

Vox Eroticus

Published in American Theatre Magazine, April 2003

In singing the voice erotic, a world-renowned voice teacher lays bare the basic instincts—an anatomy—of theatre as a verbal art.

by Kristin Linklater

The voice is inherently an erotic organ. The sensation of voice is part of the totalized suspended eros of childhood—what Freud referred to as the polymorphous perverse world of childhood, upon whose delights we slam the door as adults. Children, the object of their own love, explore indiscriminately the erotic potential of the whole body, and that erotic potential extends to the inner organs of the body and is in no wise limited to the genitals. As adulthood teaches us to draw our energies up out of our bodies and to concentrate them in reasonable and rational thinking in the brain (which lives in the head), the pleasure principle is subdued to the reality principle—polymorphous perversity becomes buried libido. Thought and speech become the servants of reason and fact, and the voice that expresses such thoughts loses, in adulthood, its map of the neuro-physiological circuitry that connects the voice with the sensuality of the body. When the connecting door between voice and auto-eroticism is shuttered, communication through mere language becomes dry, hollow, authoritatively vociferous or shrill—to the point where a larger erotic possibility shrivels and dies. Deliberately mis-used, the human voice could well be developed as a tool in aversion therapy for sex addicts.

We often toy with the word “play” as a central element of theatre, and we often devise games that will bring us back, as actors, to a childlike state where the imagination has no critic to restrain it, where instinct and intuition are uncontaminated by the fear of judgment. Creativity grows best in the garden of innocence; we have to invent the means to give us back the freedom we lost when we left childhood behind. The voice must also be offered liberation from the prohibitions of society: “Learn to speak nicely”; “Don’t shout at me”; “You’re too loud, too

noisy, too full of yourself and your ideas”; “Shut up!” If the actor is to be true to Oedipus, Medea, Cleopatra, Leontes, King Lear or Queen Margaret, his or her voice must be unlimited by societal niceties, psychological inhibition or emotional fear. The actor’s voice must run, ripple and pour through the sensory, sensual, emotional and, yes, erotic pathways of the body—if it is to pick up and reveal the rush and nuance of a character’s inner states of being.

On a daily basis in my classes I tend to use the word “sensual” rather than “erotic” to describe the pleasure that may be experienced when the vibrations of the voice travel naturally through bone and cartilage and flesh. When these sound vibrations reach the appetite centers, it may be hard to draw distinctions between food, sex and thrilling sound. There is, of course, currently a cultural conditioning that makes “sensuality” more acceptable in pedagogical practice than “eroticism.” Meanwhile, little differentiation is made these days between eroticism and sexuality, and sex has become a frightening subject—except in advertising, stand-up comedy and sit-coms. But Voice–Sex–Pleasure are designed by Nature to be unified, so we, as actors, have to be intrepid vocal adventurers. We must confront Eros, if we are to fulfill our creative destiny.

Here’s the lovely and accurate anatomical picture I’d like you to entertain: The breathing musculature laces itself down from the silky billowings of the diaphragm to be woven into the webbing of the pelvic floor along with the muscles and nerves of its genital neighbors. When the impulse to speak sparks, the interaction between breath and vocal folds creates vibrations of sound. Those vibrations are palpable throughout the body from the pelvis to the crown of the head (and can often be felt right down to the soles of the feet).

One must applaud Nature’s innate sense of humor for giving both men and women a vocal anatomy that is almost indistinguishable from female genitalia. Look at a video of the vocal folds in action, male and female—though, actually, I don’t recommend looking at such a video unless you’re pornographically inclined—and you might just as well be looking at the vagina. In other words, both men and women have tiny vaginas in their throats. Those humorous ancient

Roman anatomists doctors or philosophers, who gave Latin names to different parts of the human body, labeled a certain area of the female genitalia *labia*—which means “lips.” I assume they saw a connection with speech. If we play fast and loose with etymology, we could conflate the Sanskrit *lingam* (phallus) and the Latin *lingua* (tongue) to speculate that women as well as men possess penises, by virtue of having tongues.

As a voice teacher I allow myself an imaginative annual trip through the evolution of language. I look at the thousands of years of animal–roar communication that must have been necessary for survival among early humans (i.e., voice, before speech). A roar that is rooted in appetite centers: a hunger for food and a hunger to procreate the species (though for many thousands of years, no connection was made between sexual activity and paternity). These appetite centers are both located deep down in the lower belly area. One can imagine undifferentiated roars signifying the desire for food or sex, causing chaos in early tribal communities over millennia until some quantum leap of consciousness articulated those roars into specifics: “Can we have saber-tooth tiger steak for dinner?” versus “How about a little nookie?” The instruments of speech that accomplished this astonishing evolutionary development—the lips, the tongue, the teeth—were originally deployed in appetite-related activities such as sucking, licking, biting, chewing and early versions of kissing, and were thus directly connected to the activities of the lower belly area. Speech, for contemporary, civilized, technologized humans, is more likely to be experienced as cerebral and utilitarian than erotic.

Auto-eroticism is one of the great unadvertised joys of voice-work. By this I obviously mean auto-eroticism of a polymorphous perverse nature, not limited by genital organization. Everyday speaking has the potential to be endlessly erotic. The organs of speech *could* be experientially connected with the sensuality of the body through the vibrations of the voice. Throughout the day we *could* be experiencing sexual titillation, if not sheer orgasmic delight, just

by dint of speaking. We could, by waving a psycho-physical wand, become polymorphous perverse again in an instant.

Oh, we could blame the early Christians (for separating sex from the soul) or the Puritans (for forbidding the joy of secular singing, except on Sundays in praise of God) or Descartes (for saying “I think, therefore I am” rather than “I am, therefore I think”)—we could blame any one of them for denying us the erotic pleasures of the voice. But we are also left with some incontrovertible anatomical facts which are ours to enjoy experientially and imaginatively, if we choose. One of those facts is the internal weave that connects the solar plexus to the sacrum (the emotional center to the instinctive center) through breath. While this weave may be experienced vividly in the throes of sex, we seldom allow the same vivid connection in our daily chat. Of course, this excitement might not be appropriate for most of our verbal intercourse; but more, perhaps, than we might initially think.

What does this psycho-physical situation imply for the actor? It implies that there is an enormous subliminal power available to arouse and disturb audiences on a bewildering level, and it occurs seismically deep underneath the words being spoken. And it implies that the actor can gain access to erotic imagery only revealed to the ardent vocal explorer. Near the end of Cleopatra’s story in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, with Antony already dead and the inexorable humiliation of defeat looming, ready to die rather than submit, Cleopatra conjures up the image of Antony for Dolabella, the Roman who has been sent to guard her:

I dream’d there was an emperor Antony (Act V, scene II).

Allow the imagery to travel down through the vibrations of vocal sound to the erotic-sensual centers of the body, and the images become startlingly clear:

His face was as the heavens; and therein stuck
A sun and moon, which kept their course, and lighted
The little O, the earth....

We know the double meaning of “O” to be “vagina”; we know that “the course” very often means sexual intercourse. The image that emerges is of Cleopatra and Antony making love -- she is the earth, he shines above her.

His legs bestrid the ocean [she is the ocean]: his rear'd arm [his erection]
Crested the world [Cleopatra]: his voice was propertied
As all the tuned spheres [the eroticism of voice], and that to friends; [when he was
being gentle];
But when he meant to quail and shake the orb [rouse Cleopatra to orgasmic excitement]
He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty
There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas
That grew the more by reaping [they could make love all night and each time he climaxed
he was ready for more]: his delights
Were dolphin-like [dolphins are known for their polymorphous and ceaseless sexual
proclivities]; they showed his back above
The element they liv'd in. [What an enchanting description of love-making! She is his
essential “element”.]

Only program notes would explicate this to the audience, or horrendously bad acting.
This is secret knowledge for the actor, not to be explicated. What do these secrets give the actor?
Among a number of possibilities there is the idea that, as Cleopatra arouses in herself the visceral,

sensual, erotic memory of making love with Antony, she is making a last desperate attempt to save her life through the seduction of Dolabella. This is not so much interpretation as divination—to be given weight, or discarded, as the demands of character, concept and directorial choice dictate.

My point is that we evade the power of Shakespeare if we take refuge in metaphor rather than plunge fearlessly into the erotic vortex of his imagery: “What I am and what I would are as secret [“sacred” in some editions] as maidenhead,” says Viola to Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, “to your ears divinity, to any other’s profanation.” Disguised as a boy, using her wiles as a woman, whispered into Olivia’s ear, this is irresistible! “Give us the place alone...,” says the love-starved Olivia.

And thus later, Viola, bearing messages of love from Orsino to Olivia, to whom she pours her heart out, is aroused to poetic heights by her own impossible passion for Orsino, saying that if *she* loved Olivia she would:

Make me a willow [the sorrowful symbol of unrequited love]
cabin at your gate [the entrance to love]
And call upon my soul within the house [the soul of the lover lives in her body];
Write loyal cantons of contemned love,
And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
Hallow your name to the reverberate hills,
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out “Olivia.”

Olivia is lost: seduced by voice.

Shakespeare splits open the safe ground of our mental foundations to expose the tremors and quakes of ever-present and super-potent eroticism in his words: To survive, we actors must

screw our voices to the sticking-place and have the courage in our utterance to let fly the arrows of Eros to crack and remold the mirrors we hold up to the underbelly of today.

The *vox eroticus* does not simply serve the god of love. Every major passion engages the deep musculature of the pelvic floor and the primal instinctual nerve-endings surrounding the sacrum. Hate, murderous rage, jealousy and grief are not separated by some *cordon sanitaire* from the erotic. There is erotic energy in such lines as “Cry ‘Havoc’ and let slip the dogs of war” (from *Julius Caesar*), and in “God for Harry, England and Saint George!” (from *Henry V*), and in “I will chop her into messes” (from *Othello*), and in “Were my wife’s liver / Infected as her life she would not live / The running of one glass” (from *The Winter’s Tale*), and in Constance’s lamentation in *King John*: “Death, death. O amiable lovely death! / Thou oderiferous stench! Sound rottenness!” and later: “Grief fills the room up of my absent child/Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me....”

Moreover, the erotic energy of the voice is not limited to the works in classical repertory. Where does *vox eroticus* live in today’s theatre? In a time when irony and the flat reportorial tone are fashionable, there may be scant exercise for these classical connections. But surely the actor who plays Weston in Sam Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* must be plugging deep into his auto-erotic, childhood richness when he says:

I’ll kill him! If I have to, I’ll kill myself along with him. I’ll crash into him. I’ll crash the Packard right into him. What’s he look like? WHAT’S HE LOOK LIKE? I’ll find him. Then I’ll find that punk who sold me that phony desert land. I’ll track them all down. Every last one of them. Your mother too. I’ll track her down and shoot them in their bed. In their hotel bed. I’ll splatter their brains all over the vibrating bed. I’ll drag him into the lobby and slit his throat. I was in the war. I know how to kill. I was over there. I know how to do it I’ve done it before. It’s no big deal. You just make an adjustment. You

convince yourself it's all right. That's all. It's easy. You just slaughter them. Easy. HE'S WITH MY WIFE! THAT'S ILLEGAL!

Here Eros surely grapples with Dionysus, the god of tragedy and comedy—"the chorus-master of the fire-breathing stars," as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes Dionysus in *The Fragility of Goodness*, "who links risk with value and brings healing in a harmony that is not simplicity but the tension between distinct and separate beauties."

The *vox eroticus* is the instrument that guides us to the larger Self that lurks inside us, yearning to break free from the shackles of conformity, correctness and the judgment of an imagined hostile world.

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