

Interview of Saul Kotzubei by Nancy Saklad (2010)

This interview is in Nancy's forthcoming book, *Voice and Speech Training in the New Millennium: Conversations With Master Teachers*

Background

NANCY: What drew you to voice and speech work?

SAUL: My mother Catherine Fitzmaurice, it turns out, is a gifted voice teacher and so there is a strong gravitational force there. I avoided her work for thirty years, and when I finally decided to try it, I realized it could help me. It didn't take me long to realize that many other people, actors and non-actors, really need to learn how to find and then effectively use their voices, too.

NANCY: Besides Catherine, who are your mentors and how have they influenced your work?

SAUL: My most important teachers are my students in Los Angeles and the people I've worked with who've gone through the Fitzmaurice certification program. There are also a couple voice teachers outside of the Fitzmaurice tradition, wonderful teachers who have taught me and have deeply influenced me---Patsy Rodenburg and Richard Armstrong. They are true voice teachers, each very different than the other. Then there's my therapist. I know that's personal, and that he's not a voice teacher, but for me he's been a necessary part of my learning about my voice. I've also had a few mentors who never explicitly addressed voice who nevertheless profoundly influenced my teaching. For many years I did conflict resolution with a man named Peter

Chipmann. In the 70's, Peter was a leader in the computer industry. He had 20,000 employees working under him, and he travelled all over the world opening new factories. Then one day in Puerto Rico, touring his factory and seeing the nice cars and the golf course the workers now had, he also noticed that the workers had lost a vitality in their eyes that they had had before the factory was built. And at that moment, he saw clearly that his work wasn't meaningful to him anymore. So he left and found his way into doing conflict resolution with corporations, non-profits and what we would probably now call terrorists---a wide-range. When he hired me, late in his career, he sat next to me under a big oak tree and said, "Saul, there are a few reasons why I'll fire you, and I want you to know what they are right now." I was immediately apprehensive. Then he said, "First, if you don't learn something every day that we're working together I will fire you. Second, if you don't contribute something every day I'll fire you. Third, if we don't have fun together I'll fire you. And finally, if you don't fail often I'll fire you because it means you're not taking risks." Wow. I felt whole new parts of myself begin to breathe that day. Then there are two acting teachers in Los Angeles who taught me something that really affected my teaching: Richard Seyd and Stuart Rogers. Richard really knows something about acting, but what made him so special to me was witnessing how he helped his students access and reveal their humanity without ever beating them up, dominating them, or puffing them up with false praise. The other teacher is Stuart Rogers. He taught me how to bring myself into a part while still staying true to the part. An important aspect of that was learning to enter the subjectivity of a character, to become a character. A lot of teachers talk about this, but Stuart showed me how to do it. Before working with him, I only played the idea of a character. When I played the idea of a character, I created a lot of distance from myself that in turn lead to a lot of distance from others. There's a corollary in voice work. A lot of actors come to a voice class thinking that they are

going to learn how to sound “good.” The non-performers I work with often start by asking if I can teach them to sound “confident” or “correct.” But focusing on getting the voice to sound good or correct actually distances students from themselves and others. Here’s a personal example. When I was just starting out as a voice teacher, I had a telephone answering machine. My outgoing message started with something like, “Hello my name is Saul Kotzubei. If you’re calling about voice coaching . . .” I spoke the words with my best resonant voice. I had a notion--created out of my own unacknowledged fear---that I was supposed to sound like a “good” voice teacher. That was not a voice teacher I would want to study with. That was somebody who was, albeit unconsciously, putting on the idea of a voice that sounds good. It took me a year to recognize what I had done. Once I recognized it, I decided not to change the voice message. I left it on for another year as a reminder to myself of the limitations of going in that direction. When we get stuck in some rigid idea of good, correct, confident, even resonant—that is using the voice to hide more expertly. Ultimately voice work should open up the voice so one can fluidly reveal to others what is important in any given context.

The Voice and Speech World of Today

NANCY: How would you describe the features that distinguish your work in the field?

SAUL: First, my work is rooted in Fitzmaurice Voicework. That work is aimed at helping people develop freedom and flexibility in their breathing and voice and in their ability to communicate effectively with others. Based on Catherine’s own search of how to accomplish this, she has drawn together various areas that were not originally developed for voice training and modified

them to make them relevant. She has, for instance, modified Reichian bodywork, shiatsu, yoga, and many other modalities so they would be relevant to freeing the breathing and the voice. This work is mixed with voice training that Catherine studied at the Central School of Speech and Drama. She calls her work “Destructuring” and “Restructuring.” Destructuring releases habitual holding patterns in the muscles involved in breathing and voice, and then Restructuring is about focusing the resultant freedom of breath, energy, musculature, awareness, feeling, imagination, and melding it with thought into effective communication. In terms of my particular body of work, I use the principles that my mother taught me and mix them with many others. My mother encouraged this from the beginning by saying, “I want you to learn from everyone to be the best teacher you can be. My work is not a fixed thing but a living, growing body of principles, exercises, and ways of knowing to be applied uniquely and specifically in different circumstances.” Another element that distinguishes my work with actors---probably because I teach in LA---is that it is intimately connected to the performance and audition process. I’m interested in how students build a bridge from their voicework to their acting. How do students reveal their humanity through the voice and body, fluidly, moment to moment, within the highly specific needs and language of the story? One big way I approach that is through encouraging presence and focus---becoming aware of what one is actually experiencing internally and externally and then leaning into what is important for the character. Another area I’m very excited about is in helping students use---rather than reject---the challenges they face in the moment of performance. I’ll elaborate on one aspect of this. Many actors habitually split, by which I mean they reveal something in performance while unconsciously hiding more challenging parts of their experience. When this happens wonderful nuances of the story become muted, students’ voices become flat, and the performances fail to sizzle, to reveal. For example,

an actress who is nervous does a scene in an acting class. It doesn't go so well. The acting teacher points out that she's missing something really important in the scene, tells her what it is, and asks her to investigate it further. That teacher might be spot on, but from my perspective, it's also true that the actress probably did a fantastic job during the scene of communicating how important it was to her not to be afraid. In this example, that's the split; the actress believes she's working on communicating as her character while she's really doing a tremendous amount of largely unconscious work to try not to experience or be perceived as experiencing fear. We could say she's doing a poor performance of what the writer intended but an accurate, perhaps brilliant expression of what the actress is really putting her energy into. That split often begins in preparation for a part. When she's preparing, and she feels anxiety about getting something "right," instead of splitting away from her anxiety she could begin to acknowledge it and learn how to let it be so she doesn't have to do so much work to push it away. Having acknowledged her anxiety, she can then focus on what's important to the character. As part of that process she may very well need to do more work to get to know what she's saying and the context that she's in. But once she's performing, if she's afraid, there's a different need: to incorporate what is into the story. Once she has become aware of her fear and accepted it, she can focus on what's important for the character, or she can incorporate her fear as a part of her character's experience in whatever way makes sense for the story, or she can wield the energy of the fear and transform it through the subjectivity of the character. When she has some facility with those options, her performance will become more vivid, fluid, and appropriate for the piece. Of course, actors can learn to work this way with all manner of challenges and experiences, not just fear. In developing this part of my work, I have drawn from many teachers, but it is rooted in my mother's work on opening to the self as a basis for revelatory voicework.

NANCY: So, in performance you're incorporating all of the given circumstances and that includes the actor and all of his or her stuff---fear, breathing, yearning, openness etc?

SAUL: Yes. It's so valuable to learn to expand the flexibility of your imagination and the fluidity of your sense of self enough to be able to include almost anything you experience in the moment as a part of the character's experience. Some of what you experience will be important and some not so important, just like in life. Whether and to what degree the experience is relevant depends on your character. The idea isn't to rewrite the story in order to include what is, but to allow "what is" to integrate into the story to help reveal the rich humanity of the story as opposed to just a one-dimensional idea of the story. One can begin to see almost every problem that is encountered in the moment of performing as an opportunity to experience something as the character rather than something to suppress in order to "act well." That process is, of course, different with every actor.

NANCY: When I see and hear somebody like Ben Kingsley, I would guess that he does that.

SAUL: Great actors do this and they often do it intuitively and sometimes they've been taught. They do it and we see and hear nuances that simply can't be manufactured in advance. They're too complex, too spontaneous, too human, too reflective of what is being received in the moment from the other actors. That is the integration of voicework with acting. Moving beyond just having an open, flexible voice, and clear understanding of the text, to revealing one's moment to

moment humanity through the voice, all within the needs of the story, the realities of what the character needs to communicate. This integration emerges in the moment, often through relating with other characters. When it happens, something inside an audience wakes up.

NANCY: Does voice and speech training play a unique role within actor training?

SAUL: Yes. But we get into trouble when they become an overly isolated part of the training, and actors don't learn how to integrate the work with their acting training.

NANCY: Some of the obvious benefits of voice and speech training are an evolved instrument and improved use of it. What are some of the indirect benefits?

SAUL: One benefit is helping students experience what it is to be present or at least aspects of what it is to be present with oneself and with others, in a space. The possibility of presence or lack of presence emerges a lot in voice and speech work.

NANCY: What is vocal presence and is it teachable?

SAUL: Vocal presence is being present to what is happening and, with a sufficiently available voice, communicating what is important in the moment. Being able to communicate implies not only that the other characters get what you say but that the audience also gets to share in it. If

you can do that, and do it in a way that is vividly accurate for the character and healthy for you, you've found pretty damn great vocal presence. What vocal presence isn't is important, too. Generally speaking, it's not "sounding good." My mother used to say that after she coached a show if the reviews mentioned anything good or bad about the voices, she hadn't done her job. The voice is a vehicle for communicating something. It's not the thing we want an audience to pay attention to unless the character is supposed to have an especially noticeable voice.

Practical Considerations

NANCY: Do you think students should study multiple approaches?

SAUL: Yes, with this caveat. It can take many years in a particular kind of work, or with a particular teacher to really learn something deeply. That said, the danger of not studying other approaches is that one develops too narrow an experience of the voice or thinks one has access to "The Only Truth." If you get to study with two great voice teachers with different approaches in your lifetime, you've done really well.

NANCY: What does the body need to produce optimal vocal work?

SAUL: It needs to be able to respond to the needs of the moment in a flexible, efficient way.

NANCY: Would you talk about the breath work you use, “Destructuring” and “Restructuring?”

SAUL: Destructuring helps the body/mind become flexible, less rigid. It is the work that Catherine developed, and is still developing, to help people access release. Release can mean a lot of different things to different people. By release, I mean several things: release into gravity, release of unnecessary tension, acceptance of and release into what one is experiencing---I often think of release as vibrant release, not dead release---and finally letting the breathing go as an expression of being with what is. Let me talk a little more about this last point. When I first ask people to let me witness their experience of released breathing most people do some kind of graceful, very slow breathing. But that’s not release; it’s management. Discovering the experience of release is a crucially important process. Release needs to be experienced not just on the ground, but also standing up, as a kind of vibrancy. But release isn’t enough. You’ve got to focus the freedom found in Destructuring into healthy, efficient, and effective voice use. That’s where Restructuring comes in. I think of Restructuring as a technical process for waking up the support and natural resonance that are needed when you genuinely communicate with someone. There are a few key elements here. One is how breath pressure is being initiated and changed in order to power the voice. Catherine has found that many highly gifted speakers organically accomplish this, often unconsciously, through the deepest muscle of the abdominal wall, the transversus abdominus. That muscle works in tandem with the diaphragm and the external intercostals of the ribcage, with only limited engagement of other muscles. Next there’s relating breath to the vibration of the vocal folds in an efficient and healthy way. Eventually there’s doing that while being able to find natural resonance while actually relating to somebody else and communicating what you want to communicate. The practice of Restructuring is meant to wake up the key elements of what someone with a free body/voice does organically when they

want to communicate. Once you've woken up the necessary connections through the technical work, there is a crucially important final stage: trust. You let go of the technical in favor of communicating with someone. It's like a pianist practicing scales. The point isn't for her to get good at practicing scales. The point is to practice scales so she can eventually let them go and play stunning music.

NANCY: How do you approach resonance, tonality and vocal qualities?

SAUL: I address them as naturally needed aspects of the voice that arise in vivid communication in specific contexts. I address them technically in exercises but always with an eye to communication. For resonance specifically, I address it differently from Catherine because of influences from other teachers. But I take seriously her warning to avoid getting stuck in resonant patterns that we associate with a "good" voice.

NANCY: How would you describe the role of listening in voice and speech work?

SAUL: I am inspired to speak by a combination of what is inside of me and what and who is external to me. When I stop listening, what's the point of speaking?

NANCY: How would you describe the relationship between emotion and voice and speech work?

SAUL: We shouldn't try to make students be emotional. Instead, we want to slowly and gently encourage them to allow themselves to be available and emotionally responsive. Some actors fall into the trap in voice work of seeking emotion---as if that's the goal. If part of what actors do is reveal the human condition, the fact that we have to acknowledge is that much of the time in daily life people try to avoid being emotional or are private with their emotions (which is completely different from trying to avoid being emotional). When appropriate, actors need to be able to contain or even repress emotions while they are speaking. That said, some people fall into the opposite trap and believe that actors shouldn't ever be extremely emotional when they speak. Sometimes there may be very little obvious emotion; sometimes there may be a lot, depending on the context. Someone who has learned to be available and to manage that availability can respond to the needs of the moment without manufacturing or unconsciously repressing emotion. I want to say one more thing here. It's very personal work for each actor to discover how to open in voice class, and other acting contexts, and then learn to integrate those experiences in healthy, meaningful ways outside of class. For many students, as well as teachers, that work is very, very challenging. Partly for that reason, teachers should not try to force students to be open.

NANCY: How do you approach the teaching of range?

SAUL: I'm assuming you mean pitch range, though I also think about range in terms of the range of our humanity that we can experience and communicate, which is of course broader than pitch

range. Early on as a student I really misunderstood the notion of exploring pitch. I thought of it as purely technical and so I had strong resistance to it. Now I understand that doing pitch related exercises is a way to help actors open to the richness of the possibilities of revealing the self. So, what I do is teach exercises while finding ways to encourage the exercises to be human. That is, I ask people to engage their imaginations, their minds, their bodies, and sometimes simply their awareness of what is inside and outside, while exploring pitch.

Moving Into the Future

NANCY: How has your work evolved over time?

SAUL: After doing whatever specific preparation I do for teaching on a given day, I'm now more willing "not to know." By "not knowing" I mean being willing to enter a situation without deciding in advance exactly how it should be. That helps me discover a "knowing" that lives only in the moment of interacting with an actor, which for me is very similar to what I'm asking actors to do onstage.

NANCY: What advice would you give to voice and speech teachers at the beginning of their teaching careers?

SAUL: Spend time with this question: when you teach are you unintentionally helping some of your students hide behind "good" voice or speech? That sounds harsh perhaps, but it's so

important. I continue to be curious about my motivations for teaching. We're talking about teaching voice here, and voice is so huge and so personal that it behooves us as teachers to continue to explore our own humanity and communication so there really is something to teach. Finally, I would say that perhaps even more than through the specific approach that you teach, your students will learn by being with you.

NANCY: What advice would you give to performance students on the brink of their professional careers?

SAUL: Be porous to others but don't abandon yourself. Keep learning and learning to trust yourself. Continue to seek out genuine, excellent teachers and trust your instincts about whether they are empowering you to find and use your voice to communicate effectively with others.

NANCY: What do you think the future holds for voice and speech training? Where are we going?

SAUL: I will tell you once we get to the future. That's not me being glib. I don't know what I will be teaching in ten years. How could I know? I hope it won't be the same as what I'm doing now. That would mean that I haven't kept growing. So how could I know what the future holds for all of voice and speech training? I'll tell you when we get there.

NANCY: What impact do you hope your work will have on vocal training at large?

SAUL: I realize that I hold a unique position in the context of Fitzmaurice Voicework. I am, as it were, a lineage holder. My hope is that I'm internalizing the richness of my mother's work and making it my work. It's complex---learning the principles of a body of work, and specific processes for teaching it, and internalizing them in such a way that the body of work has continuity and also changes as its practitioners grow and change. At the same time, I'm a voice teacher, not just a teacher of an approach to the voice. I hope my own work and curiosity will help a lot of other teachers and students discover what is helpful for them.