
PLAYING THE ALTERED VOICE

Lately I've been experimenting with playing an ageing woman, and voice-wise have found myself lapsing into Catherine Tate's Nan – how does *that* happen?! I do hope to become an ageing woman one day (!) but in the meantime how do I achieve that breathiness, roughness and tremor characteristic needed to portray old age?

Around 25 years ago I went to a lecture given by the impressionist Rory Bremner and an eminent ENT Surgeon. Spellbound I listened as they dissected (metaphorically!) Rory's different character voices and revealed where and how the vocal tract was being manipulated to create such a variety of sounds and voices. This had a profound effect on my voice work and teaching.

As an actor, the importance of playing around with your own voice and speech and discovering those parts of a voice you didn't think you could reach cannot be underestimated; have *you* been to the dark side? (impersonated Darth Vader I mean?!) In all seriousness, speech and voice problems ('impediments' to use the outdated word) can be some of the most challenging aspects of a character, aspects that take you out of your comfort zone - can you recreate a stammer? - access the slurred or denasal speech of someone with a stroke? - let yourself spit or dribble? And how do you ensure these voices, which are unclear by their nature, can still be understood and believable?

The workshop also looks at exploring your own natural speech setting, partly accent but mostly physiology. John Leguizamo arrived at the 'lateral lisp' of Sid in *Ice Age* due to his own natural tendency to an open, lip-spread speech setting, and realising that, like him, the character of Sid had a wide, toothy grin! Knowing your own equipment – your vocal tract's natural tendencies – can help lead to a greater understanding of the character voices you could reach for.

Going for a run? – you would get fully acquainted with how to warm up and cool down large muscles; the same applies to the voice and speech muscles, especially if you are about to be a bit more athletic with them which, 9 times out of 10, an actor usually is. How about a quick refresher on the anatomy involved in voice and speech production and on how to care for your voice, especially if the role demands emotion or access to something more primal? – can you monitor your own vocal qualities, not just your character voices?

It's exhilarating when you not only find a new voice but can also work out how to take it even further. As Joseph Millson, patron of The Actors Centre, said at the recent courses launch event: "Challenge yourself this season and choose one course that scares you" – is this workshop the one?

'Playing the Altered Voice' is coming up on Monday November 27th.
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