

Tips and tools to vocal freedom

A theatre vocal director's guide

YOUR NOTES

Judy Leigh-Johnson & Julie Ostrem, text • Sarah Shebaro, sketches

Part One • Warm up your body from head to toe

After a quick aerobic work-out, stretch the body to release unnecessary tension. Think of unnecessary tension as wasted energy and an enemy of the voice.

Remember: Keep your body well aligned. Good posture is essential to good voice use. Breathe out slowly on a gentle "ffffff" sound.



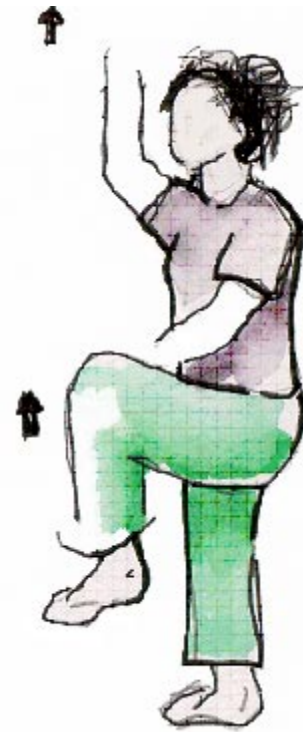
◀ Head and neck: Stand. Moving only the head, make small "nods" from a central position, first to the left (so that the chin is over the left shoulder), back to center and then slowly to the right, so the chin is now above the right shoulder.

Think of your head as being on a bouncy spring.



◀ Shoulders: Stand. Gently shrug your shoulders several times. Make small circles forward with your shoulders, then make small circles back.

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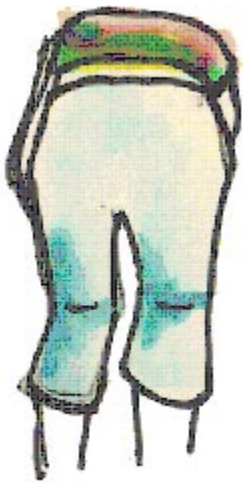
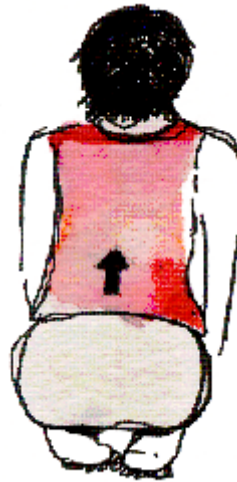
Overall body stretches. ▲ Stand with legs spaced widely apart. Make yourself as wide as you can. Now, stand with legs hip width apart, with legs together, and stretch your fingertips toward the ceiling, making yourself as tall as you can.

▲ Pretend you are climbing a ladder with the rungs spaced widely apart and stretch to reach each rung of the ladder. Stretch from the waist up - leaving the lower body relaxed (feel grounded to the floor) and then release from the waist, flopping over and releasing from the neck also.



▲ ► Bend arms at the elbow as if you were holding ski poles. Bend knees. Bring arms up so that your wrists are near the ears. Push off as with ski poles and allow the body to relax forward, bending at the waist and knees, with the end position of the head near the knees and elbows back. Push off with ski poles, slightly straighten legs and with "poles," swing arms forward and stand up. Repeat.

Spine: Kneel on the floor and sit back on your heels. Gently use your muscles to create small “waves” to travel from the bottom to the top of your spine. ▶



▲ [Start with sketch at far left.] Stand with feet hip distance apart. Allow yourself to slump from the waist, as limp as a ragdoll, letting the knees bend slightly until the fingertips touch the floor (or as far as you can). Keep the shoulders and neck released. Slowly roll up to a standing position, feeling each vertebra move on top of the one below it (similar to building a tower of wooden blocks). Leave the neck and head until last, then build those vertebrae.

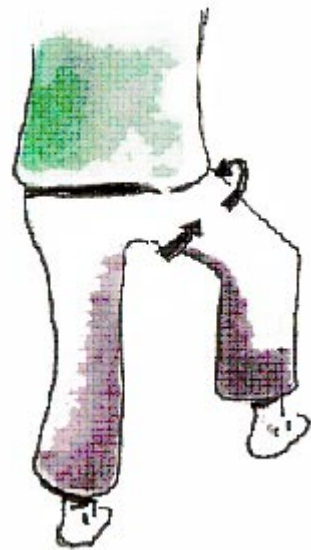
Lastly, note good body alignment after the roll up. ▶



YOUR NOTES



◀ Lower body: Stand with legs hip distance apart, balancing your weight on your left leg. With the right leg, make small circles with the ankle, first clockwise, then counter-clockwise.



▲ ▶ Then use the knee as the pivot to make clockwise and counter-clockwise circles in the air. Next, make circles with your leg with the thigh-hip joint as the pivot point. Repeat sequence with other leg. Finally, make circles - clockwise and counter-clockwise - with your hips.

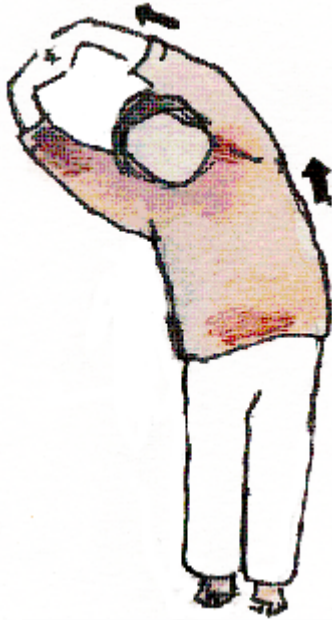


Part Two • Warm up your body's breath-makers

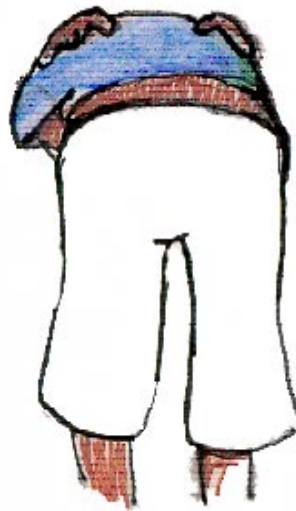
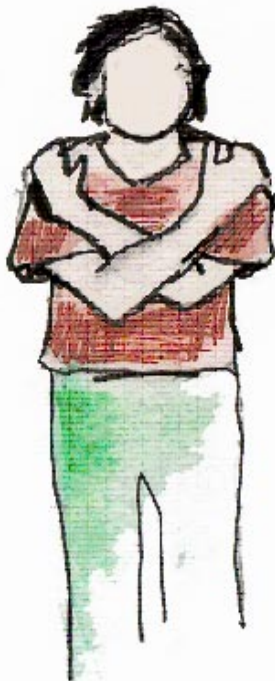
These exercises are from Patsy Rodenburg. Breathing exercises release the primary muscles of inspiration, the diaphragm and the intercostal muscles between the ribs.

The diaphragm gives strength to the outgoing speech. Intercostal muscles sustain the outward flow of speech. Abdominal muscles relax to allow the lungs to fill with air.

In simpler terms, breathing in appropriately for speaking means: the diaphragm moves outwardly; the chest and shoulders stay still; the intercostals (sides and lower back) expand.

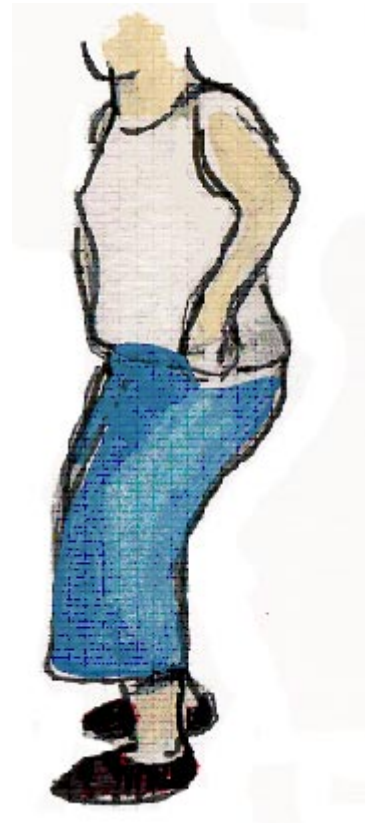
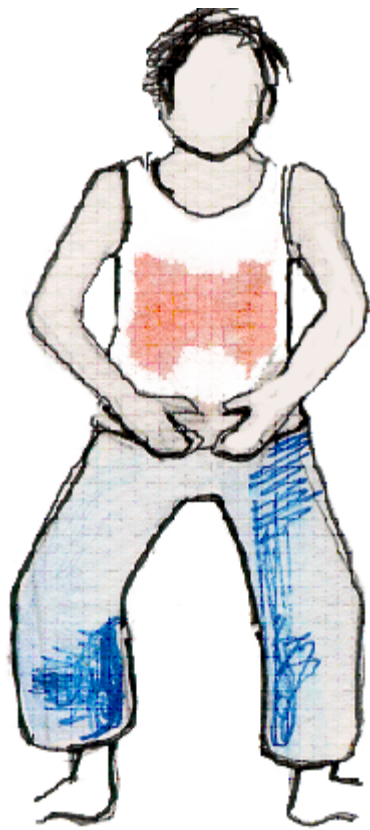


- ◀ Stretch intercostals (the muscles between your ribs) - Stand with the feet about hip distance apart. Keep the knees slightly bent and your weight evenly distributed. Arc the right arm up and over the head and clasp hands. Lean slowly and gently to the left. Take 3 deep breaths in and focus on the muscles in the ribs cage on the side you are stretching. Blow out on an "fffff". Repeat on the other side.

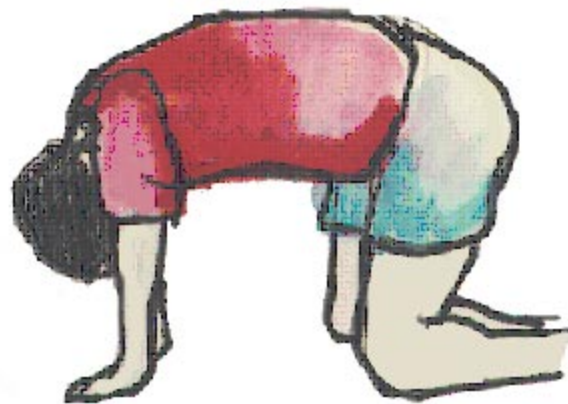


- ▲ Stretch the back intercostals - Cross arms over the chest so that hands gently cup the opposing shoulder. With the knees slightly bent, drop from the waist so that the head is near the kneecaps. Breathe in and out in the bent over position, focusing on the muscles in the lower rib cage. Drop the arms and slowly come to standing.

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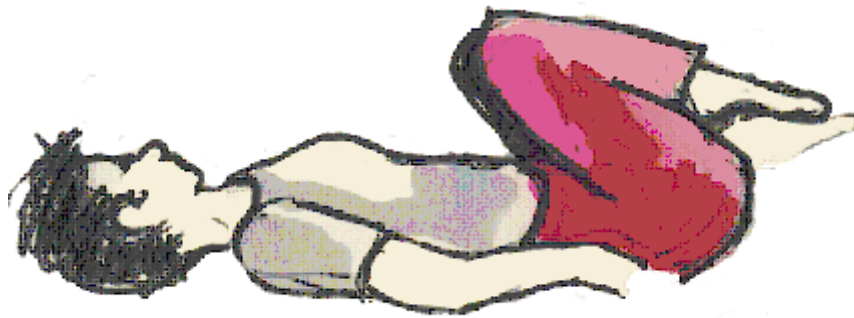


▲ Release the abdominals. Stand with feet widely apart. Bend knees fully, keeping the spine in a vertical position. Place hands flat on your lower belly (around and below the navel and just inside the hip bones). Bend the knees a little more. Inhale. Feel the natural relaxation of the abdominal muscles? To test this, try to tighten these muscle under your hands and note how difficult it is to take in a full breath.



◀ Get on your hands and knees with the spine straight, so that the back is as parallel to the floor as possible. Let the abdominal muscles “drop.” Take some short, diaphragmatic pants. Feel how the diaphragm “pops” in and out with these quick breaths.

Expand air space in the back. ►
 From the dog position, lower yourself so that your buttocks rest on your heels and your forehead rests on your hands (or you may have your arms by your side). Inhale deeply, allowing air to fill the “reservoirs” in the flank area (just above the hips).



▲ Fully expand all airspaces. Lie on the back, knees pointing toward the ceiling, legs hip-width apart. Just as an infant waves his/her feet in the air, allow your feet to dangle freely. As you are lying there, breathe in deeply to feel all the body’s pockets fill with air. Slowly release the out-breath.

Your breath is now warmed up and ready to go. Throughout your teaching day, think about how you use your breath. Do you tend to keep speaking even if you are almost out of air? One option is to get into a habit in speaking in short sentences. Unlike the actor who follows a prescribed script, teachers may elect to divide their communication into shorter and more manageable breath loads.

As you become more fully aware of coordinating your muscles to take in adequate air and as you become attuned to matching your vocalization to your breath, you may notice that your body begins to make these adjustments automatically.

Part Three • Hum your vocal folds to life!

Now that your body is stretched and rid of excess tension, wake up your vocal folds with gentle humming. As with all of the exercises, inflate your lungs fully so that the sounds you make are supported by the breath. The consonant “m” is best for getting the vocal fold vibrations going. Start at about the middle of your range. Once you’ve mmmmed a bit, glide your pitch up and down on “mmmmm”s.

Part Four • Get your articulators ready to go

A great way to begin your articulator warm-up is to gently massage the face. The technique is exactly like rubbing a cleanser or lotion on your complexion. Simply, massage the muscles of your face with your fingertips in small circular patterns to get the blood going.



◀ Jaw. The lower jaw should only drop straight down, and not be manipulated from side to side. As a gentle warm-up, say "fah, fah, fah"

The lips. Warm up the lips by saying ▶
"eeee" then, "oooo" (as in tooth).

Another technique is to say a sentence filled with "w's". How about: 'we will wait with Willie and Winnie Williams.' Or blow air through your lips (just as a horse does).

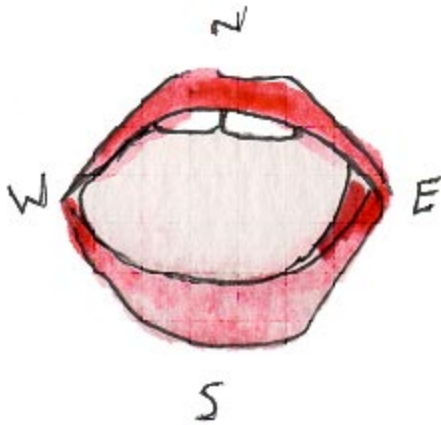


SAY "EEEE"



AND FOLLOW BY "OOOO"

Pharynx. A nice way to open up the pharyngeal area (the wall behind the uvula) is to practice a few fake yawns. Imagine your “air tube” originating from the air source (lungs) and out the mouth. This tube makes a curve at the pharynx, but does not collapse.



◀ Tongue Using the tip of the tongue, touch the “north, south, east and west” of your mouth to warm up the tongue and increase its flexibility. Keep the tongue inside the mouth behind the top and bottom teeth. Say “Plague-bearing prairie dogs” [Remember: Tongue twisters gain flexibility, but remember to breathe first! In the excitement of speaking quickly it is easy to forget the breath work you have just done and so you’ll arrive at a flexible tongue but with a sore throat!]

Soft palate. To get the muscles of the soft palate going, breathe, drop the lower jaw, keep the tongue tip behind the bottom teeth and say “ah”. Then add “ng” (as the last sound in “hung”), to make a connected chanting sound, “ah ng” Repeat. Do you feel a buzzing in the top of the mouth or floor of the nose?

Part Five • Let resonance & projection work for you

Think about the Vocal Director’s discussion of resonance and projection. The ability to adjust your vocal tract into a shape that reinforces your voice is a natural skill and can really take the load off the larynx. However, some adults seem to have lost this natural ability. Need some tips to re-gain these skills?

- Drop the bottom jaw enough to allow the words to pass through your mouth easily (a rule of thumb: there should be about 2 fingers’ width of space between your upper and lower jaw just in front of the joint where they meet.)
- Keep your tongue flat (except when you need it to shape words) on the “floor” of your mouth. Its tip should lie directly behind the bottom teeth.
- When your body’s natural resonance is working well for you, you will feel a vibration or “buzz” in different parts of the body (the face, chest, or nose).
- Develop mental imagery. As a teacher, your words should not stay trapped in your mouth. Rather, they should be delivered on a stream of air to your students.
- Practice bringing your voice “forward” where it can be heard clearly. Place your hand, slightly cupped, several inches in front of your mouth (palm side up). Speak a sentence or two, trying to make your words fall into your palm. Use good breath support, and don’t push from the throat. The idea is to place your words into your upturned hand.

Part Six • Some final thoughts on the actor's approach to voice

All unnecessary tension in the body is the enemy of a free and natural voice, so working on good alignment and finding the ease of this posture is the starting point. Telling yourself anxiously to relax is not productive, but exercises are employed which bring an actor to an awareness of where tensions are held, and gradually the feeling of freedom in this tension release is what the body remembers and recaptures. The body is the conduit for the breath and speaking muscles so it makes sense to have the body in a good place of release and alignment.

There is no such thing as a 'bad' voice. We are born with the natural ability to use our voices in a healthy manner, however, sometimes unconscious habits and/or the dictates of our society can result in an 'habitual' voice that is poorly used physically and creatively. Therefore the aim is to release the muscles and make adjustments both physical and psychological which will bring us back to the natural voice, that we may realize its full potential.

We 'free' the voice, and in doing this we release various tensions which block the flow of breath, reduce the flexibility of the articulators, inhibit the fullness of resonance, and limit the fluidity of range and expression: so our choice of words in speaking about the voice becomes important. We 'sustain' the breath we don't 'control' it. Sound is not 'forced' from the throat in an effort to project but 'released' from the body through the 'openness' of the resonating cavities on the 'support' of the breath stream. This concept and word choice becomes important if we are to encourage ourselves to approach the work with a freeing energy.

In finding this ease we realize that the energy in speaking always comes from the breath and that the breath mechanism resides in the center of the body. If, as we work to free up other areas of the voice (as in the muscles of our throat and articulators etc.), we stay connected to the idea of the breath as the generator; then we can recognize that speaking is a whole body act originating from the middle of our body. This allows us to feel grounded, 'centered', and with any kind of verbal communication now fully supported, energetic, varied in tone and expression, it brings us, as Patsy Rodenburg would say, into a state of 'readiness to speak'.

Cicely Berry, Patsy Rodenburg, Kristin Linklater and others have eloquently expressed all this (and more) in their books, in tandem with practical exercises. They are, among others, pioneers in the field of voice use for the actor.

To continue to explore the fascinating topic, we suggest the following books:

Voice and the Actor by Cicely Berry
The Right to Speak by Patsy Rodenburg
Freeing the Natural Voice by Kristin Linklater
The Voice Book by Michael McCallion
Finding Your Voice by Barbara Houseman