

Alignment and the Voice

Stand better, sound better

BY ANTONIO OCAMPO-GUZMAN

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU!" the director is saying. "You're mumbling!" And later, "Send your voice to the back of the house!"

If you've ever heard a director say these things to you, or if your voice sometimes gets tired during rehearsal or performance, you may need some spoken voice training.

The voice of an actor must be able to accomplish three main goals: it must be heard throughout the auditorium; it must be understood by the audience; and finally, it must meet any demand placed on it without compromising its health. Training your spoken voice will help you achieve these goals. All you need is a solid progression of exercises and the discipline to consistently practice them.

I train actors to use their spoken voices using a very popular approach known as "Freeing The Natural Voice," designed by master teacher Kristin Linklater. (The name comes from the title of Linklater's famous book, recently published in a revised and expanded edition by Drama Publishers.) This practice helps actors free their voices from the limitations of physical, mental, and emotional blockages that prevent the natural flow of the rich voice with which we are all born. The practice is based on the release of the breath from the body as the starting point of a relaxed, efficient, and highly expressive voice.

One way I like to think of this voice training is connecting the Four M's: *mind, middle, mouth, and message*. Our voice connects our thoughts (mind), with our breath and our emotions (middle), which creates eloquent speaking (mouth), that has an effect on the listener (message). Thus the voice is a psycho-physiological instrument: it has to do as much with the physical body as with the mind, the imagination, and the emotions. In order for our voice to work with efficiency, we must first understand its physical container: we must investigate the ways we use our body.

In our society, most people live disconnected from their bodies, operating mostly from the head, where the brain and





The elbow trip.

most sensory organs are located. Yet we have infinite resources of information and creativity in the rest of our bodies and for our voice to achieve its goals, we need to fully energize them, especially the spine. One of the best ways to improve the use of the voice is by improving the alignment of the spine.

About this series

THIS IS THE FIRST of four articles on vocal training, a series assembled by Rena Cook, professor of voice at Oklahoma University, in which nationally prominent voice and speech coaches will introduce our readers to the fundamentals of their work. The series:

This month—Alignment and the voice, by Antonio Ocampo-Guzman

April—Breathing and the voice, by Judylee Vivier

May—Resonance, by Rena Cook

September—The articulate actor, by Dudley Knight

The spinal column is the most important physical structure in terms of how we use our bodies. It supports the weight of the skeleton, connects all the limbs, and houses the spinal cord, through which all messages between the brain and the body travel. Even more importantly for the voice, all respiratory muscles are connected to the spine. The big horizontal muscle that divides our torso in half, the diaphragm, attaches to the lower spine; the muscles in between our ribs that help expand and contract the lungs, called intercostals, are attached to the rib case and the ribs are attached to the spine; and the complex web of lower abdominal muscles that contributes to the breathing process are also anchored to the lower spine. Therefore, having a healthy spine and learning how to use it efficiently will help us breathe with more ease, and help our voice achieve those three goals I mentioned before: to be heard, to be understood, and to be healthy.

Alignment of the spine

I'm sure that many of you have at some point or another been told "don't slouch" and "stand up straight!" Actually it is physiologically impossible to stand up straight. In order to support the weight of the body, the spine is designed with curves.

The spine is made up of thirty-three vertebrae, separated by spongy tissue called discs. For the spine to work efficiently, supporting weight and not pinching the spinal cord, the vertebrae must be aligned, giving the spine its maximum length. Most of us, however, struggle against the habit of letting the force of gravity win the battle: we slouch and we generally misuse our bodies as we respond to the simplest demands of our environment, such as standing, sitting, or walking. These misalignments and misuses of the spine compromise our ability to breathe freely, and the efficiency of our voices.

A really effective way of realigning the spine is by rolling it for-



ward, giving into gravity and allowing the spongy tissues between vertebrae to expand, and then rolling up, restacking the vertebrae one on top of the other to find the spine's maximum length. These are the steps:

The spine roll

1. Stand with your feet underneath the hip sockets.
2. Make sure that the weight of your body balances evenly between the left and the right foot.
3. Make sure that the weight of your body balances evenly between the toes and heels of both feet.
4. Make sure that your knee joints are not locked.
5. Imagine that your tailbone is heavy and not lifted.
6. Imagine that your skull is floating off the top of the spine.
7. Allow the back of your skull to release forward, and then allow the weight of your head to drag the vertebrae down one by one.
8. Once you are hanging upside down, imagine that gravity is helping

you to lengthen the spaces between each vertebra.

9. Imagine your tailbone being the anchor of your spine, and roll on up through the spine, restacking the vertebrae one on top of the other.

10. Make sure that the skull is the last thing to come up, and that you maximize the length of your neck.

11. Imagine the distance between your tailbone and the top of your skull to be as large as possible.

Most people experience a certain amount of physical release as they roll down and up the spine, and some people will call that sensation *relaxation*. It is important to define clearly what relaxation actually means.

Muscles work by tensing and relaxing. The heart compresses itself and then releases that compression in order to pump blood through the body. When I lift my forearm, my biceps muscle will contract, shorten and bulk up, bringing the forearm

with it. To release my forearm, my biceps will return to its resting position, elongating and expanding. In both cases, the muscular tension allowed the muscle to work. Tension in and of itself is not a bad thing. However, I can choose to work most muscles with extra effort, creating unnecessary tension. For example, I could hold a significant amount of weight as I lifted my forearm, thus building the muscle.

Most of us tend to respond to demands on our instrument with unnecessary tension—stress is an epidemic in our society, almost to the point that most people think of relaxation as collapse, exhaustion, and complete oblivion. By the same token, most people will define tension as stress, a holding, a tightening of muscles. Both of these assumptions are completely untrue. Think of tension as the concentration of energy and of relaxation as the release of that energy. What we need in order for our instrument to work with efficiency is to find the balance between tension and relax-

ation in everything we ask our muscles to do. I suggest that as you begin to become aware of the ways in which you use your physical and vocal mechanisms you find the easiest way out, the road with less effort. Strive for maximum effect with minimum effort.

Here's an exercise that might help define tension and relaxation.

The elbow trip

1. Stand with your feet under your hip sockets.

2. Pinch your elbow points with your fingers. You will notice little sensation there—there are very few nerves around the bones.

3. Rotate your elbow-points forward toward each other, and then release them back to their original position.

4. You may begin to feel movement in the muscles of your upper chest—a contraction and a release.

5. The next time the elbows rotate forward, leave them there, and imagine you have strings attached to your elbow points. The Great Puppeteer of the Sky will pull these strings up, causing your elbows to gently rise up, in front of the body, until they are a little higher than your shoulders. Your forearms are limp.

6. Then imagine that there are strings attached to the top part of your wrists, and they too get pulled up, and your wrists float up, causing your arms to extend fully. Your hands are limp.

7. Lastly, imagine strings attached to your fingertips, and those get pulled, causing your hands to be fully extended.

8. Sense all the energy coming into your body from the soles of the feet, up the legs, up the spine, out your shoulders, up the arms, into the hands and out the fingertips. Label this sensation as *tension*: lots of muscles are now working to keep your arms up!

9. Then the strings attached to the fingertips—and only those strings—will be cut and the hands will release into gravity. Label whatever you sense in your hands as *relaxation*.

10. Cut the strings attached to your wrists, letting the forearms release

into gravity. Label whatever you feel in your forearms as *relaxation*.

11. Lastly, cut the elbow strings, allowing the arms to release and flop into gravity. Label the sensations in your arms as *relaxation*.

The sensations you experience when your arms are fully stretched might include burning, pinching, and fatigue. Sensations as you begin to release parts of the arms might include warmth, blood rushing through the veins, awareness of the weight of the arms, and tingling of the fingertips. At any rate, there will be an increase in physical awareness.

Let me suggest that you focus on the sensations of warmth and tingle, and label them relaxation. Tension makes the muscles work, concentrating energy in them; relaxation is the free release of that contained energy. Have you ever seen a cat that seems to be asleep but that you know could scratch your eyes out in a second? That is a very good example of relaxation: ready, poised, and acutely alert. It is vital that you understand that relaxation is not at all collapse; it is the release of energy. You may want to revisit the spinal roll exercise and try to identify similar sensations of relaxation as you release yourself down and realign yourself up.

When we roll down and up the spine in order to maximize its length, we may choose to do this with minimum effort. In order to maximize the potential of these exercises, feet ought to be underneath the hip sockets, shoulder-width apart. In this way, the whole skeletal structure will collaborate with the spine in carrying the weight of the body. Standing with feet underneath the hip sockets, with the knee joints free, the tailbone heavy, the skull floating, will maximize the length of the spine and the efficient use of the physical container of the voice.

It is very important to understand and talk about any experiences resulting from these exercises. The overall aim is to refine our self-awareness so that we can continually choose to work in more efficient ways. Some

people may complain of pain and discomfort during this roll down and up exercise. When we lengthen our spine, the spinal cord will also begin to work more efficiently—we will begin to receive more messages from the body, including aches and pains that we were not aware of. This is a good sign, although it might be uncomfortable. Likewise, as we lengthen muscles that have been habitually tight, the nerves that travel through those muscles will begin to send messages—there is an increased amount of sensation, and that will certainly be uncomfortable for some. Some people may complain of feeling dizzy and even nauseous. Blood will rush into the brain and the inner ear will need to adjust. But trust that the body will regulate itself back into its natural state of balance, or homeostasis. The dizziness might be a result of more oxygen coming into the body once the muscles of the torso begin to open and release.

I hope these two simple exercises help you find the maximum length of your spine and help you connect your four M's—mind, middle, mouth, and message. Remember, fostering a sense of relaxation as energy release will help you improve the use of your instrument. A longer spine will help you breathe with more ease and allow your voice to be free and fully expressive. As I mentioned before, all breathing muscles are attached to the spine, and one of the first results of lengthening the spine is finding ease in breathing. Once you have a better access to breath, your voice will be able to be freer and more open.

Voice is vibration; vibration is sound waves. Sound waves love to travel—all they need is some space. Our voices love space. Aligning the spine will help you give your voice more space and you will be able to be heard throughout the house, and be clear, and find limitless vocal energy. ▼

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