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## Professional Actors Reflect on Their Training and the Actor/Vocal Coach Relationship

by Mira Kehoe
The Guthrie Theatre

For this article I interviewed thirty actors from around the country with whom I've worked professionally. These actors have been working in regional repertory theatres, on and off Broadway, and in film for 3-25 years. I was interested in hearing their thoughts on how voice and speech training has influenced their work as professional actors, and the relationship between actor and vocal coach in professional theatre.

I will summarize comments from many on the same subject, and occasionally will let the actors speak for themselves. My desire was to let them speak anonymously and freely, and for us to hear from a group of working actors.

Actors, in general, spoke well of their training, and said they appreciate their training more since being out of school. A few mentioned a transitional period following graduation where they felt as if they were "doing their training" as opposed to acting--that it takes time to trust the skills and training to be there for you." Others mentioned taking responsibility for their own development and appreciating the rigorous discipline instilled in training.

Training was useful in recognizing and expanding on habitual patterns. One young actress said she has learned that voice becomes more limited if she doesn't keep up with her voice work.

To students, one actor's advice was, "Take everything you can from your training." Another said, "It's important for an actor to not be betrayed by a lack of technique."

Exposing actors to a variety of techniques to stretch their boundaries, stay open-minded, flexible and resilient.

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ient was expressed by a number of actors. Actors need to learn what works for them. Being trained in one "correct, best" method left some actors fearful and defensive when asked to work in ways which were less familiar or comfortable. An actress in her forties said, "Flexibility is very important in the professional world."

Some actors brought up the issue of "good" sound vs. their natural sound, and the sensitive territory teachers enter into when dealing with this. They spoke of a need to feel connected to their emotional life and the challenges of incorporating changes in placement, articulation, or effort into the flow of acting "naturally." One young actor mentioned confusion on this issue, when a vocal coach would encourage an "ease" in his voice, but the director would then say that his stakes seemed too low. Actors suggested that the separation of skills classes from acting classes made this difficult. They either went with the new skill or reverted back to their old patterns in order to act freely. A few actors felt teachers should be aware of the possibility of putting their aesthetic view of voice onto their students, creating beautiful voices at the expense of self-expression.

An actress who has worked over twenty years in professional theatre said, "Teachers should be wary of expressing that their way is right, and the student's way is wrong. Encourage creative solutions to issues of clarity, projection, range and color; to expand from the essential "rightness" of how a student speaks right now. There is a place in the middle where a student's own wisdom and awareness can be awakened."

Many actors expressed a wish that their training had provided more integration between voice, movement, and acting. This extended to their work on productions--more communication between the director and coach, supporting the student in integrating movement, voice and speech skills into the act of acting. Other comments reflected a desire for a stronger connection between voice and speech skills and emotional life, and how voice and speech can be explored in character development. One actor specifically commented on his appreciation of a teacher who "took voice and speech skills to the level where acting, impulse, breath and emotion happen simultaneously."

IPA and speech training were described as extrememly useful by most of this group. Its value in their professional work ranges from dialects and classical texts to work in large spaces. Some actors mentioned that individual speech work, early in their training, helped them solve issues like a sibilant /s/. One actor said, "To be able to speak clearly with ease is a long-term benefit." Another, to students, "Don't worry if you feel like a 'speech machine'--it's okay, it will ease off over time."

In addition to IPA and speech work, the following are aspects of training that actors find most useful in their professional lives:

--a thorough vocal warm-up, tapes
--a large vocabulary of exercises
--repetition of exercises
--technical exercises
--a process of learning dialects
--how to release excessive tension
--breath support
--voice work based on organic connection with breath, center and energy
--learning to release voice with courage and inhibition

Areas of training that could have been explored more:

--identify and release tension throughout the body/voice
--how to express high emotion without tensing body/voice
--finding and maintaining center when the character may be off center
--vocal health
--verse: classical texts
--more private sessions earlier in training
--awareness of and work on vocal habits earlier in training
--more work in a variety of challenging acoustic spaces
--work on the transition from rehearsal to performance