From the AACT Knowledge Base

Now, You're Talking!

How to use your voice to create stronger characters

By Stephen Peithman

"I don't like the idea of an 'acting voice,'" says voice coach Bonnie Raphael. "Your voice is your voice. How you use it depends on the needs of the role."

Raphael's opinion carries the weight of experience. A teacher and vocal coach since 1965, she has worked with the American Repertory Theatre of Cambridge, Massachusetts, the University of Virginia, and PlayMakers Repertory at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Her methods become clear in her work with two actors during a New York City workshop sponsored by the American Association of Community Theatre (AACT). Raphael's practical, easily-grasped suggestions for breathing and posture helped these two actors create stronger characterizations on the spot. Since one of her subjects was a teenager with limited experience, and the other a working professional, we knew our readers--both actors and directors--would benefit from Raphael's advice.

Focused Energy

Steve, a professional actor, delivered a monologue from *Daddies*, a play by Douglas Gower. It's an in-your-face rant, full of profanity, about a street-corner Santa screaming profanity at a passer-by. And he presents it in similar fashion, leaning toward the audience, often shouting the lines.

Afterwards, Raphael praises Steve's energy and his understanding of the character. But she also notes his dependence on what she calls the "naturalistic crouch."

"We often fall into this when we're being dramatic," she explained. "The body hunches forward as we try to make eye contact with the audience or another player. But it cramps the stomach muscles and stretches the throat forward. That means not enough air gets out, and the throat has to work harder to project sound."

She also points out a tendency to address a character or the audience through the top of his eyes.

"It's a bad habit, especially with taller actors like Steve. When you look through the top of your eyes, you lower your head and your chin presses on the vocal area. This compromises the relationship between the muscles of the chest and the throat. Actually, your head should be parallel with the ceiling," she explains. "If your eyes were car headlights, the beams would go straight out."

When Steve does his monologue again, without the crouch and looking straight out, it is with greater intensity.

"It's more centered, more connected," he admits. The audience agrees.

Raphael next works on getting a greater feeling of spontaneity into his reading. She suggests three things.

"First, ask yourself the question to which the first line in your monologue is the answer," Raphael begins. "That's what propels you into the monologue. Acting is reacting: A character is speaking because he can no longer remain silent, not because the author has given him a speech. You must provide the trigger, and knowing the answer to that question sets the rhythm of the speech--and that tells you how to use your voice."

Her second suggestion is to "talk *to* someone, not *at* them--focus your attention *and* your voice for maximum effect."

Her third piece of advice takes Steve by surprise: Raphael asks him to pant.

"Start by getting a nice, easy pant going. It doesn't have to be big--don't push it," she explains. "Start panting and then go right into the speech. And every couple of lines, pause and start panting again. Don't pant from the throat, though. Keep it down in the chest. Otherwise, it's hard on the voice."

Steve does the scene again, and the panting makes him sound as though fresh from a defensive encounter, which is precisely the situation. Again, audience response is immediate.

"Of course, you can't pant in every speech," she says, "but you can find something in your speech pattern or breathing pattern that you *can* use. And you can do it so subtly that the audience isn't aware of what you're doing--even though they *will* notice the energy this brings to the performance."

As proof, she makes up a speech: "'[breath]...and this is what I want to tell you [breath] and I've been meaning to tell you this [breath] for 25 years.'

"Note how that little tiny breath prevents you from setting your rhythm and making the speech predictable," she continues. "It prevents you from getting stuck in any particular rhythm."

She points out that Steve gave every bit as much intensity with the panting, but without having to shout or lean forward for effect.

"It's coming through the voice," she says. "Sometimes actors give a little cake and a lot of icing. What you want is more cake and less icing."

Hide-and-Seek

Raphael moves on to Rachel, a high school student who performs a dramatic monologue about a teen in anguish. The performance is strained, in part due to nervousness. The angst comes through, but like Steve's first run-through, it's all at the same level. There's no shading. And like many teens, Rachel tends to drop words at the end of phrases.

Raphael complement's Rachel's intensity, then points out that, like Steve, she is pushing too hard.

"You're not trusting your voice, or you're not trusting your acting enough," Raphael says. "The more the voice does, the more message it carries, and the less extra physical stuff you have to do. A lot of the work I do with my students is simplifying, peeling away the layers. Less is more. Actors have to trust that the audience will get it. You don't have to prove it by 'acting.'"

Raphael next suggests that Rachel focus more on projecting to the audience.

"A lot of your speeches were delivered to the floor," she explains, "but the monologue is directed to your mother. In order for us to see you--and after all, this is an audition piece--you need to direct your speech out, and to a place where everyone in the audience can see you and feel included. When I audition, I usually direct myself to a person--real or not--over the shoulder of the person who's doing the auditioning."

When actors work with heavy, emotional material, it's important not to hide.

"We have to fight that tendency, because in real life we often don't want to face someone when we're upset," Raphael says. "But on stage you don't want to get lost."

Rachel repeats the monologue. Now, looking out to the audience, she comes closer to realizing the intensity of the moment. Still, something is missing. She knows it and the audience knows it. Raphael gives it a name.

Walking up to Rachel as she's delivering a line, Raphael takes Rachel's hand and places it on the young woman's breastbone.

"Notice that you're breathing in the upper chest and throat," she says. "This happens with a lot of actors: As soon as the emotion goes up, so do the shoulders. If you move your shoulders upward when you take a breath, it's a sign that you're not breathing correctly. A deep breath expands from the lower chest. A good rule to follow: the higher the emotion, the deeper the breath."

Raphael demonstrates a quick trick for directors to help actors get the breath lower in the body.

"Take a lightweight wooden chair and have the actor hold it above their head with both hands. Don't lock the elbows--allow them to bend slightly. Have them do some deep breathing, then have them say their speech. It makes it impossible to raise the shoulders. The weight pushes you down, grounding you."

Rachel tries it, and the speech improves. There's more variety of pitch, but when she finishes a few lines with the chair overhead, she admits, "I feel stupid."

Raphael nods.

"It may feel stupid the first time, but keep at it," she tells the directors in the audience. "After they've done it, do it again, but have them put the chair down halfway through the speech. If the upper body gets very busy again, have them put the chair back up. Eventually they can keep that feeling of being grounded without the chair."

Raphael next shows Rachel how to breathe from the diaphragm so her words don't drop off at the end of phrases.

"The diaphragm is right under the lungs," she explains, placing Rachel's hand on the spot. "Interwoven with the diaphragm is the solar plexus, a network of nerves second only to the brain. The solar plexus is thought to be connected with the primitive emotions--grief, rage, lust. When we work on breathing from the diaphragm we also warm up that network of nerves that allows us to convey emotion in our speech."

How do you know when you are breathing from the diaphragm?

"Do some sit-ups or push-ups, or enough exercise to make you out of breath," Raphael suggests. "You are now breathing from your diaphragm. Put your hand on your stomach and notice that it expands your hand when you inhale. Your neck and shoulders are free. To do the work of an actor, you must breathe from the diaphragm. It provides the power that will project your voice and your character."

Noting Rachel's nervousness, and a monologue that demands that she jump immediately into an emotional outburst, Raphael suggests what she calls "bookending."

"Bring something with you--a small prop to help bookend the experience. When the prop is there, you're playing the character. When you finish playing the character you put the prop away. You're creating an end and a beginning, which is very important when you're playing a role that calls for deep emotions. You literally step into the role and then you step out of it, so you don't wake up at 4:00 in the morning with the character's feelings sweeping over you. You need to make a dividing line between you and the part you're playing."

Using techniques such as bookending is a major part of Raphael's approach, which focuses on more than voice and speech.

"Eighty percent of my work is changing the mind set," she explains. "Shakespeare wrote, 'All things are ready if the mind be so,'*[Henry V,* IV, iii], and I believe that's true.

"Eventually, as you strip away your bad habits, you will come to a point when you'll ask yourself, 'How do I know I'm *acting*?' Some people 'know' they're acting when they stand a certain way, or their eyes go wild, or their jaw clenches. Without these cues we also take away the comfort we had that we were 'acting.' We feel naked."

But when actors strip away the bad habits and get to the essence of the moment, Raphael says, "We don't have to push. We don't have to 'act.' It's just there."