

## **Shake, Rattle, and Role**

by Marti Runnels

The second "Deconstructing/Restructuring: from Breath to Voice" workshop conducted by Catherine Fitzmaurice and her associates is now over, but the excitement about this work is still very much alive. For the participants at Temple University this past June an eclectic pedagogical methodology was experienced, analyzed and synthesized. The process is much more than just another vocal training method with various applications. While the goal of a well-functioning vocal instrument may be the same as other voice training methods, individuals working in this process may also experience a freeing of the soul. While Fitzmaurice is by no means introducing or advocating a new religious experience, the effect of releasing and empowering the body/mind has its parallels in ecstatic religious phenomena. But then so does a rock concert.

What Fitzmaurice is exploring gets one beyond mouth, larynx and diaphragm and into unifying that which western culture continues to divide: the body/mind. This puts her work in the same category as the ideas of Freud, Pavlov, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, John Locke, Kant and perhaps more pertinently Stanislavski and Meyerhold. Stanislavski's system of internal motivations and Meyerhold's biomechanics have in many ways launched two different approaches to theatre and acting.

But despite their apparent polar positions about the acting process, both these Russian theatre practitioners knew that natural, believable performance was only achieved in a unified, energized body/mind. As Fitzmaurice's work seeks to energize and coordinate both the Autonomic Nervous System (A.N.S.) and the Central Nervous System (C.N.S.), she offers a path for actors who work from the inside out or from the outside in. In this sense, the process may not only offer universal application, but also encourage, or at the least allow actors to discover more than one way of working. With the cornucopia of style demands placed before the working actor, this appears to be advantageous. For teachers who want to teach that there is "only one road" this may appear to open Pandora's Box. In practice, the thing this participant saw opening was the body/mind of the other participants.

SHAKE - This opening of the body/mind takes place initially in the Deconstructing portion of the process. Fitzmaurice has adapted/borrowed from bioenergetics and yoga and other somatic trainings to offer her own means of freeing, expanding and energizing the body/mind: particularly through tremors. Just as the body/mind responds (A.N.S.) to the threat of cold by shivering, shivering exists as a positive energy to counter the negative of cold. Fitzmaurice teaches that one can tremor as an action instead of as a response. In this way, instead of gaining energy to fight off a threat, one who is not under a threat becomes a recipient of only the added benefit. As these tremors are created, the individual is not only energized but is also released from tension. Just as the tremors create increased demand for oxygen, breath, and blood supply they also require that the individual release tension in order for the tremor to occur and be sustained. The process of deconstructing, then, is a means to break down bad breathing habits, locate and eliminate tension, open and expand breathing mechanisms, and also to allow the person to become vibrant.

RATTLE - Fitzmaurice does not see the vocal cords vibrating in an immobile vessel. Instead the tremors help one experience the entire being as something that vibrates. From atoms, to cells, to the heart, the entire body/mind is vibrating. When one begins to vocalize during the tremor, an awareness that the entire body/mind is making sound is clear.

Whether with prepared text or unintelligible sounds, it's obvious that one will not normally be performing or speaking in the manner described above. However, the demands of the tremor operate as a metaphor for the physical and psychological demands of the performance experience and also functionally as a substitute for those same demands. In other words, the tremor combined with sound and remembered in the body/mind, can provide possible avenues for creative choices in the rehearsal/performance process.

ROLE - As the actor, speaker, businessperson or singer prepares to perform it is critical to do the restructuring ("structured breathing") as well. If destructuring is letting the A.N.S. free to break down the barriers, the restructuring is integrating the A.N.S. with the C.N.S. so that maximum efficiency and flexibility can be wedded to fulfill the demands of the performance.

The aim in view leads to an open, receptive, energized performer who is able to respond naturally and improvisationally to the demands of the role. But clearly it is not just the vocal demands that this process enables the performer to face. For in dealing with total body/mind, the entire person is recreated to take the stage.

© Runnels, Vasta newsletter: June 1995. Reprinted with permission.