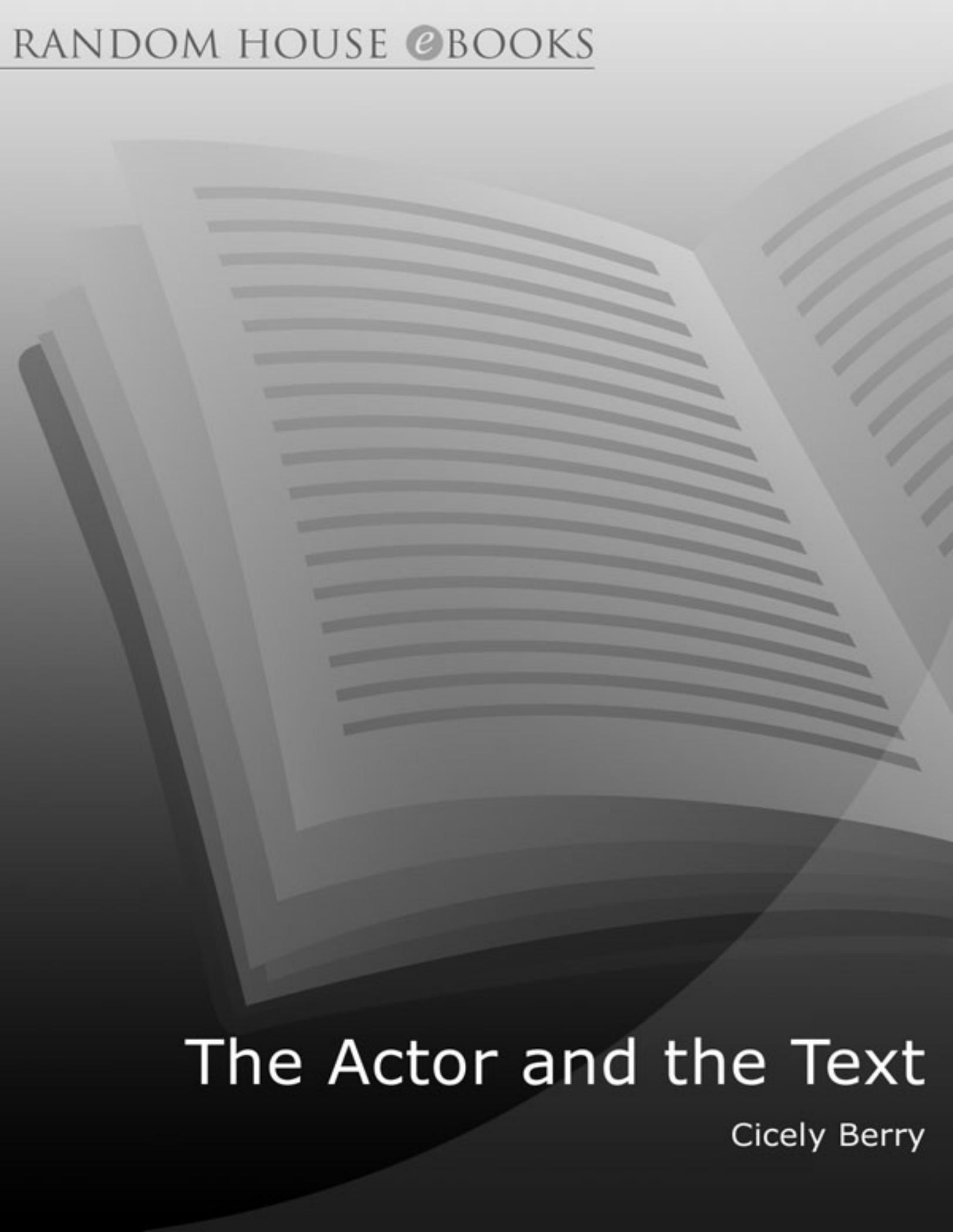


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Actor and the Text

Cicely Berry

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Also by Cicely Berry
Title Page
Dedication
Introduction

Part ONE: Attitudes to Voice and Text

Chapter One: Sound and Meaning

- 1 Attitudes to voice
- 2 The practical means

Chapter Two: Heightened versus Naturalistic Text

Part TWO: Shakespeare – Setting out the Rules

Chapter Three: Metre and Rhythm

Chapter Four: Structures, Energy, Imagery and Sound

- 1 Energy through the text
- 2 Antithesis
- 3 Substance of the word
- 4 Discovery and movement of thought
- 5 Nature of the image, its logic, and its inquiry into nature
- 6 Argument and emotion
- 7 Word games and patterns
- 8 Structure of speeches

Part THREE: Shakespeare – the Practical Means

Chapter Five: Introduction to the Exercises

Chapter Six: Substance of the Text

- 1 Sounds: vowels and consonants
- 2 Hearing the language: substance of text
- 3 Language fabric

Chapter Seven: Metre and Energy

1 Metre

2 Energy through the text

3 Subversion — or making language your own

Chapter Eight: Acting, Text and Style

Chapter Nine: Further Points of Text

1 Prose

2 Heightened music

3 Scene structures

4 Recap on speech structures

5 Sonnets

Chapter Ten: Relating to Other Texts

1 Jacobean text

2 Restoration text

3 Formal modern text

4 Modern text

Part FOUR: Voice Work

Chapter Eleven: Preparation

1 Finding the space

2 Using poetry

3 Cadence and note

Chapter Twelve: Further Voice Exercises

Final thoughts

Acknowledgments

Copyright

About the Book

Cicely Berry, Voice Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, is world-famous for her voice teaching. *The Actor and the Text* is her classic book, distilled from years of working with actors of the highest calibre.

Building on the specific exercises covered in her first book, *Voice and the Actor*, Cicely Berry relates the practicality of voice production to the challenges of a different text. And by getting inside the words we use - whether those of Shakespeare or our contemporaries - she shows how to release their energy and excitement for an audience.

Also by Cicely Berry

Voice and the Actor

Your Voice and How to Use it Successfully

The Actor and the Text

Cicely Berry



To the memory of my husband Harry Moore

Introduction

This book is about ways of working on the speaking of text. Much has been written about the voice and the sound we make, and about articulation and verbal clarity, but little on how we bring all this to bear on the specific speaking of text; and so I want to bring the two together in a practical way.

For it seems to me there is so often a gap between the life that is going on imaginatively within the actor in order to create the reality of the character he is playing, and the life that he gives the text which he finally has to speak. It is as if the energy and excitement that an actor feels when working on a part is not released fully when he commits to words, when he is bound by the language set down.

And this is true of all kinds of text, both modern and classical, though the problems are different and the gap is more apparent in the speaking of heightened or poetic text where there is a certain size to the language, and where the expectations of the listener are often an inhibiting factor — i.e., these texts have been heard before. But whatever the style of the writing, the actor has to find the right energy for that particular text; if his energy becomes too inward and controlled the words become dull; if he presses too much energy out the words will be unfocused and the thought will be generalized. Either way the result is that the speaking of text or dialogue is too often not as alive or remarkable as the imagination that is feeding it.

I do believe that work on Shakespeare is the surest way of learning about text, and for these reasons: because it demands such a complete investment of ourselves in the words; because it is so rich and extraordinary we are

forced to be bold and even extravagant and so perhaps discover more possibilities within our own voice than we are aware of; because, in a very practical sense, the connection between the physical and verbal life of the characters is totally apparent and palpable; and lastly because, and this is particularly important for the modern actor, the structure of the thought demands both courage and discipline.

The main part of this book, then, deals with the speaking of Shakespeare and with the challenge of classical text — and it is practical. Having worked in a company for fourteen years where the focus is to a great extent on Shakespeare, I think there are things we have discovered together — practical ways of working on the text — which help us into the language and are useful. These have always been in the area of relating acting method to practical direct speaking. I would like, therefore, to set down what I have learnt.

However, I think it would be limiting if we left it there as an end in itself, so I have made reference to modern writing, for this always feeds our response to Shakespeare, and vice versa. We are always lucky when we have an opportunity to work on both, for it is the interchange between modern and classical writing that enriches both and makes each more alive. Work on Shakespeare opens our awareness to language in modern writing by adding to the resonance of the words we speak, even when they are rooted in a modern reality. And work on modern text keeps our ears tuned to the colloquial rhythms of everyday speech, which need to be integrated into our speaking of verse. We should be always balancing the two for, in a sense, every piece of text we speak on a stage is heightened — it is performed — and we have to find its particular voice and place that particular language.

I think it is also important to say here that, as actors, we are able to be articulate through the language we bring

alive; we therefore have a responsibility to that language. The care and life that we bring to it helps the hearers also to be articulate; and I think this has a special value for the present time when computer technology threatens to dehumanize communication, and when the term 'post-articulate' has become current. Therefore we must always be after the reaching out through words, and not a dulled, inward-looking speaking of dialogue. We have to honour a greater need, and that is to make what we say remarkable to the hearer. This is what Brecht was after. Now obviously this cannot apply to everything we do — mediocre dialogue in second-rate scripts, for instance — yet I do believe that the richer our experience of handling language, the more we can get out of the most banal of writing.

Now Voice is a difficult subject to write about — I know from my experience of teaching it that everyone responds to instruction in different ways. Each person recognizes what is happening with his own voice purely subjectively, and although the basic principles are common to everyone, how we interpret them for ourselves varies enormously with each individual. This becomes even more complex when we are dealing with text.

As we shall be talking a great deal about the image we have of our own voice and how this conditions the way we work on it, it is perhaps useful here to recap briefly on what I have already written in *Voice and the Actor*¹, about how we arrive at our voice. Briefly it is this: the voice which we arrive at is the most intricate mixture of what we hear, how we hear it, and how we unconsciously use it in the light of our personality, our physical make-up and our experience. That is to say, how we use our voice is conditioned by a) our environment and our attitude to that; b) our perception of sound and the accuracy with which we hear it (our ear), and this is also involved with our aesthetic pleasure in sound and consequent judgement of it; c) our individual physical make-up and agility, and our natural

power; and d) our own wish and need to communicate. So we see it is very bound up with our formative years — whether we were encouraged to speak or not, what influenced us, etc. — and to break from our habits of speech is often a huge step to take. And it is important always to remember the subjective nature of the voice, for it helps us to work through the limitations we make for ourselves.

In *Voice and the Actor* I have covered the general aspects of voice production. However I will be adding to the exercises given there, for since writing it I have developed the work and I think the emphasis has slightly changed. But my starting-point here will be that exercises are already part of the actor's work, that range and flexibility are opened out, and the voice is in readiness, as it were, at whatever stage of experience you are as an actor, and with whatever background of voice work you have.

So, this book is not simply about making the voice sound more interesting. It is about getting inside the words we use, responding to them in as free a way as possible, and then presenting that response to an audience. It is about how to use the freedom we get in exercises when we are being real in speech. It is about making the language organic, so that the words act as the spur to the sound, and so that flexibility and range are found because the words require them.

Finally, two general points. I think we tend to use words as if they belong to either our reason or to our emotions, so that we make them either only literal and logical, or alternatively only emotional. We do not use them as our thoughts in action, which are always shifting and changing, and are the result of both thought and feeling.

Secondly too often the imaginative process becomes ordinary at the moment of speaking. I think this is because

we are tentative and do not know how far we can go, or because we do not know how to explore the language boldly enough without being unreal. I want, in this book, to set out the possibilities as I see them, which I hope will give us the confidence to trust in ourselves and in the text.

One last point: I felt the word *actor*, as referring to both male and female, was correct. At the time of writing I chose to use *he* rather than *he/she*, believing it to be less cumbersome. I now regret this, and I apologize to those whose feelings may be offended.

¹ First published by Harrap in 1973. Reprinted ten times.

1

Part

**Attitudes to
Voice and Text**

Chapter 1

SOUND AND MEANING

IN THIS CHAPTER I want to focus on two things:

1 The attitudes we have to our own voice: how we think of our own sound, and how this affects our work as an actor. And then:

2 The practical application of exercises: that is to say I want to clarify the aims of the voice work we do, so that it gives maximum support to the words we speak.

Ideally, I suppose, every actor wants to know that his voice is carrying what is in his mind and imagination directly across to the audience. He wants it to be accurate to his intention and to sound unforced. He wants to know that he is carrying the listener with him for, in the end, it is the voice which sets up the main bond between him and his audience. Certainly this is true of Western theatre. He knows that the audience want to be let into his character, and that this will happen to a large extent through his voice and speech. Above all, he wants it to be interesting.

This sounds simple enough, but many things get in the way. For, paradoxically, often the more truthful he wants to be and the more he wants to fill the text — i.e., the more possibilities he sees within the character — the more difficult it is to be simple, and to release the words directly and without pressure. Depending on the actor, this tension between himself and the text can make him over-explain,

be over-emphatic, or over-charge the speaking with emotion — all qualities which come between him and the direct and simple sharing with his audience. Yet, equally, it is no good saying: let the words speak for themselves and just rely on the text. This is a platitude which has no meaning when you are on stage performing to several hundred people; and in any case it is misleading, for words have to be filled with your own experience or they will be flat and lack commitment, and so be uninteresting. Yet all these over-statements which come out of an anxiety to present are a matter of balance, of judging the precise amount of energy needed for the text you are working with and the space you are working in. And I feel strongly that we tend to work on voice as an end in itself, and somehow do not see that work through clearly enough to the specific speaking of text and, further, to our commitment to language.

Therefore we have to work at language as well as voice; we have to practise it, in a sense, to get more adept at feeling its weight and movement. Just as, in everyday life, how a person uses language (or does not use language) is part of the essence of that person, so the actor has to be ready for the dialogue to take us into the world of the character — he has to be able to pick up the resonances of the character through the words given in the script. He must touch the character through the language. Yet also we have to allow that language to bear on our own experience so that it is real for us, and this asks for a continual blending of our own truth with the truth of the character. And so I think we have to keep reassessing our attitudes to language — never taking it for granted — for this is our commitment; and each piece of writing asks for a different connection between the actor and his audience, a different style of speaking perhaps.

1 ATTITUDES TO VOICE

First, I want to look at the factors which hold us back from making the text as rich and alive as possible. This may seem negative, but I think there are certain attitudes and ways of working by which we are conditioned, which take our attention away from the right verbal focus, and I think by simply stating them it will help us to re-think that focus.

Now of course each actor is at a different stage of development and has different concerns, but I think the factors that hold us back are common to us all. They manifest themselves differently because each actor's personality and make-up is different, but the causes remain similar. Sometimes the adjustment that is needed is to do with the perception of language; sometimes it is technical; more often than not it is a mixture of both.

I think these inhibiting factors fall roughly into five areas — the order is not important:

(a) The reliance we put on our own sound

To a large extent I think we are trapped in our own sound and sound pattern. This is because our voice has evolved with us, and is therefore a complex mix of background, physical make-up and personality, and the interactions of one upon the other. And because of this we quite involuntarily make a statement with our voice. This statement has a great deal to do with class, education and cultural background, and therefore with what we expect of ourselves. Here I do not mean accent — we can work on that quite specifically and get beyond limitations of dialect — what I mean is something more, something we feel inside. We are used to our own voice in a quite palpable way, and I think it quite unconsciously forms the way we think about language and use it.

It is curiously difficult to work on our own voice both boldly and creatively, because it means we have to let go of our own patterns. Let me explain: given that our voice is

our sound presence, and is the means by which we commit our private world to the world outside, it is tied up with how we think of ourselves — our self-image — and with the image of ourselves we wish to present. It is therefore bound absolutely to our own self-confidence, and so is particularly sensitive to both criticism and to feelings of unease. This is true even in our everyday life: we find our voice changes according to how we feel our status to be at any given moment. It is also true that we are quite strongly affected by criticism of our voice, even to the point of it inhibiting our wish to talk. None of this happens particularly consciously, or necessarily at a very deep level; nevertheless, the voice is extremely sensitive to our own ego.

The important point I think is this: we are more strongly aware of our own sound than we realize, and that sound is strongly bound to our emotional state, and to our self-esteem. Yet, because we hear the sound via the bone conduction in our own heads, and also because we hear it subjectively in the sense that it is tied up with our perception of our voice and how we would like it to sound, and also to how we feel at the time, we seldom hear it accurately. We obviously never hear it in the way we hear someone else's voice — we are aware of this when we hear ourselves on tape, but even then we listen subjectively. It certainly seldom tallies with how others hear us; but then, they are only listening from the outside!

For the actor, all this takes on a slightly different emphasis — for the voice is part of his job, and a skilled part. He has to train his voice and to begin to know it objectively. Yet it is still part of his private means of communication, and is still subject to his confidence. So how he uses his voice in a job is bound up with how he feels about that job, and how confident he is in it. Now part of the actor's business is to know how he is presenting himself: just as he has a persona which he objectively

needs to use, and for which he is often cast, so he needs to rely on the vocal qualities in which he feels sure and confident. Certainly, when you do not feel easy with a particular part it is difficult to find your authentic voice in it — your vocal stresses. So we tend to hold on to the sound which feels familiar, and in which we have confidence; and this happens at all stages of an actor's life, regardless of how much flexibility and range he has acquired. We tend to limit ourselves to what we know. I suppose this is how in the end vocal mannerisms develop — seldom consciously, but rather because we hold on to a quality of sound or inflection which we recognize from inside, and we start to repeat that and 'firm it up', as it were. We ourselves do not hear it as a mannerism.

So when an actor is working on a part, he needs to discover and experience feelings while he is speaking, while at the same time he must know what effect his voice is having. He needs to know his voice both subjectively and objectively at the same time: he needs that third eye, or perhaps ear. Now when we make adjustments to how we speak, the difference we hear inside our heads is often much greater than it sounds to the listener. Small differences seem big. Yet the actor has got to feel true to his sound, for, just as a writer cannot take the words back once they are in print, so an actor, once he has committed himself to speech, either in rehearsal or in performance, feels he has said something both about himself and about his work which cannot be retracted. This is part of the pressure an actor has to deal with and which is not fully understood by those who are not actors. Even in the early days of rehearsal, once you are speaking the part you are already making decisions about it — you are taking yourself along the path. Therefore, when being bold either with an inflection or in response to a word, or in the very manner of speech, we can quite often feel we are doing too much and the result will not be quite true. Our concern, then, is often

to make the voice behave in the way in which we feel comfortable, to be in control of it, and to some extent plan it. This prevents us exploring a text as creatively as we could however flexible the voice is in exercise.

Obviously none of this is wrong, for we need confidence and we need to be able to trust in our own voice — yet this reliance on our own sound, without realizing it, gives the words a secondary importance. And this is reinforced by the fact that we hear the sound in our own heads more dominantly than the words, and this is a very important point. It is always interesting, for instance, when you have been working on a part for some time and know it well, to then whisper a part of the text through — you notice quite freshly what the words are actually doing, their movement, weight, and length and they take on a new focus and layer of meaning.

The crucial thing for us to notice is this: that we frequently get over our intention by loading the sound with meaning, and this overlays and dominates the words. (And this again is tied up with our subconscious emotional response to the sound of our voice — in everyday life we so often transmit our needs in the tone that we use.) So often, when I have been listening to a performance, I have made a mental note, 'sound v. words'; and to me it simply means that I, the listener, am receiving the sound of the voice, perhaps full of 'meaningful' inflection, but am not being made to notice the words. I therefore am not being interested by the argument, and so I am not fully engaged. Technically it could be that the speaker is not finding the correct muscular pressure for the consonants, and certainly this is often the case; but it is never just that, for it always has to do with the speaker's commitment to language and a right sense of its importance. You could also say that the actor is not thinking specifically enough and therefore not pointing the phrases adequately, but I think that is an easy solution and not necessarily true. I think it is to do with not

having the right focus — the right balance between words and sound — for it is the meaning that must always dictate the sound, and not the other way round. It is through the words that we will find the possibilities of the sound.

I think this over-consciousness of sound dulls our response to words, and somehow lets us off the hook of thinking accurately through them.

(b) How the actor works

This second reason is to do with how the actor works. Each actor has his own way of working, and therefore of finding the reason for the words he has to speak, of relating them both to his own experience and to the motive of the character, in order to make them authentic. The way he does this will vary according to the text he is speaking, but he is continually probing and asking himself: 'why these words'. When he has come as near as he can to the answer, he is ready to say them in performance. But somehow he very often stays with the reasons in his head, without quite springing the energy of the thought into the words. In a sense, the words are by-passed, and they become slightly less important than the thought, instead of being the thought in action. So the actor remains just behind the words — a metaphorical half inch — and not quite on them. This is not a big problem, but a very common one. And what is difficult is to judge exactly the right energy needed, for somehow, to be that much more positive in speech is a balance we resist, for it is tied up with our own taste and our wish not to be crude. However, what is important is that the energy of the thought and the word coincide.

Obviously this is partly to do with how we use our voice. Nevertheless, the time taken to get to this point of being 'on' the words will vary according to the material we are working. If, for example, we paraphrase a Shakespeare speech in order to clarify the meaning, we know that we

will miss important clues into the character which lie precisely in the choice of language, though this could be a necessary and valid stage in our preparation. In Shakespeare the motive of the character and the way the character expresses himself coincide in a positive way. Whereas in a great deal of modern work the actor needs to play the sub-text against the spoken text, so there has to be a different kind of focus on the words. Also, different styles of production ask for different kinds of concentration. But, whatever the style, and however naturalistic, language is always a positive choice, and as such it is special, and must create interest in the hearer.

Perhaps what we should hold on to is this: that the words must be a release of the inner life, and not either an explanation of it or a commentary on it, otherwise we start to present the reason for the language and not the discovery of the thought. This does not stop us being able to have a perspective on the language when we wish.

I would like to put this another way: in our concern to get the motive right, we sometimes think the thought slightly before we say it — we plan our thinking to an extent — and so we do not live through the thought as it happens. The result is that the speaking becomes what I call passive, and not active, in that we are presenting the result of a thought and not the thought itself. We are then at one remove from the words, and there is no possibility of either ourselves or the listener being surprised by them. They cannot take us anywhere. And, to tie this up with what I said earlier, I think we do this to keep control over what we are speaking, because we do not quite have the courage to live at the moment of speech. We make the language behave, instead of staying free to our basic primitive response to it — primitive in the sense of being less consciously organized, and less culturally based. This of course does not mean that we should be uncontrolled; we must be clear and organized as to the motive and

reasoning of the character, but the speaking should be free to the moment. And this is not as difficult as it sounds, as we shall see. You must forgive me if I say the same thing in more than one way. As I have said, to talk about voice is always subjective, and each person interprets what is said in a slightly different way according to his skill and experience and nature, and although we are reaching after the same skill, that skill can be found in different ways. And, as all teachers know, the moment when someone understands a point totally for themselves has nothing to do with how often that point has been made, but just to do with the moment that person is ready to receive it.

(c) Attitude to words

The third factor I think has to do with our attitude to words. We tend to think of them as springing from somewhere around the neck up. That is to say we are curiously unaware of their physical nature, and think of them mainly in terms of expressing reasons and ideas and of colouring them with feelings, and not in terms of our physical self being expressed through them and involved in them.

For language, as well as being highly sophisticated, is also primitive in essence. We may have technological jargon of every kind, we have legal language, language of sensibility and emotion allied to literature and art. We have the bloated language of the media and of much political speaking. We also have highly sophisticated slang which communicates social patterns and change, often subversively and always with wit. Yet words evolved out of noises which were first made to communicate basic needs; they were in fact signals. And we still have that sense memory within us — that resonance if you like. For they still act as signals and can arouse quite basic and primitive responses in us, which are totally subjective. We know we

can still be stirred by words spoken in public, without quite knowing why we are stirred. I am not talking about rhetorical resonances which are rhythmic and of a different and more public kind; I am talking about the physical response which we have to words which touch our inner thoughts and feelings, where the association of the word itself can evoke a response separate from the feeling.

For instance, if there is something in our life about which we have a deep feeling, perhaps of regret or shame, it is possible to look back upon the event after a time without seemingly feeling upset. However, were we to tell someone about it, the act of putting the feeling into words — finding the words associated with the feeling and being precise about it — can in itself be upsetting, and we may break down in the telling. Most of us have something in our lives which we find painful to talk about, a condition or event, where the act of committing this to words makes us not quite in control of our physical self. It can ‘choke’ us up. Now actors know well what it is to be vulnerable: they lay themselves open to criticism whenever they go on stage, and therefore to the possibility of being hurt; and this is an awareness they use as they reach into the study of a character. But I think that awareness is not always allowed to inform the speaking, because we feel we must be in control. It is of course not necessarily a sad experience that can affect us physically in this way. We get feelings of elation and joy through words too, and they can arouse us sexually and you cannot get more physical than that. It is simply easier to make the point on a serious note first; we recognize it more readily.

To put it in another form: if we genuinely own up to something and admit that we have been wrong, the more serious we are about it the more effort the words require. When we finish we feel a sense of relief, but not only that, I think we feel physically different; there is almost a chemical change, and we say we have ‘got something off

our chest'. The point being that the words have been the instrument of change within us.

Practically, this seems to me one of the most important points to keep in mind: that words change both the situation, the speaker and the listener. After words are spoken, nothing is quite the same again. I remember Peter Brook saying words to that effect during rehearsals of *The Dream* (one of so many things that he said which informed my attitude to work); and suddenly I realized how important it was to think about them in this way, for then the energy is handed from one character to the next, and the words become an active force not for yourself alone. I think in our anxiety to fill the text with our own meaning, we often become too involved with what we are saying for ourselves, and how we are saying it; we overplay our own feelings and our own responsibility, so that we do not let the words go, let them free to change the situation and provoke a response.

Words are the opposite of silence, and as such make a positive stand. We must recognize that there is an element of challenge always present in the words:

The worst is not,
So long as we can say 'This is the worst'.

Edgar — *King Lear*

Recognizing these two factors, 1) that words have a physical root, and, 2) that they are an active force, gives the speaker another dimension. They are also very practical notions to hold on to.

But I would make a further point: if we are truly to make the words active, it asks for a commitment to the work beyond a personal commitment, which is to do with seeing theatre as a serious political force in the context of the society we live in.

Words spring from many layers of consciousness: from the ordinary management of our everyday lives, to the unguarded expression of deep feeling. We must be ready for their shifts.

(d) How we present language

The fourth point I want to make is partly technical, and is to do with how we present language. It ties up with what I have already said about being 'on' the words. The cause, however, is different. It is this: because words are part of our everyday living we tend, even in performance, to keep them at an energy level which we recognize. This of course does not mean that we are not aware of projecting to an audience — obviously we speak louder so that they can hear — but in a subtle way we still keep the words at an energy level with which we are comfortable. In fact we increase the sound energy, the volume, but do not increase the verbal energy to balance with it. Now the energy required to share with a large number of people is only partly to do with volume, but it is all to do with how we fill the words themselves. And this is not done just by greater sharpness but by carrying the intention through the vibrations of the vowels and the consonants, being aware of the physical movement of the words and making them reach. We tend to reduce their possibilities to our everyday expectation of them — anything else sounds slightly false to our ears — instead of giving them the room that they need, and this will vary with each space you work in.

An actor may have found all the right feelings and motives, he may be working from the gut if you like, but if he transmits these only naturalistically it will seldom be enough. We are obviously influenced in this by television, where the more naturalistic the actor appears the better, though even this requires to be presented and needs great skill, but of a different kind. In all live performance there is

something more that has to be done to make the language telling to the audience. This is of course apparent in heightened language, but I believe it to be true of naturalistic writing as well. To fill another character we need to open ourselves to all the possibilities of the language, and this has to reach an audience not just by being loud enough, but by being filled with purpose. The making of the words themselves has to be perceived.

(e) An over-educated response

This last point may seem obvious, but I think it is crucial, and I think it underlies what is unimaginative in the end result of speaking: it is to do with an over-educated response to words. We learn dialogue from a printed page, which is in itself a cerebral process. We know that to make it our own we have to repeat it until it is physically 'on the tongue'; we have got to get round the words. However, I think that because we see lines on the printed page first, the residual effect is that we keep them within that connotation. Our eyes take in a grammatical set of words — a sense clump — and we make a judgement on them from a cultural and sense point of view, so that our initial response to them is a 'read' one and not an intuitive one. I think this puts a subtle pressure on us to make 'good sense' and not to say it 'wrong'. Perhaps it makes us plan how we are going to say it. The important point is that it makes it difficult for us to live through the words as they happen, because we begin to feel out of control of the sense.

I know from my experience in working on Shakespeare with groups of schoolchildren — mainly 15 to 18-year-olds — that those who are classed as low ability readers get a stronger, clearer and more immediate response to the physical nature of the words and images, and are more deeply moved by them, than do the more sophisticated and highly educated 'A' Level students. They get closer to the

sense that a character can be possessed by the words, and as it were, driven by them. And in the prison where I work quite frequently I have had quite extraordinary reactions to the underlying force of the imagery from men who know little or nothing of the literary values of Shakespeare. And this to me is an important point for actors to grasp: the fact that people understand words at a much simpler level than we have come to expect — a more intuitive level. They will also pick up the gaiety which is there. So, we have to find ways to get them not only on our tongue, but to make them part of our whole physical self in order to release them from the tyranny of the mind.

All these points are quite simple, and we know them in our heads, but it is often difficult to get the right perspective on them. For what is always working against the actor, that prevents him from taking time with the language even when working on his own, is the fact that most of the time he feels under pressure to present some kind of result, under pressure to be interesting; and so he becomes concerned with getting to the end of what he has to say, with all the meaning that he wants it to contain, without allowing himself to discover the thought in action through the words as they are spoken. This is often an unreasonable pressure that we put on ourselves. Nevertheless we have to interest our director, our fellow-actors and the audience. So what we frequently do, and this happens to actors at all levels of experience, is get caught up in the idea of how best to put the text over, and this makes us lose contact with the text itself. For it inhibits the less conscious responses, and it is those responses which are often the most interesting, for they come from a deeper current within us. Words are so often much rougher and more anarchic than we allow them to be.

This feeling that we need to present and be interesting, even at early stages of rehearsal, makes us press in some way. Each actor will press differently according to his

inclination and his pattern of working. The actor whose pattern it is to emphasize the logic of the character, will tend to be didactic and overweight the stress of the words. Technically this will make him press out the consonants and reduce the vowels to equal short weight and length. The speaking then becomes emphatic, which at once reduces the possibilities within the text by keeping it at a totally logical level. It is literal and allows for no ambiguity, and therefore no richness of texture. In other words it is less interesting. At the other end of the scale, the actor who is attracted by the emotional quality and mood of a character will find a poetic and romantic line, and the thoughts will more often than not become generalized. He presses out the mood, and we are then not put in touch with how the character thinks — how he ticks — which is in fact what the audience wants to know. The words are then dulled by the mood. Then there is the actor who responds in totally the opposite way: in his concern with the truth of the motive he delays his commitment to the words for as long as possible, and holds back from them in rehearsal as if distrusting them. This way, it is much more difficult for him to find a true release of thought through them, for he is denying something of the nature of the thought. And whilst I respect enormously the desire to be truthful, if he holds back in this way he will not find the life-force which the words must be, even when they are expressing an oblique or negative thought — ‘The worst is not, So long as we can say “This is the worst”’ — Edgar again. If we hold back from the words, we are not being quite truthful.

Now I have obviously over-simplified these attitudes of working, but I suspect we will recognize them in ourselves to some degree or other. And it is important to look at them objectively for they can limit our work in rehearsal, and it is the choices we make there that we bring into performance.

It is difficult to find an extravagance in language, a music which is perhaps beyond our everyday usage, and I

think the answer has always to be through some form of physical release: I am not talking about large movements, but simply an awareness that the words are themselves a movement — and this is quite subtle. It would seem more appropriate to express large emotions through dance and song than through the words and inflections that we use every day, so we must now look at our attitudes to the practical work that will help us through to this freedom.

2 THE PRACTICAL MEANS

I want to look now at how we prepare our voice through exercise and see how we can connect that work more organically to our response to words. I think that when the voice is not interesting enough, it is rarely to do with it not being good enough, but simply that it is not being given the right stimulus.

Again, what I am going to say will seem simple, but the deeper we take it the more important it will be: we have to make the breath and the muscular formation of the words the means by which the thought is released. The thought needs to be spoken, that is the choice, so breath and verbal movement are part of that need. Whatever work we do on breathing and articulation must be towards this end.

Like any interpretive artist, actors have to work at their craft because they are always being faced with the challenge of new work, and because they want to continue to develop and perhaps do more ambitious parts. Because every job presents different challenges they have to renew ways of exploring character and character relationships, of relating to the narrative and style of each particular production; they have to keep alive to different ways of working and the problems that different spaces may bring. Most actors, for instance, keep up some form of basic movement work. All actors, I think, realize the importance of voice and to what extent they are dependent on it, so

they do exercises on relaxation, on breathing and resonance, power and clarity, according to what they need at any particular time. All these exercises are necessary and good. However, unless this work connects organically with an ever-fresh and developing response to language, it remains a technical accomplishment, which makes the voice stronger and more resonant, but does not necessarily make the speaking more interesting, for it is not necessarily feeding the sense of freedom with the text that he is really after.

For perhaps we work vocally at too conscious a level, and we must look to see how exercises can feed us in a deeper way than we are accustomed. Exercises should make us ready for the intuitive response.

Plainly, freedom with the text comes from knowing what you are saying — i.e., knowing well the character, motive and action. But, because we are so afraid of not making sense, we end up only making sense — literal sense — and so we put a strait-jacket on the language, for we do not hear what is happening under its surface. When we are over-concerned with our logical, conscious thought, we simply do not hear what the language is doing; and here I mean structure not only of the rhythm and phrasing, but the structure of the words themselves — the dynamic of each word. We have to train ourselves to respond to words in a less obvious and stated way, so that their very movement contains our feeling.

And this kind of response demands our whole attention: we have to be physically as well as imaginatively prepared. So I want to clarify our attitude to the work in three areas.

(a) Relaxation. Obviously this is of vital importance, for, in a sense, relaxation is resonance. If we have muscular tension in the neck, the shoulders or the back, firstly we cannot breathe properly, and secondly our resonators cannot work fully. So we need to make sure that our body is