

Citation information:

Lynn Watson, "Actor and Vocal Director," *Acting Now*, Issue 1, www.actingnow.com/one.html#, January 2004. [Out of publication.]



(ACTING NOW endeavors to discuss the total process of the actor, including vocal and physical training. In the first of a rotating series of opinions about the actor's voice, University of Maryland-Baltimore County professor Lynn Watson discusses the relationship between actor and Vocal Director. In addition to her professorial duties, Ms. Watson currently consults on voice, speech, dialects, and text for Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. She has worked at venues from East coast to West, including: South Coast Repertory, The Mark Taper Forum, A.C.T. San Francisco, and Maryland Stage Company. Ms. Watson also consults with a host of private clients for stage, film, and television. —ed)

In today's professional theatre world, the Vocal Director is increasingly viewed as an indispensable member of a production's creative team. Many theatre Directors insist on having a Vocal Director for every production they undertake. Some Directors have developed relationships and prefer to use the same Vocal Director on all their productions. Many LORT theatres have one or more Vocal Directors on staff, or Vocal Directors who consult on productions on a regular basis. This article is intended to assist the actor in making the most of time spent with a Vocal Director.

Why might I need a Vocal Director?

The most obvious times an actor might need a Vocal Director are when dialects or extreme character voices are required. But there are other circumstances you may not have considered when a Vocal Director could be invaluable. Perhaps you have been cast in a lengthy and emotionally demanding role — you rarely leave the stage. Perhaps a role requires you to scream, shout, wail, or produce other extreme sounds. You know you don't want to risk "losing" your voice during rehearsal or performance because of extraordinary Vocal demands. On the other hand, you want the Director to feel confident that you have the vocal "chops" required to meet the demands of the production. A Vocal Director can give you approaches and techniques to achieve what you need effectively but safely. In doing so, she can work with you to find and train your optimal breath capacity, breath support, alignment, resonance, and articulation. She can help you with coordination of energy so that you are relaxed in the areas of your body where you need to be relaxed, and muscular where you need to be. She can keep the Director apprised of what is reasonable to demand of you vocally and when you need to "mark" a rehearsal (take it easy and not extend your voice to its full capacity). She can help you ascertain if you are working with unhealthy vocal strain and refer to you to an otolaryngologist who specializes in voice for performance.

When confronted with extreme performance demands that have the potential to be vocally harmful, actors sometimes claim they are willing to risk damage as long as they can feel completely "free" or uninhibited in their acting. The esteemed Vocal Director and teacher, Bonnie Raphael, has a powerful response to that sentiment. She asks the actor to think of vocal damage through reckless use as the "cannibalizing" of the voice; of spending it on a single production, leaving less

<http://www.actingnow.com/one.html#>

and less for future productions. Her view affirms the actor's responsibility to care for what is essentially her or his instrument – the body – and to keep it in excellent condition to last an entire career. What concert violinist would dream of performing with such abandon that their Stradivarius was damaged in the process? Why should the theatrical artist's standard of care be different?

I've always performed successfully without a Vocal Director – why do anything differently?

Many actors have learned by doing, and have succeeded with little or no formal vocal training. If this is the case with you, consider the following: if you have an opportunity for free time with a Vocal Director – grab it! If you have been cast in a production that has a Vocal Director, any time you spend with them can be viewed as a wise investment. Coaching fees for one-on-one sessions with established Vocal Directors can range from \$100 an hour to \$250 per hour and up. Savvy actors can take advantage of the fact that a production has engaged a Vocal Director and can request session time. Unless they are overwhelmed by production demands, Vocal Directors are generally pleased to have actors initiate requests to work with them. Of course sessions will be geared toward the needs of the production or what the Director has requested that the actor work on, but often the actor's desires and the needs of the production will coincide.

What if I've already received excellent vocal training?

Renowned Vocal Director, Patsy Rodenburg, states: "Without continual work and stretching, the breath and its support lose power within days of inactivity." ¹ Many actors work frequently in film and television, where vocal demands are often lessened because of the use of microphones and post-production recording. When the same actors return to working on stage again, they often find it necessary to use vocal sessions to get back in shape in terms of breath support, increased vocal energy, articulation, resonance, and the rigors of heightened text.

What areas of voice and speech should I expect the Vocal Director to cover?

It depends. In the U.S. Vocal Directors are often generalists and have expertise in many areas: vocal production, dialects, speech and articulation, text analysis, and voice/speech integration of text analysis. Sometimes a production will hire a dialect specialist only. In the latter case, the dialect specialist may have the ability to work in other areas, but you should not insist on it because their contract or agreement may limit the type of work they perform. In any event, for a particular production you can always ask the Vocal person what areas they are trained in and what areas they have agreed to address in their work with the actors.

What can I expect of my sessions with the Vocal Director?

In many cases your time with the Vocal Director is limited. The Director will often expect that the Vocal Director see all or most people in the cast, and rehearsal time is invariably tight. If the Director of the production has requested specific work, that will be a priority. Often Directors don't speak to actors beforehand about what vocal work they have requested. There are many reasons for this, none of them nefarious -- Directors have countless other things on their minds, they don't want to risk making an actor feel self-conscious, it's not their area of expertise, or they trust the Vocal Director to discuss voice issues with the actor.

Most Vocal Directors will want to take some time in their first session together to talk with the actor about the work to be done. If the script specifies dialect(s) for you, that will likely be a priority. You can use this initial contact wisely if you think of assisting the Vocal Director in shaping a "game plan" for your work together. Listen to the Vocal Director's ideas. Talk about what you feel could be most helpful to you. It is very useful for her to know what sort of vocal training you have had. Particularly if you are working on dialects, let her know if you are familiar with International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) notation. Let her know if you have studied a

particular approach to voice so that, in addition to introducing new material, she can use vocabulary and techniques with which you are familiar. If your formal vocal training has been limited or nonexistent, do not be afraid to say so. It will be very helpful for her to have that information in developing a working plan.

If you expect to be working on dialects, ask if you should bring a portable recorder and/or blank cassette tape to record your sessions. Often the Vocal Director will have equipment that can record as well as play tapes, but not always. Or for later review, you may want to record your session while listening to and receiving instruction on her dialect resource tapes. Make sure you take your script to ALL vocal sessions, even after you have memorized your lines. You will want to be able to mark your script – for notes on the text, dialect pronunciation specifics, places you dropped the dialect, etc. – for review later in rehearsal or at home.

If you know you will be working on vocal production elements such as breathing, breath support, or vocal extremes, wear workout clothing to your session that does not restrict your movement. Tight clothes make it difficult to do the type of very physical work that is often required for practice in vocal production.

What should I expect from a session in which the focus is on text?

As one might expect, Arthur Miller is eloquent on the subject of language and acting:

It's not easy to find people who use the language the way I think it is in my plays. They tend to emotionalize everything when, in fact, the emotion can come through the language with far less effort than they're putting into it. I made it easy for them, really, if they'll just trust the language.²

Miller's description beautifully captures the primary goal of the Vocal Director in working on text with an actor – digging deep into the text to explore how language unites thought and emotion to reach the highest levels of human expression. Sessions with the Vocal Director are a wonderful opportunity to undertake a sort of "linguistic archeology" with the detail that one rarely has time for in the rehearsal room. And it need not be laborious. Any actor who has experienced the power of language that Miller describes knows the exhilaration such work can bring to acting.

Text analysis is intended to contribute to more powerful acting, and is never just an intellectual exercise. You and your Vocal Director may examine the text to: find the argument in a speech and discover how it builds; determine how Vocal dynamics can lead the listener to hear and understand complex syntactical structures; find key words that should be pointed up and not rushed; investigate how imagery is used; find lengths and patterns of sounds and related emotional effects; find rhythms or meter and determine how they move the text forward or work on tactical, subliminal or emotional levels; investigate how a character uses language to achieve objectives.

Should I engage a Vocal Director if I'm not currently in rehearsal?

You might want to hire a Vocal Director yourself for a variety of reasons. Maybe you're heading into a role that calls for vocal extremes and want to get in shape vocally so you can safely sustain the performance. Maybe you want extra time and assistance preparing for a dialect role. Maybe the text for your next role is complex and you want to get a head start on developing it. Maybe you've been working in film and television lately and were recently cast in a stage production. Maybe you want to continue to develop voice and speech aspects of your craft. These are a just a few reasons to consider hiring a Vocal Director for private sessions.

How can I find a Vocal Director who takes private clients?

Talk to actors whose work you admire and ask if they know Vocal Directors they

would recommend. Contact a college or university theatre department near you and ask if they have voice faculty who take private clients. Many faculty list their biographies on their department web sites, which can give you an idea of their experience in vocal direction and training. The Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA) has a website with an index of its members. Look for members in your area and at the information they provide for an idea of who might suit your needs. Their contact information will also be listed. VASTA's website is www.vasta.org. You might ask whether instruction is individual, or for a group, or if both types are offered.

Final thoughts

Even if the space you are working in with the Vocal Director is small, don't feel you have to remain seated. Feel free to get up and move around as you work. Think of your time with the Vocal Director as a time to work and explore without the pressure of the rehearsal room. Use the coach as an "audience of one" to try out ideas you have considered taking into rehearsal. Enjoy and make the most of your time; it can bring wonderful, unexpected richness to your performance and add to your repertoire of vocal skills.

End Notes:

1. Patsy Rodenburg, *The Actor Speaks: Voice and the Performer* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000) 24.
2. Steven R. Centola, "The Last Yankee: An Interview with Arthur Miller," *American Drama*, 5.1 (Fall 1995): 78–98.

This article originally appeared in the online magazine ACTING NOW, which is out of publication.

<http://www.actingnow.com/one.html#>