

On Cicely Berry, Voice, and Red-eye flights to London

The documentary 'Shakespeare Out Loud' showed recently on the ABC. At 4.25pm on Sunday it was a shoe-in to pull at least thirty avid viewers to their screens, most of them out-of-work performance artists. Of which I was one. With the difference that I was also actually in the documentary. 'Shakespeare out Loud' was filmed last year in Sydney over the six days of an Acting Masterclass. The teacher was head of Voice at the Royal Shakespeare Company: Cicely Berry no less.*

I sat down to watch the show with some trepidation. It came with a mental health warning issued by the Sydney Morning Herald TV Guide: "As much as thespians, fans of Cicely Berry and flush-faced theatre luvvies will gag at the thought, watching a gang of actors leaping about in their trackies in a bare studio does not make for compelling TV. Frankly it's a little irritating, and may well have you reaching for your special couchside crossbow..."

In fact it wasn't nearly that bad. But, equally, the doco did not, could not, capture the genuine sense of discovery and excitement that we actors all felt working with dear Cicely Berry.

I was lucky to participate at all. Many months before the crowned kings and queens of the Sydney Acting community - the likes of Sandy Gore and Barry Otto - had been cordially invited to participate in the workshop and graciously accepted. But unsurprisingly a great many pulled out at the last minute because they had professional commitments (except, happily, Sandy and Barry, who soldiered on through concurrent rehearsals). A lesser luminary such as myself was only too happy to leap into the breach to make up numbers. I got a late-night phone call from Marcus West the day before the Masterclass began. Nearly dead from the superhuman effort of bringing Cicely's visit together (in itself an epic tale to rival any of Shakespeare's), his judgement was no doubt seriously compromised. He flicked me the crumb of an invitation. I leapt on it and devoured it immediately.

My friend Peter Hambleton had flown innocently over from the Land of the Long White Cloud, expecting only - like myself - to be safely ensconced in the audience bleachers, cheek by jowl with all the drama teachers and voice coaches who had paid for the privilege to merely observe the proceedings. (For six days these sages got to pick mental holes in Cicely's technique and ponder how much better they would have done it). But no such comfort zones for me and Pete. For six days we slaved away on scenes and monologues, leapt about the room on demand, cynicism suspended and actor tights hugging our hard-working buttocks.

* As well as this short doco a four hour educational series for schools and Acting Institutions has been produced from the footage shot over that six days.

First up we explored verse and the origins of Shakespeare's style. There was the stuff we already knew – that hidden in the meter was Will's four hundred year old directions. This is where he wants us to pause, why is that? 11 beats in this line, we must be in a rush. And so on.

But then we headed off into new territory. We read several long speeches, each person taking a phrase (the distance between two punctuation marks) so that we read it as a group as we heaved around the space. The effect was of an urgent and unpredictable argument between a dozen different voices; nothing like the never-ending monologues that sent us all to sleep at school. It was a marvelous illustration of how a character in Shakespeare's world uses language to solve problems, needing to speak to think, surprised by the words, each thought made possible only by the preceding one.

Will, Cicely told us, would have studied rhetoric at his Grammar school. Certainly the classical rules and principles of rhetoric were applied in his writing. A key one was forward momentum. To illustrate this lost art-form (sound-bytes convince nowadays, not lengthy argument) Cicely told us that Michael Foot, once head of the British Labour party, was never interrupted when he spoke in the House of Commons. Why? Because he employed that rhetorical trick of never drawing breath at the end of a thought. How can you interrupt when the speaker, as does Shakespeare, crams all the vital information into the second half of the sentence then without drawing breath plunges on to the next one? In theatre the result is to keep the listener keyed in, hanging out for the next auditory tidbit.

But for most of our time with her Cicely focussed on getting us out of our heads and getting the words to work for us. She was big on that – putting the brain aside (not a great problem, one would have thought, for some actors I know). Trust the intellect, it is there, work on instinct.

Through long experience (and I mean long; she has been an active teacher for over half a century) Cicely has developed a sense of what exercise might help the actor, in that particular moment, with that particular block. Her kit-bag of tools and tricks are simple enough, but wonderfully effective for all that. Here are just a few, most focussing on the notion of resistance:

- As we delivered a monologue Cicely would make us move to a new space in the room with each new thought – as if moving to all the different thoughts in our own brain. Or we'd walk, changing direction on every punctuation mark. In each case we'd be forced to engage with each new thought physically and forcefully. One idea would impel us (literally) forward into the next. Tricky this, because we oughtn't draw breath always at the punctuation marks.
- Two people (or chairs) would be set up either side of the actor at each end of the room representing two different elements in the speech – integrity and

ambition or fear say, in the early speech of Macbeth's – 'is this a dagger...'
OR interior world, present in Brutus' 'It Must be by his death'. It was amazing to see how quickly the actor's imagination embraced this idea, and how it transformed the result.

- We would stand around a person in a circle, arguing with them throughout their speech, repeating key words, hissing them, savoring them...
- We'd whisper to each other in a scene – it'd help us LISTEN.
- We'd repeat the last three words of the previous person's line, then say ours: again this made us listen, our words then came out as a more CONCRETE AND SPECIFIC response to the other person's.
- Another actor pacing to a designated part of the room would mean you would have to stop speaking until he left that area, imbuing a sense of intrigue and danger into your words.
- We'd physically hold back two actors – lovers, fighters – from touching each other – and they would fight to get at each other as they spoke. Then we'd release them and the energy of that exchange would remain in the dialogue.
- One person would try to get to the other and be stopped, the other would walk away.
- More stuff for monologues: as an actor speaks the speech he or she builds a monument representing that speech. Out of clothes, bags, people, chairs, whatever. Sandy Gore did this exercise during her speech as Cleopatra where she extols the dead Antony's virtues, beginning with, 'I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony,' and ending with the heart-rending, 'think you there was, or might be, such a man as this I dreamt of?'
- In a similar exercise, this time for a scene, Cicely gave Barry Otto the task of tidying up, to pick up and stack neatly a dozen books scattered on the floor as he spoke.
The effect? The words come out in an easy, flowing cadence, interrupted by the physical actions just as words are broken up by thought.
- Finally, Cicely stunningly transformed a scene between two actresses, Olivia Pigeot and Lucy Cornell, playing Desdemona and Emilia. We know (this is one of the last scenes of the play) that Desdemona is surely about to be killed by Othello. Regrettably, so do the actresses, and all too often this premonition pervades the scene. Cicely got Lucy and Olivia to sit back to back, and focus on drawing what they could see in front of them on sketchpads. Suddenly we could hear the almost banal domesticity of the words. We saw two friends sharing a recognizably human moment - and playing it in a simple and

unaffected way. The full impact of impending doom hit us ten times harder than if the actresses had 'acted' that feeling themselves. (It's nice when the playwright is so good that we actors can trust the story, and focus solely on finding the truth of the moment. I think over-acting and emoting is our often understandable response to poor scripts).

Cicely loves the earthiness, the *violence* in language. She talked a lot about the muscularity of the words, and I confess I never quite worked out what she was getting at with that.* She told us that acting in Shakespeare's day was a matter of life and death: A-ha, I realized, all that death around them, heads on spikes, infant mortality - didn't Will lose his own son, Hamnet? to a FLU! Not to mention that darn London plague, routinely taking life every summer...

But typically Cicely meant something much more practical. She was referring to the fact that in the *good olde days* of the Globe, circa 1600, actors were only ever given their own lines and the last three words of their cue. All scripts were handwritten and there just wasn't time to write out the whole play for the actors. So if you didn't know your cues, if you didn't LISTEN for them and missed one, you would DIE on stage. Act Shakespeare, Cicely advised us, as if someone could sink a dagger between your shoulder-blades at any moment.

Actors listened then because they had to, and they were better actors for it, I have no doubt. Those same Elizabethan players could get a play up and going in less than a week, a mind-boggling idea to a modern actor.

Cicely wasn't always able to explain quite why a particular technique of hers worked – for our performance and our voices. If an exercise didn't get a result Cicely would just shrug and experiment further till another task wrought the desired breakthrough into recognizable natural human behavior. She didn't have to have a SYSTEM. She resisted the temptation to label. She was interested only in the outcome. If I tried to sum up Cicely's personal approach it would be negatively: NO bullshit, NO hidden agendas. It is only ever about the work. It's the real thing and it's simple.

Like Andrew Wade, another voice maestro from the RSC I've been privileged to learn from, Cicely's not a great fan of emoting. Here's what she says about all that in one of her recent books:

"You must get rid of all the rubbish! By that I mean you have to constantly pare away all unnecessary coloring and tension and the paraphernalia which you feel you need to convince an audience and which, in fact, gets in the way of direct communication. I am sure that one of the actor's greatest concerns is the fear of not feeling enough and, therefore, of not being interesting enough. The greater the emotion in the part the more he tries to convince the audience of his feeling and so ceases to be specific.

* I get visions of nouns and prepositions working out with barbells.

You know that this often occurs but it is difficult to trust yourself. You must believe you have a right to be there.”

Good no-nonsense stuff. A warm and giving creature Cicely is undoubtedly, and modest to a fault. But a pushover she ain't. There's the steel that integrity gives you in that ready smile.

And me and Pete? Well, personally, I couldn't tell a rhyming couplet from a manhole cover, so my learning curve was a vertical cliff-face. I clambered noisily (horribly this has all been painfully captured on film) from the depths of unconscious incompetence to an eventual understanding of my fundamental ignorance. Or put plainly, Cicely hammered me on my downward inflections, getting me to primitively thump the last word of every line, while around me my fellow actors created word paintings of profound elegance.

Peter Hambleton glided, with narry the odd speed-bump, from conscious competence to the lofty heights of unconscious competence. His monologue, Berowne's epic speech at the end of Act IV of *Love's Labor's Lost*, was delivered on day five. It elicited the following gush from a swooning young actress: 'he's like a translucent pearl!' And indeed he was, I was forced to concede: simple, specific, direct – RELAXED.

It can be revealed now that Peter the pearl's main concern over the six day Masterclass, with breath-taking superficiality, was whether the camera would pick up his red eye or not. He had somehow (don't ask) managed to poke himself in his right eye the day before the workshop started. Thousands of tiny blood vessels had exploded, giving him the appearance at close range and the wrong angle of a badly made-up extra in a C-grade horror movie.

Even as I write Peter is flying to the UK on a Shakespeare Globe Fellowship. There he'll spend a month wresting more secrets of performance from that alluring, long-dead man of the theatre: Will Shakespeare. Baring a run in with a protruding object or his own thumb on the plane he should arrive at the Globe, London, unscathed and fully translucent.

May he hold his head and unpoked eye high.

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