

HOW TO USE A VOCAL COACH: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR DIRECTORS

Foreword

This document is designed to enhance the director's understanding of how to use a vocal coach. It presents an overview of what a coach can do, incorporating not only the coach's responsibility to the director, but also to the audience, playwright and actor. It offers suggestions of what a coach can provide the director and traces the relationship between the director and coach from first meetings through the run of a show. These guidelines are in no way meant to be proscriptive, but simply to enhance the rich possibilities of collaboration between the coach and director.

Introduction

"Ever since I went to Stratford, Connecticut in the late sixties, I've worked... with a vocal coach... And so for the most part...I always have a vocal coach on almost any production I do." Michael Kahn, Artistic Director of the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington. D.C.

"The vocal coach is a real important part of the creative team for me, it's not just someone to come in and say, 'hit the final consonants or be louder.' It's really someone who is involved from before rehearsal through rehearsal." Daniel Fish, director, New York City.

"The function of a vocal coach is to liberate the actor.... This help...gets the artist through hoops and over barriers that prevent them from doing what the director wants them to do." Tony Tanner, four-time Tony Award nominee.

"It is also wonderful to have a coach because it allow the actors to hear... a confirmation of the direction the director is giving." Marci Hill, The Road Theatre Company, Los Angeles.

Creating contemporary theatre requires a team: director, designers, dramaturgs, choreographers, coaches and performers. Just as the designer, choreographer or actor is in willing collaborative service to the overall vision of the director, so is the vocal coach.

The role of the vocal coach has not, however, been as well defined as that of other specialists. In addition, this role has been changing over the past several decades for a number of reasons. In post-modern theatre, voice, language, speech and text use are no longer ruled by what is "proper" or "correct," but by what is appropriate to the vision of the director. More and more actors need assistance with complex language as less of their education is devoted to classical literature. At various times, the director's attention may not be focused on the text, but on the technical or conceptual elements of a production.

Many elements affect the way in which a coach can be used. Budget, of course, may limit the coach's time. The production concept, specific text challenges, dialect needs, number of actors and their level of expertise, talent or training may all affect the coach's way of working. There may be differing numbers of rehearsal hours or spaces, or differing rehearsal protocols. Design

elements, the acoustics of the theatre, or the use of the performing space may alter how the coach approaches the task.

The coach's goal is to enhance the vocal aspects of a production. The coach can provide research information, specific language use expertise, and assistance in bringing the optimum performance out of an actor. The coach is also able to contribute ideas of what else is possible and ways to help the director achieve that. Pride in accomplishment is in the act of collaboration: to support the director by bringing out the best in the actor in relation to the text, concept, space and audience.

What Can A Vocal Coach Do for You?

Audibility of Text -- Can the Words Be Heard?

The simplest function of the vocal coach is to assist you with this fundamental question. Often, as a director becomes extremely familiar with the language of a play, or when other aspects of the production are demanding attention, accurate judgement of the level of audibility diminishes.

During rehearsals, the vocal coach can aid the actor in developing audibility with or without amplification as dictated by the style or concept of the production.

Moving from the rehearsal space into the theatre, the director may need to have an unbiased ear and the actors may need assistance or techniques to help adjust to the new acoustics.

During technical rehearsals, the vocal coach can help with the balance of the production's aural elements; working as a part of the design team, the coach can bring insight into the relationships between sound, lights, set and costume which enhance audibility.

During the run of the show, the coach can assist stage management with maintenance of the actors' performances, by providing a continuing ear for audibility.

Clarity of Text -- Can the Language Be Understood?

The voice coach is trained to hear and comprehend uses of language in ways in which the director may not have time to explore. The coach may provide assistance, sometimes working with the dramaturg or designers, with the following text challenges.

Analysis of complex or unusual text: grammatical organization, verse conventions, rhetorical constructions, imagery, rhythm and melody of classical texts, translations, deconstructed texts, non-linear or highly poetic texts, or new forms of language and expression.

How the actors use the text: articulation, rhythm, tempo, pitch, emphasis or vocal quality for clarity and specificity of image in action.

The balance of aural components: the actor's voice in relation to the sound design, costume design, and set/lighting design, microphone technique and use (if electronic amplification is a part of the director's vision), assistance with masks, stilts, puppets, or other elements that may affect clarity of text.

Varieties of Language Use -- How are the Words to be Spoken?

Dialects: information leading to the most appropriate or exciting choices for the play or concept.

Pronunciations: modern, historical, regional, or non-regional use of names places, foreign words, or other unusual expressions, which reflect the director's vision for the play.

Resources: materials to assist the actors in learning dialects or pronunciations (written hand outs, audio tapes, native speakers, movie lists, or other possible sources.)

Training: in groups, individually or via rehearsal notes to ensure consistency, clarity and believability of language style.

High Vocal Demands -- Can the Actor Do This?

Intense expression: safe and healthy vocal use for screaming, shouting, keening, vomiting, coughing, dying, crying, laughing, animal sounds, or other extreme verbal or non-verbal expressions.

Physically demanding moments: coordination of breath and voice, often in collaboration with the movement or fight choreographer.

Challenging acoustics: vocal techniques to expand the actor's capabilities when environmental or design considerations demand more of her/his instrument.

Lengthy or demanding roles: efficient vocal use for a large role or long run.

The Actor's Voice -- What If It Isn't Working?

The coach can identify vocal difficulties that might be keeping the actor from best achieving the director's vision. The coach can also provide an analysis of why these problems may be occurring and give strategies to the director to address them in the rehearsal situation if desired. The coach can create a program of specific vocal exercises for the actor to release or expand the voice to better fulfill the director's vision. The coach can present a company vocal warm-up or an individualized actor warm-up. The coach can distribute basic vocal hygiene guidelines, if needed, and provide referrals to local medical specialists (an otolaryngologist or performance oriented vocal therapist) if required.

General vocal use challenges: shallow breathing, lack of support, physical tightness, or limited pitch range.

Habitual speech patterns: mumbling, whispering, adding extraneous sounds, stressing too many words, stressing inoperative words, dropping ends of words or sentences, or other speaking habits which are in the way of clear expression.

Vocal stress, strain or damage: onset of extreme hoarseness or roughness, inability to perform at previous levels or loss of voice.

Other Things the Coach Can Do

Choral work: coordination of breath, melody, rhythm, articulation, volume or other aspects of vocal use to fulfill director's vision of spoken choral pieces.

Recording assistance: clarity, accuracy, and specificity of recording technique in the studio.

Increased rehearsal time: working with an actor or groups of actors on text, dialects, pronunciations, text in movement (with or without choreographer), choral work, recording, or other aspects of vocal use, while director is in rehearsal to maximize available time.

How does this Collaboration Work?

First Meetings

The relationship of the director to the vocal coach is influenced by many factors. Often, a director may be working at a theatre that has a resident vocal coach, who will then be available full-time to assist the production. This could be an ongoing relationship, or a first time one. Sometimes, a director asks the producing organization to hire a specific vocal coach. Depending on budget or scheduling constraints, the relationship may be one of collaboration or assistance. Sometimes, the need for a coach is identified only after a production is in rehearsal; the coach may then function as a consultant with limited time to address the issues. The following are ideas to include in your initial meetings with your vocal coach, no matter what level of participation is expected.

Concept: what are the general ideas for the production? Script revisions or cuts? Use of the space? Other casting or technical considerations?

Vocal Ideas: what would you like the production to sound like? What specific type of vocal assistance do you think might be needed (dialect, text, pronunciations, vocal extremes, or other aspects of vocal use)? What other issues do you anticipate?

Schedule: how much time is there for rehearsal? How much space is there? How much would you like the vocal coach to participate? What are the best times for you for the coach to be present? How much individual coaching do you anticipate?

Protocols: what is your preferred manner of rehearsal? How would you like notes to be taken/given? How do you envision the coach's participation in day-to-day rehearsals? What is your preferred mode of communication with the coach?

Before Rehearsal Begins

Design elements: it is important for the coach to know about use of space, building materials, costumes, masks, make-up, special props, sound design, special effects which may affect the actors voices.

Casting: questions regarding the voice, speech or text capabilities of actors under consideration during the casting process.

Language Choices: what will the style be? How is character revealed through language use? What specific dialect(s) might be used? What kinds of pronunciations of names, places, etc. do you want? The coach can provide you with ideas and alternatives.

Research materials: native speakers, movies, tapes, or other resources found by the coach can, along with dramaturgical information, help inform your production thoughts.

During Rehearsal

First Read-through: possible presentation by the coach of language style, dialect analysis, pronunciation or other vocal materials; coach listens to the actors initial use of voice, text, speech and dialect(s).

Day-to-day: depending upon level of involvement, the coach may attend occasionally or often to stay fully cognizant of director's process and actor's vocal usage; sometime the coach may work in tandem with director, choreographer, or fight choreographer to integrate vocal use into the physicalized concept.

Special rehearsal: the coach may lead a rehearsal to reinforce dialect, language use or pronunciations, to work with non-actors on vocal usage, to create choral work (with the director or to review director's concept), to collaborate with the movement or fight choreographer, or to address other vocal issues.

One-on-one rehearsal: based on rehearsal observation and consultation with the director, the coach may schedule individual sessions (according to production protocol) for the actor to learn dialect, speech use or pronunciations. These sessions may also be used for assistance with complex text demands or extreme vocal use, to troubleshoot vocal misuse or lack of clarity, or to help the actor fulfill the director's vision. Follow up may include review of the session with the director and strategies to assist the actor with continued success.

Run-throughs: no matter what the level of involvement, it is crucial for the voice coach to attend run-throughs to observe integration of vocal use.

Technical rehearsals: the coach can provide a "text" ear when the director is concentrating elsewhere. The coach can check audibility in the theatre space with design elements intact, can advise on balance of technical elements which affect language comprehension and clarity, and can assist the actor to deepen vocal use in coordination with the added elements of space use, materials, and design.

Previews: the coach listens to the changes in acoustics or performance with an audience present as well as to the audience response to vocal use.

Once the Show is Open

Maintenance: the coach can assist with clarity of voice, speech, text, and dialect use in coordination with stage management to maintain director's vision.

Understudies: the coach can insure the quality of understudy vocal use prior to opening, during understudy rehearsal(s), or in the eventuality of an understudy in performance.

Giving Notes

The content of vocal notes is in response to four simple questions: 1. Can the text be heard? 2. Can the text be understood? 3. Is the text being used to the fullest in relation to the director's vision? 4. Is the actor making optimum vocal choices in relation to both text and concept? The point in the actor's process and

the point in rehearsal process influence exactly what is said and how it is phrased.

The manner of giving notes depends on the director's wishes, the time available, union protocols, the protocol of the theatre, and how rehearsals are run. Notes for the actor may go in written or verbal form, formally or informally, to the director, stage manager, and/or the actors, individually or in groups, privately or posted, or noted in the script for perusal. The style of notes may change with differing relationships of the vocal coach to the production.

The resident vocal coach of theatre with a company may have long standing relationships with directors, stage management, actors and other members of production team that allow a useful shorthand of communication. The coach may interact with guest artists in a more considered manner.

A vocal coach hired for a single production with a professional company may have to build trust slowly with other guest artists through carefully worded notes.

A faculty voice person coaching a student production may wish to include teaching aspects in the notes given to the student actors in a production.

A vocal professional hired on a limited basis may have to use time quite efficiently: notes might be more direct and succinct.

When an Actor Hires a Vocal Coach

Don't worry. The private voice professional the actor may have engaged is an invisible partner in your creative endeavor. Actors wish to do their best and, if your production does not have a vocal coach, a private coach may give the actor just the edge you want with the following.

To get in shape vocally prior to the start of rehearsals

Dialect or pronunciation assistance

To troubleshoot vocal use challenges

Text challenges which the actor does not feel confident in approaching

Long-term vocal development which can address particular challenges of the production within the context of the actor's personal training goals.

Suggested Readings

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Withers-Wilson, Nan, ***Vocal Direction for the Theatre: From Script Analysis to Opening Night***, New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1993.

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