have to be good enough at the rules of physical fun to be able to twist them for clowning.

Last year I did an opera and was fascinated to see how the singers held back in rehearsals, but at the dress rehearsal their full sound blew the top of my head off. That last rehearsal week and the start of a show are dangerous times for most actors as they are tired, stressed and nervous, with all the fear of the opening night and the resulting judgements. I have never once done a play where warm-ups happen in that time; everyone is far too stressed and nervous to protect their voices and yet that's exactly when they should be doing so.

There is a tricky line between relaxation and necessary tension, and it can be hard to find. Performers have to find exactly the right energy balance at any time of day and sustain that for hours. I still have a tendency to push. It's a long-standing habit of assuming that, if I do a 'bigger' version of what I do in normal life, I will get away with it on stage. Like many actors, I have had to learn to do something different with my voice on stage.

You cannot give a good performance if your voice is not serving you well, and it's cripplingly awful when it fails you.

I know the techniques and have mostly managed to get by, but have still had problems with my voice. On one occasion I was in the long run of a play and had developed an increasingly hoarse and raspy voice, but still kept pushing as I felt furious and guilty at its failure. Finally I lost it completely half-way through a show, and the understudy had to go on. I went to see a laryngologist where I was fascinated to see my vocal folds moving on a screen, and the vocal nodules that had developed. The specialist explained that I would probably always have voice problems unless I changed my pattern of voice strain and inadequate breath, and he sent me to see Christina.

At that point my barriers were up and I still suspected that voice work was indulgent. It can also feel like a personal investigation of one's whole nature - as if the voice itself has a personality - so it's very intimate to have someone comment on it and work to change it. However, although I had thought that the voice therapy was going to be quite clinical, I actually found it surprisingly healing on both spiritual and physical levels. As Christina and I worked together, I remembered how as a child I instinctively breathed and voiced 'well', and realised that somewhere I did *viscerally* know this.

Now I recognise that being furious with my voice doesn't help; I need to nurture it, take time to breathe and use the

techniques I have learnt. This book will provide me with a reminder of some of those techniques, and I genuinely believe it will sustain me through plenty of bum-twitchingly scary times. I don't think of it as manual, I think of it more as a companion with practical knowledge and helpful insights. Who would have thought a book about voice would contain so much heart?

Lesley Mathieson FRCSLT, Speech and Language Therapist

(Visiting Lecturer in Voice Pathology, The Ear Institute, University College London; Honorary Research Adviser, Department of Speech and Language Therapy, The Royal National Throat Nose and Ear Hospital, London.)

Voice practitioners, whether artistic or clinical, who pick up this book and start to glance through its pages, will know immediately that it contains an enormous amount of information that will be relevant to their practice. Even the most experienced will learn from the considered balance of explanation, theory and information about practical voice work that Christina Shewell has brought together.

The various parameters of the human voice, such as vocal quality, loudness and pitch, have a plasticity that allows them to be changed both involuntarily and as the result of conscious intervention. The reasons why individuals might decide to embark on vocal changes intentionally span the abnormal-normal-superior voice continuum. Those with disordered voices seek remediation for the problems that affect their oral communication so significantly and those with 'normal' voices might aim for increased functional efficiency and perceived acoustic beauty. There are no fixed boundaries throughout the continuum, however.

As Christina Shewell points out in this book, changing the voice is both an art and a science. All voice practitioners,

whatever their disciplines, must base their intervention on a sound understanding of the anatomy, physiology and biomechanics of phonation if they are to practise safely and with maximum effect. In addition, providing evidence for the techniques that we use is becoming increasingly important. If there is no scientific evidence for the effects of the techniques that we favour through experience and long-term use, then we have an obligation to investigate their effectiveness. This concept should apply to all fields of vocal work, not only voice pathology, if we are to provide our students, patients and clients with the best intervention that is available. Of course, as the author of this book recognises, many techniques that are in use do not have such supporting evidence, and we have to use what seems to be most helpful from experience. In time, however, being able to select intervention strategies of proven worth would be the ideal situation. Those who endeavour to provide this evidence do not seek to devalue the clinical and artistic skills of the vocal practitioner that are so essential to the best intervention, but to enhance the process by using the best tools.

This book is special in the field of voice literature because the author is dually qualified as a speech and language therapist and as a voice teacher. Her extensive clinical and teaching experience results in a text that reflects her insights into the complex processes of changing voices. The importance of the multidisciplinary approach to voice care and pedagogy is implicit throughout the text. The reader, from whatever vocal discipline, will have the opportunity to gain greater understanding of the broader spectrum of intervention than his or her particular field of interest, and will discover numerous tools and strategies by which to achieve vocal change successfully.

Mark Meylan, Singing Teacher

In the twenty-first century, vocal anatomy and voice science are an important part of singing teachers' knowledge, and most singing teachers would place themselves somewhere between 'imagine inhaling the perfume of a rose and 'feel your arytenoids working'! Our contact with speech and language therapists, laryngologists, speaking voice coaches, voice scientists and other voice professionals mainly happens at singing teachers' or multidisciplinary voice conferences, or through articles in professional journals. In any of these situations our exposure is only to one aspect of that particular voice practitioner's work. So we may gather information on, say, vocal hydration from a lengthy article giving general advice, or from a number-crunched 9-minute PowerPoint presentation featuring 36 female seniors living in an air-conditioned retirement home in a southern state of the USA. From all this we piece together our 'take' on this amazing world of voice.

Only in a book with, ideally, one author do we truly get more than a snapshot of a voice practitioner and so it is with Christina Shewell. Books on singing teaching are exactly what they set out to be and, although they can be invaluable, serious singing teachers need to broaden their search for valuable, informed and practical information to help guide the decisions that they make and the information that they impart in the singing studio. Christina is a uniquely placed voice practitioner by being skilled, effective and experienced in two areas of the multidisciplinary voice world: speech and language pathology and the speaking voice development. So in *Voice Work: Art and Science in Changing Voices* the singing teacher has the opportunity to explore two other worlds.

With these two disciplines the author is able to offer such treats as 'Speaking Wonderfully' in Chapter 28, moving the valuable healthy everyday norm of speech and language therapy into the advanced voice use of the speaking voice

coach. Her experience means that she is not afraid to stand up and be counted, and I personally welcome her strong feelings on – for example – the importance of breath as a ‘core foundation for voice work’.

There is a wealth of valuable diagrams and photographs here, ranging from trusty old favourites to her own table of breathing muscles – a joy. Her eclectic nature enables the inclusion of her own practical hand photographs for head and neck alignment in the bodywork foundation section. In her simple yet unpatronising writing, I read an experienced practitioner relaying ‘best practice’, with references to lectures, articles or books that, however esteemed, never spoil the flow. I am encouraged to stretch my knowledge by exploring, among other exercises, the chakras and the sound bath. It is this openness and knowledge of voice outside her specific fields that makes this book greater than the sum of its two parts.

Patsy Rodenburg OBE, Voice Teacher

Christina Shewell has written an important and unique book – a book that should be embraced by the voice world and owned by anyone working with the human voice.

There often seems to be a division in voice work. On one side of the voice sphere are the spoken and sung voice teachers. They work to excavate, extend and train our magnificent natural voices, and mostly work with professional voice users. In order to be a successful voice teacher you need to have trained your own voice, which takes a minimum of 3 years’ dedication. You also need to learn how to teach, which can take decades of practice.

On the other side of this intriguing world are the therapists who work to repair damaged voices and speech muscles with impaired movement. In order to begin to understand

therapeutic work, a therapist has had long training in anatomy, neurology and psychology, and then has to achieve years of clinical experience to work effectively.

The human voice needs both teachers and therapists, but sometimes these two groups can view each other askance and even occasionally with contempt. This division became very clear to me some years ago when I attended a voice conference in New York.

An eminent American voice teacher and coach created an uproar when she declared to the whole conference, filled predominantly with therapists and doctors, that she was tired of listening to presentations from voice experts who had had no vocal training. She considered that they consequently didn't use their own voices well, and asked 'Why should I listen to dull and inaudible voices?'

At the same conference, an equally eminent singing teacher showed disgust when she viewed film of the vocal folds in surgery. She interrupted a doctor's session by stating 'I don't want to look at the ugliness of vocal anatomy, I only want to hear the beauty of the voice'. The next day she conducted a singing master class and was criticised by therapists who suggested that some of her singing techniques were anatomically unsound and could damage a singer's voice.

Let me repeat the obvious - the human voice needs both groups of practitioners, and Christina Shewell is uniquely placed and experienced to unite these divisions in our world. She has trained and is recognised internationally as both a therapist and a voice teacher. Her book helps us all to journey to the other side of our world and, because she writes so clearly and with such humanity, this book is not only an essential reference book but constantly reminds us how privileged we all are to work with voice.

Preface

The aim of this book is to offer a meeting point for all those whose work is the repair, improvement, development and exploration of voice along the normal-abnormal voice continuum. The focus is the spoken voice, but many of the ideas and exercises are also relevant to the teaching of singing.

There are three main voice practitioners who work with people who want to change their voices in some way:

1. Voice teachers (in some countries known as speech trainers or voice coaches).
2. Speech and language therapists (in some countries known as speech pathologists or logopedists).
3. Singing teachers (in some countries known as voice teachers).

At times I also refer to another group, the exploratory voice guides – a term coined for those who lead experiential sessions where people are encouraged to explore their voices using a wide variety of sounds. There are an increasing number of workshops on offer, and the facilitators use a variety of songs and techniques gathered from around the world.

The voice practitioner professions are separate and autonomous, but there are areas of overlap where at times one will carry out aspects of another's work. Other groups – such as drama teachers, dialogue coaches, and theatre, choral and musical directors – also sometimes work directly on the sound of an individual voice, but this is usually part of wider work. There are other professions with work that is invaluable to understanding about the care and quality of the voice, but the involvement of which does not usually involve direct 'hands-on' voice work. These include

phoneticians, speech scientists and ENT specialists (who may also be referred to as otorhinolaryngologists, laryngologists or phonosurgeons if they have a specialism in voice).

There is a wide range of literature for voice teachers, actors and public speakers on how to develop the spoken voice. There are many books for speech and language therapists on the management and treatment of voice disorders, fine texts on developing the singing voice, and an increasing number of books about esoteric aspects of voice exploration and healing. Each of these is written or edited by relevant specialists in their field, but the approach of one profession may not be easily accessible to another.

This book has a particular focus on how to problem-solve if a voice is 'not working well', and offers a clear philosophy of practical voice work based on a structured way of listening. This is linked to both theoretical knowledge and practical exercises. Stories are given throughout to illustrate what can happen to a voice, and how a voice practitioner can be part of vocal change.

Christina Shewell
June 2008

About the book

The style aims to be scholarly but accessible, with insights from both artistic and scientific fields. Extensive references are made to research findings and to other writers, alongside stories found to be useful or interesting in my own varied professional voice journey, so the pronoun 'I' is used when appropriate. The approach of this book is deliberately eclectic, with ideas and techniques from my experience as a speech and language therapist with special interest in voice, and a qualified voice teacher who has worked extensively with actors, singers and public speakers. As a university academic, I have taught voice and counselling for many years, bridging the art-science divide whenever possible.

In the practical voice work section, some ideas are phrased as suggestions on what to do with a client, but many are addressed to 'you'. This sets the tone of experiential work, because most voice practitioners will have practically explored their own voices. However, this is *not* a self-help book for people who want to develop their own voices. There are several such books available, and these are best seen as supplements to use alongside work with a practitioner. Few people have the stamina and discipline to work through a silent book of advice and, even when this is supplemented by a DVD of exercises, feedback and encouragement from an 'outside listener' are invaluable. When appropriate, references are made to the audio files that are included on the book website, found at www.blackwellpublishing.com/shewell, and they are

indicated by the following symbol: 

I avoid the use of the dual 'he or she, him or her', preferring instead to freely use one or the other of these third person pronouns, because both voice practitioners and

the people with whom they work cross the gender division. For brevity, the term 'speech and language therapist' is generally shortened to 'therapist' or 'SLT'.

Voice practitioners vary in the terms that they use for those with whom they work, and these include 'client', 'patient', 'pupil' and 'student'. Although all these may appear at times, the book generally uses the term 'client', a word that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as 'a person using the services of a professional person or organization'.

Our power and effectiveness in working with voices are a mix of the practitioner's personal experience and qualities, the speaker's needs and personality, and the practical work chosen. The book's focus on vocal skills takes for granted that an individual's life and emotions are at the foundation of the voice; the way we 'live our sound' is shaped by our childhood background, inherited personality traits, the way life treats us, the moods we experience and the world in which we live.

There are six parts in the book:

1. Part 1: **Considering voice work** describes the different voice practitioner groups so that other professionals can learn something of their background, and looks at the different philosophies and shared methodologies of practical voice work.
2. Part 2: **Investigating voices** describes ways that we can find out about a voice, from physical, acoustic and perceptual perspectives.
3. Part 3: introduces **the Voice Skills approach**. This offers a simple 'common sense' way of describing voices under eight core voice skills. A new perceptual scheme is introduced that can be used by therapists, voice teachers and singing teachers.
4. Part 4: the nine chapters of **Voice work foundations** are based around the core voice aspects described in

Part 3. These offer core theory relevant to the later practical work.

5. Part 5: **Practical voice work** offers a wide range of ideas, specific techniques and exercises. These relate to general body and voice care and to the eight voice skills. This section also discusses the emotional aspects of voice work.

6. Part 6: **Voice disturbance** describes the main voice disorders, and looks at the kind of vocal disturbance that can occur in working life, with specific focus on the acting and singing voice.

At the end of the book you will find extensive reading references in the Bibliography, and details of a number of relevant websites in Appendix I.

Acknowledgements

For a generous writing grant: Eric Adams and the Barrow Cadbury Trust. For the gift of her original painting as book cover design: Pip Benveniste. For encouragement and quiet sanctuaries in which to write: Alison and Michael Mayne; Andy Paterson and Zanna Beswick; Susan and Adrian Fry; Jane Maxim and Stephen Barnard; Michael and Freda Fisher.

For their particular contributions - special thanks to Dawn French, Lesley Mathieson, Mark Meylan and Patsy Rodenburg; and to Dr Evelyn Abberton, Professor Adrian Fourcin, Evangelos Himonides, Professor Robert Sataloff and Samantha Wallace.

For a most generous sharing of knowledge, experience or support:

Dr Alison Bagnall, Dr Jan Baker, Noelle Barker, Dr Janet Mackenzie Beck, Cicely Berry OBE, Professor Martin Birchall, Ed Blake, Lynne Booth, Annabel Bosanquet, Jane Boston, Margaret Braund, Mr Richard Canter, Professor Paul Carding, David Carey, Helen Chadwick, Jayne Comins, Joyce Cook, Rocco Dal Vera, Mr David Garfield Davies, Catriona Dixon at Wiley-Blackwell, Sarah Dunant, Jill Gabriel, Caroline Gant, Katarina Gildebrand, Juliet Grayson, Chloe Goodchild, Duncan Grossett, Andrew Hambly-Smith, Mary Hammond, Mr Tom Harris, Sara Harris, Dinah Harris, Professor Markus Hess, Professor Reinhart Heuer, Paul Hill, Professor Robert Hillman, Professor David Howard, Dr Eva Holmberg, Louise Holland, Sophie Holland, Matt Hood at Equity, Barbara Houseman, Mark Huckvale, Lizzie Hutchinson, Sandra Inglis, Janet Jones, Sue Jones, Gillyanne Kayes, Sue Kuhn, Jacob Lieberman, Kiereen Lock, Myra Lockhart, Jeanie LoVetri, Rachael Lowe, Dr Stephanie Martin, Noel McPherson, Liz McNaughton, Melanie Mehta, Masashi Minagawa, Yvonne Morley, Dr Steve Nevard, Ellen Newman, Yioda Panayiotou,

Mario Petrucci, Judith Phillips, Amaryllis Pye, Dr Gillian Rice, Mr Philip Robinson, James Roose-Evans, Debby Rossiter, Mr John Rubin, Dr Alison Russell, Mr Mike Saunders, Professor Klaus Scherer, Ann Skinner, Southmead Hospital ENT department, medical library and the speech and language therapy department, Siobhan Stamp, Andy Stephens, Janet Swan, Mr Paul Tierney, Cathy Timothy, Professor Ingo Titze, Janie van Hool, Stevie Russell and the library of the Department of Human Communication Science University College London, Mr Robert Slack, Mark Vaughan, Jack Vaughan, Anna Vaughan, Andrew Wade, Mr John Waldron, Morwenna White-Thomson, Professor Graham Welch, Rachael Wilkie, Dr Jenevora Williams, Joe Windley, Cynthia Whelan, Claire Wonnacott.

And warm appreciation to all my clients from whom I continue to learn so much.

Part 1

Considering voice work