

AN INTERVIEW WITH NANCY HOUFEK
from
*Voice and Speech Training in the New Millennium:
Conversations With Master Teachers*
by
Nancy Saklad

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Nancy Houfek

Nancy Houfek, head of voice and speech, American Repertory Theatre / Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University, teaches voice, speech, dialects, and text to the MFA acting candidates; coaches the actors of the professional theatre company; and administers the MFA in voice-training pedagogy. With a BA from Stanford University, Nancy received her MFA from the American Conservatory Theatre. She has coached hundreds of productions at ART, the Guthrie Theater, and ACT, among others; acted and directed in regional theatres nationwide; and consulted to professional speakers throughout the United States since 1978. Nancy is a master teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework®.



Background

Nancy Saklad: What drew you to voice work initially, Nancy?

Nancy Houfek: I was an acting student at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco in the mid '70s. Catherine Fitzmaurice was my voice teacher. I also had an extraordinary scope of training in other aspects of voice and speech during that time. I studied with Edith Skinner, Tim Monich, Deb Sussell, Bill Ball, and David Hammond. After I completed my acting training, I moved to Seattle. I performed in roughly five shows a year for the three years that I was there. I also taught one voice class after another, culminating in teaching dialects for the University of Washington Professional Actor Training Program. It was a natural progression. For twenty years my performing career and my teaching career paralleled each other. Only when I came here to

the ART in 1997 did I decide to let go of acting and focus simply on teaching. And it's been great.

Saklad: You've talked a little bit about some of your mentors. How have they influenced your work?

Houfek: Well Catherine is the major influence. I've been teaching her Deconstructing/Restructuring breath and voice work since 1978. So that's a very clear through-line. A wonderful movement teacher named Peggy Hackney was also really influential. When I was living in Seattle, I took Peggy's classes in Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Movement Fundamentals. This work made me reexamine how the body is organized. By experiencing the psoas as the center of the body around which axes of movement occur, a dancer learns to bring spine and limbs into an integrated whole. At the time I was thinking: "How does this experience interface with what I already know about breathing and voice?" Working with Peggy really deepened my understanding of how the body functions and is now a basis for my teaching of physical awareness in relation to vocal production. Another influential movement person was Bonita Bradley at ACT. She expanded my understanding of breath in yoga practice, as well as how best to work with the basic yoga positions that are fundamental to the Fitzmaurice Voicework® tremors. I also was privileged to study with Frank Ottiwell, who was one of the great Alexander teachers; and Bill Ball, who founded the American Conservatory Theatre. There was Edith Skinner, of course—a woman of absolute rigorous detail; and David Hammond—text analysis and Shakespeare; and Colleen Carpenter-Simmons, a singing teacher whom I studied with in Seattle. She really clarified vocal support for me. Currently, I would say Scott Zigler, director of the ART Institute, has had a huge influence on my work. He teaches a discipline called Practical Aesthetics, which is a combination of Meisner technique and action-based acting theory. The work we do in voice class goes hand in glove with what he's teaching; voice is the expression of action, moving outward and, as it lands, affects change in the scene partner. I must also mention Marcus Stern, associate director of the Institute, who is our other acting teacher. He has a wonderful way of talking about actor-to-actor work. I use his vocabulary all the time.

The Voice and Speech World of Today

Saklad: You head up the vocal pedagogy program for the MFA students at Harvard ART. What makes your program unique?

Houfek: What's really great about our program is the amazing array of artists our students get to work with; plus they get to travel to Moscow to teach and study. We take one student a year. During the first year of training, the voice student takes both the first- and second-year voice curriculum of the MFA acting program: voice, speech, text, and dialects. The focus is on learning the content. The second-year voice student repeats the first- and second-year voice curriculum, experiencing it in a different way the second time, focusing on learning and practicing new pedagogical tools. Each voice student also gets a lot of hands-on experience

coaching, because every production in the Institute and on the ART mainstage gets assigned a vocal coach.

Saklad: What a wonderful opportunity.

Houfek: Yes. There are at least six Institute productions every year, as well as a varied mainstage season. As a result, the voice students get lots of coaching experience, either as my assistant or with shows of their own mentored by me. They get to work with world-renowned directors, actors, and designers. The voice students also attend a number of acting classes. Scott Zigler, director of the Institute, genuinely respects voice as an integral part of the training process. He often says that any acting problem can be solved if you solve the voice or the movement problem. I make sure the voice students attend Scott's acting class because he will use them as a voice coach. On the spot, they have to start thinking like the voice person, integrating voice with acting work, learning how a voice note can help the actor with more than just voice. The voice student also starts a practicum in the second year, teaching a speech-drill course called Voice Lab to the first-year MFA students. And all of our students study Russian. The voice students travel to Moscow in the spring of their second year to teach an expanded Voice Lab to the first-year students, adding voice and text to the basic speech work.

Saklad: Would you describe the features that distinguish your work in the field?

Houfek: I teach voice. I teach speech. I teach dialects. I teach text. I do it all. I don't view these elements as separate disciplines. When I'm working on speech with a student, it's as much about breathing, opening up the resonance, using support, and finding the space that allows you to have forward placement. When I'm working on text, it's as much about speech, breath, and alignment. When I'm working on dialects, it's as much about placement and melody as well as all the other aspects of vocal production. It's possible to be rigorous in each area as well as understanding how they weave together. And they're also not separate from acting.

Saklad: Where does vocal presence come from, and is it teachable?

Houfek: When I think of vocal presence, I think of a voice that is balanced in resonance, a voice that is bright and has depth simultaneously. We have a particularly difficult theatre space for the non-amplified voice here at the Loeb Drama Center. The actor's voice really needs to have a ping to it to be heard. A voice that is only deeply resonant might not actually have presence in that space. It's not going to penetrate. Conversely, a voice that's just bright isn't going to have the depth that moves people. So that's my litmus test for teaching our students. I think about it like a stereo; I want to teach them to balance the treble and the bass, to adjust the resonance so their voices are like three-dimensional surround sound. It's also about the deep pleasure of making consonants and open vowels and the desire to contact others. If there's no desire to actually connect, the voice is going to be fake and very "beautiful"—you know, distancing. And yes, I believe vocal presence is teachable. That's what I'm trying to do!

Practical Considerations

Saklad: Do you think students should study multiple approaches to the work?

Houfek: Absolutely. I think it's a mistake to become too wedded to one way of working. It limits your style of acting and limits the way you use your voice. You become identified as that particular kind of actor or speaker, rather than being open to a range of experiences.

Saklad: What does the body need to produce optimal vocal work?

Houfek: It needs to be free, flexible, aligned, and strong, but not bound. The actor needs to have the ability to isolate muscles, to feel what their muscles are experiencing—a really strong mind/body connection. I use elements from Bartenieff Movement Fundamentals, yoga, Alexander technique, and Feldenkrais—as well as elements from modern dance—to teach use of center, energy flow, alignment, and breath. Fortunately, I'm not alone in this at the ART. We have a wonderful combination of Alexander training, yoga, and dance to bring our students to a deeper awareness of self and movement. And one of the great strengths of our Russian collaboration is the rigorous movement training they undergo while in Moscow.

Saklad: Does an understanding of anatomy deepen the student's relationship to his or her voice?

Houfek: Yes, within limits. Sometimes, when acting students are required to learn too much anatomy, they get stuck in their left brains and stop experiencing their bodies. Their learning must be linked to physical experience. I want my students to understand their bodies on a non-language level.

Saklad: Do you find an imagistic understanding of the voice to be helpful as well?

Houfek: Yes. I use lots of images in my teaching. One of my favorites is the idea of lines of energy. Catherine Fitzmaurice refers to a related line of energy called "the focus line." I use a slightly different image—six lines like a starburst streaming out the limbs and spine from center. When these lines are activated with breath and vibration, they expand the body and become the connective energy from actor to actor. Other images that I use are wearing a crown—which helps the actor feel the spaces between the cervical vertebrae—feeling the head as a helium balloon floating upwards with its string hanging downwards as the spine, or imagining the body as a Plexiglas vessel filling with liquid vibration. Those are just a few of the images I use. Images or metaphors are absolutely necessary to make abstract language become a crystal-clear physical experience for the student.

Saklad: How do you address breath work?

Houfek: To begin, I teach the Fitzmaurice Destructuring sequence to help students find out how to naturally breathe more fully. Then I spend a lot of time on alignment. I do a crawling and walking exercise I learned from Frank Ottiwell, the Alexander teacher I trained with at ACT.

When we are moving on our hands and knees, the body gets quite organized. The ribs expand and contract like an accordion as we reach forward, and the belly naturally releases. Breathing becomes a part of movement, not a separate activity that we have to think about. The idea is to transition to an upright position and still retain the ease of breath that we feel crawling. Then we start in on the mechanics of Restructuring. I do a lot of exercises to stretch the intercostals, the upper chest, and the back. Students can really feel how it's possible to change how our muscles are being used. I do a lot of exercises to release the belly. I like to use the image of the body as a beach ball for inhalation. This creates the sense of the three dimensionality of the inhalation. It has width, and it expands front and back, bottom and top. Then we begin to investigate support.

Saklad: What does it mean to support the voice?

Houfek: For me, and I understand there are various perspectives on this, to support the voice means to activate the lower abdominal muscles. This action feels like an upward motion of the pelvic floor. And what that means is that we're not using the exterior intercostals or latissimus dorsi to hold the ribs open. What the lower abdominal activation does is allow the ribs to float down gently, letting a managed, not controlled, steady stream of air to flow past the vocal cords. If we use the upper abdominal muscles in front of the diaphragm to press the air out, the back of the mouth drops and the space inside gets really small. So by keeping the support coming up from the pelvic floor, you're keeping the soft palate raised. And when there's no support? Number one, without support, typically actors will squeeze the ribs to push the breath out, and immediately they get throat tension. Or if the ribs just collapse, they may get a super breathy voice.

Saklad: How would you describe the role of listening?

Houfek: My listening as a teacher and a coach is a diagnostic tool. I'm not listening with my ears only; I'm listening with my eyes soft and with my intuition heightened. In my classes, I'm also intent on the students listening to each other, soliciting responses from them about what is working and why. I want them to be actively engaged in listening with the whole self. This holistic kind of listening helps them learn experientially, even when others students are working. When actors listen to their own voices, it is not productive. One can notice that the vibration remains contained in the body, seeming somewhat trapped, not moving forward spontaneously, affecting a scene partner or audience member. What this means in teaching voice, speech, or dialects is that I focus on the physical experience of expression rather than suggesting that actors check their voices by hearing themselves.

Saklad: Do you teach the IPA?

Houfek: Yes! It's a great tool for the actor. It can make speech and dialect work incredibly detailed and precise. It's also a shortcut to learning languages. I was coaching a production of Oedipus at the ART with many sections of the text to be spoken in ancient Greek. After phonetically learning the Greek myself, I had to teach it to the actors. One actor knew the IPA,

and so he learned the Greek very quickly and accurately. Another actor didn't know the IPA, so I transposed his text into a phonemic system that, by its nature, could not be as precise as the IPA. For example, if I were to write "ay," you could pronounce it either /ei/ or /ai/, unlike IPA where each symbol has only one pronunciation. As a result, this actor's learning of the Greek text was slippery and constantly needed correction.

Saklad: Do you teach a Standard Speech or General American?

Houfek: I teach what I call "nonregional American speech."

Saklad: Is this your own coinage?

Houfek: Yes. The only regions that it is spoken are on the American stage and television news broadcast. I don't call it a standard; I call it a dialect of English that is useful for the stage. I think that every American actor has to have a nonregional dialect (or something close) so that they can audition for any role in any play. Otherwise they're only going to be cast by how they sound regionally or culturally. The dialect I teach has some of the same qualities as Edith Skinner's usage, but without her more formal, slightly British-sounding aspects. I want my students to actually sound American.

Saklad: How would you describe the relationship between emotion and voice and speech work?

Houfek: Having a deep, available, present emotional life is a gift. Not everybody has this. Where actors get in trouble is when the emotion overrides the action. If the language is overtaken by the emotion, we won't actually understand the action. Emotion is great fuel, but it's not the be-all and end-all of acting. The playing of action is primary; emotion arises out of getting or not getting what you want—if you're open to it. What happens frequently with young actors is that they invest time and energy in generating emotion. This may make the body squeeze and the voice tighten. A false feeling of tension substitutes for the essence of true moment-to-moment experience. There are two more parts to this. One of the many great things about trembling is that by freeing the breath, the inner emotional life that may be trapped in the body gets churned up and starts to release. Consequently, the actor becomes much more present with the inner life, which starts flowing outward rather than remaining pent up. When an actor speaks the text while trembling, the emotional experience may be quite overwhelming, but the goal is to keep the text moving and the action going. If an actor can sustain forward motion—actively pursuing an objective while all the inner life is coming up—the give and take between the two can be extremely exciting. That kind of edgy performance is what we are longing for: deeply connected emotional life fueling high-stakes pursuit of objective. That said, sometimes the actor has to technically produce a heightened emotional state. This is why I teach extreme voice. If the actor can create the form of an extreme emotion in a physically truthful way, and if the given circumstances of the play support the action, a truthful emotional life is going to be experienced by the audience, which is all that matters in the end.

Saklad: How do you see scientific and/or technological advances within or without the field influencing your work or the work at large?

Houfek: One of the biggest changes is in the current use of electronic amplification in shows. It alters what's necessary vocally. The actor still needs to have a very focused voice and really crisp, clean consonants, but not necessarily a lot of volume or projection capability. There's also a huge increase in online resources. You can find everything online: dialect samples, Shakespeare text-analysis, the IPA, and so forth. For example, Paul Meiers's IDEA (International Dialects of the English Archives) site on accents is an unbelievable online resource.

Moving into the Future

Saklad: What advice would you give to voice and speech teachers at the beginning of their teaching careers?

Houfek: Find a great mentor. Teach and coach as much as you can. Find private students. Experience is the only way to get better as a teacher or coach. And always stay focused on the purpose of the task, which is not just to teach well, but for your students to learn well.

Saklad: What voice and speech advice would you give to performance students on the brink of their professional careers?

Houfek: Make a voice workout or warm-up an essential part of your daily life. Be sure to warm up physically and vocally prior to every audition. You'll be more present, calm, and available. Be sure to warm up physically and vocally prior to every reading or performance also. Keep your text skills sharp. Read Shakespeare out loud. Keep your IPA and dialect skills sharp. Keep learning new things. Take workshops. The only thing that acting school can do is set you on a path. Continue on that path. And don't smoke.

Saklad: Have you witnessed much of an evolution in any aspects of voice and speech training over the course of your career?

Houfek: Definitely. One thing that's happened is there's no longer a demand for classical stage speech. Strict Standard Speech is gone, which is a really nice shift. Unfortunately, on the flip side, not everybody is teaching the IPA anymore. Some people associate the IPA with Edith Skinner alone and think that learning the IPA is going to make their speech sound fake. That's not true. Phoneticians and dialecticians and linguists use the IPA to describe oral expression by assigning a symbol to each spoken sound, not to limit how the sounds are spoken. As I mentioned earlier, it's an important and useful tool for the actor, just like reading music might be important for the singer. Another change is an increase in the need to study dialects, particularly for actors wanting to go into film. That's primarily due to the phenomenal work of Tim Monich, who is the dialect coach on so many films today. It used to be that only British or Australian

actors were considered to be good in dialects. Now people are accepting that American actors can perform well in dialect. Therefore, there's more need for actors to be trained to hear the nuances of a variety of sounds and pick them up quickly. I find it's more challenging to teach heightened text now. This has to do with the lowered standards of American primary and secondary education. Many students don't get the grammar, language structure, and poetic conventions that perhaps you or I got in our educational system and certainly still exists in England. And perhaps this is the best shift: there is, among the generation of voice teachers now emerging, a wonderful cross-referencing between various vocal-training systems and pedagogical techniques. We're no longer feeling strictly bound to one single way of teaching.

Saklad: What do you think the future holds for voice and speech training?

Houfek: I'm finding more and more that the spoken word in the United States is diminishing. So I would say, in my idealistic world, there is a strong tangible need and calling for vocal expression to continue to be celebrated.

Saklad: Nancy, what impact do you hope your work will have on vocal training at large?

Houfek: Well, I hope that my students in the theatre will speak with spontaneity and specificity and power. I hope that they will be really rigorous in their research of a role, not just to perform from habit, but from choice. I also want to inspire a new generation of voice teachers. I hope they will not be committed only to the material or the content, but committed to this idea of teaching—what it means to be a teacher—to really listen, to really understand the culture the student is coming from. And then to be willing to change tactics, change style, and change what they're bringing based on the individual's needs, based on each student's culture and learning style. So this notion of teaching, the art form of teaching, is what's most important to me now, and that's what I'm actually trying to impart to my voice students.

