

Interview by Eugene Douglas
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THE ACTOR'S VOICE

The ability to use simple touch to free a person's voice? The demolition of all vocal "systems"? Heresy to some, but that's just the tip of the iceberg for Catherine Fitzmaurice, an artist whose "Fitzmaurice Voicework" has literally been shaking up actors and vocal students across the world.

In our continuing series on The Actor's Voice, internationally known vocal vanguard Catherine Fitzmaurice talks with Actingnow.com's Publisher and Founding Editor Eugene J. Douglas about her techniques, obstacles to vocal freedom and her populist vision for the future of voice work.

Catherine Fitzmaurice doesn't feel well today. Her sonorous voice -- which is distinguished by a lingering British accent -- is scratchy, and she has to pause frequently to cough. This would seem like a less than ideal foundation for an interview on voice, but the gifted instructor quickly proves that nothing could be farther from the truth.

Currently in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Ms. Fitzmaurice is presiding over one of her popular, well-attended workshops. In these sessions, she and a collection of students explore her approach to vocal training, dubbed "Fitzmaurice Voicework." This approach, or collection of techniques, encourages actors, voice teachers, and the curious to experiment with many things, but with two things in particular. The first is "Deconstructing", a series of exercises in which students place their bodies in challenging yoga-esque positions that affect breath, production of sound, and the delivery of text. Secondly, the students learn a process called "Restructuring", wherein they are encouraged to literally re-structure the ways in which they shape sounds by integrating a physically muscular and imagistic approach with the act of releasing the voice.

Initially instructed at London's Central School of Speech and Drama, Ms. Fitzmaurice studied with Cicely Berry, and others, before moving to America in the late 1960's. During that time, she began to develop the approach that now bears her name and, over the years, continued honing her approach at institutions such as UCLA, Julliard, The Yale School of Drama and New York University. Ms. Fitzmaurice now instructs students at the University of Delaware, while calling New York City her home base.

Fitzmaurice Voicework -- which is used at theatres and actor training programs throughout the world -- is rapidly becoming one of the more sought-after forms of vocal training, combining solid vocal practice with energetic philosophy. Students and colleagues from all over flock to her workshops and seminars, some to discover what all the fuss is about, some in search of a new approach to voice, and still others hoping to become certified Fitzmaurice Voicework instructors.

I sat down with Catherine Fitzmaurice in an empty dance studio to discuss her passion for voice. On a much-needed break, and suffering from a cold, she nevertheless spent nearly an hour discussing her work with great vigor and joy.

In the world of performance, vocal training, for better or for worse, is often considered an ancillary wing of the actor training compound. Ms. Fitzmaurice, however, makes a compelling case for the actor's voice to move front and center.

BRILLIANT SELECTION: THE CATHERINE FITZMAURICE INTERVIEW

By Eugene J. Douglas

ACTING NOW:

For those who are unfamiliar with what you do, what is Fitzmaurice Voicework? And, if that's too huge, what is Destructuring? What is Restructuring?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

I think that I've always intended to teach people who wanted to be professional actors. I started with young actors in training at the Central School, where I'd been taught, but I didn't find that they were physically free enough to make the noises that I thought the text was capable of drawing out of them. Also, they were not thinking deeply enough into what the text might imply. So, the two things that I wanted to teach were freedom and focus. I kind of came up with the weird name of "Destructuring", which is taking away habit and pattern, form and structure, from certain behaviors. Then, I would re-inform that with something that was both physically efficient and penetrating. That became "Restructuring".

ACTING NOW:

Someone first approaching the work of "Destructuring" would come into the studio, look around and say, "Okay, you're asking me to get into challenging physical positions while I may be producing sound, breath, or rudimentary text. Why?" Why is that happening? And how is this "Destructuring?"

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Well, the positions that I use are specifically designed to move the breath pattern into different areas of the body. And, in doing so, they probably also interrupt breath rhythm. So they're changing patterns in any of four ways: size, direction, placement, and rhythm.

Why do that? Because people's breathings are so compromised. What breath does is allow people to feel -- and think, really. An inspiration is an idea and a breath. So when the breathing itself is compromised, inhibited, or interrupted in any way, you don't get the expression flowing.

ACTING NOW:

What are the obstacles to freedom of breath?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Muscle tension, which is chronic, and habit. The two things kind of intertwine, really. We make decisions very early on to restrict the amount of input from other people or the amount of expression we allow.

ACTING NOW:

Why?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Because it's not social behavior, it's not allowed by parents, by the world, by cultures of all kinds. It simply is not done. So the body gets compromised. One holds in order to not let oneself cry. Or not let oneself hit. So all of these impact not only the body but also the breathing pattern.

ACTING NOW:

So a person, for their whole life, holds something in. They may hold muscular tension in the intercostal [the areas between the ribs] muscles. Or maybe in their lower back. You're encouraging people to get into physical positions for "Deconstructing" that forces them to break those patterns of tension?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Yes.

ACTING NOW:

And what are the key positions?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Well, basically anything that impacts the breathing, which is primarily the intercostals, both external and internal: the abdomen, the throat, the whole face and jaw. The pelvis, especially the sacrum. Everywhere, actually. And when I teach breathing, I point out that breathing is not only air coming in and out of lungs, but it is also an oxygenation of the whole body. So you can get what I call a "global breath" where you can perceive breath reflex flowing throughout the body, beyond the torso. Into the fingers and the toes and face.

ACTING NOW:

If we defined "Deconstructing" as a way to encourage freedom in the body by putting yourself in different physical positions and integrating breath and voice with that process, what do we say "Restructuring" is?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

"Restructuring" is the management of a breath pattern, which is not dependent just on the need for oxygen, but is an intended breath with the rhythm of thought. The word "inspiration" -- I think, maybe I said already -- means both "in breath and idea". So that, instead of breathing in to oxygenate myself and stay alive, I'm breathing in because I have something that I want to express to you.

ACTING NOW:

So "Deconstructing" is encouraging the body to unite with the voice and breath in these physical positions, loosening and freeing --

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

It's allowing anything to happen. Anything that wants to happen. It's creating chaos. It's throwing people into the forest of Arden.

ACTING NOW:

And "Restructuring" is not about removing that sense of freedom, but about how to maintain a sense of full breath, or rib-swing, while all of that freedom is happening?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Yes, yes, yes. So that you're not controlling -- I don't use the words "breath control" any longer, which is what was told to me, but rather "breath management". So, if I'm [she speaks in a high-pitched, disturbed manner with short intakes of air] kind of hysterical [she returns to her normal voice] but I need to express

that and have my audience hear it, I can have that breath pattern quite spontaneously, perhaps, if I'm a really good actor. But, at the same time, I can manage it so that I don't hurt myself, I don't try to squeeze too much, or blow too much, or injure the vocal cords in any way. That allows me to decide how loud it needs to be. So it's about choice, as well as spontaneity. Both of those things.

ACTING NOW:

So, to break it down: the freedom to have all of the emotions and feelings, this is "Destructuring", and the security in knowing that you've got a technique to manage it, so that you can have that freedom, that's "Restructuring"?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Exactly.

ACTING NOW:

Is that why you had to put these techniques together? Because, on top of the freedom, there had to be some way to manage the release, or else it would just be [Interviewer makes wild, bouncing sounds often made while Destructuring]?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Yes, yes, because when you are just taught [She repeats the wild, bouncing sounds the interviewer just made], people injure themselves. Or they're not audible or clear. Or they can only go [She makes the sounds again] one way. So, I'm interested in variety, but I'm also interested in brilliant selection.

ACTING NOW:

How long did it take for you to develop this process -- which is still developing? How long did it take you to really develop these fundamental ideas?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Well, I would say the most fertile time was the five years I spent [teaching at Oakland University's Academy of Dramatic Art] in Michigan, because nobody was overseeing what I did. (She laughs.) There was nobody teaching any somatic behaviors such as Alexander or Feldenkrais training. There was a movement person who was real hard-assed, [saying]: "Strong movement! Muscle! Look good! Do it right! Be powerful!" Very active! So my voice class became the place where relaxation, reintegration, and the letting go of the need to be "right" became a pool, a safe place for that, as well as [a place for] working on the voice. We certainly worked with relaxation, but the relaxation tools got deeper and deeper. And then I did meditation, too. So I think the meditation things that I did were as important as the bodywork that we've talked about.

ACTING NOW:

What is preoccupying your mind right now, with regards to voice? What are you thinking of as, "This is my new challenge!"?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Well, I've been working a lot with energy. Where I used to use shiatsu and pressure, I now use a simple touch and an energy relationship.

ACTING NOW:

What do you mean? You say you use a simple touch. You mean you're actually getting hands on with the actor?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Yes. For instance, if I see the upper chest is tight, I would go in there and maybe knock on it or press it a little bit or try to open it up physically -- like wrench it apart, in the most extreme version. But that becomes unnecessary if you just add some energy. The body brings its own energy to the place and that energy kind of heats up and moves tight muscles.

ACTING NOW:

Are you moving away from physical manipulation because you believe that simply focusing the actor's attention on those areas is enough? What brought you to thinking about energy and light touch in your work?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Well, you see, like other people working with the body and with somatic things and release, I began to see stuff...(She starts to giggle) I'm not sure that you really want to have this paragraph in...

ACTING NOW:

This is JUST what I want. Keep going.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Well, I would see someone doing my work and as they began to release, as the breath focused or changed, it would appear to me that this body was maybe giving off heat. That's what I thought, at first -- and it probably was! It was heating up, it was energizing itself, it was exercising itself.

Now you know if you look at the hood of a car or a hot road, you can see little mirages, wiggles. I began to see that coming off bodies. That interested me a lot. So I started listening to, and reading about, and talking to people about, energy. And it interested me so much that I went to the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, which has a mission of health, not of arts. It has an arts component, but what they talk about, and teach, is chakras and what they call "Levels of the Energetic Field". Some of it goes way, way out and is entirely unusable by me as a theatre trainer. But some of it was very relevant and I use quite a bit.

So there are certain intuitions or other knowings that I'm beginning to trust. And I'm looking at people and touching them less, touching them gentler.

ACTING NOW:

Why more gentle?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Because it's less effort. And it's less invasive, too. It's connecting the bodywork to the mind work. If you're working all the time with the "substance body" and saying, "You've got to do this physically," the mind is very often someplace else. It's disengaged. But when you're working with energy, the mind is energy. So you are focusing energy and therefore bridging -- through breath and energy -- what the material body is to, if you like, the spiritual body. But it doesn't have to be the spiritual body, it can be the creative or intellectual person: the mind, the brilliance: they're the same thing and our culture divides

them. The body is too often objectified and I want to bring awareness into the body -- what is called, in science, proprioception. You can bring awareness into the body, internally. Even into organs, into breath flow. And then the ideas pop, one trusts oneself, and the mind becomes free together with the body.

ACTING NOW:

You start to trust your physical intuition.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Yes. Yes.

ACTING NOW:

In your VASTA (Voice and Speech Trainers Association) bio, it says that you're interested in the "healing potential" of your work. What does that mean?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Moving away from the "healing as a healer" aspect, simply, that I could bring what passed for a normal voice into a kind of creative brilliance, where that voice could really tackle difficult texts, difficult spaces -- improve, literally. So, if there was a ratio of improvement from a normal voice to a really wonderfully, creatively used voice, why not work with an injured or almost dysfunctional voice and see, by using the same techniques, whether one couldn't bring it to normalcy? I've worked with people with spasmodic dysphonia, people who've been diagnosed with paralyzed vocal folds and brought them to normal voice. So why not use these techniques?

ACTING NOW:

As you're looking out at the field, what do you find to be the future of vocal pedagogy? What is the future of thinking about the voice, of using the voice? Where are we going?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

I think that it deserves to have much wider currency. I have been privileged to teach in very highfalutin conservatories like the Central School of Speech and Drama, Yale School of Drama, Juilliard, and so on. I also care very much to bring this work into the liberal arts area. To give it to people on the liberal arts level, to B.A.'s who may be business majors or English majors or science majors. To give it to all people as simply information. It's information that very few people have. Nobody knows how the voice works; most people don't know that breath is involved with voice!

To answer your question, I see it as moving beyond theatre. I've been encouraging people who've trained with me to offer it as an alternative to yoga, as an alternative to any of the bodyworks which are current and are entering the mainstream -- finally in this century -- which used to be considered very weird. Alexander has been accepted for a long time. Feldenkrais has become acceptable. Now there are many such somatic disciplines. I think that [Fitzmaurice Voicework] really can stand by itself because of the particular synthesis that it is and because of its focus not only on body, but on breath and managing that breath into sound making.

ACTING NOW:

Are we moving away, in your opinion, from a "right way to talk"? A Skinnerian [the work of Edith Skinner] approach?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

I hope we are. Yes.

ACTING NOW:

But, as you look around, is that what you're actually seeing?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Yes, it is what I'm seeing. It definitely is. I am not looking for a "good sound". Most voice training has always been about, "What sound are you making? Make the Sound! Another Sound!" And voice teachers are sensitive to sound and they're listening to sound and they have good intuitions.

But I'm more interested in building the instrument and learning to play it, letting the sound be the result. If you're going always for results and you don't care about how you get there or what you get there with, you can injure people.

ACTING NOW:

What are some of the biggest vocal challenges you hear from most performers or people interested in doing voice work?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Everybody, I think, starts by thinking that the voice comes from the neck, from the larynx. And, in a way, it does, in the same way that music comes from the piano. But it doesn't come from the piano unless somebody goes over and plays it, right? It's completely silent. The person who has to climb inside me and play my larynx is my breath. So, really, that's the mindset I have to change. Let's do the necessary work with the breath and the body and have you feel the voice, so that you develop a kinesthetic relationship with your voice, rather than an auditory one.

ACTING NOW:

That's important for your work. It's not just a way of knowing, you have to do it.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

You have to do it. You can't write about it, or understand it, without doing it.

ACTING NOW:

I think that's key for our readers, to know that they really need to get into contact with someone who's certified with your work, or that they actually work with you, so that they can get a real understanding of the specific technique, of the DOING.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

It has to be. To make sound is a physical, in the moment, present occurrence. In order to understand what I'm talking about you have to be willing to do that.

ACTING NOW:

You have to be willing to experiment with the concept of breath being the engine, with the concept of breath exciting the vibrations in your body.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

That's right, yes. And the breath is also related to the idea, it's the A-ha! It's the [She performs a sudden, excited intake of air], "I've got something to tell you!"

ACTING NOW:

The inspiration?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

The inspiration, yes.

ACTING NOW:

How long, in your opinion, does it take someone to go from the introduction of these ideas -- say in a five-day workshop like the one you're teaching at this university -- to the moment when they "get it"? I know it varies.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

It totally varies, yes. And, you see, in this workshop I've got people who've worked with me for ten years or more, as students. I've also got people who don't have a clue what I'm doing. And the third morning is always the crucial moment, the time when people are actually beginning to let go. I had people crying, I had people yelling, as they released physical tension.

ACTING NOW:

Why?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

It takes a while to really believe that there is permission. It takes a while for people to feel safe with that permission. It takes a while for the group to get to know one another, so it's not just a function of who the teacher is. But this is a very specialized situation, teaching a voice workshop to adults --

ACTING NOW:

All day long.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

All day long, yes. It's six hours, six-and-a-half hours, a day. For five full days. And many of them are voice teachers who didn't have the knowledge of my work, but they've come to explore further. They may have studied with some other kind of system.

I hate the whole idea of systems, which is why I resisted writing and why I resisted giving [my work] a name. I think I'm teaching Voice, which is what other people are doing, but they do it a different way and they call it This or That. People that have studied with me asked me to do the same, so I finally agreed to put my name on it -- but it was for them, it wasn't for me. It was to give them legitimacy and coherence and a voice in the world: [She affects a voice] "We're teaching THIS not That". [Back to normal voice] I think all of these systems, within the next generation or two, will recombine, so that the field is just Voice. It's just a Voice world.

ACTING NOW:

What's your advice to a student who is just getting interested in your work, or in voice work period?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Well, I would advise them to touch base with all [of the different methods] and choose what works best for them. I think people have different needs, have different bodies, have different voices. Their voices are going to be used for different things. So whatever works for them is fine by me. But I still would like the information that I offer about physical freedom and the focus of breath management, I would like those to be current and common knowledge. I think that they're important.

ACTING NOW:

Conceptual ideas aside, how about some practical stuff for our readers? Like, "Hey, make sure you're doing this every day". Or, "Avoid this pitfall". Or "Try this, because it took me ten years to pick up on it".

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

I would say that they have to listen in to themselves, because they have to learn to say No and not push themselves or force anything. Also, to follow curiosity. Curiosity is desire of the mind.

ACTING NOW:

Would you say that the best advice is to get fascinated with something about voice and just follow that?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Yes.

ACTING NOW:

Your fascination was with breath and with the body, I'm assuming.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

I was totally fascinated by breath, because I saw it as the thing that was inhibited and caused inhibited behaviors, vocal as well as physical. [Breath is] life -- literally! If you inhibit your breath, you inhibit your life! (She laughs.) It's so delicious to me. And it is still so delicious to me that I will just seek out anything that has the word "Breath" in it. (She laughs.)

ACTING NOW:

Why has breath been ignored for so long?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

People are fascinated by the result of the breath, which is the sound, because the sound is beautiful. The sound makes you feel good, especially when you're listening to it. It makes you feel good when you're doing it, when you know how to do it, when you're a good singer or speaker. It's an art object, the voice. So people want to go straight to that and they don't really want to be bothered or take the time to learn the process of how people achieve that result.

I think the process is interesting as human development, whether you're trying to heal an injured voice or give someone self-empowerment or become a better actor. It doesn't matter if you don't have the best voice in the world, that doesn't stop you singing or speaking. You can still sing or speak your joy. You

can share. And the voice is really about sharing. We're sharing space as you listen to me and I'm speaking to you. We're sharing the air, the always-interchangeable air. And we're sharing vibrations. One can go so mystical about it, but it's also an extremely practical thing.

ACTING NOW:

Final thoughts or words to a young actor who might be reading this? Or for someone whose interest is just starting to get ignited about voice?

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Well, I don't know whether it's so anymore, but maybe ten or more years ago, people were really dismissive of voice. You know, you could be an actor but you didn't have to have a voice, you didn't have to train your voice.

What I'm looking for is when the voice and the creative juices flow together, so that an impulse can be acted upon vocally, as well as physically. So that the vocal behavior, the vocal gesture, is as important and interesting as the physical or psychological gesture. There is so much behavior on stages nowadays where people are working to "try to express themselves" and they're really injuring their voices. They're hurting themselves. And we're left with the sound of this person "trying" and...

ACTING NOW:

"Cannibalizing" the voice.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Cannibalizing is a great word! Cannibalizing themselves, in trying to express something that could be so easy and come from so deep and manifest so far, if they allowed themselves to explore the elements of breath management turning into sound turning into the expression of an idea. It's fun. (She giggles) It's such a huge field. It incorporates so many different styles of language and so many different behaviors: psychological, physiological, mental, creative, healing, presence. It's power. It's fun.

ACTING NOW:

Catherine Fitzmaurice, a real pleasure.

CATHERINE FITZMAURICE:

Thank you. It was great fun.

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