

The Teller's Voice: Your Instrument

By Sebastian Lockwood & Nanette Perrotte

I GIVE YOU THE END OF A GOLDEN STRING;
ONLY WIND IT INTO A BALL,
IT WILL LEAD YOU IN AT HEAVEN'S GATE,
BUILT IN JERUSALEM'S WALL.
—WILLIAM BLAKE

As we step up into the teller's ring, as we accept the teller's talking stick, as the voices about the camp-fire hush and we begin; we offer our audience that golden string. If they take that thread from us, and wind it into a ball of tales, it will enter them into Heaven's gate: Storyland.

The string is the tellers' voice. That voice must hook and seduce – then flow, sometimes a brook (creek for the rest of you) sometimes a strong river, rapids, waterfall and silent pond: but always the tension of the string, the voice, is there – even in the silent pause, the tension is not lost till silence at the end.

When poets meet they shake the hand that shook the hand: a handshake that passes back down the generations to first poet who shook the hand... of Homer?

For the Storyteller the voice connects us to all the golden strings that form the web within which we weave our tales, always aware of the ancestors who told before us and on whose shoulders we stand.

Singers will take infinite care of their instrument – their voice – tellers less so. Singers understand the value of the warm-up of breath, body and voice. If they are not physically open and loose and using the pedal of breath wisely, they know that the vocal folds cannot handle the work alone. A warmed up voice is a voice that has nuance and depth, and is a voice that is ready to go on a journey with you, the energy of the story and your audience.

Have you found yourself telling a half-hour piece and ten minutes in your vocal chords crack? That unmistakable tickle in the throat and tear in the eye: the audience blurs and Oh No! Not now... as you find another range to push through, drink water, clear your throat. The clearing of the throat only makes it worse, the water is only a temporary Band Aid. And on top of all of that, your mind is now focused on the problem, not focused on the telling of the story. Monkey Mind.

The teller's Zone One is within the trance of those great words, Once upon a time... and if the moment is right, the telling will be word perfect. But if a voice and body aren't warmed-up properly they can become an Achilles' Heel: you can run, but it

eventually catches up and takes you down. You are out of the zone, out of the trance and in trouble.

Telling outdoors is a challenge. I always hope for some sort of building or wall I can bounce my voice off – in the open the voice must become wind. Caesar claimed to be able to be heard by ten thousand men in the field – he studied with the great Orator, Molon, in Rhodes to achieve that feat – and it was on the way there that he was kidnapped by pirates, but that is another story.

So what to do for the voice? You have to start where you are, begin to work with the tools of breath body and voice. Make a recording of yourself and listen: how does your breath work as a carrier for your voice? Is your voice breathy or rough and hoarse? If either of those is true, then we work to balance your voice in the other direction. Too much breath in the voice means that you aren't using the vibration of the vocals folds to their full potential. Hoarseness could mean that your voice is completely dependant on your throat – you aren't using the resonators in your face and chest.

How deeply are you breathing, are you taking the breath into your upper chest where it will do you no good? You want to learn to breathe deep into the ribs where there is more power.

What does your voice sound like? Don't judge, just listen deeply. Listen for depth of sound – that is what your audience wants to hear. The things you want to work away from are: nasality, too much high and thin pitch, a swallowed and mumbled sound.

It helps to take singing lessons and do Yoga. Singing will improve range, dynamic, and endurance and teach you about the textures that are available in your voice. Yoga will open up your awareness to your body and its changes as you travel through your piece. It helps focus your mind to the task at hand of telling and following that Golden String to your fullest potential.

The Haida people say the story teller should practice on trees till fifty and then they are ready – we are not as strict, and wish to encourage young tellers – nevertheless, I find that alone in the woods I can really feel the edges of my voice, take it to its limit – and remember, if you get lost the trees know exactly where they are.

Sebastian Lockwood (teller of epics, educator) and Nanette Perrotte (voice coach, singer, yoga teacher) will be giving their workshop, The Teller's Voice: Achieving Power and Endurance, at this year's STF conference. www.lumenarts.com