

Vocal Traditions: Fitzmaurice Voicework

Jeff Morrison

Department of Theatre Arts, Marymount Manhattan College, New York, NY, US
jmorrison@mmm.edu

Saul Kotzubei

Independent Scholar, Los Angeles, CA, US

Tyler Seiple

Fitzmaurice Institute, Los Angeles, CA, US

Jeff Morrison teaches voice, speech and dialects to B.F.A and B.A. acting students at Marymount Manhattan College. He has taught at ART/MXAT at Harvard University, the Old Globe School/USD in San Diego, Tufts University, San Diego State University, the University of Northern Iowa and the Heifetz International Music Institute. He is a Certified Associate Teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework (2000) and has assisted Catherine Fitzmaurice at workshops and certifications since 2002. He has coached for television and stage in New York, Los Angeles, San Diego and the Midwest and is the former Editor-in-Chief of the *Voice and Speech Review*. He holds an M.F.A. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and a B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania.

Saul Kotzubei teaches voice workshops and private clients in Los Angeles and around the world. He is also a lead trainer in the Fitzmaurice Voicework Teacher Certification Program. A performer with a master's degree in Buddhist studies, and wide-ranging acting training that includes a year studying clown with Philippe Gaulier, Saul has taught Fitzmaurice Voicework at NYU's BFA program (CAP 21), the Actors Center in New York, and in workshops throughout North, Central, and South America, as well as Europe. In addition to teaching voice, Saul teaches public speaking and does a wide range of communication-related consulting. He holds an MA from Columbia University and a BA from Wesleyan University.

Tyler Seiple is an actor, director, writer, producer, and freelance voice and speech coach in the Los Angeles area. He holds an MFA from the University of California, Irvine and a BA from the Ohio State University. He is an Associate Teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework and a Certified Teacher of Knight-Thompson Speechwork, as well as the founder of his coaching company, *phonetic phreedom*. Tyler coaches productions and private clients throughout the Los Angeles area. He has taught at the University of California, Irvine, California State University, Long Beach, Chapman University, and at multiple studios in the Los Angeles area.

Vocal Traditions: Fitzmaurice Voicework

Vocal Traditions is a series in the *Voice and Speech Review* that highlights historically important voice teachers and schools of thought in the world of vocal pedagogy. In this essay, Fitzmaurice Voicework offers its overview, history, principles, and certification process. The key features of Fitzmaurice Voicework are explored including: Destructuring, Restructuring, Presence Work, Applications, and Play. The essay discusses connections between Fitzmaurice Voicework and *bel canto* singing technique, the importance of an anatomically accurate understanding of the voice, and the significance of experience-oriented (as opposed to goal-oriented) teaching and learning.

Overview

Fitzmaurice Voicework explores the dynamic interactions of body, breath, imagination, language, and voice. This holistic approach to the voice supports the development of vibrant voices that communicate intention and feeling with an economy of effort. The work is a synthesis of Catherine Fitzmaurice's classical technical voice training, her adaptations of other modalities, and her own experiential insights. It also includes significant contributions from voice teachers she has trained.

Students of Fitzmaurice Voicework usually begin with a focus on breathing by learning **Destructuring** and **Restructuring**. These two parts of the work guide students to experience the distinction between the autonomic (involuntary and reflexive) nervous system and the central (voluntary) nervous system. Harmonizing these two aspects of the nervous system helps students embody and communicate their full humanity while also developing relevant skills with greater ease, specificity, and adaptability.

To help students integrate and use the work of Destructuring and Restructuring, students also learn Fitzmaurice **Presence Work**. In Presence Work, students gradually cultivate their ability to be seen, heard, and felt by others. A key part of this work involves expanding the capacity to be present by developing a fluid awareness of internal and external experience and honing the ability to focus on and react to what matters in the moment.

Students then explore **Applications** of Fitzmaurice Voicework in various contexts of performance that involve the voice. As students explore these Applications, they engage their sense of creative **Play** to experiment and innovate with the work, incorporating it into their own individualized practice as performers and communicators of all kinds.

History

The work began in the explorations and teaching of Catherine Fitzmaurice. From age ten to seventeen, she studied voice, speech, verse speaking, and acting with Royal Central School of Speech and Drama alumna Barbara Bunch, who was also one of Cicely Berry's childhood teachers. Catherine then attended the Central School (which was founded in 1906 by Elsie Fogerty to teach her adaptations for stage actors of the classical Italian *bel canto* voice training method).

Catherine was a scholarship holder for three years at the Central School. Her teachers there included Cicely Berry, Gwyneth Thurburn, and J. Clifford Turner. While at Central, Catherine won multiple prizes including a national competition: the prestigious English Festival of Spoken Poetry, sponsored by Edith Sitwell and T. S. Eliot.

In 1965, Catherine began teaching voice, verse speaking, and prose reading at the Central School. When teaching the acting students there, she found that some of them seemed incapable of being fully vocally expressive. She saw the primary problem as inhibition caused by tension, particularly around breathing. As she explored ways to reduce these habituated limitations, David Kozubei introduced her to the work of Wilhelm Reich and his therapeutic use of reflexive tremors. After further study with Alexander Lowen and others, she began to adapt some of Reich's work for voice training and incorporated it into her classes, where she immediately recognized its effectiveness. These discoveries initiated a process in which she began to build upon and differentiate from her Central School training.

Since then, Catherine has continued to study somatic, mindfulness, and energy-oriented disciplines (including yoga, shiatsu, meditation, and healing techniques such as Brennan Healing Science and Reiki). Through these and other explorations, Fitzmaurice Voicework has evolved into a vocal pedagogy with a unique approach to voice and with a cultural inheritance and perspective that span centuries and continents.

Since leaving London, Catherine has taught voice and text at the Yale School of Drama, Harvard/American Repertory Theatre/MXAT, the Juilliard School's Drama Division, New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Acting program, and many other actor training programs, as well as in numerous workshops and seminars around the world.

Beyond the classroom, Catherine has lectured and conducted workshops for theatre, academic, and medical colleagues at international theatres, actor training establishments, universities, and conferences on five continents. She has worked as voice, speech, text, and dialect coach and consultant for award-winning directors JoAnne Akalaitis, Robert Wilson, Molly Smith, and many others, at such venues as the Guthrie Theatre, Stratford/Canada, Arena Stage, and Lincoln Center. Her roles as a performer include Goneril in Robert Wilson's *Lear* in Los Angeles and Prospero in Molly Smith's *The Tempest* at Perseverance Theatre, and she was a member of the company at the American Conservatory Theatre for three years.

Key Features of Fitzmaurice Voicework

Throughout her teaching, Catherine has championed a basic reality: breathing in-the-moment that is responsive to inner and outer circumstances is the foundation for vibrant and expressive voices. This focus on breath (as opposed to vocal “quality”) as the key to expressive potential helps students of Fitzmaurice Voicework engage in a deep and wide-ranging exploration of the underpinnings of the human voice and communication.

In Catherine’s terms, “survival breathing” refers to the autonomic or reflexive breathing that responds dynamically to the body’s need for oxygen, and “intentional

breathing” refers to the voluntary use of breath to power vocal communication. Rooted in a keen awareness of anatomy, neurology, and physiology, Fitzmaurice Voicework incorporates the latest scientific insights to assist students in communicating with depth and clarity by harmonizing the involuntary with the voluntary, rather than allowing these forces to remain isolated or in conflict with each other.

Destructuring and **Restructuring** are the two primary practices associated with this exploration. Fitzmaurice Voicework further utilizes **Presence Work**, various **Applications**, and **Play** to support communication and performance in all of its dynamic variability.

Destructuring

Destructuring helps students open to their involuntary impulses, release excess tension, and increase a felt sense of flow. It “prepares students to allow autonomic, uncontrolled physiological shiver-like oscillations to pass like a wave through their entire bodies,” during which “chronic tension blocks are made very apparent” (Fitzmaurice 2015, 3). These “shiver-like oscillations,” or “tremors,” are “induced initially through hyper-extension of the body’s extremities only, thus leaving the torso muscles free to respond with a heightened breathing pattern” (1997, 249).

By triggering reflexive responses in the autonomic nervous system, **Destructuring** opens students’ awareness to changes in their survival breathing and other involuntary impulses. Tremors can be explored, either through self-guided practice or with instruction, following a “Sequence” of exercises that have been developed over time, but “there is no exact, prescribed regimen or set of exercises to be followed in this work” (2015, 5). Instead, students’ individual experiences are paramount. Ultimately, the practice of **Destructuring** is “self-regulatory,” in that the students determine “how much, and when, and where” they experience release in their own body and breath (3).

Catherine refers to some of her exercises as “dynamic efforts,” rather than “positions”

(as in yoga), in order to emphasize that each individual will engage with them differently rather than aiming for an idealized external physical image, and that the transitions between each are as important as the efforts themselves. Teachers of Destructuring are encouraged to develop sensitivity to individual student growth and experience, in the moment and over time, rather than adhering to a fixed set of repeated exercises. Students of Destructuring are encouraged to develop “autonomy, authenticity, and authority” while exploring this work (1997, 249). This mindset extends well beyond the classroom.

As summarized in Catherine’s writings, most notably “Breathing Matters,” the benefits of Destructuring include:

- releasing muscle tension (and reducing stress and limitations on movement, circulation, breath, and vocal expressivity);
- sensitizing the body to vibration (and ultimately to resonance);
- stimulating autonomic (survival) breathing (and cellular oxygenation) without causing hyperventilation;
- creating a simultaneously relaxed and receptive state of awareness by encouraging the brain to slow into alpha and theta wave frequencies; and
- inducing the pleasurable feeling of energy flowing through the entire body (2015, 4).

Destructuring also introduces “fluffy sound” through the minimal effort of semi-approximated vocal folds. This encourages the “engagement of the vocal folds to coordinate with the exhalation, developing a kinesthetic rather than auditory relationship with the participant’s voice” (4).

A subjective exploration of sound accompanied by the release of habitual tensions also enables (but does not aim for) the release of repressed emotion. Any such emotion generally is channeled into play with text.

During Destructuring, the interplay of the deliberate with the involuntary can extend to articulator activation, impromptu speaking, and fully embodied explorations of text, creating opportunities for spontaneous, personal responses to inner and outer circumstances.

Restructuring

Restructuring develops further awareness of breathing, and it can be used after, alongside,

or even before Destructuring. Destructuring serves as a helpful foundation for Restructuring. But even alone, Restructuring is useful in developing an embodied knowledge of rib and abdominal anatomy, function, and flow as they apply to communication.

During Restructuring, students activate the central nervous system, and therefore an intentional breath pattern, to communicate. Rather than suppressing the breathing or other impulses accessed by Destructuring, Restructuring harmonizes the expression of thought and other facets of communication with “the individual’s physical and/or emotional needs for oxygen moment to moment” (1997, 250).

The specific flow of muscular use and release in Restructuring is an evolution of Elsie Fogerty’s *bel canto* method (which she called “rib reserve”) and seeks to preserve the best of her work while also incorporating nuances found in organically open and expressive bodies.

Restructured breathing begins with “the use of the external intercostals and release of the abdomen for a fast inhalation responsive to a desire to express a thought — an *inspiration*” (2015, 7). The expansion of the lower third of the ribcage, where the bones and costal cartilages are most free to move and the lungs are largest, allows students to draw in “as much air as needed phrase by phrase without undue effort in the upper chest but also without inhibiting any movement that may occur there as a result of physical need or emotional involvement” (1997, 250). The coordinated movement of rib muscle engagement and abdominal muscle release during inhalation enables efficient movement of the diaphragm, as it moves down and out in all three dimensions and increases lung volume.

The Restructured exhalation (with sound) begins with a contraction of the deepest, most internal abdominal muscle, the *transversus abdominis*. This muscle compresses the abdominal organs back into the abdominal cavity and upwards, into the underside of the diaphragm, rather than compressing the ribcage to force air out. This specific use of the *transversus abdominis*, without overuse of the oblique or *rectus* abdominal muscles, provides sustained support in the Restructured exhale. The result is a versatile flow of breath and voice

that can respond to autonomic needs and communication goals, without introducing unnecessary—or potentially harmful—tension in the ribcage, abdomen, shoulders, or neck. Or anywhere else in the body!

Restructuring is a distillation of an organic process that follows from and fulfils the need to communicate. Students often find that Restructuring emerges spontaneously from the process of Destructuring—an “order out of chaos” that parallels similar emergence patterns in the biological and physical sciences.

Unlike “rib reserve” and *bel canto* singing techniques, during Restructuring the ribs are not held open, and the *transversus abdominis* is engaged as a response to imagination, emotion, text, spatial context, and other realities affecting communication. Restructuring supports the needs of the performer, rather than tying students to a “correct” or “proper” way to use their breath to create “good” sound production. While there is a clearly discernible pattern in the sequence of muscular actions of Restructuring, the manner in which these movements unfold is infinitely variable. Timing, duration, and sense of effort and release in Restructuring are intuitive and improvisatory, responding to the in-the-moment needs of performance.

Restructuring also involves the use of the “Focus Line,” an awareness of connection to the listener and audience that “involves receiving as much as sending” (251).

Presence

The foundation of **Presence Work** is the gradual invitation to students to be present with others, themselves, and the space they are in. Through this exploration, a natural vibrancy or presence emerges—perceivable by audiences—as students learn to reveal their expressivity with more ease. An appreciation and care for the strength and tenderness of students’ humanity supports them in recognizing their own willingness to be heard, seen, and felt by others. The process is unforced, respecting the individual rhythms and impulses of students. As students explore opening themselves to others, they also clarify their own boundaries and

their right to have boundaries.

Part of the Presence Work is focused on learning to be with nerves and stress in useful and healthy ways. As a natural by-product of this work, performing can become easier and more pleasurable.

Applications

The **Applications** of Fitzmaurice Voicework have been taught and explored in myriad ways in theatrical, cinematic, professional, and scientific fields. Some of the applications taught during Fitzmaurice Voicework Teacher Certifications include: vocal range (pitch, rate, volume, and resonance); heightened emotion (laughing, crying, wailing, shouting, screaming, and more); character voice (including voiceover); voice with movement (including stage combat); singing (all styles); speech (based in physical exploration, limberness, and specificity, rather than “correctness”); text, stylized text (including Shakespeare), and acting; diversity training; and teaching practice.

Fitzmaurice Voicework has also supported the creation of many new performance pieces through the interplay of Presence Work, Deconstructing, Restructuring, and Play.

Bringing It All Together ...

When combined, Presence Work, Deconstructing, and Restructuring—followed by explorations with various Applications—encourage students to “invite a combination of freedom and choice,” a powerful blend of flexibility, adaptability, possibility, and specificity (2015, 7).

The integration of the intentional with the involuntary does more than add up to a unique skillset. Fitzmaurice Voicework helps students “access the almost infinite number of options available to them,” creating the opportunity to “tap into expressing the whole range of their humanity as needed” (7).

... to Play!

Students and certified teachers of Fitzmaurice Voicework bring their individual life experiences and curiosity to the work and are encouraged to improvise and innovate with the principles and exercises of Presence Work, Deconstructing, and Restructuring. The Applications of these practices are therefore as varied and adaptable as the people who use them.

This embrace of diversity and continual evolution gives rise to the last major aspect of Fitzmaurice Voicework: **Play**. Students and certified teachers are encouraged to “regain both freedom and focus,” to trust themselves “to make healthy, appropriate, fearless, brilliant, and very personal choices,” and “to truly listen” as they apply this work to performance and communication of all kinds (8).

Discussion of Teaching Style

Certified teachers of Fitzmaurice Voicework move away from the classical authoritarian model of information delivery towards a mutual sharing of experience between teacher and student. Teachers learn to recognize that the nervous system responds differently to commands, even internalized commands, than it does to exploration motivated by one’s own curiosity and passion. Instead of focusing on control, competition, and “getting it right,” teachers, during and after their training, seek to develop a greater acceptance of what is—with a focus on deepening awareness and perception—and then a curiosity about what could be.

The certification process in Fitzmaurice Voicework helps teachers develop their capacity to teach “what’s in front of them,” embracing their own humanity and in so doing serving as a model for their students. As certified teachers develop an understanding and experience of Presence Work, Deconstructing, Restructuring, Applications, and Play, they are encouraged to develop innovative curricula that respond to their own passions, interests, and

needs. They are also encouraged to study widely with teachers of other voice training methods and in related fields.

This focus on teacher and student autonomy extends to a sensitive, personal, and political awareness of diversity, inclusion, and cultural difference. Teaching voice is an opportunity not only to recognize but also to embrace diversity and inclusion. Naturally, no single Fitzmaurice Voicework classroom is ever the same.

Goals of the Organization

The Fitzmaurice Institute is responsible for preserving the legacy of Catherine's work and guiding its continued evolution. Broadly speaking, the goals of the Fitzmaurice Institute and teachers trained in Fitzmaurice Voicework are:

- to foster healthy, clear, adaptable, and passionate voices;
- to develop students' unique voices without narrowing towards a default, standardized "good" voice;
- to foster diversity and inclusion of difference;
- to offer practical means for students and teachers to be embodied and present;
- to encourage students' self-regulation and self-trust based on self-perceived cues from within and outside the body;
- to engender curiosity and patterns of learning and practice that lead to deep and sustainable growth;
- to maintain and further develop the body of experiential and practical knowledge called Fitzmaurice Voicework that without care could be lost in our often fast-paced, stressed-out, technologically-oriented world; and
- to create community through clear, direct, and open-hearted communication and collaboration.

Certification Process

Teacher certification in Fitzmaurice Voicework began in 1998. Applicants to the Teacher Certification Program must have previous experience with Fitzmaurice Voicework. This experience can include one or more years of study in an academic or conservatory environment, or multiple group workshops taught by Master Teachers. Exceptions have been made for those who show extraordinary promise with the work or who have extensive experience teaching voice in other traditions.

The Certification Program takes place over two years, with a total of ten weeks of group instruction plus regular individual mentorship in the intervening year. Weekly curricula are coordinated and led by Master and Associate Teachers providing instruction in their areas of expertise. Instruction during certification supports the curiosity, perceptiveness, specificity, and adaptability that teachers need to embody in order to encourage the same in their students. To help participants internalize the work and develop practical skills, there are also ample opportunities for teaching practice.

Master and Associate Teachers individually mentor those participating in the certification process. Mentorship creates an opportunity for dialogue about the unique challenges and opportunities each participant encounters as they incorporate Fitzmaurice Voicework into their lives and careers. Participants are expected to teach aspects of the work between the two years of the program, using their practical experience to test knowledge and unearth questions for the second year. Written work, including introspection and candid feedback, is also an essential part of the certification process.

Teacher certifications in Fitzmaurice Voicework have been conducted in the United States and Europe and will soon also be coming to South America, Australia, and Asia.

In addition to taking advanced coursework that is offered post-Certification, certified teachers can participate in the Fitzmaurice Voicework Teachers' Symposium (offered bi-annually). They are also invited to teach and perform in the public Freedom & Focus Conference, also offered bi-annually, in which certified teachers teach and learn with the public in various international venues.

Contact Information, Resources, and How to Get Involved

Visit our website at: www.fitzmauricevoice.com

Representatives of the Fitzmaurice Institute are happy to share information about our international community, resources, ongoing classes, workshops, conferences, teacher certification, private study, and performances spanning six continents.

Our website is regularly updated with public workshops and opportunities for private instruction with certified teachers—including voice, speech, singing, acting, public speaking, Balinese mask, and others.

Hundreds of university training programs that offer Fitzmaurice Voicework (including NYU, Yale, Harvard, and UC Irvine) are listed on the website, as are publications that reference or explore the work and its applications. You can also find information on the evolution of the work through the writings and public offerings of Catherine's past students, including Dudley Knight, Joan Melton, Saul Kotzubei, Phil Thompson, Micha Espinosa, Michael Morgan, Heather Lyle, and Christopher DuVal.

Reach out to the Fitzmaurice Institute or individual teachers through the website, or write to info@fitzmauricevoice.com. We hope you will visit us soon to learn more about our work.

References

Fitzmaurice, Catherine. 1997. "Breathing is Meaning." In *The Vocal Vision*, edited by Marian Hampton, 247 – 252. New York: Applause Books.

Fitzmaurice, Catherine. 2015. "Breathing matters." *Voice and Speech Review* 9 (1): 61-70.

DOI: 10.1080/23268263.2015.1014191.