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Voice and the young actor: a workbook and DVD

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BOOK REVIEW

Voice and the young actor: a workbook and DVD, by Rena Cook London, Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury, 2012, xii + 177 pp., US\$29.95 (paperback/DVD), ISBN 978-1408154601

There is a creative exchange between student and voice teacher found within this very practical and fun guide for emerging actors to find their voices. In *Voice and the Young Actor: A Workbook and DVD*, Rena Cook has captured the essential steps in creating the foundation for voice and speech training for young actors, and it is clear that she is a talented teacher and an artist. The presence and process of the students' experience is revealed in the ongoing blog updates found throughout the book. Kristina and Colin, two of Cook's actual students who shared their journeys, provide a brilliant through line of young actors finding their voices. Kristina and Colin are also featured on the DVD. This book flows seamlessly, inviting the reader to become part of this engaging, well-taught class. The combination of chapter and DVD segments is an excellent tool for the teacher and actor to use in order to gain an understanding of the importance of warming up the voice, body, and breath. Cook balances the students' reflections with tips for the teacher. The book's 13 chapters are structured similar to classes during a semester, or perhaps a flowing, intensive workshop. Following each chapter, the readers are given a useful list of references and exercises where Cook graciously acknowledges the many mentors and colleagues who have shared their work and, in turn, influenced hers. The Central School of Speech and Drama is a major influence on Cook's work, as well as many talented voice practitioners with whom she has had the opportunity to train.

Beginning with a common dilemma for many young actors, *I hate my voice*, each of the book's chapters explores positive solutions through explanation and exercises. *What are vocal folds anyway?* provides the reader with clear explanations and illustrations of the anatomy and physiology of the voice – suitable for the beginning actor or anyone looking for a review of the science behind speech and the voice. Cook even provides the readers with the directions for making a paper larynx in class. In *Protecting the jewels*, Cook describes the importance of healthy voice use for actors, always crucial in training the young performer, and includes reflective exercises for the young voice user to assess their habits. In the chapter, *Why am I so tense?* exercises assist actors with discovering where their tension lives and gives them tools to help the rigidity disappear. This brilliantly links young actors to their alignment in chapter 5 *But this is how I always stand!* Cook stresses the concept of unlocking the knees and the connection to the ankles with this gentle beneficial reminder: "Release the knees with a gentle bounce—I call it 'oingo boingo' in your ankles and knees. Be aware of space and 'cush' (a spongy feeling) in your joints" (p. 46).

Breathing is introduced through the chapter *If I weren't breathing I would be dead* in which the reader will find excellent illustrations and activities for breath awareness tackling challenges such as: high shallow breath, weak abdominal muscles, lack of breath support, and generalized tension in the body. The sequence of exercises found in this chapter on breath provides the young actor with seven goals for breathing.

- (1) connecting to the natural breath that sustains life,
- (2) releasing the abdominal wall, which must precede the inhale,
- (3) engaging rib release and rib swing,
- (4) sensing the moment of readiness,
- (5) engaging the transverse, which manages and supports the breath on the exhale,
- (6) building breath capacity and sustainability, and
- (7) connecting breath to text (p. 66).

Cook's descriptions of the seven categories of breath are arguably universal in today's actor training and give the beginning actor a solid foundation for a lifetime of voice use. This is the largest – and arguably the most important – chapter in the book, supported by three exercises that are illustrated on the DVD. Cook clearly gives the reader an awareness and knowledge of breathing for actors. Breath is an area of Cook's expertise as a contributing author and co-editor of the 2009 publication of *Breath in Action: The Art of Breath in Vocal and Holistic Practice*.

The following chapters unify the essential ingredients of voice and speech work as it relates to the young actors' process of training. Vocal resonance is explored in *My voice is a trumpet?* Pitch is examined in *The highs and lows of voice*. Articulation, consonants, vowels, and clarity of thought are dynamically illustrated in *No, I don't have marbles in my mouth* which is packed with accessible and effective drills that bring a sense of play and physicality into the clarity needed for effective voice and speech work. Cook provides a practical foundation for students to begin their own sound-shaping discoveries through the lively exercises provided. The only criticism of the book is that Cook does not introduce the *International Phonetic Alphabet* (IPA) to the student as part of the exercises in this chapter; however, in the teacher tip section, she recommends two books that deepen this aspect of speech. Cook recommends *The Joy of Phonetics* by Louis Colaianni and the recently published *Speaking with Skill* by Dudley Knight for teaching speech and articulation. Cook acknowledges, "What is included in this chapter barely scratches the surface of speech work" (p. 128). This is a valid point in that speech work and the IPA are often book-length topics that can be intimidating for beginning actors; however, an abbreviated introduction to the IPA could have been helpful. Chapter 10, *My personal warm-up*, is a shorter section that engages students and provides space to document their own vocal warm-up – a crucial step for the beginning actors to embrace for their future vocal health as a performer. This is essential information for students to grasp early!

The final chapters of the book deepen and reinforce the voice, speech, and text work for beginning actors. Chapters such as *Expressivity: Tennis balls and more* cleverly uses activities that will connect actors to one another – and their text – through partner work with actions and music. Cook lists specific pieces of music allowing actors to explore *Five Rhythms*: Flow, *Stattaco*, Chaos, Lyric, and Stillness.

The *Five Rhythms* exercise was adapted from Gabrielle Roth's work by Debbie Green and Morwenna Rowe at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Cook also includes a great resource list for music to use in classes or workshops. The concise directions found throughout this book make it a valuable resource for the teacher and student. Exploring acting and vocal choices within monologs is found in chapter 12 *Perfect voice! Now What?* This chapter includes a variety of useful activities such as: mouthing the monolog and breathing in the given circumstances which are fun and simple tools that will help the actor discover possibilities within the monolog. This is frequently a step young actors will skip on their own resulting in a flat, disconnected monolog used in an audition. Concluding with *Sample warm-ups*, this step-by-step guide can be experienced in real time on the enclosed high-quality DVD. This is quite a gem.

Cook's writing is filled with her warm spirit, love of her students, and demonstrative evidence of her appreciation of the significance of voice and speech training. Yes, students will gain both insight and vocal skills after experiencing the effective exercises found within the text; however, the material is equally beneficial to the voice teacher. Cook's teaching style is present throughout the book, as well as on the DVD recording, and is an asset to voice and acting teachers who desire to convey these concepts to the young actor. A practical, playful, and pleasurable experience, *Voice and the Young Actor: A Workbook and DVD* is a must have for anyone starting his or her vocal journey and will provide a foundation for beginning voice and speech work.

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Notes on reviewer



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