

## **Fitzmaurice Voicework** **by Julia Moody**

Increasing our knowledge of the body-voice synergy - Fitzmaurice Voicework is an exploration of possibilities. Catherine Fitzmaurice works from a premise of engaging the body by activating the reflexive, autonomic nervous system so that the senses and the breath are alive and functioning efficiently (Deconstructing) then harnessing that energy to focus a performance through the text (Restructuring). To quote Fitzmaurice's article "Breathing is Meaning" in *The Vocal Vision*: "the act of speaking is always somewhat improvisatory, based on impulse ... It is a commitment to the manifest present."

Downtown Manhattan, May-June 2002, 24 people meet daily in a studio for a six weeks of intensive Fitzmaurice Voicework. I was lucky enough to be one of them and believe me it was a rigorous six weeks!

Catherine Fitzmaurice ran a 3-hour session every day, the rest of the teaching was delivered by a different master teacher each week, among them Professor Joan Melton from California State U-Fullerton, the person who first introduced Fitzmaurice Voicework to us at the 5th AVA Voice Symposium in Brisbane and who has since written a marvellous book: "One Voice: Integrating Singing Technique and Theatre Voice Training". The participants came from various fields associated with vocal performance: voice and speech teachers, acting teachers, singing teachers, actors, singers, and speech pathologists. It was interesting to note that many of the teachers appeared to specialise in either voice or speech whereas in Australia we who teach speaking voice to performers usually teach both.

The framework of the course was divided into 6 weekly sections: vocal function and health, deconstructing, restructuring, singing, speech, and text. The final two weeks were devoted to practically guiding the voice through text, under the expert eye and ear of Professor Dudley Knight from the University of California-Irvine. Phil Thompson from California-Irvine had some fascinating ideas on learning accents and dialects using computer technology for audio feedback.

Catherine Fitzmaurice originally trained at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London where she returned to teach before going to the United States in 1968. She has worked extensively internationally as a voice teacher and actor and explains the drive for her research as coming from noticing "the lack of ability in most of my students in both countries to isolate, without undue tension, the breathing actions of the vocally efficient rib-swing and abdominal support". Catherine drew on the modern and ancient somatic training systems of Bioenergetics, yoga, and shiatsu; adapting and experimenting, she wove them into her breath and vocal research. This has resulted in what she calls "a series of exercises and interventions...Deconstructing".

Practically, the deconstructing is achieved by allowing a tremor to pass through the body and breath on an open [ah]. Catherine has found a series of physical positions that encourage tremors; these positions provide a form as the work is very personal and can be adapted to the physical idiosyncracies of the individual. Catherine's philosophy is to encourage individual research and hence autonomy for the performer. As with any body/voice work, the health and physical capabilities of the individual must be taken as the foundation for care and development of training.

The restructuring is well named because it is a conscious engagement of intercostals and the transverse abdominus for breath support into the act of speaking, replacing the need for rib-squeeze or neck tension. The resulting freedom allows for a wide range of vocal expression without strain.

The research is ongoing and practical with Fitzmaurice Associated teachers contributing ideas from their own formal training backgrounds and personal research. During the training in New York ingredients from Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, physical training, song, classical voice texts including Shakespeare, poetry and contemporary texts were all fed into the mix.

At first when I began the training in New York, I have to admit I was dubious...were the tremors quaking through people around me manufactured or spontaneous? A debate ensued, ultimately how I found the

tremor didn't seem to matter. The excitement was in allowing an unrestricted open tone to erupt from your body, you feel very awake and alive in your presence. In actor training we often talk of being 'grounded' in performance, this Fitzmaurice Voicework can help make the breath and hence the thought very immediate, very current: allowing the breath to be chaotic (destructuring) and then using that energy efficiently, imaginatively through the text (restructuring).

Fitzmaurice Voicework is currently being taught at Yale School of Drama, Harvard University/American Repertory Theatre's Institute for Advanced Theatre Training, the University of California-Irvine, in studios for New York University's undergraduate drama program, and numerous other institutions and theatres in the United States and abroad.

Catherine is in the process of writing a book but for the moment there is an excellent web-site featuring further information on all areas of the Fitzmaurice Voicework: articles, workshops, and outlines of the work and of Fitzmaurice voiceworkers. Catherine may well be visiting later in the year and if you would like any further information about potential workshops or about how and when I use the Fitzmaurice Voicework, feel free to contact me on [j.moody@ecu.edu.au](mailto:j.moody@ecu.edu.au).

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"Breathing is Meaning", The Vocal Vision, editor Marian Hampton, Applause Books, New York, 1997.  
"One Voice: Integrating Singing Technique and Theatre Voice Training" by Joan Melton with Kenneth Tom, Heinemann, 2003.

Web site: [www.fitzmauricevoice.com](http://www.fitzmauricevoice.com)

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